

## TEXT BOOK

He proudly walked to the school, holding on to his father's hands, almost pulling him along. New shirt, a new bag on his back and a yet-to-be-opened umbrella in his other hand. It would be more exact to say that he bounced along, right from the bus stop. He was happy, but also in a hurry. What if it rained? What if his new shirt became dirty? Uppa would definitely scold him. Would Uppa come with him to school everyday? Hope not. It would be more fun to walk with his older brothers and sisters- playing and laughing. But he would not fuss about this. Otherwise, he may not be allowed to go to school at all. As it was, he got to go to school only after a lot of crying and complaining, and a great deal of waiting.

When the older boys and girls from the family and the neighborhood went to school, Saheer used to accompany them till the paddy fields. Lunch in the rectangular tiffin box, textbooks full of pictures, the tick marks that teachers gave with colorful chalks on the black slates ... school was all these for Saheer. By the time his shirt would have become dull and dirty. Saheer would imagine himself playing "cops and robbers" at the big playground he thought of as school. Ever since, he would cling to Umma's dress and sob, demanding to be allowed to go to school. Many times, Saheer's enthusiasm and longing had made Uppa ask Govindan Teacher if he could be admitted to the school. But the reply was always: "He has to be at least five years old."

Today as he walked to school for the first time with a colorful bag on his shoulder, and an umbrella imprinted with dreams, Saheer felt like a big boy.

Year after year, on the black slate, next to his shapeless letters, teachers put ticks and crosses. He moved up to the sixth Class. He felt very sad on the rare occasions that he got a beating from the teacher. He would remember that there were no beatings in his school – dreams! And in his new fantasies he would snatch the cane from the teacher and throw it out of the window.

Still, Saheer liked school. He liked Govidan Teacher, Gangadharan Teacher, Shyla Teacher, Sulaiman Teacher and all. Yet, sometimes, at school, Saheer felt sad. He felt as if everyone, his father, mother, grandfather and all his dear ones, were somewhere far away! It was as if all those whom he loved and who loved him were lost. Even the worlds that were familiar to him felt distant in school.

Saheer lived in a small village called Puthan Kunnu near Kozhikkode. He had so many friends there – Rasheed, Abdulla, Rahman, Shafeeq, Shamsuddin, Rahim – and lots and lots more. The Quran verses that came floating through every morning and evening, Abdulla Ustad's *azan* that wafted from the mosque five times a day, the ever prayerful Uppa with his *thasbeeh mala*, the *dikr* every Thursday after the *magrib*, the tea after the *dikr*, and the sharing of *pathiri* after the tea, playing 'leaf-ball' with friends in the masjid compound every evening – these were part of Saheer's world from as long as he could remember.

Every morning Saheer went to the madrasa. The madrasa class was from seven to nine in the morning. Mammu *ustad* taught Arabic letters, Quran recital, namaaz and other prayers. After madrasa, Saheer rushed home in order to get ready for school, three kilometers away. On most days, his breakfast was a cup of coffee and biscuits, which he had very early in the morning. Sometimes after the madrasa classes, he would have tea. By nine thirty, Umma would have neatly arranged the tiffin box and books in his bag. He would just pick that up and run to school.

Classes started at sharp ten o'clock or, at nine fifty on assembly days. If he happened to be late even by ten minutes or so, he would have to stand outside the classroom for that whole period and then follow the Class Teacher to the Staff room to be marked present for that day. There, in front of other teachers, he would be thoroughly scolded.

Most of Saheer's school life was anxious race from the madrasa to school. The fear of missing a class, the fear of being scolded by the teacher . . .

Sometimes Saheer used to think that he would soon be able to beat P.T.Usha. Indeed, by the time he was in the Sixth Class, Saheer was very good at running races.

Just as much as the school and the madrasa, there was another world that Saheer so loved. That was Grandmother's world of stories and ballads. When she recited the Nafeesat ballad, anyone would stop to listen. She had such a distinctive voice, and a beautiful sense of rhythm. Saheer learned a lot of history from the songs and legends, from these stories that did not appear in his textbooks or in *Balarama* and *Poompaatta*. The stories of Mohiuddin sheikh, of the battle of Badar, of Aliyar Thangal, the love story of Badarul Muneer and Husnul Jamaal, the stories of the *auliyas* of Ervadi and Mutthupeta . . . When Grandmother recited these stories, it was like meeting, face to face, all his familiar heroes. Saheer would often wonder how she memorized such long pieces.

But Saheer felt sorry that none of his friends in school knew these songs or stories. "Why don't they have these songs and stories in school textbooks?" he had once asked Grandmother. She had not replied. Maybe she didn't know the answer either. And Saheer never asked that question again.

Saheer wanted to take Grandmother to school one day, and make her sit on Shyla Teacher's chair to recite all these songs and stories to the whole class. But would it ever happen? Would Shyla Teacher ever allow such a thing?

For the Sixth Class B Division, every day, the fourth period was Malayalam. Since Onam examinations were close, most of the teachers were doing revisions in class. The Malayalam teacher, Gangadharan, as usual, came into class with his cane placed in the textbook like a book – mark. He went through some old question papers and explained the model to the class. He went on, “Most of you fail to answer the ‘Explain the Context’ question. Often, you don’t even remember of the characters in the lessons.” He asked all the students to write down in their notebooks the names of the characters in each of the lessons for practice.

Saheer also went through each lesson quickly and noted down the names of the characters. There were eleven characters from four lessons. When they finished the task, the teacher turned to Saheer and asked him to read the answers aloud. Saheer read:

“Lesson Number one: ‘The Good Friend’; Characters: Kuttan, Unni, Kunjulakshmi and Ammu. Lesson Number Two: ‘The cunning Ramu’; Characters: Ramu, Madhavi and Aromal. Lesson Number Three: ‘The Fruit of Labour’; Characters: Raman, kunjunni, Sathyan . . .”

After a pause, in a sad but strong voice, he added, “. . . and Rasheed.”

The whole class fell silent. Gangadharan Teacher took the partly hidden cane in his hand. His curious eyes popped over the gold – framed spectacles. He asked Saheer: “What was that? Where did you discover that name? Such a name is not there anywhere in the whole textbook!”

Saheer stammered, “Sir, because . . . nowhere in this text is there a Muslim’s name . . .”

As all the children burst out laughing, Saheer gathered courage to look at Gangadharan Teacher. The teacher rapped the cane on the table with force. The whole class fell silent. Controlling his anger, the teacher asked Saheer: “Saheer, are you talking communalism?”

Saheer did not understand the question. He wanted to ask Gangadharan Teacher what he meant. But just then the lunch bell rang.

With tiffin box in hand, Saheer ran to the tap to wash his hands along with his friends. He raced out . . . to be the first.

