The Inspector of Schools - Level 4 - 2010 words

In a perfect world, every child should have an education. There would be a school in every small village, with excellent teachers, a good strong building for the schoolroom, and books for every child, all paid for by the government.

But it is not a perfect world. The Inspector, walking through the dusty fields to find the next school on his list, knows this very well...

The Inspector asked a man who was walking down the village street about the school.

'Yes, yes, there's a school here. Somewhere. Outside the village, I think.' The villager pointed a work-worn, dusty finger to the narrow road leading away from the village.

The village streets were muddy where water from the mudhouses had leaked out, and dusty everywhere else. They ended suddenly where the fields began. The Inspector started walking down a path between two fields. In the distance he saw a man on a bicycle

coming his way. The man stopped as the Inspector of Schools came near, got off his bicycle, and respectfully stood to one side of the path.

'Where is the school?'

'School, Sahib-ji?'

'Yes.'

'You see that shisham tree over there?' he said, pointing to a large tree several fields away. 'It's under that.'

'Could you come along and show me?'

The villager was only too happy to help a city-Babu. If the students and Master or a passing neighbour saw him with the Babu, his importance would surely grow considerably in the village. He held his head higher at the thought. They walked together.

'Very good man, Sahib-ji, the Master is. Works very hard.' The Inspector of Schools did not reply. This chasing of schools across the area was becoming rather exhausting. In dirty towns, in smelly places, in distant villages where his car couldn't go. And there was so much wrong with them. All so depressing. By now, after

three years in the job, he should be used to it. But no. Every school still hurt - not enough books, local people who didn't care, lazy students, masters always wanting free meals and presents.

It was all too much. What could he do? Recommend and recommend. And every recommendation was refused by the Planning and Development Department, which planned little and developed less.

They passed fields which were green with young plants. At one place there was a small pool where water had gathered and insects were flying around the surface. They rose in a noisy cloud as the two men came closer. The Inspector of Schools waved them away from his face. The villager walked fast, and his loose bicycle bell rang madly as he pushed the bicycle along the uneven path. His colourless footwear had been repaired in several places. It was difficult to keep up with him. They crossed another field, and beyond it was the shisham tree. It was a shady tree at the edge of a field which was now ploughed and ready for planting. There was nothing there. The villager was disappointed.

'It was here, I'm sure. At least before the ploughing.'

'So?'

'Perhaps it has moved somewhere else.'

'But what about the building?'

'Building? What building?'

'Isn't there a building? A school building?'

'No, Sahib-ji, no building. The Master carries the school with him. Where he goes the school goes.'

As they stood wondering what to do, the villager noticed a man working several fields away.

'Meediya!' he shouted to him. The bent figure stopped work and straightened up. The sun was in his eyes. He put up a hand to shade them and looked.

'Meediya, where's the school? Sahib from the city has come to see it.'

'School? The boys are near the sugarcane field. At least I saw them going that way in the morning,' he shouted back.

The sugarcane field was thick and rich. The tall thin plants, grey-green and dark red in places, were topped with deep green leaves that rustled noisily in the wind. On the other side there were more fields, ploughed and ready. The Inspector looked around. There was nothing there.

'He did say the sugarcane field.' The villager was puzzled. 'Yes.' This was becoming boring.

'Perhaps it's on the other side of the field.'

'Listen, you go and look. And when you find it, let me know,' the Inspector of Schools said. He was getting hot.

The villager laid his bicycle on the ground and hurried away. The Inspector of Schools sat down on the path and looked at the brown earth and the different greens of the sugarcane going up into the blue sky. There were no clouds. A few birds, little lazy black shapes, swam high in the sky above him.

Soon there was a shout. He turned. The villager was running towards him. The Inspector got up. His muscles

felt stiff. He knew he wasn't leading a healthy life, sitting in the office, sitting in his car, sitting in the only chair in the schools he visited. He really must do something about it.

'I've found it.' The villager was smiling happily. He led the way into the field.

The Inspector of Schools hesitated. They could rob him here among the thick sugarcanes, and there would be no one to see or come to his help. But he followed the man anyway. The green tops of the sugarcanes cut at his face and arms. He bent his arms in front of his face to see where he was going. The ground was hard - he almost fell several times. He followed the noisy, shaking plants to the centre of the field. There, in a small area where the sugarcane had been cleared, about forty students sat with crossed legs on the ground. The quietness was especially noticeable after the noisy journey through the field. Some students were busy practising their writing, while others were working with numbers. An old man, stick in hand, sat with his legs crossed on an ancient chair in the centre. The chair had

been repaired several times, and was only just holding together. The Master stood up, his feet searching for his shoes in the dusty earth.

'Class, stand,' the monitor commanded in English. All the students got to their feet, brushing the dust off their clothes. The Master, confused by the arrival of such an important person, took a little time to gather his thoughts. He dusted the chair he had been sitting on and offered it to the Inspector of Schools, who sat down. The villager watched for a sign. The Inspector of Schools thanked him, and he disappeared between the sugarcanes.

'Sahib-ji, you are most welcome, Sahib-ji.'

'The students may sit,' said the Inspector of Schools.

'Class, sit,' said the monitor, and the boys sat down.

'So this is the school?' The Inspector of Schools looked around, frowning.

The Master was heard to swallow. 'Yes, Sahib.'

'What are you teaching them?'

'Urdu and Numbers and English and Writing, Sahib.'

'From the correct books?'

'From the correct books, Sahib-ji.' He handed the Inspector of Schools the bundle of dirty, well-used books near the leg of the chair.

The Inspector of Schools looked through the Urdu textbook, stopped at a particular page, and told a student to read. The boy got up, looking worried, and stayed silent.

'Sahib-ji. The book is of Fourth Class. He is from the Second Class.'

'How many classes do you have here?'

'Six, Sahib-ji. Class One to Six.'

The Inspector of Schools now realized that what he had thought was one group was in fact divided into a number of smaller groups. 'This is Class Four, Sahib-ji,' the Master said, pointing with his stick.

'You read,' the Inspector of Schools ordered a student. The boy got up and began to read. His reading was

clear and loud. Not a mistake anywhere. The Master looked more confident.

'Ask another class, Sahib-ji,' he suggested.

The Inspector of Schools continued his inspection. He found that the students had been well taught, and were all far better at their reading and writing and numbers than students at any of the other schools he had visited. He had heard this schoolmaster was an excellent teacher, and it was certainly true. Pleased by what he had seen, the Inspector of Schools got up to leave. The Master was visibly delighted.

'Class, stand,' shouted the monitor. His voice was louder than it had been earlier. The Inspector of Schools started walking away through the sugarcane. The Master followed, stick in hand. In this village and the next, people would talk about the event for days. Once he was out of the field, the Inspector of Schools spoke to the Master.

'Why do you keep moving your school? Isn't there a room you could hire?'

'Hire, Sahib-ji?'

'Well, get.'

'No, Sahib. No one will provide us with a room. They don't want a school here. They have said this many times.

Many times. They think the children are wasting their time - having fun when they should be in the fields, helping their fathers or looking after the cattle. Chaudhry Ali Muhammad is the only one who is kind to us. He thinks education is very important. He can't give us a room or even land for one. But he gave us his shisham tree's shade all last season, until the field was planted. This season we're using his sugarcane field.'

'It was good of him to clear the centre of the field for you.'

'Yes, Sahib-ji. It was good of him to let us clear the centre. The boys and I cut all the canes in that area. It took us three days. Even the little ones in Class One helped. From eight in the morning to prayer-time when the sun goes down. After that it was too dark. We made

bundles of the canes, then carried them to Chaudhry's house. He said that was the best way we could show how important education is to us.'

The Master took off his white turban, and showed a place on the top of his head where there was no hair. There were tears in his eyes and his voice trembled a little.

'I lost my hair, carrying those bundles.' He put the turban back on and looked away. They kept walking, the Inspector of Schools on the path, and the Master, in a suitably lower position, in the field beside him.

'Sahib-ji, all we need is a room. Just one room.' He spoke quietly. 'If not a room, a piece of land. The boys and I could build the room. It would take a whole season, but we could do it.'

The Inspector of Schools walked silently on.

'I know a piece of land is expensive, Sahib-ji. And people don't want a school in the village. But outside the village, I could have my school there. Some land is better than...' The Inspector of Schools was silent.

Already he could see the recommendation refused. The government gave no land or building for a school. The local people must provide that. So why should it change now? A rule is a rule. And there were so many rules that had been followed for a century now. Independence for the country didn't make a difference. What was good in the past was good now. And the government was telling all departments to spend less money. He could hear all the answers he would receive. He sighed. One little piece of land. That was all. And how many Masters were as enthusiastic as this one? How many really cared about their students, how many were able to do such a good job in such difficult conditions? He couldn't remember one in all his three years of inspecting. He got into his car, accepted the Master's deeply respectful goodbye with a small nod of his head, and drove away. He could not meet the man's eyes.

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