

## THE SCHOOL INSPECTOR

A Short Story By **Habib Mohana**

A newly-appointed primary school teacher got off the rattletrap at the pukka road and headed on foot to the village that nestled among the citrus orchards and wheat fields in the flank of a hill. Walking for over an hour on the gravel he reached his destination. The call to afternoon prayer was echoing from a low stone mosque when the newcomer requested a villager to guide him to the primary school.

He had arrived at the primary school but it bore no semblance to an educational institute. The two-roomed school's roof groaned under the enormous stacks of dried corn stalks, in the courtyard three dairy cows were munching on the corn stalks while their calves were dozing in the early winter sun. The neighbourhood chickens were pecking at the cow dung that littered the pebbly courtyard of the school. The one doorless room was full of wheat chaff while in the second room three men sat on aromatic khavi hay around a crackling fire. The first man lay sprawled on a greasy bolster, the second one sucked on the chillum while the third one was thumping on a chunky rosary. They stood up and cordially shook the new teacher's hand. The ceiling of the room was dark with soot while its walls were white at the bottom, brown in the middle and dark near the ceiling. At the far end of the room lay a jumbled heap of mattresses, quilts and pillows and the blackboard bore a fading congratulatory message chalked in Urdu, 'Hearty congratulations on the pilgrimage to The Holy Land.' They all sat down and one man poured tea for the guest from the sooty teapot that sat near the fire. Sipping syrupy tea the newcomer introduced himself.

"I am Fazal, I have come from Dera. I am your children's new teacher."

"I am the headman of this village and this gentleman here is the caretaker of this school. My son is a teacher in this school. But he is driving a dumper in Dubai." The chieftain chuckled, "with us you will be very comfortable, master sahib. Our kids don't come to school. Our people do not bother about education. They are interested only in their fields and businesses. Education is the headache of the city people. Sit at home and get your salary, master sahib. All the teachers that were appointed at this school never bothered about the kids. They would come to school just once in a month, fill up the teachers' and students' attendance registers and retrace their steps."

“But I am not going back. I want to teach.”

“Every new teacher says the same thing but slowly their enthusiasm dies down and they flee. In the mountains boredom will gobble you up, my friend.”

“But I will do what I am saying. What help can you give me in this regard.”

“I have already told you that our village folks are not into education. Don’t meddle into these things. Sit at home and get your salary.”

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Next day after breakfast Fazal asked the chieftain, “whose cows are those? In the courtyard of the school.”

“They are mine.”

“Would you take them to your house because from tomorrow students will be coming to the school?”

“No, my cow will stay here. This school was built on my recommendation and here you can’t do anything without my permission. I got this cemented building erected for my convenience. I paid one lakh in bribe to the officers; I did not get it for free, you don’t get anything for free in this country. This school is my guesthouse, it is a fold for my cows and it is also my hay store. Young man, you are very respectable to me but I am not going to hand this building over to you. You are my guest and you can stay here as long you wish, but never ever even dream of starting this school. Because opening of school will pose many problems for me. For example where will I seat my guest? On my heat! Sorry it is prayer time, I have to leave.”

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Three days had passed and during this time the newcomer had made some valuable acquaintances, among whom one was the village shopkeeper whose three sons went to study at the school in the village down the road. He put his mud-stone guesthouse at the schoolmaster’s disposal. The guesthouse had one room, one dry toilet and an enormous courtyard.

The schoolmaster went to the village chief's house and requested, "I will start my school some other place, can I take a few things from your school?"

"Why not, help yourself."

From the chaff room the teacher picked up a wooden blackboard, a bell, a chair, a table and three long jute rugs. He shifted these things to the guesthouse and started the school. On the first day he had three pupils—the shopkeeper's sons. On the second day they brought their two cousins with them to the school. On the third day a dour looking, retired soldier brought his grandson to the school and asked the teacher to accept the child as his pupil. Only in three weeks the enrollment in school had grown to twenty. Encouraged by his initial success, the teacher requested the villagers to ask the headsman to evacuate the school for the students but the chief turned a deaf ear to their requests.

Fazal then asked the janitor of the school to report for duty but he retorted, "I saw ten teachers during my service but none of them could make me sweep or fetch water. Let us see if you can force me to do it."

The teacher lodged a complaint with the high-ups against his janitor. Within a week the janitor received a registered letter from education office informing him about the immediate blockage of his salary. Next morning the janitor reported for duty at the guesthouse-school.

"Sir, I am a poor man, I am totally dependent upon my salary." He begged his boss to write to the education office for the release of his salary.

One day an old woman brought her grandson to the school. The grandmother had a long discussion with the teacher, then she toddled home, and carrying a brand new water cooler she came back to school in no time. She offered the water cooler to the schoolmaster.

"This is a gift for the students, they will drink water from it."

The retired soldier donated an old cupboard to the school while a gulf returnee gave the school a gift of a crystal water set. Fazal together with his pupils planted decorative plants and flowers in the guesthouse-school. The school was flourishing. Early in the morning the janitor would sweep the school, unroll the long jute rugs on the ground and fill the cooler with water.

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At night the teacher stayed in the school. After dinner, the shopkeeper and some villagers would visit the teacher at the school where they would chat, listen to the BBC, and share jokes after which they would leave for their homes. The villagers took turns sending the teacher lunch and dinner.

March had just marched into the mountains. The birds chirped lustily, the trees were green again, the wheat ears danced in the breeze in the terraced fields, and the village air was laden with the subtle fragrance of the citrus blooms.

One day the schoolteacher told his students, “the inspector is coming to our school tomorrow. He will check how you are faring with your studies. Don’t be afraid of him, he is a very nice dude. He will put easy-peasy questions to you and then you will be promoted to higher classes.”

The children were excited and scared at the same time. That day they spring-cleaned the school, sprinkled water on the pebbly courtyard and dusted the long jute rugs.

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The morning was crisp. The students were in clean clothes and some wore new dresses. Their eyes were rimmed with kohl, their oiled hair glistened in the spring sun and most children’s shoes were shining bright. The harried caretaker and the teacher too were in clean clothes and they were fussing with the minor detail of the cleanliness of the school. Both were on their toes. The school had one rickety chair, so the caretaker brought a charpoy from his house and draped it in a golden, lacy sheet for the inspector. Earlier the caretaker’s wife had made doughnuts for the esteemed guest. The caretaker had built a fireplace from stones and kept things handy to make tea for the officer. The nail-biting wait began. The pupils sat in neat lines on the jute rugs, their angelic faces beaming with breathless anticipation.

Today their behaviour was exemplary: they sat in straight lines, their books organized on their bags according to their size and they talked quietly. The teacher was all aflutter as it was his first experience with the annual inspection. Every now and then he would go out of the school and crane his neck to survey the gravel road for the inspector’s vintage bike. He who instilled awe among the illiterate villagers, that day walked and talked awkwardly.

Four hours had passed and still there was no sign of the school inspector and the students had become tired of the wait. The freshness had faded from the children’s faces, thick antimony was leaving smudges around their eyes and their fingers were smothered in dark ink from writing on

the wooden tablets with reed pens. Some students' noses were, now, running with yellowish green snot. Their excitement and cheerfulness had turned to tiredness and boredom. Their intestines were growling with hunger but the teacher would not give them a lunch break because the officer could come any time. They were seething with mounting frustration and a buzz of grumbly whispering came from them but the teacher told them to be patient, "the inspector will be here in a very short time."

The keyed up teacher was pacing in front of the school gate like a caged bear. At a distance he spotted the surveyor and his two assistants surveying the gravel road. They would stop, fix levels and theodolites, jot something in a notebook and then move on. Fazal was about to duck into the small door in the school gate when he saw the janitor of the neighbouring school bowling down the hill on his bicycle. The cyclist got off before him. He had brought a message for the teacher: "the inspector sahib is sitting in our school, he says that he can't visit your school. He is running short of time. He says that you can bring your logbook to his house and he will scribble you the inspection report."

The messenger departed. The mountain peaks swam before the wired-up teacher's eyes. He scratched at his closely-shaven, pointy chin. He looked lost, he felt as if the hills were slithering down to constrict him in their verdant coils. Then he plodded up to the surveyors and told them the whole story of the inspection. He requested the senior surveyor to pose as a school inspector and visit his school and ask the students a few questions.

"We can't oblige you, we are already running short of time," the senior surveyor replied wearily.

"It will be a great encouragement to the students, they have all donned up for the occasion. The little ones have been waiting, so eagerly, for the inspector since morning. Please come otherwise they will lose faith in education, in their future, in their elders!" The teacher's face wore a pathetic look.

The senior surveyor rested his chin on the theodolite fixed on a tripod and mused for a while, then he asked the teacher to go on ahead of him and wait for him in the school. The surveyor washed his face with water from his canteen and staring in one of his bike's rear view mirrors, he ran the wet fingers through his windswept hair and dusted his boots with a rag.

When the children heard the brum-brum of the motorbike, they scrambled to their jute rugs and sat down in neat lines. They felt excited and scared, several students' urine was dripping in their pants. They smoothed the front panel of their shirts to hide the wet patches. With one hand the

janitor opened the gate while with the other he gave the surveyor a crisp salute. The surveyor-inspector got off his bike with dignity and walked towards Fazal with measured steps.

The teacher shouted “stand” and the boys stood up for the honorable guest. The students’ wilted faces had brightened up but one boy started bawling when he saw the inspector. He grabbed his shoes by the straps and, barefoot, fled the school. To receive the esteemed guest, the teacher walked up towards him, they shook hands warmly but formally. Fazal invited him to sit on the charpoy. The guest reclined on the bolster and the janitor brought him a glass of water. After exchanging formal greetings and smiles the teacher asked him to check the students’ cleanliness. Accompanied by his host, the inspector moved towards the students, and the boys stood up. He shook hands with all students and then asked them to show him their nails and teeth. He made a generous use of two magical words, “very good.” He then asked every child to read two or three lines from their books and he showered them with encouraging words.

The janitor was boiling eggs and brewing tea on the open air fireplace but his eyes were fixed on the students and the inspector. The janitor’s face wore a wide grin. His village boys made him feel so proud.

After the inspection, the teacher let his pupils go home. They tumbled out of the school gate, their bosoms bursting with tons of information to impart to their mothers. The inspector sat down on the draped charpoy with his host and they feasted on the hardboiled eggs and doughnuts and slurped tea.

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