

MOUSE (MUSHAK)

Our Pundit ji was very troubled as there had been rioting in his locality which was in the midst of the crowded city.

His predominantly muslim locality was called the *Mohalla* of Hajis because most people there had performed the pilgrimage. There were just a few houses belonging to Pundi ji and his community. He worked at the lawcourt, and devoted his free time to prayers. He and his wife lived a contented life. Their older son was a doctor in the military; the younger one, an engineer in the P.W.D. was minting money. Pundit ji had brought up an orphaned nephew who lived with him.

People in the locality, both Hindus and Muslims, had great respect for Pundit ji, and even consulted him on various matters. Pundit ji's closest friend, Haji Ajmal, was as religious as him.

This time round, the whole city was engulfed in such flames of rioting that Pundit ji also felt the heat. In spite of the good will of the neighbourhood, rioters and *goondas* from other localities, pelted his house with stones and tried to set it ablaze; but the neighbours used force and drove them away.

Pundit ji had never experienced such a thing; his very life had been in danger. He was not only worried but terrified because he felt that his neighbours were ineffectual and helpless; his chess mate, Haji Ajmal, was ashamed.

Pundit ji's cousin, the son of a paternal uncle, was a minister in the ruling party, and held an important and influential position. Pundit ji had never approached him for any favours. They met only at marriages of relatives or at family functions. After this incident, Pundit ji camped at his place in the capital for a whole month When he returned home, he was a happy man.

The District Magistrate allotted him a government house in the Civil Lines, and Pundit ji moved there with his family. Members of his community could do nothing but be envious, and curse their fates. It would be wonderful if they could also get new houses, away from this locality. No doubt, they were all trying; but rents of safe havens had sky-rocketted as they usually do after every riot.

The new house was at a distance from the city. These new government colonies were a part of the larger expansion plans for the city. People were gradually moving in, and only a few houses had been occupied. A market was also coming up. But, generally the place remained isolated. There was a village adjacent to the colony.

Pundi ji was happy... fresh air... a clean, quiet environment, away from the hustle bustle ... no smoke ... no noise ... that was the kind of retreat he wanted. His former house had been wedged into one of the *galis* of the over-crowded locality; there was hectic activity with a neighbours going in and out all the time. The interior of the house could be immaculately clean, but a *gali* is after all a *gali*.

Pundit ji's cousin was initially pleased that he had come to him and asked for help. But, within a year when Pundit ji again landed in the capital, along with his wife, he was surprised and apprehensive. Pundit ji was in a state of shock and very scared. Houses in the colony had been robbed in broad day light. People were waylaid at odd hours. A few days ago, during a robbery in the neighbouring house, inmates kept shouting and screaming, but no one came out to help. Pundit ji, was accustomed to ways of the former locality; he immediately rushed out with a *danda*... but found that he was alone and that too with a mere *danda*. The dacoits frightened and threatened everyone with rounds of fire, and made away with the booty. Pundit ji was greatly distraught, and decided that he would not live there any longer. Both husband and wife spent a month in the capital. Ultimately they accomplished what they had come for.

Pundit ji left his job. He went up to the mountains to live in his ancestral home. He invested all his savings in a bus, and his cousin got him the permit. The bus plied and brought him enough for his livelihood.

Pundit ji hailed from the mountains. His father had come down to the plains for a job and had eventually settled there. The old house was in a dilapidated condition, and had to be rebuilt instead of making do with minor repairs. Relatives from the neighbourhood helped him. Interaction with them, felt like returning to his motherland, and Pundit ji was greatly satisfied.

He was extremely happy. In the bosom of his ancestors, he had heavenly peace, whereas the entire country was turbulent with insurgency or riots; terrorists were going around flaunting AK-47s and other foreign weapons. Kidnapping, arson and looting, bomb blasts had become the order of the day. Tall serene mountains, cool air, fresh water; amidst simple and honest folk speaking his language, practicing the same culture; his own people and such cordiality, what more could he ask for. He was overwhelmed.

But, one day suddenly, lightning struck his paradise. His bus was targeted by terrorists on its return trip. His nephew was on the bus, and they looted all the cash from him. When he resisted, they hit him, and threw him out along with the driver and the conductor. They made away with the bus, which they later blew up.

Pundit ji had a heart attack, but he survived. He could never have imagined that terrorists would emerge from different parts of the country and reach the summits. Somebody had snatched him from the heavens thrown him into the darkness of hell. He was devastated. His health, wealth and happiness were all gone.

His younger son, who lived abroad, came home, and took his father and mother to a foreign land. This time round, Pundit ji did not have to camp in the capital. His minister cousin voluntarily helped, and got them passports and visas within a week.

Before departing, Pundit ji came to see me. He attributed his dutiful son, *Shravan Kumar*, to good deeds of some previous birth because the boy had said that he would never allow his parents to return home. What was there in India after all? The whole country had become a battle ground ... from one end to the other, from north to south, there was nothing but fighting... riots, brawls. No security, non-existent law and order ... terrorism held sway. Man's life had no value... it was worth a few coins. All this is what Pundit ji told before accompanying his son abroad. He used to write regularly in beginning, but as time passed, the letters were far between, and then they ceased. I thought that Pundit ji had adapted himself to the foreign land, and was comfortable there, which was good.

After a few years, I happened to go to that same riot-stricken city to attend a friend's wedding. After evening tea I came out for a stroll, and decided to walk to the market. That's when I heard the voice. Someone was calling out. I followed the sound' and came to a stationer's shop. The person sitting at the counter had hailed me. He seemed familiar, but I had to make sure so approached him.

It was none other than our Pundit ji But he had dramatically changed; gone were the traditional *kurta-pajama*, and sandalwood paste on the forehead. He was donning a suit. His foreign trip transformed him into a smart man. His old friend, Haji Ajmal was sitting beside him on a chair. He sported the same grey beard, wore his black *sherwani*, and held a cane in one hand.

"Masterji... seeing you after a long time" said Pundit ji'

"Pundit ji ! You had gone abroad. When did you return? Have you come back for some work? For how many more days will you be here?"

"Oh Master Saheb! our Pundit ji is a mouse, a real mouse. He travelled all over the world, but like a mouse returned to his own hole.... He just went round the world" Haji Sahib replied.

Any way, Pundit ji's Story amused and saddened me. He said that he had nearly

adapted himself there....new place, new environment, different language, different types of people added to his growing years. In spite of everything, he had started blending with the atmosphere when one day something unexpected occurred. He had gone alone for a walk. There was no cause for worry because people around the locality had come to recognize him. It was a little dark when he returned. There was a dark passage of around two furlongs. Suddenly four or five white young men emerged and surrounded him. These clean-shaven, youth were members of a clan that resented foreigners on their soil. They specially hated and terrorized Indians or people like Indians with black or brown skin. They were ferocious people. In the beginning they kept poking fun and ridiculing ... then they became hostile. They started abusing Pundit ji, pushing and shoving him around, raining blows on him.

“Master ji, in our country, so much happened but no one even touched me. Besides, bruises on the body were not as bad as the humiliation and fear... an unknown place, unfamiliar people. I fainted. When I regained consciousness, there was a policeman nearby. He dropped me home in a taxi. That day I had been face to face with death, Master ji I said to myself, if I have to die, I would prefer to die in my own country rather than in this alien land. If I die abroad, there won't be anyone to understand my dying words... there won't be any familiar face around... If I am destined to be murdered, why not at the hands of my own people?”

"Oh Master Saheb, Pundit is not going to dying just yet. He will die after he sees us all gone" Haji Sahib once more roared with laughter.

Pundit ji gently smiled, blinking his small eyes.

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