

Barkat Baba

The entire neighbourhood knew the old and bad-tempered Barkat Baba only too well. Hardly was there anyone in the neighbourhood, with whom Barkat Baba had ever spoken pleasantly, with the result that people hardly spoke with him nowadays. Consequently, Barkat Baba would remain at home, all by himself, and yet fume with rage on occasions too often. Close to his house, Barkat Baba had a small wood-cutting workshop of his own, where labourers could be seen working fastidiously- as they knew that if they were found idling away, they would have to bear the brunt of Barkat Baba's ire.

Barkat Baba's harshness was, however, restricted merely to his verbal tirades. Though, when he rebuked and blasted his workers – the impact was no less than as if blows were struck on them – yet, the workers preferred to not leave him and continued working for him. This was so, because he paid them better than others did. His workers could have eventually found in their master some other quality worth appreciating too, but his bad temper destroyed all probabilities of that. He was cross with everybody all the time and this prevented others from searching for any positive traits in him. Barkat Baba was also an ardent hard-liner when it came to religion and over-zealously held on to his fanatic beliefs.

People in his neighbourhood, however, were simple and nice. They hardly ever took offence to Barkat Baba's outbursts or rude behaviour. If somebody became a victim of his ire, he or she would simply react with a smile and just let it go. It was probably because everybody sympathised with Barkat Baba. He was old and lonely. Not that Barkat baba had never married or did not have children. Barkat Baba had a wife and children too, but they had all fallen prey to the

communal carnage which shook the nation at the time of Partition. Thereafter, he never remarried and instead, immersed himself in his work. A sense of contempt for fellow human-beings ran deep in his heart.

These days, there was some visible change in the mood and behaviour of Barkat Baba. The reason being that a few days ago, a small 4-5 years old boy with a little cricket bat in his hands, had happened to run into the vast courtyard of Barkat Baba's house. The little boy had stood transfixed, gazing at the vast expanse to play in. Barkat Baba too, unlike on other occasions when he drove the children away, stood staring at Jimmy. The innocence on Jimmy's angelic face overwhelmed Barkat Baba and left him wondering. Perhaps, the shadows of his past had swept across his heart. He then asked Jimmy if he would like to play in the compound. Jimmy had nodded eagerly and from then on, it was a different game altogether. Not only was Jimmy often seen running about in the vast ground but, Barkat Baba too could be seen playing enthusiastically with him.

There was no other playground in the entire neighbourhood; neither any open space, nor wide roads. There were only narrow winding lanes; the only vast space available to play being Barkat Baba's courtyard but his foul-mouthed outbursts prevented everybody from venturing into his compound. Jimmy was perhaps the only fortunate one who had gotten access to the vast ground. It became a daily ritual then. Every evening, Jimmy would come by himself or with his friends and they would play either hockey or cricket and Barkat Baba would join them in their games.

Every evening, Barkat Baba eagerly awaited Jimmy's visits and if, on any day, the latter did not come – Barkat Baba let his anger out on

the hapless labourers and sternly asked them if they had dared to scold Jimmy, to which the frightened labourers always replied in the negative. *Jimmy was, after all, such a sweet child-* they would say in unison. And then on the next day, when Jimmy would come and run towards Barkat Baba and hug him hard, it was obvious that Jimmy too had missed Baba ardently. The outcome of all of this was that Barkat Baba's ire and anger had almost vanished. He had begun to speak warmly with all his workers, and sometimes shared a laugh with them too. The workers knew this transformation was due to Jimmy and the little boy had become their favourite too.

One day, Jimmy's bat broke in two and Barkat Baba himself lovingly made another one for him. Jimmy was happy and so grateful that next day, he brought his father along, to meet Barkat Baba. Jimmy's father thanked Barkat Baba profusely and told him that how initially on coming to the neighbourhood, Jimmy had troubled them saying that he had no friends. Jimmy's father had been transferred to that area and unable to afford a house in any other posh locality, Jimmy's father had chosen to stay there. Now, however, his father pointed out, Jimmy was happy and kept raving about Barkat Baba all day long at home. Jimmy's father told Barkat Baba that Jimmy was not ready to even go to their ancestral village in his holidays as he would have no 'Barkat Baba' there to play with, and on hearing this, Barkat Baba's delight knew no bounds.

A few days later, it was *Holi* – the festival of colours. The workers had been given a day off and Barkat Baba sitting alone in his house was pleasantly surprised to see Jimmy walking in quite early that day. He was carrying two bottles of colour and as he was about to pour the same on Barkat Baba, the latter stood up and sternly reprimanded Jimmy saying, 'Do you not know that Muslims do not play *Holi*? It's only the Hindus who celebrate *Holi*'. Jimmy's eyes were filled with

tears. Not understanding much about what being a *Hindu* or a *Muslim* meant, he began to sob and replied, 'Everyone at home – Mummy, Daddy, Uncle – is playing *Holi*, but I told them that I will play with you first and I came over'.

'What is your father's name?' asked Barkat Baba. He realised that the other day while they did speak at length, he had forgotten to ask Jimmy's father his name. Jimmy hesitated and replied softly, 'Anil Kumar'. Holding the bottles of colour close to his chest, and with tears streaming down his innocent cheeks, Jimmy began to walk away. Barkat Baba's reprimand had hurt him immensely. Suddenly, an emotionally-charged voice rang through the air: 'Wait, Jimmy – my son! Wait'. Barkat Baba could not hold himself back and ran towards Jimmy and hugged him hard. 'Where are you going, Jimmy? Will you not play *Holi* with me? ', and saying so, Barkat Baba took hold of the bottle from Jimmy and began playfully pouring colour all over the little boy. Jimmy wiped his tear-stained face with his tiny hands and began to jump with joy. In a minute, he had coloured Barkat Baba completely.

In the evening that day, Barkat Baba was seen savouring the *Holi* sweets at Anil Kumar's house and little Jimmy was grinning ear-to-ear as his friend had come home for the first time. He kept insisting that Barkat Baba must finish all the sweets, one after the other. Jimmy's mother, covering her head with her saree, came in to pay her respects to Baba. Barkat Baba blessed her and gave her all his best wishes. And Anil Kumar, while observing old Barkat Baba, was wondering how lonely must he be.
