

Chane wala...

Chana... chana... chana... le lo!!!

When repeated such calls fell like a musical treat on my ears, I woke up in the moving train with a start. My eyes roved a bit and rested on a young teenage boy who had a small basket, with both ends enjoined with a cloth, hung from the neck, and filled with *chana*. I identified him as the source of the melodious calls, exhorting the passengers to buy the *chana*. Nearly all the passengers in the train were daily passengers, traversing a distance from home to work in about three hours, and they were all buying the *chana* from the boy with a childish grin on their faces, and vigour in their demeanour. It seemed as if they were simply waiting for him to come and offer deliverance from what otherwise would have been a mundane journey. The young lad was singing some witty couplets, while marketing his *chana* and his sturdy voice prevailed even over the din caused by the moving train.

The passengers seated next to me were all in praise of the crispness and flavour of the freshly roasted *chana* and I was listening intently to their eulogies, which had an unusually overwhelming element of unanimity. All the commuters were of the opinion that the delicious taste of the *chanas* was simply *out-of-the-world*. The compartment was filled with the scent of the hot...spicy... peppery... flavoursome *chana*. I could not escape the temptation any further. I too bought a handful of *chana* from the young lad and that was my first encounter with him.

For reasons of undergoing a training program, I had to traverse between Allahabad and Mirzapur, to and fro, every day. As the daily passengers rushed and pushed and scrambled to get in, all hell would break loose. No matter how crowded the compartment got, the everyday passengers, however, always managed to find a seat for themselves. They would sit in groups of two or four, so that it became easier to play a game of cards, during the journey. Those who did not join the game of cards could be heard lamenting about the state of affairs in the nation. Some loved to boast about how they had *given it back* to their boss the previous day or had refused to be cowed down by the

ringmaster... Worse, some indulged in croaking the timeless melodies in their flat voice, which lacked harmony or melody. And then, amidst the din and bustle, the *chane wala* would emerge in our compartment, and from thereon, he, his voice and his scrumptious *chana* prevailed...

I have been taking the said journey for nearly a month now, and the young lad selling the *chana*, has become my friend. I have joined the long list of his loyal customers. During this one month, I have managed to polish my survival-skills almost up to the level of the daily passengers. The sense of dignified behaviour within me has gradually eclipsed. Formerly, if the compartment was crowded, I stood hesitantly and quietly at the side. Now, I know how to scramble aggressively for a seat and even manage to push the others aside and secure one. The choice of words that I have begun to utter also does not reflect courtesy. Sometimes, I end up blurting the slang expressions at home as well, and then I am forced to gulp them back with a pang of guilt.

Yes... coming back to the young vendor in the train, who has become my friend, I asked him once as to where from had he learnt the verses, which he recited in the honour of the *chana* he sold. He told me that he had learnt the witty lines from his father, who also sold *chana*. I was saddened to further know from him that his father had met a gruesome accident, when trying to board a moving train. At the time of his father's death, the boy was studying in Class V, and if his father had been alive, he told me that he would have been in Class X, and maybe studied further as well. Fate had it planned otherwise though, and the responsibilities of running the household fell on the ten-year old lad.

The other day, I was nestled comfortably in the train and it was gushing forth with speed. The approaching station was Vindhyachal and I was expecting the young boy to reach our compartment by then, after doing a brisk business in the compartments ahead. Suddenly, the train slowed down and then came to a grinding halt with a screech. Somebody had probably pulled the chain and brought the train to a halt. And then, loud noises and screams emanated from the adjoining compartment. Some of us stretched our necks and tried looking out from the window. From the next compartment, about four to five men, armed with clubs and hockey sticks jumped down on the railway track and began running towards the nearby village. The guards from the Railway

Protection Force too reached the tracks, on hearing the loud screams for help and saw the fleeing men, but did not have the guts or maybe the inclination to go after them. Several passengers from adjoining compartments had begun alighting and walking towards the compartment wherein the commotion had started. I too got down and went to the next compartment. To my horror, I found the young boy selling *chana*, lying in a pool of blood. He was screaming in pain and his entire body was trembling violently due to the deep wounds that were inflicted on him. The bystanders informed me that a group of five men had beaten him mercilessly and pulled the chain and fled. No passenger had come to the rescue of the hapless young lad. With whatever aid that was available with the passengers, the bleeding was stopped and the wounds covered. The train moved forward. At Vindhyanchal station, two to three passengers who probably belonged to the same village as the *chane-wala*, got him down and took him to the nursing centre nearby.

The *chane-wala* was not to be seen for the next ten days. A co-passenger informed me after my repeated inquiries with everyone around, that the boy was alive and admitted in a hospital. On the eleventh day, the *chane-wala* entered our compartment. His forehead was still bandaged and the injured forehead was balanced on a sling. The basket carrying the *chana* was clumsily hanging from his neck. I bought *chana* from him and made him sit next to me.

‘How are you? You do not seem to have fully recovered... You ought to have rested for a few more days’, I expressed my sympathy.

He smiled wistfully. The pain that his smile held pierced my heart. ‘Sir, all that we had in our house has been sold to take care of these expenses. I have lost everything. Today, the last piece of furniture—a broken cot—had to be sold so that this *chana* could be purchased...’ he said in a choked voice.

‘Who were those people who attacked you?’ I asked

‘One of them is from my village, and travelled on this train every day. He used to daily take *chana* from me, and owed me a quite a bit of money. That day, I refused to give him *chana* till he paid the dues. And see, I was beaten up in retaliation.’ Saying so, tears welled up in his eyes. ‘I have a lot of responsibilities on me, Sir... I have a sister who has to be married and thereafter, I will think of a family of my own.’ This time, he had blushed.

'Sir, I will leave now. The station where I have to get down, is approaching, and saying so, he tried to get up. Suddenly, he clutched his head and sat down with a thud. *He is feeling giddy*, I presumed. I held his arm and helped him get down safely on the platform.

When he comes tomorrow, I must give him some rupees, so that he can rest for some more days and meet his day-to-day expenses, I reminded myself. Looking out of the window, I wished I had little money that day itself which I could have given him...

The next day, I waited anxiously for him to come, but he did not come. A few more days passed and I did not see him in the train. And my training program, spanning over three months, concluded. The *chane-wala* did not come again in the train, although the sale of *chana* did not stop. Many other new vendors had taken over the business vacuum which was generated with the *chane-wala's* absence.

Nearly five years have passed, since I had first met the *chane-wala*. I often think of him and wonder as to what he must be doing with his life. *Must he still be selling chana? Or did he start doing some other work? Did he succeed in getting his sister married...? Is he even alive? Or did he meet the same fate as his father?* I shudder at the latter thought. His image is still crisp and fresh and firmly etched on my mind...
