

## Ghaffaar

The heat in Rajasthan is scorching during the summers. The temperature soars to dizzying heights. The dry and arid climate exhausts anyone who dares to venture out in the sun, especially in the afternoons. And engaging in any field work during day-time is simply impossible. And yet there **was I, out** in the field. I was assigned the task of surveying the land, to determine the volume and depth of the ground water table. A large part of Rajasthan suffers from a severe shortage of water. Rainfall is scanty, and by the time summer arrives, most districts begin to reel under the impact of water shortages. And then, one can see the long queues of women carrying small children on their waists and earthen pots on their heads, travelling miles in search of water. Never does one see men in such queues though, burning their skin and searching for water for their families...

On one such unbearably hot afternoon, just as I was about to step out for surveying the soil in a rugged and rocky terrain, for determining if there was water underneath, my assistant reported sick. A little reluctantly, but I ventured out by myself. It was difficult to find a substitute helper at the last minute. I had to do it all by myself—taking out all the equipment from the jeep and taking all of it to the site and then, arranging the tools. Every now and then, I had to pick up one thing at a time and go to and fro, where the machinery was set up. The heat was unbearable - so much so that there were not even any bystanders and curious onlookers gathered around. Perhaps, the villagers could see me from the safe shelters of their homes and were wondering what a solitary man was doing with all the machines in the scorching weather.

Suddenly, as I looked up, I saw a curious-looking young boy standing there, gazing at me intently. He was probably eight or nine years old, and was dressed in tatters, with a shoulder bag hanging down till his knees. *Perhaps, it is his school-bag*, I told myself. After standing there silently for a few minutes, he finally asked me in a slow hesitating voice: 'What are you doing?' I replied that I was trying to find out if there was water underneath the land and if so, whether it was sweet water or salty. 'Oh', he replied back, nodding his head readily as if he had grasped all about the mechanism.

'Will you go and fetch me a bag that I have kept on the front seat of my jeep?' I asked him. He went running to and fro, and brought me the bag. He stood there, expecting some more errands to be asked to perform. Exhausted as I was, after picking up and placing down things and ferrying tools and equipment from the jeep to the site, I began to tell the boy small errands to do. He was doing everything intently; focussing on every task carefully. He seemed to be courageous and intelligent. He was there in that heat, when even adults had taken refuge in their own abodes... and was doing the chores, unmindful of the soaring temperature. That itself spoke volumes of his perseverance. He was asking me several questions as well. 'How will you know if there is water underneath?' or 'How does this machine work?' His questions convinced me that he must be amongst the toppers in his school.

'If you find water beneath, will a well be constructed?' he continued asking. 'Will a water-tank be built? To how many villages will water reach?' His questions kept on pouring. He seemed to be much concerned about the paucity of water all around. He was probably in class IV or V, but he sounded like a young adult, studying in high school.

‘What is your name?’ He had been helping me for about two hours, and I had not asked him his name. ‘Ghaffaar’, he replied.

‘In which class do you study?’ I asked him.

‘I do not go to school. I work’, he replied matter-of-factly. His words pierced my heart.

‘I work in a hotel; wash utensils and do other chores’, he added. I felt a chill down my spine. I looked at his tiny hands and innocent little face, and wondered: *What kind of parents had the heart to make such a young child slog like a servant? And the primary schools offered free education these days. Why could he not study, when education was free for all children?*

‘What does your father do?’ I asked.

‘He is dead’, he replied matter-of-factly once again. There seemed to be no emotion on his face.

I wondered that was probably why he was working in a hotel, so as to sustain his family. He sounded neither regretful nor wistful. *Did he understand what death meant?* Probably, he did not even know the meaning of ‘joy’ or ‘sorrow’, or of many other emotions. Life, for him, was probably a day-to-day affair involving hard work and constant rebuke and rebuttal.

‘Who all are there at home?’ I asked further.

‘We are six siblings. I have four elder sisters, and one younger brother. Our father died when I was very young. I do not even remember his face or any other thing about him’.

At the tender age of eight, the tiny shoulders were carrying the responsibilities of running a household. I looked at his face keenly. There was no sign of any anger towards the travails of fate or longing

for the comforts in life. He was intently coiling the wire, and I was taking the last reading. *I will give him the Rs. 100, which I would have otherwise given my assistant*, I mumbled to myself. Gaffaar had performed almost the same, if not more chores, as my assistant would have. But the next instant, I felt angry at myself.

The money would compensate him for the chores he had executed, but why had I not thought of doing something really worthwhile for the young child. *If I convince him to go to school, who will then feed his family?*, I thought to myself. My mind was racing: *Sending him to school was not the only solution as it would deprive his siblings of even two basic meals. But then, it was equally crucial that such a bundle of sincerity and intelligence received good education so that at least the future could be saved from drudgery and deprivation....*

Entangled in the web of my thoughts, I called out, 'Ghaffaar'! On hearing no reply, I looked up and found nobody around. And then I saw a bus standing far away, and passengers getting down and some boarding it. My eyes rapidly searched for the tiny boy in tatters, with a shoulder bag hanging down. But I could not spot him. A few passengers who had alighted were coming towards me and I asked them if they had seen a young boy. They nodded their heads and replied in the affirmative. They had seen him boarding the bus and they had even heard him telling me, while running towards the bus: 'Sir, I am going. My bus is here. It is the last bus to go home...'

I shrugged my shoulders in despair. *Why had I not heard him? Why had I not paid him a little earlier? Why did I not ask him the name of his village?*

Going towards the jeep, I was downcast. If I wanted, I could have driven the jeep after the bus at that instant. It was not difficult to search for the boy in a few neighbouring villages. I could have asked

those passengers the final destination of the bus. And yet, I had not done any of that. I was feeling miserable. I knew I had no solution for the situation Ghaffaar was in. I wanted to do so much for him but knew there was no way to do anything. Even if I adopted him, what would the family do without his earnings? How could I make them accept and live on charity for life? I had no answers for the questions that were jamming in my mind. I had no solutions. There were thousands of Ghaffaars out there...

