

## Manglu's Bicycle

He knocked at the open door. From inside came a voice: 'Is that you Manglu?'

Kripal Das came out and looked at Manglu with an amused expression. He then glanced at the watch and said: 'You are never late, Manglu. It is exactly 8 'o' clock. You do not have a watch and yet you are here every day, sharp at 8 am. How do you manage it?'

Manglu did not say a word, but smiled quietly and nodded. Manglu was a young labourer, employed with Kripal Das, since about fifteen days. Kripal Das was a rich merchant and was adding another floor to his two-storeyed house. Manglu was employed on a daily-wage basis and at the end of a day filled with hard labour, Kripal Das gave him Rs. 50, which Manglu accepted graciously and kept it carefully in his sweat-soaked pocket.

His village was a little over six kilometres from the city. He had to come every day to the city for securing some work. He was young, honest and hard-working. He managed to find some or the other work, almost on all days but there were, however, those days too when, he had to return home tired, and empty-handed.

While coming to the city in the morning, Manglu easily managed to walk the long stretch of six kilometres but, in the evening, after a day's hard labour, he found it an arduous task. Since many months, he was therefore thinking of buying a bicycle. He had already begun to save a little bit from his meagre daily earnings. It was difficult to save anything from Rs 40 or Rs 50 that he got on the days he worked, but he was trying diligently. At nights, he often dreamt that he was riding his brand new glistening bicycle, with his wife seated on the back seat. He would dream that either he was racing at a great speed atop his bicycle or that he was flying high toward the sky on his bicycle. In the mornings, he would enthusiastically open the old tin box in which he kept his savings. He counted the money almost every day. After calculating the amount that he still needed to buy the bicycle, he felt motivated to work harder each day.

Manglu had enquired the price of a bicycle at a shop in the city. A new bicycle's cost was somewhere around Rs 2,500/- The other day, when he counted the money in his tin box over and over again, he was happy. He had managed to save Rs 2,100/- It had taken him more than a year to save that much. It could probably take him three months more to save the rest of the required amount. And then his dream would come true!

His wife was as eager as him to have that prized possession which not many in their poor village could afford. She was a woman who otherwise always remained contented, despite the tattered clothes and the meagre food. *Probably, she had never seen better food or comforts, and hence did not know the craving for them*, Manglu believed. Every evening, when Manglu came home tired and completely exhausted with the long walk, his wife washed and then massaged his feet. Then later, after dinner, they both would lie down and looking up at the roof of their house- dreamt about when they would be the proud owners of a new shimmering bicycle. He would smile at the thought of taking her along and going on long rides and even taking her to the city to see all the glitter and glamour. She would smile at the thought of her husband riding back home in comfort and everyone in the village looking up at them in awe.

Manglu's wife knew that she was a lucky woman. Her husband was a simple and a caring man. He never yelled at her or raised his hand at her. There was not much to eat always, but it wasn't all that bad either. He was not only her husband, but a friend too. They had grown up together in the village and they had known each other since their childhood days.

One day in the evening, as Manglu was counting their savings from the tin box, they saw a young lad from the neighbourhood- Ghanshyam intently watching the money in their hands from outside the window of their hut. Though Ghanshyam was just ten years old, he had fallen in bad company and was rumoured to have been caught stealing on several occasions. The villagers spoke in hushed voices that he was beaten several times by those who had caught him red-handed in the adjoining villages. Manglu and his wife looked at each other anxiously, and decided to keep the tin box under their head and sleep, henceforth.

That night and from then on, they could barely sleep peacefully. For most part of the nights, Manglu kept the tin box under his head and then in the middle of the night, his wife would take it from him and keep it under her head. But, neither could sleep. Their necks and backs ached terribly, as a result. A good night's rest eluded them for the next few days and even months...

Finally, one morning, tears of joy welled up in their eyes as they counted for the umpteenth time. They had Rs 2,500/- in their saving kit. Manglu looked lovingly at his wife. *This anxiety of the past few weeks has taken a toll... her face looks so weary*, he said to himself and sighed. The next moment, he reminded himself that when he would come home in the evening with his new bicycle, all her weariness would simply vanish. He carefully tucked the money in his *dhoti* and left for work.

The night set in, and Manglu had not yet come home. His wife stood at the doorstep and kept looking in the direction from where he usually came walking. After an hour passed, her feet began to ache and she went inside but barely sat for 3-4 minutes before coming back again at the door. And then, she saw him coming merrily—walking a brand new bicycle along with him.

She ran forth and hugged him delightedly. 'You came on a bicycle and yet you are late today', she tried to complain while casting a shy and a loving look at him.

'Hah...I did not ride the cycle all throughout the way. I am not that skilled in riding the bicycle. Wherever it was crowded on the way, I used to get down and walk along with the cycle', he explained and pulled her cheeks mischievously. 'Let us do one thing... For a few days, let me practice in the village itself, and only thereafter, I will take it to the city', he added. His wife nodded in consent, confident that it would not take more than two days for his Manglu to get proficient at riding the bicycle.

Manglu's wife had guessed it correctly. After two days, Manglu got up early in the morning and got ready to go to work on his bicycle. He wanted to start early as despite the practice, he was a little afraid of the crowded areas on the way. He was still employed at Kripal Das's house. The construction at his residence was going to take further 3-4 days. That day, he reached nearly 30 minutes before his usual time.

‘Ahhhh! You have come quite early today, Manglu’, remarked Kripal Das, rubbing his eyes. ‘It is not even 7.30 am...’ And then, he glanced at the new bicycle Manglu was holding on to. ‘You have bought a new bicycle?’ he asked.

‘Yes, *sahib...*’ Manglu replied with a smile.

‘Looks as if you have loads of money with you’, Kripal Das said matter-of-factly and went inside.

It was a hot and a long day, for Manglu. There was a lot of work to be done, and by noon, Manglu was too tired and perspiring profusely. The humidity was causing more fatigue than usual. Around 2’o’ clock, the labourers finally kept their tools aside and called out to each other for lunch. Manglu, too, sat down with them and was about to open his lunch-box, when on an impulse, he felt like checking on his bicycle. He got up wearily and went to the backyard of Kripal Das’s house where he had parked it. He reached the spot and stood paralysed with sheer shock. There was no bicycle at the spot where he had left it in the morning. His head began to swim and he could see nothing for a few seconds. He sat down with a thud and started weeping inconsolably. A minute later, he got up and started shouting for help. He went out where all the labourers were having their lunch and asked them: ‘Have you... Did you see my new bicycle? It was there in the backyard... right there. I... I had left it there in the morning...’ He went about frantically asking everyone who was present there in the house. On getting no positive reply from anyone, Manglu ran out on the road and started asking the passers-by... the vendors... the owners of little shops outside. ‘Have you seen anyone taking a new blue-coloured bicycle from here?’

On hearing all the commotion, Kripal Das came out of the house. ‘What is all this fuss about? What has happened? Who is screaming here?’

Manglu entered the *verandah*, with his head bowed down in sheer despair. ‘*Sahib... sahib...* somebody has stolen my new bicycle. It is not where I had kept it in the morning... I do not know who did it...’ Suddenly, he remembered something and looked up accusingly at Kripal Das. ‘I had requested you to let me take it inside the house and keep it safely... but, you did not let me’.

Kripal Das did not like the tone in which Manglu was speaking to him. 'Did the bicycle have a lock?'

'Yes, *sahib*... I clearly remember locking it'.

With a grunt, Kripal Das went inside. The other labourers dispersed too, leaving Manglu alone to deal with his loss. Manglu went out again, and searched everywhere and kept asking everyone once again. Two to three hours passed and Manglu was still frantically searching in vain. His throat was parched and hunger pangs rose in his stomach. He had not paused or rested even for a minute since morning or gulped a little water either.

The evening had set in, and the labourers were winding up for the day. Manglu sat at the door-step and waited for Kripal Das to come out for making the daily payments to the labourers. He was thinking of asking him for a loan. *If I ask sahib for some money... he will understand my situation and help me. He is a sympathetic man. He knows I am a honest person and will return the amount to him eventually...* During the past few minutes, Manglu had decided that he would not go home without the bicycle. His wife would not be able to cope with the loss. *Her heart would break into pieces*, he knew. He was planning to ask his *sahib* to lend him Rs. 2,500/-, while promising him to return it gradually. He would work harder and save every penny he could and return the amount at the earliest.

Kripal Das came out of the house carrying his register and began calling out the names of the workers in order to give them their wage for that day. He called out Manglu's name and expressed his sympathy at the loss of the bicycle. He then opened his wallet and said: 'Here, Manglu... take this—25 Rs. It is your payment for half a day's work. After all, you did not work in the afternoon at all'.

Manglu was speechless. He was staring intently at Kripal Das's face... He then bowed his head and took the payment. With a heavy heart and a dejected look, he began walking back towards the village. His wife would be eagerly waiting for him to return on the bicycle.

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