

## *The New Boy*



Vinod K. Puri

Born in 1941, Vinod was brought up and educated in Amritsar. He attended Government Medical College, and subsequently trained as a surgeon at PGI, Chandigarh. He left for USA in 1969, and retired in 2003 as Director of Critical Care Services at a teaching hospital in Michigan. Married with two grown sons, he continues to visit India at least once a year.

**Apology-** I wish I could apologize to him! How to apologize for something that happened sixty five years ago? That means I was not more than eight or nine years old when I committed a horrible act of extortion. But the fact that I think about it and have thought about it for years – that has to mean something, right? And I seem to remember most of the events related to the incident as if they were happening on a television screen now. Let it be known that there is no way for me to apologize to the person who would be now my age, and unknown to me for the last sixty five years.

Ramesh was a delicate looking shy boy when he first joined our third standard class in Amritsar. The school was not much to speak of. In the late 1940s-early 1950s, the municipal committee ran these elementary schools with very limited funds, especially after the partition of India. The border town of Amritsar was devastated, and families must have sent the children to these neighbourhood schools for convenience. The two storey school was run in a rented building, about half a mile from our house. It was located at the end of a dark lane; the smelly open drains outside the houses often had small children with bare bottoms doing their business.

From my house, even my feet would carry me there in ten or fifteen minutes. We would walk through the Goal Bagh grounds towards Durgiana Mandir and cross the road which had some traffic. The fee was only four *annas* (1 rupee = 16 annas) a month for attending the school. Both my elder brothers had attended the same school.

For the first two grades, we sat on long jute mats laid lengthwise on the floor. In the third grade we got to sit on long low wooden benches. These were crudely constructed and painted a dark brown to mask gouges and ink stains. There were no individual seats. There were no desks, and no inkwells set in the wooden desks. That was to come later in another school, in the fifth grade. In the primary school we carried our own inkpots along with slates and *takhtis*. We would prepare the *takhtis* beforehand; they were wooden rectangular boards with stubby handles, on which we would spread special gooey clay, and allow to dry in the sun. Our pens were made of special reeds, sharpened with a knife and squared at the end. Our penmanship had to be good to pass. The lone teacher assigned to each class taught us everything, but the emphasis was on reading and writing. We did not have too many books, and almost no notebooks.

Though my mother insisted that we wash and bathe before going to school, not all kids seemed to change their clothes or wash up when they came to the school. Their shirt tails would hang over brown knickers or striped pajamas. Once a month the teachers held inspections, when our finger nails were examined. I even remember when kids would be lined up before a water tap and dispensed tooth-powder called *manjan*. They were instructed to use their index finger to rub it on their teeth and clean their mouths.

When Ramesh joined us in the third grade, he looked out of place. He was wearing a white shirt and half-pant, with his shirt neatly tucked inside. His hair was combed. He was even wearing a leather belt through his half-pants. He had proper leather shoes with socks, and the shoes were polished and laced up. He was in fact accompanied by a uniformed peon.

The teacher did not introduce him but we all knew that he was important. Subsequently, we discovered that his father was an important official. We were too young to be impressed by titles. But a peon in his khaki uniform would bring him on the back of a bicycle. As he got down, the peon would hand him a shiny tiffin box. Suffice it say that we were fortunate if our mothers had wrapped a roti in an oily rag for our lunch.

But I made friends with him. He was easy to talk to, not stuck up because his father rode in an official car. He was polite. But, at that time, friendships in this school did not extend beyond the school. I don't remember ever inviting any of my twenty five classmates to my home.

Ramesh was not that great in his studies. I was doing better. In this topsy-turvy world after India's partition, it was apparent that the teachers who knew only Urdu now had to teach in Hindi. So they were given four years by the municipal committee to learn basic Hindi. Since I had been learning some Hindi at home from Lal Devi, a teacher in an Arya Samaj school who lived on our street, I could help Harbans Lal, our teacher.

I remember in another class when the teachers had depended upon me to convert into Hindi a slogan, "Always Tell the Truth." This was to be painted high up on a white washed wall in a class room. This was in preparation for an inspection by the inspector of schools. The difficult word was 'always' which translated as *hamesha* in Urdu and Hindi. I had to convince the head master, Mr Bedi, as well as the teacher whose class room was to bear this proud inscription that *hamesha* was correct word in Hindi!

Our teacher, Harbans Lal was a friend of my father. I think they had grown up in the same neighbourhood in the inner city. With that advantage and also coming from a somewhat better socioeconomic class, Ramesh found it easier to be friends with me. The tall stoop shouldered master Harbans Lal would even let me watch the class as he would step out in the street to smoke a cigarette.

After a few weeks, Ramesh was not averse to sharing his lunch with me, as I unwrapped my *prantha* with some potatoes inside, while Ramesh tastefully arranged his tiffin dishes. He avoided the rough games of our classmates. During the recess, many of these boys loved to pick up the mats and whip them in the air with the intention of cleaning them. They raised dust clouds which were only good enough to make you cough and choke. Exactly at four in the afternoon, as winter time school closed, the uniformed peon would appear outside the class room to take Ramesh home.

My daily allowance of an *anna* was good for just a few things. Often a banana or small orange or a few cut pieces of juicy sugar cane called *ganderi*, or *aam-papar*, which is a dried parchment-like dark brown savoury made out of mango-pulp.

There was an old man who ran a dark and musty shop next to the school, and some vendors with carts or trays would appear at recess. Ramesh never patronized them, as his packed lunch would include a piece of fruit or sweet dish. There were few kids who seemed to have more money than Ramesh but we never saw him spend it.

It must have been warm season, though I am not sure. It had rained, and our teacher had generously given us time to play in Goal Bagh. Just a day earlier, my mother had taken me to Hall Bazaar to buy *chappals*, leather flip-flops good for easy walking; usually, it was my father who bought shoes for us boys. I was proudly wearing those chappals, accompanied by Ramesh and a few other boys.

We crossed the road and went through the wooden fence which surrounded Goal Bagh. The fence separated it from the road which you had to traverse to reach the school. We tried to avoid the mud as we slid down the embankment. There was a *beri*, a tree that bore sour and sweet fruit of berries. I took off my chappals and carefully inserted one into the other. I remember telling Ramesh to guard my brand new chappals as he was not going to climb the tree. He was fussy about not getting his clothes dirty. I climbed up and threw down the *ber* that we would later share. Ramesh had uncharacteristically pulled his shirt out of his half-pants and was gathering the *ber*.

When I climbed down, I looked for my chappals. They were nowhere to be found. They had disappeared in the mud, which was not too far away from the base of the tree. We looked for them frantically. We poked around with a branch of a tree, and we put our hands in the slushy evil smelling mud.

I was beside myself. I knew what my punishment would be! My mother had spent two rupees on those chappals, and she was always tight with money. She skimped and saved pennies to make do with her allowance of fifty rupees a month. I was crying, tears rolling down my cheeks. Ramesh was sad with a long face. He was almost trembling with fear, and could not speak.

“But I asked you to look after my chappals!” I yelled at him. “And you promised.”

He was quiet.

I grabbed him by his shirt collar and pushed him against the tree trunk he was standing under. He covered his face, expecting a blow. He abhorred physical violence.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion, “You will have to pay for it.” And I told him how much – two rupees because I had seen my mother pay that amount.

“I do not have two rupees,” Ramesh pleaded.

“I don’t care,” I yelled. “You know what is going to happen to me? I will get a thorough beating.”

He felt sorry for me. We negotiated for a long time. We settled that every day that he came to school he would give me a *takka* or half an *anna*. He would pay until the two rupees were paid off.

Predictably, when I reached home barefoot, my mother noticed it right away. And she wanted to know where I had left the new chappals. I had to tell her that they got lost in the mud. I got a tight slap, and an admonition that I would now have to wear my old sneakers which had holes in them!

In the family of three boys and any number of cousins who showed up, I was labelled a loser. I was mortified but had no recourse. I had lost my new chappals. I was glum and walked around the house like a sad sack.

Ramesh was good with his promise to pay me back. He would slip a two-paisa (1 anna = 4 paisa) coin in my hand in a quiet corner of the class room, stairs or verandah. My daily allowance had suddenly increased! It took a little time but I started to gloat about it.

I bragged to my older brother Satish that I could increase my daily allowance by a *takka*. He was astonished but ignored it as some weird play. I bragged in front of Janaki *bua*, my father's sister who was visiting from Batala. She was the most inquisitive of my father's five sisters. I showed her the anna that I got for my allowance that day, pulling out my pockets. They were empty. She waited patiently for me to return in the afternoon. That day I did not buy anything at recess, and showed her an anna and a *takka* in my fist. The distinct square coin smaller than the anna was not with me in the morning. She asked me how it happened. I laughed and declared that was it was magic!

In my child's mind, I had turned my mortification into a triumph. But to this day I have not told anyone how I made it happen. Ramesh dutifully paid me until I counted two rupees.

For my shoes, my father found an unusual solution. One of his wheeler-dealer uncles had acquired a huge consignment of condemned sneakers. So Satish and I were told to go his house in the city, and sort through hundreds of sneakers to select some that fit us. We went with a cloth bag, and found dozens of shoes with holes or missing soles. We picked up some which were spared the damage and brought them home. Now I could throw away sneakers after one week! And no one would say anything.

But what should I say about Ramesh? We were no longer close friends. Ramesh kept to himself. In the final year, the school shifted to another rented house. This was situated in the opposite lane. This school was sunnier and more open. At recess, the steel gate at the end of the lane would be opened to a small patch of grass. This play ground abutted against a lumber yard and had no trees. After the fourth grade, I knew that I would go to DAV school inside Hathi Gate. My older brothers were attending that and there was no question of my going anywhere else. Ramesh, I think, went to a different School.

So many years have gone by. I do not know what happened to Ramesh. Did he ever forgive me? I have lived with the guilt of having mistreated someone. At times I feel like a bully even though I know all children do it. Why should I feel sorry for myself? It is the gloating and boasting that I regret now. ❖