

THE STORY OF RAMU

It was the fifth day in a row. Ramu's father couldn't arrange for food even that day. The rains had failed them. The crop of rice this year had gone completely bad for the want of adequate water. Months of backbreaking hard work had yielded the Sevaks nothing but absolute starvation. It was a very painful fact to digest. Not only was hard work wasted, so too was the entire family savings amount. This was a perfect illustration of the hurdles that an Indian farmer has to overcome not to make profits, but just to earn his family's daily bread. Even after the abolition of the horrible Zamindari system and the introduction of land reforms, the condition of the average Indian farmer stayed where it was fifty years back. Lack of proper economic backing from the government and the banks forced them to mortgage everything they had to the local moneylenders. Lack of irrigation infrastructure left them very vulnerable and totally at nature's mercy. Insurance programmes to save them when they faced nature's wrath, were woefully missing. Shankar Sevak's plight was no different, especially now, when the rain Gods were in no mood to save him and his crops.

His fourteen-year-old son, Ramu, was feeling totally helpless. The thought of not contributing any thing to the family in this time of crisis frustrated him. Only thing that the illiterate farmer's illiterate son, even at his tender age, knew was extreme physical hard work. But at this time, even that was proving to be useless. Ramu saw his father breaking down with sorrow after the moneylenders cruelly threw the family out of their hut. It was around this time that Shankar found solace in liquor. Intoxication led to frequent family quarrels. One day, Ramu's father who had earlier never even raised his voice while speaking to him, let his hands loose at the young boy. Ramu was terribly hurt. His frustration got the better of him that day and he decided to run away from home.

Ramu travelled ticket less in the local train and landed up in the city. Ramu was hungry. Not a paisa in his pocket, Ramu wandered from place to place in search of some petty work that would earn him something that'd be enough to buy him food for that time. He went back to the railway station. He acted as a makeshift coolie and helped tired passengers transport their luggage to their respective vehicles. It was there that a couple impressed with the young boy's hard work, his sincerity and honesty in his work, offered him the job of their domestic helper for a princely sum of two hundred rupees! The amount might have looked paltry to anybody else but to Ramu, anything was better than starvation. He agreed readily.

Within a month's time, Ramu had won over the hearts of the entire family. Just his sheer hard work and single mindedness for his job were enough to earn him the praise that he was receiving. Add to that the various traits of his soothing personality and one can easily realise that what a great refreshing addition to the Sharma family he proved to be. Ramu was so respectful and obedient to Mr. and Mrs. Sharma that they would often tell their children to follow his example. Ramu looked after the needs of the junior Sharmas, Sunil and Suresh as if he were their elder brother, though the latter was actually a year elder to him. Mr. and Mrs. Sharma were both working and hence could not devote much time to look after the needs of their children. They soon realised the importance of Ramu's service in this regard. Ramu on the other hand, saw the reflection of his own parents in the Sharma couple and took every order of theirs as a religious decree and did everything possible to satisfy them, just as he'd do to his parents.

The lovable boy was always cheerful. Whenever Mr. Sharma came back from a tense day at his office, a smiling Ramu would greet him at the door. Quickly sensing that his master wasn't in the best of moods, he would bring him a nice cup of warm tea. Then he'd pick up his mouth organ and play such an enchanting folk tune that Mr. Sharma would be almost stress free by the time he finished playing. The mouth organ was something that he used to play very often in his village, and very well at that. He loved it so much that he carried it with him when he left for the city. Ramu had become the apple of the eyes of not only the Sharma family but also the entire neighbourhood. The wonderful boy was ever helpful to these neighbours whenever they met him outside the Sharma residence. Ramu became so popular that it was almost a feeling of pride for Mr. Sharma

whenever anybody praised him. His relentless service not only earned him a salary raise but also earned him the status of a family member, or so he thought.

But amidst all this, he had never forgotten his real family. He requested Mr. Sharma to send his entire salary to his family so that it could help his father who was otherwise struggling to make ends meet. Mr. Sharma suggested that a part of the salary should be put into a bank account in Ramu's name that can be used by him whenever he wished or needed. Ramu disagreed saying that his needs were being taken care of very well by the Sharma family and he needed nothing more. Such simplicity is very hard to find these days. His honesty too was unparalleled. Once he found a pair of earrings belonging to Mrs. Sharma who had lost it almost two months before Ramu had actually started staying with them, and promptly returned it to her. So moved was she that she spontaneously gave Ramu a hundred rupee note. Ramu though, refused it saying that he just did his duty.

Four years had passed. Mr. and Mrs. Sharma were close to their retirement while Suresh was close to his graduation. Ramu, with active encouragement from Mr. Sharma had learnt to read and write. Suresh however, in all these years had fallen in to bad company. He had done everything that he could have done to ruin his life. He was deep into smoking, drinking, drugs and what not? He did all this in total secrecy and without the knowledge of the entire family. His demand for money kept increasing every day. His parents kept supplying him without asking any questions. Things reached a point when Suresh could no longer ask his parents for money. He was left with no other option but to steal, not from somewhere else, but from his own place!

This carried on for quite some time. Once when Suresh got indications that his parents smelt something fishy, he quickly devised a plan. He shifted his empty alcohol bottles, cigarette packs and brown sugar packs to Ramu's room. Then he himself leaked this to his parents. Never in their dreams had they thought that their son could do something like that. So, the suspicion obviously fell on Ramu. Ramu pleaded ignorance when Mr. Sharma discovered the horrible things from his room. In shock that he was, Mr. Sharma ordered Ramu to come out with the 'truth'. In total disbelief of what was happening, Ramu kept saying that he didn't know anything. Mr. Sharma was losing his temper. He was determined to eliminate these horrible things from his house, lest it affect his children! He kept tormenting Ramu with interrogations that were as painful to Ramu as thorn pricks. His tears failed to pacify his master. Mr. Sharma slapped him hard. Ramu fell to the ground.

"Ramu, get me a cup of tea." screamed Mrs. Sharma the next morning. But Ramu was not there. He had left the place the last night itself. Suddenly, she felt so sorry for the entire episode that took place the night before. But Mr. Sharma was still angry. "Good riddance!" he shouted back when informed about Ramu's disappearance. But in a corner of his heart, he felt guilty for raising his hand on the boy. The smiling face of the lovely boy who played the mouth organ to ease his tensions suddenly started floating in front of his eyes. He rushed to his room. The same mouth organ was lying on the floor. He also scanned through many of Ramu's belongings. His memory brought tears to his eyes. At last, he also found a brown bag that Ramu considered as very personal and did not let any one touch it. The bag contained hundreds of letters that Ramu wrote to his father through all these years, but somehow deliberately never posted them. It was as if Ramu wanted to be close to his father only virtually, might be because Mr. Sharma had displaced his father's position in reality. Or so he thought. Reading the letters, Mr. Sharma realised the respect Ramu had for him and his family. But the last letter was such that Mr. Sharma just could not control himself. This letter was written the last night. It was very short and somewhat written in a hurry. It read,

"Dear father, today I lost the faith and love of Mr. Sharma. I've also lost the faith that I had in values like honesty. I was punished for a crime I did not commit. Today I've realised that a servant always remains a servant. However close he might get to the family, he can never be trusted in a manner in which members of the family are. It reminds me of the day when I left home.

Father, it feels as if you have slapped me again."

