

# Untold School Stories

**Three Fourth, Half Price, Bajji Bajji**  
Mohammed Khadeer Babu

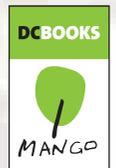
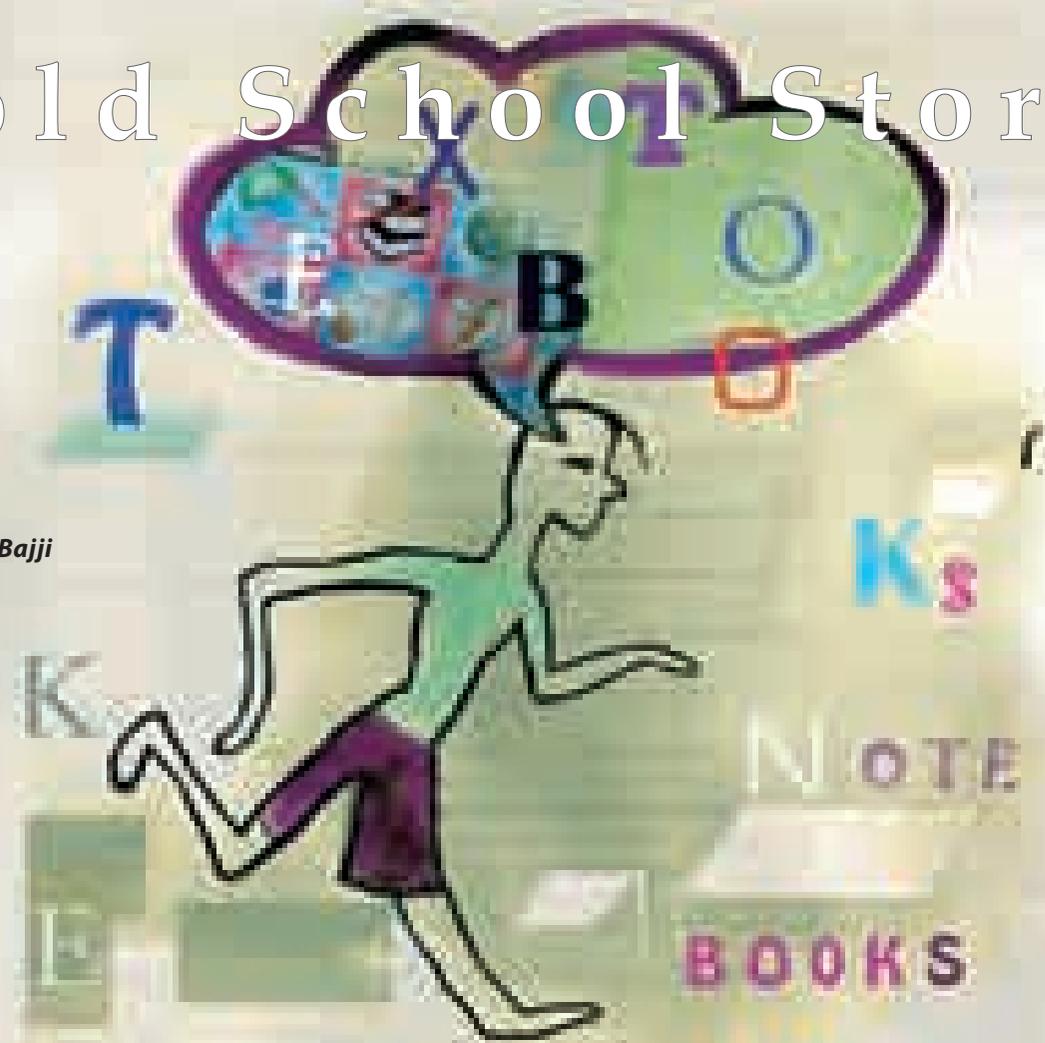
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Suresh B. V.

**Textbook**  
Nuaiman

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**Friends in School**  
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# **Three Fourth, Half Price, *Bajji Bajji***

**Mohammed Khadeer Babu**

Illustration  
**Suresh B. V.**

Translation from Telugu  
**A. Suneetha**

Series Editor  
**Deepa Sreenivas**





Students, please note. Textbooks required by all classes have arrived at our high school. Those who wish to purchase them can pay the price and collect them from the office in the afternoon after the third bell. There is still time for the arrival of Lepakshi notebooks. Those who want a set of notebooks should pay forty-eight rupees as advance. If anyone demands notebooks later, it will not be possible to provide them.

sd/ xxxx

Head Master, Vishvodaya

Written with white chalk on the blackboard, put up on the yellow wall next to the office room in our school, were these two points of note.

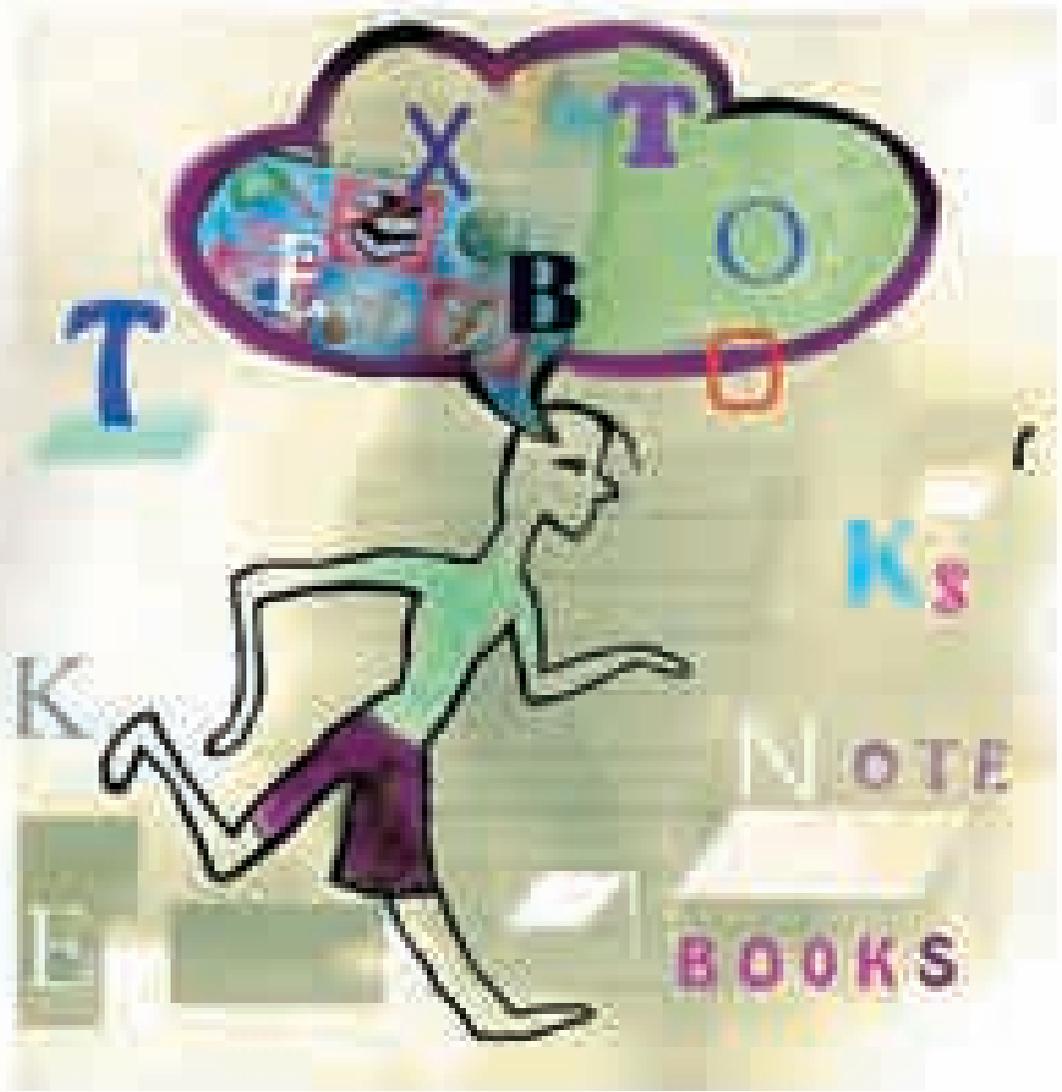
One point about textbooks: this does not concern us.

Next point about notebooks: this concerns us.

I say the issue of textbooks does not concern us because the mother and father who gave me birth hardly ever bothered to buy me a new set of textbooks, either in the Sixth or in the Seventh Class. I always had to make do with secondhand textbooks. Even now, since there was no guarantee that they would buy a new set of textbooks, I thought—why don't I look out for someone who has books that will be of use to me?

During this search, I came across the *setti* boy Gaademsetti Ramesh who lives close to my house. He is in the Ninth Class now. He had just passed out of the Eighth. He would have the Eighth Class textbooks that I need. I decided that if at all I buy textbooks, I should buy his.

Why? Because secondhand books have their own story.



There are three categories among them.

The first category—if one buys a fresh set of textbooks that very year, covers them with brown paper so that they don't get soiled, goes to the cloth store, gets the clear plastic cover used to wrap sarees, and covers the brown paper-covered textbooks with this plastic cover, staples it, preserves the inside pages carefully without making a single pencil or pen mark throughout the year; then, when one sells these books the next year, they easily get three-fourths the price.

This means that an eight rupees textbook will fetch six rupees.

But when one does not take good care of the new textbooks, does not cover them with paper, lends them to just about anybody, and soils the inside pages—these get sold at half price.

This means that an eight rupees textbook will fetch four rupees.

Yet another category: when one buys secondhand textbooks, destroys them further so that they crumble when touched—these belong to the *bajji bajji* category.

Such books would be sold at one-fourth price.

An eight rupees textbook will fetch only two rupees.

But why should we get *bajji bajji* textbooks? Or crumpled half price textbooks? We should possess only three-fourths price textbooks. That too, obtained at half price.



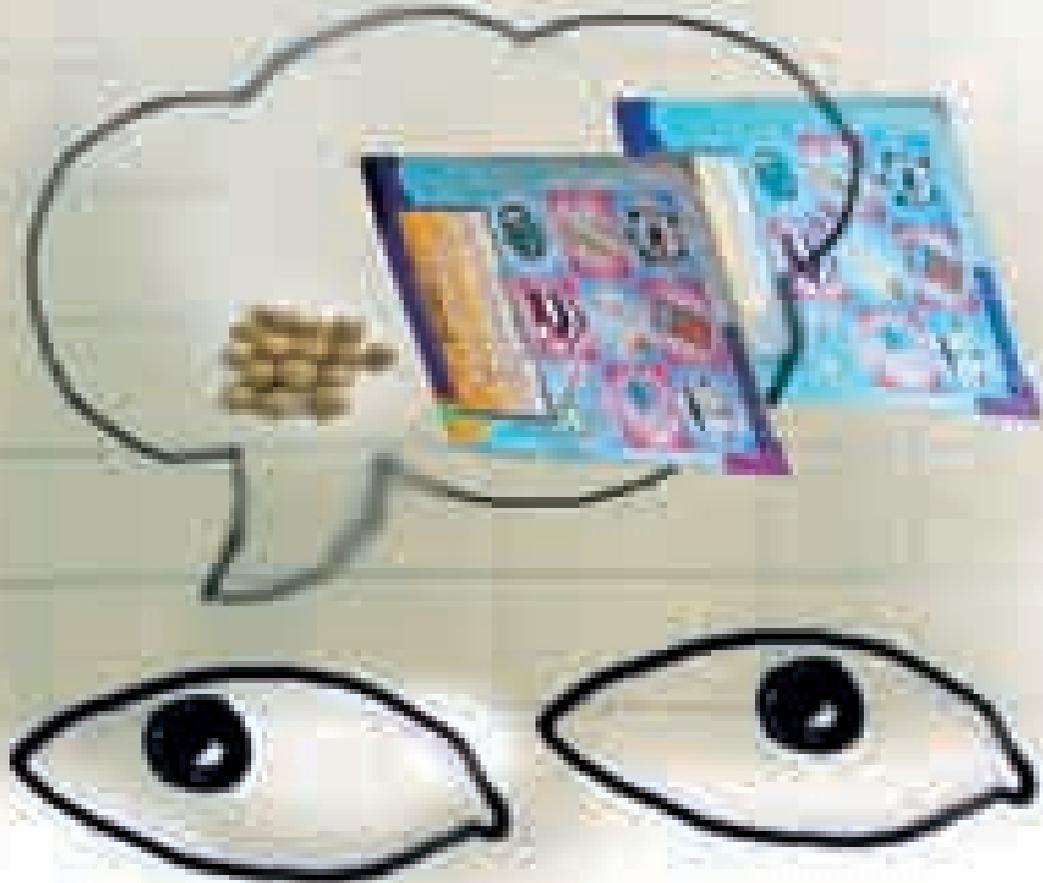
Since the only books that meet all these demands are those with Gaademsetti Ramesh, I went and asked him for the books.

Without even looking at my face, he said, "No way! How neatly have we kept the textbooks! You can buy them at three-fourths price, but not at half price. Don't I have to buy the Ninth Class textbooks by adding some more money?"

I did not know how to respond to this, so I kept staring at him, scratching my head.

He may look thin and emaciated, as if about to disappear into thin air, but he can finish a kilo of *channa*. He stuffs his pockets with it and keeps munching throughout the day. When he laughs, small pieces of *channa* are visible whitely against his black gums.





Looking at these pieces, I got an idea. "Orey Ramesha! My father went to Nellore to repair a motor in a daal mill. He said that he will definitely get half a bag of *channa* when he returns. I will give you a little of that. Why don't you please give me the books at half price?" I made up a lie as sturdy as a wall. "Abba! We have *channa* even at our house, to eat with jaggery. We don't need yours," he said, making light of my offer.

I was thinking of alternate plans when Ramesh's mother came and said to him, "It is alright! Why don't you give him the books at half price?" Ramesh's mother is a very nice lady. She is a soft person.



Moreover, she likes stories a lot. She gets *Chandamama* and *Balamitra* every month. She is fond of me because whenever I go to their house, I read these books greedily. "Look Ramesha, he asked for something, why don't you give it? One should not link everything with money, son!" said Ramesh's mother and went inside.

I took up where she had left off. "Even your own mother is telling you to give me the books. One should not go against one's mother's words. You will get *punyam* if you do as your mother says. If my mother had asked me to give the books away free instead of at half price, I would do it at once," I said, holding his chin.

(My mother would not say it even if she were to die. Even if she said it, I would never do it. Didn't I sell my Seventh Class *bajji bajji* textbooks to the old *setti* on weight basis because no human being was ready to buy them, rather than give them away free?)

He made a face and said, "Okay! For this year, I will let you have them. Next year, I know you will be back again for the Ninth Class textbooks. Then, I won't sell for half price."

"Okay *ra!* You are really something! By that time, by God's grace, I will buy them at full price," I said, getting hold of the three-fourths priced textbooks for half price.

Now though my anxiety about Eighth Class textbooks was over, my worry about notebooks still remained. The Lepakshi notebooks mentioned on the notice board were mouthwateringly enticing.





But were they in my destiny? Was my father capable of that much?

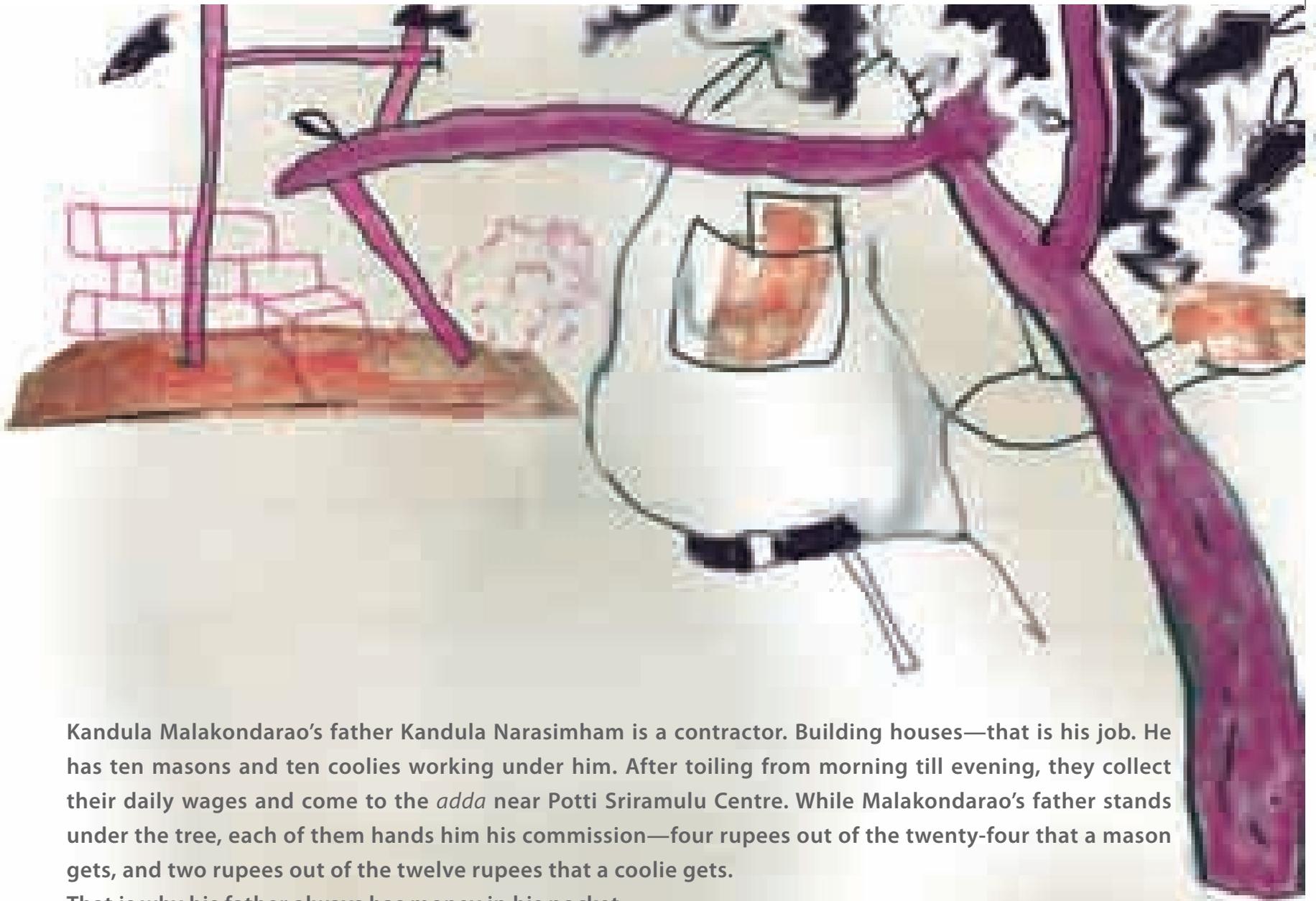
While I was wondering how to go about it, I saw Kandula Malakondarao, who was standing under the *gulmohar* tree, counting his fingers.

“What Malakondayya? What are you counting?” I went and asked him.

“Nothing. I have money to buy textbooks. I also have money to pay for the Lepakshi notebooks. But the Headmaster says that it will take a while before the Lepakshi notebooks arrive. Till such time, I wonder whether I should buy at least six notebooks for rough work, one per subject?” he said.

My stomach burned with envy at these words.





Kandula Malakondarao's father Kandula Narasimham is a contractor. Building houses—that is his job. He has ten masons and ten coolies working under him. After toiling from morning till evening, they collect their daily wages and come to the *adda* near Potti Sriramulu Centre. While Malakondarao's father stands under the tree, each of them hands him his commission—four rupees out of the twenty-four that a mason gets, and two rupees out of the twelve rupees that a coolie gets.

That is why his father always has money in his pocket.



And my father?

Money comes one day, does not come on another. Moreover, my father has to pay those working under him, they don't give him anything.

And that is why, when we ask for money to buy notebooks, my father says, "Let's see, let's see," and Malakondarao's father says, "Take, take."



Now, I thought, I should be happy because if Malakondarao got something then I too would gain something. And so, I devised a plan. "Malakondayya, you don't know the problems with notebooks," I said. "They are of one type in Srinivasa, and of another in Chellapilla. Some absorb ink. On some, if you write on one side, you can see it on the other. You take me along with you. I will pick the good ones for you."

*"Abba, you saved my life. Okay, let us go,"* he said.

That evening, both of us went to Potti Sriramulu Centre, collected money from his father, went to Chellapilla Book Center and bought six notebooks. There was the joy of looking at their hard covers, and the smell of new paper. But the sad part was that the joy was not mine.

On our way back, I asked him, "Malakondayya, didn't you buy a lot of notebooks in the Seventh Class? You had one set for school and one set for tuition. Apart from that I remember you keeping separate notebooks for important questions in *Maa badi* Question Bank. What happened to all of them?"

"They are all there. I will sell them on weight basis."

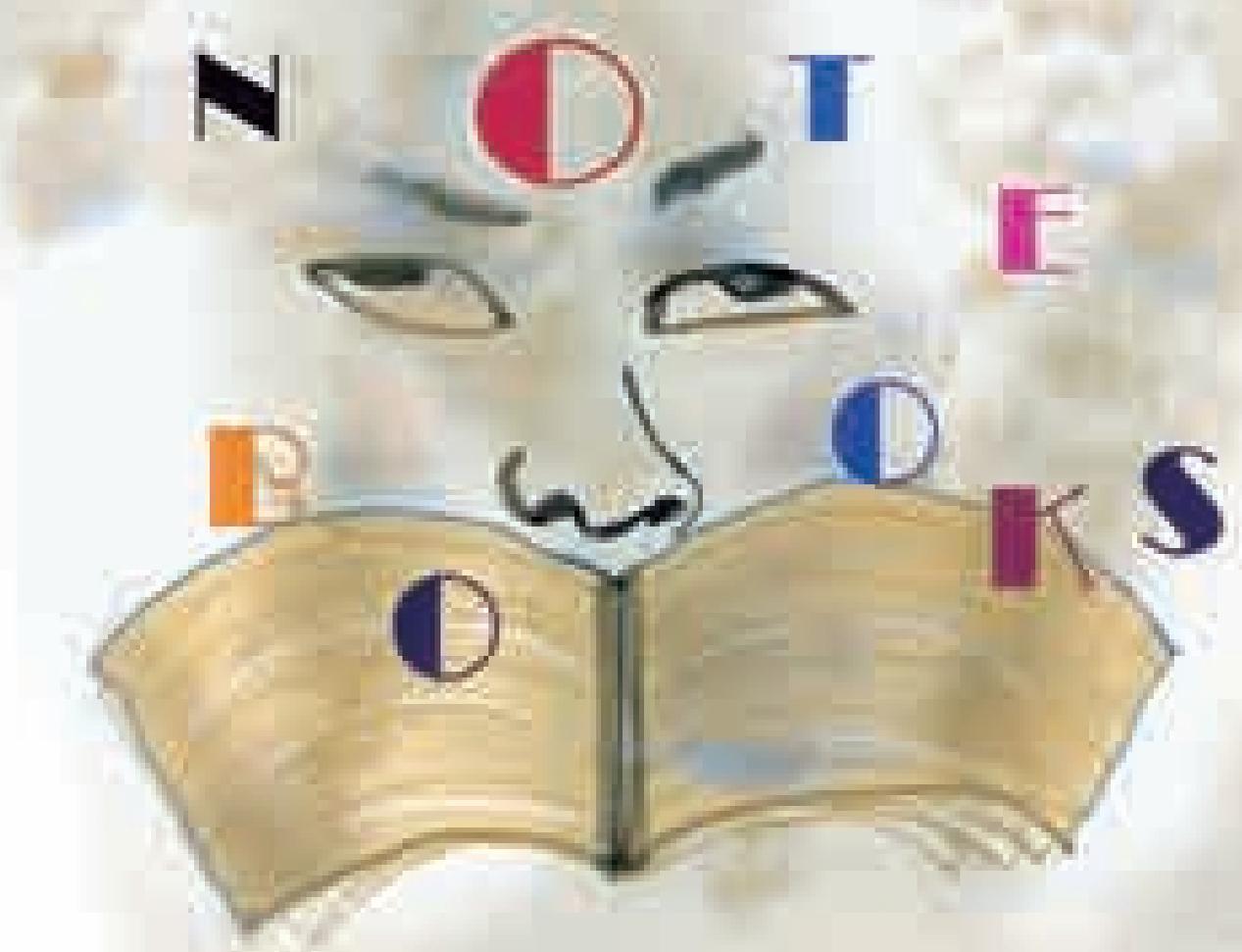
"Don't do that. Give them all to me. Your handwriting is very good. If we give them to some new student in Seventh Class, it will be very useful. You will get *punyam*," I told him.

"What an idea!" he exclaimed. He found the old notebooks at home. "Take them and give them away," he said as he handed them over to me.

There were twelve in all.



I took them all home, carefully put them on the floor, sat cross-legged in front of them, neatly tore off the blank pages in each notebook, divided these into two parts, and then, putting chart paper on top, I stitched two notebooks.



After stitching them, I brought them close to my nose. When I smelt them, they smelt of delicious old paper. I thought, "The Lepakshi notebooks can go jump in the village tank. Aren't these good enough for us?"

I came out of the house and stood outside. I saw Gaademsetti Ramesh going home with the new set of Ninth Class textbooks.

I went to him, made him give me a little of the *channa* in his pocket and had an eyeful of the new textbooks, thinking of them as my own children who would remain in a *paraya ghar* before returning to me in a year. So I accompanied them and Gaademsetti Ramesh till his house.

# **Textbook**

**Nuaiman**

**Illustration**  
**Chithra K. S.**

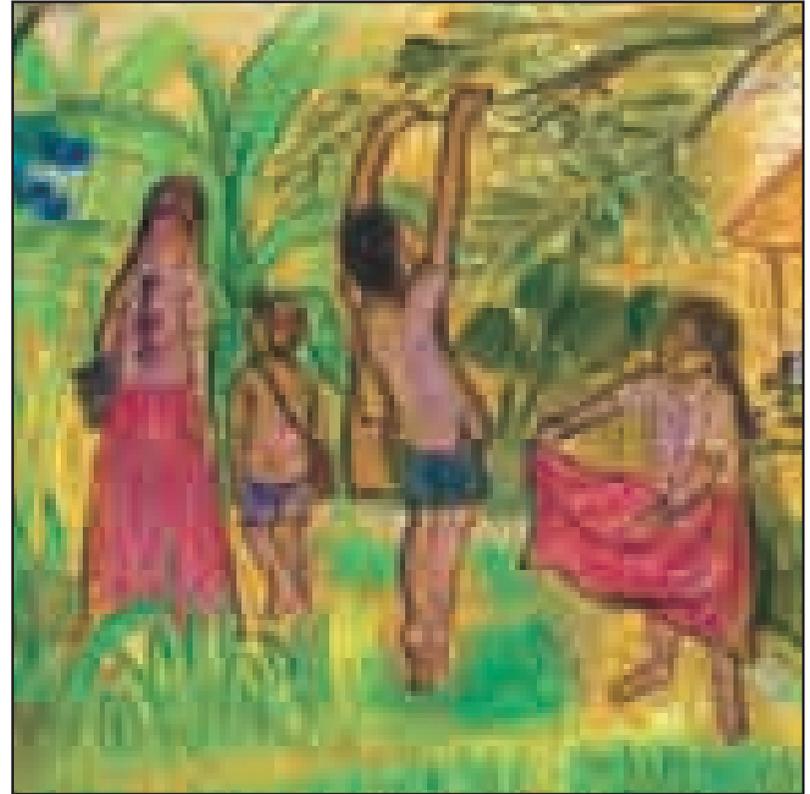
**Translation from Malayalam**  
**M. T. Ansari & Liji Varghese**

**Series Editor**  
**Deepa Sreenivas**



It was Saheer's first day of school.

**H**e proudly walked to the school, holding on to his father's hands, almost pulling him along. New shirt, a new bag on his back and a yet-to-be-opened umbrella in his other hand. It would be more exact to say that he bounced along, right from the bus stop. He was happy, but also in a hurry. What if it rained? What if his new shirt became dirty? Uppa would definitely scold him. Would Uppa come with him to school everyday? Hope not. It would be more fun to walk with his older brothers and sisters—playing and laughing. But he would not fuss about this. Otherwise, he may not be allowed to go to school at all. As it was, he got to go to school only after a lot of crying and complaining, and a great deal of waiting.

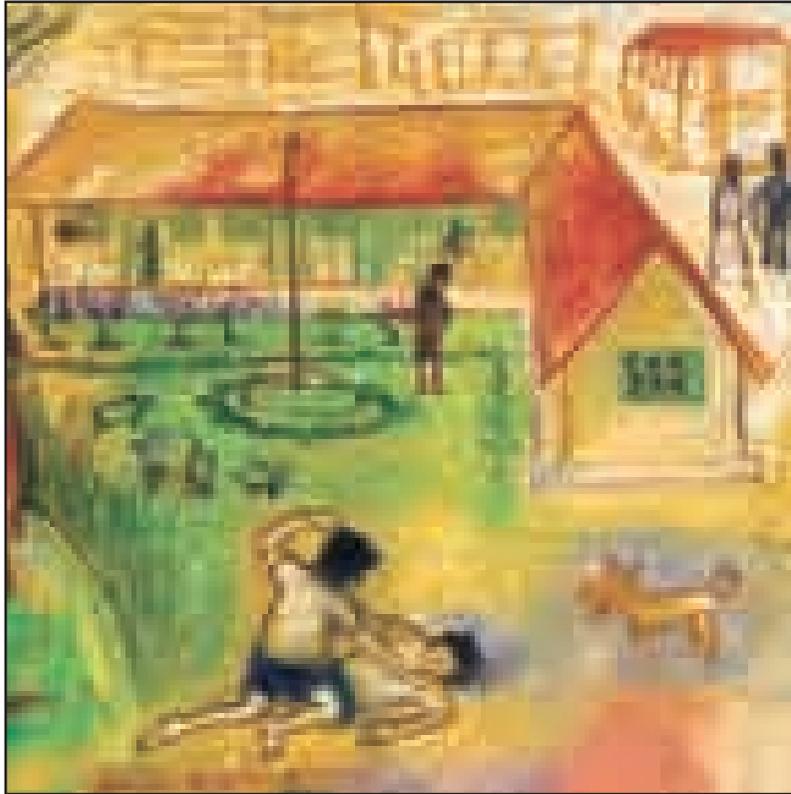




**W**hen the older boys and girls from the family and the neighborhood went to school, Saheer used to accompany them till the paddy fields. Lunch in the rectangular tiffin box, textbooks full of pictures, the tick marks that teachers gave with colorful chalks on the black slates . . . school was all these for Saheer. By the time his brother came back from school in the evening, his shirt would have become dull and dirty. Saheer would imagine himself playing “cops and robbers” at the big playground he thought of as school. Ever since, he would cling to Umma’s dress and sob, demanding to be allowed to go to school. Many times, Saheer’s enthusiasm and longing had made Uppa ask Govindan Teacher if he could be admitted to the school. But the reply was always: “He has to be at least five years old.”

Today, as he walked to school for the first time with a colorful bag on his shoulder, and an umbrella imprinted with dreams, Saheer felt like a big boy.



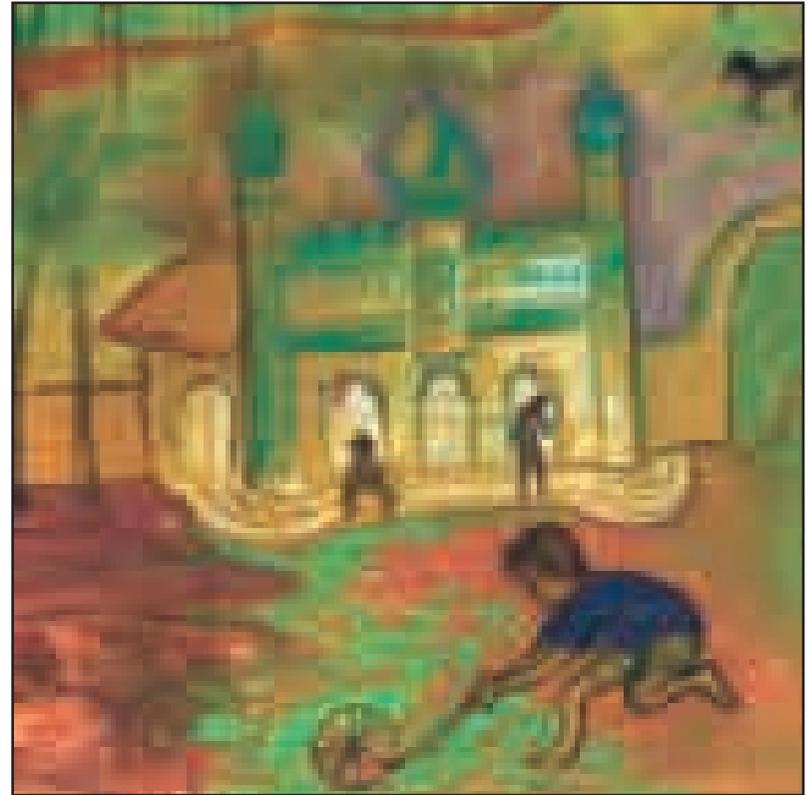


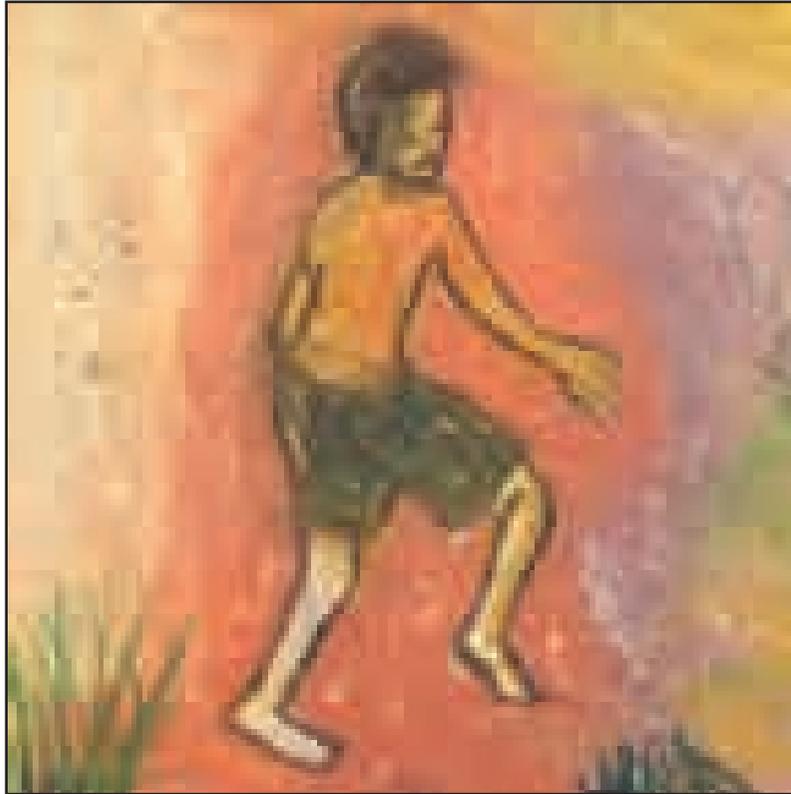
**Y**ear after year, on the black slate, next to his shapeless letters, teachers put ticks and crosses. He moved up to the Sixth Class. He felt very sad on the rare occasions that he got a beating from the teacher. He would remember that there were no beatings in his school-dreams! And in his new fantasies he would snatch the cane from the teacher and throw it out of the window.

Still, Saheer liked school. He liked Govindan Teacher, Gangadharan Teacher, Shyla Teacher, Sulaiman Teacher and all. Yet, sometimes, at school, Saheer felt sad. He felt as if everyone, his father, mother, grandfather and all his dear ones, were somewhere far away! It was as if all those whom he loved and who loved him were lost. Even the worlds that were familiar to him felt distant in school.

Saheer lived in a small village called Puthan Kunnu near Kozhikkode. He had so many friends there—Rasheed, Abdulla, Rahman, Shafeeq, Shamsuddin, Rahim—and lots and lots more. The Quran verses that came floating through every morning and evening, Abdulla Ustad’s *azan* that wafted from the mosque five times a day, the ever prayerful Uppa with his *thasbeeh mala*, the *dikr* every Thursday after the *magrib*, the tea after the *dikr*, and the sharing of *pathiri* after the tea, playing ‘leaf-ball’ with friends in the masjid compound every evening—these were part of Saheer’s world from as long as he could remember.

Every morning Saheer went to the madrasa. The madrasa class was from seven to nine in the morning. Mammu *ustad* taught Arabic letters, Quran recital, namaaz and other prayers. After madrasa, Saheer rushed home in order to get ready for school, three kilometers away. On most days, his breakfast was a cup of coffee and biscuits, which he had very early in the morning. Sometimes after the madrasa classes, he would have tea. By nine thirty, Umma would have neatly arranged the tiffin box and books in his bag. He would just pick that up and run to school.





**C**lasses started at sharp ten o'clock or, at nine fifty on assembly days. If he happened to be late even by ten minutes or so, he would have to stand outside the classroom for that whole period and then follow the Class Teacher to the Staff Room to be marked present for that day. There, in front of other teachers, he would be thoroughly scolded.

Most of Saheer's school life was an anxious race from the madrasa to school. The fear of missing a class, the fear of being scolded by the teacher . . .

Sometimes Saheer used to think that he would soon be able to beat P.T. Usha. Indeed, by the time he was in the Sixth Class, Saheer was very good at running races.

Just as much as the school and the madrasa, there was another world that Saheer so loved. That was Grandmother's world of stories and ballads. When she recited the *Nafeesat* ballad, anyone would stop to listen. She had such a distinctive voice, and a beautiful sense of rhythm. Saheer learned a lot of history from the songs and legends, from these stories that did not appear in his textbooks or in *Balarama* and *Poompaatta*. The stories of Mohiuddin Sheikh, of the battle of Badar, of Aliyar Thangal, the love story of Badarul Muneer and Husnul Jamaal, the stories of the *auliyas* of Ervadi and Mutthupeta . . . When Grandmother recited these stories, it was like meeting, face to face, all his familiar heroes. Saheer would often wonder how she memorized such long pieces.

But Saheer felt sorry that none of his friends in school knew these songs or stories. "Why don't they have these songs and stories in school textbooks?" he had once asked Grandmother. She had not replied. Maybe she didn't know the answer either. And Saheer never asked that question again.



Saheer wanted to take Grandmother to school one day, and make her sit on Shyla Teacher's chair to recite all these songs and stories to the whole class. But would it ever happen? Would Shyla Teacher ever allow such a thing?

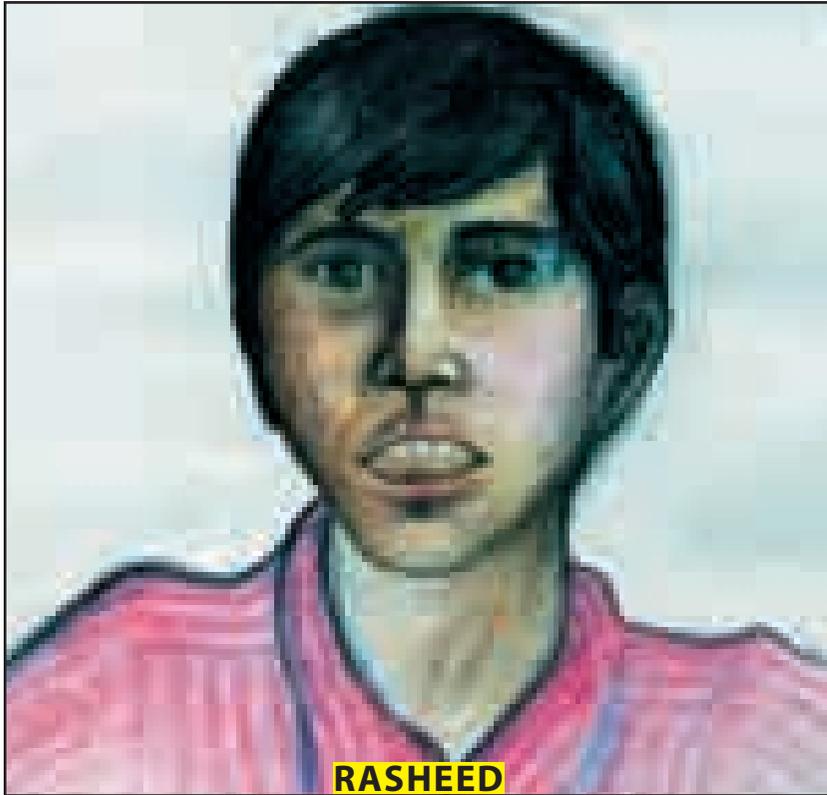


**F**or the Sixth Class B Division, every day, the fourth period was Malayalam. Since Onam examinations were close, most of the teachers were doing revisions in class. The Malayalam teacher, Gangadharan, as usual, came into class with his cane placed in the textbook like a book-mark. He went through some old question papers and explained the model to the class. He went on, “Most of you fail to answer the ‘Explain the Context’ question. Often, you don’t even remember the names of the characters in the lessons.” He asked all the students to write down in their notebooks the names of the characters in each of the lessons for practice.

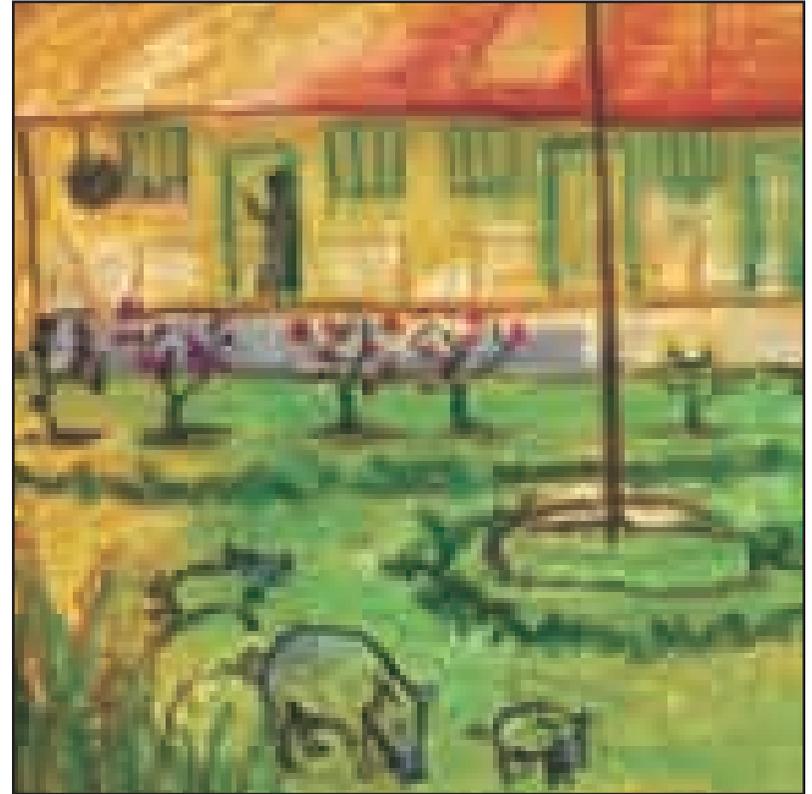


**S**aheer also went through each lesson quickly and noted down the names of the characters. There were eleven characters from four lessons. When they finished the task, the teacher turned to Saheer and asked him to read the answers aloud. Saheer read:

“Lesson Number One: ‘The Good Friend’; Characters: Kuttan, Unni, Kunjulakshmi and Ammu. Lesson Number Two: ‘The Cunning Ramu’; Characters: Ramu, Madhavi and Aromal. Lesson Number Three: ‘The Fruit of Labour’; Characters: Raman, Kunjunni, Sathyan . . .”



**A**fter a pause, in a sad but strong voice, he added, “. . . and Rasheed.”



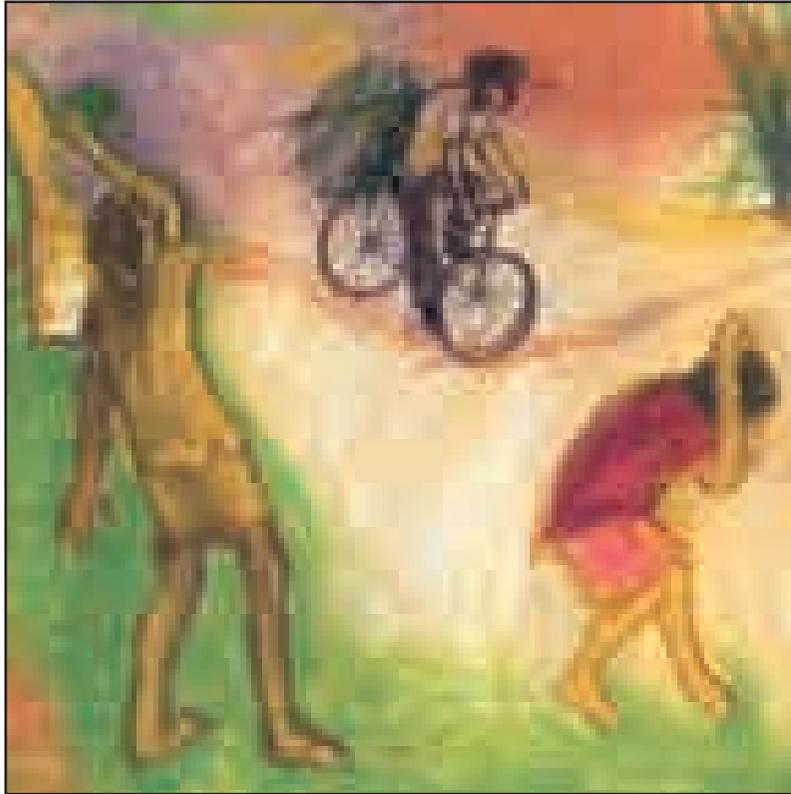
**T**he whole class fell silent. Gangadharan Teacher took the partly hidden cane in his hand. His curious eyes popped over the gold-framed spectacles. He asked Saheer: “What was that? Where did you discover that name? Such a name is not there anywhere in the whole textbook!”

**S**aheer stammered, “Sir, because . . . nowhere in this text is there a Muslim’s name . . .”

As all the children burst out laughing, Saheer gathered courage to look at Gangadharan Teacher. The teacher rapped the cane on the table with force. The whole class fell silent. Controlling his anger, the teacher asked Saheer: “Saheer, are you talking communalism?”

Saheer did not understand the question. He wanted to ask Gangadharan Teacher what he meant. But just then the lunch bell rang.





**W**ith tiffin box in hand, Saheer ran to the tap to wash his hands along with his friends. He raced out . . . to be the first.

# **Friends in School**

**Joopaka Subhadra**

**Illustration**

**Saumya Ananthakrishna**

**Translation from Telugu**

**R. Srivatsan**

**Series Editor**

**Deepa Sreenivas**



“**T**omorrow is flag hoisting. Do you have everything ready?” Sreelatha asked her friend Suvarna, moving her bag from one shoulder to the other.

“What do you mean, everything?” Suvarna shot back, kicking her feet and raising clouds of dust.

“You know, like school dress, ribbons and the rest . . . Are all your things ready?” Sreelatha clarified, kicking up dust herself.

“Well, I have a new school dress, and new ribbons too. What about you?” Suvarna asked.

“*Abba!* I don’t have a new dress, only the old one. I have to crisp it up. Wash it with soap twice or thrice and rinse it in blue, then starch and iron it, and it will dazzle like new,” said Sreelatha, preening. “But when did you get your new ones stitched?”

“When school reopened, Ayya got three uniforms stitched. I used only one and set the other two aside,” said Suvarna smugly.

“My mother said she would get me a new one after the cotton balls were picked. Till then, I have only these to wear,” Sreelatha said gloomily.



Sreelatha and Suvarna had studied in the same school from the First Standard onwards. They were from the same village. After primary school, Sreelatha's parents did not want to send her to the high school in the neighbouring village. Why only Sreelatha's parents, no family in the village ever sent girls to a school outside. The reason they let them go to the village school at least was that the girls could look after the house and go to school too without much difficulty.

"Leaving flock and fowl, abandoning pots and pans, like a man, what is the use of all her learning?" thought Sreelatha's parents, "In any case, she will have to leave with whoever we get her married to." Even though she wanted to study very much, she could not oppose her parents' decision.

Learning that Sreelatha had stopped going to school, the teacher had visited her home. "Your daughter is very intelligent. Don't tie such a good student to the stove and pot and ruin her life," he had argued, struggling long and hard to win her father's ear.



**N**ot only that, Suvarna's father, weaver Sambanna, had been looking out for a companion for his daughter. He was hoping that the two girls would go to school together. Sambanna sat Sreelatha's father Poshalu down and said, "Poshanna, after all, how far is the Chennapuram School from our village? It is within earshot. It is possible to go there and return before spit dries. My daughter Suvarna will also be going there. They are both girls; they can do their house work in the morning and will be in front of our eyes at dusk."

"I too want to send her, but I fear it's not safe," said Poshanna.

"Times have changed. When the world goes one way, why should we insist on going another! From generation to generation, will you keep soiling your hands and prodding your bullocks to live? Leave all this behind and send your daughter to school," said Sambanna to Poshanna.

Poshanna thought hard. Rather than watch his daughter's face dull with wage work, he preferred to see her smiling and playful as she went to school with her bags. "Truly, if our daughters gain knowledge, we will twirl our moustaches with pride. Somehow or the other I will send my Sreelatha to Chennapuram to study," he assured Sambanna. From then on, Sreelatha and Suvarna went to school and returned together. They became good friends.



Suvarna's father went from village to village on his motorcycle carrying bundles of new clothes for sale. Her mother ploughed their fields. Now, Sreelatha's family had just half an acre of dry land. The seeds planted there gave a small crop. Her mother and father did daily-wage work to make ends meet. Sreelatha studied better than Suvarna. She took notes carefully. She went to school regularly and did her homework with ease. The teachers were full of praise for her. Sometimes, if Sreelatha had work at home and could not go to school, Suvarna would also stay back; school was boring without her friend. It was the same for Sreelatha. When they fought they stopped talking to one another but they would quickly make up on the way and start chattering. They had fun together; they would return to the village playing happily. They would share the food they had brought from home with each other. They would exchange beads, chains, bangles and *bindis* and enjoy themselves. But all this happened only at school or on the way. Back in the village, they would go their way quietly, like separated garlic pods.



“So you are not going to wear a new dress?” asked Suvarna again.

“How can I wear what I don’t have?” replied Sreelatha with a small face.

“I have two, don’t I? Wear one,” said Suvarna, looking at Sreelatha with affection.

“Ammo! No! Will your people ever keep quiet if they come to know?” Sreelatha asked anxiously.

“I will get it without letting them find out,” said Suvarna with confidence.

“If you so much as hold my hand in front of your mother, she looks me up and down with a hundred frowns on her face,” said Sreelatha.

“It is after all only for a day! Wear it there and take it off here. Don’t we exchange beads and bangles? This is just like that,” said Suvarna, trying to convince her.



Sreelatha too wanted to be happy wearing the new uniform. But if anybody came to know, smiles would go awry and there would be unnecessary quarrels and fights. And if there were fights, that would only lead to "Stop school. Why ask for trouble?" Still, though she was scared, she agreed to this plan for Suvarna's sake. They parted on that note and went to their own houses.

Next morning, Suvarna brought her new uniform in her bag and put it in Sreelatha's, saying, "You must wear it tomorrow." Sreelatha brought the dress home but she was full of anxiety. What if her parents saw it and asked, "Why do you need somebody else's finery?" What would her reply be? But when they left early for work on the morning of fifteenth August, she was glad that there was nobody to stop her from wearing the new dress.

Sreelatha and Suvarna wore the new uniforms and went to school. Even during the celebrations of flag hoisting, Sreelatha's stomach churned with the fear that her borrowed finery would lead to a loss of face. As they returned home one or two people did ask, "Your father may not have a broken paisa to hand, but he has stitched you a good dress, hasn't he, *polla?*"

Eating chocolates and biscuits on the way back, Suvarna said to Sreelatha, "Don't wash the uniform. As soon as you return, take it off, wrap it in paper and bring it tomorrow."

"Shouldn't I wash it?" Sreelatha asked, surprised.

"If you wash it, people in your house will ask where the new dress came from. Our secret will be out there, right on the treetops!" said Suvarna, running to her house.



The next day, Suvarna came home, hiding the clothes Sreelatha had returned in a paper packet among her books. As soon as she saw her daughter, Suvarna's mother said, "Are you back, my child? The buffalo-calf has broken loose from its tether and is running here and there. Bring it back."

She took the bag of books from Suvarna's shoulder. "That calf is such a nuisance; it never stays home! No rope is strong enough to tie it down," thought her mother as she hung the bag on the wooden hook.

Meanwhile, Bhoomakka, the toddy-tapper, came in. "Kovurakka, has your daughter come back?" she asked.

"She just came in but had to go out to round the calf up. What work do you have with her, sister?"

"I wanted a pen from her."

"What do you want a pen for?"

"My son wants to write Buchhireddy's son's address . . ." replied Bhoomakka.

Suvarna's mother went into the house and put her hand in the school bag. When she could not find the pen, she put aside the books and the packet of clothes, pulled out the pen and gave it to Bhoomakka. Then, as she returned the books into the bag, she saw the clothes in the torn paper wrapping. She saw the slightly soiled white blouse and the blue skirt. "Why has this girl put dirty clothes in her bag?" she wondered. "I'll ask her when she comes back," she thought as she laid them aside.



Suvarna drove the calf back. Handing her the rope to tie the animal, her mother asked “*Bidda*, where are the clothes in your bag from?” Suvarna was thrown off balance by this sudden question. She hadn’t anticipated that her mother would see the clothes and ask her about them. She didn’t know what to say. Too startled even to make up a lie, she told her the truth hesitantly, fearfully.

“What is wrong with you, you miserable wretch?! First, why did you give those clothes to that Madiga girl? And then you bring it back!! Why have you put them among your books after taking them back from her?” her mother shouted, rushing into the house. She picked up the package of clothes and threw it in the yard in a rage.

“I gave it because she is my friend. What if I did?” asked Suvarna quietly.

“Friends! Friendship is only in school, not in our village! You have ruined the new clothes. Burn them! Why did you bring them back? How can you wear it after that creature has worn it?! If you didn’t understand this, didn’t that thing at least know? How dare she make *you* carry the clothes she wore!” she ranted, beating the child in a blind fury.

“May her study become worthless rocks! As soon as she learnt four alphabets she has forgotten the difference between high and low. Has her pride gone to her head? Have her parents not told her the difference in our status? Why are you standing still? Pour kerosene and set it on fire!” She pushed her daughter away, went to the water trough and washed her hands clean. Suvarna stood weeping, looking at the clothes that had fallen out of the torn packet.

“Poor Sreelatha, exactly what she feared has happened. I had to give Mother the bag and run after this animal, otherwise I could have hidden the clothes safely. The secret is out. Curse this calf!” Suvarna thought. More than the beating her mother had given her, she was distressed by such abuse of her bosom friend. Leaning on the fence, she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Aren’t you human, girl? I asked you to pour kerosene on the clothes and burn them, and you stand there stubborn!” cried her mother, fetching the kerosene from the stove. She poured it on the clothes and prepared to set fire to them. Suvarna, as she stood in tears, was moved to action by a sudden flash that commanded her hands and legs. She snatched up the clothes and raced heedless to Sreelatha’s house. Suvarna’s mother stood frozen in shock, unable to follow her child.



# *Anveshi*

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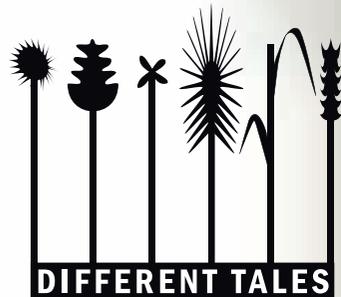
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