
Appa's Coat

(Translation of the Marathi Short Story '**Appancha Koat**' by Bharat Saasne into English. From the anthology Laal Phulaancha Zaad, Dilipraj Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., Pune, January, 2010)

I was quite young then. I might be twelve years old. We used to live in the Bombay Suburbans then. 'We' mean me, my grandmother and grandfather. Only three of us. I used to call my grandfather Appa; because Baba addressed him like that. Baba and Aai were employed. They thought that it was convenient if I lived with Appa. Baba and Aai used to come on Sunday or holiday because Aai could not take me to school, looking after me properly on account of her job. She used to go a long distance for her job and used to return exhausted at night. They had taken the decision to me keep at Appa when I was very young. Since Appa-Aajji were fond of me I had no reason to complain. Appa-Aajji were quite happy in my company. Otherwise how could they have spent their time? On whom would they have shouted at? Moreover, Appa was tired due to old age. I used to take him for a stroll holding his hand. In this manner, it was convenient for Appa and Baba-Aai that I stayed at his home. Therefore, I lived in the suburbs with Appa.

My friendship with Appa was deep down. I could correctly guess what he wants and doesn't want. The first thing was that there was no peer around. And even if there was any one around I didn't have time to play with them. After returning from school I was supposed to take Appa for a stroll or to a friend of his. Therefore, Appa's friends were my friends too. They used to adore me. I used to run for errands for them. I had mixed up and had become the part of the circle of those tired people.

That was the age of getting civilized. It was the age of learning by heart that one must never lie. Not as simple as that but the training was on those lines, clear and easy to follow. It was given in each possible way, in school, in books and at homes. I suddenly realized in this age that a truth is sometimes a lie and a lie could sometimes be a truth and my acquisition changed at once. Further I realized that things taught in a simplistic manner were quite taken for granted. Actually, things have many shades of meaning. A particular thing is true in a given situation and it is not true in another situation. Nobody teaches us these things. I learnt it from an incident. Further, I could only analyze it.

Activities of these pensioner people started in the evening. They were not supposed to go by local anywhere. Very slowly their life of 'no crowd and haste' used to creep ahead. I used to help Appa holding his hand climb down the staircase in the evening. Then we used to walk slowly to his friend grand uncle Mr. Datar. Another smoker uncle already used to be there. He was named like that because he

always smoked *beeris*. Grand uncle Mr Deshpande also used to be there. These old men then played cards and chess. Quarrels and debates also ensued. I was a jury at such instances. Sometimes they spoke on politics too. During such times I used to sit reading in the balcony or just heard their radio. There was no one of my age there. These three friends of Appa lived in various localities. Among them the smoker grand uncle was poor. He lived in congested and shabby locality.

There was a mystery behind the smoker grand uncle. He had a son called Shambhu. Uncle never pronounced his name. If someone called his name, remembered him uncle used to get quite nervous. He used to abuse him. He used to say that his son was dead for him. This Shambhu was in bad company. Once upon a time he was insane but he improved. He was an addict and a criminal. Police used to visit uncle once in a while to enquire about Shambhu. He had been absconding quite for some time. Uncle used to shout when the police came. He used to say, “He is not my son, he is dead. Why do you come here?” Then Appa used to pacify him saying, “You be silent. Let him face the consequences of his deeds.” Always the police followed him and he missed arrest. People used to thrash him if he was caught committing a trifle crime. It was torturous for him. He used to beg sometimes. These were quite terrifying things. I knew these things because I witnessed and heard about them. Kaku (wife of grand smoker uncle) used to cry at the mention of Shambhu’s name. Shambhu used to approach the back door of his home at odd night time in a

gap of month or two or even after anyear, skipping people's sight. He never entered home. He used to stay outside, linger around. He used to be quite woe-begone. Kaku used to stealthily serve him food. Hiding from smoker grand uncle and the police. Meanwhile someone in *Khaki* used to come for his enquiry. Then he used to run away. Such terrible things used to occur in that home. We, means Appa and me used to visit that home on each Thursday. However, I was never at home there. They used to offer *Aarati* (prayer of flattery of God). My job was to break the coconut. I used to get lots of crystal sugar.

Once I had gone with Baba to that home on a Sunday. I lived for a day and a night. Aai said, "I feel bad that I am keeping you away from me, you are being brought up there, but..." Then she started crying. I said, "I am quite happy here. You just keep on visiting me, that's all!" It used to be like that many times, then Baba used to sit in a serious posture, Aai used to cry. I returned on Monday noon. Of late I had started to travel alone by local. It was a close distance.

When I reached home I saw Appa and Aajji (grandmother) sitting in anxiety. I said, "What happened?" when Appa said, "I returned just now and realized that I had forgotten the coat. What will happen now? I lost it somewhere or kept it somewhere.

He was right. His woolen coat was the most essential thing for him in that age. It was certainly an incident which will make him restless. Ajji said, “Can we buy the new one now? When I asked this to Laxman (my father) he quotes my daughter in law. To buy woolen cloth, to get it stitched. All is quite expensive.” I said like a matured person, “Why do you suppose that it is lost? You tell me which places you visited, I will check whether you kept it there.”

Appa was quite pleased. He said, “My dear, there is a ten rupees note in it. But it’s raining heavily outside. How will you go?” I said, “I will go, tell me.” He said, “I went to Datar, then went to Deshpande, at last to your smoker uncle.” I started immediately. I said, “I will be back soon, don’t you worry.”

As if they had suffered a great financial loss Ajoba, Ajji kept waiting at home. Since he had lost the coat Ajji gave a cotton quilt and her saree to cover. She said, “Cover tightly with these and sit quiet. He will be enquire and come back.” We could not afford to buy a warm shawl at that time. But I loved their caring for each other. I went out in rain. I wanted to get drenched too.

Datar smiled and said, “Dear, why did you come in this rain? But your grandpa is a fool.” I was angry on this. I said, “How can you say like this?” He replied, “Dear, he went out in coat only. He must have left it somewhere else! Wait, have tea.” I did not stay there.

Deshpande was quivering in cold, wearing a sweater on a sweater. Meanwhile it had started raining heavily. He started shouting looking me drenched. Then said, “He hasn’t forgotten his coat here, take this umbrella.” His daughter in law didn’t like him, she said, “Look here, I need an umbrella, I’m going out.” I said, “I don’t want an umbrella, I’m going.” I reached the smoker uncle.

I was exasperated coming fast in the first place and was also drenched. As if I had taken bath. Jumping I climbed the staircase. Smoker uncle’s door was closed. The atmosphere inside was somber. Uncle was smoking beedi, looking beyond eternity. The whole house was leaking. Everywhere there was water. Outside quite a few people were sitting in filth. Their homes must be leaking as well.