

SMILING TEARS

-Yandamoori Veerendranadh

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K. Kiran Kumar (Section B, VIII class) – his was a problem which none in the recent times would have come across. He was so full of sadness that not even the daily game of cricket played in the middle of the roads in the evenings, excited him. Right through morning through evening, he was sad. Even the lessons of his teachers didn't interest him.

All this trouble was because of his neighbor Gurnam Singh. What happened was that ten days ago Kiran Kumar's father went to Amritsar on a business assignment and bought machines for his factory. Before his departure, Gurnam Singh met him and said, "Bhaiyya, in the lane beside the Golden Temple, on the right side bazaar, you will find 'holy sindhoor'. Please bring one pack for me." Kiran's father bought that pack from Amritsar and gave it to Kiran and told him to give it in the neighbor's house.

As fate would have it, that was time for playing cricket. For Kiran, nothing was more important than playing cricket. In the haste to go for a game of cricket, he kept the packet somewhere and left for the game. In the night he remembered it, but he forgot where he had kept it. Trouble started in his mind. He was worried. He couldn't study or sleep.

The news of the missing holy sindhoor packet was not known to his father because he went to the factory early in the morning and has not yet returned.

But on Sunday, he would surely come to know about it. Every Sunday, his father and Gurnam Singh would go to the market together and on the way he would ask him whether he received the packet or not. He would say that he hadn't. That would result in a good thrashing on his back. Kiran knew pretty well the piety of Gurnam Singh and the anger of his father. What a big problem for such a small creature!

The night passed on. Kiran dreamt that his father painted his back red by bashing him thoroughly. Suddenly he had a thought. His face shone with brightness. He had seen his father receiving letters from Reader's Digest now and then.

On a friendly note, they write letters to people they haven't met before. He took a card and wrote a letter.

"Dear friend,

I don't know who you are. I think even you must be studying VIII class like me. That's why I am writing this letter. I am Kiran Kumar. My father bought holy sindhoor from your city for my neighbor. I left the packet somewhere in a hurry to go for cricket. If I don't give it to my neighbor immediately, my father will scold me when he comes back on Sunday. So, my dear friend, please send one pack of sindhoor by post. It is available in the lane beside the Golden Temple. My address is given below.

Yours,
Kiran Kumar"

He addressed the letter to 'Sing, Roll No.1, VIII Class, Municipal High School, Temple Street, Amritsar' and posted it. Some time back, Gurnam Singh had told him that there was a school in Temple Street. Kiran knew that most of the people in Amritsar have the name of 'Singh' at the end of their name.

But after posting it, he got a doubt. What is the guarantee that there will be a 'Singh' in Roll No.1? Why can't there be a Kumar or Rao like him?

By afternoon his doubts increase. He saw the money he saved in his kiddy bank when he came home for lunch that afternoon. He had 15 rupees in his bank. He bought 100 cards with that money. He sat in the playground the whole afternoon and wrote the same matter on 100 cards. He kept the name of Singh on each card but changed the roll numbers and classes from 6 to 10. There is a reason for Kiran doing like that. Even if a particular roll number belongs to a Singh, there is no guarantee that he will take the trouble of going all the way to the shop and buy sindhoor. Even if he buys it, there is no guarantee that he will have the money to post it. He also should have a grandmother like his who should give money and more importantly the boy should have concern and pity to do so much for a boy whom he doesn't know at all.

With these haunting fears, Kiran spent four days. As Sunday started approaching, his heart became heavier and heavier with fear. That afternoon when the Mathematics teacher was solving sums on the board, post man arrived and announced that Kiran got a registered parcel. Everyone including the teacher looked with surprise on their faces. Kiran signed and opened the parcel. In a plastic cover, there was sindhoor and a letter.

"Dear Kiran Kumar,
I received your letter. Today itself I bought the sindhoor you asked me to send and I am sending it to you. I haven't heard the name of your village before. I think your village is on the southern side of Andhra Pradesh beside the Bay of Bengal. As soon as I received your letter I showed it to my mother. It seems that my grandfather came to your place some time back. Is it true that you don't eat rotis and chapatis like we do? Reply to me as soon as you receive the letter. Hope you write to me about your region, your friends and yourself. I was told by my teacher the other day that there is a big museum in your state's capital Hyderabad. Is it true?

Your friend,
Sanjay Singh

Kiran's face shone with happiness and relief. All his sadness is gone for good. With excitement he went to his neighbor's house and gave him the packet. The same evening he wrote a letter thanking Sanjay Singh.

The next day once again the post man came when the Mathematics class was going on. This time he received four covers from different classes. There is kumkum in each parcel. Kiran didn't know what to do. He took them and silently mixed them with kumkum in the prayer room of his house.

His father came on Sunday. He saw Gurnam Singh thanking his father with great gratitude. Hiding his face behind his book, Kiran tried to be serious.

Monday afternoon the postman came again. Kiran was able to see an element of surprise on the post man's face.

"70 covers" he said.

"How many?" asked Kiran.

"70". He opened a big packet of 70 covers. It took half an hour for him to sign. After giving him all the letters, the post man gave him an ordinary cover also. There is no kumkum in that but only a letter was there.

The teacher questioned Kiran why he was getting so many letters. He couldn't but reveal the truth. He told her about all the background fear he had which resulted in his getting parcels. He was afraid that the teacher would call his father and tell him what his son had done.

The total class listened to him with rapt attention. The teacher listened to his story and asked the students to open the covers. Each one opened two covers each. Soon there was a heap of red kumkum packs.

Afterwards they read the letters.

The letters looked like a bridge between the north and the south. The students in Amritsar know that there was a state called Andhra Pradesh but they didn't know the other details. The letters revealed that they were thrilled to receive a letter from a far off place like Andhra Pradesh. They sent him greetings and asked him to reply. Some invited him to visit their place. One student wrote amusingly that the owner of the shop told him that was the last packet available in his shop as all the packets were sold out.

The teacher asked the students in the class to take a packet each to their homes. She advised them to make pen friendship with the kids in Amritsar. She instructed them how to write about our culture and our state. The class that day was very lively. Kiran felt elated that a danger is converted to happiness.

He came out after the class. Empty envelopes were seen flying in the air. They looked like invitations of friendship crossing borders, boundaries, obstacles of region and religion- hundred small hands came together to solve the problem of a small child on the other side of the country.

Suddenly he remembered that he had not one last letter.

He opened it and read it.

'Dear Kiran Kumar,

I received your letter. I am studying VIII class in Municipal School. I eagerly thought of buying the holy sindhoor for you. But we are poor. I have four sisters. Four months ago, terrorists killed my father when he was working in the fields. My mother has been weeping hence. Even my sister has no money. However, very soon I will send you sindhoor somehow.

Yours,
Bharat Singh Sidhu"
