

GUEST EDITORIAL

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF BHURI

Adults have a tendency to take children's conversations lightly or with a pinch of salt especially when it concerns children of a young age. But if one were to stop a while, observe them and hear them carefully, some sense starts emerging more often than not. I am referring to the case of Bhuri, my former domestic help's eleven-year-old daughter, who used to accompany her to my house on many evenings. Bhuri had large brown eyes that justified her name. Her continuous, upbeat chatter always lit up the room and warmed our hearts. This was always the cherished time for everyone – tea and snacks for elders and milk for children, a gentle melody playing on the radio in the background.

Between gulping down sips of Complan milk, Bhuri would speak of plucking mangoes or sharing a chuski outside school with her friends, or would narrate stories of the 'dangerous' cycle-ride back home with her brother who always tried to find new by lanes on their way back. Bhuri shared nicknames of many of her teachers – saddu madam (who scolded children a lot), danda sir (who especially punished boys who didn't do HW) and thakdu-akdu sir (the PT teacher who seemed old, arrogant, and didn't have stamina to run like an athlete when he tried to inspire them for running). "Bache kitna bolte hain!" often remarked her exhausted mother as she finished mopping the floor. Bhuri's father was a daily wage earner who came home drunk once or twice a week to snatch away money from her mother.

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One day, the ever-chattering Bhuri seemed a little lost as her restless eyes wandered while she kept fidgeting on the stool that she was sitting upon. She wasn't smiling at all and was exceptionally quiet. I offered her milk with her favorite chocolate cookie which she gently refused to take. Her mother seemed quite alright with Bhuri's changed temperament but then she also seemed too distracted by the household chores she was handling at break-neck speed. But I knew it in my bones that something about the child was completely off. She was not in her element.

After switching off the radio that was playing particularly cheerful tunes that day, I took her away into my room for a conversation. She would usually play a quick game of Ludo with me there but that day she didn't want to play that either. I still don't know why but I started telling her stories about my days in the over-crowded, rickety DTC buses on way to my college; how it involved eve-teasing, being inappropriately touched, and many journeys to college ended with the choicest rants from my side.



“Apke saath bhi aaisa hota tha,” Bhuri looked at me in disbelief. I explained to her that every girl needs to recognize bad touch and learn how to say ‘no’; and raise their voice if someone persists. Feeling somewhat relieved after listening to a few anecdotes from me, Bhuri opened up about how the thakdu-akdu PT teacher touched her front shoulder and all the way down to her chest that day. She also shared that on an earlier occasion too, he had touched her bottom and her waist on some pretext. “Mujhe ajeeb toh laga tha didi par who papa-jaise haina toh main kuch nahi boli unko,” said Bhuri.

I hugged her instantly and assured her that won’t happen again if she was vocal about it with her school teachers, her friends and her family. There was no POCSO at that time so we did what we thought was the best thing to do. We spoke to both her parents and then her school principal. After a few days of absence, Bhuri walked in with her mother one evening, the spring back in her feet, smiling ear to ear. The first thing she excitedly said was “didi, badi madam ne thakdu-akdu ko sabke saamne khoob danta. Usne mujhe sabke samne sorry bhi bola and wada kiya aise kabhi dobara nahin karega.”