

Patches

Mudra Rakshasa

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I first met Mudra Rakshasa in 1986 when I visited him at his home in Lucknow. My last visit with him was in 2004. Throughout that eighteen-year period, and for some time before, he was the proud owner of a red 1969 Standard.

The doors of an old motor are particularly troublesome. This motor, which with much grandeur I called a “car,” was old from the very beginning and after being with me for several years has only become more ancient. So it was only natural that its doors, too, would give trouble. Once, when I closed the right door, it refused to open again. The left door opened, reluctantly, and for two days that was the only way I could get in. Sometimes, when the windows would roll up, they would refuse to roll back down. Another time a door was stuck for months, but despite being so firmly shut it provided percussion accompaniment to the motor wherever it went, and for the longest time I thought some rascally neighborhood kid had attached a can to it.

Then, it went too far. My wife was sitting in the passenger seat. As the motor turned right her door very accommodatingly swung wide open, and as I finished the turn she rolled out. I don't know if you know or not, but if your wife falls and you are somehow to blame, she will be very angry with you, and if she falls all

on her own, she will be no less angry with you. I don't know why wives think their husband's hand is always involved in this sort of accident. If nothing else, she is absolutely certain you find her falling quite entertaining no matter how serious a face you put on it. If you show your sympathy and try to help her get up, she'll snap at you as if you were trying to push her down again. The next time she falls, if you remember being snapped at before and let her get up all by herself, you'll still be yelled at, and she'll be even angrier with you for being such a hard-hearted beast. Many people will give you a great deal of well-intentioned advice on how to deal successfully with such situations. I can maintain with absolute confidence, however, that when the time comes, that advice will be no help whatsoever.

So, after that accident I decided to have the door fixed as soon as possible.

I should also mention that even if you have your motor's door fixed, that will neither guarantee you will be able to prevent your wife from falling nor will it protect you from being snapped at for her fall because wives can easily find other ways to fall besides out of a motor's door. She can slip in the bathroom, and you're the one to blame for leaving the bathroom floor slippery. She can fall off a stool while trying to get something down from on top of a kitchen cabinet, and you will be reminded that it was you who had pushed that thing so far back on top of that cabinet. She can trip herself up on her own sandal, and the fault will be all yours. Once, the wife of a poet friend of mine fell on a footpath and broke her leg. I did not ask my friend for more details.

All the same, I decided the motor's door had to be fixed.

This was not as easy as you might think. If a motor runs into a truck or if its axle breaks and a wheel goes running off on its own, that motor the mechanic will fix quickly and enthusiastically. To fix a door, though, a mechanic can muster little enthusiasm. He gives it a few taps with his hammer and tells you to bring it back later, when he's free.

I waited days for his freedom to arrive. Meanwhile, an unusual man came by one day.

His pants were well worn and torn here and there. His shirt was even more torn than his pants, and his vest was filthy with oil spots. His shoes were very fat and heavy, for they had been repaired numerous times, and a layer of dirt gave them an odd appearance. In them his feet looked like piglets cowering in tiny holes. Under his bushy eyebrows his eyes were tiny but sparkling, and the leather bag of his face his nose covered like a half-open umbrella. His hair was long, but rather than hair it looked more like hanks of dirty rope. After he was born perhaps he had vowed never to bathe until he died.

His bicycle too, was just as unusual as he was. On the side of its back wheel was a pannier similar to what motorcycles have for necessary things. On the handlebar was a basket with a cover. The frame had obviously broken many times in a number of places: the welds glistened like his teeth. The tires were covered with patches. A shallow wooden box hung from the frame between his legs, and torn bags hung from everywhere else possible. Looking at this odd fellow, one's first impression is that this is not so much a man but a pile of rubbish. He smiled widely, greeted me respectfully and asked, "Is this your car?"

“Yes. Why?” Lord knows why his question upset me a little.

“It’s a very good one, saheb.” Putting his elbow on the bicycle seat, he said, “It has an excellent engine.”

Though softened a bit by this praise, I was unable to fathom what his intentions were, so I did not respond.

He brought the kickstand down, left his bicycle and came over to our gate. Inspecting the “car” carefully he said, “Saheb, the chrome decoration on the left is coming off. If it loosens any more it’ll fall off in the road somewhere.”

“Hmmm,” I replied, still looking at him with the same suspicion.

My expression had no effect on him whatsoever. Blinking his eyes skyward he said, “It’s very hot, saheb. Could I get a glass of cold water? A glass of water from the fridge would be just the ticket.”

Which made me even more angry with him. The way he asked for water made it seem as if, as soon as he got the water, he would say, “Saheb! Got any pulao? Sitting down at a table in front of a plate of pulao would be just the ticket.”

Despite my anger, it did not seem right to refuse his request for water. While waiting for the water, he pulled out of his bag two small pieces of heavy cable. Showing me them he said, “Just look, saheb! I only have two, and your chrome has two joints that have come loose. Don’t worry, saheb. I won’t be asking you for any money for this. If the Lord wants, then you’ll pay when you have a bigger job for me.”

Then he came inside the gate. Before fixing the chrome, he gave the motor

such an inspection, on both sides, as if he were calculating how much meat he could get out of it.

The water came, but before he grabbed the glass he said, “Wait a minute!”

Without removing the loose chrome, he attached both new joints. The silver leaf that had curled up like a snake’s hood snapped adroitly back into place.

“I’ll take the water now,” he said and took the glass from the girl’s hand. After drinking a little he said, “Saheb, one should eat water, slowly, one gulp at a time.”

Sending my irritation to even greater heights, he actually did “eat” his water like that. There being no other way out of this situation, I finally asked him, “How much do I owe you?”

He displayed his distaste in a most melodramatic way and said, “Look saheb, please do not insult me. Do you really think I would take money from you for such a small thing?”

Though looking like nothing more than a filthy, odd clown, his self-confidence made it more difficult to simply brush him off. My irritation lost its intensity because for many days yet there loomed before me the possibility of my wife tumbling out of the motor. My own mechanic will never find the time for this. And meanwhile my wife might need to be taken somewhere.

He had a good knowledge of psychology because he stared at me and said, “Don’t judge me by my appearance, jenab. In my day I repaired the motors of Englishmen.”

“This motor’s door doesn’t stay closed. Can you fix that?”

“Now, saheb, you should not be testing me. First give me the job. If my work isn’t as good as others’ I will take whatever penalty you care to impose.” Advancing toward the motor he said, “Which side?”

“The left one.”

“Hmmm.” He pulled the door. It opened. He tested it by closing and opening the door many times. Then he rolled the window down. After rolling it all the way down he rolled it back up. Gazing intently at the door like an experienced doctor he said, “The teeth on the mechanism that raises the window have also worn down.”

“Forget that,” I said. “The whole motor has worn down. You only fix the door.”

“As you wish, saheb; it’ll be no trouble. . . .” he said as he began taking down the bags of tools tied to his bicycle. There were three of them, made of canvas, and filled mostly with old worn-out spare parts, many of which he also used as tools. He spread out this world of his tools and spare parts as if he were a surgeon preparing for a major operation. Despite the fact that he repaired relatively modern machines, his tools gave one the solid impression of being creatures from the stone age. It wouldn’t be long before they would become rare finds for museum curators. His hammer, for example. To a five or six inch piece of broken axle he had attached a cross piece of bamboo by means of tightly pulled wire, twine and string. For a handle he used an old piece of bicycle inner tube. That piece of rubber was witness to the great historical distance between this mechanic and primeval man.

Shocked by this museum of tools I asked, “These are the tools you work with?”

Stopping his arrangement of tools, he looked at me with the shock of a great singer whose ability to carry a tune and maintain rhythm had been questioned.

“Look, saheb,” he said very seriously, “work is accomplished by means of intelligence and skill, not tools.”

He did not cite Sheikh Sadi, but he spoke with such confidence that he could have been quoting from the *Gulistan* or the *Pancatantra*.

And what he said was true. I felt a little ashamed. Then, pulling myself together I said, “You’re right, but with good tools you can accomplish your work more easily. And besides, a hammer isn’t such an expensive thing.”

Using the name of a big multinational toolmaking company he said, “I used to use only their tools, never anything Indian. But you don’t know what thieves people are here. They steal your tools. They took my hammer, my screwdriver. I had a very expensive pair of pliers; they even stole that, the bastards.”

“Who did?”

“Aré, how could you know them, the mechanics here who are such bastards. As soon as they see a tool they snatch it. That’s why I no longer use good tools.” And then from his last bag he pulled out some more things and set them out.

I either grew tired of his talk or wanted to avoid its further development and said, “Accha, you work, I’m just coming.”

“Do not worry, saheb,” he said. “Do your own work without a thought about me.”

For quite a while after going inside I heard the sounds of hammering and scraping. Then it was silent.

Meanwhile, my wife came up with another worry. She was certain that this man was some slick thief. She said with total confidence, “That’s all well and good that he’s a mechanic, but how do you know what his intentions are? Suppose he runs off with the spare?”

Then she told one of her own experiences which she had already narrated many times before. Each month, in addition to my newspapers and empty bottles she sold old tins and cans to the scrap men. She was certain they were not giving her a fair weight. So with me as her chauffeur she drove all around the iron market until she found a fine pair of weighing scales and a balance. With that she weighed everything very carefully first. Then she tested the scrap man: “So tell me, how much does this weigh?”

Of course, the scrap man would say that thirty kilos of trash was fifteen. Then she snapped at him. “You people are so untrustworthy. This is fifteen kilos?”

“Then how much is it?”

“It’s thirty kilos. I’ve already weighed it.”

Defeated, the scrap man would say, “Accha, I’m just coming. Let me get my bag.” And we would never see him again. Gradually, almost every scrap man came to know that in this house the papers and things were weighed ahead of time. So they lowered their prices, from four rupees a kilo to two.

I had witnessed this fretting and complaining for a long time, so I suggested that she have the scrap man use her scale when he weighs the stuff. But that only

made her angry. “You don’t understand anything, do you. These people are thieves. They’ll run off with my scales.”

Then she related a story about her mother. Of course, her mother, too, had had a similar relationship with the scrap man. The story goes that once, the scrap man weighed the scrap with her mother’s own scales and took the scrap out. Then he said to her, “Mem saheb, I’m going to leave my own things here. Let me just use your scales to weigh the neighbor’s scrap and I’ll bring them right back.” He was never seen again. After some time they looked in his bag only to find some rags and a pair of old shoes. To obliterate my suggestions my wife used this story like a nuclear weapon.

Defeated by that story I tried again to hear the sounds of hammering and scraping outside. Total silence. I too suddenly became suspicious. I pulled the curtain ever so slightly aside and looked out. That man was seated on the ground intent on bending or straightening something with pliers.

Despite all my wife’s fretting and fuming it didn’t seem right for me to be spying on him. Actually, from what I understood so far of his psychology I was afraid that if he were to see me hovering around him, he would immediately know my intentions.

I pulled the curtain to again and moved away from the window. But it wasn’t possible for me to busy myself with anything else. I was, in fact, being pushed and shoved between two psychological warriors: on the one hand my thoroughly experienced wife and on the other, this wily old rascal of a motor mechanic. While I was making every effort to assure my wife that I was attentively watch-

ing every move the mechanic made, I was trying as hard as possible not to give the mechanic the impression that I was doing exactly that.

After a little bit of this toing and froing my attention wandered away. Then in a panic I remembered about the mechanic and looked outside the window. He wasn't there. Some of his unusual tools were scattered around, but he could not be seen. I looked out the window that was closest to the motor — he wasn't there either. Maybe he was on the other side of the motor lying on the ground doing something, but there too, no sign of him.

Throwing aside my hesitation I came outside. The mechanic was simply not there, nor was his bicycle. On the ground were bits and pieces of scrap metal and some of his odd looking tools. Both doors of the motor were wide open, and their handles had been pulled off and were lying on the seat.

I anxiously opened the dickey. The spare was there, but the jack was gone.

Oh no, what a disaster! I thought. But even more than that trouble I was afraid of my wife. She was of the opinion that of all the husbands in the world I was the most ignorant and most uncouth who, by chance, had come under her supervision. If she weren't careful I could easily succeed in not only having the house stolen out from under us but having myself stolen as well. I tried to estimate how much it would cost to replace the stolen jack. Maybe a hundred, a hundred and fifty, or two or three hundred? I had never bought a jack before. It always came with the motor.

Just then, while I was in such a confused and anxious state of mind, my wife appeared next to me. The feeling a thief must have when a policeman catches him

red-handed — that’s exactly how I felt. Immediately, I slammed the dickey shut.

Like a wily police officer my wife began the interrogation. “Where’s the mechanic?”

“Mechanic! He probably went to get a bite to eat.”

“A bite to eat! He just got here! He’s already hungry? Why didn’t he say something before he left?”

“You’re absolutely right. He should’ve said something to us before leaving,” I said, completely supporting her, but unfortunately in such a hollow sounding voice.

“These people take their food with them when they set out for the day. This one eats in some restaurant? The cycle isn’t here either.”

“No, the cycle isn’t here either, but the sala did leave his tools,” I said, trying to suggest the idea that he had left a deposit.

But my wife stared sharply at me. “Tools! You call these tools? Its scrap iron at two rupees a kilo. These won’t even fetch ten rupees.” Thus even the knowledge she had obtained from haggling with the scrap man came to her aid. And what she said was right. Then she asked suddenly, “Do we still have the spare?”

“Yes, I’ve looked.”

A look must have come over my face that tattled on me without shame. My wife didn’t believe me. Almost ripping them out of my hands she took the keys and opened the dickey. The spare was there for all to see, safe and sound, but pushing me down even more into the boiling water she asked, “Where’s the

thingamajig that's always right here?"

Although she didn't know what the jack was called, she still knew exactly where it and everything else was supposed to be.

"You are right," I said, staring at that empty space as if for the first time.

Not only did that cleverness not work, it made my wretched state that much worse. Angrily staring at me she said, "You have no concern for anything at all, do you. You don't care what difficulties we have to face."

Hurling down on my face more such slaps about my thoughtlessness, she headed for the open door. She noticed that the mechanism that raises and lowers the left door's window was also missing. "And have you seen this? Of course not, how could you? All the parts of the thing that should be right here — they're all gone," she said.

I too bent down by the door and stared at it with the innocence of the thief to whom, after they beat a confession out of him, the police themselves showed the hole in the wall he himself had made.

"You've really hit the limit. Aré, he could've taken whatever he wanted. And look at that, the inner door of the garage is wide open. He could've waltzed right in and picked the locker clean. But so what; even then you would've stood there just like you are now."

"But just think — how can we possibly have a police report written up, given what he has taken!"

"Why ever not!" Her argument was — a theft is a theft, no matter how little. And the thief must be punished — that's most necessary.

I was stuck, in a very bad way. Even if the mechanic who had run off with the jack were to be caught — even his state wouldn't be as bad as mine.

“And this stuff? What are all these for?” It looked like she was about to pick up those bits and pieces and hurl them into the street. By now her voice must have reached a particularly loud volume because the neighbors could be seen obviously busying themselves on their verandas. Married neighbors are the most vile of things, and whoever doesn't know that should not consider themselves fortunate. In Sanskrit the married neighbor is defined as the exact opposite of a friend. A friend hides those things concerning you that should be hidden and he broadcasts your virtues, but the married neighbor is most perverse. Before spreading them around to all and sundry he adds his own salt and pepper to those things about you that should remain hidden, and of your virtues he remains absolutely innocent.

My wife's voice was just about to get even louder, and my neighbors' ears were ready to do their best work ever when that man appeared by the gate with his cycle and with our motor's jack. Setting up his cycle he came in and said, “I had to go quite a ways. The welder was a big badmash. He charged five rupees for such a little job.” He put the door parts and the jack on the ground. When he stood back up he sensed what his absence had caused us to think. Smiling he said, “All of us mechanics aren't the same. I work honestly; I'm not like others who screw in one screw and then make off with your handle and sell it.”

He said that while looking directly at me as if I had been his accuser. I wasn't able to tell him that it wasn't me but my wife who had suspected him of theft. I

probably would have begun asking for forgiveness if my wife hadn't made her own play.

“Well, now, didn't you go beyond your bounds,” she said threatening him. “You should have said something before going. Right? Haven't you acted poorly. You went off somewhere. All these things were left out here on display. So now we're the ones who have to watch guard over them! And if someone had come along and taken off with some of them, you would have said it was all our fault!”

She had a truly amazing way of thinking fast — how long did you expect us to watch guard over your things!

There are very few people who can not only fight a battle from both sides but can also do so with complete self-confidence. The truth of the matter is that such people are made just for attacking and attacking; they have no need at all for self-defense. I saw the effect of my wife's amazing character fall upon the mechanic. He totally lost that readiness with which he had responded to me, and toward my wife he became apologetic. “Yes, mem saheb, you are absolutely correct. I did think first of speaking to you, but then I thought it best not to disturb you.”

“Why did you take this without asking?” She asked pointing at the jack and making the mechanic more ashamed.

Sheepishly he said, “Mem saheb, what can I say? But the hole in the jack in which the lever fits was split open. I figured that since I was getting that mechanism fixed I might as well get this soldered up too.”

This conscientiousness of his also had no particular effect on my wife. She said, “What did you think you were doing! Without asking permission you

unlock the dickey.”

In response all the mechanic could do was sheathe up all his weapons, and his silence afforded my wife the joy of victory. The glow emanating from her face was unmistakable. Then just as suddenly an unexpected transformation occurred. She asked him, “Can I get you some water?”

“I’ve already had some, mem saheb, but a little more. . . .”

“That’s fine, I’ll have a glass sent out. Have you eaten anything?”

Without hesitation he smiled and said, “I had tea this morning, mem saheb. I’m fine. . . .”

I thought he was the most shameless rogue I had dealt with in a long time, but my wife did not share my opinion. In no time she had small squares of double roti sent out along with a potato dish, all of which he devoured ravenously, and despite the fact that I was standing right next to him he praised mem saheb to the highest heaven with the loudest voice he could muster. Then he drank down his water, belched and set to work.

Although that man had indeed proven his trustworthiness, I nevertheless found some excuse or other to stay nearby.

“Look at this, saheb,” he said. “Look at these teeth.” He showed me the mechanism that raises and lowers the window. “They’re all worn down. I had this fixed up, too. Now it’ll work even better than new. Even a whole month from now you’ll open the door. . . .”

With his prehistoric tools and crooked fingers he worked on the door till dusk. Then he had me test the door to approve of his work. I raised and lowered

the window. It was much tighter than necessary. I closed the door, and it stayed closed, but to open the door again took a lot of effort, even from him.

“No problem, saheb,” he said. “I’ll fix that right away. I take no money until the job is done right. Even if I have to open and shut the door fifty times, then I open and shut it fifty times.” He concentrated on his work again.

Meanwhile, a cup of tea came out for me and one for him as well. This was one of my wife’s peculiarities. If I ask her to give someone water to drink she gets upset, but to someone she herself has tangled with and straightened out she shows a particular kindness.

The door’s mechanism that kept it closed when it was shut was once again hale and hearty. The door closed correctly, but opening it was still difficult. The mechanic explained. “With a little use it’ll work itself out.”

Then he handed over to me a piece of steel and said, “This is a piece I took out. Keep it.”

“You took it out? But what is it?”

“It’s a support, so that the window doesn’t go all the way down to the bottom of the door. That’s why it was in there.”

“So why did you take out?”

“Don’t worry about a thing, saheb. I made another arrangement. This has already rusted out and was about to break.” He explained that instead he had jammed in a piece of brick that he held in place with rags stuffed in all around. It won’t budge. “And besides,” he said, “I’m always available. If you have a problem just let me know.”

There was nothing else I could do but believe him. Both my motor and my wife were constant sources of surprise.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Aré, saheb, such a little thing — what could I take? Okay, then, just give me fifty.”

“Fifty! You’re a fine one! At the very most this is a fifteen rupee job.” I was actually trying out what I had learned from my wife. She thought that whenever I purchased something or paid for a service I never argued for the right price and always got taken. I had vowed to change my ways.

But that mechanic proved to be a most unusual badmash. He totally changed his attitude and said, “Saheb, I am not a man who goes back and forth like this. I do excellent work and take a fair price. You think I’m asking for too much, then it is best you not give me anything. I’m going.” And he started gathering up his things. With only the most difficulty did he agree to take forty-five instead of fifty. Now the problem was to get forty-five rupees out of my wife. I knew that as soon as she heard it she would explode — “Forty-five rupees! And you probably simply accepted it!”

To save myself from that I tried as hard as I could to look absolutely furious as I went inside and said, “That sala of a sala! He does a little work and asks for seventy rupees!”

“Seventy rupees!” She hit the ceiling. I was afraid she would run right out to the mechanic and my ruse would be ruined, so I immediately continued, “I’m giving him forty-five and not a paisa more.”

“Forty-five!”

“That’s not too much. Had I taken it to the garage Akil would have taken seventy or eighty for it.”

“Akil is another matter. Okay, give it to him.” Without any evident concern she said, “Did he do a good job?”

“Yes, he did a good job.”

That man took his forty-five rupees, promised to come back and left.

In no time my string of problems only lengthened. The passenger door’s inability to stay closed became even worse than before and its window now was permanently in the open position. The door handle jiggled but functioned for a while until one day it simply pulled off in my hand. The driver’s side door, which had functioned perfectly well, he had “fixed” so that it would remain in its perfectly good state far into the future, the result of which was that it, too, started swinging open at will.

For a number of days I attempted to hide this problem with the doors. Since the left door was difficult to open, as soon as I stopped the motor I would hop out and hurry over to it like an enthusiastic chauffeur and open it for her. But one day it all came out. I couldn’t even open her door from outside. With the handle gone I had simply stuck my finger in the hole and raised the lever directly, but now that lever, too, had slipped down in the door somewhere. So she had to scoot over the gearshift into the driver’s seat and go out that door, and when she did that the first time she didn’t get angry at the mechanic, she got angry at me, saying, “You really enjoy wasting money, don’t you.”

A prudent husband develops strategies so that he can take a public scolding and yet maintain his self-respect. I had them, too, for example, bending down to retie my shoes and strolling along looking up at the sky as if it were only by chance I happened to be next to this extraordinarily loud-voiced woman with whom I had no connection whatsoever.

On the way back I took the motor straight to the garage. Like always Akil was lying under a car. When he saw me he came out. Seeing my motor's doors he put on an unusual face and said, "What have you done to your doors?"

My wife replied before I could. "That's right. Ask him. He has no idea who he brings in. That man took the money and left both doors in the ruins."

Akil smiled. Investigating the sad state of the doors both inside and out he said, "You've done it now. What was the rush? Who did you use?"

It wasn't necessary for me to utter a word. What's more, I didn't even know the man's name. My wife gave such an accurate verbal description of him that Akil immediately recognized him. "Aré, that's Patches!"

"Patches?"

"Yes. That's what we call him. The sala — he'll bathe the day he dies."

Akil's assistant Riyasat said, "One day I beat the sala up real good."

Akil described with great relish the circumstances of the beating up of Patches. "Without removing the fuel pipe first he was having the chassis of Khanna saheb's motor welded together. The whole damn motor could've blown up. He ran away crying."

The motor's doors were fixed, and Akil took three hundred rupees for it. And

of course my wife blamed me, not Akil, for this extravagant misuse of funds.

Later one day Patches appeared. As soon as I saw him I screamed, “You again? Get away from here or I’ll give you a repair job you won’t forget. You ruined both doors.”

“Aré saheb, how could that be? Tell me whatever is wrong and I’ll fix it right up.”

“No, sir. I won’t let you lay a hand on it. Go away from here.”

Embarrassed, he got on his bicycle and rode away. I told everyone the stories of the eccentric mechanic while my wife told anyone who happened by all about my stupid naiveté.

Later, my motor simply stopped. The crankshaft had become stuck. Akil explained that if that should happen, I was to put the motor in gear and rock it back and forth. So I rocked it. No improvement at all. Giving up, I asked the boys at a nearby motorstand if there was a mechanic in the neighborhood.

“Yes, of course, but he won’t do any work now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, there’s some strike going on.”

I took a rickshaw to Akil’s garage. I had never seen it like that before. His young assistants were sleeping under a tree, and Akil was sitting in the backseat of a motor smoking a cigarette.

“What’s going on, Akil saheb?” I asked. “Have you declared a vacation?”

“Welcome, saheb,” he replied, getting out of the motor, “welcome. No, it’s not a vacation, it’s a strike.”

“Strike! What kind of strike?”

“Aré saheb, what can I say. It’s all because of that Patches sala.”

“Because of Patches! Meaning?”

“Aré, that same Patches who ruined your doors — he fixed the motor of a Deputy SP.” Then Akil started laughing.

“You mean he ruined his motor’s doors too?”

“No, he fixed his gear stick. The next day it came off in the DSP’s hand.”

I broke out laughing, too. “Oh, my, this Patches of yours is a strange bird.”

After a lot of laughing together Akil asked, “So tell me, what trouble have you got now?”

“Aré yar, the crankshaft is stuck.”

“Hmmm.” Akil became serious. “That is a problem.”

“Could you send one of your boys?”

“Yes, but as I was saying, we’re in the middle of a strike. It’s citywide. Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you — Patches went to the DSP’s place again, so the DSP beat him up, real bad. Broke his leg. The poor guy’s walking around in a cast.”

“So what’s the purpose of the strike?”

“We all went to the DSP and demanded he pay Patches’ medical expenses. All he did was swear back at us. So we had to go on strike. We won’t fix anyone’s motor.”

“But what does that have to do with the rest of us?”

“What else can we do, saheb? The police wouldn’t even listen to our charge against the DSP and write it up. Now it’s up to all you people to do something.”

“Damn! Now what am I gonna do? My motor’s stuck over there.”

Just then Patches arrived by rickshaw. Akil helped him get down. A cast covered his left leg, and mercurochrome-stained bandages covered both elbows. While getting down he said to Akil, “The strike is everywhere. Only at Jetli’s, Daha’s, and Ratan saheb’s garages is any work being done. And even there very few mechanics have showed up for work. Aré saheb, you?”

Akil said, “Patches sala, the saheb’s motor, too, is involved in your strike. It’s crankshaft is stuck”

“What can I say, saheb,” he said to me with embarrassment, sticking his finger down in his cast to scratch.

“Look, saheb,” Akil said. “He is, after all, a poor man. Who doesn’t make mistakes?”

“Aré yar,” I replied. “A mistake is one thing. He works less and fouls up more. You saw the state of my motor’s doors.”

“Don’t say that, saheb,” added Patches. “I am now over seventy years old. I was eight when I first started learning from Johnson saheb. . . .”

“Abé, of course you must have begun at some time, but what you did to my motor is clear for all to see. If you can’t do the work, then don’t do it.”

“Who works at this age just for the fun of it, saheb? When he has no choice a man does his work and takes his beatings. Don’t take it the wrong way, saheb. You’re successful. Again and again your motor will break down and again and again you’ll get it fixed, but you’ll still have a roof over your head and food to eat. Without your forty-five rupees, I would have starved that day.”

“Now you’ve really gone too far. Even Riyasat beat you up,” I said angrily.

Ready with a sharp response Patches opened his mouth but remained silent. A thick layer of indifference rose up his filthy shirt. “Yes,” he said, “he did hit me. He slapped me a few times and covered me with curses. But then he took me to the dhaba and gave me tea and two samosas. As I was about to leave he hit me again, but he didn’t break my leg. My leg, he didn’t break it, understand, babu saheb? When you people break my leg you turn me into a beggar! A cripple!”

Angered by his speech I said, “‘You people’! what do you mean by ‘you people’?”

“Aré saheb, forget it. Forget it.” And Patches turned away and went over to the tree.

Akil once again apologized that he would not be able to fix my motor. I returned home. I thought for sure my wife would come down on me like a ton of bricks, but she must have been busy.

That night, around eight o’clock, I was startled to see Patches standing on the veranda.

“You?”

“Please excuse me, saheb. I’m the cause of your trouble.”

“That’s why you came?”

“I thought what would mem saheb say. So tell me, saheb, where is your motor?”

“But you’re on strike!”

“True, saheb, but the strike has its place and humanity has its. I’ll fix your

crankshaft secretly. Don't tell anyone."

With a small wrench and in barely a few seconds he fixed the problem. Then he said, "Shine the torch over here."

I did as he asked. He pointed out a small axle-like thing and said, "See this, saheb? If the crankshaft gets stuck again, all you have to do is turn this to the right with a wrench. Here, you keep this wrench; it'll come in handy"

The motor was immediately able to move again.

"How much should I give you?"

"Oh, don't embarrass me, saheb. If I can help you in any other way, then I'll take money."

"May I drop you off somewhere?"

"No, huzoor. I'll be on my way. Please express my salaam to mem saheb. I have been the cause of some trouble for her, but I will ask for forgiveness. I'm an old man, I'm sure she'll forgive me. And, oh yes, please do not tell Akil that I fixed your crankshaft."

Dragging along his plastered-up leg he set off down the side of the road.