

The Bombay Run

By Salil Chaturvedi (India)

“When will we reach Bombay?” three-year old Gudiya asked her elder brother.

Gudiya was the youngest and she sat – would be more correct to say dangled – on the seat of the bicycle, while Raju, leaning forward, pedalled hard. Koki, the middle one, sat on the carrier over the rear wheel with her arms around Gudiya, for protection.

“What? We’ve just started! Bombay’s a long way off. No whining and asking stupid questions,” Raju said peevishly.

It had been Raju’s idea, of course, to run away to Bombay. He had no inkling where, or how far, Bombay was. All he knew was that any self-respecting person wanting to change his destiny ran off to Bombay. He also knew that they would have to go via Jaipur; he had checked that with a friend. When his sisters had heard about the plan, they had insisted that he make them a part of the adventure. It was decided that they’d set off in the afternoon, once grandmother was dozing. Their father worked a rickshaw and left early in the morning, returning late at night. Their mother worked as a maid in two houses in an upper-class colony. She left quite early, too. Grandmother stayed at home, looking after the kids and was usually asleep by noon. When they’d heard her snoring, the three of them had mounted the bicycle to set off to Bombay.

“It’s a different city and quite far from here, so it’ll take us a long while, maybe even days to get there,” Koki explained to Gudiya.

“How many days?” asked Gudiya.

“I said no stupid questions. That’s why I didn’t want to run away with girls,” Raju said.

“You’ll never be able to make it on your own. When it’s time to eat, you’ll be crying for mother,” said Koki. She was right. Raju didn’t know how to cook and he was quite attached to his mother. Not unusual for an eleven year old boy, but it still hurt his pride.

“Look, if y’all want to stay back in the slum, be my guest. I’m not going to stay one more day in the mucky, cramped place. And if you are coming with me, my word is final.” He sounded the cycle bell a few times to underline his authority.

“Do you think we’ll able to go to school in Bombay?” Koki asked.

“School! What kind of a plan is running away from home to go to school?” Raju scoffed. “School is for stupid people,” he made his opinion on the subject clear.

“You’re the one who’s stupid. We’re going to go to a school in Bombay,” Koki said firmly.

“How dare you talk to me like that! I am one year elder to you,” Raju reminded her.

“One year doesn’t count,” said Koki.

“I’ll smack you hard and it’ll start counting. Anyway, I don’t enjoy this talk. I am the eldest male in this group and I say talk about school is banned,” Raju said firmly.

“I’ll show you what a ban is, you ugly rascal!” Raju heard as he was grabbed by his ear and lifted off the bicycle. He gave a shout as blows landed on his face. “You rogue! How many times have you been told not to ride your mother’s new cycle?” Grandmother had woken up and she had heard the cycle parked in the courtyard. Koki gathered Gudiya in her arms and ran out of the house. The pedals went round and round and the rear wheel spun freely as the cycle, hoisted on its stand, continued on its way to Bombay.