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## The Power of Prayer

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### I

It is a large room, in the Sultanpur Collectorate, with a carpeted floor, a high ceiling and windows with old-fashioned wooden shutters. The district magistrate, a good-looking man of about 30 and of keen intellect, is sitting at his elevated desk, listening to the people. A middle-aged man in a kurta and pyjama places a letter of application before him, asking for permission to hold a public meeting in the city. Then a businessman follows with a plan of a shopping complex. He shows him the drawing and makes a request for approval. On one side of the hall about a dozen clerks and lower officials are sitting at their tables, dealing with records. The district magistrate glances through the applications one by one, writes instructions on them and then passes them to the officer responsible for dealing with the case; sometimes he also bawls orders at some of them. Just then Mr Azaz Ahmad enters the chamber. But as he sees the DM, he stands stunned, unable to believe his eyes. He peers at him for a while then walks slowly over to his table. The DM raises his eyes from work and as his gaze falls on him, his face lights up. He gets to his feet and comes round to the front of his table to greet Azaz.

“Hello brother, how are you?” asks the magistrate.

“Are you Brahma Prakash?” enquires Azaz, paying no attention to what he said.

“Yes, but I wonder why you took time to recognize me.”

“Are you the district magistrate here?” he goes on as if he didn’t hear him again.

“Yes, I am.”

“What a pleasant surprise!” exclaims Azaz, shaking hand with the DM. “Congratulations!”

Everyone is astonished to see them greeting one another warmly and affectionately.

The District Magistrate takes his friend behind the desk and offers him a chair next to his. “Brother,” he begins, “I’m delighted to see you again after so long. You might have forgotten what you did for me the day when we first met in Kanpur. It was just by chance that I had the honour to drive you to the Jama Masjid. Can you remember when you said you didn’t want to be in debt to me? Now you see how much you have paid me for that simple service. Your heart is true, your soul pure and this is why your prayer for me has been answered.”

“Allah is bountiful, keeps a close eye on us and does not let a good deed go unrewarded,” says Azaz. “He listens to our prayers only if we remember that He lives in a no entry area, called ‘The Apex’. Anyway, tell me how you achieved your aspiration.”

“It’s been five years to the day since I dropped you outside the Jama Masjid. In these past years, I have had some blinding things happen to me in respect of my career and I attribute my success to you. By the way, do you remember how I refused to drive you back home? I think you do but you don’t know why. Actually, it was time for lunch and, after a rest thereafter, I used to spend afternoons and evenings studying for competitive....”

“Oh yes,” interrupts Azaz, “at first I thought you were pretending to be a scholar, but later I realized that you were not exactly what you looked to be.”

A smile curves Brahma Prakash’s lips. He turns round and looks at Azaz. “Yes, that was not my regular work,” he concurs amiably. “I was trying for a government job, but I hadn’t imagined that I’d be an IAS officer.”

“Then how did it occur to you that you should enter the UPSC competition?”

Now the district magistrate turns his chair round to face his friend. “I was flicking idly through a newspaper on a cold February morning in the same year when we met. Suddenly my eyes fell on an advert for civil services. I read it carefully then as usual left for work. The following night I had a dream that you were kneeling to pray to Allah that I would pass the exams. When I got up in the morning, I began to feel confident of getting through them, and I applied for the prelims without a second thought. Now I began to study harder preparing for the exams, which were scheduled for June. As the exams drew nearer I became more excited and the day the results were published, I was thrilled to bits.”

“This is called the grace of Allah!” says Azaz Ahmad with enthusiasm.

“Mains were a long way off, scheduled for mid December,” continues Brahma Prakash. “I gave up my job to devote myself entirely to books, though I was on my own with my ailing parents and a younger sister to feed and clothe. I took out a bank loan, and it was because of this that I was sometimes worried about what would happen if I failed. But soon a divine voice inside me would say: ‘Problems determine who will make it to the top: if they repel you, don’t waste your time; but if they encourage you to prove yourself, the prize is there, waiting for you’. Sometimes when I got a swollen head, the voice would say: ‘The sweetest fruit that I have ever created is conceit and the most sensitive plant ego. Ordinary people enjoy conceit and nourish ego. The ambitious trash these two things before they start their journey’. Sometimes when I was disheartened by thinking that my status was too low to be an IAS officer, the voice would say: ‘You’re someone special with enormous inner recourses – go on, you can achieve anything’. You know what? I felt even more comfortable about the exams this time, and as a result nothing could puzzle me in the event. After the successful completion of the second stage, I had to

undergo a personality test to be held in April the following year. You'll be amazed to know that something magical happened to me, which made me calm, coherent and impressive while answering questions. Dear brother, I can't tell how happy I was on the hot June morning when the postman knocked at my door to hand me the appointment letter."

Azaz Ahmad is taken aback to hear the story. He looks at Brahma Prakash with an expression of appreciation on his face. "Brother," he says, "I've tremendous admiration for you in terms of your principles, your single-minded will and above all your faith in God."

## II

It was a cold January afternoon. The air was crisp, filled with hazy sunshine and frost. Kanpur's main square was clogged with traffic. Cabs, rickshaws, pedestrians, all were moving very slow. Mr Azaz Ahmad stood by the side of the road, waving his hands to hail a taxi, but none of the approaching ones stopped. Strange, all are engaged today, he said to himself.

Suddenly an empty cab pulled up in front of him.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"Jama Masjid," replied Azaz.

"All right – I'm going by that way."

Azaz Ahmad got into the cab and the driver pulled away slowly.

"Your taxi is empty – why didn't you wait for some more passengers?" enquired Azaz.

"Now it's time to go home."

"Are you a Brahmin?"

"They say I'm," said the driver drily.

"What does the tilak on your forehead signify?"

"The same as what your beard."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite follow you," said Azaz, looking rather perplexed.

"I mean it's simply a religious symbol and I can't expect God to be happy with me just because I wear a tilak."

"You're very upfront about religion."

"I think you'll like one like me," reposted the driver.

“Do you have respect for a religion?”

“I’ve great faith in God and firmly believe in the power of prayer, but I hate religion because it’s like the duckweed that grows on the surface of the society and stops the natural flow of it. Now I needn’t add that still water becomes dirty. However, the unique thing about religion is that it introduces us to the Almighty and inspires us to love and worship Him.”

“You talk as though you are more of a scholar than a taxi driver,” Said Azaz sarcastically.

The driver felt uncomfortable talking to a passenger. “Yes, you’re right,” he said rather coldly, concentrating on driving the taxi.

The conversation stopped and the taxi began to move faster. When it was about to reach the Masjid, Mr Azaz reached into his pocket for his purse. His face fell when he found that he had forgotten it. “The driver is a Brahmin and a hard-headed guy,” he thought. “He won’t listen to reason. He’s sure to humiliate me; he’s sure to insult me in public.”

The taxi pulled up in front of the Masjid and the driver turned his head to look at Azaz.

Azaz Ahmad got off and walked over to the driver’s door. “Pundit ji, you’re a nice man,” he said. “Would you be so kind as to wait until I get back after Namaz? I wonder if you could possibly drive me back home. You know, I’ll pay double the fare.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. It’s time for other routine tasks which I cannot curtail.”

“I’d be extremely grateful if you could change your mind.”

“No sir, I won’t,” said the driver bluntly. “I wonder why you coax me into taking you back when there are other taxies you can get.”

“Try to understand me, brother. There’s something which I hesitate to tell you.”

“But I have no time to solve your problem. You’d better hurry up and pay me the fare. I’m already late.”

“Pundit ji, I feel acutely embarrassed to tell you that I have left my wallet at home.”

The driver smiled. “So this is your problem!” he said, opening the money box. “Don’t bother – this is the type of thing that can happen to anybody.” Then he took a twenty rupee note out of the box. “Would you mind if I gave it to you, sir,” he added. “Please take some other cab when you return home.”

“But I don’t want to be in debt,” rejoined Azaz, looking at him nervously.

“Well, can you offer an additional prayer?”

“Yes, why not?”

“Then you’ll say a prayer for me and you are clear of the debt.”

Azaz Ahmad was astounded because he had never expected such a response. He finally put the money in his pocket and assured the driver that he would pray for him. Suddenly he remembered something. “Oh brother!” he cried. “I’d like to know what your name is.”

“Brahma Prakash,” said the driver and drove away.