

Shakoor Sahib- my middle school teacher



R C Mody

R C Mody is a postgraduate in Economics and a Certificated Associate of the Indian Institute of Bankers. He studied at Raj Rishi College (Alwar), Agra College (Agra), and Forman Christian College (Lahore). For over 35 years, he worked for the Reserve Bank of India, where he headed several all-India departments, and was also the Principal of the RBI Staff College. Now (2011) 84 years old, he is engaged in social work, reading, writing, and travelling. He lives in New Delhi with his wife. His email address is rmody@airtelmail.in.

I had my initial schooling at home under private tutors as my father was not inclined to send me to any school in Alwar, where my parents lived, because he thought none of them offered a good education. *Editor's note: Alwar was a Princely State at that time, not part of British India.* But, my father changed his mind when a new school, named Model School, opened in 1936. Model School, with classes up to Standard VIII, had a well selected staff, and a very forward-looking Headmaster, Mr Ram Narain Sharma, who went on to become Joint Director of Education in Rajasthan.

I took a rigorous admission test. To my great delight, I was found fit for Class VII, even though I was only 10 years old. Straight away, I was a senior student! Some of my teachers, though not highly paid, were excellent: they were dedicated and they knew how to teach.

One of my teachers particularly lingers in my memory till today, 73 years after I left that school. He made a lasting impact on my mind and thinking.

It was Abdul Shakoor Qureshi, who taught me History and Geography. Shakoor Sahib, as we called him, used to come immaculately dressed, despite the low two figure salary he was paid. More importantly, he did not believe in sticking to the prescribed text books and syllabus. Instead, he was bent upon arousing our interest in and curiosity about the affairs of our country and the world at large.

Whether it was a history class or a geography class, he would find some way out to depart from the beaten path and tell us something different and exciting. While teaching the geography of Europe, when the topic came to Spain, he switched to the ongoing Spanish Civil War and told us all about it: its causes, how it was proceeding, and about Nehru's visit to Spain in the midst the war to support the left wing Republicans. Overnight, we students became experts on this War, about which the elders in our families knew very little.

And when we took up Russia's geography, he told us all about the Russian Revolution. He thrilled us by his account of how the Russian royalty was wiped out by a volley of gunfire, and the country came under the rule of those considered representatives of peasants and workers. But when he described the Communist state, I remember doubt arising in my nascent mind "Would such regimentation not kill the spirit of the people?" But I kept my feelings to myself. (I kept subscribing to the leftist ideology till I visited East Germany forty years later. I found that out how true my nascent fears were. People in East Germany were suffocated, clamouring to cross over to the West by jumping the Berlin wall, and risking their lives. Another 15 years down the line I witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is a good lesson for any one to learn: never suppress a child's thinking).

To return to Shakoor Sahib. While teaching us the British period of Indian history, he would leapfrog two centuries, and would talk about the ongoing struggle for India's freedom from British Raj. He would romanticize personalities like Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Bose and inject in us love and admiration for them and for the country. He would excite our curiosity about the outcome of the ongoing 1937 elections. He personally went to witness polling in the adjacent areas of UP; there were no elections in Alwar. After his return, he gave us an exciting and vivid account of what he saw, and his talks with voters as they coming out of the voting booths. "I have voted for Gandhi," every one told him.

What was the impact of all his talks on the results of his students in our examinations? In keeping with normal Indian practice, the examination questions were only from the prescribed syllabus, not from the other material Shakoor Sahib taught us. Believe it or not, Shakoor Sahib's students all performed better than the boys from the adjoining school where teachers taught only what was prescribed in the syllabus.

Shakoor Sahib had instilled in his students a love for learning!

In 1947, when Pakistan was created Shakoor Sahib went over to Pakistan. Apparently, as a Muslim from Alwar he felt he had no alternative. What he did there with his love for Indian leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru, whom he revered, I kept on guessing for a long time. But, in some of us, the flame of love for this country, which Shakoor Sahib had lit, remained ever lasting.

More than 60 years later, I visited Lahore in 1999. I made an attempt to trace out Shakoor Sahib. But, I did not succeed. I was told that the migrants to Pakistan from Indian areas other than East Punjab could be traced out only among the *Muhajirs* in Karachi. ❖

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