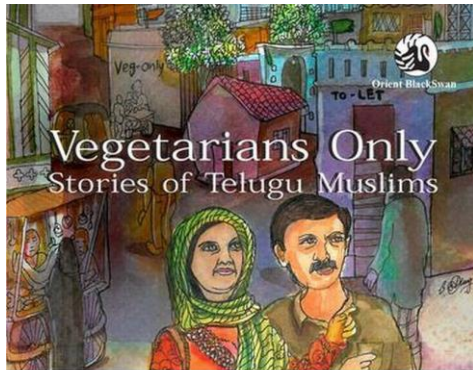


Sheer Khorma



Vegetarians Only Stories of Telugu Muslims

SKYBAABA

Translated from the original Telugu

Edited by A. Suneetha and Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda



“Sheer Khorma” is from an anthology of Telugu stories by Skybaaba edited by A. Suneetha and Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda and translated by the latter. The collection titled “Vegetarians Only” by Orient BlackSwan (2017) is the entire collection of the author’s first book of stories, “Adhure: Muslim Kadhalu” (2012).

IT was Ramzan. Jani was walking towards the idgah. He was in a hurry now. By the time he had bought the milk and all the other things that ammi wanted for Ramzan, it had got late. Salma’s beautiful face—the face that brought tranquillity to his mind—flashed before his eyes. His heart began to race. As soon as the namaz is over I shall first go to Salma’s house, he told himself and quickened his pace.

The idgah was at the western end of the town. The Ramzan and Bakrid prayers were always held there. But it lay half a mile outside town. The town was fairly large, about the size of a taluq. Dust rose from the road with all the scooters and motorcycles speeding by. There were a lot of people walking on the road along with him. Everyone was dressed in new clothes. The different colourful caps on their heads and the fragrance of perfumes they wore made the road

look like a floating flower garden. The older ones had tied kerchiefs over their heads. Some had even brought their little grandchildren along.

They could now hear Imam Sahib adjusting the mike at the idgah. Jani walked faster. He carried a plastic bag in his hand. It contained an old blanket and a satin cap that ammi had taken out of the trunk for him. He was wearing clothes he had ironed and kept ready the night before, and a pair of worn out hawai chappals on his feet. He was nearing the idgah. On either side of the path sat fakirs, pleading for alms. A couple of them sang qawwalis to the accompaniment of the marfa and kanjeera. Many people sat alongside the newly built compound wall of the idgah, calling out to the arriving visitors to leave their footwear with them. They were all competing with each other to attract the highest number. Jani stood undecided for a few seconds, wondering where to leave his slippers. Then he noticed a gentle looking old man sitting in front of him. He removed his slippers, shoved one into the other and handed them to the old man, who kept them along with the pile of footwear he was minding. As more and more people made their way in, Jani moved towards the entrance of the idgah. Imam Sahib began,

Avuz Billahi Minshaithan Nir-rahim

Bismillah Hir-rahman Nir-rahim

I seek God’s protection from the Devil

I begin by invoking the name of the All Merciful God

Everyone was now in a terrible rush to get inside. Jani pushed himself in along with the crowd. Some were grumbling that the entrance ought to have been built wider. He saw the idgah masjid at the far end. In front of it was a huge neem tree. Jani hurried towards it. There were many who had already occupied the space under the shade of the tree. He looked everywhere but realised it was futile to look for a shaded spot. So he took out his blanket and spread it out in one corner, and three others promptly sat down beside him when they saw there was extra space.

The sun was sharp. Jani glanced at the watch on the wrist of the man beside him. It was past eleven. Had he come earlier, he would have found a space in the shade. He looked back—there were more and still more people pouring in. They were hurriedly spreading their sheets and sitting down wherever they could. Those without sheets would stand and wait until they found a spot on someone else's sheet. Some just sat on the bare ground. Many were sweating in the heat. Many had worn new clothes, but there were also those who hadn't and they looked less enthused and somewhat downcast. Some faces were full of worry. Some faces looked more mature than their years, more wrinkled than was natural, their eyes sunken, sleep-deprived and lifeless. Allah! They say that all these are tests that You put us through. Why do You subject so many to such misery?!

Imam Sahib continued to deliver his *bayan*. Time moved on. The incoming crowds gradually thinned down. Imam Sahib ended his speech and began to expound on the mode of prayer for the festival. In a few minutes the entire assembled jamat stood up for namaz. The men stood shoulder to shoulder and began to form rows. As the rows were being formed, those behind quickly moved forward to fill in the gaps in the front rows. Allah-o-Akbar! Imam Sahib raised his hands and began the prayer.

When the namaz ended, before beginning the *dua*, Imam Sahib gave a lecture on *takhreer*, the conduct appropriate for a Muslim. But Jani was not listening. He sat there lost in his own thoughts. No new clothes for him this year. With the money he had managed to save from time to time, he had bought a sari for his mother. She was saddened. "Why did you buy for me, *beta*? You should have bought a readymade shirt or trousers for yourself instead!" she had said. "It's all right, Ammi. It's hardly been six months since I got a new pair." She had pleaded with him to return the sari and get something for himself. But he did not listen to her.

Imam Sahib began the *dua*, prayers for mercy. All assembled extended their arms in prayer. Jani looked at his hands. Oil-stained hands. Stains that refused to go away, just like the stubborn stains of poverty. Stains that stuck to his fingertips even after he trimmed his nails and washed his hands, just like his persistent, unrelenting melancholy.

In his prayers, Imam Sahib pleaded with Allah that all human beings should prosper, that there should be plentiful rain, that there should be no famine—he pleaded for all kinds of good things for everyone. To all of these, Jani kept saying Ameen along with all the others. But in his mind, all he could see was his mother's sorrowful eyes, his younger sister's frightened face, and his elder sister's anxiety. Tears sprang to his eyes. Will he ever be able to fill their lives with some joy? Allah! Won't You come to our rescue? Allah! Won't You grant us some happiness?

Salma... How wonderful it would be if he could marry Salma by next Ramzan! Allah, grant me that one thing, if nothing else. After the *dua*, everyone got to their feet and embraced each other, exchanging Id greetings. Jani scanned the faces in the crowd to see if there was someone he knew, but he couldn't find a single familiar face. Just then, the old grandpa who had shared his blanket stretched out his arms and wished him, "Id Mubarak, beta!" Jani's

heart filled with joy. “May God keep you safe, Chacha!” he greeted and embraced the old man wholeheartedly. He was reminded of the saying that those who have no one else in the world have God. He picked up his blanket, folded it and put it back into the bag. On his way out, he met a few distant relatives and a couple of his neighbours. He greeted and embraced all of them before walking towards the idgah gate. As he scanned the crowds again, he wondered why he hadn’t met any of his uncles. Everyone was now in a great hurry to leave. It took quite a while to get out. At the spot where he had left his slippers, there was a huge scramble as people were pushing and jostling each other to grab their footwear and leave. They gave the old man minding the slippers a rupee or two as they collected their pair. Jani looked for his slippers, spotted them in a corner and put them on. The old man was worried that people might slip away without paying him and he held out his hand and looked at everyone anxiously. Jani managed to put two rupees into his hand with some difficulty because of the milling crowd. As he was moving away, a strong foot fell between his slipper and his raised right foot. He nearly fell but managed to steady himself. He looked down at his slipper. His heart sank. It had broken from the heel upwards. It was already a little broken to begin with. He lifted his foot—the half-broken slipper dangled from it. He took it off and examined it. There was nothing to be done; only the very end of the slipper still held together, the rest had fallen apart.

The old man looked at Jani and the broken slipper and said, “Oh! That is unfortunate, son.”

Jani suddenly felt like bursting into tears but he collected himself and threw the broken slippers aside in anger. Though he had been sitting in the sun all this while, he didn’t perspire. But now that he had lost his slippers, he broke into a sweat and his kurta was soon soaked.

“They are just old chappals, beta. Just think that you have gotten rid of all your ill luck along with them! Buy yourself a new pair and you will fare well,” the old man consoled Jani.

Sigh. Yes, they were just old chappals. But he didn’t have the money to buy a new pair. And he had planned to go to Salma’s after the namaz. Now what was he to do? How could he go to their house without any footwear? Jani stood there for a long time, watching everyone leave. The old man also left. Jani felt bleak and empty. He slowly began to walk out. “Ayya! Ayya! Sir! Baba!” the fakirs called out, their voices mingling with the sounds of the marfa and the clanging of the kanjeera. People moved along, donating alms to the fakirs. Jani didn’t have small change even for that. He walked for some distance. On his left was the graveyard. There were several people standing before their elders’ graves, showering flowers and offering prayers. Jani moved towards his father’s grave. Flowers were being sold outside the graveyard, but he had no money for flowers either. He walked through the tombstones, trying to avoid the thorny bushes and stones. He stood in front of his father’s grave. His grandparents’ graves lay next to his father’s. The person standing in front of a grave nearby carefully unwrapped the flowers he was carrying in a leaf and showered them upon the grave. He then proceeded to shower the remaining flowers on the surrounding graves. He also offered them to Jani. Jani murmured his thanks as he took a few and sprinkled the petals upon his father’s grave and on the ones next to it. He stood there and offered a prayer.

Memories of his father flooded his mind. If only abba were alive, we wouldn’t have to face so many troubles. He came out of the graveyard and stood there, wondering what to do. He didn’t feel like going to Salma’s house anymore. His heart was full of sorrow. How could he visit any of his relatives with bare feet? He slowly began the long walk homewards. All of that morning’s enthusiasm had evaporated. But his mind was filled with Salma. He passed by

her lane. He felt a terrible rage against someone, he didn't know who, because he couldn't visit her. At last he reached his house. He pushed aside the cloth curtain and stepped inside.

Gori Ma was busy making bagara rice. "Salam alaikum, Ammi," he wished his mother and touched her feet. She blessed him, praying that he should live a hundred years and that he should get married by the next Ramzan. Then she asked him, "You didn't go to visit anyone? How come you are back so early?" Jani wearily flopped onto the bed. Gori Ma asked him, "What is wrong, *beta*? Why do you look so downcast?" He lay down on the cot and said, "Nothing." "There will soon be a stream of relatives visiting. I better finish the cooking," she said and hurried back to her work.

Jani's mind was filled with the image of Salma's beautiful face. He was restless. He really wanted to see her. What a beautiful smile she had! Her smile could make him forget all his woes. She must be waiting for me. I should go meet her. Today was a festival day and a perfect excuse to visit her. On other days, it would be difficult and awkward to go there. But how? Perhaps ammi has some money...

"Ammi, my chappal broke when I was at the idgah today," he said finally.

"Ayyo! How did that happen?"

"Someone stepped on it in the crowd and it broke."

"Curse this misery! Never mind. You can buy new ones. I have fifteen rupees with me. I've been saving it for a long time. But will fifteen be enough to buy a new pair?"

Just then they heard a sound outside the door and Jani quickly got up and drew the curtains aside to see who it was. Ammi's brother, Chand Mama, had come. Jani greeted him, "Salam alaikum, Mamu!" "Valaikum salam, Jani! You didn't come to the idgah?" his uncle asked as they embraced each other in the *alai-balai* way. Jani replied,

"I did, Mamu! I was also looking for you!"

Chand Mama bent down and touched Gori Ma's feet as he greeted her, "Salam alaikum, Apa!" She blessed him. He sat for a while, ate the sheer khorma that ammi had prepared for the festival, and while leaving, pressed a fifty rupee note into her palm. As soon as he left, Gori Ma gave the money to Jani, asking him to buy new footwear. He was overjoyed! As he stepped out of the house, he saw his younger uncle and his friend Kakkayya approaching from opposite sides. He greeted and embraced each of them in turn and set off to meet Salma. He stopped on the way to buy slippers, ordinary ones that cost him thirty rupees. Jani could barely wait to see her.

Salma was the daughter of his eldest uncle. Their house lay on the other end of town. And since it was far, mutual visits were infrequent. But occasionally, he did go to meet her. Everyone in her family liked him. They always said, "Jani is a very good lad."

Jani's family's troubles had begun with the death of his father. His mother had struggled to get both his sisters married. Jani had managed to study only up to the eighth standard. As the debts from his sisters' marriages kept mounting, it became really difficult to make ends meet at home. Ultimately, Gori Ma was forced to seek work for Jani in a tractor mechanic shed. She thought it would teach him some useful skills and also help to keep their household

running. So Jani left for work every day at eight in the morning and there was no telling when he would return at night. Gori Ma was alone at home the whole day. She began to pester him to get married so she would have a daughter-in-law for company. He wanted to marry Salma. He had mentioned this to his mother.

Gori Ma had said, "*Beta*, you are the kind who never asks for anything. This is the only thing you have ever asked for. I will do all I can. I have been thinking of the girl myself. I don't see who else your uncle will want to get her married to. Let us wait for the right time, and I will broach the subject."

The next time Jani had gone to Salma's house, he had somehow found the courage to ask her, "Salma, do you like me?" She had lowered her gaze shyly, nodded as if to say yes and run into the next room. This had only made him more restless with desire. This year he was determined to marry her.

Now he stood outside Salma's door and knocked. He hoped she would come to open the door. But her brother Haneef opened it. "Salam alaikum, bhai jaan!" Haneef wished him. "Valaikum salam!" he replied as he embraced Haneef, and walked in. His aunt was in the living room. He offered her his salam. She greeted him in return and asked, "Come, Jani. How is your mother?"

"She is well, Mami. She sends you her greetings. Hasn't Mamu returned from the idgah yet?"

"He has. He has gone to Rahmat Nagar to visit a distant cousin of mine."

Jani thought, Ah. So he went to visit a distant cousin before he visited us!

"Please sit, Jani. I'll get you some sheer khorma," his aunt said and disappeared into the kitchen.

Jani sat down in a chair. His eyes searched for Salma. Where was the Salma who would run out as soon as she heard him arrive, whose eyes and face would light up on seeing him? He knew that Salma's room was on the left side of the living room in which he now sat. There was a curtain hanging in the entrance to that room. Why didn't she come out to see him? Had she gone to visit her friends? But she knew he would come; she wouldn't have gone. Jani wondered what was going on. He called Haneef and whispered, "Where is Salma?" Haneef gestured towards the room, "Inside." He wanted to ask him to call her out. But just then his aunt came in with a bowl of sheer khorma and handed it to him. Jani took the bowl from her.

It was Salma who always served him the sheer khorma, whether it was Ramzan or Bakrid. She would come to him wearing shiny new clothes, a long voni, and her radiant, smiling face. Having her come and stand so close to him and breathing in her sweet fragrance was enough to fill him with a pleasurable lightness. Eating the sheer khorma was like tasting nectar. She would withdraw to stand at a little distance and politely enquire after his mother and sisters with an entranced gaze fixed on him all the while. As for himself, he wouldn't take his eyes off her face for a moment and respond to each of her queries with a boundless joy suffusing him. Their eyes spoke a wordless, silent language. Today, Jani felt awkward and uneasy that he had to eat the khorma without seeing Salma. Mami was asking him about this and that and he managed to answer her half-heartedly as he swallowed a spoonful. He didn't want to eat any more. He didn't know what to do. He kept glancing in the direction of Salma's room as he sat holding the bowl. He couldn't understand why Salma didn't come out. If any other Id visitors arrived now, he would have no chance of meeting her at all! What to do? He was anxious and confused.

Meanwhile, his aunt was thinking, Why doesn't the boy finish his sheer khorma quickly and leave! Why is he just sitting there? I have so much work to do! Then she noticed Jani glancing repeatedly at Salma's room. She understood and shifted uncomfortably. She couldn't wait any longer and came out with the truth.

"Why don't you have the sheer khorma, beta?" she began. Jani was flustered. He began to eat. "I mentioned my distant cousin, didn't I? Their son lives in Saudi. He is here on a two-month leave. His parents want to get him married. They asked for our Salma. They said, 'She is such a pretty girl, we don't want any dowry.' They just want a grand wedding. The boy is a nice fellow, he is educated, and works in Saudi. So your uncle agreed immediately. We have to conduct the nikah in just a month's time! I hope you don't mind, beta, but we couldn't inform you earlier. It all happened so quickly, you see. Your uncle will come and inform your mother. He might come to visit you today itself. We all want our daughters to live a comfortable life, free of all troubles, don't we, beta? Moreover, these days who will want to marry without a fat dowry? And you know that your uncle can't afford much..." She went on and on, carried away with the joy and relief of having found such a good match for her daughter.

Jani suddenly felt as if he couldn't breathe. Nothing she said after this entered his head. Salma's wedding was fixed with someone else. She would go away to Saudi. He would never see her again. His head swirled. The sheer khorma tasted bitter. Sharp hot tears stung his eyes. He abruptly put the bowl down on the table, got up and walked out of the house without looking back. Mami was upset and called out, "Jani beta, what happened? Why are you leaving like this?"

Jani stepped out of the house and stood on the road. A great blackness engulfed him. He sobbed out aloud, his sobs nearly choking him. He began to walk briskly, not knowing where he was headed.

Story selected by Mini Krishnan