

## A Bicycle in Darjeeling

I had promised Maria, my ten-year-old daughter, that I would buy her a bicycle. She had chosen a pink one with a small basket in front and a little bell that chimed sweetly. But the day before we were to leave for Darjeeling, my office work piled up. I had to stay late. The bicycle was forgotten or rather, delayed.

She didn't say much. But I knew she was upset.

We were in Darjeeling for five days. Every year, I made sure to take her somewhere, away from the noise of Delhi. Darjeeling was a place I had loved since childhood, and Maria enjoyed the hills too at least, usually.

As we sat in the taxi from the station, I started clicking pictures of the beautiful green valley we were passing. Mist floated above the trees like slow-moving dreams. But Maria looked out the window quietly. I could tell she was still sad.

We reached our hotel, *Star Hotel*. A wooden board outside said: "Since 1960s." That surprised me. Darjeeling had seen earthquakes. How was this hotel still standing?

But when we entered, I forgot that worry.

Everything felt like we had walked into the 60s. The staff wore vintage clothes. The reception desk was decorated with rotary phones, old clocks, and wooden name plates. Even the light music playing in the background felt like a soft echo from the past.

Inside our room, we placed our bags. Maria gently put her doll into the cupboard, the same doll I had given her on her last birthday. She still loved it.

It started raining. Outside the window, the valley looked calm and deep. There was something both peaceful and haunting in the silence of the hills.

When the rain stopped, we stepped out. The road was shining black, the rain had made it glow like charcoal covered in glass. Maria smiled a little. But as a child rode by on a bicycle, her smile faded. She looked down again.

We walked around the town. There were many cafes, but I didn't feel like going to any. They reminded me of Delhi. Instead, I noticed a small momo stall at the corner.

A short, middle-aged man sat near it, his shoulders slouched, as if he was carrying something heavy though there was nothing on him. He quietly watched every passerby, hoping someone would stop.

I walked over.

"How much for one plate?" I asked.

He opened the steamer lid. Steam rushed out like a cloud.

"50 rupees," he said, wiping his face with a cloth.

I looked at his small signboard. It read, "*Momos made with wheat are also available.*"

"You make momos with wheat too?" I asked.

He smiled, "My wife suggested that."

"Good idea. Health-conscious tourists will like it."

He shrugged, "That I don't know."

Behind him, a young girl was preparing the stuffing. She had a small storybook next to her, which she would read from time to time.

"Is that your daughter?" I asked.

"Yes. She will start 5th standard now." he answered.

"That's good. You send her to school." I appreciated him.

He smiled proudly, “Yes. I want her to study well.”

Just then, Maria tugged my hand. She was looking at the girl. Slowly, the two girls smiled at each other.

Over the next few days, Maria and the momo vendor’s daughter, her name was **Kanchi**, became close. While her father steamed momos, Kanchi would sit nearby and read stories to Maria from her book. They giggled, laughed, and played with dolls together.

One day, we took the Darjeeling Himalayan toy train ride. Maria’s mood finally lifted. She leaned out the window, her hair flying in the wind, waving at strangers. She held my hand and smiled wide. I smiled too.

Another day of our trip as the morning fog began to clear, I noticed something unusual.

The momo vendor, always sitting upright, hopeful, cheerful in his quiet way, looked tired. His eyes were lost in thought. His shoulders seemed even lower today.

I walked up to him, Maria trailing behind.

“Bhaiya... all okay?” I asked gently.

He gave a weak smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“I had to borrow money for Kanchi’s admission to a new school. An English-medium one. The admission fee was ₹3000. It’s far from home. She’ll have to travel daily. I want to buy her a bicycle, but I can’t afford it. Not now. Maybe not ever.” he answered.

He looked down as he said this, ashamed, though he shouldn’t have been.

Maria stayed quiet the entire walk back to the hotel. She wasn’t her usual cheerful self. She didn’t skip or ask for hot chocolate like she always did. That night, as she tucked her doll into the cupboard, she turned to me.

“Papa... Kanchi walks a lot to school?” she asked, voice low.

“Yes.” I nodded.

“She wakes up early, helps her papa at the stall... and still goes to school?” she asked.

“Yes, beta.” I nodded again.

There was silence. Then, slowly, her little voice said

“She reads me stories, Papa. Even the ones she doesn’t understand...” she said.

I looked at Maria. Her eyes had changed. There was something new in them, something soft, and wise.

“Can we give her a bicycle?” she whispered. “Mine can wait.”

That moment, *that one moment*, told me my daughter had grown in ways I hadn’t imagined. Her voice was steady.

The next morning, I bought a bicycle from a nearby shop. Nothing fancy, just a simple, solid one that could handle the uphill roads of Darjeeling.

I wheeled it to the momo stall. The vendor stood frozen, eyes wide, as if afraid to believe it. I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“For Kanchi” I said. “So she can ride to school.”

He didn’t speak. Just looked at me, then at Maria, and then at the bicycle. His hands trembled slightly as he took it.

Kanchi came running out. Her eyes lit up, and then softened when she saw Maria. The two girls stood face to face.

“This is yours now,” Maria said, gently touching the handle. “Now you can go to school faster.”

Kanchi looked at her, unsure what to say. Then she hugged Maria tightly.

I watched them, two girls, from two different lives, connected by stories, shared giggles, and now, a quiet act of kindness.

As we sat in the taxi to leave, Maria turned to look back. Kanchi was waving at her, standing next to the bicycle, her storybook tucked under one arm.

Maria smiled, a smile full of peace.

She leaned her head on my shoulder.

And in that moment, the hills of Darjeeling, the rain-washed roads, and an old wooden hotel, all became a memory wrapped in the warmth of a child's heart.