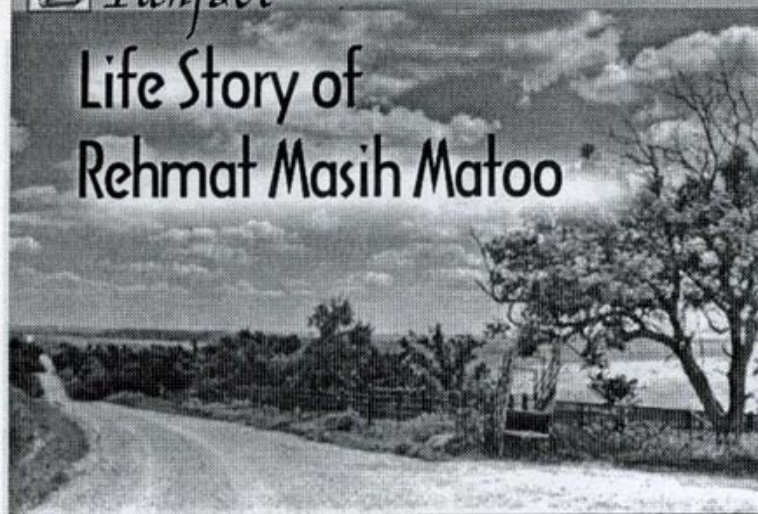




# Life Story of Rehmat Masih Matoo



**BHAGWANT RASULPURI**

**Trans. Dr. Rajinder Singh**

## Preface -1

I have to talk to you about a person who has just got down the tempo. This man of middle-age is wearing a white shirt and grey trousers. Four persons have alighted but I want to talk about the one who, after coming out of the hazy dust, has turned to the west and entered the lane leading to our residential block. Yes, he is Rehmat Masih Matoo, Master Rehmat. His bronze face is shining as if it has remained unaffected by dust. He combs his hair after a liberal use of mustard oil which makes his grey hair look golden. He generally wears a safari suit or a white *kurta-pajama*. He is having joyful puffs at the Cavender cigarette held between his middle and little fingers. Another thing I may share with you; we have got used to this brand of cigarette right from our primary school days. Yes he is holding a memento also in his hand. And, of course, a black bag which he always has in his hand. Besides other papers, there are typed applications, letters

of complaints, and a very old diary of names and addresses in the bag. I am talking of Rehmat Masih Matoo only. I want to mention in the preface itself about the main traits of his character so that you may be eager to know more about him. He has been my childhood mate in the block. Not only is he my mate, he belongs to my own community also. He is just like my brother. But I address him as Master affectionately, though he is barely a year older. Master Rehmat Masih was the drawing master in our village Gakhlaan. 'Was' means that he has retired; he retired on 31<sup>st</sup> March last month. Master Masih is regarded as a hero in the village because of his amiable and helpful nature. Even when he was in the school, he always had some issue or other to deal with. And now too his involvement is no less. After retirement he is trying to become a leader. He may be dreaming to become the messiah of the *Valmiki*s. On seeing the memento I am reminded of the fact that he has a great



hunger for being honoured. And more than that is the hunger of addressing the crowds. I am keeping safe with me many of his secrets. That is why I feel like talking about his life. Once it was decided to give him an annual award in a cultural meet, introduced in the memory of a social worker. He reached the venue of the meet early morning. After receiving the award, he took the mike in his hand and began to speak. He was lecturing about the uplift of his community in a very effective manner, but the audience was keen to hear the choicest songs. At last he returned the mike to the stage secretary with these words – 'Dear friends of my community, just as I have been honoured with this award in view of my services to the community, you too should do something for the community in this memorable way and you would also be honoured, people would remember you.' ....Rehmat Masih and I had studied together. Rehmat Masih, after passing his tenth class, joined a course of 'Drawing' and I joined my father in the corporation to take up the job of 'sweeping'. I spent the whole of my life in 'sweeping'. Then after praying to the Mayor most humbly and respectfully a number of times, I was appointed as a clerk in the corporation.

## Preface-2

This happened only yesterday. No, not yesterday. It had happened during our childhood. And not my childhood. I want to tell you about Master Rehmat Masih's childhood. My childhood too would be covered with his childhood as our childhood was spent together. When I was sitting idle yesterday in the office of the corporation, I began to rummage through the bag containing the Master's files and papers. He had kept this bag on my table and then he had forgotten to take it with him when he left. I took out a file of blue cover which was super-scribed in black sketch pen "Service Book/Personal file/

ACR noting document.' The heading had roused my curiosity. When I opened the file, I found that a good number of papers had been tagged. Photocopies of some papers were very dark – almost black- but some copies were quite faint. All these were Photostat copies of the Master's service book, ACR, letters of complaints, etc. Some portions were underlined in red pencil. I was reading the papers at random when my mind was diverted through the window towards the handcarts for garbage. Three or four children were moving around the carts with gunny bags in their hands. One of them was a girl, and the other were boys. Looking at their faces I had begun to read the childhood notebook stored in my mind.

...Perhaps we were in the fifth class. Rehmat had made me used to taking very tasty leftover food in the marriage feasts. One day Rehmat had told me, "Let's go, Darshi, to village Nangal where a marriage party has to arrive. My brother will go there as a waiter. He had asked me to go with him. We will eat to our fill there and earn the wage too for the day. We had planned immediately to play truant. Escaping the eye of the lady teacher and on the pretext of going to piss, we had run away. We walked for an hour or so to reach the place where the marriage party was due to arrive. I was barefooted. My shirt was worn-out and torn. I had either a short or a pyjama on. We were so scared. We slowly moved close to the *halvais*, who were preparing sweets and frying *pakaura*. (a snack of gram flour). The pakauras were being taken out of the large pan of hot oil and put in the large platter. Our mouths had watered on seeing this. I had come to school after taking the leftover stale loaf of the previous night. My mother had soaked the bits of it in butter milk. The waiters were arranging crockery and cutlery on the tables. Some were putting the chairs at the proper place.



Rehmat's eyes were looking for his elder brother. Then he had suddenly said aloud, when my attention fixed in the pakauras was diverted, "Just see what is he bringing, the wretched one?," saying this he had run towards his brother. I had followed him, so scared as I was. His brother was bringing the sweet boxes from the bridal house. He paused a bit and then said, 'Mother fu.... You have come now. I had told you to come early. The sister givers.... have come now at the time of eating. Run away from here.' But Rehmat kept standing there. Both of us followed him, though we were afraid of him. Then he made us sit near the tubs full of water. There was a heap of cups and saucers near us. "Wash these cups and saucers with surf and water and keep them on this table. Darshi, sit behind the surf box, and Rehmat, you can sit close to the water tub. Do your work quickly and deftly.' We began to do as directed and placed the washed crockery on the table. The marriage party had arrived. The tent was overcrowded with guests. They would be taking sweets joyfully. I had felt then as if I had a rasgulla (a kind of syrupy sweet) in my mouth. My mouth had got filled with water. The waiters were moving around quickly and serving plates full of pakauras to the members of the marriage party. Two of the waiters were bringing to us emptied tea cups and plates, with leftover pakauras, sweets, bread pieces, all half eaten, ordering us, 'Do your work very quickly you sister givers.... and place the washed cup-plates on the table. These are needed immediately inside.' Rehmat had kept near him a large polythene bag, which he had perhaps brought from home. He generally had such a bag with him. He had taken this bag out of his waist band and began to fill it with the leftover and half eaten pieces of sweets and fries. Whenever he found a piece of barfi (a sweet made of milk paste and sugar) he told me joyfully, 'Look here this is a piece of

barfi...and this is rasgulla full of syrup.' We washed the dishes till the evening. Meanwhile Rehmat's brother had given us tea and a plate full of pakauras. Both of us had finished the pakauras and begun to belch. The polythene bag with us was full of the leftover snacks. When all the crockery had been washed, I had developed backache. Rehmat had also got tired. Blisters had appeared on my hands because of keeping them in surf water for long. The head waiter had given us twenty rupees each before we left. He had also given some sweets and pakauras in small paper bags. We had put this uneaten sweet and other snacks in a separate bag. Rehmat had given me the bag containing leftover snacks. We returned home merrily. On reaching home, we had divided the leftover food in two. Rehmat had divided into two even all the pieces of barfi as also the rasgullas and given to me. I remember that food was not cooked either in our house or in Rehmat's place that night. The members of our families had very joyfully feasted on the sweets, etc. we had brought. In this way, Rehmat made me accompany him whenever there was a marriage. We got some money also in our pocket after doing work. Some of this earning was spent on *bidi*s we smoked sitting on the dunes. When we had a little more money, Rehmat used to buy a packet of cigarettes. We derived a lot of pleasure out of these puffs.

Once we had saved a lot of money which we had earned during marriages. These coins were showered over the newly-weds by the father of the groom. Those were the 'Navratri' days (the nine days of new moon of the lunar month twice a year in March and October). Rehmat had planned to go to a movie. A film with Dharmendra as its hero, was being shown. We had played truant from the school and run to the tempo to go to the town. Puffing at our cigarettes, our hair nicely



combed and shining with mustard oil, we were moving about in the cinema compound. Just at that time Rehmat spotted our Maths teacher. He had perhaps come to movie. "Just see Darshi, that sister fu...maths teacher. He is accompanied by his wife also. Let us hide somewhere, my friend." I got terribly scared. We put out our cigarettes with our hands. I had burnt my fingers. The teacher had also seen us. But we did see the movie.

Next day the teacher had stopped us after the prayer. Both of us were given severe punishments.

....Three or four children hovering around the rubbish carts are quarrelling among themselves loudly and diverted my attention again and again. They had begun to fight over something and I was distracted. I had shouted at them and driven them away. The girl with them had begun to cry. She held her trousers tightly and rant after the boys, terribly afraid as she had got. So many thoughts came to my mind about the girl.

I want to relate to you the life story of Rehmat Masih but I am in two minds as to how and where should I begin it. Now it has become easy. His blue covered file is before me. The file contains important documents concerning his service. I have no other work. I turn pages of the file and all the events slowly appear before my eyes also. You may like to call it a biography or an autobiography or a story. The Photostat papers in the file are just a pretext.

### **Humiliation**

On one of the papers tagged in the blue file, there was a note over half a page: 'Today, the 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1988, the drawing master in the school abused the headmaster V.K. Verma and used very foul language against him. When the peon was badly rebuked after the prayers today for not doing

the cleaning properly, drawing master Matoo came to the Headmaster's room and quarreled with him. The Punjabi teacher Manjir Kaur and maths teacher Hargopal Singh are giving evidence to this effect. Their signatures also are being obtained. Peon, Jagar Sidhu had not been cleaning the school rooms properly. Rubbish was found in the rooms and the Headmaster's room was also not being cleaned properly. Being the head of the school, it is my duty to get work properly from all those working under me. But Rehmat Masih Matoo had given this matter a communal colour. He began to use very foul language to humiliate me. He warned me that he would complain against me for calling the peon "sala choohra (the wretched scavenger) of depressed caste." He had threatened me also many a time. A complaint regarding misconduct on the part of Master Rehmat is also being made to the District Education Officer.'

On reading this I was immediately reminded of this happening. Jagar Sidhu also lived in our block. He was appointed in the school on the recommendation of the sarpanch (head of the village council). Mr. Verma was the headmaster when this had happened. He was in the habit of abusing the school peon, sweeper and the gardener over trifles. Jagar had told me at that time, "The new headmaster is an evil person, my brother. He abuses our mothers and sisters whenever he opens his mouth. He said to me yesterday, 'You son of a scavenger....be a man....do the cleaning properly otherwise I will send you out.'" He also used to go on burdening Rehmat Masih more and more. Whenever a teacher absented himself, his period in the class was assigned to Rehmat. He used to engage himself in long gossip with other teachers in his office room. Things came to a head when he had told the gardener who used to serve water that he



would not accept water from him. And one day Master Rehmat Matoo had protested in the presence of the entire staff. The headmaster had made a false complaint against him to the District Education Officer at that time and poor Rehmat was made to take round of the DEOs office. Whenever he met me, he used to say very unhappily, "My brother, we are destined to rot, born as we are in a low caste, we are donkeys for carrying the filth; though we got educated and worked at petty positions, the mental make-up of our countrymen is like that of the days of slavery. They begin to have cramps on seeing us getting entitled to equal rights. Even these Ravidasi chamars (leather workers) consider us of depressed caste. Look here Darshan, this headmaster has locked horns with us so that we would not protest. Anything going wrong would be noted against us." Rehmat Masih's young blood was boiling at that time.

This incident reached the village council also. The sarpanch belonged to the chamar community. There was a panch (member of the village council) from our block also. The council had visited the school once or twice. But the headmaster was not ready to pay heed to anything the members of the council said to him. The acrimony between the headmaster and the drawing master began to grow day by day. Politics had entered the school. Rehmat Masih and three class IV servants were on one side, and the rest of the staff on the other. There were two Scheduled Caste teachers in the school. However, they were afraid of taking Rehmat's side. The English teacher, Kulbir Singh Man, took very few periods. Once Rehmat had told me about him. "This teacher, Kulbir Singh, has been found to be a chamar and he used to say that he was a Jat (a land owning farmer). Once I went to their village. I enquired about this teacher from the villagers. "Is there a teacher, Kulbir Singh, Lambardar (village

official), from your village?" And he told me that there was no one from his community. "Of course, there is one chamar, Kulbir Singh Man." Now tell me what can be done?"

This teacher had never come to school punctually. When he came to school he wasted time in idle gossip with the primary school lady teachers. Sometimes he took his lunch with them. The children of his class kept making noise. One day Rehmat Masih had felt annoyed and he had poured out his ire at headmaster Verma. "Look here, Mr. Verma. You do not say anything to the English master. Instead of teaching the children, he goes on gossiping with the lady teachers of the primary classes. When he comes late, you do not mark his one third absence; you keep him going by marking his presence. If we get late even by five minutes, you mark one third absence. You should treat everybody equally. Don't side with one and humiliate others. You are spoiling the atmosphere in the school by this sort of discrimination. This is adversely affecting the the children's study.." But what Rehmat Masih had said had no effect on Mr. Verma. Every one in our block had come to know about this. A few boys in our block used to do dish washing, serve water and to work as waiters for serving snacks for the neighbouring tent house at the time of marriages and two others who drove the tractor in the farms of landlords, had planned to "gherao" the headmaster. They surrounded the headmaster when they got a chance. They came to blows with him and had torn his shirt by pulling it from the neck. The enraged headmaster had registered a complaint at the Lambra police post – "Drawing master Rehmat Matoo and the school peon, Jagar Sidhu had joined hands and had him assaulted by some boys of his community." Master Rehmat was held at the police post for two days along with those boys. I had to



do running about at that time and pleaded with the District Valmiki Sabha to have Rehmat and other boys bailed out. Things had taken a different turn. Rehmat had to suffer a lot on this account. Though Rehmat did not know about this, as the boys belonged to his block, all the blame was thrown on him. Rehmat had scolded those boys when they returned home. Then a boy had said angrily, "We cannot brook all this, uncle, if that headmaster goes on insulting our uncles. We are not girls, wearing glass bangles."

But I had rebuked them and sent them to their houses. Then they had begun to make a mountain of a mole hill. The District President of the Valmiki Sabha had taken up this matter with the All India Safai Mazdoor Sabha with the help of its General Secretary and the matter had taken a political turn. The master was not in favour of this. Ten or fifteen unlettered men of our block had become members of the Valmiki Sabha and its President had given Rehmat an important position in the Sabha's Jalandhar Circle. They had jointly handed to the District Education Officer and the D.C. a charter of demands. Headmaster Verma too had begun to enlist support of political bigwigs of the town. The incident of assault on the headmaster had almost been forgotten with the passage of time. The Master's supporters had succeeded in shelving it. Verma too had bent down a bit. The village council had been instrumental in having a compromise made between the two groups. But Rehmat had begun to prepare for a 'sting' operation. He was on the lookout for an opportunity.

### **Theft**

After turning a few more pages in the file, my eyes get fixed at a point where it has been written in blue ink and an addition made in red ink 'Mats worth two thousand rupees were stolen.' I was surprised that even this

had been brought on government records. Perhaps it is the leaf of the service book....or that of the personal file. By writing this, the headmaster had blemished Rehmat's forehead for life. I will read out this for you from the very beginning,

"Drawing Master Rehmat Masih Matoo of Gakhali Middle School has stolen two rolls of one hundred long mats of the primary school. The post of the head of the primary school being vacant, I am holding this additional charge. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of April the primary school teacher Jagir Singh had bought the mat rolls out of PTA fund. He had given the bill for one thousand rupees also to the PTA fund in charge. The two rolls of mats had been kept in the primary school staff room and when after two days, the mats were required to be cut into pieces, the mats were found missing. The keys of the school used to be with the sweeper Sidhu. Master Rehmat Masih obtained those keys and stole the mats which he sold to a shop in the city. The shopkeeper has given his statement to this effect to the police. This is a very serious matter. Therefore I deem it very essential to make a note of this in the service book.' Below this was the signature of the headmaster over his stamp.

But what had happened was quite different. I had come to know that the headmaster by writing this had blemished Rehmat's record of service for life. Everyone knew that the theft was mainly engineered by Jagir Singh. But for want of adequate proof, things had settled down and all the blame had come to Master Rehmat Masih. I learnt that Master Masih and the headmaster had even come to blows and Master Masih had lodged complaints against him. Rehmat had decided to have a showdown with the headmaster. This time the village council had sided with the Master. The entire village had



given a statement that Rehmat was not in the village on the day of the happening. Although Verma had entrapped him, still Verma had himself come to grief. The atmosphere in the school had become tense. The students were very badly affected by this acrimony. Verma was rarely seen in the school. Master Rehmat dug out something or the other against the headmaster and reported this to the press and the District Education Officer. After about twenty days, the Master had got photocopies of the forged bills placed on the PTA fund file and given to a pressman. When the news about the misuse of PTA funds with the photo of the forged bill appeared in the newspapers, the headmaster was caught in a new trouble. The DEO office had called the entire records from the school to the District office. The headmaster had got himself transferred after about two months. But he was badly caught in the web.

A headmistress of our community joined the school in his place. She had been recently promoted. Being in the reserved quota, her promotion had been very quick and Rehmat Masih had begun to feel that his writ would run in the school in future. He had met me about that time. He had told me, "Things would move my way now, Darshan. I will take full revenge on Jagir Singh. I too am a devil, you know. The headmistress is from our community. She stands by us." I kept listening to him. The Master's face exuded a strange type of radiance.

### **Ancestors**

Master Rehmat's parents had led a life of abject poverty. His father Gharib Das Masih and his mother Dhanti cleaned the drains of five surrounding villages. Gharib Das and Dhanti used to leave for work at dawn on their cycle with their broom and a scrape made of a mudguard to clean the drains. They

would eat something wherever they could get and when there was a marriage or a sad occasion, they took it as a festivity for them. They got so much to eat that after filling their belly, the remaining food was tied in the corner of Gharib Das's turban and carried home. When the leftovers of the marriage feasts, like sweets and other snacks, were brought home, Rehmat made small paper packs of some of it and brought to me. We used to eat together joyfully. And if still some of it was left, I took it home for my younger sister. Rehmat used to take the stale pakauras for many days with tea in the morning. Sometimes he brought the pakauras to school also in the pocket of his trousers and distributed among his friends. I remember that in our group, there was a Brahmin boy also. After taking a pakaura or two he used to beg Rehmat to get him more next day, as he wiped his hand over his worn-out shirt. Rehmat became a bit stubborn as he grew up. The Christian missionaries had begun to visit the village those days. Gharib Das was won over by them and he embraced Christianity and 'Masih' was suffixed to his name. Many others also got converted to Christianity in our compound. They used to go to the church wearing washed clothes with their hair dressed using mustard oil. Master Rehmat's father had begun to think for once that by becoming a Christian he had entered a higher caste. Gharibdas had become the village chowkidar. One day the Lambra police came to the village in search of a criminal. The police party had called the chowkidar. On being asked his name by the police post in charge, he had stated his name with great pride. "Sir, Gharib Das Masih" but the police in charge had said sarcastically, "You menials, you may become Masih or Singh, but you will remain scavengers only." Gharib Das had felt extremely humiliated on hearing this. He did not show his anger which he kept



within himself. He sat down fearfully on the floor. Then the police in charge had told him, "Listen to me. If you have declared yourself as a Christian, you will get no concession nor would your children get any benefit. You will become general on embracing Christianity but the people would continue to call you what you are." Greatly awed Gharib Das had listened to what the police in charge had said. It appeared to him as if a judge was pronouncing some punishment for a crime.

What the police in charge had said had an immediate effect on Gharib Das. He continued to be a Christian but he had not changed his caste in the official records. He had got recorded at school the religion and caste of his son as 'Hindu and Valmiki'. Only this would have enabled him to get concessions from government. One of Rehmat's brothers was Salim Masih who was a bandmaster. Rehmat had approached the President of Valmiki Sabha of the town to get his brother fixed up in the corporation. Though he had to enter the gutters, he was paid well at fixed scale.

When Rehmat Masih was appointed as a teacher, his life has undergone a sea change. He was married to Shanti Devi who was a school teacher. Later on she had become the headmistress and B.E.O also. Master Rehmat Masih had built a bungalow in the village and their children had received decent education. One of his daughters had become a famous hockey player. For this, she had been appointed in the P.A.P. Then she was engaged to a boy settled in Canada and after marriage she migrated to Canada. His eldest son Thomas Matoo had done engineering and gone to Chandigarh to work in a company. He was receiving a handsome salary, it was said. He rarely visited his village Gakhai. The younger son was doing Master's degree in Computer Science.

Master Rehmat Masih has retired now. He must have got seven to eight lakh rupees in the provident fund account. All this means that he is an affluent Valmiki brother in our block. Though we had studied together, I have not been able to make much headway. I just became a clerk.

### Anxiety

By and large we were all occupied in our own ways. I used to return home at five in the evening. The Master had many other things also to do. He was always on the move. But still whenever I met Master Rehmat Masih, we used to smoke together, sometimes we had a peg of 'Orange' brand wine. We used to talk a lot about our community. One day he came to my place in a worried state of mind. He was sad over some feud in the village. There are about twenty to twentyfive houses belonging to our community in the village and about a hundred votes. Master Rehmat had said as he sat down, "Darshna, we can't have a unity among ourselves. Four families are supporting the Lambardar and ten are with the Sarpanch. Our Valmiki brothers have no unity at all."

"You are right, brother. Firstly, you are no longer Valmikis. Our uncle Gharib Das has become a Christian and you have added Masih to your name. You are trying to do something or the other to raise your status in society," said I angrily.

"I have not given up my caste, you see. I have become a Masih but still I am a Valmiki. You are well aware, that I am working for 'Akhil Bhartiya Valmiki Sabha' and 'Jai Valmiki Manch, Punjab'. I join their demonstrations and *dharnas*. What else can I do? Masih has been suffixed to my name and it cannot be dropped now." Rehmat Masih had explained his position in this way.

"Dear friend Rehmat, why have we



been removing others' filth throughout the centuries. What have we been given by these people whose night-soil we have been carrying on our heads? Those, who get educated in our community break with us. We simply remain the sweepers carrying brooms." I had said so with deep agony.

What we said to each other did not reach the ears of a third person. We could give vent to our pent-up feelings by talking to each other just as we used to smoke cigarettes stealthily sitting on the dunes.

### **Welfare**

Ever since Headmistress Nirmala Devi had come to Rehmat Masih's school, Rehmat had instilled the spirit of love for her community in her mind. She even did not know how to run the school and how the distribution of work has to be done. Rehmat used to sit for hours in Nirmala's room. Sometimes madam Nirmala got fed up also. Rehmat had begun to rule the school. The rest of the staff had ceased to feel comfortable. Whenever Rehmat felt like going anywhere, he made this his official duty and Nirmala had to approve this. The benches in two classes badly needed to be repaired. He had the benches replaced by new ones with the help of a village N.R.I. He had begun to be praised in the school. Next year he had obtained a grant from a Minister for flush bath rooms for the office and classes and a staff room. Then he got a kabaddi team prepared for the boys. The team had won the District shield. Every year he managed to distribute school uniforms and books to twenty to twentyfive students with the help of some donors. He paid the school fee of five children of his block out of his own pocket. All these developmental activities and improvements made had begun to be entered in his service book. He had created some problems also for Nirmala Devi. She did not want the school

atmosphere to be vitiated because of caste-division. There had been a tension in the school ever since Masih had suggested to the headmistress to declare a Valmiki holiday. That year, the government had cancelled the Valmiki holiday like many other such holidays. Madam had sent the circular to be signed by all the teachers. Madam and Rehmat were surprised when except for three teachers, others had refused to sign it. After all Nirmala was the headmistress. She too had a reverence for Rishi Valmiki. She called all the teachers to her office and strong arguments had ensued there. Half the teachers had walked out and returned to their classes but Rehmat Masih succeeded in having the holiday declared.

Once Rehmat Masih had approached a Minister from the area. The Minister had agreed to provide funds for a new building for the school. A function was to be held in the school. The expenses were to be incurred out of the PTA funds. Rehmat had prepared some children also to stage a cultural programme. Well-known pressmen had also been invited. The function was a great success. The worthies of the village had also attended the function. The Minister had announced a grant of ten lakhs for the school building and according to government directions the school had to arrange matching amount of ten lakhs out of its own resources. Rehmat Masih contacted a few N.R.I.s belonging to the village and collected ten lakhs from them and the construction of the school building had begun. Rehmat was highly praised in the village. The headmistress was very happy with him and she had made an excellent entry in his service book in this regard, the photocopy of which is before me:

"Master Rehmat Masih has performed an historic act by beginning the construction



of school building. The school has been functioning for the last twenty years in a dilapidated building for want of matching funds from school's own resources. Master Rehmat contacted the public spirited people and collected a sum of ten lakhs from them. Thus he has made history for the school. Such teachers as do so much in the field of education should be selected for state awards."

Nirmala Devi had written several such notes in his service book ever since she had become the headmistress. Besides, he had made a name in the Teachers' Union also. He had been able to have the problems of many teachers solved in a jiffy. Whenever Master Masih met me he used to say, "Doing work has become a pleasure now, Darshan. My work is valued now. The headmistress is our own. Whatever I say is respected everywhere. D.E.O. had called me yesterday. He praised me so much."

### **Award**

I wonder when the desire to become a state awardee had cropped up in Rehmat's mind. He had done so much in five years that he could become a claimant for the state award. He had a good number of newspaper-cuttings in which he had been shown as playing a leading role in every field. But the adverse entries made earlier in his service book and personal file and such other notes had become a source of trouble for him. Rehmat used to feel very unhappy thinking of the early period of his service. Still his case was very strong. He prepared the papers for the state award and had the case completed and forwarded to Chandigarh by the headmistress. He had full hope of being given the state award because he had done a lot in the field of education. One of his adversaries had got the photocopies of the adverse entries in the service book and such

other comments in the person file wherein he had been described as an evil person who had stolen the mats and insulted the headmaster, and forwarded to Chandigarh. Rehmat Masih Matoo had narrowly missed the state award. Rehmat Masih had come to know that the mischief had been committed by his colleague Master Kulbir Singh Maan.. Once Rehmat Masih made up his mind he never retraced his step. Next year he had got acquainted with the Education Officer also. The files for state awards were to be routed through him to Chandigarh. He had prepared an excellent case of Rehmat, by giving him encomiums from his own side also. And that year Rehmat Masih received the Punjab State Award. This was a new feather in his cap. He had begun to write 'State Awardee Teacher' on his visiting cards.

He was honoured everywhere by different bodies of our community and the teachers' unions. It was widely known that whenever Rehmat Masih received an honour, his blood increased by half a pound.

### **Story-telling**

One day Rehmat had told me, "Look here Darshan, headmistress Nirmala is completely in my hands. She does not take a step without consulting me. And she is from our own community and she agrees to do whatever I tell her to do. She seeks my advice for everything. She sends me only to DEOs office whenever needed." I had said to him on hearing this,

"Your bread is buttered on both sides, Master." He had shown his white teeth with a smile. His moustaches too had moved sideways.

Those days I used to hear some tale or other about Master Rehmat and Nirmala everyday from the students or Jagar Sidhu, the peon.



"....It was learnt that Master Rehmat went to Nirmala madam's house yesterday. He was ringing from outside but there was no response from inside. She was stated to be alone in the house. She had got scared. She was wondering why the teacher had come to her house? She kept sitting inside, so much scared as she was. He returned crestfallen after ringing the bell for nearly fifteen minutes. Next day when Master asked Nirmala about this, she just dodged him by saying that she was not at home. Only the boy was in. When he goes to sleep, he does not wake up even if you put the loud speaker to his ear. It is said that the Master went to Nirmala's house twice or thrice every month. And he wouldn't leave even after two or three hours.

Peon Jagar Sidh would light his bidi and say, "Something wonderful happened today, Darshan. Our Master Matoo entered the office at 9 AM and came out at 12. No one knows what was he talking about all the time? I went in twice or thrice to serve water. Tea was also served twice. I don't know what sort of Ramyana was that 'son of a man' relating to the madam. The madam is a good woman, my friend. She does not tell him to go to the classroom to take his class."

Someone would relate a new episode, "It is understood Master Matoo and Madam went together to Chandigarh to the Education Department. Madam had something pending there for a long time. Master Matoo had assured her that he would get it cleared in a moment. He had good standing in the union and contacts in the office. Both of them were delayed there, it is understood. No one knows where they spent the night."

".....It is said that Master Rehmat and Nirmala had a wordy duel yesterday in the school. Madam came out of the office when he was talking loudly. He followed her saying

– listen to me madam, please do listen to my request, please try to understand me. The next day madam sent an application for a week's leave."

Such tales were carried to me almost everyday. Madam had got fed up with the atmosphere in the school. She was thinking of getting transferred. She had got restive from that day when a cartoon showing the Master holding Nirmala's hand was seen on the back board in the 8<sup>th</sup> class. The cartoon was made by a mischievous boy. In the centre was made the picture of heart under which their names were written. When the head madam came to take the period, she got furious. It is said that the madam had lashed the boys mercilessly leaving deep marks on their bodies. Thereafter, madam had got herself transferred to another school. The new headmistress Charanprit Kaur Brar had joined in her place. Madam had come from a very big school in the town. She was quite experienced and a strict disciplinarian. She set right all the teachers and students immediately on assuming charge. Everybody began to fear her. To start with Rehmat had tried to conduct himself in an amiable manner to win her confidence by showing that he was her supporter and obedient subordinate but in vain. She used to deal firmly with Master Rehmat. Then Master Rehmat began to play his own games. Madam Brar eventually thought that it would not help in having acrimony with Master Rehmat. She softened her attitude towards him. Both of them were nearing retirement. The Master had just three months to retire. And the headmistress was to retire after five months. The headmistress thought "why should I put the dead snake round my neck?" So she had become 'normal' in her dealing with him. She had begun to lose interest in the school. She came to school early morning and after pulling up the peons and staff she left saying that she had



meeting with the CEO or the DEO or she had to go somewhere, etc., etc. Master Masih began to send complaints against her through the members of the village council (Panchayat) – “She goes away five days in a week after marking her attendance”. The DEO took serious note of this and warned her but there was no effect on her.

Master Rehmat Masih had a keen desire that he should be given a very warm send-off and all his achievements should be recounted in the function, he should be garlanded and his photographs should appear in the papers. But the madam had made it clear that the school was not in a position to spend so lavishly. Tea and snacks could be served to him, members of his family and staff out of the PTA funds. Master Rehmat was unhappy over this. Then he told the madam that the entire expenditure on the farewell party would be met by an N.R.I. friend belonging to the village and some Minister may also come. The madam had nodded in agreement. I had then asked him, “Well, Master, will there be lot of festivity at the time of his retirement, I mean, singing, dancing, etc.?” He had replied sulkily, “Oh no, Darshan. The head is a miserly person. She does not see reason. I would have invited a minister, who could have donated something to the school also besides lending colour to the party. But she is not agreeing in any manner. She is a stubborn lady. But now she has given her consent to the party. She says that it should be arranged as per the tradition of the school.” To me Rehmat appeared to be speaking the truth.

### **Farewell**

The day of the farewell party had reached. The party was arranged on the day of his retirement. The Master had to retire on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March. The party was programmed to be organized in the school ground. Master

Rehmat was meeting the expenditure on dinner and tea and snacks were to be arranged by the school. The Master had been distributing the invitation cards for nearly a fortnight. Numerous leading personalities, members of the Panchayat, the neighbours from Matoo's block, members of the Teachers' Union and those of the Valmiki Sabha had come to attend the party. The master was blooming. He sat on the stage, fully laden with garlands. I was watching the Master from a distance sitting in my chair. He was not removing the garlands around his neck. A day earlier he had written a long note and given it to the Punjabi teacher. The note contained his achievements, along with the reference to the developmental activities, it contained the social services rendered by him. His being an honest teacher was mentioned in the note in glowing terms. The note was headed “The well known social worker and teacher Rehmat Masih Matoo.” When the Punjabi teacher was delivering her speech, Rehmat was feeling inflated like a balloon. I cannot forget the speech given by the President of the District Valmiki Sabha. I have seen and heard this speech in the party's video film a number of times. In spotless white dress, the president was speaking, “Sisters and brothers, our brother Master Rehmat Masih Matoo has reached a high position as very few of our community are able to reach. The Master has done a lot in social welfare activities and this has brought credit to the entire Valmiki community. Our Valmiki community is leading a life of penury even today. Our share in the services is negligible. Master Rehmat Masih has done a lot for society while in service. He arranged free distribution of books, uniforms, etc. among the poor students of his community and I am sure he would continue to do so. He has been given the state award because of these good deeds. Today he is retiring from service. I do hope that in the future also



he would continue to serve his society. We need such gems." The president of the Valmiki Sabha had continued to speak much more. Those sitting in the chairs had begun to stir. Had he continued to speak a little more, the chairs would have been emptied. Then the school headmistress spoke for two minutes and a gift was presented on behalf of the staff to Master Rehmat. The school children had sung the patriotic songs. Bhangra dance was also performed. Master Rehmat was conducted to his house with the beat of drums and band.

### Harassment

The headmistress Charanprit Kaur Brarar retired two months after Master Rehmat Masih's retirement. The post of the head had fallen vacant in the school. Jagir Singh was the senior most teacher in the school. The DEO had given him the drawing the disbursing powers. He had begun to perform all the duties of the headmaster. He did not have good relations with Master Rehmat Masih from the very beginning. He was delaying his pension case. He delayed the provident fund case to the maximum. He was delaying its clearance for one reason or the other. Master Matoo did not approach him directly but went on sending messages across to him. He went to DEO office many a time and also had phone calls made by some clerks. At some stage both of them got together before the DEO. Master Rehmat Masih insulted him while sitting in DEO's room. He had felt very bad. "Master, now I will see how you are able to get your work done," saying this he started his scooter and went away. The cheque for seven or eight lakh rupees towards GPF had been received after about twenty days. But it was kept in the school for quite some time. No message was sent to him to receive it. It was returned after two months with the remarks that the Master had not come to receive it. Master

Rehmat had come to know about it. Next day he had brought it in the newspaper with headline "Allegation against the school head for harassing Master Rehmat Masih." It was written that the head had not passed on the cheque to Master Rehmat Masih for personal grudge. Nor was a message sent to him to receive the cheque which was returned to the treasury. The concerned Education Officer was asked to do justice to Master Masih. The frauds being committed in the school under the headship of Jagir Singh were also mentioned. It was also stated, among other things, as to how the forged bills were being prepared and the money pocketed by him. Jagir Singh felt very unhappy on reading the news. He was running after the pressmen and the newspaper office. One day Master Jagir Singh was called by the DEO office. He was rebuked and sent back.

### Deliberations

When Master Rehmat Masih met me last Wednesday, we had thought of having a peg or two and doing some talking. On holding the first peg, I had asked him, "Yes Master, has your problem been solved?" His face became serious when he said, "The problem of GPF has been solved. I have received the cheque. Master Jagir Singh had sent the cheque to me through the peon Jagar Sidhu. The cheque for the balance amount of five thousand rupees has also been delivered to me by the peon. Now the pension case is held up. The file is ready. The staff in the DEO office desire to be served 'tea, etc.'. They are making me go there again and again. I had got other peoples work done in a jiffy but now that I have retired, no one cares for me."

"What are you doing now, Master, being free after retirement?" I had asked him one day when he had said, "I have become the general secretary of the Valmiki Sabha, Jalandhar Circle. I will fight for my community.



The Safai Karamchari Union has also been revived. All our brothers and sisters in the corporation hold me in high esteem. I will fight for our people's right with undivided attention."

"Our brethren, who have been removing filth for centuries and cleaning the gutters cannot be freed. The need of the hour is that our mothers and sisters should hold pens and copy books in their hands instead of the brooms. When a father gets old, his son holds the broom. When a woman gets old, her place is taken by her daughter-in-law. I don't know how long this ancestral work would continue?"

"There is lack of education among our people, Darshan. Non one is ready to go to school. They have no property; they have poverty but no awareness. We have been going round the well platform like oxen."

"Our community never had a leader of substance, Master. The mischievous people divided us in small factions. Just take your own case, why go far? You began to follow the Christians. The family of butchers working in the farms of the Lambardar embraced Sikhism. They could not join the mainstream of the Sikh faith but they came to be called 'mazhabi'....Just see the way they have been treated...'You are Sikhs no doubt, but not like us; you are lower than us.' And these Brahmins made us Valmiki. 'You are Hindus, no doubt, but lower than us, Valmiki. They made the sage Valmiki sit over our heads. Things are so very deep and far-reaching, going back to distant past. We have been scavengers from the very beginning, master. Mahatma Buddha came. We became Buddhists. We were poor, starved and whosoever shows us a morsel, we begin to follow him. What a pitiable state are we in today, Master! Even after becoming Masihi, keeping unshorn hair and beard and tying turbans, we might hide ourselves, they would

say, 'He is a scavenger after all' and turn us into dust. Am I wrong, tell me? Dr. Ambedkar tried to unite us, exhorted us to become Buddhists but we did not heed him." I had kept within me my pent-up feelings.

"Look here my brother, you are right. We will continue to tread the beaten track. It is very difficult to change this. Though I have suffixed Masih to my name, my father was a Christian no doubt, but I derived all the benefits in service by remaining a Valmiki. I am a Valmiki inside. My father had my name recorded as Rehmat Masih Matoo and the name continues. It is joined to my name and can't be disjoined. Just see, none of my children bears this name of 'Masih'. All of them write Matoo. My younger son Manzoor bought a new Spleandour motor cycle last month. He has got written 'V' in bold red letter over the head light. When his mother expressed her unhappiness over this he retorted 'When a Jat's sons can write *Singh is King*, why can't we write 'V' for Valmiki,'" Master had said this drawing a long puff.

"Look here, master, we have been scavengers for centuries and we have to remain scavengers. We may wear any number of masks of new names. We are the amputated limb of society." Perhaps I had got emotional. Or I had got inebriated.

Whenever we met, we gave vent to our feelings.

### Epilogue-1

I had read at random three or four papers on the blue file. I did not feel like going ahead. I tied the file and kept it aside. I began to think about the Master. Everything had begun to appear before my eyes. ....Master Masih had now come in the 'creamy layer'. His daughter Robin Matoo had become a good hockey player. Then she got a job and she was married to a boy settled in