

HUNGER

The story is set in Afghanistan. This cursed country has been embroiled in coups, big power rivalry, internecine warfare, internal strife, and religious chauvinism for a very long time. The unending conflict has plagued the country for nearly 50 years causing large scale destruction, poverty, and deprivation. The interminable struggle to fight hunger and want has robbed the people of their hopes, vigor, and humanism. Looting, robbery, kidnapping for ransom, and abuse of women and children are rife. With so many ills stalking the country, the land has become unlivable.

Story ... Rizwan & Kasim are the two characters in the story. Rizwan is a wannabe journalist. Kasim hawks old clothes to make a living. Hunger and poverty have gripped them both, but Rizwan, with his education in journalism, is better off than Kasim. Kasim with no land, no education and no skill has fallen into a bottomless pit. His body is worn with the daily grind and his mind has become a parched land where no seed of hope can sprout. He is virtually at the end of the tether.

Rizwan is on the verge of getting a reporter's job in a local daily, but for that he has to conduct three interesting interviews and file the stories.

Rizwan sets out to the market place looking for someone he could interact with. In a land where criminals and petty thieves outnumber decent citizens, everyone in the street is wary of a stranger. No one is willing to talk freely. Strangely in the market, stores overflow with consumer goods. It is clear, the destitute and the deprived living in the fringes of the society can not patronize these shops.

Rizwan stands near a shop and looks around to spot a person he could interview. His eyes fall on Kasim who carries a load on his head. Rizwan approaches him with uncertain steps. Soon he discovers that his target, a middle-aged man, goes by the name Kasim. He earns his bread selling old clothes. The profession fetches him a paltry five hundred rupees a month.

Rizwan struggles to draw Kasim out. The latter is reticent and wary of talking to a stranger. It emerges that Kasim is a shelter-less landless person who has left his family back in his village.

Rizwan attempts to start a conversation with his target, but meets with limited success. Rizwan mentions about a government scheme to assist landless citizens like Kasim stand on their feet again. Kasim evinces little interest in this information. Rizwan continues to coax him to reveal more about his background. Kasim says how his family has been battling poverty for generations. His father and grandfather had no land to till. So, they toiled as landless labourers till their limbs failed. The long legacy of want and impoverishment had made Kasim a cynic. Life has been very hard for him thus far. He has a small boy as son. He would assist his father in the hawking business as soon as he turns five. Kasim can't even dream of sending him to school. Illiteracy will continue to choke Kasim's young son as it has done to his forefathers.

Kasim is even unaware of the legendary Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah whose rule ended with a coup plunging the country to total turmoil that continues to bedevil Afghanistan till this day. This surprises Rizwan who is educated enough to know Shah.

Rizwan wants to extend the conversation. He says he can arrange for a loan for Kasim to start farming. Even he could get some government land allotted. None of these inducements has any effect on Kasim. He shrugs off the loan offer saying that he is already in debt, and does not want to increase the burden.

Kasim recalls how some people made similar offers during last election time. All those offers vanished in thin air soon. On one day of electioneering, Kasim did a lot of slogan shouting for a whole day at the behest of a politician. He got nothing in return. He remained hungry that day. With such bitter memories fresh in his mind, Kasim's offers were doomed to be ignored. Kasim has lost all appetite for the comforts of living.

Rizwan can retain Kasim no longer. The latter walked off saying he could spot some buyers for his warm clothes among the labourers near the bridge. Rizwan pleaded with him to give his address. He

disclosed that he had no house: he lived like a tramp. Rizwan suggests that they could meet the next day. Kasim says he is going to his village the next day.

Dusk is approaching. The darkness makes Rizwan gloomier. His cup of woes is full with a home beset with problems. His widowed mother is ill. His two younger brothers have stopped going to school. Hunger and want cast their long shadow over his family. It is six in the evening. He has barely an hour to reach the newspaper office and file his report. He is hungry. Yet, he manages to trudge towards the newspaper office.

At the newspaper's office, he slumps on to a chair. A staff of the office asks him to write his name on his day's report and leave it on the table.

For Kasim, it is a job well done. Despite the all round gloom, he sees a ray of hope. He can come to the newspaper's the next day. However, he has to spot another 'Kasim' the next day! With tired steps and a stomach wrenched with hunger, the small ray of hope enables Rizwan to reach home.