

But law is an honourable profession...

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Translated from Urdu by

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I am only here to state the mere facts,
And not to blow the trumpet of my poetic disposition
(Mirza Ghalib)

Law is an honourable, erm...no, an independent profession. Why, you ask? Let me explain.

It was a bone chilling winter morning last year. The clock had already struck eight, but I hadn't yet mustered up the courage to step out of my bed. Snugly huddled up in my quilt, I sipped my morning tea. Twice my wife tried to yank the damn thing off me, but I was equally stubborn in my sloth. As soon as I had finished my cup, I quickly lit a cigarette while nestled in the warm confines of my quilt. It was then that I noticed a cat staring at me from behind the almirah. Startled, I got up, and tiptoed across the room to close one leaf of the door, and then leapt to the other side to close the other.¹ Having cornered the cat, I let out an earth-shattering scream "Dear, quick! Cat...the cat...it is cornered!"

"What is it?", she shouted from the other side of the yard, "Wait, I am coming"

I screamed again. “I have cornered the cat...THE CAT...cat...have you gone deaf?”

My wife was fond of keeping pigeons and this wretched feline had devoured three of them. Aside from those poor birds, she had also helped herself to two hens, four chicks, some butter and milk to wash the feast down. My wife reached the room flustered and remarked “Oh! the cat? You caught it? Did you?”

“Yes, I have cornered it, now come here quickly”, I replied and ushered her into the room and quickly closed the door behind her. At this point, I faced a dilemma. On the one hand, my mother in law has forbidden us from killing the cat but on the other, this cat was not a creature which could be tamed by throwing cotton balls. Necessity, however, is the mother of invention. So I conjured up a scheme which would placate the mother in law as well as bell the cat in one fell swoop. The method was simple — make sure the room was closed, except for a slight opening between the two leaves of the door through which the cat would be able to squeeze in. While the cat was trespassing, I intended to stand on a chair on one side of door, with my hand on one of the leaves, ready to shut it in an instant behind the creature. Meanwhile, I instructed my wife to chase the cat with a wooden stick in her hand, so that the cat would be frightened and bolt straight for the lamp. After that I planned to undertake a strategic attack through the purposeful launch of pillows, shoes, glasses, essential case files, the Indian Penal Code, Law of Evidence, Code of Civil Procedure, and other such paraphernalia in the cat’s general direction. Should these prove ineffective, my last resort was to aim and fire my emptied cigarette box, followed by each individual stick in quick succession.

I was sure that at the very least, one of the sticks would find their target and annoy the cat to the extent that it would try to escape from the door, where I lay in wait. Once the cat got halfway across the room, I would close the door in such a way that it would be stuck. Then, I would ask the wife to keep the door pressed while I would go find myself a sharp razor to cut the cat’s tail like a cucumber. I was certain that after that

ordeal, the tail-snipped cat would not dare look in the direction of our house.

So, I proceeded according to the plan and as soon as the cat was stuck inside the door leaves, I told my wife to hold the cat firmly in her position, otherwise it would come back to bite her. Hence, as she closed the door tightly, the cat yelped with pain, and as she was screaming out in that ghastly manner, I chopped her tail right off.

While the tail came right off, my luck did not turn for the better as I expected and I suffered another misfortune. Since this incident was relatively early in the day and office hours had just started, my elderly accountant (or *Munshiji* as he is respectfully addressed in these parts of the world) had managed to trap and bring along a hapless prospective client.ⁱⁱ That man very nearly jumped on seeing the cat trapped between the door panels. Unfortunately, he saw this spectacle just as I had cut off the tail, and the vengeful cat charged towards *Munshiji* and the prospective clients with hissing viciously all the while. Seeing the trio in such confusion, my wife blurted out “*Munshiji*” while all I could muster was “client, case!”.

A few moments later, *Munshiji* peered into the room. I had a razor blade in one hand and the cat’s tail in the other! My wife was standing nervously by my side, and *Munshiji*’s face was seething with anger.

“My God!”, he exclaimed, squeezing his hand tightly. “Client!”, he said, and inspecting the pell-mell condition of the room, muttered angrily under his breath “My god...you’ll never get a case...is this how you practice law?”

The wife meanwhile had conveniently disappeared, and I stared back helplessly unable to answer *Munshiji*.

“So, this is your legal practice?”, he repeated in the same tone and added “the case may be in the ‘five hundreder’, now come”

I was stunned as soon as I heard the mention of five hundred rupees. Immediately, I put away the tail and the razor and opened the other door

of the room that led towards the office. *Munshiji* seated the client quickly and urged me to hurry, as 500 rupees were at stake. Heeding his oft-repeated words, I hastily put on my coat and trousers before proceeding to meet the clients. I was just about to put on my socks when he again chided me for a third time saying “you still haven’t moved?”. So I rushed, nay, was dragged into my office forcibly by *Munshiji* with nothing but slippers on my feet. I greeted the prospective client politely — he was a paunchy Marwari *lala* (moneylender) with two of his accomplices. The *lala* sat down and explained the details of the case.

What had transpired was that some wise soul had cussed at *lalaji*. Since it is improper to repeat the term, it is enough for the readers to know that the word in question put a shadow of doubt on our respected *lalaji*’s parentage. I asked him some more questions and thought a lot about the matter at hand but in the end, I had to confess that “the case does not seem strong enough”

“Why?”, the *lala* protested.

“Because firstly, you do not have any witnesses, and secondly, all high courts are in agreement that such words are routinely and freely exchanged by esteemed gentlemen, and thus they are not tantamount to defamation”, I responded.

The *lala* turned to *munshiji* and remarked in a condescending tone: “Where have you gotten us? Take us to a lawyer who will prosecute the case”

Munshiji and I exchanged glances. He was seething under the surface. He menacingly clenched his teeth at me, reached for the top of the almirah and randomly picked three of the thickest books that were kept there.

Dropping the books in front of me he said: “Sir, *lalaji* is a dear friend. I would like to request you to subject this matter to further careful scrutiny and find a legal angle in these tomes that can be used to proceed with the case.” Saying this, he opened the dictionary in front of me, since it was

also the thickest of the three books that he picked. Looking up from his spectacles, he addressed the *lala*: “My apologies Sir, this is part of the trade...its your case...”, and turning to me, he added: “now whether it’s a ‘hundred’ category case or a ‘thousand’ (thus ruling out the possibility of ‘no case’), how does it matter?”

Munshiji droned on “*Lala Sahab* is like family to me. Our friendship goes back eighteen years”.ⁱⁱⁱ While this nostalgic reverie sounded tremendously grandiloquent, the truth of their friendship was much more ‘pedestrian’. It was simply that for eighteen years, the *lala*’s shop had been on the road through which *Munshiji* passed. Given the circumstances, the *lala* graciously acknowledged his friendship by staying silent in response to *Munshiji*’s eager professions. In the midst of this ode to friendship, I was randomly flipping pages of the dictionary. I landed on a page where the words started with the letter ‘B’. My sight instinctively landed on the word ‘bird’, and made its way upwards to the seated *lalaji*. Naturally so, as the *lala* certainly seemed like a bird to me. To be precise, a golden goose that would lay a profit of 500 Rupees! I regretted my earlier comments regarding the infeasibility of the case. Seeing my silence, the *lala* remarked *dryly* “Sir seems to have gone quiet”.

Getting back to the nitigrities of the case, I asked *Munshiji* “Is the *lala*’s father holder of the *Khan Bahadur* title?”^{iv} The *lala* jumped in and replied, “There is also a *Rai Bahadur* currently residing in my locality”, with such enthusiasm as if he himself was the son of a *Rai Bahadur*.

One niggling doubt remained, and I attempted to once again voice it “But *Lala Sahab*, you do not have any witness...”

Cutting me mid-sentence, *Munshiji* replied, “That has been settled. We shall arrange for witnesses...”

“Ah, then it should be easy-peasy”, I replied with contentment.

Having sorted out these details, the *lala* was massaged with dollops of legal snake oil. Consequently, a very strange but apparently deep connection was developed between the *lala* and myself by the virtue of

both of us belonging to the *Marwari* community, and the fact that my father served in the same Marwari kingdom where his daughter was residing after marriage. In the middle of these discoveries, however, my bare feet started getting cold. Twice I had called the errand boy, but to no avail. The socks were kept on a chair close to my bed. On *Munshiji's* suggestion, the *lala* offered his assistant for this all-important task. The room was just next to the office, and the task at first seemed simple enough so I acquiesced but upon entering the room, the Marwari assistant called out and asked "Should I get both?"

"Oh, dear God!", I thought to myself, what an utter imbecile this assistant was, but being a Marwari, I imagined that the assistant barely understood Urdu. This linguistic gap notwithstanding, I was still annoyed at this errand boy's stupidity. But before I could get aggravated further, *Munshiji* replied "Yes, both of them".

You will not believe me when I say this dear reader, but much to my astonishment, he returned without the socks and brought two spittoons from the room instead. Seeing this, I did not know whether to laugh or cry in exasperation. Before I could determine my emotional state, however, I noticed the *lala* mistaking my Moradabadi silver-plated spittoons for a flower vase. He clutched them the same way that street jugglers held on to their little drums, and before *Munshiji* could correct his mistake, the *lala* stared into the spittoon and seriously addressed his assistant in his dialect, "youra goodun sonny but you've have spat innit lika daughter's dad"

As the *lala* began rubbing his hands on the ground to clean them, I lapsed back into cursing my luck at having gained an ignorant client like that. "Youra goodun sunny" meant that "You are a good man" and "daughter's dad" was an expression that meant "an uncouth idiot". I was certainly despondent at this thought but alas, those elusive five hundred rupees! Just because of that promise, the *lala* was nothing less than an angel to me. As the *lala* got up and left, *Munshiji* looked piercingly at me and let loose. "Oh, you are a fine lawyer...just fine...a FINE ONE" He bellowed.

“How many times has this happened? No, this can’t go on. I get so many clients here and it’s always one story after another. Is this how you are going to practice law?”, he continued, unabated.

Fed up with this constant chastising, I retorted “It’s not like the skies have fallen”

Munshiji replied back with the same coin, “Oh yes of course, I get a Marwari’s case here and you are busy cutting cat’s tails. What if he would have seen it?”. Then he added with even more sting: “And how dare you say that the case would not hold up?”

“Well, that’s because there are no witnesses to corroborate the story and also because it’s such a trivial matter”, I responded trying to reason with the man.

He ignored me however and continued with the same irritation in his voice. “Enough now. You are not made for this profession. How could you know that the case would not hold water in court? Just because you passed an examination, you think you are Mr. Bigshot lawyer now? Let me enlighten you that there is no shortage of ‘exam-passed’ lawyers. The world is full of them. I have told you time and again that even if the case will not hold up, you are not supposed to tell the client that”. At his utterance of this last instruction, I finally realized my mistake. *Munshiji* was a wise and sympathetic elder who was looking out for me and my naive focus on the intricacies of each case. The practice of law was not enough, it was the business of law that I had to familiarize myself with. The inner principle of the profession was understanding the nitty-gritty of the business end of things, or in other words, duplicity.

Having seen the light, I could do nothing besides nodding my head in agreement. Laughing at my own naivete, I consoled myself with the thought that “Rome wasn’t built in a day”

Through the window, I could see my wife staring and laughing at my misfortune. Seeing her, I too burst into laughter and while trying to

conceal my chuckles left the office room in a hurry. I could faintly hear *Munshiji* mumble “Insolent...can’t be a lawyer”, as he left the house.

After this eventful escapade, I had just begun my lunch when a client’s son gestured to me. He said “My father has requested that you bring your thickest book to the court”. Now the man’s case was in the civil court but coincidentally I needed a book on criminal law for another unrelated matter at the court today. Hence in order to strike two birds with one stone, I handed the young fellow a hefty volume of the Indian Penal Code intending to placate the client, while also saving myself the labour of transporting multiple volumes to court. While this may seem spurious at first glance, it is essential to note that in the event that the client loses the case, he sometimes kicks up a ruckus claiming that he lost the case because the lawyer refused to get the ‘thick book’ to the court. Irrespective of whether or not it was relevant to the case in the first place. But at the end of the day, the customer is king. So if the client believes that the thickness of the book tips the scales of justice in his favour, who am I to disagree? Even if all you need is a thin volume, you had best get a thick one along to ensure that the client feels like he has paid for the right labour, mental and physical.

Regardless, I was pleased with my accomplishments of the day, and was keen to parade them in front of my wife. I called out to her and said “Did you hear what happened today? None of my friends has managed to bag a five-hundred-rupee case yet”. She smiled at my remarks which emboldened me, so I went on with more authority “See how quickly these ‘five-hundred rupee’ cases have started to come. Now tell me, is an office job better or the legal profession?”

She was lost in her own thoughts, however, and unimpressed with my legal dexterity said “Do not forget your promise now and buy a pair of earrings for me on the way back from the court. Make sure you negotiate the price in advance and pay the full amount”. I interrupted her line of thought to circle back to my big achievements. I said “I will, I will, but you see now that I have got this first big case, other big cases will also line up in quick succession”

Undeterred, my wife stuck to her guns and dismissing my initial steps up the ladder of success continued “So get them. The more the better. In any case, the Marwari moneylender will give you the fees by tomorrow at the very latest. Five hundred rupees are no big deal for him”

Upon this mention of collection, I thought to myself that *Munshiji* with all his business dexterity must have taken the fees by now. The thing is, when a lawyer of my standing gets a five hundred rupee case, it inspires within him a new kind of confidence. On the basis of this self-esteem, I boldly promised my wife that I would buy a pair of diamond earrings for her on the way back from court. She had recently seen these earrings, and was quite fond of them. However, until now they had been out of my reach. Beautiful trinkets to admire from afar. However, my wife was not placated with arguments like means and budgets and repeatedly pestered me about them.

Having had my fill of the conversation I snapped and said “Oh, drop it for god’s sake. I told you I would buy them on my way home, and I will go to the market right away after leaving the court.” But having no confidence in my resolve she continued to drone on about them unceasingly up to the point where she saw me off at the door.

I proceeded towards the courthouse and along the way, whenever I saw a *neem* tree, all I could imagine was my wife wearing those diamond studded earrings. I was beaming to myself, having finally made it to the big league of lawyers. Upon reaching the courthouse, I went straight to *Munshiji*, and his nostrils flared upon seeing me. I tried to make small talk, but he responded only in mumbles and grunts. While I should have seen the signs, I was otherwise preoccupied with the thought of getting my wife those earrings, so unable to contain my impatience, I finally asked him how much of the five hundred rupees had the *lala* given him already, and how much of it was left? Before I tell you what transpired next, dear reader, there are moments in life when the Persian proverb ‘Alas! all my wishes turned to dust’ comes to life.

Lalaji's response turned all my hopes to naught as he informed me that the 500 did not refer to the monetary compensation I would receive, but instead to Article 500 of the Indian Penal Code. I don't think anyone can imagine the despair I felt at that moment. My neck drooped in dismay, as the realization and its repercussions sunk in and my despondency was further amplified by *Munshiji's* pointed remarks as he bitingly remarked "Yes, of course it is Article 500. Who do you think you are? Do you expect me to magically procure a five hundred rupees case for you from the High Court? Dear God!"

As my enthusiasm vanished, I was overcome with gloom. I yawned and looked at the *neem* tree in front of me. However, a storm had passed by and rained on my parade. Instead of my wife's face reflected in the leaves, all I could see now was the pair of earrings safely tucked away in a velvet box inside the jeweller's almirah.

When I reached home, my wife snuck up behind me, and keeping her eyes closed, put her hands in my pockets and asked "Tell me truthfully how much you paid for them". All I can say for the moment is that with tremendous difficulty I mustered up the courage and told her the truth. While it was one of the most difficult things I had to do (and a severe blow to my bruised and battered ego at that point), I had only myself to blame. It was my own stupidity, arrogance and air headedness that placed me in such a predicament in the first place.

Part 2

To continue the story, a couple of days ago, a few college friends and acquaintances had travelled from outside the city for a function and all of us decided to meet at a nice restaurant to catch up. A few of them were lawyers, - well known to me - who were discussing things with each other. I was quite informal with a few of them as they had finished their LLB just a couple of years before me. Let's call one of them "A", another "B" and the third "C".

When I met Mr. A in the morning, he seemed quite worried. His legal practice was in the dumps.

“I am just scouting for a job these days”, he said.

“And?”

“I have found nothing so far”

He asked me how I was faring and I told him the truth, “Till the time my father continues to send the money, I will keep on practicing law”

Similarly, I met B at another person’s house. His state of affairs could be summarized by the thick wad of newspaper clippings in his shirt pocket screaming ‘WANTED’ followed by the details of each respective job vacancy. Since he was a close friend, he sorted through the wad and handed me a couple of postings, advising me to send in my application through registered post. Until now, I have not heard back from a single one, despite burning my money on registered post for all of them. When I met C, he was in a similar condition and we exchanged commiserations. However, since I was on close terms with all of them, none of them hesitated from telling me their actual state of affairs.

Anyway, coming back to the restaurant, there were many lawyers like myself adorned in expensive suits paid for by their fathers, who were gorging on cake and fruits. Since all of us were quite similar in age and disposition, the inevitable question of ‘How was everyone faring’ came up. I cannot communicate to you, reader, how puzzling such a question can be. A neat trick that I can tell you is that if a young lawyer coughs or casts shifty glances before answering such a question, then you can safely divide his stated income by ten to arrive at the accurate figure. Novice lawyers (especially me) are so afraid of this question that when it comes up during a visit to the in-laws, an urgent excuse is made, ironically, that an extremely important case has conveniently come up, enabling me to excuse myself and leave immediately. What else is a man to do?

This same question was directed in the form of a deceptive “How goes?”, to Mr. B. Forcing a smile, Mr. B answered with a “By God’s grace, work is going well”.

“How much do you make on average?”, Mr. C enquired rather pointedly. Mr. B cleared his throat, discomfited, and replied, “Ah, what can I say, some months it’s less, and others it’s more”. With that cryptic sentence, Mr. B turned towards the snacks, lest he be considered negligent of his duties. But as an afterthought he added: “For example, in one of the months, I only made 32 rupees and 8.75 annas”

There was a sound of laughter in the room, and one of the men present, sarcastically remarked “8.75 annas, neither more nor less”. Mr. B recovered quickly however, and added, “While I made only 32.5 rupees in that particular month, I was more than able to make up for it by earning two hundred and forty rupees in the first seventeen days of another.” Mr. C and others paid close attention to the figures and concluded “so you must make about two hundred rupees a month on average”

Biting into an orange slice, Mr. B added “Well, I would say nearly so, but not quite two hundred”. As he refocused on the food, he misdirected the conversation in order to save his own skin, and asked Mr. C “So, how are things at your end?”. Like a shift in the winds, all the attention of the room was now focused on Mr. C, and since he was also in a similar state, his stated average fell between a hundred and seventy-five to two hundred rupees. After this the gauntlet was thrown to Mr. A who chose lofty idealism as his weapon of choice stating that he did not bother much with accounts, so it wasn’t possible for him to shine a light on the matter. However, everyone agreed that law was an excellent as well as an independent profession (provided the family sends money regularly). Everyone further agreed that in a year or two, one could make about a hundred and fifty to two hundred rupees, and in ten to twelve years, one could potentially amass a comfortable income of a thousand to twelve hundred rupees.

When my turn came, contrary to the general trend, I took out the newspaper cuttings of vacancies that B had handed to me and stated quite frankly “This is what I am looking at.” Everyone laughed at my expense, except for Mr. B, who was visibly anxious. Mr. A, B and C as well as all the other lawyers present there sympathized with me despite their affected

airs of affluence. A, B, and C who were more intimately well versed with my situation, however, encouraged me, saying “Don’t lose hope. We were also looking for jobs once but be resolute in your own practice. Do not be so quick to succumb to the other path!”

I decided they were right. After all, law is an honourable and independent profession.

Part 3

I ran into one of my college seniors at the same restaurant. He asked me to come meet him in the morning for a small assignment. “You can take the morning train and then go back home in the evening train”, he added.

It was a case that was to be presented in front of the sub-district judge. I could not muster up the courage to enquire about the fees. My senior was an old and accomplished lawyer. A tall man with an imposing frame, his loud voice made him stand out amongst the legal fraternity. As the matter was in one of the sub-district courts, I made sure to dress nicely and picked out an appropriate suit the preceding night. Instead of the usual morning tea, I instructed my wife to make *parathas* with eggs that morning. I also carried a book with me to present a more sombre demeanour, although it wasn’t strictly needed.

I told my wife about the exasperating state of affairs that had transpired between the senior and myself while preparing to leave for the train station. Since my senior had been called upon as an acting judge in another case, he had asked me to sign on the power of attorney, authorizing me to represent the client. Since he had originally charged the client twenty rupees, he asked me to give him ten rupees back (since he could not represent him), a decision which exasperated me further.

I thought that it was indeed frustrating that although I was going to do the same job as my senior, he was making me return the ten rupees. However, what had to be done, had to be done. On the bright side, at least the reduced fees excluded conveyance charges etc. which I presumed

could be claimed separately. While my senior had already filled me in on the case, I still wanted to know if there were any further complications that I needed to be aware of. On the face of it, the whole matter was quite straightforward — there were two brothers, one of whom had taken a loan. When the moneylender came to impound any belongings of the borrower, he gave his brother's oxen for impounding without the latter's permission.

In my opinion, the whole matter did not even require a lawyer, especially a senior one at that. The register of the cooperative bank, as well as that of the local patwari, proved that both the farming as well as other businesses of the brothers were separate. Thus, under no condition could the other brother's oxen be impounded for non-payment of the loan. Also, there was evidence that the oxen were purchased with a loan from the bank. Despite all of this, this man neither considered avoiding the legal route or hiring a third-class lawyer like myself, and went straight for the senior lawyer.

Oh, if I could only tell you the pain new lawyers (especially me) feel when clients run to senior lawyers for the smallest matters! Even a clown does not ask for us, otherwise we would do the same work better, and that too at half the price. But who listens to us? Everybody goes straight for the big lawyers. What can we say? Go, go to your senior lawyers, pay twice or four times the fees through your nose, while also getting soundly abused and chastised for the same. But what can be done about it?

I reached the agreed-upon spot at ten thirty and began searching for the client. This client was a huge admirer of my senior and believed that he could even turn the course of a weak case. Hence, he went running to him. I had never seen this wretched person. Here I was looking for him, and he was searching for the senior lawyer. He wasn't aware that I had come in place of the senior lawyer and was looking for him instead. I went to the court official to submit my power of attorney. I had just left the courtroom when a bumpkin greeted me.. He looked askance and questioned my presence asking me why my senior hadn't come. Before replying to his question, I first asked him his name, and once it was confirmed that he was indeed the client, I heaved a sigh of relief. I told

him that “I have come to your court since he has to preside as a judge over an appeal”. His expression changed as soon as I told him this. Dejected, that scoundrel remarked within the earshot of the men standing around that “he (the senior lawyer) has destroyed my case”. How can one not be angry at such an idiot? Offended and embarrassed, I thought to myself that if I had the misfortune of meeting a few more of these luminaries, I would heed *Munshiji*'s advice and say goodbye to the legal profession altogether.

To hide my shame at his aspersions and make light of the situation, I said “Nonsense! No such thing will happen”. I thought that this would be a good time to return the ten rupees out of the twenty, so that at least he would be placated from a monetary perspective. So I took out a ten rupee note, and told him that I was returning part of the money he had paid and keeping the remaining ten as my fee. This incited him further, and his insolence knew no bounds. Keeping the note in his pocket, he irately retorted “If I had to hire a ten or five-rupee lawyer, why would I hire you? I would have picked anyone over here.”

This treatment shook me to my core and I became quite nervous after his public shaming and chastisement. I began shivering. Had I known that this no good bumpkin would insult me like this, I wouldn't have taken up the case even if the fee would have been a hundred rupees. I cursed myself for acquiescing to my senior's request and wished that I could disappear into the thin air before this insolent lout could embarrass me further. In my head, I was cursing the profession while the people in the court were laughing at my expense. I don't think I had ever been disgraced in such a way, and for what? A measly ten rupees? “Woe to this damned profession!”, I said to myself.

When I saw that the idiot had gone away, I stepped into the courtyard. I saw him at a distance, standing under a tree. He saw me and pointed a finger towards me. If an enemy's loaded gun was pointed at you, what could you do besides hide? So, I went back inside the courtroom to escape his pointed insults that were taking low blows at my self-esteem. After a while, when I stepped out again, he repeated the gesture. By this

point, I had reached my limit of tolerance and my anger knew no bounds. I marched across the courtyard straight to him and on sensing my mood he hesitated a little. That brief reprieve was enough for me to launch my outburst, “Shut up you insolent fool, I have come from far, that too on half the fees that you were originally willing to pay and you dare taunt me like this?”

A couple of scribes sitting around me supported my stand and castigated him roundly, all the while apprising him of my abilities as a lawyer. These choral accolades cooled him down considerably and he apologized profusely. After he came to his senses, I asked him for some more details of the case and as a precautionary measure I also spoke to the *patwari* and the bank’s clerk. The hearing began shortly and the chronicle of events that unfurled thereafter is something I will never forget.

The defence lawyer was a ‘sizeable’ man with a long moustache, well dressed from head to toe, and he spoke at a rattling speed. I, on the other hand, was emaciated to the extent that ten of me could fit inside his portly frame. While I could also raise a ruckus if push came to shove, there was a major difference between him and me, and this was often what distinguished high court and district court lawyers.

When the hearing began, I calmly presented my client’s case, but only God can protect one from the insolence of other lawyers. The opposing lawyer began to needlessly interrupt me and raise bizarre objections to my arguments. Numerous times I registered my protest against his disruptive behaviour, and the judge chastised him as well, impressing upon him the need to maintain order and behave, but all to no avail. Neither did he care for the court’s reprimand, nor the ethical implications of interrupting me. Having realized that the case was lost, he merely wanted to impress upon his client that he had fought hard. Between him randomly picking up a file, to jumping across the room to interrupt me, the whole scene resembled a cockfight.

Somehow, I managed to finish my speech in an elegant manner. As it was his turn, he twirled his moustache and cleared his throat in such a manner, almost as if he was saying:

“Now wait for my fireworks to begin!”

He started with his defence. It seemed like he was vomiting words in quick succession without rhyme or reason. During his speech, he often jerked his neck in a strange fashion, waived his hands, rolled his eyes, skimmed through his files, only to release the pages in the air. This was all such a spectacle, for the case was so weak that even legal luminaries such as Mr. Alliston, Justice Mahmood or Rash Bihari Ghosh wouldn't have been able to defend against my arguments. However, this man was in another league of bravehearts altogether.

While his nonsense had no effect on me or the court, unfortunately, it did impress my client enough to make him lose his senses. He became paranoid that since the other lawyer was raising such a fuss, he may lose the case because of my timidity. He whispered his concerns to me and urged me to fight as hard. I didn't respond to his preposterous suggestion, as I knew anything I said would backfire. However, as he was relentless in pestering me, I finally told him to shut up.

Unfortunately, this led to a new headache. When the defence lawyer was in the middle of his fiery speech, my client yelled “Sir!” and folded his hands in front of the judge. The judge signalled the other lawyer to pause and turning to my client asked him what was the matter. The judge then turned to me and asked what was happening, as it was generally the case that a client only acts as per the advice of his lawyer. I professed my ignorance and urged the client to speak directly to me. He looked at me angrily and said, “I don't want to tell you anything, I will directly address the lordship”. The judge then asked him to state clearly what he wanted to say to him and the court. He now got to his knees and said, “Sir, can you please give me another date for the hearing”

Before the judge could say anything, the client repeatedly exclaimed: “Sir please postpone this hearing! I will be ruined!”. I became worried.

Since the court does not postpone hearings without cause, the judge asked him to explain the reason behind his request. He went on to say that he will be ruined, and he is no position to say anything else. When he repeatedly refused to divulge more, the judge angrily warned him to state his reasons explicitly or be expelled from the court.

The client angrily said, "I had initially hired a senior lawyer for the case, but it was my bad luck that he sent this man to fight my case", and pointed his finger towards me. This drained the colour from my face, my hands and feet began to twitch, and my heart beat violently. I started sweating even though it was winter. He rambled on in the same accusatory tone, "He (the senior lawyer) sent him, and he has the courage of a sheep"

There was an uproar of laughter in the courtroom. The judge admonished the man but the laughter did not wane. I tried to laugh out of embarrassment, but to no avail. So I put a handkerchief over my face to cover a yawn, started looking towards my watch, and started scribbling on the table with the pen's nib. All this while, the idiot was begging the court for an extension, asking the judge to show him mercy.

The judge himself tried to suppress a laugh and with a serious expression asked the other lawyer if he had any objection. He said that he does not have any problem with the extension on the condition that he be compensated by the other side for the extension. Hearing this, my client kept the same ten rupee note that I had given him earlier on the courtroom table, which the defence lawyer pocketed immediately. With a self-assured gaze, my client then turned to the other lawyer and said, "Smirk all you want now. The lawyer I get next time will shut you up." The judge admonished him and ordered him out of the court. My client left the court showering praises onto the judge and wishing him well for his career. I was in a different state altogether. Everyone present was smiling at my condition, and I was dying from the inside. I wanted the earth to swallow me whole. Even the judge could not resist making a wisecrack at my expense while leaving the court and advised me to exercise daily in order to 'broaden my chest'.

Somehow, trying desperately to retain my wits, I managed to exit the court and head straight for the station. Since that day, I have never dared to enter the sub-district court again. To be perfectly frank, it's a miracle that I am still practicing! Perhaps that is because law is such an honourable and independent profession. God save this independence!

ⁱ I borrow this definition of 'leaf' from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, see 2(b): <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leaf>

ⁱⁱ The suffix 'ji' added at the end implies respect. Usually used for someone who is senior by the virtue of age, stature or wealth

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Sahab' is also a term of respect, usually reserved for someone considered elder/senior or of a high status

^{iv} Both *Khan Bahadur* and *Rai Bahadur* were titles of honour during the colonial period