

Ashraf Khan – a cheerful soul

I heard the shocking news of Ashraf's death from Sanjay on WhatsApp on 10 September 2019. Ashraf apparently died of a heart attack at his home.

The news was deeply saddening because Ashraf was not just a contract driver for me; he was beginning to be a friend, someone with whom I felt I had a connection, someone I looked forward to meeting during my trips to Pune and having a conversation with and even gain some wisdom from.

The news was shocking because Ashraf was still in his prime -- busy raising his family, helping his two college-going daughters find their rightful places in this world, helping his son, who worked at a financial services firm and who had recently suffered a terrible motor-cycle accident, literally find his feet again. Ashraf was yet to accomplish so much from his notebook in which he not only kept detailed account of every rupee spent or earned but also a list of his plans and dreams.

Ashraf was a professional driver and driving was what he loved most. He was ambitious and wanted to make money to earn a respectable living for himself and for his family, because he knew money was the key to gain respect, security, and safety in the modern society. But, his ambition did not lead him astray -- on random paths that promised a quick buck. He stuck to his primary skill of driving and driving is all he did all his life. People - well-wishers or not - asked him why he would not "build a business" or "hire other drivers" or "diversify into vehicle servicing". Ashraf, even though very respectful and receptive to any and all advice -- especially from people who seemed to have achieved it all -- stayed firm to his one and true religion of driving solo.

Ashraf drove for his living, he drove for his entertainment, he drove for his peace of mind.

"I never fight or argue on the road", he once explained to me when I inquired about his position on the terrible traffic in Pune. "I wave at people; I say sorry to them if there is a problem and move on with a smile."

Smile is the other thing Ashraf always did, other than driving. I never saw him morose, sullen, without a smile. He was always cheerful, took the initiative to help out at every occasion, and had no inhibitions about work -- be it serving tea or cleaning up the table or disassembling an old piece of furniture. His smile was contagious; his positive energy lifted spirits of others. He knew how to cheer up people, to make them feel important, appreciated, respected. His energy was limitless; on long drives he could keep you entertained with his stories until he sensed your boredom or tiredness.

People talk about "work ethic". Ashraf was a role model in this aspect. He always showed up ahead of time, always stayed longer than the assignment required - in case there was more work, and stayed alert, active, helpful throughout the duration of his assignment. There were, of course, delays or unexpected additions of work from the customer's side, but Ashraf never showed surprise or dismay. It was as if work was a joyride for him. I do not believe Ashraf had a single "unhappy customer" on his record.

Ashraf probably loved himself, his own looks. I am guessing because I don't really know, but know this that he took good care of himself, exercised regularly, wore clean and decent-looking attire, and posted his stylish selfies on social media in which he wore sunglasses. He probably loved life in general -- it would be so hard to keep up false smiles and false pretenses about loving people and loving work if one did not love the opportunity to live. Ashraf surely did not have a cushy life - far from it. He grew up in

difficult circumstances -- I would not dare describe some of the terrible aspects of his upbringing because I might betray his trust that he put in me while sharing some of those stories. But, it was clear that he would have been a drunkard, a street goon, a complete loser, had he not shown the courage and persistence to think and act different. As a young boy, he walked long distances to perform work which paid only enough to catch a bus ride back home! But, he kept his faith, his trust that hard work was the best, if not the only, way to a future that lifted himself and his close ones above the insults of poverty. Fortunately, hard work did not betray him. Ashraf's hard work did help him pay for the education of his 3 children all the way to college. Of course, it was always a life on the edge, with razor-thin margins, lots of corners to cut, lots of hardship, and very few, if any, luxuries. But, commendably, Ashraf was able to achieve his dream of sending his son to college and seeing him earn his own salary. He was also able to see his daughters graduate from high-school (12th) and enter college. The terrible and merciless hand of fate did not allow him to see their further progress. Nor did it allow him the restfulness he looked forward to, or the annual "touristy" trips that he never took but was hoping to take with his family, or the house that he was hoping to build in which he would live happily as an old man with his son and his family.

Ashraf will be missed dearly.



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Last updated: 10 September 2019