

Losing my Religion

Nandkishore Pandey, better known as Pandeyji, was a priest at a local temple in Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Be it someone's daughter's marriage or a child's naming ceremony, he was a one stop solution for all religious concerns. He was the special guest at every special occasion in the district. Everyone in the district used to seek his blessings before taking an important decision. Preaching his religion was the sole motto of his life. For Pandeyji, his life began with religion and ended with it too.

He started his day with the morning aarti at the temple, and ended it with the night aarti. Essentially, his work was to take care of the temple, perform aartis at regular intervals, prepare and distribute prasad, read mantras and shlokas from holy books, bless and counsel the visitors to the temple. His life thus, practically revolved around the temple and his religion.

However, Pandeyji's son Akhilesh had a completely different view on religion. For him, religion was following one's own dreams and ambitions, and not worshipping the God day and night. In spite of this, they respected each other's views. Religion was never a part of the discussion in the family and therefore there weren't any arguments in this regard, until one fine day.

Akhilesh wanted to appear for the Joint entrance exam to pursue his engineering. This exam was highly competitive and Akhilesh wasn't able to get the same guidance in Allahabad which his counterparts in other parts of the country had access to. So he always wanted to go to a bigger city to prepare for these exams. But Pandeyji wanted his son to be brought up in front of his eyes so that he could inculcate his values in his mind. According to his views, a child should spend the constructive years of his life in his parents' company. He also felt that sending a child away from his family and town could give him too much freedom which he may not be able to handle. Akhilesh tried very hard to convince his father but in vain. He gave up and agreed to study in Allahabad itself. But he always had a feeling of dissent and frustration in his mind about the lost opportunity.

Two years went by. Though Akhilesh worked immensely hard and tried his level best he was quite sure that he wouldn't be able to make it. He shortlisted a few local colleges in which he could get admission and started enquiring about the positives and negatives of each one of them. He was also considering appearing for the exam once again. He was in a very confused state of mind and was waiting for the results to be announced, to take a decision. Deep down in his mind however, he felt that his father was partly responsible for his poor state and that his views had stood in the way of his success. However hard he tried to get the thought out of his mind, he couldn't succeed.

There was about a week still for the results to be announced and Akhilesh was still unsure about his future course of action. At that point of time, he got a call from one of his friends that the government was planning to reserve around 9 percent of the seats for the people belonging to the minority religions. His friend belonged to a minority religion and was

quite sure that he will be able to get admission through the reservation. Akhilesh felt happy for his friend but he was also frustrated because he felt that he had worked harder than his friend and that he deserved admission to the college much more than his friend did. He felt that the government was wrong and was dividing people by giving special privileges to some religions. He lost the little faith he had in the concept of religion. He was already furious and this step by the government only added fuel to his thoughts.

Akhilesh was unable to sleep that night. His mind was filled with several thoughts. He didn't want to live a life like his father. His dream was to become someone big and live a lavish and comfortable life in a plush apartment. He felt that admission in one of the IIT's would bring him one step closer to his dream. It had become very important for him. The fact that his friend would get in without any hard work troubled him much more than the fact that he might not get in. He was frustrated with the state of things in his family, annoyed with the concept of reservation, and felt helpless. His mind was a sad river of negative and depressing thoughts with no direction whatsoever.

Suddenly, an idea came up his mind, an idea that was an answer to all his troubles but at the same time, a seed of conflict between the virtues of his father and those of his. He wondered what if he converted into one of the minority religions to get in through reservation. If not this year he could surely get in the next time around with the help of the reservation. He did not care much about his religion and thus felt it was a practical solution. But then he thought about his father, who had devoted his entire life to his religion. How would he feel if his own son changed his religion? He was standing at the junction of crossroads and he kept pondering about his course of actions for hours together. He concluded that his future weighed more than his religion. He hoped that his father would understand his stance. He felt that his father was already in a way responsible for his state and he had no right to decide his future once again. He decided to speak to his father about this over breakfast the next day.

For the rest of the world it was an ordinary day, but for Akhilesh it was something more. He was going to confront his father and his views. There was a lot of inhibition in his mind before he finally gathered courage and asked the question. It was a question that Pandeyji never in his wildest dreams expected, a question that made him numb, a question that left him gasping for air.

Pandeyji couldn't believe what he just heard! The person who tried to teach everyone about the importance of religion didn't succeed with his own son. The person who expected each and every one to love and nurture his religion failed to develop that love in his own child's heart. He felt pathetic and lost his faith in life. He was hoping that it was just a bad dream and was yearning to wake up. But reality bit him with the bitter truth that his son had actually uttered those words. He was shattered and went away to the temple to take solace in God's company without uttering a word.

But Akhilesh wanted answers, answers which could decide his fate. His father's silence was killing him. Akhilesh had an old and bitter relation with silence. Silence had always been like a bed of cactus for him. During his childhood when he had the urge to ask questions but did not have the courage to do so, he preferred to stay silent, and now when he finally gathered the courage to do so, all he got in reply was silence. He felt he had enough of it

and decided to take things into his hands. The rebel in him had gained total control. He started his walk towards the temple to announce his final decision to his father.

Meanwhile, Pandeyji found the walk to the temple, the longest of his life. His mind was echoing with thoughts. "How could Akhilesh do that to me?" "It can't be true, it can't be true" he kept murmuring to himself. He couldn't think of anything else. Finally he reached the temple. Physically he was present in the temple, but mentally, he was lost in another world but then he saw Akhilesh. "Why is he doing this to me?" he cried to himself. He never wanted his family problems to become public. Ironically, he had always advised people to handle their personal problems at home and to never bring them out in the open, but today, his own family was set to have an argument in broad daylight in front of the entire town. Pandeyji exasperated.

He requested Akhilesh, in an uptight manner, to go home and assured him that he would discuss the matter with him during dinner. But Akhilesh was adamant and wanted some quick answers. "I wouldn't go back until you tell me your decision" he protested. "There is no point discussing this matter, you already know my answer", Pandeyji replied. "In that case, I would tell you, I have already taken my decision and I am not stepping back, irrespective of whether you like my decision or not" Akhilesh announced. Pandeyji was shocked. He lost his cool. He couldn't control his emotions any more. He slapped Akhilesh and reduced to tears. He had never thought that he would slap his son. These were surely some of the most difficult moments of his life. On one side was his son, whom he loved more than his life and on the other side there were his principles. It was surely a very tough decision but at the end he was obliged to go against his son.

These moments were no good for Akhilesh either. This embarrassment in the public forced them to go back to their house. After a series of discussions and arguments, Pandeyji took one of the most difficult decisions of his life, perhaps against his own belief. His love for his son finally won over his love for his religion. He urged Akhilesh to wait until the results were announced and after that, if he needed to take a decision, he would support him. Deep down within their hearts, however, both of them were hoping that they wouldn't need to take the decision and that Akhilesh would secure admission without the need of using reservation.

Both father and son, spent sleepless nights until the results were announced. They used to secretly pray to God that Akhilesh wouldn't need to change his religion. They were also secretly studying the various aspects of the religion that Akhilesh was planning to convert to. Their lives were at crossroads where one turn could change their entire future. However during this period when Pandeyji was studying the other religion, he actually found many similarities between that religion and his own religion. He felt that both the religions were based on almost the same principle and had almost similar teachings. His respect for the other religion grew day by day. This crisis actually gave him the opportunity to study another religion and imbibed a feeling of respect for it.

Finally the big day arrived, the day on which the fates of the father and son were to be decided, the day which could either tear them apart or bring them closer than they were ever before.

They went to check the results at Akhilesh's school. As expected, a rather huge crowd of students and their anxious parents had gathered there. While the sense of expectation about the result was intense enough for other people, for Pandeyji and Akhilesh, the turmoil in their lives had magnified it many folds.

With tension searing through his veins, Akhilesh went to check the board where the names of selected students were written. The whole gamut of expressions ranging from the ecstasy of success to the despair of failure could be seen on the faces of the people who were returning from the board. He reached the board, his emotions running high. With each passing name on the list, he felt his energy drain a little. He was down to the last few people on the list. He was resigned to his fate, and preparing to say his final goodbyes to his family.

But he got to a name on the list, which brought him to the point of tears. It was 'Akhilesh Pandey', rank 5927. He felt as if a huge load was taken off his chest. His joy knew no bounds. After he regained his bearings, he went back to his father. The tears in his eyes said it all. He had made it.

Pandeyji welled up with tears as well. They hugged each other knowing quite well what would've happened if things had gone otherwise. They went back home without saying a word.

At home, Akhilesh ran to his mother and hugged her. She understood what had happened. The look of relief in her son's eyes told her the whole story. While hugging, she noticed her husband's expressions as well. His face showed a mixture of joy, relief and a sense of a pleasant surprise.

After an hour of personal congratulations and thanks, to Akhilesh's own hard work as well as God's grace, came the public celebration. Pandeyji invited everyone from the locality for sweets and a havan. Akhilesh was feted as a brilliant student and everyone wished him the best for his future endeavors. A new life awaited him!