

## The story behind a story

Chandmari, in front of the Radio Station. Eleven in the morning, business, rush, noise, endless traffic, city buses, cars, scooters, push-carts, countless rickshaws but not one unoccupied. I am waiting. Principal Goswami at the wheel of his car coming from towards Zoo Road, saw me and stopped.

'Where to?'

'Panbazar'

'Please get in'

Principal Goswami is an expert driver. He hardly signals with his hand, instead blows the horn frequently. Today, I noticed he is honking less frequently. Normally the cigarette that used to be in his right hand, inseparable as Amitabh Bachhan's pistol – that cigarette is also missing today. Instead, in his right hand a rolled-up handkerchief, and a Vicks inhaler. He is putting that frequently to his nose and inhaling deeply.

"Hell, this pharyngitis is killing me". Steering his car away from the horns of a huge bull, he said; his voice heavy, coughing often, snorting at intervals, putting his hanky to his nose, the expression in his face bitter.

Principal Goswami has caught a cold. In the glove-compartment his pack of cigarettes, a few Strepsils, a strip of something vitamin'C'ish. Principal Goswami's colds, coughs, sore throats are a perennial bother to him. Still I said, at least to sound sympathetic, "Do these inhalers give any relief?" In answer, Principal Goswami smiled a smile of sworn unbelief, what's called "cynical" and said, "Maybe some psychological relief" –

'Oh!' I said, "what pipe smokers get from drawing at a dead pipe, that sort?" 'Maybe that sort' Goswami said, 'Maybe some other satisfaction also' – you know, like in the history books, the picture of Akbar holding a rose, Shah Jahan sniffing at one, - a Grand Pose! We can't just keep sitting sniffing a rose, we put this Vicks inhaler to our nose and keep drawing it, that could be a kind of delusion of grandeur –

'Oh! Hold it, just a moment please!" Stopping his car by the kerb, Goswami got down, maybe he would buy something. I took the packet from the dashboard and lit a cigarette. Saw that he had left the inhaler on the seat, picked it up and just glanced at what was printed on it, Goswami came back with a magazine, put his hands to the carkeys, groped on the seat with his other hand for the inhaler.

"Here it is," I said but I did not give him the inhaler – 'Looks here's something good'.

"Oh! you mean the camphor- " Goswami said indifferently, put the car in gear and moved.

'Yes', I said, 'Camphor is of course there. Moreover listen,' shouting above the noise of the traffic on G.N.B. Road, I read out from the body of the inhaler -' clears stuffy nose fast ..... formula "Menthol I.P. 37.6% W/V. Camphor I.P. 37.6%, Methyl Salicylate I.P. 11% W/V, Oil Sassafras 5.0% W/V, Oil Siberian Pine Needles 4.2% W/V. makes breathing clear and cool ..."

Gave Goswami the inhaler. He drew at it once and said – 'What good thing were you talking about?'

"Pine needles."

"Why, has that got special properties?"

"Absolutely special.

The other day I had read a book on meditation, quite a bit on psychic energy.

What they call life in our yoga texts, psychic energy. From food we are supposed to get physical energy, bodily strength, even from water we get physical energy, but from air we get a bit of psychic energy also. Through breath control, i.e. if we can control our breath properly we can collect psychic energy in huge quantities. There are techniques, and rules. Pranayam. And from that life force or you may call it, I wouldn't know if my translation is exact 'spiritual energy', strength of the mind, psychic energy."

Without replying, Principal Goswami scraped past rows of push-carts and trucks, blew his horn a couple of times – and then said, 'Oh Pranayam! But how precisely are pine needles connected with Pranayam?' 'Not that', I said, 'it appears there are a few techniques of collecting psychic energy and there are certain substances which help collect psychic energy, what they call 'Dravyaguna' in our sastras. One such stuff that increases psychic energy is musk. Another very potent stuff is your pine needles. The book says that the tips of pine needles store psychic energy, especially the green ones. You put your finger to the tip and keep it that way for a minute or two and you will feel some sort of new energy surging through you, that is psychic energy. The book also says that if you do that without picking the needles from the tree action is definitely more rapid. Suppose you are convalescing after an illness or you find your energy, drive, enthusiasm, running low, touch a pine needle and your mind and body would be charged with psychic energy. Musk is also like that – Chinese musk is the best, next a particular variety of Tibetan musk. Pretty costly too – a hundred to two hundred dollars an ounce. In ancient India and China some kings and emperors used to take musk before taking any momentous decision. That was supposed to have made the brains of these kings, all sharp as they come, and, as a result, they could do some very clear thinking indeed.

Eyes narrowed, Principal Goswami gave me a quick look through his glasses – said nothing, but went ahead. After crossing T.C. School he reduced speed and stopped the car at the Ambari level crossing, there was a blockade, a train was coming, crowded all around by waiting cars.

'So', I continued, 'your parallel of sniffing at something like Akbar and Shahjahan is not quite off the mark. Emperors those days used to gather psychic energy by inhaling musk, to aid their thinking, and in the modern age you have pine needle essence put in a small tube and when you use the Vicks inhaler it's more or less the same thing.

The small train bound towards the river bank crossed us, the hurdle was removed. Principal Goswami followed an Ambassador car, crossed the rail lines and said derisively, - scoffing at the idea. 'Yes, more or less the same thing. And, perhaps when you use the inhaler, the stuff from the inhaler, it relieves cold, clears nasal congestion, clears your nostrils – then of course you can think clearly. If your nose is blocked, that's more than you can bear, you keep on snorting. 'Your head feels heavy, your mood is spoilt, clear your nose, wipe it, disgusting, - all thought automatically evaporates. Call it what you will, psychic energy or spiritual energy the main thing is if your nose is clear so is your brain, and if your brain is clear, naturally you think clearly. So, former emperors used to inhale musk, pine needles and such other stuff to clear their nose and we're also doing the same thing, with our inhalers – it's pretty simple really."

I did not have a cold, but I felt that somehow my nostrils had also become clear- and my brain was no longer foggy. Of course, it's a simple thing- a straightforward, simple explanation. Even Patanjali would not quarrel with this causal relation. The great sage Kapil will also have to accept it. Breaking through the web of spiritual, extra-sensory obtuseness, Principal Goswami has found an easy, straightforward explanation.

That is to say, Principal Goswami is a practical man. Something wrong with your car, tell Goswami, he will strain his ear and listen to your engine, then he will tighten a loose nut somewhere and your car starts. Your radio, TV, fridge won't run, your watch stops, the valve of pressure cooker bursts spraying hot curry, your cosmos plants won't flower, your hens are lethargic, sickly, tell Goswami, he will tell you they are suffering from Ranikhet-administer tetracycline. Even in other non-mechanical matters, he would never indulge in unnecessary speculations. He is not lost in the swips of the jalebi. He straightaway puts his finger on the problem and brings out the simplest explanation, "simple thing". They may look difficult, incomprehensible, mysterious but if you go deep, it becomes clear that it has something to do with money, property or sex or something of sexual origin. Economics and sex. And various branches of these two root causes – craving for power, for fame – material and other ambitions, bodily ailments, psychic malfunctioning, quarrels and fights, friendship, enmity, murder, violence, fights, wars. You don't have to read Marx, no point burrowing into Freud, just give it a thought. You will see that like patriotism, national pride; at the root of all these noble sentiments, in fact, all wars have an economic root. And, after you've got over the poetic, rhythmic

mesmerizing effect of *Meghdoot* or *Romeo and Juliet* – you will find that behind all these poetic fights the real cause is sexual hunger – the sex-urge of adolescents – “Simple thing”.

Crossed the Emporium and then the Deaf and Dumb School, a traffic jam in front of the Museum- the car stopped. Through the traffic I saw we had already left behind the two similar Assam type houses in front of the school – one was busy with people, cars, etc – the other was closed. – A big lock on the gate. A few days back we had been there to attend the wedding reception of two of our ex-students. That day the house was gay and lively, hosts of invitees, smiling bride and bridegroom, jests, noise, merry-making, feasting – I pointed backward and said, “Remember, that day we had gone to that house to attend Romy’s marriage reception, is that let out only for marriages?”

“No, not that, it is.” – trying to think something, Goswami stopped.

“Wasn’t that Dr. - ’s house – the brother of Dr.- (told him the names) that’s what we knew while passing this house as we went to school when we were young.”

“Maybe, can’t remember.”

“It’s been locked up for quite some time. Does no one stay there? Getting a rented house is such a big problem in Gauhati, yet this has been – a bit odd, - isn’t it? What’s the matter?”

The cars ahead were beginning to move and Goswami put the car on gear and steered round the push-carts loaded with asbestos sheets, had a go at the inhaler, coughed a couple of times – and then rather casually said, ‘Maybe – oh it must be that -’ the car took on speed and he finished his sentence without seeming to think much, what they call ‘casually’ in English, the sentence that he let out so nonchalantly, it may not at all be the case but it was a simple, feasible explanation, practical solution from a practical man, and a typical Goswami’sh “simple thing.” I was silent. After crossing District Library we went round the Dighali tank and reached the Panbazar traffic point, a red light, he reduced speed. I said, I have to get down here, please stop. Would you ..... thanks.”

Got down. I had to have an x-ray taken but Principal Goswami’s last sentence – it tickled my imagination with the possibilities of a story – I was excited – dropped the x-ray idea – got into a restaurant – ordered a cup of tea – lit a cigarette unsteadily, my mind was in turmoil, as if it was a great worry – how can I keep that abandoned house in Dighali Pukhuri ; no, it won’t do to keep it there – I have to remove it to some other place – my tea was getting cold, I was trying to remember the look and the surroundings of the house – was there a lawn in front or was it bare? Empty – no trees or plants or flowers – no, there must be a few plants since people would be staying there. I remembered, in our old home at Panbazar, a Beena creeper had climbed up the walls of the living room to the verandah on the first floor, all right, a similar creeper will climb up the porch and reach the roof and, in the house, there will be .... those readers who have read ‘Beena Kutir’, they will perhaps get to know that the whole story is nothing but what Principal Goswami had said, “Maybe what happened was....” But after all you can’t say it just like that ! You have to create the necessary maze like the swirls of a *jalebi*, there has to be much ado,- you have to create a situation, heroics, conflict, crisis, dialogues – Principal Goswami’s careless, ‘casual’ sentence must play the final role at the end, what they call the ‘punch line’ in English – I don’t know what they call it in Assamese, maybe there is no synonym.