

The Story Behind A Story

Chandmari, in front of the Radio Station. It is eleven in the morning, and all around me, there is hectic activity, crowds, chaos... There is an endless stream of vehicles: city buses, cars, scooters, and pushcarts. There are innumerable rickshaws, but not even one is empty, and I am waiting. Principal Goswami was coming in his car from the direction of the Zoo Road, and he stopped the car on seeing me.

"Where to?"

"Panbazar"

"OK, get in."

Principal Goswami is a skilled driver and rarely uses his hands for signalling; he uses the horn instead. But I am noticing that he is using the horn much less today. The cigarette that always dangles from his right hand, inseparable like the pistol in Amitabh Bachchan's hand, is also missing today. In its place, there is a rolled-up handkerchief and a Vicks inhaler, which he frequently brings to his nose and sniffs. "Oh damn, this pharyngitis! It is making my life hell!" he said while deftly swerving the car to avoid a collision with the horns of a giant bull. His voice is rasping, and he is coughing intermittently. He also makes wet snuffling sounds through his nose and uses the hanky quite frequently, his face sullen.

Principal Goswami has a cold. His packet of cigarettes, strips of Strepsils, and Vitamin C tablets are lying inside the dashboard of his car. Though cold-cough-sore throat is a round-the-year affliction for Principal Goswami, I asked him, to sound sympathetic, "Do these inhalers give any relief?"

In reply, Principal Goswami gave a cynical smile, the smile of an inveterate non-believer, and said, "Gives a psychological relief, possibly...."

"Oh, I see," I said, "Is it something like a pipe smoker sucking on his pipe just to get the feel of smoking, even after the pipe has gone cold?"

"Maybe something like that," Goswami said, "or it may be some other form of satisfaction—take, for instance, the portrait of Akbar holding a rose in his hand or Shahjahan smelling a rose that you see in history books ---giving a grand pose---but where do we find a rose to smell, so instead of a rose we put this Vicks inhaler to our nose and that provides us with an illusion of grandeur---Please wait, just a minute---"

Parking the car near the footpath, Goswami got out of the car, may be to buy something. Picking up the packet of cigarettes from the dashboard, I pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and then noticed that the inhaler was left behind on the driver's seat. I picked it up and casually read the words printed on its body. Goswami came back with a magazine in his hand. He put one hand on the ignition key and, with the other, started feeling around for the inhaler.

"It's here, " I said, but did not hand over the Vicks to him--- "Look, it has some good stuff in it---"

"You are talking of camphor, aren't you?" Goswami said in a carefree tone while engaging gears and letting the car move forward.

"Yes, " I said, "Camphor, of course, and besides that, --- listen" and to make myself heard over the noise of traffic on the busy GNB Road, I read loudly from the body of the Vicks: "*Clears stuffy nose fast... Formula : Menthol I.P 37.6% W/V, Camphor I.P. 37.6% W/V, Methyl Salicylate I.P. 11% W/V, Oil Sassafras 5.0% W/V, Oil Siberian Pine Needles 4.% W/V... make breathing clear and cool...*"

I put the Vicks on Goswami's hand, and he inhaled once. He said, "Which good stuff were you talking about?"

"Pine needles."

"Why, does it have any special quality?"

"Absolutely. The other day, I read a book on meditation. It spoke at length about psychic energy, referred to as 'Life Force' in our scriptures on Yoga. We get physical energy from food, they say. We also get physical energy from water. But we get some psychic energy from the air through inhalation and exhalation. By controlling our breathing, a lot of psychic energy may be collected. There is a

technique involved. There are also rules. It is Pranayama. And from that comes the life force. You may also call it spiritual energy, mind-force, or psychic energy."

Without giving any reply, Principal Goswami navigated the car through a maze of pushcarts and trucks, honked a couple of times and then said, "Pranayama is OK, but what could be the connection between pranayama and pine needles---"

"No, it's not that," I said, "There are many techniques, they say, for collecting psychic energy, and a few materials also help because of what our scriptures call their *drabyaguna* or the intrinsic quality of materials. One such material is *Kasturi* or musk. Another very potent material is pine needles. The book says that pine needles are full of psychic energy, especially the fresh, green needles. One has to hold it between the fingers for two to three minutes. One then feels a new kind of power entering the body—psychic energy—that's what the book says, anyway. The needles should preferably be touched while on the tree before getting plucked, and their action is much more rapid. Suppose you have just recovered from some ailment, or your strength-energy-enthusiasm-liveliness has greatly decreased. Then you go and touch some pine needles, and your body and mind will get charged with a new energy and vigour. Musk also acts in the same way. Chinese musk is the best, followed by the Tibetan musk. They are expensive too, one to two hundred dollars per ounce. It is said that in ancient India and China, some emperors used to take musk before they had to make important decisions, that made their brains extremely sharp, and they could think quite clearly."

Principal Goswami crinkled his eyes behind his glasses and looked sharply at me but did not say anything. After crossing the T.C. High School, he reduced speed and stopped the car at the Ambari level crossing. The bar at the level crossing was blocking the way, and a train was on its way. All around us, vehicles were waiting for the train to pass.

"So," I said, "your parallel of Akbar or Shahjahan holding something and smelling it is not entirely wrong. In ancient times, emperors took whiffs of musk to collect psychic energy and to think clearly, and in the modern world, you are stuffing a plastic cylinder with camphor and the scent of pine and repeatedly sniffing from it to help you think— it is more or less the same thing."

The short train going towards the riverside came and passed, the bar on the level-crossing was raised, Principal Goswami slowly followed an Ambassador car to cross the railway line and then said sarcastically, " Yes, more, or less the same thing. While sniffing that stuff from an inhaler, nasal congestion disappears, the nostrils become clear, and one can think more clearly. When the nose is stuffy, everything goes wrong; one goes snuffle -snuffle all the time, the head remains heavy, the mood stays grumpy, life becomes hell, one keeps clearing the nose and keeps wiping it with the hanky--- it's a dreadful affair--- and there is no way one can think clearly. Call it psychic energy, call it spiritual energy, but what matters is that when your nose is unclogged, your brain remains clear, and when the brain is clear, thinking is clear. So, emperors once used to inhale stuff like musk and pine needles to keep their noses clear, and we are doing the same by sniffing inhalers -- - Quite simple..."

I didn't have a cold, but I, too, felt as if my nostrils had suddenly become clear and my brain had opened up. Of course, it is pretty simple, and the explanation is straightforward. Even Patanjali would not have found fault with this cause-and-effect relationship. And a great Yogi like the sage Kapil would have accepted it. Principal Goswami has torn apart the misty veil of incomprehensible psychic stuff, bringing out a simple explanation from within its folds.

It means Principal Goswami is a practical man. Is your car having a breakdown? Tell Goswami. He will listen attentively to the sound of the engine. Then tighten a loose nut somewhere and your car will run again. Has your Radio, TV, or Fridge developed a snag? Has your clock stopped working? Has the safety valve of your pressure cooker blown off, spraying *dal* all over the place? Are the seeds of your Cosmos not flowering? Is your hen sitting dejectedly with its head in its chest? Tell Goswami. He will say they have been afflicted with *Ranikhet* disease and will need to be treated with tetracycline. In other non-mechanical problems also, he does not get bowed down by hair-splitting discussions, but unravels the maze and goes straight to the core of the problem to bring out the simplest explanation. "It is quite simple, really." A problem may look complicated, incomprehensible, and mysterious from the outside. But, if one delves deeper, it becomes clear that the problem may be either one of money, property, etc., or it may have something to do with sex or sexuality. These two principal sources have many branches...: yearning for power, desire for fame, a wish for name, fame and

authority, physical ailments or mental derangements, quarrels, enmity, killing or fighting. There is no need to read Marx or delve into Freud; ponder for a while, and you will realise that behind all the lofty words like patriotism, national pride, etc., the actual reason for all wars is economic. Once the feeling of euphoric enchantment with the rhythmic beauty of *Meghdoot* or *Romeo and Juliet* blowover, you will see that behind all these epic creations, the driving force is sexual desire, the dawn of the sexual urge in adolescence. Quite simple, really."

We crossed the Emporium, crossed the Deaf and Dumb school. There was a traffic jam in front of the Museum, and our car came to a halt. Through the gaps in the traffic, I saw that we had left behind two Assam-type houses on the opposite side of the School, and in front of one of them, there were people and cars, but the other had its doors and windows shut, and a huge padlock was hanging on its gate. Some time ago, I had come to the same house, now kept locked, to attend the wedding reception of a pair of our former students, but that day, the house was abuzz with life; it had a jostling crowd of invitees, smiling bride and groom, lights, a joyous hum, and the muted sound of dining in progress. I pointed backwards over my shoulders and said, "The other day, I attended the reception of Rumi's wedding in that house. Is it a wedding hall?"

"Oh, no, that is actually..." Goswami said and stopped, trying to recollect.

"Wasn't that the house of Doctor so-and-so? The brother of that Doctor friend of yours? (I mentioned the names). When we were young and crossed the house on our way to school, we believed that was the case."

"May be. I don't remember."

"I have seen it remaining shut for a very long time. Does nobody stay there anymore? And why not? Guwahati has such a shortage of houses, whereas this one here has remained unoccupied... Odd. What can be the reason?"

The vehicles in front of us started moving; Principal Goswami engaged gear and, after passing two pushcarts laden with asbestos sheets, sniffed the inhaler once, coughed a couple of times and then said, rather carelessly, "Who knows? Maybe what happened was ..."

The car started picking up speed, and he completed the sentence. The sentence he uttered rather casually, without thinking, might not have been the

truth, but it was a simple way of looking at it and pointed to a possibility. Practical words of a sensible man and a typical Goswami-type, "Quite simple, really." I sank into silence. Crossing the District Library and turning by the side of the *Dighali Pukhuri*, the car reached the Panbazar police point, where the red light was on and slowed down. I said, "I have to get down here. Please stop for a while... Thanks."

I got out of the car. I was to take an X-ray, but Goswami's words suddenly implanted the seeds of a story in my mind. The possibility made me somewhat restless, so I gave up the idea of the X-ray and hurriedly entered a tea shop where I sat in front of a cup of tea and lit a cigarette, my mind racing excitedly. My mind was in turmoil, and I was in a quandary. How do I keep that abandoned 'Wedding Hall' in that locality near the *Dighali Pukhuri*... No, I can't allow the house to remain in that locality; I must shift it elsewhere... The tea was getting cold as I tried to remember the shape and size of the house, the lawn in front of which was almost empty, vacant, devoid of leaves and flowers—No, I must keep a couple of trees since I propose to fill the house with people --- I then remembered that in our old house in Panbazar, a creeper of Bina flowers had crept along the wall to go up to the first-floor veranda--- so, this house will also have a creeper of Bina flowers creeping over a lattice in front of the house...

Those readers who have read the Assamese story '*Bina Kutir*' must have understood by now that the entire story was triggered by Principal Goswami's sentence, "Maybe what happened was..." But one could not just narrate the simple fact in a single sentence; one had to create a maze before that, with many twists and turns, and with a hero and a heroine, with conflicts, crises, and dialogues---and Principal Goswami's careless, casual remark had to be made the concluding sentence of the story, the so-called 'punch line'--- a phrase, which may not have an equivalent in Assamese, I do not know.
