

THE DEATH OF A HERO

‘Sit down,’ the principal said. But Mr Tagde continued to stand, gaining courage from his own straight-backed stance, because he was beginning to feel a little afraid now.

The principal looked unhappy. He disliked being forced to perform this sort of an unpleasant task.

‘I wish you would consider withdrawing this report,’ he said.

‘I am sorry sir, I cannot do that,’ Mr. Tagde said. He was pleased with his unwavering voice and uncompromising words.

‘It will be a very damaging report if put on record.’

‘It is a factual report on very damaging conduct.’

‘You are asking for the boy’s expulsion from school. Don’t you think the punishment is too harsh for a few boyish pranks?’

‘He has spoiled benches in my class room by scoring them with a razor blade. He has made the blackboard useless by scratching on it with a piece of tin. He has broken several window panes by throwing stones at them. Yesterday he broke another one and the flying pieces of glass hurt a pupil badly. That is not all. Many girl students have complained of having their books, notebooks and pens stolen, and I could get evidence that the More boy is behind it. Also there have been complaints from girls that he stops them on the street and shouts obscenities at them and threatens to beat them up. The report contains all this and more. I cannot agree with you that the behaviour can be called merely boyish pranks.’

The principal spread his hands in a helpless gesture. He looked at Mr Tagde, a small thin man in his slightly yellowed dhoti and his coat of a nondescript colour and his black cap. Outwardly he looked the same as he had for the last fifteen years that the principal had known him. A solid teacher, a mature and rational man, suitably diplomatic in his dealings with those in authority, a good man to work with.

The principal, heartened by his scrutiny of his colleague, continued more hopefully.

‘But the boy has already been punished for this misconduct,’ he said. ‘Why take it all up again?’

‘When More hurt that boy yesterday—the glass cut his cheek, and small piece of it had to be removed from the wound at the government dispensary—I decided that he had to be stopped before he did any further damage. The boy who was hurt comes from a poor family. His parents are not in a position to do anything about More.’

‘I am sure Veerendra did not mean this particular boy any harm.’

‘Most certainly he did not. He merely wanted to break a windowpane and disrupt my class. If in the process someone got hurt that was an added bonus.’

Mr Tagde surprised himself at the sudden intensity of his anger. The kind of anger he had felt when he saw the irregular star of the broken window and the blood running down the boy’s cheek, and anger which sends the blood rushing to one’s eyes and momentarily blurs one’s vision and one’s fear.

‘There is no call to be sarcastic, Mr Tagde,’ the principal said sharply. ‘I am not condoning the boy’s behaviour. I am merely suggesting that you are putting too serious a construction on it.’

Mr Tagde neither moved nor spoke.

‘I could refuse to put the matter on the agenda for the school committee meeting, you know?’

‘In that case I shall be forced to send a copy of the report to each committee member and one to Vartavihar. I am sure the editor would find it interesting enough to publish in the next edition.’

This was an extempore thought, and his elation at having stumbled on it gave Mr Tagde more confidence.

The principal made a feeble attempt at laughing. ‘Come now, you don’t mean that,’ he said.

‘I am afraid I mean every word I said.’

‘You are aware,’ the principal said, carefully enunciating each word as though to make sure Mr Tagde heard it, that the chairman of the school committee is Veerendra’s uncle?’

‘I am.’

‘You still want this report to go up to the committee?’

‘All right, I shall forward it as your personal recommendation, for consideration at the meeting to be held on Friday evening.’

That’s right, save your own skin, don’t endorse it, Mr Tagde thought, looking with distaste at the principal’s bland face. Then he thought, I have no right to be bitter. I spent my life doing just what he is doing, saving my own skin.

While he was walking home, the enormity of what he had done began to dawn on him. He had always had access to all the facts, of course. He had simply failed to combine them and realize their implications. Without the principal’s endorsement, his report would cause serious repercussions. It might very well

mean the loss of his job. There were rules for the protection of employees of long-standing. But most of all private schools had a way of getting around such rules.

He decided he would simply have to face the consequences. The loss of his job would not be such a great tragedy. He was only three years away from retirement anyway. His children were on their own, a daughter married and two sons in good jobs. For once in his life he was in a position to do something he felt was right, without fear of consequences. He was sick of doing the bidding of the petty politicians and manoeuvrers who ran the school, and of always being afraid of losing his job if he punished or failed their delinquent children. There had to come a time in every man's life when he had to square all these things with his conscience.

When he reached home he called out as usual, 'I am home.' While he removed his coat and had a wash, his wife would have a cup of tea ready for him. He debated telling her about what had happened, but discarded the idea. He had always been thankful for her unquestioning acceptance of his decisions, though her acceptance had meant only that she was not sufficiently interested. Since this decision might affect her, it might interest her. But for the time being he was content to leave it.

The reactions came sooner than he expected. Mr Thakar, the lawyer, brought up the subject during their before-dinner walk.

'Principal Deshpande asked me to have a talk with you,' he said.

Mr Tagde said, 'I have made my decision and nothing you say is going to change it.'

Mr Thakar looked at his friend in surprise.

'Wait till I have had my say,' he said, holding up his hand. 'I hold no brief for Veerendra More. He is despicable and deserves to be kicked out of school. The point is this. You know and I know that your report is not going to serve that purpose, because of circumstances you know very well. Then why commit suicide needlessly?'

'I know you have only my interests at heart, and I am thankful for it. But it's no use your trying to talk me out of this. I have made up my mind.'

'But why?'

'I think this whole system is rotten, by which politicians control educational institutions. Somebody has to strike out against it.'

'Why you?'

'Why not me?' Because I am just a poor insignificant teacher?'

Mr Thakar sighed.

'Think of the consequences. First, you may lose your job.'

'I wouldn't mind. I can continue to make a living by giving tuitions. That was what I had planned to do after my retirement anyway.'

'Do you think it would be easy for you to get tuitions if you declare yourself openly an enemy of the Mores?'

Mr Tagde was silent a long time. This was a logical possibility, but it had not occurred to him.

‘Everybody in this town is not afraid of them,’ he said finally. ‘And if they are, there are always other places to go to.’

‘Oh, you mean you are prepared to disarrange your whole life over this worthless boy?’

‘Yes.’

‘We’, I admire you, Tagde, but I still think you are making a foolish mistake.’

Vishnupant Joshi came to see him the next morning, large, aggressively hearty man, a brahmin bagaitdar, careful of his skin but foxy enough to gain a foothold in Maratha politics, and therefore the ideal pacifier and go-between.

Over tea Mr Tagde said, ‘Why should a father’s money and political, power protect his child from punishment which he richly deserves?’

Every time he argued his case, he seemed to receive an inner reinforcement from his own words.

‘I agree with you, it shouldn’t. But the fact is that it does. It does all the time, all over the world. We have to live with it. That’s life. You have to keep your balance. Why jeopardise your position for a fine-sounding sentiment?’

‘We are looking at the questions from two opposing points of view, Mr Joshi, and I cannot hope to make you see mine.’

‘Don’t be in a hurry to take a stand. Think about it for a while. There is still time to withdraw your report?’

‘You can take it as final that I will not withdraw it. If necessary, I am prepared to hand in my resignation.’

‘You are aware that the school committee has powers to stop your pension?’

‘I was not aware of it until you mentioned it.’ Mr Tagde said in cold anger. ‘If you came here to ensure my compliance through threats, you are wasting your time.’

On Wednesday night when Mr Tagde was returning home from a visit to the public lavatory which he used, he was attacked by a group of boys. They beat him with sticks and stones and fists. He thought he recognised Veerendra More among them, thought he heard his voice urging the others to ‘teach the bastard a lesson.’

The next morning, covered with turmeric paste and bandages, unable to get up, Mr Tagde lay in bed groaning with pain.

The night before when he walked in after the beating, his wife had been horrified and angry.

‘Why won’t you take back your silly report? Is it worth being beaten, losing your job? Oh yes, I know what’s going on, even if you won’t tell me anything.’

‘I think it’s worth it,’ he said calmly.

‘They will kill you.’

‘Let them. I am an old man, I am not afraid of dying.’

‘You think only of yourself. What about me? What will happen to me if you die? I shall be a helpless widow for nothing.’

Mr Tagde felt like laughing.

He said gently, ‘Not for nothing, my dear, for a principle.’

‘What good will a principle be to me when I am a widow?’

Then he did laugh, and she withdrew into sullenness which she did not abandon with the dawning of the next day. Watching her going about her work silently, he thought, I cannot be bothered with inessentials, now. I have jumped into this, and I will not back out. God will look after me, and look after her if something does happen to me.

Their neighbours had seen him coming home with a bloody face, so the news must be all over town, but nobody came to see him. This is what I shall have to get used to, he thought with a strange kind of exaltation. I shall have to stand alone. He thanked God for giving him this opportunity to become free of fear at last, to grow into a tall, proud man.

In the evening Mr Thakar came.

‘Glad to see you.’ Mr Tagde said. ‘I thought you had also abandoned me, like the others.’

‘Ha-ha, you do get funny ideas.’

Mr Tagde frowned at the lawyer’s levity in the face of the seriousness of the situation.

‘I bring you news,’ Mr Thakar said.

‘Good or bad?’ Mr Tagde asked cautiously.

‘That depends on you.’

‘If you are going to ask me to back out, you can save your breath.’

‘At least let me tell you everything before you jump to conclusions. When I heard about the beating, I said to myself, this has gone too far. Something must be done about it. So I went to see Ramrao More, Veerendra’s uncle. I put it to him that you were not going to withdraw your report no matter what, and many of the townspeople respected you for it; that the beating you had received was disgraceful and sufficient evidence, if any was needed, that your report is accurate; that the beating, if no action was taken about it, would create a lot of resentment in the town. Finally I said that if he looked at the thing rationally—I emphasised the point that I felt he was the only member of their family who was fully capable of thinking rationally—being kicked out of school might be the best thing that could happen to Veerendra. He agreed.’

‘What!’ Mr Tagde shot up in bed.

‘Calm yourself. Of course he did not agree that Veerendra should be kicked out of school. He agreed that it would do Veerendra good to be taken out of school and put in a boarding school such as the Solapur Boys’ School which is run specially for problem boys. Naturally the family has not been happy about Veerendra’s exploits, but they haven’t known how to control him. I also brought it

to Ramrao's attention that, in view of the forthcoming elections in which Veerendra's father is a candidate, any adverse publicity—such as you, I said, were capable of giving this matter—would be undesirable at this time. So he consulted with Veerendra's father and they have agreed to take the boy out of school immediately, and in June, only three months from now, send him away. This is of course on condition that you withdraw your report about the boy immediately. You will have to agree that it is fair compromise, because it gives you what you want.'

Mr Tagde, white and trembling, sank back on his pillow.

'What is the matter? Mr Thakar asked in alarm. 'Are you feeling ill?'

'No, no, I am all right. This is such a surprise.'

'I understand. After the tension of the last few days it must be a sudden relief. You do agree, don't you? I have to get in touch with Mr More and let him know tonight.'

Mr Tagde nodded mechanically and then closed his eyes; a tired old teacher looking ahead to three more years of teaching and then retirement and a pension, however measly.

- Jai Nimbkar

About the Story

The story begins with the familiar conflict between integrity and justice on the one hand and expediency and corruption on the other. Somewhere in the middle of the story we find that how struggle changed the timid ordinary school teacher into something of a hero who can fight recklessly for a cause sacrificing his career and security. The compromise at the end deflates him by taking away the need for this heroic sacrifice and settling him once more in the groove which he had temporarily transcended.

Glossary

More: pronounced Mo-ray, a common Maratha family name.

bagaitdar: A rich farmer who has irrigated land.

Maratha politics: Marathas are a non-Brahmin caste in Maharashtra who wield a great deal of political power in the state.

stance: position

unwavering: not changing; becoming weaker

expulsion: forcing someone to leave the place

prank: trick played as a joke

gesture: movement with hands or head or face

non-descript: having no interesting features

disrupt: make it difficult to continue in the same way

bonus: advantage

blurs: less clear

sarcastic: expressing of ridicule that wounds
 condoning: accept as immoral act
 extempore: spoken or done without any previous preparation
 elation: happiness; joy
 stumbled: hit, walked
 feeble: weak
 enunciating: saying; pronouncing
 endorse: support
 bland: with little excitement
 saving my own skin: safeguarding one's own interest
 enormity: of a great size or effect
 access: approach
 manoeuvrers: movement performed with skill and care
 delinquent: a young person showing tendency to commit crimes
 discarded: rejected
 brief: (here) instruction
 despicable: unpleasant, evil
 deserves: to be worthy of something
 worthless: useless
 foxy: like a fox in appearance
 jeopardize: take risk
 sentiment: feeling
 compliance: practice of obeying rules
 silly: foolish, stupid
 sullenness: darkness or unhappiness
 inessential: not necessary
 exaltation: joy, happiness
 frowned: got angry
 disgrace: insulting
 rationally: reasonably
 exploits: (here) unwanted daring acts
 adverse: negative and unpleasant
 merely: not enough, very small in size

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

- (1) The Story 'Death of a Hero' is about the conflict between-
 (a) integrity and justice (b) honesty and dishonesty
 (c) sincerity and insincerity (d) truth and absolute lie
- (2) Mr. Tedge is a _____

(a) doctor (b) teacher (c) lawyer (d)nurse

(3) “I have to get in touch with Mr.More and let him know tonight...” Who speaks these words and to whom?

- (a) Mr.Thakar to Mr. Tadge (b) Mr.Tedge to Mr.Thakar
(c) Mrs.Tedge to Mr.Thakar (e) Mrs.Thakar to Mr.Tedge

(B) Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words each:

1. Who is the hero in ‘The Death of the Hero?’
2. Name the boy whose expulsion from School Mr.Tadge asks for?
3. What is ‘Vartavihar’?
4. Who is the Principal of the School?
5. Who is Vishnupant Joshi?

(C) Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. Why does Mr.Tedge insist that Veerendra More be expelled from the School?
2. What according to Mr.Thakar,may happen to Mr.Tadge if he insists on the expulsion of the boy from the School?
3. On what condition does Mr.Tadge agree to withdraw his report about the boy?
4. Who, according to the author, control the educational institutions?

(D) Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. The story ‘The Death of a Hero’ is a satire on our educational institutions.Discuss.
2. How is a timid school teacher changed into a hero?

(E) Say whether the following are true or false. Write ‘F’ for False and ‘T’ for true

1. The Chairman of the School committee, where Mr.Tedge works isVeerendra More’s Uncle. []
2. Mr.Tedge agrees to withdraw the report only if Veerendra More’s expulsion is ensured. []
3. The story is a satire on the functioning of the present day education. []
4. Mr. Tadge protests because he has personal enmity with Veerendra More. []
5. Veerendra More represents the students whose aim is to spoil the system. []