

Short Story: The Master



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1983, Assam. But that doesn't matter. What happened could have happened in any other state or any other country. Early spring afternoon. A meaningless description. It also doesn't matter that in the small village we don't know so well, everything was going on fine. A depressed farmer was walking through the stubble in his field, the tapper was tapping the sap of palm trees, or salting berries, or drying preserved hilsa. Someone was beating his wife, or thinking of doing so. What does matter is that the Poet had just delivered an excellent though puzzling speech at the village school. He had talked at great length of blood and retribution and claiming the land and stuff. Who claiming whose land, who drinking whose blood didn't matter. The Poet was usually a bit too energetic and a bit too mad. The wise women who have explanations for everything say he was once reading his newspaper and meditating by the riverside when the snake's breath entered him. They say he had stood up, flung the paper aside, kicked a snail that had struggled to reach his feet and mumbled something about revolution, safety of the indigenous people or something of that sort. That was the beginning of his madness, they say. What also mattered was that old Master had walked to the village to meet with his friend, the cattle dealer. Twenty years ago, the Master, then a young person had become the first of his people to get a job at the school. Over the years he had transformed from Master bhai to Master kaka to Master bhai again because of the beauty of our language that has the same word for brother and grandfather. In less than a hundred hours he would have a new nickname but that is what this story is all about. Well, so at ten in the morning which in our village means mid-afternoon, he was seated on a stool in the cattle dealer's courtyard.

“... so as you see, I sold the goods to Sona and he said that because one of them had one crooked horn, he would pay me only twenty thousand rupees for the whole herd. The blood went to my head, you see. You know how the prices have gone up. And this Sona, he used to sit on the same floor as you and I and now he talks to me about crooked horns!”

“What can you say, bepari? I asked someone to give me an estimate of my thirty betel nut trees and do you know what he says, ‘I can give you a hundred rupees for the lot, not more.’ By the way, were you at the school this morning?”

“O yes. Your Poet has some interesting ideas once a while but he really outdid himself this time, don’t you think? That young man will come to no good.”

The dealer didn't know how good a prophet he was. In two years, the Poet would bring out a booklet of poems that would, by its detailed and highly imaginative description of dogs mating, shock all the readers of the language. By the end of the same month, he would tour five districts giving guerrilla speeches and be imprisoned for a week. A week after release, he would marry the neurotic village belle and in five years, have as many daughters. In the sixth year, the couple would have their first son and the poet would, in jubilation, leave his idealism on a cloth hanger and turn into a highly successful and highly corrupt Panchayati official.

“Maybe”, said the Master. “Some of what he said made sense. But I don’t want him to lead our villagers into a dangerous situation.”

“You see, Master I am an illiterate person but I read the papers. I know about the problems in our land. Yesterday’s incidents in Nagaon were really sad. I might not be able to express myself in your educated language but what I believe should be our approach to the matter is very simple. If someone walks into my house or touches my woman or my girls, I will tie his feet with his tongue. However, if he stands a mile away and shouts at me or my people, I think it makes sense to shut my ears and let him blabber on.”

“But you do understand that the evil winds of Nagaon might also blow here, no?”

“Yes, Master. But why panic? We could wait. Besides, we have the river on our north and the marsh on our east. They will protect us for a long time. To come from the west, they will have to trample over a hundred kilometres of our people. The only fear is from Kachumari which our Poet so devotedly wants to decimate. But they, the Kachumari men are foolish farmers. They don’t even realise what’s going on in the rest of the world. I bought some mustard from them last week and they were the same as before- ‘Bepari dada, when will you bring honey to the market?’, ‘Bepari dada have tea with dates’ and so on. What exactly does the Poet have in mind, tell me.”

“Well, ‘Kill the people and set fire to their houses’, I guess. Loot and rape he doesn’t mention. The thing is that the Headmaster wants me to go with them. What do you say?”

“Go, go certainly go. Our young idiots should have someone elderly to guide them. I will go with you. But tell you what, the people of Kachumari are easily frightened. If they get news of the Poet’s preparations, which they must, someone from that village must have come to the market today, they will run into the jungle. Then the Poet and his mad party can go to the village and rape the crows. But we must go to stop the killing.”

“Okay, bepari I will leave you now. Come to the school ground tomorrow morning.”

Since they were old friends, there was no request for tea nor the polite refusal. The dealer started splitting bamboo and the Master walked along three houses to his own home and his bath, still slightly nervous and a little frightened.

En route the Master met Kanchan who was hurrying with a little glass bottle in her hand. The free end of her sari had slipped off her head and there was a little hole on the shoulder of her blouse. Seeing the old man approaching, she became conscious and instinctively pulled a ragged pallu over her head. As the Master nodded at her and moved on, she skipped, the sari falling in place on her shoulder once again. She entered the bamboo gate of her childhood friend Jaba’s house. Jaba’s youngest daughter was playing on the ground, mud mixed in her snot.

“Where is your mother?” she asked and the tiny child pointed towards the kitchen shed.

Jaba was crushing chillies in the mortar.

“Give me two cups of mustard oil” she said without announcing herself. Her friend looked up from the mortar and said,

“You haven’t returned my three glasses of rice yet, you whore.”

“You will get it next Friday. But give me the oil quickly.”

“And why do you want it? To massage your husband’s beautiful body?”

Kanchan laughed,

“So you have been to the Poet’s meeting too?”

“Yes” said Jaba laughing. She walked down the mud steps of the kitchen, hands holding her waist that had gone stiff with an hour of pounding the mortar. “I loved the way he asked us to get our husbands ready for the great battle. I almost giggled but the others poked me and I shut my mouth.”

“Yes but give me the oil soon. The father of my children just fished some puthis¹. And he is going to the Sunday market, so I thought let me fry them. Otherwise he will grumble over the plain rice and dal.”

“Well, he will need the strength. Tonight,” said Jaba mischievously.

Kanchan smiled shyly. Her husband’s dominance in bed was free knowledge among her friends.

“He better save the strength for tomorrow.”

“Well, I told my man to go too, but he said he had to clear the weeds around the pond. We are planning to raise the embankments this year, so he has a lot of work to do. Otherwise he would have gone.”

She took the bottle from Kanchan and measured out two cups of oil. As she handed the bottle back, she said,

“Try to return it soon. I have very little oil for the rest of the month. And after your man returns tomorrow, come tell me what he saw there.”

Kanchan agreed and left. But she would not tell the story the next day as she had promised. She wouldn’t visit Jaba even the day after that or for that matter the rest of the whole week.

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The next morning, Tukku the fisherman was walking to the school with his two pronged fishing spear when Chanda, the village flirt saw him and started laughing,

“You are going to kill a man with that”

“Well, this is the strongest thing in my house and I kill water snakes with it every day. I can’t stain the dao, see. My wife said she would never unhusk coconuts with it if it got covered with blood.”

The village had only a limited number of sharp or heavy instruments. Everyone borrowed from everyone else when they needed something, so by simple logic, no one cared to buy what his neighbour already had. The assortment of heavy arms was very limited and the Poet had little time to organize his army’s weaponry. Monu took his sickle and Boba, the dumb one took a hammer. Only Gugu, the professional that he was, cleaned and polished his dagger and came out grinning.

“Let’s go.”

At the high school, there was quite a crowd. The poet was rehearsing his battle cry when the Headmaster came up to him.

“Are you very sure?”

“Yes sir. I have fought in Nalbari and Barpeta and I know what’s what. Victory will be ours. It will be burnt on stone with our blood.”

The battles he recounted were entirely hypothetical of course. The Headmaster was amazed that the village could find no better leader. But he was also relieved. The Poet in the helm meant that there would be less violence and more panic when faced with the real fight, and thus, less real loss. For the past week, he had tried making the villagers realise the foolishness of the venture but they were bored people and eager for some fun. Moreover, the Poet’s rhetoric was better than his, so he took his defeat with grace and accepted the position of the advisor. However, he now said with concern.

“Blood! You are repeating that word too much, son. Besides, do you think these small acts of violence here and there will be really enough to achieve greater things? And your exams are in March. Please transfer some of your energy towards that too.”

“Sir, in times of need, it is necessary to sacrifice trivialities for the greater good and for the initiated to guide the uninitiated. Besides, what am I before that which I am pursuing?”

“Thank you. Save the rest for your flock. And try to read a little less, son. Your geography master has agreed to go with you to see that you don’t cause any serious mischief. And from what I hear, Kachumari is mostly deserted by now. Don’t accidentally kill a stray goat and weep over it all your life.”

It can’t be said that the master led the march because the others had to push him forward, such was their enthusiasm. What with his blood pressure and all, he didn’t walk as fast as he used to twenty years ago. They waded through the marshes, fifty of them, in the same marshes where a few days later, my father would hide with his news report packed in a polythene bag. They walked through the elephantine grass and their white fluffy heads. The Poet, poet that he still was bent a few stalks and cut them with his sword. It was a rusty piece of metal which his grandfather had found in the bed of his pond. Nothing relic about it, just a strip of strong aluminium bent into a curve. They walked on the hard unbroken clods of the fields and when they reached Kachumari, they were shocked.

From a distance they could see the smoke but it was only when they reached the first hamlet that they noticed the extent of the destruction. Thatched roofs had fallen into the huts that were not completely burnt and pieces of torn clothes lay all around. Tin plates with the last meal crusting on them, a carpet of hair under the barber’s chair, ropes of cattle, dry leaves gathered in heaps.

Gugu looked disappointed,

“Some other group must have come here before us and scared the bastards away.”

The aluminium walls of a house cracked like bamboo joints in the fire. Burnt haystacks disintegrated slowly in the breeze. Not knowing what to do, the men rested their palms on their hips and a few lit cigarettes.

It was the siren of a fast approaching army jeep that broke the silence. Everyone looked at the Poet but he was too surprised to give orders. Instead he whispered to the Master,

“The news must have reached the district headquarters.”

“That I understand, son, but what do we do now?”

“I don’t know, sir. Let’s talk to them.”

At the silence and betrayal of their chief, the older men sat down on their knees. The others stood dumb, their weapons still tucked in their waistcloths.

The army men jumped out, their rifles in their hands and the commander shouted,

“Lait jao.”

The people looked at each other and then at the Poet. He motioned at them to lie flat on the ground. They hesitated.

“Hathyar phék do”, said the commander and the people began shrinking back. Only ten years later would the first television set enter the village and the cinema hall a couple of years later. For now, Hindi was a language they had been brought up to fear.

The army men advanced, the commander shouting,

“Baith ja motherchod.”

They were hardly twenty feet from the people. It was then that the master took charge.

“They are speaking in Hindi. I think they want us to give them our daos.”

Everyone threw whatever they had and put their palms on the crowns of their heads. Slightly shivering, the Master said,

“Don’t worry, I will talk to them.”

He made his flock move backwards and walked up to the army men,

“Main Hindi bol sakta hoon.”

But his feeble knowledge of the great language wouldn’t save him for the moment. The commander beckoned to him and shouted in a loud voice,

“Idhar aa betichod.”

The men were surprised. They understood the tone of the expletives and were worried. Young Subu almost said,

“Sir, this man is older than you. Please talk a little politely.”

But he guessed that such things did not matter to them, so he babbled it in his head. Master walked towards the army men, his hands raised. The commander reached out to him and thrust him forcibly behind their line. Master stumbled and fell on his face. Kaka, a village elder who had come with the group pulled the man closest to him and whispered loudly to everyone,

“Run you bastards. They will not spare a single one of us.”

And Hell broke like an uncontrolled fart. The men ran towards the direction of their village crying out for their mothers and for God. The army men took positions and calmly fired shots into the air. Gobu, the master sprinter ran so fast that when he reached home, he had to wait for half an hour to get back his breath and the company of the other men who had gone with him. Gugu created the story that a bullet had whizzed past his left ear and became a mini celebrity for a long time. The women had all gathered at the hospital field. They received their men with cries and ‘didn't I tell you's’. The Poet's grandfather dragged him home by the ear. Only the Master's wife hovered around lost asking everyone she met to confirm that her husband had really been held back. When the explanations had finally gone into her head, she sat down on the grass and stared. The other women immediately came to the rescue and enveloped her in hugs.

Master returned three days later as a showpiece. His jaws had been twisted and the joints of his fingers had swelled so badly that they looked like sugarcane stalks. His fingernails had turned charcoal black with the clotted blood underneath. He lived many more years but never told anyone what had happened after his fall on the field in Kachumari nor how he had managed to come back home. He had to be fed mashed rice with milk and banana for a long time until his face came together again. His friend, the cattle dealer came to see him frequently but they did not talk. He sat in one corner of his large bed as his old playmate ground his betel and paan. For months relatives and neighbours and even strangers from other villages came visiting and for courtesy's sake, the Master had to meet with them and bear the indignation of not being able to divulge all the information they desperately required.

In 1985, the Assam agitation reached its triumphant culmination. No one really understood who had won. Master's wounds healed though the trauma grew into a chronic nightmare and after fifteen years of torture, consumed him. And although he taught geography in the village school, he was henceforth known as the Hindi master.

1. Small fish.

By Shalim M Hussain

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