



5

The Special Prize

What a naughty boy! He deserves to be thrashed. I have also received reports of his getting into fights with other boys. Send for him. “Mohan! Hey, Mohan!” the headmaster shouted for the chowkidar. Mohan guessed from the growl in the voice that the headmaster was very angry. He rushed in and asked apprehensively, “Yes, Sir?”

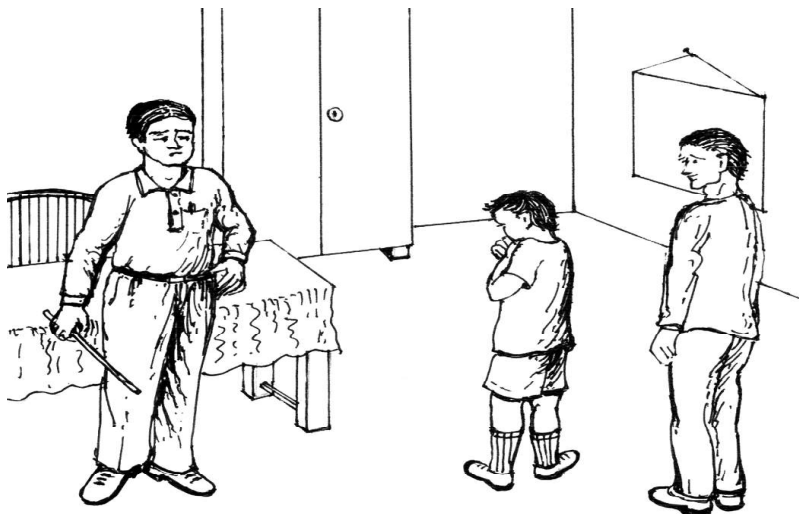
“Hurry and get Tapan of Class V,” the headmaster ordered.

Let me introduce the reader to the boy named Tapan. He is the second son of Ratan, the clerk of Padumani village. Although rather thin, he is strong, somewhat dark and has bright eyes. He is quite good at his studies. But both at home and outside, there is no end to his pranks. He is always getting into trouble. But it must be admitted that he is never the first to pick a quarrel. But if anybody offends him he never hesitates to give as good as he gets. He is the leader of his age-group and is always ready to take up the cudgels on their behalf. He is popular and respected by his companions.

After completing primary school at the village, Tapan had gone for a year to a High School, fifteen miles away and stayed

with his uncle. Now he is back home and is studying at Jnanpeeth High School, a mile and a half from his village.

He had only been at Jnanpeeth a month and already there was a complaint against him. Haren, the shopkeeper of Padumani village, had complained to the headmaster that Tapan and a number of other boys had without provocation thrown stones at his shop the previous evening. Tapan had been the ring-leader.



Tapan came in with the chowkidar and after glancing timidly at the headmaster stood with head lowered. Swinging his cane the headmaster demanded, “You are Tapan, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir,” Tapan replied politely.

“Do you know this gentleman?” the headmaster asked pointing at the shopkeeper.

“Yes, Sir. He lives in our village.”

“Well, is it true that last evening you and your friends threw stones at his shop? Tell me the truth, or I will flog the skin off your back.”

“Yes, Sir. It is true that I threw stones at his shop with Ratan and others.”

“Why? Why did you do that, you rascal? Answer me,” the headmaster thundered.

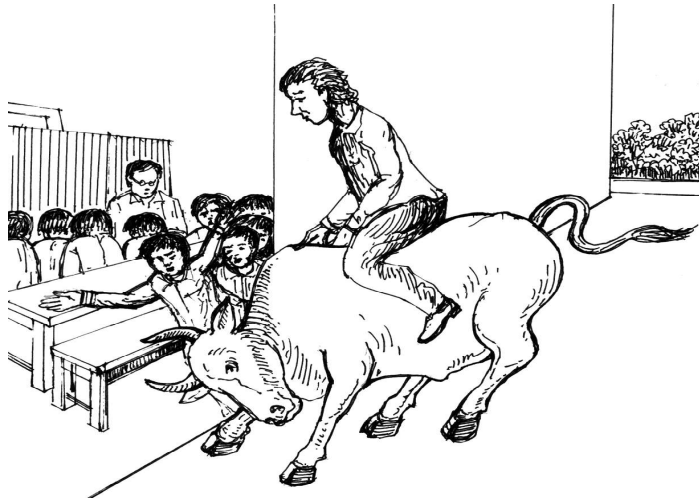
“Sir, this man cheats. He charges higher prices and gives less. Moreover, he has introduced a new kind of paper bag which is padded at the bottom. The day before yesterday we bought a kilo of *dal* from him. When we weighed the contents at home, it turned out to be only eight hundred grammes. The padding in the bag weighed fifty grammes; he had short-weighted one hundred and fifty grammes. It is common knowledge in the village. When I questioned him about it yesterday he abused me and chased me out of his shop. That is why I and the other boys threw stones at his shop.”

The headmaster looked at the shopkeeper; his face was crimson.

The headmaster thought for some time. Then turning to Tapan he said, “Even so, what you did was not right. It is wrong to harm the property of others. If the shopkeeper is dishonest it is for the Government or the village panchayat to take up the matter. It is none of your business. Hold out your hand!”

Tapan received five strokes of the cane. When he returned to his class, his classmates looked at him sideways and sniggered.

There was another incident a few days later. It concerned a fierce ox which was menacing the locality. It had gored several people. If anyone approached it with a stave it would charge at them. Everyone was terrified of it.



The effrontery of the animal aroused Tapan's spirit. "Wait, you big bully! I will tame you," he mumbled. During the school-break he brought a stave and a piece of string and slowly approached the ox. Waiting for the right opportunity he jumped onto its back and put the string in its mouth as if bridling a horse. The ox was taken by surprise but the moment it felt the weight on its back it started stamping, and buckling. It broke into a gallop, hoping to throw the tormentor off its back.

Meanwhile, the school-break was over and class had resumed but Tapan was busy taming the ox. He managed to keep himself on the back of the tossing, buckling bronco, holding the string firmly. He patted the ox's back. That further enraged the animal. It crashed into the school compound and then into the room of Class VII. The teacher and students were petrified and scattered in all directions, shoving and pushing their way out of the classroom. In the stampede many of them stumbled and fell. The teacher, Rajani Saharia, managed to escape unhurt by running outside. Several glass-panes were broken by the horns of the wildly prancing animal. Finally, the dazed ox ran bellowing desperately into the school field and fell on its side. A few seconds later it jumped up and ran for its life, without a backward glance.

So there was another complaint lodged against Tapan; this time by the teacher Rajani Saharia. The headmaster flew into a rage. The boy was a menace and a trouble-maker. Not only the students but even the school building had suffered. The headmaster summoned Tapan again.

Tapan appeared with Mohan ,the chowkidar. On seeing him the headmaster's temper boiled over.

"You are a wicked boy! Why did you lead the ox into the classroom? Speak up!" the headmaster demanded, brandishing his cane.

Tapan replied, head lowered, "Sir, I didn't lead the ox into the classroom. I was only riding on its back to tame it, and it suddenly ran into the room."

“ Who asked you to ride an ox during school hours? Hold out your hand.”

Tapan received fifteen strokes of the headmaster’s cane. His classmates again sniggered and ridiculed him. He was branded the bad boy of the school.

Soon afterwards a notice was circulated in the school. It read: Tapan of Class V has been given fifteen strokes for riding an ox into Class VII and upsetting the teacher and students; also for breaking glass-panes; he has been further fined Rs. 25.00 to pay for the damage. The notice concluded that Tapan would be expelled from school if he committed any such offence in future. A few boys who came out of their classes on the pretext of spitting outside made faces at Tapan.

On the same evening the headmaster had returned home, had his tea and was taking a stroll. This was his daily routine. Dusk was falling as he was on his way back when he saw the school’s bad boy. Tapan was holding an old beggar woman’s hand, while on his head he carried her begging basket. Walking alongside jeering at him were two boys of his class – Naren, the one who came first, and Mahesh. The old woman had fever. She had the fever during her begging round. She could hardly walk, leave alone carry her basket. On seeing the plight of the old woman Tapan had lifted her basket on his head and taking the old woman’s hand said, “Granny, hold on to me. I’ll walk you home.”

When Naren and Mahesh saw the headmaster they saluted him and looked at Tapan with a derisive smile, pleased

that the headmaster was witnessing himself one of Tapan's misdeeds. When the headmaster questioned the old woman she told him how Tapan had come forward to help her. Her voice trembling she pointed to Tapan and said, "Had this dear boy not been there, I would still have been lying on the road. May God shower him with blessings! The other two boys there also saw how ill I was but far from lending a hand they have been making fun of this dear boy. How heartless they are!" The old woman began panting for breath. The headmaster scolded Naren and Mahesh and sent them away. He asked Tapan to take the old woman to her home.

Two weeks later the headmaster was returning home from his walk. On the road he saw the ox lying with a leg broken and kneeling beside it was Tapan rubbing some medicine on its injured leg and bandaging it. There were tears in Tapan's eyes. He was startled when the headmaster came and stood near him. He saluted the headmaster with folded hands. The headmaster asked, "What are you doing here, Tapan?"

"Sir, some wicked boys have broken the ox's leg. It is in great pain. Sir, is it not wrong to hurt dumb animals?" Tapan asked sadly.

"Didn't you ride this same ox the other day, saying that it was wicked and needed to be tamed? How has it become so good in your eyes today?"

"Well, Sir, it was very wicked. But since the day I rode it, it has reformed. It has not only stopped attacking people but even makes way for them. So they shouldn't have hurt

it. It is in agony. I have chewed a few medicinal leaves and dressed the injured leg with the pulp. I have heard father say that it is very good for injuries, Sir,” Tapan said, his heart full of sympathy for the ox and his eyes brimming with tears.

The headmaster stood engrossed in thought. Then he looked at Tapan’s face and affectionately patted him. Without a word, he started on his way home. His eyes were moist.

It was the prize-giving day of Jnanpeeth High School. The principal of a Gauhati college had been invited to preside over the function. This time the headmaster Rabin Barua had decided to award a special prize to the student with the best character. Three books – the biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, were to be given as prizes.

In the classrooms students were discussing the special prize. In Class V Naren laughed jeeringly and said loudly to Bhabesh, sitting next to him, “Do you know, Bhabesh, that the special prize for the best character is being awarded to Tapan?” The boys roared with laughter. Tapan’s face grew red with humiliation and shame. He wished the ground would swallow him up.

The function started. After the welcome of the president the secretary’s report was read. This was followed by a programme of songs, dances and recitations by the students. Then the president delivered his speech and a few others also spoke. Next came the distribution of prizes. The awardees glowed with pleasure and pride. Then came the time for the announcement of the special prize. Everyone

waited expectantly. Addressing the assembly the headmaster announced, “Honourable President and respected ladies and gentlemen, it has been decided to give the special prize for the student with the best character to Shriman Tapan Hazarika of Class V.”

The teachers and students were dumbfounded. The faces of Naren and Bhabesh were a sight to see. Tapan could not believe his ears. He could not muster the courage to get up to go to receive the prize. The headmaster repeated, “Tapan Kumar Hazarika, Class V.” His head reeled. Could it be true that he, known as the bad boy of the school, was being called to receive the best-character prize? Tapan stood up, went to the president, did ***namaskar*** and received the prize.

The headmaster then narrated how Tapan had helped the old beggar woman and nursed the injured ox. He also gave Tapan five rupees from his own pocket. The hall resounded with applause.

Tapan’s eyes glistened with tears of joy.

- Anant Dev Sharma

Translated from Assamese by Birendra Nath Dutta

GLOSSARY

thrashed	:	beat
apprehensive	:	having fear of something bad happening in future
provocation	:	act of making someone angry
effrontery	:	shamelessness
dal	:	pulses
stampede	:	sudden rush in fear
stroll	:	walk

COMPREHENSION

I. Answer the following questions:

1. Why did the headmaster want to thrash Tapan?
2. Why was Tapan popular and respected by his companions?
3. Who complained against Tapan?
4. Why did Tapan throw stones at a shop?
5. What did the headmaster do regarding this incident?
6. What did Tapan do with the ox?
7. What did the ox do?
8. Who lodged a complaint against Tapan on the incident?
9. How much money did Tapan pay as fine?
10. What did Tapan do with the injured leg of the ox?
11. What was the special prize meant for?
12. Who got the special prize?
13. What happened to the teachers and students?
14. Write a paragraph on how Tapan won the special prize.

II. Read the following passage :

Chetan reached a town. There he came across many manual labourers - barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cobblers, rickshaw-pullers, sweepers, tailors, vendors of clothes, fish and vegetables, etc. Their arms and legs stretched everywhere. He murmured to himself, "Everybody works. Everybody is busy. Everybody is proud of it. Every work is for the good of all. The town is unthinkable without them. It would have been rotten or rotting without the sweepers. No work is higher nor lower than another work. What really counts is how well one does it. Everybody should respect all labours."

Now, answer the following questions in one sentence each:

i) Where did Chetan reach ?

Ans.

ii) Whom did he come across there ?

Ans.

iii) What is every work for ?

Ans.