

Teaching a Lesson!

By Brishti Bandyopadhyay; Illustration by Shinod AP

"It's my turn tomorrow," mumbled Raghu to himself as he climbed the stairs of his school building, very slowly as if he were sleep-walking. He had been dreading this day ever since Mr Pal declared his grand class prodigy scheme, two months ago.

Mr Pal was the much-feared History teacher. "It has been said that genius is 99 per cent perspiration and one per cent inspiration," he had said in his usual pompous manner. "I suggest we test this theory. Beginning next week, we shall have one student present a chapter of this book (he dangled the History book like the Sword of Damocles), as if he were the teacher."

The teacher had announced that each student would be given a week to prepare for class. He even invited the boys to "chew my brains during this process if he so wants". Saying this, Mr Pal had grinned, while the class gave an involuntary shudder - it would take a very brave man to seek out Mr Pal's company outside the classroom.



"Twenty-four chapters for twenty-four of you - that's neat arithmetic. And, at the end of the term, we will have a poll to see who is adjudged the best teacher of all. That boy shall be the Class Prodigy. I shall personally recommend the golden star for him," Mr Pal droned in his usual style.

And so it started. Week after week, Raghu saw the best and the brightest of his classmates being reduced to quivering jellies during their teaching sessions, under Mr Pal's merciless sarcasm. The weeklong preparation might never have been, for each student found that he could never do it right.

And now it was Raghu's turn. Worse, he had done virtually nothing to prepare the chapter on the French Revolution that had come his way. His mind was a complete blank.

He had tried, of course. For a week now it had become a routine for him to sit with his History textbook open at the page where the chapter on the French Revolution began. And somehow, he did nothing but stare at the sketch of Marie Antoinette, Queen of France in the late 18th century when the Revolution broke out. Marie Antoinette, with her hair cut in a pageboy style, just before she was executed. Raghu felt very close to her for some reason. Actually, the reason had a face - that of Mr Pal's.

And then there was only one day left for his ordeal. Deep down Raghu knew that even if he stayed up the whole night and studied, he would still be a sitting duck for Mr Pal's snide comments the following day. Sometimes, though, he felt that Mr Pal couldn't help himself, as if something, some inner force egged him on to be nasty.

The day passed by in a haze. Raghu's classmates observed his unusually quiet self. Unlike other days, no one tried to snap him out of it or snigger. That afternoon, the chiming of the school bell did not rouse that familiar sensation of freedom in Raghu. As the school emptied out in one rush, he lingered on near the school grounds for a long time.

"If only I could refuse to take class," he told himself as he ambled home. But how could he possibly do that?

He took the long way home, past rows of staff houses, past the head teacher's impressive bungalow. And who should be coming out of the house, but Mr Pal. Thankfully, the creepers that hung over the front porch prevented Mr Pal from seeing Raghu, who darted behind a bush to watch what was going on.

In a while, the head teacher's wife came out with her 11-year-old son Tapan. Mouthing a profuse thank you to Mr Pal, she thrust a white envelope in to Mr Pal's hands. And then Mr Pal was off toward his house. He spent a long time at the house of Mr Tipnis, the Physical Education teacher. It was evening when he came out. Raghu had been waiting outside all that while.

Mr Tipnis's son, Dhruv, was in Raghu's class. And lately, the below-average scores of Dhruv Tipnis had shown a remarkable transformation, especially in History. Raghu was greatly excited. Whatever else the head teacher tolerated, he couldn't bear the idea of a teacher of his school doubling up as tutor. Any teacher who joined the school had to sign an agreement stating that he would not take any tuition.

Yes! That was it - Mr Pal was breaking the rules. Raghu wondered at his audacity. Bad enough that he was teaching other kids, but the head teacher's son! He must be taking advantage of his superior's routine of visiting the club every afternoon, Raghu thought. And he must be getting paid handsomely for his coaching, for it was well known that the head teacher couldn't bear academically weak students.

Now Raghu knew what he had to do. When Mr Pal finally emerged from Tipnis' house, the youngster stepped out right in front of his errant teacher's path. Despite the dark, he could have sworn that Mr Pal's face had gone completely white.

"Good evening sir, just passing by," he chortled in a breathless voice. "Were you passing by as well? Saw you pass by the head's house, too." Having said his piece, Raghu ran for his life. It goes without saying that he did not prepare for the class. He had a feeling he didn't need to. He was right. Mr Pal declared an abrupt end to the class prodigy scheme the next day, and got back to teaching his students. He stopped passing by the Tipnis' house, too.

(Source: <http://www.pitara.com/talespin/stories/online.asp?story=133&page=1>)