



Abdul Kalam: A Lesson for My Teacher

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I lived on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram, a city famous for its Shiva temple. Every evening on my way home from the mosque, I would linger near the temple.



I always felt like a stranger there, as the temple goers stared suspiciously at me. They probably wondered what a Muslim boy was doing in front of a temple.



The truth was that I loved to listen to the rhythmic chanting of the mantras, though I never understood a word. There was a strange magic in them.



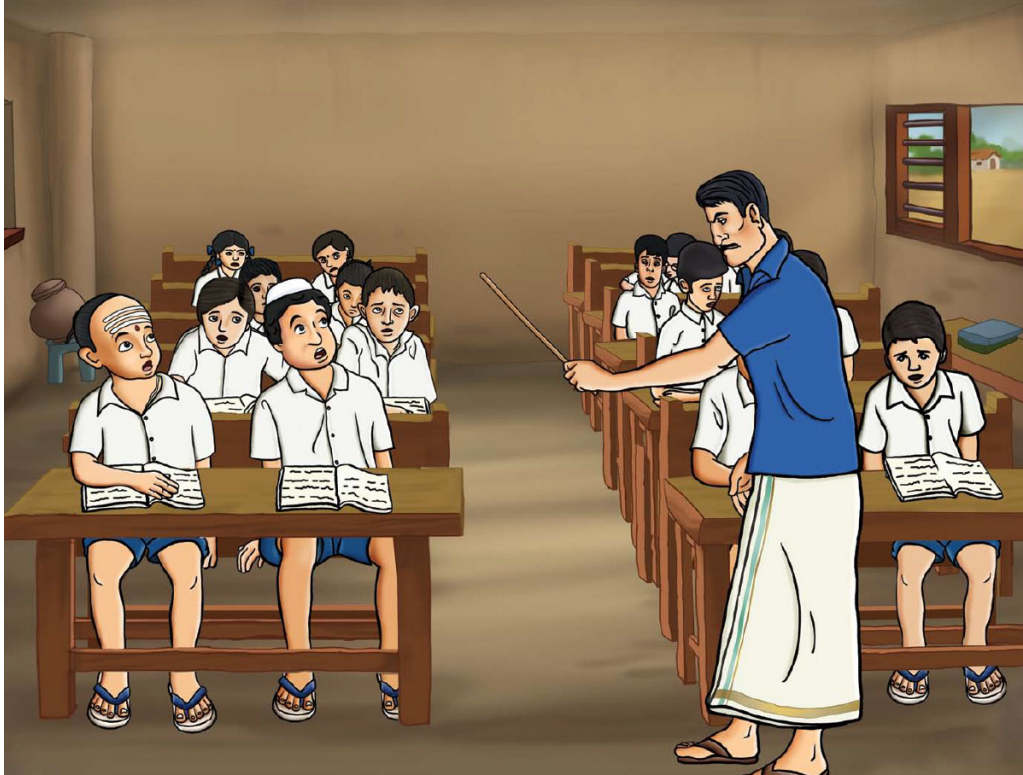
Of course, something else led me there. My best friend, Ramanadha Sastry, was the son of the head priest. He would sit beside his father at this hour, reciting hymns. Ram would steal a smiling glance at me from time to time.



At school, Ram and I always sat together on the first bench of our classroom. We were like brothers. However, being a Hindu priest's son, he wore a sacred thread, while my white cap marked me as a Muslim.



One day, when we were in the fifth standard, a new teacher came to our class. He looked strict. He went around the class tapping his cane on his palm and stopped before us.



'You, the one in the white cap,' he shouted. 'How dare you sit beside the temple priest's son! Go sit on the last bench.' I felt hurt. With tears in my eyes, I picked up my books and shifted to the last row.



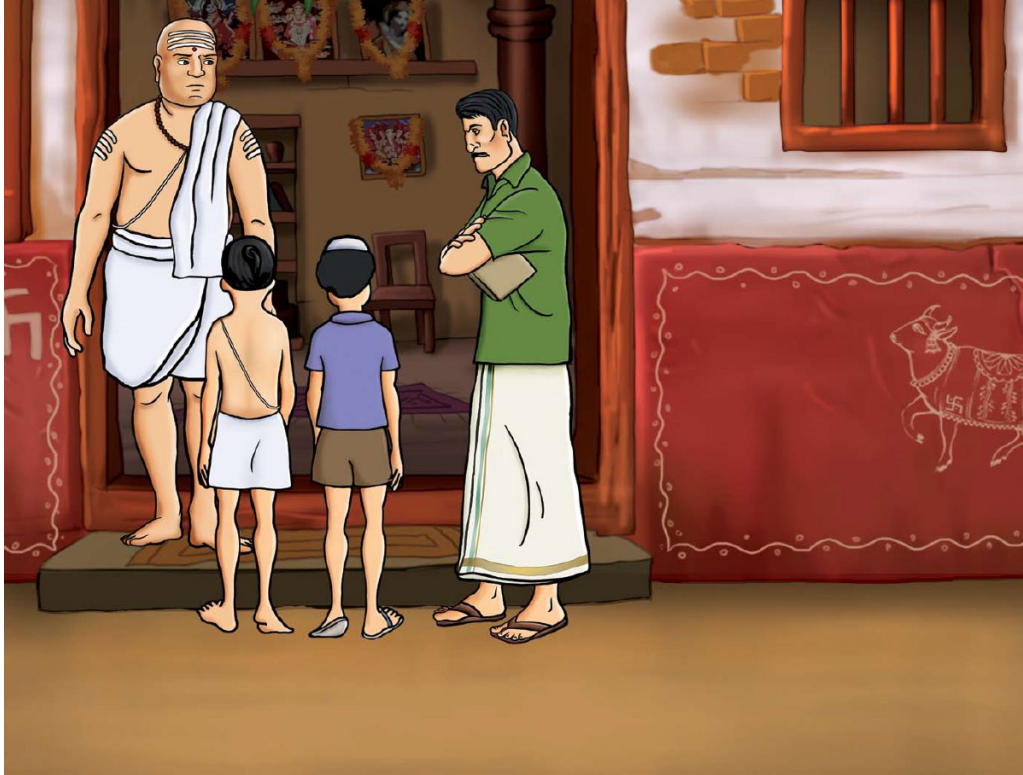
Ram and I wept together silently after school. We thought we would not be allowed to be friends anymore.



When I reached home that day my father looked at me and asked: 'Were you crying... What's wrong son?' I recounted the whole incident to my father, while Ram told his family the same story.



Early the next morning, Ram came running to our house and said: 'Father has asked you to come to our house immediately.' I was terrified. I thought I was in for some more trouble.



We hurried back to Ram's house. My heart skipped a beat when I saw our new teacher standing there.



'In the light of our discussion, apologise to Kalam here,' said Ram's father with a stern face. I could not believe what I had just heard! The head priest was asking the teacher to apologise to me?



'No child is less than another in God's eyes,' Ram father said. 'It is your duty as a teacher to help students live in harmony in spite of the differences in their background. You can no longer teach in this school.'



Our teacher immediately asked me to forgive him. He hugged me and said: 'I am sorry, Kalam. I have learnt an important lesson in life today.'



Ram's father saw that the teacher sincerely regretted his behaviour and permitted him to continue teaching.



From that day on, Ram and I sat together proudly on the front bench. We have remained the best of friends ever since.

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