

Selected Assamese Short Stories

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1

The Story of Joyantee

By **Laksmi**nath Bezbarua

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

Chapter 1

Joyantee was born in nobility; she was married to nobility, too. As a child, she grew up in a world of plenty and unbounded happiness, and following her marriage, she was always surrounded by articles of luxury. She never had to face adversity—neither in her father’s home nor in her father-in-law’s. But, a daughter of an aristocratic Brahmin family of Rongpoore, she was markedly unlike noble daughters and daughters-in-law of the time. Like other noble women, she was not a pampered woman; neither did she wallow in laziness nor did she spend her time admiring herself in expensive clothes, engaging in meaningless gossips and *tete-a-tetes*, and eating and sleeping.

In her father’s comfortable home, under the watchful eyes of her talented mother, she had become quite adept in all the necessary activities of day-to-day life. There is a saying in Assamese, attributed to the Daak, a historical wise man reputed for pithy sayings, which goes as the follows:

*Tills a powerful ox well the soil,
Begets a talented mother a daughter as talented.*

Joyantee illustrated the truth of this saying. She had diligently mastered all the crafts in which daughters of aristocratic families of Assam were required to be proficient. She was very talented; all the citizens of the fair city of Rongpoore genuinely admired, and marveled at her many and varied talents.

During those days, expertise in the fine art of weaving colorful and beautifully patterned cloths of cotton and fine silk was the hallmark of Assamese ladies in good standing. Joyantee followed the footsteps of her accomplished mother who was an expert weaver; Joyantee wove the most elegant cloths in Rongpoore—the fine cloths she created had the most beautiful

embroidered borders seen anywhere. With a melodious voice, she regularly and competently led folk and religious bands in weddings and other social gatherings. She had the essence as well as details of religious tomes such as the Daxam, the Kirtan, the Ghoxaa, and the Ratnaawali on the tip of her tongue and could effortlessly explain the lofty ideas contained in them.

Moreover, she was an exquisite beauty. Her matchless beauty was radiant particularly after a nice and cleansing bath when she gorgeously styled her beautiful hair, decorated her forehead with a dot of vermilion, adorned a pair of expensive *keroos* on her ears, and a sparkling necklace around her neck. On such occasions, she also wore sets of bangles on her forearm, and wore a set of *riha* and *mekhela* of white *paat*—the very fine Assamese silk. She looked incomparably beautiful when bejeweled and stylishly attired in such a manner, she would sit cross-legged with folded hands and pray to the sun god in the open sunshine.

In summary, although barely sixteen years old, Lady Joyantee, the wife of Romaanaath Borua, evidently belonged to a superior class of human beings in which very few could aspire to be. In truth, in all of Rongpoore, the capital of Old Assam, Lady Joyantee was unparalleled in beauty, talents, and virtuousness she possessed and the fortune that God had bestowed upon her.

Chapter 2

Almost a century ago, the prosperous country of Assam was brutally attacked from the East, miserably defeated and thoroughly plundered by the Burmese three times in short succession. The third attack was extremely vicious. The country of Assam was deprived of its prized independence and forced into subjugation. The blazing sun of nationalistic pride that had shined on the Ahom kings of Assam set permanently. After six hundred years of peaceful and progressive rule over Assam, the descendents of the great conqueror Sukafa were reduced to paupers. From the middle of March in the year 1820 AD to late January of 1826 AD, the people of Assam became hapless victims of the tyrannical killings, and egregious lootings of the cruel Burmese. Finally, the rise of the British imperial sun over prostrate Assam ended the deep, dark night of repression after almost five tumultuous years.

The situation of Assam at the time was indescribably pitiable. Because of the continuous torture and pillage by the Burmese, Assam's progress in education, agriculture, commerce, and industry was halted. In addition, there was not a modicum of happiness and peace among the people living under constant trepidation.

The Burmese mercilessly killed one in three in Assam. They despotically slaughtered—husbands in front of wives, fathers in front of sons, babies in front of mothers. They outright burnt hundreds of prosperous villages and holy temples. Thousands of women were raped. Assam, a beautiful garden of Nature, which was once inhabited by wise men, sages, ascetics, and mythical gods became a devastated burial ground. Our story pertains to an incident on a fateful day during this period.

Chapter 3

During this chaotic state of the country, nobody was assured of life or property. King Chandrakanta Singh, like a coward, fled from the capital being mortally afraid of the vastly

superior Burmese army. Therefore, the Burmese commander Mingimaha Tilooa automatically stepped in to become the Emperor of Assam. Thereafter Assam shivered under the heinous torture, and unmitigated pillage by the Burmese.

Romaanaath Borua, Joyantee's husband, was at a complete loss regarding what to do and where to go. Most of his friends, relatives, servants and helpers had already run away due to fear for their lives. Others escaped to the dense forests of Assam to risk living in the company of vicious animals. Romaanaath saw that it was impossible for him to live in his motherland with his life, dignity, wealth and subordinates. At this stage, he saw no other way of surviving except fleeing, with his beloved wife, to neighboring Bengal to the west. He decided to bid adieu to his motherland and leave downstream on the mighty river Luit toward Bengal in a week.

Before they could leave, one day, at noon, Romaanaath Borua was resting on his bed with closed eyes; he was beginning to fall asleep. Lady Joyantee had finished her housework and was sitting at her husband's side, gently and lovingly fanning him with a bamboo fan. Suddenly, they heard a loud noise coming from someone banging on their front door. Joyantee asked her servants aloud about the source of the sound. Since she didn't get any reply, she herself walked to the door and saw that three armed Burmese soldiers were hitting the door with their heavy clubs and had already smashed it into pieces. Joyantee became horrified, and she started shaking violently. It was not clear where the servants and helpers in the house had run away. In a matter of seconds, the Burmese entered the house, tied up Joyantee and Romaanaath and started looting the house of all its valuables.

Observing the disturbed condition of the kingdom, Romaanaath Borua had sent all the valuable jewelry and other expensive goods to his mother's home in Guwahati, about a couple of hundred miles away to the west. So, the Burmese looters did not find much of valuables to take. As a result, they became angry. Their eyes glowed ferociously and they ground their teeth in exasperation. The first Burmese looked at the second and growled, "These people are cunning. They have hidden all their expensive jewelry." The second Burmese did not respond to the first, but took his long leather belt and, with all his might, hit Romaanaath three times on the back, and yelled at him, "Where have you hidden all your money and expensive possessions, you son of a bitch? Show them to us right away. Otherwise, we will set fire to the house, and burn the two of you inside right now."

The powerful strikes of the scourge caused Romaanaath Borua's back to bleed profusely; he started crying, shrieking and tossing about in tremendous pain. Seeing her husband in such a pathetic condition, Joyantee started crying also, and with folded hands, she tearfully requested the robbers, "Please take pity on me, sirs and fathers; please don't hit my husband any more. I swear in the name of the Almighty, we do not have any valuables left at the moment. Whatever money, jewelry and ornaments we had, we sent them to the homes of our relatives in Guwahati because we were planning to leave Rongpoore. So, even if you cut us into a hundred pieces, you will not find anything at all. So, our fathers, please do not torture us any more; it is not going to serve any purpose. Please take whatever you find and allow us to live. I am praying at your feet, please do not hurt my husband any more. I have a beautiful necklace on my neck and a pair of expensive bangles in my hands. Please take these and let my husband go."

Saying this, she took the bangles and the necklace off and gave them to the Burmese. Hearing her plaintive entreaties, the three Burmese men started laughing derisively. "We are not young children, you tramp! Show us immediately your hidden treasures. Otherwise,

we will crack this whip so hard that your hide will tear, too. Then we will tie both of you inside the house, set it on fire and burn you both alive to ashes.”

Without paying any heed to the sobbing Joyantee, the roughnecks kept torturing Romaanaath Borua with continuous whipping and striking. Finally, when the Burmese saw that they could not get any valuables even after inflicting a great deal of torture, the first Burmese looked at the other and said, “Come on now, let’s take these two with us. The man is quite healthy and well-built. Let us put all our belongings on his back and let him carry them like a beast of burden. Later, when we reach home we will cut him into pieces.”

“The woman is an exquisite beauty. Back in our country, we will present her to the king as a gift. The king will be extremely pleased to get the gift of such a beautiful woman.”

The second Burmese expressed his objection to what the first said, “Brother, what’s wrong with you? Whenever we find something valuable, you want to present it to the king. Why? Why should we give everything to the king? This beauty is mine to enjoy. You two take all the jewelry and valuables you want, but she is mine.”

Hearing this the third Burmese started bellowing, “Whom does she belong to? You? No! I am not going to allow that. I will see who has the courage to take her away from me. She is absolutely mine. There cannot be any questions about it.”

When the two men started fighting loudly and excitedly over the woman, the first Burmese became the voice of reason and calmed the other by saying, “We will decide on this later. Let’s not fight over it now.” Then they loaded their loot on the back of Romaanaath Borua, tied him and his wife to a leash, and started their onward journey. Joyantee started praying to the almighty Lord Krishna who protects the faithful. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Chapter 4

As this sorry group went onward for a few hours, Joyantee, who had always been the epitome of honesty, piety, and simplicity, suddenly thought of a cunning plan to save herself and her husband. Skillfully controlling her feelings of anger and sadness, she looked ardently at her captors and spoke with a sweet, ingratiating voice, “Oh, dear! You three completely own us now. You are marching us to your own country for ever. So, there is no point in trying to save our fortune. When we have to leave our village and our country for ever, who is going to enjoy our hidden treasures and fortune? Whatever God Almighty has preordained for me by fate will happen to me; I am resigned to it. But if you promise not to kill my husband, please take us back home. I will show you the exact spot on the ground where we have hidden boxes and boxes of gold and silver jewelry.” The looters had been amply charmed by Joyantee’s spectacular beauty from the time they had laid their eyes on her. And, now, her sweet, entreating voice and the prospect of obtaining enormous wealth fully defeated their guard. Immediately, they agreed to walk all the way back to Romaanaath’s house to collect the fortune that they thought was their due.

Once back home, Joyantee pointed to a tall flowering plant and said, “All our boxes of wealth are right here, at a depth of four arm’s length below the ground.” As soon as they heard this, the Burmese secured Romaanaath to the tree, and started digging the ground feverishly with their hoes. The robbers thought Joyantee, being a woman, was too weak to act in her own defense, and did not have the courage to run away all by herself. So, they did not care to tie her up. Also, they thought if she attempted to run away, it would not

take any time for three athletic men to capture her.

After half an hour of diligent digging in turns, there was a hole about four arm's length deep. But, there was no sign of the hidden treasures. The first robber glared at Joyantee and angrily inquired, "You bitch! Are you playing tricks with us? We have dug a hole as deep as the neck. Where are the money and the jewelry?" Joyantee replied with feigned earnestness, "You have to dig just a little bit more. I swear we hid everything there. In any case, the two of us are your captives anyway. You can kill us whenever you want. Why should I lie then?" The Burmese who was inside the hole at that moment and was digging was sure she was telling the truth and started digging again with renewed enthusiasm. The two others on the ground carelessly lay their swords on the ground and were chatting noisily.

All of a sudden, like lightning, Joyantee struck. She jumped at them, took them by surprise, and pushed them with all her might into the hole on the ground which was more than a neck deep. Without allowing them a fraction of a moment to react, she took one of the sharp swords lying on the ground, struck them with it and decapitated them in a frenzy. Then, with swift strokes of the sword, she severed the rope which had tied Romaanaath to the tree and freed him. Finally, she started dancing exuberantly as if she was in a delirium which overtook her inexplicably.

The sudden and complete change of the situation seemed like a pleasantly welcome dream to Romaanaath. Barely a moment earlier, he had sighly resigned himself to his luckless fate and had stoically expected to lose his life any moment at the hands of the powerfully built Burmese soldiers; he had given up every hope. And, ironically, the next moment, as a well-deserved punishment for their wickedness, their decapitated torsos were quivering headless in the pit they had dug themselves. A moment earlier, Joyantee, trembling in deathly fear, was crying ceaselessly, wetting her *riha*. Now, a moment later, inspired by the taste of blood, she was dancing in mad ecstasy swinging the sword in her hand, as if she were in the thick of a bloody battle. A moment ago, Romaanaath was securedly tied to a tree, and was patiently waiting to be a sacrificial victim. Now a moment later, he was undeniably free.

Romaanaath could hardly believe that the woman dancing maddeningly in front of his own eyes was his peaceful, demure and normally fearful wife. Was this a dream or reality? Romaanaath could not decide either way; his eyes became hazy, he closed them and sat down. Moments later, he reopened them and realized that it was not a cruel hoax. It was true that the headless bodies of the wicked robbers were at the bottom of the pit, and that he was not shackled any more. And, his dear wife Joyantee was dancing like an angry mythical goddess with her flowing hair fluttering in the air; her lissome body was covered with streaks of bright red blood all over, and she was nimbly waving the murderous sword in her delicate hands. Romaanaath clearly saw that the object of his life's love had lost all knowledge of external reality and was in a fathomless frenzy.

With the help of several people, Romaanaath Borua who was extremely frightened, left Rongpoore for Guwahati that very night. In Guwahati, he treated Joyantee with excellent medical care with the assistance of his brother and friends. But, in spite of all his love and care, Joyantee did not recuperate. Finally, Death, who takes away all worldly pain and grief, offered a place in His cradle to this virtuous and talented woman. Till the very sad end, the severely delusional Joyantee continued chanting, "I am blessed; I freed my husband from the tyrants all by myself; he is alive, he is alive!"

Lakshminath Bezbarua is regarded as one of the foremost Assamese writer of all times. His writings appeared in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

Translated from Assamese by *Jugal Kalita*. Jugal Kalita teaches Computer Science at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. The translator thanks Yvonne Dilts, Hal Render, and Probal Tahbaldar, for their comments on earlier versions of the translation.

2

Men

By **Nakul Chandra Bhuyan**

Translation: **Khanindra Pathak and Jugal Kalita**

Savest me thou, O God
From this tidal world!

It was noon. The sun was shining brightly. Sixty year old *baaiyon* Dhonbor was laying on the bamboo cot. He was reciting prayers almost inaudibly. He had been bed-ridden for more than a month. He was suffering from severe blood dysentery. His son Monbor came in and stood near the bed.

“My son!” he turned to his son, “I feel extremely uncomfortable today. I am afraid today is the last day of my mortal life.”

Dhonbor waited for a moment. Then he started singing another prayer.

With all humbleness
I pray, O God

Monbor sat by his father and massaged his weak feet. The father looked at his son and spoke feebly. “Monbor, I want to tell you something before I die! Many years ago, I eloped with your mother from a Bihu fairground. As a result, there was a meeting of the village elders in the community prayer hall. They ordered a feast for the whole village and asked me to pay twenty rupees along with a basket of rice and sugar, and a jug of milk to your mother’s father. My father and uncles accepted the judgment. I bowed in front of the elders. They blessed me in the name of God. We were married!”

The old man closed his eyes and fell silent. Monbor waited awhile and asked, “Father, tell me more. Please don’t stop!”

The father swallowed a belabored breath before continuing, “Monbor, my son! In that merry fairground, your mother was by far the best dancer. In her youth, she could dance like a fluttering butterfly. Each of my friends was dying to marry this beautiful maiden.

A few serenaded her with Bihu songs and asked her hand in marriage. With a quivering heart, each pestered her many times over several days. Finally, after a tortuous period of ten or twelve days, your mother gave her verdict and sang:

I can leave my lovely mother!
 I can desert my dearest father!
 I can even disown my own brother!
 But Dhonbor, my love,
 I cannot live without you,
 I will poison myself
 If I cannot have you!

Hearing your mother's heartfelt declaration of eternal love for me, my pals deserted the fairground in great sadness. They sat on the edge of the road by the fairground and pondered over their collective rejection while chewing betel nut."

He stared at his son's eyes and paused a few moments. His daughter-in-law brought him his medication. After taking the medicine he recounted, "It was almost evening. The festival was over. Your mother, with her friends, set on foot for her home. I came and stood by my friends who were chatting. While walking by us your mother gave me a furtive glance. Your mother's home was on the way to our house. We, the boys, also followed the girls. On the way, I found your mother standing under a *bakul* tree. Very cautiously, I inquired, "Would you elope with me? Let's do it right now!" Without uttering a word, she silently followed my lead. After seven days there was that fateful community meeting at the prayer hall. The elders accepted our marriage and legitimized it. Didn't I mention that meeting just now?" The tired man again took a pause.

Monbor was unable to understand why his father was reminiscing this ancient incident now at his death bed. Anyhow, he was listening attentively. His father started again although his voice had become quite weak and he gasped for his breath. "When I was returning home from that community gathering, near the dense stand of bamboos near our home, Dhoneerum appeared from nowhere, came running at me and all on a sudden gave me an ear-popping slap with all his strength. He yelled, "You traitor! I had expected to marry Bihuti all along. Now, you have snatched her away like a cruel eagle swooping down on its prey. This is my revenge! I had to do this. I am sorry! Please forgive me. I will not think about Bihuti any more, from this moment." Dhoneerum quickly ran away. It happened in a flash. I was dumb struck." Drops of tears rolled down the old man's cheeks.

Monbor stood up. He could not help but remark, "Father, you never told me that Uncle Dhonee ever slapped you? You two are such good friends! You collect firewood together, you fish together!"

Dhonbor sighed, "Yes, we are best of friends. I remained a friend to repay that slap with one of my own. But Dhoneerum is very sly. He is so clever that I never got a chance!" He signaled his son to come closer. Grasping his son with outstretched hand, he continued, "I can never forget that smacking Dhoneerum gave me! Even in my death I will not forget it. I am going to die soon, son. I am not going to live to repay Dhoneerum in kind. Listen to me, my son! If you can hit him for me then only my soul will be at peace."

Monbor promptly replied, "Father, I swear by your soul, I am going to hand Uncle Dhoneerum his overdue smack with my open palm as soon as I possibly can. I give you my word. It's

the least I can do for you!” The old man put his hand on his son’s head, “Monbor, you are your father’s son! You will do well in life. I bless you!” He started praying again,

Savest me thou, O God
From this tidal world!

2

Village Bahonigaon in the Jorhat area was the village of Biraai, the hangman. Biraai, who could take credit for hanging countless men from the noose, was most infamous for his hanging, on behest of the British colonizers, Moneerum Dewan and Pioli Phukon, two of the most respected patriots and freedom fighters Assam has ever produced. As anywhere, the village had some good men and some bad. During the Non-cooperation Movement against the British, people of the village used to smuggle hand-made cotton clothes to the volunteers of the Congress Party which spearheaded the struggle for independence. A few young men of the village were even jailed along with the Congress volunteers. On the other hand, there were some people in this village who robbed strangers on the road at night.

Here lived Dhonbor. He was one of the richest men in the village. He had two granaries of rice, a large herd of cattle and a pair of water buffaloes. He grew a rich variety of seasonal fruits in his ample acreage. He was a respected figure in the village. Dhoneerum also lived in this village; but he was not rich. In fact, there was a time when he was becoming poorer day by day. The year after Dhonbor eloped with Bihuti, Dhoneerum too eloped with another girl from the Bihu festival. Dhoneerum’s wife had no parents; both had died when she was very young. She had an older brother and a sister-in-law. The brother was notoriously tough. Though the villagers tried to cool him down, he was furious. He threatened to report the incident to the police. Dhoneerum was very scared, and had to mortgage his farm with a businessman from the Maarowaari community to obtain one hundred and forty rupees to get his assent to the wedding. That loan which had a prohibitive rate of interest made Dhoneerum one of the poorest men in the village.

Dhonbor was a childhood friend of Dhoneerum. Following his suggestion, Dhoneerum cultivated sugarcane and cabbage, and sold them at a profit in the markets in the tea plantations that dotted the country. This helped him to get his land back from mortgage.

Since then Dhoneerum and Dhonbor became good friends. They were such good friends that they were always seen together: going to the jungle to collect firewood, fishing, or in any other activity.

3

Dhoneerum visited Dhonbor every day in the morning as well as in the evening since the day his friend became ill with blood dysentery. Almost every night, Dhoneerum melodiously sang prayers from the Kirtan sitting by Dhonbor’s side. Prayers soothe a suffering soul, especially when one is about to leave this world.

For a few days the baaiyon felt better. So, that Sunday, Dhoneerum went to the weekly market in Titabor to sell some betel nut, cabbage, pumpkin, chili and other fresh produce he had grown on his farm.

On his return home, Dhoneerum was dumbfounded to hear that his friend had died right after he left for the market. The baaiyon had felt well enough to take a bath at noon. He collapsed while pouring water on himself and soon passed away without regaining consciousness.

Dhoneerum immediately walked over to his friend's house. The neighbors had returned from the cremation and were solemnly sitting on the porch. Dhoneerum called out to Monbor, "Oh, Monbor! My son! I am so unfortunate that I couldn't even be with my friend during his last moments."

Suddenly Monbor rushed out of the living room, like an arrow, toward Dhoneerum and slapped him on the face with all his strength. Everyone was at a loss regarding what transpired. Dhoneerum yelled out reflexively, "You ingrate! You swine! I came to pay my last respect to a dear friend, and you have nothing better to do but hit me! I will kill you right now."

Angrily, he grabbed a machete and ran towards the culprit, "I will dispatch you to where your father went!" Without the slightest delay, Monbor fell prostrate at Dhoneerum's feet and started crying aloud. A few from among those sitting on the porch sprang up and held Monbor down by force; they assumed that he had gone berserk with grief over his father's death. Monbor started speaking slowly, "Please forgive me, Uncle!" He then laboriously explained what his father told him before his death about the overdue retribution. Monbor touched the older man's feet once again.

Lovingly, Dhoneerum raised Monbor from the floor. "Oh, well! Let's forget what happened and not talk about the distant past any more. I understand your motivation. What your father told you is true. In spite of that, your father was my dearest friend. Only with his sound advice, I got out of my large debt. But I never forgot. I was always careful lest your father take revenge on me. Later I thought, perhaps after turning to religion, your father forgot all about my assault on him. Anyway you have done a son's job! You slapped me! We are even. Your father is happy in his heavenly abode. Now you must absolutely and properly perform all the religious ceremonies and festivities honoring your departed father. I will provide fresh cows milk needed for the ceremony."

Monbor's old mother Bihuti, the beautiful dancing lady of many springs ago and the bone of manly contention in the past as well as now, was sitting sadly on the porch with the others. She walked up to Dhoneerum, looked him in the eye and said, "I never understood any of you. That's why you are all called men!"

Baaiyon: An elderly man who leads prayers and performance of religious plays in the village with his dhol, a special type of percussion instrument. Normally, he is accompanied by several others instrumentalists in his performances. He is well-respected in the village.

Nakul Chandra Bhuyan (1895-1968) was a well-known Assamese historian, playwright, and a short story writer.

Khanin Pathak is a Ph.D. student in the field of mining engineering in the University of London. This is the translation of a story called "Motaa maanuh by Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, from the book *Axomiyaa Galpa Gussa*, eds. Maheswar Neog, Jogesh Das and Narayan Sarma, *Axom Xaahitya Xabhaa*, 1984.

The translators thank Satyendra Sarmah and Cindy Crabtree for their comments on a earlier version of the translated story.

3

Childhood Love

By **Roma Das**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

It was a time when the biggest excitement in my life was wandering aimlessly in groves of mangoes, plums and berries by our home. It was a time when unbounded happiness and enjoyment came from making little paper boats and floating them in the open moat. It was a time when I spied mythical elephants in the white clouds on a clear moonlit night. This is a story of that era and the tender state of my mind during those days.

I vividly remember even now! Just behind our home in Guwahati, there was a large mango grove. After crossing the grove, if you would follow a narrow twisted trail under the tall bamboos, you would see a small, ancient pond. It was almost dry, and it was perpetually covered with overgrown weeds. If you continued walking along the pond for a while longer, you would get to the railway tracks. On the other side of the tracks was a very long grove where betel nuts and betel leaves grew in abundance. On one side of this grove, there was a small hut, half thatched, and half tin-roofed. In the front yard of that little house, we saw a woman named Xeuti everyday; she used to weave clothes in her loom, hunched over, under a pomegranate tree from which hung bright red fruits that were obviously ripe. During those days, the main location for our secret gatherings was the front yard of this solitary house; it was the place where all our excitement found unchaperoned expression.

I vividly remember even now! When we ventured out on our expeditions under the trees, in search of green mangoes and limes, with little pocket knives and packets of salt ensconced in our pockets, our long journeys always ended under the cool shadow of the fruited pomegranate in Xeuti's yard. Without her permission, we used to assemble on the big rocks in her yard, spread out the delectable finds, share them happily among ourselves, and consume them with great relish.

Every time Xeuti saw us huddle in a group in her front yard, she would come up from the loom on which she constantly worked. She would join us, and like a little boy, she would partake in our jokes and merriment. With open palms, she would also request her share of mangoes and limes.

I think it was because she mingled with us so well that all of us idolized Xeuti and called her Baai, older sister. We used to tell her tales of our juvenile experiences. Sometimes, we made small talk with her saying that if she had a little boy like us, we would have worshipped and adored him. We would have made him the leader of our group on our expeditions.

Although we solaced her saying such things, we clearly realized that, for unknown reasons, Xeuti's home was utterly empty. We knew that no other soul but she lived in that house. We never saw anyone visit her at home. Even when we wanted to visit her, we had to do so in secrecy, away from everyone's eyes.

Xeuti was always a bit hesitant when she mingled with us, due to these societal hindrances. She always maintained a safe physical distance. Even if we begged her, she never sat among us when we parleyed in her own yard. Never, even in jest during our playful animations, would she touch us. Even on request, she would never give us a pinch of salt, or any other items from her kitchen. If we were thirsty and wanted some water, she would raise water in a bucket from the well in her yard and would pour it on our folded palms from far above, so that there was no chance of contact.

Because we received Xeuti's affections from the distance she maintained intentionally, each of us felt a strong but ineffable attraction for her. Even though sometimes we got punished or yelled at, we tried to visit her at least once every day. Even at night, when in bed, I used to think about Baai Xeuti's loving eyes and affectionate manners. It would occur to me that if I could hide my face in her bosom and go to sleep hugging her, it might have been nicer than cuddling with my grandmother. Although I dreamed to be with Xeuti, I understood that as long as my parents or grandmother were alive, it was utterly unattainable.

It was noon on a sultry day.

I still remember the events of the day very clearly. I was all alone, chasing a brown mongoose, throwing tiny pellets at it. I was jauntily following it through the middle of our big back yard, toward the railway tracks.

Suddenly, without even realizing, I was in the betel nut grove near Xeuti's house.

I hid behind a betel nut tree, and stared at Baai Xeuti, sitting at the loom. She was laboriously weaving in rapt attention, like she did every day. Probably, she was in the middle of a project weaving an intricate, floral pattern in eye-catching red using little bamboo guides. On this particular day, radiant in the reflection of the red yarn on her face, she looked even more beautiful.

Spurred by an attraction which I did not fathom myself, I was staring at Xeuti's face from behind the betel nut tree. Suddenly, my eyes drifted from her face to the porch. Seeing not one, but four tiny kittens playing merrily, I suddenly forgot my surroundings and ran toward them. Gently, I grabbed a beautiful kitten with dark dots on its snow-white body, and hugged it close to my chest. Then I ran to the woman and requested, "Baai Xeuti, would you please give me this kitten?"

Hearing my voice come out of nowhere, Xeuti was taken aback. With playfully teasing eyes, she looked at me, smiled and said, "Oh, Xoon! I can never give this kitten to you."

I inquired, "Why, Baai Xeuti? Why can't I have it?" Xeuti kept on smiling and said, "Xoon, I have already promised the kitten to your friend Mukut!"

I failed to understand her little prank. I was very hurt. I looked at her in tears, and said,

“Baai Xeuti, if you have really promised to give the kitten to Mukut, it’s OK. But I think you should give it to me, and not to him. Because I can tell you without any doubt that I love you more than Mukut does, more than all the other boys. Since I love you so much, I come to see you at least once a day, although grandma disapproves and sometimes beats and scolds me for it.”

I think Xeuti could not keep pretending her nonchalance after what I said from the depth of my heart. She walked to me, held me close to her, and sat me in her lap. She started caressing my hair, and said, “Xoon, I know your love for me very well. Because I know you love me so much, I was simply teasing you. I will not give this kitten to Mukut or anyone else. I have chosen it for you from the very beginning. You can come and take it soon, when it’s a little bigger and doesn’t need its mother’s milk any more.”

Sitting on her lap, my little heart was wrought with happy emotions. It was the first time Baai Xeuti had touched me. In an excitement I didn’t understand, I immediately started to rush home in a swift canter.

I ran into grandma at the edge of our expansive back yard, and squeezed her in an impulsive hug. In excitement, I blabbered stupidly, “Grandma, grandma! I will tell you a secret.”

My effervescence caused her to suspect something. She glared at me, “You rambunctious child! You must have done something terribly mischievous. Otherwise, why would you run back home in such a hurry?”

I could not remain silent much longer and blurted out, “Grandma, I haven’t made any mischief. I found myself near Xeuti’s house by mistake. From a distance, I saw four beautiful kittens playing on her porch. She has promised to give me the most beautiful among them—a white one with dotted skin. I will bring it home in a few days.

Although I spoke with great animation, grandmother did not understand my feelings. She flew into a cruel rage, pulled me along by the hand, tied me up to a post of her loom, and punished me hard with a cane.

I didn’t know why she was hitting me, but my mind rebelled at the unjust punishment. Even though my back was being cruelly caned and I was jumping in pain, I yelled at her in anger. “You’re so stupid, grandma! You are very unfair too. You are making a big mistake. What’s wrong in visiting Baai Xeuti? You don’t know her, but she is a very nice person. Even if you punish me, I will still keep on visiting her. You can’t keep me from loving her...”

From that day on, after hearing such frightful words, grandmother started keeping a very strict and watchful eye on my whereabouts. She also took extreme care in physically blocking all the trails that I could conceivably take from our back yard to Xeuti’s house. From that day on, I spent all my time inside our newly-fenced home. It was as if I had been sent to jail.

I spent all my waking hours thinking about two things: reestablishing the lost connection with Xeuti, and fetching the kitten she promised me.

One day, after much thinking, like lightning, suddenly a solution came to me.

It was almost certain that I would neither be able to visit with Xeuti, nor would I be able to bring the kitten home. So, I decided to sneak to her house, get the kitten, and give it to Mukut who would raise it on my behalf. I thought it would be very unlikely that my

grandmother would ever have an inkling of what happened.

As I kept thinking about it, this option became more and more attractive. I became impatient; I started looking constantly for an opportunity to escape.

One afternoon, my opportunity arrived. Observing some slackness in my grandmother's vigilance, I ran to the edge of our backyard. Like a jailed man, groping in darkness for escape, I overcame the six feet of fence and several other obstacles. I came to the betel nut grove, and single-mindedly ran towards the house.

My emotions which had been suppressed for so long were overflowing on this day. I could not control myself when I approached Baai Xeuti who was rolling yarn on a reed tool. I ran to her from behind, and furiously hugged her with great strength. I hid my face in her long hairs and wept uncontrollably.

Baai Xeuti must have felt a deep sense of my hurt seeing me weep like that. She held my hand tenderly, lovingly pulled me on to her lap, and gently inquired, "Xoon, why are you crying?"

In a flash, all my love for her came out as if in a flood. With my face hidden in the depth of her bosom, I asked, "Baai Xeuti, Baai Xeuti! Why does my grandmother forbid me from visiting you?"

Xeuti didn't know how to respond to this unexpected question. She stared at me awhile without uttering a word, and finally said, with her eyes flooded with tears of great pain. "Xoon, my doll! I have been banished from society. That's why..."

Not following the meaning of what she said, I innocently asked again, "Baai Xeuti, does it mean it's wrong for us to come and visit you, just like my grandma says?"

Xeuti became all the more lost in emotion at my question. She sat motionless for some time, and heaved a deep sigh looking upwards to the wide heavens. Without looking at me, and with her face very close to my ears, she explained, "It's more than wrong to come here, my son! It's a sin to come and visit me; it's against tradition and religion. It's quite likely that it condemns one to hell. But, I know, my little prince, that it applies only to older folks. When a pure child like you comes to pay me a visit, and hides his face in my lonely bosom, it gives me heavenly pleasure for a few moments. I don't think it's a sin. But, only God can tell for sure."

As if in great fear, Baai Xeuti gently sat me down on the ground beside her. She stood up, and started wiping her flood of tears with the tip of her riha.

Seeing Xeuti's tears for the first time in my life, I became confused. I wanted an escape from the uneasy situation that I found myself in. So, I started toward home without telling her about the little cat, the main reason why I ran to her like a lunatic in the first place. To my surprise, Xeuti did not try to stop me.

It was midday. I was walking back home through the silent grove under the fierce sun. I was deeply perturbed and lost in thought as I walked.

A great calamity befell me near the dry pond.

I had crossed the pond, and was about midway back on the meandering trail under the tall bamboos. Suddenly I saw a strange and sinister-looking dark object emerge threateningly from under the bush. I was unable to recognize it. I gave a piercing shriek in great fear.

The scream instantly dried my throat. My fatigued legs started trembling in fear.

Overcoming the great danger, sometimes grasping on to trees and bushes, and sometimes crawling on the ground, I arrived at the edge of my backyard and jumped inside the fence. Seeing my grandmother waiting, I hugged her two legs in utter helplessness and fell to the ground with a thud.

I do not remember what happened after that.

When I regained consciousness, I was laying helpless in my grandmother's bed. Everyone surrounded me and stared at me with worried faces. Grandmother had a full pitcher of water in her hands. "Oh, my dear Xoon! Let me pour some more water on your head; it will make you feel better. I have also prepared some herbal medicine. You will feel better after you take it."

"I will go to the medicine woman Maalini, and get a freshly-woven chord, incant it for exorcism, and tie it around your upper arm."

"I have told you so many times not to wander into the groves all by yourself and become a victim of the strange things that live there. You never pay the slightest attention to what I say."

"I know that evil witch mixed potion in what she fed you. Oh, well! She doesn't know any better. If I am truly your grandmother, I will teach her the lesson of her life."

"That bitch! That disgraceful, shameless whore of a woman! That lowliest trash of society! Why does she have to cast an evil eye on a little boy from a respectable family? If she longs so much for a family of her own, why did she desecrate her own body in her impetuous youth? We still have rules and regulations, laws and traditions in the country. I have made up my mind. We cannot let that filthy crone ruin this neighborhood of upstanding citizens."

"Get well as soon as you can, my baby! I will then go to the district court and file a complaint against her to the authorities. I must get her arrested. If the authorities won't do anything, I, myself, will hire some ruffians to smash her house and her belongings to smithereens. I will make sure that this adultress cannot live here, and scheme against, and terrorize our beautiful children."

I heard all the violent tirades and loud threats my grandmother was spitting out at Xeuti. I tried my best to counter her, but I was so weak that not a single word I said was audible. The exhaustion of the specter made me very sick. High fever slowly overcame me. My limbs started shivering violently from tremendous cold. The fever soon turned into typhoid, and I lay in bed—sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious—for about a month.

After a long and tortuous period of four weeks, I felt a little better and had the energy to sit up in my bed. I surmised that the world around me had changed altogether.

It seemed the high spirits that my parents and grandmother usually had were lost. Even my friends were subdued. Everyone's face seemed expressionless, dark and brooding.

Seeing the stark faces, I was afraid to inquire about the reasons for the overwhelming moroseness. But, one lucky moment, I found Mukut, all alone by my bed and asked, "Mukut, what's wrong? Why don't you talk to me like you used to?"

Mukut scanned the room cautiously, and told me in a hush, "Xoon, you don't know because you were very sick. Because of the severity of your illness, we were not allowed to come close to you all these days. Since you are a little bit better, only now we have gathered the

courage to come near you.”

I asked Mukut the question, whose answer I anxiously had awaited from the very moment I regained consciousness. “Mukut, how is Baai Xeuti doing? Have you seen her recently?”

Once again, Mukut looked around carefully, wearing a grave face. He came closer to the bed and said almost inaudibly.

“Xoon, it’s a long story. I don’t think I have the time to tell you everything today. Moreover, you are not fully well yet. Once you are back to normal, I will tell you all.”

Hearing such ominous words, I impatiently grasped his hand and pulled him closer to me, pleading, “Mukut, I know I am weak, but I can’t wait a moment longer. Tell me right now if Baai Xeuti is alright; I don’t know why, but I have had very disturbing thoughts. Did she have an accident like I did?”

Unable to skirt my request, Mukut sat by my side, and continued in a low voice. “Xoon, you have guessed right. Xeuti Baai had a very big accident. She is no longer here.”

“Has she vanished? Where has she gone?”

“She hasn’t gone anywhere. She is dead!”

“She is dead!”

“She committed suicide a few days ago.”

“Oh dear! Why did she do such a terrible thing to herself?”

“I think it just happened.”

“From the moment she came to know of the sudden terror that visited you on the way back from her house, she became restless. Day after day, she came and stood by the gate of your house to find out more about your condition. But, your parents and grandmother did not let her come inside even once. Every day they hurled loud and harsh insults at her.”

“Hearing you were extremely weak, she came, one day, with a ripe pomegranate and some grapes. On that day too, your grandmother chased her rudely away. Not only that, she got the old hag Jaapori to snatch the fruits from Baai Xeuti, and throw them into the gutter.”

“Towards the end of your sickness, when you were still suffering from high fever, every night you raved about a kitten. Hearing this, Baai Xeuti came with a kitten one day. Even on that day your grandmother and old Jaapori did not let Baai Xeuti cross the gate. They shouted all manners of insults at her and forced her to leave.”

“As a result of all this, Baai Xeuti was very distracted; she stayed home most of the time.”

“Your grandmother and your parents did not stop harassing her at that; they couldn’t forgive her for what happened to you. They went to the court and filed an official complaint with the magistrate. A few days later, policemen in uniform came and surrounded her house. They threw all her belongings out on the front porch. They tried to force her to leave her house. She pleaded with them by saying she would leave by herself in a few days.”

“I think it was the day after that, that your condition became suddenly very critical. The doctor said only the night would tell. Hearing this, we became very morose, and secretly went to her house to let her know. She cautiously invited us inside and spoke to us very sadly. “My children! You all are very dear to me. I have never thought evil of Xoon, even for a moment. I have never done anything remotely inauspicious for him. I have been

praying to God day and night for his health. Even then, if I made any mistake or I sinned without knowing any better, I am fully prepared to atone for it. You are my witnesses. I promise, if it brings back Xoon's health, I will very gladly sacrifice my body for him. I just want Xoon to feel better. I don't want him to suffer. I don't want him to die." "

"Baai Xeuti hanged herself that night, inside her own house. And, surprisingly, you started getting better from that night onwards."

"The day after, we secretly went to see her empty house from a distance. We saw a large number of uniformed policemen. They looked in every nook and cranny of her house, wrote things down in their notebooks, and took her dead body in the yellow hospital van."

After recounting all this, Mukut, whose eyes had become red and were dripping tears, stared silently at me for a long time.

Overcome by a flood of pent-up emotions, I also could not say anything, and held fast to his hand. Mukut was silent for a while longer. I broke the silence and asked him, "Mukut, do you know anything about the kitten that Baai Xeuti wanted to give me?"

Hearing my question, Mukut undid my grasp, walked out of the room, and returned after a few minutes. He came back with a beautiful, healthy, white, polka-dotted be-ribboned kitten.

"Xoon, this is the cat that Baai Xeuti wanted to give you so badly. On the last day of her life, when I visited her, she had told me, "Mukut, I had chosen this kitten for Xoon. But it's my bad luck, I can't give it to him in person. That's why I am giving it to you. Please take good care of it, and give it to Xoon when he feels better." "

Saying so, Mukut handed me the kitten like a sacred memento of the departed soul we both cherished. Both of us hugged the kitten in our bosoms, and wept uncontrollably in a pain that we could never convey to others. There was no end to our tears; it was as if our weeping eyes would never know any repose.

Even to this day, when we remember Xeuti, we remember the helpless session of weeping that the two of us shared over her.

Every once in a while, in my mind's eye, I visualize Baai Xeuti's compassionate eyes from a distance. I see her sitting under the luscious pomegranate tree, weaving clothes on her loom!

Sometimes, when I am not busy, I try to reflect in my own mind. What was it in the sparkle of Baai Xeuti's beautiful eyes that made a child pursue her attention and company so passionately? Was it a youthful crush? Was it juvenile attraction that was transient? Or, was it love, whose depth we still cannot fathom despite the wisdom that adulthood has given us.

Translated from the Assamese original "Abuj Maayaa," Axomiyaa Galpa Gussa, edited by Maheswar Neog, Jogesh Das and Narayan Sarma, Axom Xahitya Xabha, 1984.

Roma Das (1909-1981) is a well-known Assamese short story writer. He is most well-known for his romantic stories.

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4

In Search of an Older Brother

By **Holiram Deka**

Translation: **Jukti Kalita**

A few old-style horse carriages. A few old and new buses. Some tired coolies. And a large number of passengers going to different destinations. These constituted the lifeblood of the Guwahati-Shillong bus station. Every activity took place very slowly at the bus station, like a heavy clock run by electricity. Such a clock looks dead at first sight. But if you watch with steady eyes for some time, you would find that the minute hand waits motionlessly for a full minute and then suddenly springs up with life for a few seconds. Exactly like an electric clock, every activity in the bus station was punctual—but the pace was lethargic. The long distance buses traveling from Pandu to Shillong came on schedule. There were separate buses for the rich and the poor. The buses with inexpensive tickets, called lower-class buses, waited at the station for a long time loading passengers. The goods trucks, which were all painted in saffron, came and left without caring about the waiting humanity. The passengers, who were all dressed up for long distance travel, usually sat inside cozily and waited for that auspicious moment when the buses would start. Those who got tired of waiting or were bored, temporarily got up from their seats and then walked down from the buses. They loitered outside. Those passengers who were from afar and had not seen mountains before, wondered about what was going to happen when the buses climbed high up.

They prayed for god to be with them when they marched into the belly of the mountains. At one such moment, a man in torn, dirty clothes, between eighteen and twenty years old came to the station. He had a cane in one of his hands. There were pox marks on his face. He was smiling. But two things were dearly missing from him—shoes on his feet and vision in his eyes. From the way he acted, it could be understood that this place was not entirely unknown to him. Some workers at the bus station and many of the coolies knew him. When he arrived at the station, many people recognized him and said hello, “Hi Sultan!” Several people came to talk to him. He smiled and said in Hindustani, “I have finally decided to travel today!” “Where to?” inquired everyone. He answered “To Shillong.” “Why?,” they asked further. “I am going to visit my older brother in Shillong.” They found humor in

his answer and laughed loudly. Perhaps they were proud of their eyesight and disparaged his blindness. However, he was not bothered by their insulting tone. He merely told them he had to urgently go to Shillong because he had not heard from his brother for a long of time. He shakily walked to a bus and boarded it.

Half of the bus carried lower-class passengers and the other half carried goods. "Hey, you! Get off the bus! You don't have a ticket!" Someone yelled at him. The man caught him by his hand and led him out. Without a murmur of protest, he got down from the bus and pleaded with the man, "I haven't gotten any news from my brother in a long time. I have to travel to Shillong. But, I am too poor to afford a ticket." Most people around him did not show any compassion; they sneered him away. It was as if a poor blind man could not have a brother, an unfortunate person like him was not entitled to feelings of love and affection. Tears welled in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks at his own helplessness. But it was a hot sunny day; the tears dried up soon and his face soon lighted with a smile.

Regaining his composure, Sultan started loudly singing one of Kabir's spiritual verses, written several centuries ago. He sang well. He had a sweet voice and the lyrics were meaningful. Everyone around him stopped talking. Perhaps most of those who had gathered around did not understand the Hindustani language of the song. Maybe, the lyrics of the song sounded strange to them. But what a pleasing tune he had, his pock-marked face and his eyes had such a glow, his thin lips had such a pleasant smile! During pauses in his singing the listeners showered warm accolades on him, "That's great! What a voice! What a song!" Many lower-class passengers temporarily got off their buses and surrounded him. The bus and the truck drivers also mingled with the crowd and listened to him in spite of warnings from the officers of the bus company not to waste time gathering around the singer. Because the whole space was filled with people and because even the drivers were listening to Sultan, the buses could not leave. The passengers who were traveling on the luxury buses and who had paid a lot of money to travel comfortably and on time, became exasperated. The lower-class vehicles were scheduled to leave first. Finally, an officer of the bus company approached Sultan and spoke with him. "Well, I can't let you on any bus without a ticket, but do you want to ride on one of the uncovered luggage trucks? Remember that if you fall off somewhere on the way to Shillong, the blame will entirely be yours." Sultan heaved a sigh of relief and responded happily, "I will ride anywhere you allow me, sir!" The soft-spoken employee asked him where in Shillong his elder brother lived. Sultan did not know. He only knew that his brother lived somewhere in Shillong. Finally, a porter led him to a luggage truck, and he effortlessly walked up and sat on its flat bed like a *mahout* embarking an elephant. The crowd of listeners dispersed soon. They went to their respective buses. One by one the buses left quickly. The air around the bus station seemed to have retained some of Sultan's cheerfulness!

It was raining lightly when Sultan reached Shillong in the evening. The tiny electric bulbs overlooking the city streets looked like dangling stars. The dim light enabled one to walk carefully on the side of the road, avoiding motor traffic. But for Sultan who had been blind from his childhood, the lights weren't of any help. Just after getting off the bus he had tried his best to identify the voice of the man who allowed him to board the bus. He was not lucky enough to hear that voice again to ask any questions. Sultan acknowledged the man's help to himself and thanked him. He put the torn cap on his head and started walking slowly along the main road. The cars, which only the rich and the famous could possess, passed by him. The cars sprayed mud from the unpaved road on to his clothes and his

body. Somehow, he sensed the slope of the gutter by the road on one side and the mud of the road on the other, and started walking in between the two.

Sultan realized only now that he did not know his brother's whereabouts in Shillong and that locating his brother would be a monumental task. He had heard from someone that his brother cooked for a white man, but did not know who it was. Of course, he also did not know where in Shillong this white man lived and where he worked. He was quite unfamiliar with the names of the whites anyway. He had a hard time pronouncing and remembering their names. He must have heard the name of his brother's employer, but he had forgotten it. In any case he needed to find out the name now. Where would he go now? How could he find someone who knew his older brother? His brother's name was Hussain. Knowing only that much would have been enough in a village but now he was in a big city, the state capital. Whoever cared for the poor here? People were recognized here by their money, their titles and official positions and their big houses. Only if he could somehow remember the name of the white man for whom his elder brother worked! In this dark, damp and rainy night, he could not expect help from anyone. No one was going to give him directions and guide him to his brother's place.

In time, the roads became deserted. He felt the deep silence of the night around him. Out of fear and uncertainty, he became a little nervous. His body twitched every few minutes. His tired body and mind became more weary. He put his hands into the bag he was carrying to see if he had any bread left. He searched for a half-finished *bidi* in his pockets, thinking smoking would help regain composure. He did not find anything at all in his possession. He just pitied himself and extracted a smile out of himself. He wanted to sit down and take rest. But where would he sit? The ground was too wet.

As he kept walking, the speed of the wind picked up, the rain drops became larger and lightning became more frequent. The repeated lightning forewarned the coming of a treacherous night. Sultan thought that the weather was against him. He wondered if he could get shelter for the night somewhere. But where would he go looking for shelter in the middle of the night? Then he started hearing the sound of cars, noises of men talking and the laughter of women at some distance. He thought if he could reach there, they may be kind enough to give him shelter. So he approached the place from where all the noise came. As he approached the gate of the enclosed compound, the security guard asked him, "Hey! Whom do you want?" The guard was speaking Hindustani. Sultan was a little encouraged because he thought the guard was from the state of Bihar too, just like he was. He thought that the man might know of his older brother, or at least could provide him shelter for the night. So Sultan approached the guard and said, "Oh brother! I am blind. I have come searching for my older brother. My brother's name is Hussain, my name is Sultan and we are from the Arrah district of Bihar. Do you know my brother?" The guard said, "This is a club house for the white folks. Get away from here! It is time for the women to leave. You will break your bones under a car if you don't go away." Soon, the cars which were about to leave started blowing their horns because their path was blocked. The headlights were bright. Even Sultan's shadow was very clear to everyone. The drunk voices started shouting at the guard from inside the cars. The security guard took revenge on Sultan. He became angry and shoved Sultan violently back to the street.

The road became extremely quiet. There was no one on the road. If he suddenly heard someone's footsteps, he asked, "Sir! Can you please tell me where my brother lives? His name is Hussain." No one would even reply. Finally, the rain stopped. Sultan enjoyed the

light breeze that followed. He looked up to the sky and prayed, "Almighty God, help me locate my brother! You know that I am tired, weak, and blind. Won't you help me tread these unknown paths?" God did not respond. Neither did any human being. Thus, his brother's whereabouts remained unknown to him. Also, his hope of finding a shelter for the night remained elusive. A sense of unexpressed anger arose in his mind. The target of his wrath was God he had been seeking help all along. He felt guilty at being angry with God and tried to please Him in his own way by singing a song. It was such a mournful tune. It would move even a very cold-hearted man.

But, only the rows of pine trees by the roadside listened to his solemn song. Neither any human being nor the Almighty responded to his prayers. He could clearly hear the sound of water rippling in the creek nearby, and that of raindrops hitting the leaves. But not a living soul seemed to listen to his unrelenting request for help. What could this pitiful blind boy do? He was extremely weary. Yet he kept dragging his tired body step by step into the darkness of the night in search of his beloved brother.

Kumari Sahera Banu was a professor at the Lady Kane College. She taught mathematics, but devoted a lot of time to reading literature. She was a quiet person and did not pick up arguments easily. She was not really known for her romantic exploits. She was interested in the progress of women in the society. During her days in college, she had earned the nickname of Sahara, the desert. She was sleeping in her room at the girl's dormitory when she heard a voice singing not too far away. She listened intently, to the very sad tune. Unable to sleep any more, she rose from her bed, came out and stood on the verandah. She felt the shivering cold of the rainy Shillong night. A few rain drops fell on her face. The droplets were tiny in size but felt almost solid. Sahera again heard the melancholy voice wafting towards her. It was definitely not a happy man singing out of pleasure. It was someone with a broken and disillusioned heart, singing aloud the bitter sufferings of his life. It was as if the blood of a destitute soul was splattering out on to the streets. Once again, the sky was fully overcast. The lightning started striking again and in the din of the thunder, the lyrics of the song that was coming out of the darkness became unclear. Then it started pouring very heavily. The raindrops kept banging on the tin roof of the house and produced a loud noise. Miss Sahera's clothes became wet. But she was so enchanted by the music coming in her direction that she did not leave the verandah. She did not feel like going back to her cozy little room.

Then there was a lull in the music. Now, she could clearly hear the sad, pitiful voice of a man. "Oh, big brother! Where are you?" She heard him say loudly again and again. He lamented, "I am Sultan. Oh, dear brother. Help me!" She realized that it was a helpless young boy looking for shelter. But, what could she really do? She lived in a girl's dormitory of a college run by missionaries and had to abide by strict rules. She was an unmarried woman and it was not safe for her to go out in the middle of the night. It was inappropriate to go outside and bring the man into the house, however needy he might be! What would the principal of the college say when she found out? Men were not allowed in the women's dormitory at any time. Such an action on her part, though morally right, might even lead to her dismissal from her teaching position. However she was moved when she again heard the boy's voice, "Oh, dear big brother. I am Sultan. I am looking for you." Sahara could not wait any longer; she would have to help the owner of the voice, someone who needed help desperately in the middle of a cold rainy night. She went out and looked for the security guard to get the keys to the locked main door. But the guard was no where to be found.

So, she walked back to the verandah.

Thunder struck repeatedly once again. Sahera could still hear Sultan's deep-throated crying. Then all of a sudden it seemed that a big ball of fire fell to the ground from high in the sky with great swiftness. And then everything became eerily quiet. Sahera did not hear that pitiful voice any more.

In the morning, the professor saw the motionless body of Sultan by the road near the girl's hostel. Sultan must have been lying on the ground in the middle of thunderous rain. He might have been struck by thunder and killed. Sahera felt extremely sad. Even now during rainy and distressful nights, whenever Sahera is awake, she hears that fearful voice singing disconsolately in the pouring rain. The memory of that motionless body prostrate on the ground also becomes vivid in her mind.

Holiram Deka was the first Assamese Chief Justice of the Guwahati High Court. Jukti Kalita teaches marketing in Baruch College of the City University of New York.

5

A Three Wheeler

By **Syed Abdul Malik**
Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

He waited serenely on the platform. It was a pleasure to see him. He came forward to greet me as soon as I alighted from the train. His light green car was parked outside. He drove me to his house. We did not speak much during the ride. I was not very tired. It was comfortable traveling first class on the train. But, Mr. Jaweed looked tired. Maybe, he was under a lot of pressure at work. Now-a-days, even well-placed judges worked as hard as the clerks. I appreciated that he came to greet me at the station soon after receiving my telegram. Judge Jaweed's younger brother Aftab was married to my daughter. That was how we were related. My son-in-law did not live with his older brother. He and my daughter lived in Delhi. The youngest brother lived in state capital of Shillong. He received a promotion at work recently, and became the Deputy Secretary of an important government department.

It was nine in the morning when we arrived at the judge's house. He had made all necessary arrangements for me. His wife and children were vacationing in his brother's house in Shillong. The servants and other employees were the only others at home.

The house was calm and quiet. It was a very expansive, government house with a large number of rooms and a presence of its own. The judge had a well-appointed library with high shelves full of books. There were many law books. Among the rest were novels, and books on psychology. I felt inspired in the tidy library. There was the touch of Mr. Jaweed's methodical hands everywhere.

In the early evening, Mr. Jaweed and I sat in the front yard and talked in general about our families. He was cultivated and perceptive. We did not talk about the court or about the law.

I came to him seeking advice on a lawsuit in addition to taking a vacation. I had sent him all the relevant documents earlier. My brothers and I were in the middle of a lawsuit involving tea estates inherited from our father. I was not happy with the verdict of the lower court. So, I was planning to appeal to the high court. I came to visit Mr. Jaweed

hoping he would give me useful advice regarding my chances at the high court. I had also planned to buy a new car in the city before I left. Mr. Jaweed also made a request, "I hope you will not leave right away. I am sorry my family is not here to be your host. Please stay here for a few days, if you do not have any other pressing engagements back home."

"Your family is away. I don't intend to give you any trouble during their absence. Anyway, it will be my pleasure to spend a few days with you." I replied courteously.

Mr. Jaweed left for the court at nine, and was back exactly at three thirty. He was very punctual. Since he was refined and earnest, he appeared learned and introspective. I liked the company of such people. He never uttered anything irrelevant. He was extremely polite all the time. Speaking with him, one could vividly discern a clear and uncomplicated mind. It was as if his intense eyes, and his fair and handsome face portrayed the peacefulness one normally finds in a place of worship. I liked him very much.

My son-in-law was just the opposite from his brother. Maybe, it was because he was a lot younger. Also, he had already made a lot of money. So, I could live with his restlessness. One of his hobbies was to buy new cars and sell them after a while, making a tidy profit. It seemed my son-in-law was almost addicted to this process. I would not say anything about this though. He took very good care of my daughter. He was also very close to the judge. Their relationship was more like that between a father and his son.

Early morning on Sunday, I went to pay visit to a few acquaintances I had in town. The judge did not have to go to court. So, he offered me the use of his car. It was about eleven when I returned.

A security guard saluted me at the door. He had seen me during the past few days. He recognized me.

"Is the judge home?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you know what he is doing?"

"He is dusting and cleaning his vehicle, sir."

In surprise, I stared at him. Why should the judge clean his own vehicle in a house full of servants, drivers, peons and security guards? I surmised, Judge Jaweed was a very genteel and upstanding soul.

"Where exactly is he?"

"Follow me, sir. I will take you to him."

"You are back already! You didn't have to come in here! It's pretty dirty - full of dust." I met the judge on the way out from wherever he was.

"Why do you have to do a servant's job?"

The judge was holding a dirty rag in his hand. He smiled like a child, "They have a lot of cleaning and other work to do in this big house, anyway. Let's get out of here now." He then said a bit loudly, "Daxarath, I am going to take a bath now. Prepare the bathroom for me." Then, he continued, "Why don't you take a little rest before lunch? You can take a bath too, if you want."

The judge sounded a bit flustered. It was as if he was trying to hide something from me. I felt it was improper for me to follow him unannounced when he was engaged in private

work in his own house.

Since I did not see exactly what he was cleaning, I became curious. I asked the servant who brought water from my bath, "Why was the judge cleaning a vehicle? I didn't see anything there anyway."

"Oh! It's a vehicle alright. But, it is not a car. It is a three-wheeled pushcart. The judge dusts and cleans it regularly. He doesn't let anyone else touch it."

It was inappropriate for me to talk to a servant for long. So, I closed the bathroom door as soon as he stepped out.

Every man of fame and fortune has some eccentricities. Some of the most famous people have silly sentimental quirks and weaknesses. Judge Jaweed had an air of steady earnestness about him. It would be strange if he also had an eccentric streak in him. My curiosity deepened.

But, I did not want to embarrass him asking personal questions. All of us have secrets we do not want to share with others. They are sometimes pleasant, and sometimes sad. But, they always give us something to cling on to, and to cherish as our very own.

We went together to buy a car. I bought a beautiful car for eighteen thousand rupees. The judge did not make many comments. He just volunteered, "It's beautiful. Gray is my favorite color."

My new car introduced some interruptions to the peaceful regularity in the judge's daily routine. Every evening, we took long drives in the car. I also felt a little relieved getting away from the house, the tea estates, and the constant talk of lawsuits. It seemed that the judge also welcomed the little pleasure that spontaneity and irregularity brought into his life.

The evening before I was scheduled to leave, we were quite tired after a lot of riding around. We had let the chauffeur drive us wherever he felt like. We spent a beautiful evening enjoying the scenery. We discussed my lawsuit at length. Although the judge did not discourage me, he told me to settle without going to the higher court. The judge made the recommendations based on his long experience on the bench. I did not tell him what my decision would be. I profusely thanked him for his advice.

It was a pleasantly warm evening in the middle of May. After dinner we sat in the front yard on lawn chairs. The moonlight was faint. The new grass was still sparse in places. There was a steady, low breeze. The mild scent of fresh grass was overtaken by a strong fragrance wafting in the wind from gardenia flowers somewhere in the neighborhood. The interplay of smells was augmented by a mild but pleasant aroma drifting in from the judge's own flower garden.

My new car was in addition to the car I bought last year. I broke the silence between us and commented, "Owning a beautiful vehicle is a very pleasant experience, isn't it?"

Perhaps, Mr. Jaweed was thinking of something else. He seemed startled, "Oh, yes! Sometimes a vehicle can mean much more than even a human being."

I did not expect such a comment from the judge. I kept quiet.

The judge might have become a little preoccupied in his own thoughts. I handed him another cigarette, and he started puffing at it. Observing his eyes and his earnest face, I concluded he was in the middle of some deep personal reflection.

We did not have any particular topic to talk about.

The big house stood still and silent. There was some metallic noise in the kitchen at the very back of the house. Some servants were washing the dishes. The judge spoke slowly, "You were talking about cars, vehicles in general; weren't you? Yes! It's true; sometimes a lifeless means of conveyance can do much more than a live person."

Hearing him mention the same topic twice, I concluded that he had something particular in mind. But, I could not think of a way to ask him directly about what bothered him. Still, I added, "Well! Judges encounter different kinds of people on the job; you learn many engrossing and eventful stories."

He got an opportunity to introduce the issue. Mr. Jaweed started slowly, "The cases which come up in the court are sometimes colorful, but they are normally distorted. In their zeal to be on the good side of the law, both parties invariably alter their stories to fit. In reality, the situations discussed and argued over in the court are creation of the fertile minds of the lawyers - they are very different from the real incidents they are supposed to represent."

"Yes, that's why it seems to me that the power of the lawyers is stronger than the power of the law. Still, don't you know something really interesting?"

"Not all incidents deliberated in the court are out of the ordinary. But, there are many things that happen outside the court that are far more fascinating, and at times unbelievable. Are you sleepy?"

"No, I am not sleepy. It is a beautiful evening. The sweet fragrance of the flowers is adding to its warmth."

Instead of waiting for any response from me, he continued, "Let me tell you a story from real life."

He started slowly. "It is a story about property and inheritance. There were three brothers in a poor farming family. The oldest one was very naive, straight-forward, and down-to-earth. Till the day their father was alive, all three lived in harmony. But, arguments and quarrels started soon after the father's death. All three had married by that time. The oldest one had three sons, no daughter. The younger two also had young children."

It was as if he was casually recounting a story he could clearly visualize with his own two eyes.

I listened silently.

"Finally, the scant inheritance was divided among the three. There was not much liquidity in the estate. In terms of real estate, there were only eight acres of farmland. The three got equal share of the land. But, it was impossible for a family of five to survive on such meager acreage. So, the oldest one, wanting to start a new life elsewhere, sold his share of the land to the next brother. At such a time, suddenly his wife passed away. And, thus started a new chapter in his life - a chapter of endless struggle, and extreme pain and suffering.

Mr. Jaweed waited for a few moments. He lighted a cigarette. I also lighted one for myself and started smoking. I had expected the story to be eventful, and mysterious. I was a little disappointed listening to this simple and ordinary story.

He started again.

"His brother bought the land, but hadn't paid for it. The informal understanding was that

he would pay slowly over time. Being illiterate and extremely naive, he never distrusted his younger brother. At his younger brother's urging, he even went to the court and signed the sales deed stating that he had received all the money. Later, the younger brother refused to pay up. The older brother was at his wit's end. He was clueless regarding what his options were. A few advised him to sue his brother, but others told him that there was not even the remotest possibility of his winning. So, blaming himself, the older brother ruefully decided to accept what fate had in store for him."

I expressed superficial sympathy for the man I did not know, "Oh, dear! What an unfortunate situation"

"It is nice that you feel sympathy for him. But not a single soul in the village said a word on behalf of this simple and naive man who was cheated out a livelihood by his own brother. Finally, one day he sold his dead wife's jewelry to his youngest brother for a sum of seventy five rupees, took his three sons, and left his dear village for ever."

Once again, I commented with outward sincerity, "Our society has become self-centered and cruel these days!"

"Selfish and self-centered! Some definitely are! But, not everyone is. If a section of the society is selfish, there is another section that is upstanding, open-minded, and helpful beyond the remotest expectation. If it were not so, the naive and the simpletons in the society could never survive."

"What happened then?"

"Oh, yes! Let me continue. With an uncertain future, he moved to the city. He brought his three little boys with him. All he had was a sum total of a hundred rupees. The kids were not old enough to understand the cruelties inflicted upon them by the society. But, luckily the very day he arrived at the town, he discovered a new path to survival."

"I feel a little better for him now."

"There was an old woman at the edge of the city. Kindly, she offered shelter to the father and the three kids for the night.

"Well, who will let a stranger stay with them, even for a night, in the city?"

The moon had traveled quite a bit down the sky. The smell of fresh grass was invigorating. The sounds from the kitchen had quieted down. Judge Jaweed continued.

"The old woman sold ground spices in the bazaar. Till the middle of the night, she ground turmeric roots, cumin seeds, black pepper, coriander leaves and other spices in a tall, traditional mortar called ooral, with her own hands. Then, she divided them into small packets. The next day, she carried the packets in a box on her head and hawked them. In the bazaar, in the restaurants - wherever she could. She made a very small profit, and managed her sorry life with her meager earnings. She felt sympathy for the uprooted father and his motherless sons, and gave them shelter. Not just for a night, but for eleven long years."

"For eleven years?" Only now, I could find some mystery and life in his otherwise dull story.

"He did not know a soul in the city. He did not know where else he could go. So, when the old woman invited them to stay, he accepted gladly. It became more than a family. In the beginning, the older boy and his father helped the old woman grind spices in the mortar. But the woman forbade the children to do this menial job. She enrolled the three children

in the public elementary school in the neighborhood.”

I was a bit sleepy-headed by now. But, I liked the flowing story. I continued to listen in silence.

“They ground spices day after day. But, they devised a different plan for street peddling. During the day, the woman cooked for everyone, washed clothes and took care of other household chores. There was no time for her to walk the streets. So, it became the father’s responsibility to carry the box of spices daily to the market on his head, and sell the packets. Since he was a man, his profits soon increased.”

He stopped for a short while and lighted another cigarette.

“The boys were gifted. They were excellent students. They might have never gone to school if they had lived in the village. But, being in the city, they got the opportunity of their lives. So, they studied with all their hearts and their minds. Soon, the older boy won a prestigious scholarship.”

Mr. Jaweed stood up from the lawn and started walking back and forth. I also stood up to give him company.

“One day, the woman told them that she felt a pain in her chest and laid down on the bed to rest. She passed away the next day.”

The judge fell silent. I also felt a tinge of sympathy for the old woman.

“The woman did not have any relatives. But, probably there are very few people more loving and accepting than her. There are very few mothers who nurture and attend to their own children more lovingly. The old woman left behind her thatched hut and the mortar; those were her sole possessions. She also left behind a piece of advice to the father, “Don’t ever take your children out of school, no matter what. Let them study by any means, to the best of their abilities. Also, please don’t give up on the business of spices. The time is good for this business. But, how long can you carry the box of spices on your own head? Buy a little vending cart.” ”

“Every afternoon and evening, one would find the three- wheeled cart at the entrance to the bazaar. Everyone bought spices from him. The spices were fresh and of excellent quality. The sons helped the father at night. They ground dried roots, fruits and leaves in the mortar; they used a sieve to filter only the finest powder; they made neat packets containing one, two and four ounces of various spices. They also studied and did their homework at the same time.”

The judge came back to his chair. I followed him to mine. Darkness had spread all around. The night was deep. At such a time, people’s simplicity and naivet show through their facades; they become less guarded. They divulge their deepest secrets and pains without the slightest hesitation.

Mr. Jaweed continued at his easy pace, “It was difficult for all four. They ate a full stomach only in the evening. They passed days with light snacks. Three boys had to go to school; they had to be fed and clothed properly - there were a lot of expenses. Despite the struggle, the oldest son started attending college in a few years.”

“College?”

“It may sound incredible, but they did not go back on the word given to their benefactor, the old lady, at her death bed. Yes, it sounds impossible - the son of a barefoot spice peddler

attending college! And, yes, it was also very improbable that the son of pauper would win a coveted scholarship for excellence in state-wide matriculation examinations, competing among tens of thousands, some very privileged.”

“Never for a moment did the father ponder over himself, over his own life of complete deprivation. He never boasted that his sons attended college. He did not feel ashamed hawking spices on the streets even though his sons were star students in college. In his own mind, his life was not his own, his life was solely for the good of his boys. When his sons would do well on difficult examinations, and would pass milestones with flying colors, he would be energized, he would find more strength in his body to work the mortar. Once in a rare while, his sons would buy a new shirt or a new pair of pants with money saved from selling spices or their hard-earned scholarship; they would also buy a shirt for their father. At such moments, a divine smile would brighten up the tired face of the aging father.”

“ “You didn’t have to buy anything for me!” He would turn around to hide his face soaked with tears of pride and satisfaction. Over the years, his hair slowly turned gray, he lost a few molars; his face became shriveled and lost its luster; his eyes became weaker - but the strength of his two arms never decreased a bit. He pushed the three-wheeled cart to the market every day of his life. Neither the scorching sun nor pouring rain, neither the chill of the coldest winter nor the unbearable heat of tropical summers could bring any irregularity to his life. How could his customers cook their meats and vegetables deliciously without the superior quality spices only he sold?”

So long I had concluded that the jurist was a staid man, not given to emotions. But, I realized he was not the man I thought he was. He had a very soft heart. I had always thought tender-hearted judges were good for the society.

Since he was silent for a few minutes, I surmised that the story had ended. I became curious to find out how the judge came to know of this moving story. Was the story gleaned from a case that was decided in his court? Who sued whom and why? Was there a relative of the woman who appeared out the blue determined to drive the hapless family out of the only shelter they knew? Whom did the judge decide the case for?

Just as I was going to ask a question, he resumed, “There are many stories and anecdotes about the sacrifice mothers make for their children. But, there are also many instances of remarkable fathers making the supreme sacrifice of their lives for their children. A mother receives her inspirations from the limitless love she possesses, but a father’s inspiration derives from a sense of binding duty. Isn’t it true?”

I never had the time to ponder over such lofty topics. So, I respected the judge’s observations. It was remarkable that he was able to discover moral principles underlying the facts of life. I agreed with him, “Yes, that’s very true. Sometimes, even the most ordinary man or woman sacrifices immeasurably for the benefit of the progeny.”

My comment hurt him.

“Ordinary man or woman? No, no, these are not ordinary men or women! An ordinary man can give a hundred thousand rupees to a charitable cause, donate an expensive house or a hundred acres of land. But, do you realize what these ordinary spice vendors do? They sacrifice their own lives, ounce by ounce, day by day, for the sake of the children they bring forth to this world. An ordinary man doesn’t consciously abandon every hope, every desire, and every pleasure, and lead an existence of selfless asceticism, just for the sake of his children. Only an extra-ordinary soul does, a spice vendor does.”

His voice was impatient and carried a hint of deep pain and hurting.

I had difficulty understanding the significance of the judge's outburst. The sacrifice of the spice trader was extra-ordinary, but the sacrifice of one who gives a hundred thousand rupees sheer ordinary! I was a bit astonished with his conclusions.

After a short break he continued, "These men are born to suffer and sacrifice. Their fate doesn't allow them to even get an isolated breath of pleasure and enjoyment. Are you tired? Have I bored you with my monologue? Yes, such ordinary stories of real life irritate successful people like us."

"Oh, no! I am sorry if I gave you such an impression. Please tell me, what happened to the boys."

"The older boy graduated with honors from college with a BA in philosophy."

"He received a BA?"

"Yes, but he could not liberate his old man from daily drudgery. He graduated from college, but could not find a job right away. But, his father wanted his younger sons to continue studying. So, he continued peddling."

"About six months after graduation of the oldest son, one day, the father came back from the bazaar and said, "My body is aching all over. I may be running a fever. If you can, go ahead and grind the spices for tomorrow." He did not eat anything that night. The intensity of his fever and aches shot up during the night. After a long life steeped in the travails of hard menial labor, it was as if his blood had all drained out of his mortal body in the profusion of sweat over the years. His eyes were lusterless, his mouth dry. His sons arranged for medical treatment that they could afford. But, it did not help the shriveled body of a man who had borne the brunt of many years of strenuous physical labor. And, just before he died..."

The judge's voice quivered, he sounded restless. He stood up from his chair and deliberately said, "Let's go inside. It's very late."

We walked inside. He turned the light on. I looked momentarily at his face. It seemed to me that it was not Judge Jaweed who stood in front of me, it was a strange old man from another planet. His eyes looked pathetic, his lips were pale. He must have been crying in the darkness outside for a long time.

"Just before he breathed his last, he heard that his oldest son had passed the very competitive Civil Services Examinations, and had been directly appointed to the high government position of E.A.C - Extra Assistant Commissioner. He was too weak to respond. However, hearing the news, his pale eyes regained a little of their lost shine. It was as if he had succeeded in capturing, at long last, the coveted fruit of his lifelong sacrifice. It was as if all the sweat he had lost over many long years had been amply rewarded."

Suddenly, I looked at his face intently. Was Mr. Jaweed telling me the story of his own life for so long? Without letting me contemplate for long, Mr. Jaweed added, "Let me finish the story."

I followed him as he walked along the long corridor of the huge house. "Never in his life did he ride on a vehicle of any kind. He just pushed a cart till his death." His voice had the touch of a dark night - damp and deep.

He unlocked the door to a large room, and turned on the light. I saw a three-wheeled cart

on top of a large table. It seemed that there was a disembodied voice trapped in the room, a voice still sighing in pain.

He walked to the vehicle, and said in his moist voice, "This is father's vehicle. Father and his cart kept us alive, and made us what we are. The vehicle is here. But, our beloved father is no more." His voice sounded as if it had traveled through a deep canyon in the mountains.

Slowly, he continued, "I could not do anything to repay my father. But, father continues to live for us in this vehicle. This cart is more valuable than the lives of all three of us combined. All of us, now, own several vehicles each - very expensive four-wheeled automobiles. But, this vehicle, this three-wheeled pushcart has done so much for us that no automobile can ever do. I dust and clean this vehicle myself. It has the touch of my father's sweat, the sweat that dripped from his forehead every day. None else can understand the honor, respect and veneration which we have for that sweat."

The story is a translation of the story called "Tinisakiyaa Gaari."

6

Maakon and the *Goxaai*

By **Birendrakumar Bhattacharya**

Translation: **Manjit Borah and Jugal Kalita**

It was early morning.

“Oh Lord! I have sinned. Take my life away! God, take my life away!” Maakon prayed earnestly kneeling in front of the altar in her home. Since the day she lost her right to a dot of red vermilion on her forehead due to her husband’s untimely death, she had been praying in this manner every day. Today was no exception. Today, she felt utterly ignored by god. If the almighty could not relieve her from her sufferings, who could?

People despised her. There was no one to take care of her empty house. There was not a single kind- hearted neighbor whose sympathy she could look forward to! She did not have any land beyond the compound of her homestead. She was forced to beg from door to door for a living. She spent most of her days toiling at Baapukon’s house. She earned a little money or got paid in kind for doing small chores for his wife. This was how she had survived two painful years of widowed life.

Maakon was moved to tears while praying. Her tears flooded the floor, but it was in vain. God would not put an end to her worldly agony! God seemed oblivious to her supplications, “Take away my life of sin! Lord, take my life away!” This morning, her prayer was repeatedly interrupted by impure thoughts. Again and again, the image of Baapukon appeared in her mind’s eye.

Baapukon was the *goxaai* of the village, the resident spiritual and religious guide. He was a fair, healthy and handsome man with a pleasant face. His presence brought peace to troubled souls. When he prayed, his melodious voice sounded like the crooning of bees. People venerated him. At home, he performed elaborately orchestrated prayers four times a day. His living room was always crowded with his disciples who waited for an audience with him with their respectful offerings.

But, there were fewer seekers of advice and blessing during the rainy season. In this season, people worked on their farms. Therefore, they could not afford to take time to off to visit his holiness. Not a single soul visited him yesterday.

On this day, his wife had gone to visit her mother. It was quite far. Therefore she was scheduled to return late, not before dusk.

Maakon reached the backyard of Baapukon's home and called out loudly, "Oh, mother! Oh, mother!"

Since his wife was not home, Baapukon responded, "Who is that? Is it Maakon? Come! Come on in here." Hearing his soft and pleasing voice, her heart started beating faster.

Baapukon's wife had served lunch early before she left so that he could relax the rest of the day. He was resting on a reed mat, reclining on a soft pillow. Maakon hesitantly walked inside. Baapukon was bare-chested. He looked up at her with a smile on his winsome face.

His smile did not seem innocent to her. What was happening? Oh, Lord! She was mortally embarrassed, but she stood motionless. She was unable to raise her eyes off the floor. She was unable to utter a word.

"Maakon, you are almost family. You should never be so embarrassed in front of me. Come! Sit beside me. Let me tell you some stories about your late husband who was a friend of mine. When we were young,..." Baapukon paused.

Maakon made an attempt to leave. The man stood up. "Wait! Maakon, wait!" Reluctantly, Maakon stopped in her tracks. "Why are you here? What do you want? My wife is not home." "Nothing that can't wait, sir. Your wife had promised me a basket of rice." She stood still not knowing what else to do.

"OK, you will get your rice. You mustn't worry when I am around. On his death bed, your husband requested me to take good care of you as long as I lived."

Maakon knew that the priest was being sly. She realized that Baapukon was hinting at something sinful. She was positively frightened, but it was as if some unknown force had arrested her ability to move. At the same time, although she was terrified, she was also drawn to him by an unknown attraction. She was tempted by the lustful signals coming from him.

She returned home after a while. Before she left, Baapukon told her that he would briefly stop by her house the next morning to see for himself how she was doing.

That night she couldn't bat an eyelid. Whenever she closed her eyes she saw her angry husband's fiery eyes chasing her. She was terribly ashamed of her behavior in Baapukon's presence, earlier in the afternoon. She knew she did not sin herself. It was the priest who seemed aroused.

Would the Lord forgive her indiscretion? Never! Would society pardon her if it knew? It never would! Could she forgive herself? She never could! Baapukon surely knew black magic. Without fail, he could charm everyone with his beautiful eyes, his captivating smile, and his sweet talk.

So, after finishing her morning chores, she started praying. "Take away my life before scheming Baapukon comes. Oh, Lord! Please take my life away before I fall in the claws of that charlatan!"

But, god failed her once again. Time seemed to stand still till Baapukon arrived. However much she tried otherwise, once again, she found herself staring at the attractive man in front of her. Baapukon smiled at her and asked, "What's the matter, my love? Did I surprise you?"

There was eroticism in his voice. Betraying her inner self, Maakon was thirsting for love, too. Baapukon's voice melted her. She couldn't control herself any more. Like a motionless idol, she intently stared back at Baapukon.

Baapukon fetched himself a piece of tattered bamboo mat and sat down. Unable to fathom what was in her mind, he decided to take the lead himself. "You must take better care of your house. It's falling apart piece by piece."

"Yes, sir! I know. But, there is no one to take good care of it."

"I think it is time for you to make a serious decision. I think you should come and live in my compound. You will continue to work as our maid as you do now. You will become a part of our family. You will eat with us. That way, I will be able to take better care of you."

"No, sir! I want to die in this house of my ancestors. Please forgive this poor soul."

"Alright! I respect your wishes. But you are a woman! How can you survive all by yourself?"

"Sir! I have my god in my altar. He will look after me."

"Of course!" The goxaai retorted sarcastically and glanced towards the altar. He suddenly donned an utterly serious face. "Which god's idol do you have on your altar?"

"The idol of Lord Narayan, your reverence!"

"Where did you procure the idol from?"

"From Dergaon, sir!"

"When was the last time you bathed the idol?"

"Two years ago."

"What? You, sinner! Why are you keeping the idol for which you have no respect? Do you want to go straight to hell?"

"I am afraid of living all alone in an empty house. My god's idol is my company."

"Huh!," Baapukon pondered over the seriousness of the situation for a while and announced his decision.

"I, myself, will bathe the idol tomorrow at dawn. You will surely go to the purgatory if you keep god's idol uncared for like you have done so far."

Sounding this dire warning, the goxaai left the house. Maakon was weighed down with deep spiritual regret. It was true that she hadn't bathed the idol for two long years. As a result, there was no reason for the lord to be happy with her. Why would god listen to her prayers if he was angry at her insolence? Her respect and reverence for the goxaai increased many folds. He was deeply worried for her ignorant soul!

Baapukon arrived at her house at the crack of dawn the next day. She was a bit perplexed. Why did he have to perform the cleansing ceremony at this odd hour? Maybe, the reverend had determined it to be a holy moment. He wanted to redeem her soul of the sins she had committed over a period of two years.

She opened the door in earnest, and stepped out. In the light darkness, she saw that the goxaai's body shone like holy smoke rising from burning incense. The man definitely was godly! She stared at Baapukon in awe.

Baapukon said softly, "Honey, you are truly my goddess!" Maakon was flabbergasted. What motives did he have to call her "honey" and "goddess!" She stared at the priest in disbelief.

"You are surprised, aren't you? I saw a dream, woke up, and marched here."

"What kind of dream?"

"Lord Narayan has instructed me to remove his idol from this wretched hut!"

"It can't be true! It's a lie!"

"I never lie," the goxaai answered firmly with a smile.

"I will never let you take the idol away!"

"I know you can't live without your god's idol. So, when the idol leaves so must you, my love!"

"I will never leave this house!"

"God will be furious if you don't!"

Maakon was frightened to core. She lamented, "No! My lord will never be angry with me! He never will!" She ran amuck towards the altar.

Baapukon stood motionless for a few moments and then followed after her. By this time, she had wrapped the idol around her neck in a hand-woven scarf, and was standing respectfully near the altar.

It had become bright outside. Baapukon yelled at her "You sinner! What do you think you are doing? It's a new day. How dare you touch god's idol without cleansing yourself first? Don't you know it's sacrilege to touch god's idol without an ablution first?"

"You will have my idol only over my dead body!"

Baapukon was dumbfounded. This was not the vulnerable Maakon he saw yesterday. This was definitely not the woman who cowered in his presence the day before. This was a new incarnation he never thought existed. He surmised, it would not be possible to take charge of her life in such a situation.

Baapukon waited for a while outside the house. Finally he slowly trudged back home.

Four days later Baapukon learned from his wife that Maakon had been fasting from the moment he left her house. She was constantly praying with the idol tied around her neck. The only times she ventured away from the altar were to have cleansing baths. She even slept by the altar. She was already in a serious condition from exhaustion and starvation.

Baapukon did not respond when his wife broke the news to him.

His wife was visibly irritated with him. After a while she herself decided to go over to Maakon's house.

There were a few neighbors sitting in the living room of Maakon's house. Baapukon's wife did not speak to anyone and went straight inside. "Maakon," she addressed her.

Maakon was lying near the shrine, almost unconscious. At first she didn't seem to hear her voice. When she spoke again, Maakon replied, "Is that you, Mother?" "Yes! Have you gone crazy? What do you think you are suffering for?"

"Mother, I have been summoned by the lord." Maakon said faintly.

“No! No! You are too young to die. Snap out of this nonsense! Come with me. Let us go to our house right now. I will nurse you back to health. Things will be alright.”

“Mother, please leave me alone. Please let me die with dignity serving my god.”

Baapukon’s wife kept on trying to convince her to eat something. But it was in vain. Maakon was firmly determined to die.

Baapukon’s wife went back home, and reprimanded her husband for not doing anything to alleviate Maakon’s pains. She had concluded that Maakon would not listen to anyone except the goxaai, the holy man of the village.

“I don’t think I can help her!”

“You are very cruel!” His wife murmured and walked away. “If you do not save her, you can take me for dead, too. Who else does she have other than us?”

Baapukon stared at her in silence. What should he say to her? It was his transgression that started this awful incident. He stood up and walked out of the house.

When he reached Maakon’s house, he walked to the altar. It was noon. There was nobody else around. The goxaai put his hand on the unconscious Maakon’s forehead and spoke softly, “Do you hear me, Maakon?”

Maakon labored to open her eyes and looked him in the eye. “What?” Her eyes were tired. “I recommend that you end this crazy fast unto death right this moment. Nobody will ever dare to take your idol away.”

Maakon replied in pain, “Sir! I don’t wish to linger even a moment longer in this world. Oh merciful god! I beseech you to save me from my worldly sufferings.”

Baapukon looked at her tired and serene face. He was at a loss regarding what to do next.

Just then Baapukon’s wife walked in. She brought with her a bowl of soaked rice and yogurt along with a few ripe bananas. He felt relieved at her arrival. He turned towards Maakon and said softly, “Maakon, see what my wife has brought for you!”

Maakon opened her eyes and seeing Baapukon’s wife, said faintly, “Mother, what have you brought for me? I wish to rather not eat, but put an end to this miserable life. Death is better than living alone in widowhood.”

Baapukon’s wife shared in Maakon’s grief by crying out in despair, “I swear in god’s name! If you want to die, I will kill myself, too.”

But Maakon was adamant. She was angry with Baapukon. She detested the whole world that relentlessly conspired against her. Knowing her hapless situation, Baapukon had approached her with his despicable erotic desires. She could never broach this to anyone, but no one could deny the truth either. She very well understood the goxaai’s motive for attempting to confiscate her idol as a punishment for a breach of her spiritual conduct. He wanted to capture her in his vise. Once in his grip, how could a helpless woman ever escape with a shred of dignity?

It was even more complicated than that. Her mundane life was insolvent, too. Without enduring pity of Baapukon’s family, how could she ever survive? Who would she turn to for day-to-day needs? Where would she work to earn even her meager living? Baapukon was right. A helpless woman could not survive a day in this cruel world without the protection of a someone resourceful. Especially a penniless widow!

Baapukon was well-established in society. People respected him. In contrast, what did she have? This society didn't understand her predicament. So, she had decided that it was far more honorable to die with dignity at that moment rather than give in to Baapukon's lust and die a slow and painful death.

She did not want to express her feelings of despair and shame to anyone, because she was convinced that nobody would understand.

The goxaai and his wife were frustrated and tired struggling against the widow's determination to die. Suddenly Baapukon regained his spiritual authority, and made a crucial decision. Baapukon announced that Maakon was under the influence of Saturn, the god of ill fortune and bad luck. Therefore there should be an elaborate and formal reading of the scriptures in honor of the goddess Sondee to overcome the ill effects. He would conduct the prayers right there in front of the enfeebled and prostrate Maakon. Having failed in every other way, Baapukon's wife thought this was the best thing to do under the circumstances. She labored to make appropriate arrangements for the prayers to start in the evening.

With a determination never seen before, Baapukon recited the prayers praising the powers of the goddess. The prayers continued through the night. After a few hours, his wife was tired and started dozing, and finally fell asleep on a reed and bamboo mat. However, nothing could disturb Baapukon's fervent worship. It continued uninterrupted.

Late at night, when he briefly lost his unbroken attention, he looked at Maakon and noticed that her eyes were fixed on him. He paused and politely asked, "Maakon, do you feel better now?" Maakon nodded giving a positive response.

By morning Maakon's tired eyes were weeping incessantly.

Baapukon finished his recitation and nudged his wife, "Wake up! It seems goddess Sondee has taken pity on us. She has heard our prayers. Before you go home for your customary morning ablution, give Maakon something to eat."

His wife rose and rinsed the soaked rice well. She added yogurt and sugar to it and put a little in Maakon's mouth.

Maakon was still engrossed listening to the high prayers to the goddess Sondee. All anger, sorrow and fright were dispelled from her mind. She was filled with a feeling of calm submission to the goddess.

Maakon was so lost in her reverent thoughts that she didn't know when she started swallowing the food. Only when she cleaned out the bowl and Baapukon's wife asked if she wanted more, she realized that her determination to die was broken by the power of goxaai's prayers.

"No, thank you. I am full." She looked the other way and responded.

She was no longer sorry for herself any more. She felt that her attempt to die has had an enormous and palpable impact on Baapukon. Probably, the same divine power would pull him toward goodness.

After it was bright and his wife left for home, Maakon looked at Baapukon and said, "Sir, may goddess Sondee bless you with wisdom!"

Baapukon did not resent the comments. He sighed in relief and said gently, "I swear, Maakon! You must get well. If I displayed any illicit intent toward you, I have given them up forever. From now on, if I displease you, goddess Sondee will be unhappy with me. From

this day, you are my spiritual peer.”

Maakon sat up. “Sir, a man of wisdom like you must never praise an ignoramus like me! You are a man of divinity.”

Baapukon sighed knowingly and left for home.

Maakon also sighed in relief and embraced the idol of Lord Narayan that she was still wearing in the scarf around her neck. In her own mind, she knew that she could fully depend on the goxaai’s goodwill and protection for the rest of her life.

Translated from the Assamese original “Maakonor Goxaai,” Axomiyaa Galpa Gussa, eds., Maheswar Neog, Jogesh Das, and Narayan Sarma, *Axom Xahitya Xabha*, 1984. Manjit Borah is a Ph.D. student of computer science at the Pennsylvania State University.

7

You Win Some, You Lose Some

By **Mahim Bora**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

Bhoogey, the sixty year old village chief, was watching his prized water buffalo Beejoy relish the fresh tall grass in the shallow swamp. Bhoogey was fondly addressed by everyone as the *gaonboora*, the grand old man of the village. A lot of eclectic thoughts were on his mind this sunny morning.

He was reminiscing of the old days—about the impressive herd of water buffaloes he used to have; in particular, his recollections centered around the pair of buffaloes whom he had affectionately named Joy and Beejoy. It was utterly unfortunate that Joy was killed by a stray tiger several years ago. Another marauding tiger had scratched Beejoy's left eye, leaving him wounded for life.

During the British Raj, the *gaonboora's* was a wealthy, and well-respected family in the Jolluh Pootony area. They raised a large herd of cattle and water buffaloes for milk as well as for ploughing. They also had twenty five acres of well-irrigated paddy and five acres of lush vegetable and fruit gardens. But, with the gradual loss of material wealth in the last several years, there had been a definite downslide in the high esteem he and his family naturally enjoyed in the village.

After Independence, the younger generation was fortunate to receive satisfactory public education. As a result, most sought after and secured low-level administrative jobs in the state government and moved away to the towns following the elusive search for greener pastures. These days, hardly anyone wanted to take up farming as the primary source of livelihood, no one wanted to raise cattle—a traditional source of wealth. The older folks that used to tenaciously raise cattle, following in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers, were mostly forced to sell. These unforgiving developments of modern times which had conspired to despoil the simple beauties of country life had made him so despondent that the *gaonboora* himself sold his beloved herd of cattle and buffaloes. Even his own children deserted him; they grew up, married and moved away to the neighboring town. They usually came home like strangers for a couple of days during the festive seasons—at the time of the Bihus and on other family occasions. In his old age, the *gaonboora* lived alone

with his wife and a couple of helping hands—a husband and a wife. He took care of the land and his other properties with their help.

After the death of the buffalo named Joy, the prosperity and prestige of his family started to wane precipitously. Five years ago, the indomitable gaonboora was himself seriously wounded in an amateur, but ferocious buffalo fight. After this unfortunate incident, the gaonboora never took the other buffalo Beejoy, who was the better fighter, to take part in any more fights. He actually stopped going anywhere near a *bihutolee*—an open-air fair ground where the Assamese people gather for merrymaking during the three Bihus—the most joyous festivals of the year. It is in such fair grounds where the amateur buffalo fights usually take place. Every year, enthusiastic residents of twenty or twenty five villages in the area assemble and organize buffalo fights during *Magh Bihu*—the harvest festival celebrated in the middle of January. The fights take place over two days, and there are usually between twenty and twenty five fights in total.

The gaonboora's buffalo Beejoy was raised in the Lonka region in Central Assam, well-known for raising highly successful fighter buffalos. Beejoy bravely fought and won every fight like a permanent champion till five years ago. Even though Joy, Beejoy and their mother were all raised domestically, they still had the bestial courage and the primal instincts of wild buffaloes. At the peak of youth, they had the reckless love for life only seen in self-confident wild animals. They had uncontrollable emotions like those possessed only by mythical demons.

To be entirely truthful, Joy was not really a formidable fighter. But, sometimes the gaonboora would coerce Joy and Beejoy to fight with each other to entertain the crowds at the Magh Bihu fair ground. He did this especially if in some year there were not many hardy, well-trained fighters who could bring the crowd to stomping on its feet, and raise a fire in the hearts of those assembled. Usually, it took a lot of coaxing to get them to fight each other. They would then act like two brave soldiers in a *bhowna*—an historic medieval play, and simulate an authentic looking fight to entertain the spectators. Later, after they were both back home, they would fondly lick each other and caress each other by resting one's neck over that of the other as if to rekindle their mutual love and affection.

After Beejoy stopped fighting, the excitement and the explosive animation of the fighting arena had dwindled quite a bit. Most owners were afraid to let their buffaloes fight. If a buffalo was wounded, it gravely wounded the financial well-being of the owner's family for a long time to come as well. These were not professional fighters, they were extremely crucial for any rural farming family for activities such as ploughing the paddy during the rainy season, and transporting the grain at the time of harvest. Sometimes, a buffalo died as a result of injuries sustained in the fight; in such a case, one of the primary sources of livelihood for the owner's family was lost prematurely. The crowd which rejoiced at the Bihu fair ground watching the frenzied buffalos fight to their gory deaths, went home satisfied after witnessing an exciting primeval fight for survival. But, the crowd hardly commiserated with the owner who suddenly lost a fortune. Nobody compensated the master for his grave loss by giving some paddy, or by raising some money on his behalf.

During the last four years, after Beejoy stopped fighting, no buffalo from the Jolluh Pootony area was able to achieve the glory of victory. Every year the people of the village—men, women, children, and teenagers—returned with heads downcast, frustrated after repeatedly losing the fight to decorated buffaloes from other villages. During these years, the consistent winner was the buffalo named Birball owned by Joydhon Chetiya of Village Borpathoree.

Birball, endowed with uncontrollable energy and youthful prowess, proudly defeated every enemy he faced in the brutal arena and delivered the glory of victory to his village, with his head and horns held high.

This was the fifth year. With supreme confidence, the people of Village Borpathoree arrogantly challenged everyone a fortnight prior to the Bihu. If a buffalo from any other village could defeat Birball in this year's fight, the people of Borpathoree would treat all the people of that village to a sumptuous feast on the eve of the Bihu in the *hurrolee ghars*—the festive tepee-like structures built with bamboos and hay in the fallow winter fields. On the eve of the Bihu, the young people of the village camp overnight in the *hurrolee ghars*, heartily party unescorted all night, cook and eat good food, ushering in the festive season.

As a result of the challenge from Village Borpathoree, people from several villages started training their own champion buffaloes. However, most of these buffaloes remained uncared for during the rest of the year, to be remembered and pampered for a few days before the Bihu. The villagers did not seem to realize that it was almost impossible to produce a winner in a mere fifteen days. One had to start at least three months in advance, feed the buffalo on the best fresh tall grass in the village swamps, and sometimes sneakily feed him in the middle of the night on a field of lentils growing in an unsuspecting neighbor's unfenced farm. In simple terms, the buffalo had to be adequately fed and fattened. In addition, one had to shine the horns by repeatedly rubbing lime on them. One had to make the hooves as sharp as a freshly sharpened knife by rubbing oil, and by tirelessly scrubbing them with hard shells of snails.

Villagers from several distant villages also took note of the grand challenge. Therefore, it was certain that several well-trained buffaloes would show up for the fight on the day of the Bihu.

The residents of the village Jolluh Pootony came to the gaonboora for advice. His friends and peers told him, "Gaonboora, you must do something to help out the whole village. Otherwise, there will be no prestige left for our village. None else in our village is as courageous as you are. No one else has the guts to let their buffaloes fight. Please train your buffalo Beejoy to fight again. His companion Joy has died anyway; he is also blind in one eye. Let him die on the field if it comes to that. The brave should really die on the battlefield."

The gaonboora was not at all prepared for such a request from his neighbors. Did Beejoy have the power, the agility and the sharpness to be a winner again? Moreover, nobody in his family—not his wife, his children and their wives, nor his granddaughters would let the gaonboora fight at this age; they would be extremely concerned that he might himself be injured again during the fight. Anyway, this year, none of his children and their families planned to be home on the day of Magh Bihu—they had come home every year since they moved away. This time, however, they were all taking vacations elsewhere. So, they had written home saying they would come home perfunctorily just for a day before the day of the Bihu.

After deliberating silently for a while, he told his neighbors that he would seriously think about their request before making a decision one way or the other.

His neighbors went home fully confident that he would not let them down.

The gaonboora affectionately walked over to Beejoy, leashed to a post in the front yard. Beejoy was lazily resting and regurgitating the fresh grass he had eaten earlier. The sight of

the buffalo instantly filled the gaonboora's heart with fatherly pride. His majestic horns were so huge that they extended about five feet on each side; magnificent horns are the source of unrestrained pride for buffaloes from Lonka where Beejoy's origins were. Moreover, it had taken many years of tender care to sharpen his horns; in his reckless youthful days, the gaonboora used to spend large amounts of time and money to shine them. Now a days, there was no one to take care of the buffalo. In addition, he no longer had that kind of money to spare on a dangerous and callously ungrateful sport.

The gaonboora caressed the buffalo by tenderly stroking his hands on one of the long horns. "Beejoy, will you be able to fight this year? Can you win? Since your retirement from the fighting circuit, Birball—the buffalo from Village Borpathoree has been marching arrogantly all over the region. There is no other buffalo as brave and fearless as you in our village to stand face to face, eyeball to eyeball with Birball. Everyone in our village has lost the love of adventure—the men as well as the buffaloes. Can you bring back prestige to our village, restore our lost glory, reclaim the forfeited dignity of our forefathers?"

Beejoy seemed to understand what his master was trying to convey. He jumped upright energetically, and his nose started making loud noises like that of a steam engine. The hairs all over his body seemed to stand straight on their roots—just like thousands of archers in a battlefield standing upright at attention ready to fight on the slightest cue from their decorated commander. He started sniffing his master's body as well as his hands. Yes, he could, he could fight and give the other buffaloes a good run for their money even with his old body, just like the old times.

"That's wonderful! You are so brave!! It's better to die brave with one's head held high than to die in utter shame. My pride in you has sustained and encouraged me all my life. Even now I want to spend the remaining days of my life basking in your glory. It's so sad, I have nothing to be proud of in my lazy and pampered sons who don't want to work honestly on the farm and earn a living by the sweat of their brows, following my own example. They have taken the easy route hiding behind lifeless office desks doing petty bureaucratic jobs that bring no satisfaction whatsoever. I am extremely proud of you dear son! Now, let's get ready in earnest. Mind you, it's better to die proudly on the battlefield than to run away timidly and shamelessly."

Starting that very day, the gaonboora started feeding Beejoy on his own. He started regularly polishing his horns with lime at night and with heavy mustard oil in the morning. He arranged to have fresh grass cut from the swamps and delivered for Beejoy. In just ten or twelve days, the gaonboora's attentive care made him much healthier, much more energetic and sprightly. But, the gaonboora realized that Beejoy was old; it was not possible to fully nurse him back to his prime health of youth any longer, however much he tried.

But all of gaonboora's dreams were laid to rest about four days before the Bihu. His sons unexpectedly came home from the town before their scheduled arrival, and promptly forbade him to take Beejoy to fight. They were extremely worried considering their father's advanced age and deteriorating health. In their dispassionate view, it was better to unceremoniously shoot the buffalo or to sell it for a small profit. They offered a sum of a hundred rupees to the villagers, sincerely requesting them not to encourage their father to fight at this old age and gravely injure himself again; they asked the villagers to rent a buffalo to fight from another village. They even promised that they would fully compensate anyone else in the village who would come forward to let his buffalo fight, if that buffalo was injured and rendered useless in the fight.

His sons left on their vacation trips on the first day of the Bihu as planned earlier. The gaonboora blamed his own fate for not being able to fight. He took Beejoy out with him and came home only in the evening after spending the whole day outside. He barely ate his lunch. His wife was very nervous and sad. She became restless, and she cried incessantly, not knowing what to do.

On the second day of the Bihu, the buffalo fights started early as planned. A large number of spectators came from far and near; many people came from the town in rented trucks and buses. It was almost an endless sea of people; they all came to watch the famed Birball, the buffalo from Village Borpathoree, fight.

On this auspicious day, the gaonboora morosely sat at home like a man possessed—disinterested in life and everything around him. He did not feel the slightest urge to go to the fair ground where the joyous Bihu celebrations were in full swing. He sat on a *moorha*—a low wicker stool in the front yard, and fed fresh grass and hay to Beejoy. He consoled himself—it was not the first time, it was the fourth year in a row he had not set foot on the fight arena. He rationalized to himself, there was no primal excitement in buffalo fights any more. He assured himself that no other buffalo could ever fight like his own Beejoy did.

From the field where the buffalo fight was in progress, sounds of *dhols*—the native drums and the more elaborate bands, loud laughters, and raucous cheers filled the air. Now a days, during the breaks in the fights, the organizers arranged for hired bands to play fast dance tunes to entertain the crowd, and for young boys and girls to dance wild, unfamiliar dances. Moreover, sometimes, some cute little boys dressed up as girls with flowing scarves and handkerchiefs and danced with great excitement. Sometimes, the adults also joined by dancing the traditional Bihu. All of this was done in the name of simple, open-hearted country fun; everyone enjoyed it immensely and joined in the camaraderie by ebulliently clapping in unison, and by laughing and cheering heartily.

The spectators gathered with a lot of expectations; but most of their enthusiasm and anticipation were beginning to dissipate after a short while. One by one, Birball from Village Borpathoree engaged in fight with ten to fifteen buffaloes; none of his competitors could persist more than five minutes. Birball was drunk with arrogance as a result of his invincibility; he started swaggering cockily in the arena, making exuberant noises. Repeated victory cheers of the exultant residents of Village Borpathoree, completely wrought up with uncontrollable excitement, filled the festive air for miles around. The residents of Jolluh Pootony were so deeply mired in shame and humiliation that most were unable to even look up and look others in the eye. It was not only the residents of Jolluh Pootony, but residents of about a score of other villages from all around—such as Hutee Gaon, Pune Gaon, Shooter Gaon, Coomer Gaon, Deegholee Aati, Bengena Aati, Borbhokotee, Comekhiyal—were rudely, but not quite unexpectedly, once again, forced to acknowledge the supremacy of the buffalo from Village Borpathoree. Not a single buffalo from any of these villages could fight Birball for even half an hour, not to dream of winning.

The passage of time had not been generous to the people of Jolluh Pootony. Till just four years ago, the teenagers and young adults from Village Borpathoree had consistently returned home downcast in shame after losing all their fights without fail. Alas, those were the good old days!

Suddenly, Beejoy stopped eating grass for a few moments, raised his head, and stared at the gaonboora; the buffalo's ears stood straight as if he expected to hear something. In

return, Gaonboora Bhoogey also stared expectantly at the buffalo.

“Do you hear them dear Beejoy? Do you hear their insulting cheers? These are the sounds of victory of Village Borpathoree. These are nothing but haughty insults being poured on our accursed ears.” Suddenly inspired, Bhoogey asked of the buffalo standing in front of him, “Can you do it again, Beejoy? There is still ample time. Can you fight this menace of Birball and teach him a well-deserved lesson in utter humiliation?”

Hearing the imploring sounds of his excited master, Beejoy stood up with a swift, powerful motion. His eyes were filled with fire. They resembled the all-consuming fire that devours the *hurrolee ghars* ceremonially lit after the all night merrymaking, early in the morning on the first day of the Bihu. The buffalo’s mouth was emitting hissing sounds with all the ferocity he could muster—just like those of a savage cobra seconds before attacking its mortally frightened prey. With his front left leg, he started kicking the ground, vigorously digging into it; he started shaking his long and majestic horns with incredible speed declaring his full preparedness.

As Beejoy and his master, Gaonboora Bhoogey proudly and sure-footedly entered the fighting arena, the hapless spectators saw a ray of hope. They started cheering again in a frenzied unison. Gaonboora Bhoogey untied the leash with which he had led Beejoy to the arena. On the far side of the field, Birball started screaming and bellowing at the top of his voice.

The gaonboora carefully observed the adversary with keen eyes. Birball was a prime example of an Assamese water buffalo; he was of excellent stock. He had all the prowess of a wild, irrepressible animal. He was not too tall, his body was very well-developed and well-muscled, the horns were short, curving slightly towards the back. His forehead was strong, as if some skilled blacksmith created it with incessant pounding of a giant hammer on smelt iron; it was as if the power of an elephant had been intentionally stowed away on that broad forehead for safekeeping. It was definitely not going to be a cakewalk, it was going to take all the might that old Beejoy could mobilize—the gaonboora concluded.

It was as if Beejoy also understood the gravity of the situation—today was the last day of his mortal life. It would not be possible for him to escape his fate by running away from this buffalo, the epitome of bestial power. He must fight his nemesis to the last and martyr his life by facing ineluctable death like a brave soldier upholding the honor of his humbled village. He was ready to face his destiny.

Amidst the noise of the pounding of the drums, thunderous cheers, and exhortatory and ritualistic calls to God, Beejoy and Birball catapulted at each other like two swift pointed arrows. It was as if two colossal railway engines were purposefully thumping each other headlong in the middle of the arena, to brutally punish each other to the fullest. The booming noise reminded the spectators of the reverberating sound that is generated when tall, mighty trees are felled to the ground with a logger’s axe. The battle had started in right earnest. Beejoy tried to take a steady confronting stand. Birball, intent on piercing him mercilessly with his horns, ferociously attacked him from the left side, going in circles. But, Birball could not even nudge Beejoy from the steady ensconced stand he had taken no matter how much he tried. Beejoy was able to nullify all of Birball’s attacks from his entrenched position. The excited noise and wild cheers of the spectators filled the air over scores of villages all around.

It went on like this for about half an hour; no one was getting the upper hand. At this

point, Birball decided to embark upon a novel battle strategy. All of a sudden, when no one expected, Birball pretended to give up the confrontation and dashed away to the right. Smelling victory was his in his grasp at last, Beejoy followed Birball confidently to finish that which was destined to be. But, suddenly and very craftily, Birball turned around swiftly taking Beejoy completely aback, and struck him on the forehead with all his might. When Beejoy tried to face that tremendous assault with his left horn, it could not stand up to the occasion, it broke into two pieces like a frail stalk of dry jute; about a foot of the long, stately horn broke and fell to the ground with a rattling sound.

Although Birball inflicted a heavy wound on his enemy, he was also hurt in the process. He stepped back a few unsteady steps in reaction. Beejoy was almost thunderstruck at what happened to him; but defiantly and cautiously, he stepped back in the opposite direction towards the middle of the field, while still maintaining a frontal configuration.

Unquestionably, Birball had wrested the upper hand. Once again, at lightning speed, Birball raced towards Beejoy, turned left very swiftly and struck Beejoy in the neck with his murderous horn. Beejoy, who was blind in the left eye, and had just lost a good part of his left horn, was in a precarious, life-threatening situation. By the time he managed to turn around and fight with his right horn, blood was gushing forth from the wounded left side. The blood clotted immediately in places, and the left side of his head started looking like a cluster of bright red hibiscus. Each strike of Birball's horns caused Beejoy to lose the grip of his feet on the ground, he was being shoved back violently, one slow and cruel step at a time.

The spectators were understandably frantic. The turbulent noises, the victory cheers and the exhortations to fight from all around became extremely raucous. Birball, shrewdly understood the weakness of his mortal enemy, and steadily pushed and shoved him from the middle of the fair ground to the dry paddy nearby. Since the harvest was over, the paddy had no rice, just the *noraa*—the short dry paddy stalks left standing erect after the harvest. This gory spectacle continued for a while, entertaining the blood-thirsty crowd. Beejoy unsuccessfully tried supporting his left legs against an *aali*—the raised but low, earthen boundary of a plot of land irrigated during the farming season. But, Birball was mercilessly cruel and was set in an determined mood to finish his kill; he continued assaulting Beejoy from all directions. After a while, Beejoy lost the grip of his front feet; they opened up since all strength had drained out of them. His head drooped till it touched the ground, and the whole of his body started shivering violently.

The spectators started sighing loudly. Joydhon, the proud owner, and some others came close to Birball, the apparent victor, and started striking him gently with their sticks urging him to give up. After quite a bit of effort, they were able to calm him down and walk him back to the fighting arena. But, he kept on bellowing fiercely, he was unable to completely control his delirious excitement after the taste of a sure kill. Joydhon continued to stand close to him with his stick so that the buffalo would not run back to the wounded animal to finish his task.

At this time, Gaonboora Bhoogey was squatting next to his beloved buffalo and gently patting him in the back, "Congratulations! I am very proud of you! I must thank you, Beejoy!! Even at this old age, you fought very well. You may have lost the fight, but you didn't run away from the battle. This is the fundamental essence of life, isn't it? It's a constant battlefield. You win some, you lose some. But, you must face every battle without fear and fight as best you can." After Gaonboora Bhoogey tearfully massaged him for about

five minutes, Beejoy regained his self. He stood up, and Bhoogey slowly led him back to the arena.

With a thunderous scream, Birball turned around, and saw the wounded animal walking back to the arena. But, quite inexplicably, Birball decided to calmly walk away to the far side of the field, away from incoming Beejoy, instead of putting up a fight. Seeing that Birball was walking away, Joydhon let his guard down for a brief moment.

Suddenly, there was a complete reversal of tactical fortune. When every one was least expecting, Beejoy struck. Amidst all the people milling around, Beejoy found some narrow gaps, and like a javelin thrown by a proficient athlete, raced towards an unsuspecting Birball who apparently wanted to shun a renewed confrontation. Birball, who had almost secured a victory moments earlier, was taken totally off-guard. But, he discovered his agile self in no time, and instantly prepared himself to counter the attack and make his own determined charge. But, it was a tad too late. It took just the blink of an eye. When the spectators realized what had happened, they found Birball stuck to the top of Beejoy's pointed horn—the one which was still intact, and wagging like a hapless fish caught in a fisherman's hook that slowly and painfully wrenches out a wounded life. His deafening screams for precious life were earsplitting. It was as if a small aircraft came in from nowhere and crashed amidst the horrified crowd killing everyone inside. Everyone was dumbstruck—no one spoke, no one moved. There was pin drop silence. Beejoy was violently and incessantly shaking Birball impaled motionless on his horns; it was just like the way little kids shake a *bogori* plant to make the berries drop to the ground to pick and eat. Birball was quite heavy on his horns, and after a short while, Beejoy lost his precarious balance and fell down on the ground with Birball still stuck to his horns. Beejoy's horns had pierced Birball's chest deeply just near the front feet. After Beejoy fell on the ground, under pressure, the needlepoint of his horns penetrated and punctured Birball's heart. He shook violently, but after a short while, his body stopped shivering.

By this time, the spectators had gathered around the fatally entangled animals from all sides trying to catch a closer glimpse of the two pivotal actors of this spectacularly sanguinary episode; then they hurriedly headed back home to their mundane lives with great satisfaction after bearing witness to a fight well-fought.

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8

The River Port at Kathoneebury

By **Mahim Bora**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

There were several large mounds of coal scattered all over the river bank that had been ravaged by relentless erosion over many years. Verdant waves of grown weeds and tall grass rocked on the low sand dunes that had emerged after the flood waters had receded. During the unforgiving rainy season, the waters of the mighty Brahmaputra regularly rose up to threaten the elevated road quite a distance away. However, since it was the dry season now, one had to trudge down a steep bank to the edge of the water. I observed a few walking trails that were built by placing tightly woven bamboo matting on the sand.

There was only one store in the port area, a thatched tea stand built on a raised bamboo platform. The wide folding door to the stand was built from flattened tin obtained by cutting open big cans. It also formed a makeshift awning for the store. Right below it, the owner of the store had placed two long and sturdy pieces of bamboo, cut along the length in the middle. They made an improvised, and somewhat comfortable bench. Patrons sat on them, lazily drank tea, smoked birisa cigarette-like tube of tobacco rolled on dried leaf, and generally lounged and chatted.

I was not doing any of the above. I had arrived at the port during daylight in order to catch the steamboat scheduled at nine at night . I was simply staring at the sun which resembled a big bowl of bright red vermilion. The water of the river looked colorful. It seemed as if the many little waves on the turbulent river had smeared themselves with red paint borrowed from the sun's limitless supply. They were restlessly running away from me, possibly because they had some fun to partake in a distant locale downstream!

It was getting dark. In my fertile mind, it seemed as if someone, in exasperation, threw the whole bowl of vermilion on the face of the playful waves. As a result, the brightness slowly disappeared. In the absence of sun, the port started looking like a widowed woman—a woman traditionally not entitled to apply vermilion on her forehead.

I started feeling lonely. There were no other respectable passengers in the port yet. There were two Nepalese men with their wives. A few immigrant tea plantation laborers were also

present. As long as the sun was shining, the port was busy with trucks and other heavy vehicles transporting crates of tea and tons of coal. But, by now, it was becoming difficult to distinguish the smoke bellowing out of the chimneys in the distant tea plantations from the darkness itself. Finding only a few stranded souls, the arriving blackness became bold. It quickly enveloped the ramshackle port along with its porters and other laborers, the small family that owned the tea stand, and the few passengers who had assembled.

I became curious at the growing noise of wheels along with accompanying tinkles of rattles. Through gaps in the reed wall of the tea stand, I saw a bullock cart approach. The cartman got off first and carefully placed the yoke on the ground. The two bulls, free after a toiling trip, started smelling and eating the few scattered strands of grass on the sand. Then, I saw the green screen that separated the cartman and the occupants of the covered cart. My mind seemed to partake itself of some of the green and started fluttering like the screen.

Following the older man, an agile boy of fifteen or sixteen swiftly jumped out of the cart. He struggled with the man to carry out a metal trunk and place it on the ground. The driver floundered to raise the heavy box on to his head and then plodded along following the boy to the warehouse where the ticket counter was situated.

With a little attention, I could almost distinctly see the silhouette of a very attractive young woman who finally stepped outside the cart. The last shimmering particles of light gliding in the early evening air had almost completely vanished by then. The woman adjusted her crumpled clothes and stood outside intently staring at the river beneath her. After a short while, the young boy and the cartman were back to carry inside a few bags. They also carried a hold-all, an all-purpose bag that primarily holds a travel bedding, and is rolled into a tight bundle during travel. My eyes followed their path.

A little later, the boy and the man were once again outside. The boy gave the man some money and instructed him to head back home without much delay. "Please stop by our house and tell mom and dad that we arrived at the port safe and sound," he requested him. After speaking with the driver, the boy went inside. I observed as the cartman gulped a small cup of tea and devoured a few biscuits in haste. Finding a laborer-type man standing by the tea-stand, he briefly chatted with him. I overheard a part of the conversation: he had to ride back a distance of ten miles.

The slow and laborious trip back home for the older man started soon afterwards. The lantern he lighted before leaving and hung below the bullock cart could be seen shaking and flickering for quite some time. Finally, the point of light disappeared behind a turn.

A feeble wick of a burning candle appeared at one end of the large waiting area. The woman and the young boy had selected that area for the long wait for the steamboat. My luggage was also right there on the floor. In the whole big building, it was the only area which seemed a little cozy. Two bright hurricane lamps also came up, one in the walkway in front of the low building, and the other in front of the tea stand. These three anchors of brightness made a valiant attempt to defeat the darkness which had overcome the place earlier.

I heard a clod of dry earth rush down the bank and fall into the water with a thud. In the shallow water near the edge, very close to where I was waiting, one could almost hear schools of tiny fish restlessly entertaining themselves. I peered at the huge piles of coal scattered around the bank. I must have started imagining: they seemed to come to life in the form of monsters from fairy tales. They were ready to chase me with their natural

ferocity.

I could not control my desire to go back inside and reoccupy my little spot. I also wanted to make my acquaintance with the new passengers whose arrival I had silently watched. I stepped on the sturdy deck and walked inside. In the darkness, odors from many eclectic sources seemed to have started an unsupervised chorus after getting awfully tipsy. The sources included crates of loose tea, drums of coal tar destined for road work in some far away town, bags of dried fish, and the mounds of coal outside. It felt as if someone had opened a locked trunk that had remained unopened for years. It might sound strange; but, I like such a melange of smells very much.

Sitting on the floor, the porters and the few other low-class people were busily finishing up their dinners. A few steps away from the place which I had claimed for my luggage, the Nepalese families had spread a blanket, sat down, and were singing songs with interminably long tunes. A little further away, a few people either of Saontali or Oriya origin, had sat in a comfortable circle and were chewing on something very noisily. It might have been a snack of rice, crisply fried. Right next to my luggage, the young boy had opened their hold-all and had laid down. He was engrossingly leafing through an English film magazine. On the other side of the makeshift bed, was sitting the young woman. She was glued to a newspaper.

I was unsure of the best way to start an interaction. I tried to get their attention by fumbling with my suitcase a little. I thought I succeeded when the young woman looked up at me. She stared at me for a while in order to get a good view of my face in the flickering light. Unwittingly for her, it also created an opportunity for me to observe her beautiful face illuminated by the light of the candle. The boy also stared at me holding the magazine in his hand. As I bent down to move the suitcase, the candle light gently swept over my face to make it clearly visible. The unobstructed view of my face caused the boy to sit bolt up. The young woman pulled up her veil to cover the bun of her hair as a courteous show of feminine modesty.

“Is this your suitcase? Perhaps our open hold-all was blocking it. Let me move it for you. We will make some space for you right here in the light. Please open your bedding and take some rest.”

I was startled a bit because the boy spoke in a manner that seemed to convey a sense of complete familiarity. I had been embarrassed many times earlier for promptly forgetting faces of people I had met and come to know. I tried hard to recollect the boy’s face from memory. I did not succeed in the effort. I replied politely, “Please don’t worry a bit about me. You two sit and rest comfortably. I will make arrangements for myself.”

My travel bedding, draped in a blanket, had collected a noticeable layer of dirt on the outside. I quickly moved it away from their sight because I was ashamed of its shabby state. I was embarrassed by the ungainly appearance of my suitcase also. No doubt, once upon a time, it was of excellent quality. It was made of English steel, but time had taken its toll.

Seeing me collect my belongings, the boy spoke to me with a sense of genuine regret, “Are you planning to move your things somewhere else? You don’t have to do so for our convenience. In fact, we will feel guilty if you do so.” The boy actually started rolling shut the open hold-all he was resting on.

“Please don’t worry about me at all. You two must take your rest. Who knows when the

steamboat will arrive tonight? Its timing is very erratic. Quite frequently, it doesn't come at the scheduled hour. On some bad days, it doesn't even show up at all!" I told them.

The boy responded, "That's precisely why we would like it very much if you stay with us right here. There are very few passengers tonight. Moreover, I don't see any other Assamese souls. My sister and I have been discussing this for a while. It would be really nice if we could make an acquaintance with someone we can chat with."

I clearly concluded that being alone in strange surroundings, the young boy was as frightened as the sister, although he was trying to put up a brave front. One of the reasons for which I had intentionally orchestrated my movements a little earlier was to remove my bundle of clothes from the proximity of their bed. Having succeeded in doing so, I was finally able to take out the clothes I wanted to change into. I opened the bundle and finally sat near their feet.

"I think it is already time to buy tickets. Let me go and inquire. Where are you two traveling to?" I knew there was ample time before the ticket counter would open. But, I did not have anything else to talk about.

"We are going to Jorhat." The boy answered eagerly. "Are you sure you want to go to Jorhat? I am terribly afraid that tonight's steamer is heading downstream." I was taken aback at the lack of information the two young people displayed. It would be awfully irresponsible for someone not to know the direction of the ship on the day of travel. I did not think they were so remiss in their planning. The boy seemed to derive pleasure in explaining my naiveté to me. Like a proud fifth grader explaining an intricate matter to someone from the sixth grade, he took delight in explaining to me that they would take the "down" steamboat and get off in Xilghat. From there they would take a bus, and travel to Jorhat.

"We have to be in Jorhat by tomorrow. It's very urgent." The boy continued.

It was not the meaning conveyed, but the uninterpreted words themselves that I found very interesting. The woman, who was obviously married, was sitting demurely on the sidelines, with apparent disinterest in the ongoing conversation. But, in reality from the way she rocked her head from my face to her brother's, she seemed to have become an active participant. I was impressed by her remarkable ability to make her presence felt without the need to even whisper a single word. From her appearance, I surmised that she must have gotten married very recently. Once again, I lost myself in reverie. Even in the faint candle light, I could distinctly see her lovely visage as it appeared on her wedding day. The delectable fragrance emanating from her body and her long hairs was completely mesmerizing. With her healthy and radiant face, long and graceful hands, the brilliant yellowish tinge of her flawless skin, and the captivating beauty of her traditional wedding dress made of famed Assamese silk, she resembled a live painting, for my viewing pleasure. The sight of such beauty was genuinely rare.

Suddenly, I was transported back to reality. I realized that the boy had been asking me a question. He started fidgeting not getting any response from me.

"I am sorry! What did you ask? Oh, where am I going to? I am also traveling to Xilghat. That's where my home is." "We will definitely enjoy your company. The steamer arrives at Xilghat before dawn. It is a little scary for us. We are very fortunate to make your acquaintance here tonight. Isn't that true, sister?"

The sister was leafing through the magazine without actually reading it. Her ears were set to our conversation. She looked up approvingly at her brother. It was as if God had perpetually stamped an attractive smile on her rosy countenance. Even her forehead seemed to exude happiness. Her nose, ears, and chin also seemed to eagerly participate in the resonant smile. In addition, her dark eyelashes also smiled gently to enhance the overall presence of her comely face. It was almost the scheduled hour for the ship's arrival. I stood up to go and make inquiries. The boy took some money out of his pocket, and tried to give it to me requesting me to buy their tickets also. I stopped him and told him that the bell for the ticket had not rung yet, and even if the counter was open, I would buy the tickets with my money, and they could pay me later.

"If there is still some time for the ship to arrive, can we have some hot tea?" The boy looked at his sister for her approval.

Hearing her brother's request, she started groping the innards of the hold-all and while doing so, asked aloud, "Where did you put the flask? We need it to fetch tea from the stall?" I heard her voice for the first time. It was deep, but at the same time soft. I don't know why, but I thought the tenderness of her voice was like molten butter! However, I do not think such a description is ever apt for human voice.

The boy found the flask and gave it to me since I volunteered a trip to the tea stall. First, I walked to the ticket counter to make my inquiries. As I walked to the counter, I thought of what might be happening outside in the dark night. I pictured a river shark looking up from the water to find out what time it was. I heard a large chunk of loose earth as it rolled into the river with a rumbling noise. I also heard tired sounds of musical instruments from a tea plantation afar, wafting with the river's swift current. It must be laborers enjoying themselves late at night.

The man at the counter told me that there was no news of the steamer. So, tickets would not be sold yet. He feared that the ship might have ran aground in shallow water somewhere. The ticket clerk said that the last one of the frequent earthquakes churned the river bed with absolute ferocity. He blamed nature for upsetting his sleeping schedule. Finally, I arrived at the tea stall with my mission to fetch some hot tea. The owner's family had just finished their late dinner. His young sons and daughters had started to take the displayed merchandise off of a wide and low, bamboo table- cum-bed and were preparing to sleep. On the makeshift bench outside the stall, the fat middle-aged owner was excitedly playing bridge with three other men.

Someone said loudly, "It's ten o'clock! I must leave soon." "You can't go now! Let's play for a while longer." Another protested while shuffling the cards.

No one had seen me since I was standing behind the engrossed players, observing them without disturbing their antics. "One heart!," "One spade!," "No trump!," "Two clubs!," "Three diamonds!," "Double play!"—I heard many such excited calls crackling like fire crackers.

A game started and finished in front of my own eyes. The session finally came to an unexpected end because the person who urged for continuation lost a hand quite badly. Finally, the three visitors said good-bye. By this time, I had come to know that they were employees of some neighboring tea plantations. They regularly assembled and played bridge in the tea stall, late in the evening.

I was staring at the shopkeeper's face which looked like a spade to me. It took him some

time to notice me. "Can I help you, sir?" He pleasantly inquired.

"I want some tea. Is it too late?" I asked him as I observed the young children who were making arrangements for the night. "Of course not! I heard that the steamer may not come tonight." One of his young sons jumped up from bed, and came to stand by me to take my order.

"One cup, sir?"

I handed the flask to the boy, "Three cups!"

"I see your family is here, too!" The owner continued, "Please let me know if you need anything else. Even if you want to have dinner at this late hour, it's no problem. At any time during the night, if you need hot water or anything at all, we will be very glad to be of service."

The man's skin was very dark and he was very obese. But, there was tenderness in his face. His voice was helpful and compassionate. After a brief conversation, I came to know that his wife had passed away a few years ago. Following that, he and his small family started a new life on the sandy beaches of the Brahmaputra, one of the widest and cruelest rivers in the world.

Tonight's experience had increased my love for the people of the world. Everyone seemed to be caring, affectionate, and helpful. I was very pleased with myself and the world. I made some more small talk with the owner, thanked him and finally left after about an hour after I arrived at the stall. I spoke with the ticket clerk again and understood that there was no sign of the steamer anywhere yet.

I made it back to our little spot in the waiting area. I had to walk carefully along a narrow aisle between two tall rows of tea boxes, arranged one on top of the other, up to the ceiling.

The group which was snacking on crispy rice earlier was now snoring loudly. It sounded as if they were popping corn. The songs sung by the Nepalese family must have reached their crescendo a while earlier. Their musical performance was now at its ebb. They had stretched out on the floor and were now yawning.

The film magazine was spread out comfortably on the boy's chest who was sound asleep. The poor boy seemed to have become completely secure after finding a night-time companion in me. His sister, who was sitting near his head, must have been waiting for me. Seeing me return, she slowly woke up her brother. "Boroon, aren't you going to have some tea?" Neither was she unnecessarily hurried, nor unnatural in the way she reacted to my arrival. I understood that she had self-confidence. She was also willing to trust others. As a result, I lost most of my uneasiness in her presence.

"Boroon," I also called out.

The three of us sat together to have tea. I had brought three clay cups from the tea stand. The young woman opened their suitcase and brought out some fried coconut balls, and two or three other types of delicacies. After accepting my share, I wanted to go aside a little bit to give them privacy. They protested. As a result, I ate sitting close to them.

"Boroon, spread your bedding well. Hang the mosquito net also. You will be able to sleep well for the rest of the night." "Will the steamer come tonight?" The two asked me in unison. "What are we going to do Boroon?," the sister asked of her little brother. She was very worried. I had never thought that anxiety could make someone look beautiful. But,

her load of worries seemed to perform such a miracle tonight.

“What’s so urgent in Jorhat, Boroan?” The words suddenly sprang out of my mouth.

“We need to be in Jorhat by any means tomorrow.” This time the young woman responded to my question directly although she did not look up to my eyes.

“Let us not think of tomorrow now. What do you say Boroan?” The boy seemed to be relieved in what I said. “I think so too! I don’t know why my sister worries so much. The telegram we received clearly said, “Don’t worry!” Don’t you know what these words mean?”

She protested, “But, the telegram said, “Come home sharp!” too!” She looked at her younger brother and said with a shy smile in her face.

“I think your husband worries too much, just like you! Even if he has a slight headache, he wants you to be present by his side. It is as if he will die of it! I am sure there is nothing more to the telegram.”

I saw in the light of the candle that her face had become very beautiful. “Don’t worry! Come home sharp!” There must be some mystery in these simple, but direct words, I thought. “Is your brother-in-law not well?”

“He fell off his bicycle a few days ago. He is in the hospital. We received the telegram a couple of days ago. I was not home to escort her back to Jorhat. I arrived home only yesterday. Also, it’s the seasonal harvest time at the tea plantation. So, father is unable to take any days off work.” After repeated requests from me, Boroan spread their bedding nicely. He also hung the mosquito net in a triangular fashion. The sister went to sleep without saying anything more. I chatted with Boroan for a while longer and came to know a little more about their family. He also wrote down my address. After a while, Boroan also fell asleep.

My mind escaped from the immediate mundaneness once again. On a sand dune in the distance, there must be tigers stealthily lurking behind the bushes along their regular hunting trails. There must be many mysteries trying to emerge into the open amidst the tall grass and pine shrubs which grew in the shallow and dark waters of the Brahmaputra. The stars had clustered together and were trying to discover what the puzzles were. Very near the warehouse, sitting on the edge of the water, a few washerwomen, with their unkempt, wiry hairs, were laundering clothes in the middle of the night. They were producing a rhythmic sound. I came back to reality again. Of course, these were only the waves!

The boy studied in grade nine in a high school in the town. His father, whose name he mentioned but which I promptly forgot, worked in the factory in a big tea plantation. He was the head of operations there. Their home was ten miles from the river port where we were spending the night. His sister had been married for a year and a half.

She had come to visit her parents. But, within a week and a half, she was summoned back to Jorhat with a telegram. It was supposed to be only a slight injury. But the telegram also asked her to return immediately. I remembered what Boroan had said earlier. Her husband could not spend much time without seeing her. They were still very much in love. I was lost again. What if tonight happened a year and a half ago, and I was the man she married! Look at me! I am hale and hearty. I didn’t fall off my bicycle.... I felt guilty. My thoughts were despicable! Why was I thinking like that? The sole candle was blown out in the wind. I liked the darkness, but thought it might not be appropriate. So, I struck a

match stick. I found a little scrap of paper and lighted it and slowly approached the candle. I was startled by the young woman's voice. "I can't sleep!"

"I thought you were fast asleep!"

"No! Lately, my sleep has been very light. I can't seem to sleep well any more."

I thought it was natural considering her current situation. I did not light the candle. I went outside, leaned against the railing and kept staring in the direction from which the steamer was supposed to come. I stood there for a very long time.

Suddenly, a big commotion started. Everywhere there were loud voices. "It's the steamer!" "The steamer is coming!" "We need a lamp here!" The ticket bell rang. Sound of heavy footsteps filled the port.

I lighted the candle quickly. The young woman was already awake and had sit up. She pushed Boroon with her two hands and woke him up also. Boroon sat up as if in a trance, half asleep and half awake.

"The steamer has arrived, Boroon. Wake up!" It was as if after an interminable wait, the doctor informed the anxious relatives, "It's a boy!"

I asked the boy to quickly tie up their bedding and went to buy tickets for all of us.

Seeing the disturbed face of the ticket clerk, I knew right away that there was bad news. He had received messages from the ship saying extensive repairs would have to be done before the ship could start again. The steamer was somehow limping to the port, he told us. So, he announced that tickets would be sold later after the ship's arrival and after repair work was complete.

After a while Boroon came over and stood by my side. Once I apprised him of the situation, he went back to convey the news to his sister.

It was already dawn.

I walked down to the edge of the water. I felt responsible for the two young people. I would have to make some alternate arrangements for them. At any cost, they must be in Jorhat today. I washed my face and had a cup of strong tea at the stall to snap out of the sleep which was still haunting me. At the stand, I ordered three cups of tea and freshly made lucis— flat and soft bread fried in oil.

While I was waiting for my order to be filled, the steamer arrived at the port and a few passengers disembarked. A few moments later, I saw Boroon walk down the bank with another young boy.

"Hello! Mamu has arrived. He came on the steamer from Jorhat. See! I had told my sister that there was nothing to worry about!"

Mamu had arrived tired and worn out after a night without sleep. He was a first cousin of Boroon's brother-in-law and lived in the same house. He was about Boroon's age, maybe, a little older.

"How are things in Jorhat?" I looked at Mamu and asked. Immediately, Boroon replied instead, "Everything is fine. Since my sister was late going back after they sent the telegram, they sent him to escort her back."

"Why did they have to send someone to fetch your sister?" Mamu answered, "I came

thinking if she wanted to go back immediately, I will give her company. Otherwise, I myself will spend a few days visiting her at her parents' house." "So, what's the plan now?"

"Your sister wants to go back to Jorhat by any means. So, I will rent a private boat. We will cross the river and catch the first bus to Jorhat from the south bank. The steamer was caught in the sand. Something is broken. It can't start till all repairs are complete. So, we won't wait for the steamer." "In that case, make arrangements for your sister to freshen up. Go ahead and see what you can do. I will fetch breakfast for the three of you."

Boroon gave me the flask and the two boys walked back to the woman.

After about an hour, I returned to the waiting hall with a delivery boy from the tea stall. He carried breakfast. Boroon's sister looked fresh and beautiful after washing herself. She was chatting happily with Mamu. There was no sign of the worries I had observed in her face during the night. "At first I was very scared seeing you here."

"I have told you already. We can go back to your father's house in the tea plantation and spend a few more days there if you wish."

"No, no! I don't want to go back. It's good the two of you are here. We can now safely travel to Jorhat together. It's so nice of you to have come. A gentleman helped us quite a bit last night..."

I had already arrived by their side before she could complete her last sentence. She pulled up the veil covering her hair a little more. She seemed to have turned red from shyness. The boy from the tea stall sat the breakfast on the floor by us and left.

"Where is Boroon?" I asked Mamu.

"He went to wash up, and hasn't come back yet." Boroon's sister replied. She started pouring tea onto the cups. She forwarded the tea cups and the rest of the breakfast to Mamu and me.

"I just had breakfast at the stall. You two go ahead."

"That can't be! You must have breakfast with us again!" She requested persuasively.

"I can't!" However, I took the cup of tea and walked a little away from the two relatives. "I have rented a private boat for all of us. We should get ready as soon as possible. The tea will get cold. You don't have to wait for Boroon. What do you think Mamu?" "We should start right away. The bus to Jorhat will arrive at Xilghat sharply at nine." The boat's owner, an immigrant from somewhere west in India, started oaring rhythmically. Boroon and Mamu started singing a song to give him company

Brahmaputra and Ganga are our mothers
The trees are blowing in the wind
Heaven is our destination
We will arrive there soon.

The boat traveled downstream like an arrow in the swift current. I glanced at the young woman who was Boroon's older sister and Mamu's sister-in-law. (Why did I feel so close to her? Who was she to me? Nothing, really!) She was intently listening to the song. Her lips were moving up and down slightly with the lyrics. She was smiling to the melodious tune. I stared at the dot of vermilion on her forehead. It looked like a powerful source of strength and power! It represented her strong devotion and unquestioned love to her dear husband.

In the early morning sun, her beautiful face shone like gold, maybe, even brighter. But, even the brilliant golden color somehow seemed to have lost its luster.

I thought about her life. A picture of a happy extended family came to my mind. A house with loving parents-in-law, considerate brothers-in-law, and most importantly, a 'can't-be-out-of-sight-for-a-moment' husband. He loved her and missed her so much that he sent a telegram asking her to rush home on the slightest pretext. I remembered what Boroon said while making fun of her, "You worry so much about your husband!" I remembered her requesting me a few moments ago, "You must have breakfast with us again!" She was so feminineloving and caring.

In the uneventful life of a vagabond young man, running from one tea plantation to another looking for a good job, it seemed like a very special day. Last night would clearly stand out among all the nights in my life.

As the boat started approaching the south bank, I started feeling deserted by my new acquaintances from the previous night. I had subconsciously embraced them as my own. Already, I was starting to feel all alone!

Suddenly, my roaming eyes darted back to the blood-red dot of vermilion which seemed to be burning brightly on her forehead. This simple dot was so significant in a married woman's life in the Hindu society! Since she was leaning on the side of the boat looking out, the swift waves seemed to scurry past the reflection of her face with great excitement. It seemed that the restless waves wanted to wash away the vermilion which proudly announced her married status, and her profound and eternal love to her husband.

Finally, the boat came to the edge of the water. It was Xilghat at long last.

Once again, we had tea in a stall. I wanted to see them off before I walked home. No sooner had we finished our tea, the bus arrived. Being a government bus, it was punctual. It was time to say good-bye. Boroon and his sister stepped aboard and sat in the front of the bus. Boroon seemed very grateful to me for all the help I rendered them.

"If you ever go to Jorhat, please stop by sister's house. You have the address, don't you?" Boroon's sister did not speak, but her intimate stare was much more eloquent than Boroon's words.

"And, if you ever again cross the river to Kathoneebury, please visit us at our house on the plantation." This was not just verbal politeness, their invitation was genuine, straight from the heart. The bus was about to leave. So, the driver honked to warn the passengers who were still outside. The young woman raised her joined palms respectfully in my direction. I also returned her solemn good-bye. But, where was Mamu? He had not boarded the bus yet! For some unknown reason, Mamu was still lingering in the tea stall. I requested the driver to wait for a moment and went to the shop to ask Mamu to hurry. I found him finishing up his last quick puffs on a cigarette.

"The bus is leaving, Mamu! Hurry!"

As a sign of respect, Mamu threw away the cigarette when she saw me, and stood up.

"It was very nice meeting you!" Mamu was jittery as he spoke.

"I hope we meet again some day. The bus is leaving. Now, run before it leaves."

He still did not show the slightest inclination to make his way toward the bus.

I had to almost push him to shake him up out of inexplicable lethargy. The driver was getting impatient, and blew his horn again. Mamu was sweating profusely. I did not understand what was happening to him.

He seemed to start crying, but was able to control himself. “How can I go home with them? My cousin didn’t have fall off a bike, he was hit by a bus. He died the next day. The telegram was worded innocently so that sister-in-law would rush back home. No one has the heart to tell her the truth till she is home. She may go berserk, and do something really awful to herself. I, myself, have been acting nonchalant for the past few hours, hiding my true feelings behind a pleasant facade. I don’t have the guts to tell my beautiful, sweet and caring sister-in-law that the husband she loves and respects more than her own life is not waiting for her arrival.” Almost unwillingly, Mamu ran to the bus and jumped in. The bus started immediately. The wheels started rolling in rapid earnestness transporting the travelers to their destination.

In a matter of minutes, the bus was hidden from my view after a turn in the Kamakhya Hills.

Mahim Bora, an ex-President of Axom Xahitya Xabha is an author of some very well-acclaimed Assamese short stories.

9

Cactus That Flowers

By **Mahim Bora**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

This story was written in the early 1940s. The language is crude and racist in places demonstrating the mindset of that era. The translator apologizes if the language used hurts any of its readers. The translator is not responsible for the language of the story.

I was silently taking a leisurely stroll along the trail by the river. The last rays of sun were disappearing behind a thick curtain of dust rising from the dirt road. A military convoy was camped on the bank of the river. The camp was a beehive of activity. Most soldiers spoke softly, but one could hear a person laughing loudly, and someone else yelling angrily. A third person was singing, filling the evening air with a soft melody.

There were a lot of negro soldiers from distant America in the camp. Everything was so distinctly different about them! Their speech, their songs—everything was uniquely foreign; it was almost impossible for anyone else to even understand them. They looked menacing too. With their thick lips, unkempt and wiry hair, dirty and loose-fitting military clothes—they looked almost like gorillas from the African jungles. The very dark color of their skin added to their ugliness.

This was the first time the Assamese had ever seen a negro man. The Assamese language has an idiom which can be translated roughly as “as dark as charcoal.” If the Assamese had laid their eyes on negro men earlier, their language may have possessed the idiom “as dark as negroes” instead. This made the Assamese very perturbed at the fair-skinned British colonizers, too. The British had the temerity to compare the brown-skinned Assamese with the negroes. They sneered at us as dark-skinned Indians in spite of the fact that they knew of the existence of negroes all along!

(Assam was quite close to the Burma Theater of the Second World War. The negro soldiers had come to Assam to fight against the Japanese on behalf of the British colonizers. They had come to fight against the “Azad Hind Force,” a native Indian force fighting side by side with the Japanese to oust the British from Indian soil and gain India’s Independence. The Americans wanted to keep us under the British rule forever. Also, there had been rumors

about the negroes behaving improperly with Assamese women in some areas.)

I was still walking although I was quite frightened. Then I saw a negro man walk alone toward me. As he walked, sometimes he kicked pebbles and stones with his heavy boots like tiny soccer balls. Sometimes he picked up a little stone and playfully juggled it in the air. Sometimes he leaped straight up into the air! He seemed happy, playful and animated. Instantly, I decided to ignore him; to look the other way when he and I crossed paths. But, he did not walk all the way to me. He sat down on a clean grassy spot on the bank, on top of a steep drop. Now, there was nothing else I could do; I would have to walk by him. I became restive with hatred and fear.

As I passed him, he raised his head, looked up to me and said in Hindi, "Please sit down," pointing at a little clear area with grass next to where he sat.

At this time, my mind was inexplicably filled with hostility and disgust. I didn't even care to show good manners saying a simple, "No, thank you!" and continued to walk briskly. Where did these guys learn Hindi, which some of us here know although it is not the local language? I wondered about what language they spoke at home—I assumed naturally that it was broken English. He had smiled when he spoke to me. Since I didn't care to respond to his simple request, he was visibly depressed. Well, what a surprise! I learnt negroes can smile too!

I kept on walking on the soft grass by the river bank. There were several narrow trails on the grass all leading to the water; trails on which the women from the village walked to fetch water from the river. In the distance, I saw several women walking with brass water pots in their hands and at their sides. In places, a few gorgeous swans were crossing the river back and forth. Not too far away, there was a white-washed gazebo-like structure shining in the late sun. It must have been a memorial built over the tombstone of someone rich and famous. In fact, I was crossing a cemetery, the place at which everyone arrives, at the end of their worldly lives. Well, the human race is brave, bold and intelligent. Is that why we always have wars? I remembered a verse from Omar Khayyam, "The spirit of life blooms only once—it doesn't flower a second time."

If the existence of human life on the earth is the ultimate truth of nature, aren't we committing a grave crime to the human race by not giving ourselves the chance to live peaceably and prosper? What do we gain by fighting wars—by killing and destroying?

By this time, I had left the negro man far behind. It was time to head back home. If I didn't arrive back at the college dormitory before dusk, I would be reprimanded and fined. I was nearing an area with some thick thorny cactus shrubs, we call them *dofola kaint*. There were also many weeds and ferns that thrive in the humid Assamese climate. There were leafy arums; a smattering of the *dhekiyaa* fern; and the irritating *bihlongoni* with leaves that burn the skin on touch. But, among all the weeds, ferns and other plants, the thorny shrubs were the tallest, proudly standing out among the others. Every branch of the cactus had a cluster of beautiful yellow flowers on the very top—blooming in abundance and in great dignity; the flowers were gracefully swaying in the mild breeze like the colorful wings of a majestic butterfly. It suddenly dawned on me that this is a true miracle of nature—that these hardy, menacing-looking and thorny cactuses bloom in great luxuriance. The flowers definitely are unsurpassed in beauty!

I was retracing my path: the trails I had crossed, and the broad flights of earthen steps or *ghats* that lead to the water. I again came by the negro still sitting contentedly. He was

still looking out across the river, watching the trees and shrubs on the other side, observing the tall skinny betel nut palms which dot Assamese villages. Once again, he looked up and around at me and smiled just like the first time, his white teeth producing a discernible contrast to his dark face, like pieces of bright hail dancing in water accumulated on a large black leaf of an arum after a storm.

"I like your country. It is really beautiful," he said in Hindi as he smiled.

His comments made me extremely proud. Suddenly, I was not the least bit afraid of him any more. I was under the impression that negroes were cruel. Also, the people of India hated the British colonizers on whose behalf the Americans were fighting. I had thought the negro man might rough me up on the slightest pretext. That was why I was filled with fear.

I stood just behind him and looked at him sideways from my walking trail. "Please, sit down," he requested of me as before, softly clapping his hand against the grass next to him. I am not sure what attracted me to him. I sat down next to him and asked, "Do you really like our country? Do you really think it's beautiful?"

He smiled and nodded, silently answering my questions.

He took the half-finished cigarette he was smoking out of his mouth and threw it to the river in a swift swirling motion. He took out a packet of American cigarettes and his lighter from his pocket and offered me a cigarette.

After I lit it, he also lit one for himself, and spoke in mixed English and Hindi, so that I could understand him, about many different things. His speech was unclear at times, and his accent unintelligible. It did not fully understand him; but I tried my best to participate in the conversation with nods of my head, and making brief, trite comments such as "yes," "that's true," "of course," and the like.

At this point, on the other bank directly across from us, we saw two young girls come to fetch water from the river with their distinctively-shaped water pitchers—a *gagori* and a *koloh* each. The negro man stopped talking, and started staring at the girls with the cigarette fixed tightly between his lips. Because it was the dry season, the river was only fifteen or twenty feet wide in the middle. Suddenly, his behavior filled me with almost uncontrollable anger. I could not tolerate the fact that he was giving dirty, lustful looks at our young girls and women—our daughters, sisters and mothers. During the past few minutes, my hatred for him had become much less intense; all of it came back to me in a flash, its intensity stronger than ever. For a moment, when he turned around and looked at me, he saw a stern face filled with visible animosity. He instantly understood my disturbed indignation and felt very uncomfortable, his smile vanished between his thick lips.

The two girls walked down to knee-deep water, filled their first pitchers and waded back to shallow water. They had placed the pitchers carefully on their right sides, grasping them around tightly against the curves of their bodies with their hands. As they walked back to shallower water, they steadily lowered their skirts—the *mekhelas* (which they had pulled up when they had entered the water) so that their clothes would not get wet. Moreover, feminine modesty demanded that they did not expose their lower legs. They were quite careful because we were sitting on the water trail on the opposite side of the river; an Assamese girl never shows her legs to strangers—particularly men. The girls were also very apprehensive of the negro man sitting by my very side. The girls sat down the first pitchers on dry sand, and then filled the second pitchers with water as before. Then, they silently

walked back home on the trail by which they had come, with one pitcher on the left side of the body, and the second smaller one grasped near their tapered, narrow top with the other hand.

The girls vanished from our view quickly. The negro man was still staring at them intently. I thought it was a lascivious gaze, it was a fixated look at something deeply missed—it was like the way famished people look at scraps of food during a severe famine. After a few moments, he turned around and looked at me. He didn't see a smile on my face, my eyes were also not friendly. He struggled to retrieve the smile on his face, and during his attempt to do so, he handed the packet of cigarettes to me again, after taking one out for himself.

"I also have a sister whom I love dearly and whom I miss a lot," he snapped at the lighter and carefully forwarded the burning flame to me.

After I lit the cigarette, the flame got put out in the wind. He tried it again and as he lit his cigarette, he said, "She also goes to fetch water from the creek nearby just like this."

I repeated to myself what he said in mixed Hindi and English so that I understood it better.

"I have a younger brother also, younger than my sister," he continued.

As the shadows progressively became longer and the darkness became more pronounced, the last few rays of the sun seemed to dance playfully in the water like a rambunctuous child. I knew the man's gaze was fixed on a serene scene, a long way away. In his mind, he was probably recreating the scenes of an American negro settlement. He was, in his mind, among his own people—his sister, his family, his village, the children and the girls fetching water.

He said he had a loving sister, and a brother across the seas, thousands of miles away. This time, I looked at his face intently. I saw a loving, protective, caring and sensitive older brother, lost in thoughts of his homeland, and thoughts of near and dear ones.

The last rays of light were engulfed in darkness. Our conversation became silent and serene, just as the peaceful river bank had become.

This is a translation of a short story called *Dofola Kaaint* by Mahim Bora.

Translated from Assamese by Jugal Kalita. The translator thanks Yvonne Dilts for her careful reading of an earlier version of the story and marking suggestions for improvement.

10

The Headmaster

By **Mahim Bora**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

The alarm clock on the table near the bed started screaming—its familiar shrill, wailing sound waking him instantly. Mr. Borkakoty, the school Headmaster almost sprang up and sat bolt upright on the bed. Steeped in deep self pity, lacking the slightest enthusiasm, he blankly stared at the offending clock for a while as if he did not know what to do. Grudgingly, he got up and walked to the table and turned the alarm off. As usual, he drank the water in the covered glass, and then washed his face with the water in the jug by the corner sink; there was no running water in his home. After drying himself with the towel hanging near the sink, by habit he walked to the chair, moved it a little bit, sat down, and relaxed for a while. But, in his restlessness, he didn't feel like sitting for long. He came back to the trusted bed and laid himself down again since there was absolutely no point in following a strictly outlined daily routine today. There was no need to wash his face, shave or take a shower on time any more. He decided he would lie in his bed until noon; he would have his breakfast in bed.

He looked up at the well-organized little bookshelf above the reading desk. The trusted English grammar book by Nesfield was staring him in the face from its secure location. Consulting this particular book, even if it was for just ten minutes, had been a part of his morning schedule for the last twenty-five years. He imagined hearing even today, "Good morning, Mr. Borkakoty", his students' first greeting of the morning. This book, printed and published in England had not shown any sign of advancing age. He had been teaching grammar to students of grade ten for a long time. When Mr. Borkakoty was growing up, the medium of instruction in British Assam was English from secondary school onward. The students used to learn the official language with great sincerity and respect. Mr. Borkakoty could not resist the temptation to carefully open the book again this morning also. He sat up on his bed, reached for the book, grabbed it and rolled back onto the bed again.

There was a light knock on the door. At night he only shut the door, he did not feel the need for locking it from inside. His second daughter Loolie opened the door quietly and walked in with a cup of hot tea. It was her duty to serve tea to her father every morning.

Mr. Borkakoty always set his alarm for six in the morning and wanted a cup of tea right after washing his face in cold water. It had been his daily schedule for as long as Loolie could remember. Her older sister had the responsibility of bringing tea to his bed until a couple of years ago. When she got married and moved away, naturally, it had become Loolie's duty. As a result, she woke up early each morning, turned the stove on and made two cups of tea, one cup for herself, and one for her father. Only after that, she started her early morning school work. Sometimes, she had to make tea for her brother and mother as well.

But, Loolie was a little unsure today. Maybe, her father wanted to get away from his regular schedule which to her seemed carved in stone.

"Loolie", her father spoke while still in bed.

"Father, I thought you might still be asleep."

"Yes, I wanted to sleep a little longer. Let me have the cup of tea anyway, since you've already brought it."

Loolie sat the cup on the tea stand and put it close to the bed and said, "How come you had set the alarm for this morning also?"

She could see the first smile of the day on her father's face, a face which was still full and smooth, a face on which advancing age had not been able to leave the slightest mark.

"You are right, Loolie. I don't know why I had set the alarm last night. Anyway, why don't you get back to your school work?"

Her father normally said something once. He did not repeat himself at home when he spoke with his family, or at school when he spoke with his students, colleagues and subordinates. He had a reputation of being a very stern disciplinarian, at home as well as at school, and with the parents of his students. Everyone in the sprawling neighborhood from where students came to his school knew this very well. During the last twenty-five years, a lot of anecdotes had come to be told about the headmaster in the neighborhood. Everyone, whether young or old, seemed to have a story about him.

Among all of his children, only Loolie could look him in the eye when she spoke with him. That's because she was now the only daughter still at home. But, such behavior was not always tolerated. It depended on his mood. Sometimes Loolie thought her father had dedicated his life to following without question the almighty clock every day of his life. Furthermore, he expected everyone else to be precisely on time for everything. If on any occasion, a student or a teacher was late to school, even only five minutes, calamity was bound to befall that person that day. Quite often, the students and the teachers had valid excuses for being late. Some students had to walk five to six miles to school. Several teachers also had to walk or bike long distances to get to school. In such cases, he let them off the hook with just a mild warning. He also had kept a stern eye on the private lives of his students. As a headmaster in the neighborhood, he considered it his solemn duty. However, Loolie believed that despite his hardened exterior, there was no other headmaster anywhere else who was as loving and considerate as her father.

All her life, Loolie could not remember ever seeing her father break his daily routine even for a single day—not even for Sundays or holidays. He was tied to his schedule even today.

"Loolie!"

Loolie turned around before reaching her destination and briskly walked back to her father's bedroom.

"What is it, father?"

"Open the windows, Loolie. Have you seen that swollen little knot in the curtain?"

"Yes, father! I sewed it yesterday, but didn't have enough time to do a thorough job. I knew for sure you would spot it right away," said Loolie as she opened the windows.

By now, her father had finished the tea, so she picked up the cup and walked toward the kitchen.

Once again, the headmaster opened the Nesfield grammar book and rolled onto the bed. He had sat up on the bed to have his tea.

But, Borkakoty could not even steady his eyes on the book. Reading was out of question. He was unable to sleep until quite late last night—his eyes were irritated and burning now. At the same time, his mind, soul and body began filling up with a terrible, burning rage. What was happening was totally new and unprecedented in the history of Assam. It was going to be written in the pages of history for posterity. There used to be occasional strikes by students during the time of the British Raj. But, after independence in 1947, regular student strikes on the slightest pretext had almost become a part and parcel of the educational process. As a teacher and a parent, he had always opposed strikes organized by students. He believed this did not augur well for the future of the nation. The educational and cultural accomplishments of the society were bound to fall victims to the reckless regularity of irrepressible student strikes. Now, it was the teachers who were shamelessly on strike! They were demanding more raises for themselves.

The Executive Committee of the teachers' association was comprised of mostly young, hot-blooded male teachers. A few days ago, the meeting of the Executives lasted until three in the morning. Amidst the chaos, noise and excited discussions, the proposal to strike had won handsomely. However, the teachers were willing to give some time to the government, especially after the President of the association applied all his diplomatic and oratorical skills. The President was once a student of Mr. Borkakoty in this same high school. Jiban Gogoi was now a colleague and a member of the Executive Committee of the teachers' association. The headmaster was able to learn a few details of the difficult negotiations from him. Gogoi was fully supportive of the strike. This had made the headmaster quite sad and despondent. He was so morose that he could not even bring himself up to making any comments. Even then, like an expectant beggar, he had anticipated a ray of hope. Maybe the government would accept the demands of the teachers at the very end; maybe, a compromise would be reached. But, in the end, his hopes and expectations were dashed, his silent, private prayers were not answered.

It was as if Mr. Borkakoty's unexpressed pains and sufferings had set his bed aflame. No, he couldn't be a silent spectator any more, watching from the sidelines. He couldn't lay on his bed any longer. He stood up, and looking toward the door called out, "Baputee, get me some water for my bath. Also, bring me the razors, I need to shave."

Baputee was the school orderly. He roomed and boarded in the headmaster's home. In lieu of paying rent, he cooked two meals a day for the Borkakotys.

Precisely at half past nine, the headmaster rode his bicycle to the school. For the last quarter of a century, he had biked to school at nine-thirty every working day, except on

special occasions when classes were held in the morning or when there were school festivities. It was only one short mile to school. The ride was never more than ten or fifteen minutes. Even on this day with the teachers on strike, he was quite anxious to reach the school precisely on time. All the watches in the world might some day conspire to run five minutes late, but this headmaster never remembered being late by even a minute.

As he rode his bicycle a short distance along the main road, he met Naranath Bhuyan. Bhuyan was the President of the local government and also a powerful member of the Management Committee that oversaw the school's functioning. He was walking from the opposite direction, holding his umbrella over his head to protect himself from the scorching sun. The headmaster got off his bike to speak briefly with Bhuyan.

The fact that Mr. Bhuyan was about sixty or sixty-five was evident from the deep, clear lines on his forehead that showed his advancing age. As soon as he saw the headmaster, the marks on his forehead seemed to become even deeper and more prominent, weighed down by his worries about the school situation. His forehead looked like a knotty lump of thread.

"I was going to meet you," Mr. Bhuyan started without customary greetings. "I thought you would be home. I didn't think you would head to the school at the regular hour on a day of strike."

"I thought the government would come up with an acceptable solution to this mess. And, the Executives of the teachers' association would continue renewing their threats, but never go on strike. ... I tried very hard, but couldn't stay at home. I had to come out to the school," said Mr. Borkakoty.

Mr. Bhuyan continued, "Well, since you are on your way to school, I am not going to take any more of your time. I will see you at the home of the President of the School Managing Committee this evening. We must have an emergency meeting of the Committee tonight," saying good-bye, Mr. Bhuyan started walking again. The headmaster got back up on his bicycle and resumed his ride to the school.

He was not able to go much further. Soudhury, the storekeeper was trying to draw his attention from the porch of his little store. "Hello, Mr. Headmaster. There is some good news I want to tell you."

A feeling of disdain and anger momentarily flashed through the headmaster although he managed to control himself. He had bought a lot of groceries on credit from this store. The headmaster got down from his bike.

"Sir, where are you rushing to this morning? I thought the teachers were on strike today. I am sure you know that," said Soudhury.

"Yes, of course. How can I not know it? But, I have to stop by the school for a short while. The school doorkeeper is not well, he is down with fever."

"If I may be bold, you've accomplished something commendable this time around. The teachers are on strike! I never thought it was possible. Over the years, I have seen factory workers strike, students strike, and government workers strike. But, I fully understand your dilemma. What can the hapless teachers do? It's the fault of the times. Everything has become so expensive. Did you ever hear that the price of cooking oil has shot up to twelve rupees a gallon?"

Soudhury was speaking incessantly, walking towards the headmaster at the same time.

Therefore, although he started loudly, his voice was normal by the time he reached the headmaster. In a voice softer than normal, he said, "I have kept aside four pounds of sugar and four pounds of flour especially for you. Baputee can pick them up in the evening. You yourself can pick them up on the way back if it is convenient."

Nothing was going to be solved by getting irritated at the shopkeeper, the headmaster rationalized.

"When did the price of cooking oil go up? I thought it was just eleven rupees per gallon," said the headmaster.

"Sir, it's not just cooking oil. Everything has become more expensive—lentils, flour, sugar, *soojie*—everything without exception. I just got back from the city yesterday. They set the prices there, you know." the shopkeeper explained.

"Do you know why prices have risen so suddenly? There is no excuse for such an instant rise of prices." The headmaster was curious.

"How am I to know? You need to ask the government. I am sure the state ministers and the state legislators have their own explanations for such price hike."

"I don't think that's the case. I am certain it's the wholesalers who have raised the prices," Mr. Borkakoty said.

"I think you are right, sir, but the wholesalers have no other option. If they don't inflate prices, how can they finance all these expensive elections in a newly independent, democratic country? Moreover, as soon as the teachers decided to strike, the shrewd foreign-born wholesalers concluded that the teachers are going to get a hefty raise. And next they will be followed by other government workers. So, they decided it's best to raise the prices right away instead of waiting for the dust to settle. Anyway, I don't want to take much more of your time. Please don't forget to send Baputee to take the groceries home later."

The headmaster was deeply worried by what he had heard. He was not able to understand that there could be any relationships between the teachers' strike, the possible salary raises for the teachers and election financing. Although he graduated from college a long time ago with a B.A. in Economics, he was somehow not prepared to understand the subtle connections. Every now and then, he had heard Mr. Gogoi vehemently complain about the collusion between business and politics, but he never paid any attention because he didn't believe that such a thing could happen.

Suddenly his irritation with everything around him started gathering steam; he started fuming with anger within himself. All the anger within him was about to explode. Times had turned topsy-turvy. Respect for teachers, the humble guardians of a society's continued progress, had become a victim of the self-destructive modern times. Otherwise, how could an illiterate and uncultured storekeeper dare to lecture him on the duties and responsibilities of teachers? Wasn't it because the storekeeper could deign to keep aside some sugar and flour for him to buy during these days of dire scarcity? Wasn't it because the storekeeper could allow him to buy groceries on credit for a couple of months, knowing fully well his pitiable financial situation? With his meager salary as a headmaster, he could hardly afford to buy enough groceries for a couple of weeks of every month. Other teachers were suffering much more than he was. Those teachers who had local roots were lucky, because most of them had small plots of arable land they inherited. They cultivated the plots themselves in their spare time, or leased them out to others. As a result, they didn't have to buy rice,

the staple of the Assamese diet. But, the teachers who had moved here from other places were really in an extremely tight financial situation; they were hurting badly. They had to buy everything including rice.

The government had become a puppet in the hands of the wholesalers and big businessmen. These people had managed to suck up to the political leaders by fawning over them at every opportunity, lighting cigarettes for them, taking them out to restaurants, and sometimes lending a car for private use such as attending a relative's wedding. Educational reform should have been the foremost duty of the national leaders immediately after independence. They should have taken appropriate steps to make teaching a lucrative and prestigious job, able to attract talented young people. If they had done so, the country would not be in such a terrible mess.

Mr. Borkakoty's grip on the handle of the bicycle became firmer as he resumed his ride to the school. He started pedalling briskly. His mind was racing through a thousand different things. The bicycle was also moving faster.

"Good morning, sir! How are you doing?"

Madhab Ponchanon was standing by the roadside. He had recently retired after working all his life in a huge tea estate. He bought a plot of land by the main government road and had built a new home. He hadn't yet gotten entangled in village diplomacy or local politics. He was very polished and sophisticated. His son also studied in Mr. Borkakoty's high school.

The headmaster returned his greeting and once again got off the bicycle.

"Do you have school today?" Mr. Ponchanon was naturally curious. His voice was deep and throaty.

"I have some office work to finish up," he replied.

"Well, my son told me that the teachers are on strike from today. Well, well, ... I understand the teachers are demanding increased pay," he said realizing that he didn't start the conversation too well. He wanted to make it less aggressive, but repeated his first sentence unable to find anything gratifying to add.

The headmaster was at a loss of words to reply. The man had stated the bare facts, but it wasn't possible to carry the conversation far with direct accusations. However, the context was sensitive; it was not possible for either one to suddenly take leave of the other without making an attempt at continuing the conversation.

Mr. Ponchanon tried to ease the situation by attempting to clear his throat. "I am absolutely certain the teachers have been forced into a tight corner. Their salaries are pitiful, lower than that of even the junior administrators in the tea industry."

"You are absolutely correct! We were forced to decide upon such a drastic course of action only after months of petitions and negotiations didn't deliver the goods." At long last the headmaster was able to shed his uneasiness of being an involuntary participant in the strike. He was able to muster enough self confidence to blurt out the facts. It was as if he was beginning to accept the situation.

Ponchanon had stopped looking at the headmaster. His gaze had moved to an unidentified distant object. "What scares me is that this teachers' strike may encourage our students to become even more unruly and irresponsible. In the future, they may be prompted to call student strikes at the slightest pretext. I am sure you know the stinking rot our neighboring

state of Bengal is deeply dug in. It is perpetually mired in nothing but teachers' strikes, college and university professors' strikes and student strikes. It's a shame that the beautiful and prosperous city of Calcutta has gone to the dogs. It bothers me immensely that our children in Assam may now jump onto this irresponsible bandwagon also. Anyway, I didn't intend to offend you. I worked all my life in the tea industry. It's very proper and disciplined, everyone works hard and earns his living by the sweat of his brow. There is no free ride there. I don't understand the current political and social situation in our country where everyone wants a piece of the pie for nothing. Of course, esteemed people like you are the pillars of our society. You are much better qualified to find an acceptable solution to the current dire situation than I am."

"No, you didn't offend me at all," Mr. Borkakoty replied. "You have made your point by stating the bare facts. Anyway, I have to leave now." The headmaster got back on his bike once again. The man was very frank in his assessment and was speaking from his heart. There was no doubt about it. But, at that moment, the headmaster was shrouded in complete uneasiness, shame and self-doubt—just like when an insect is strangled to gradual breathlessness and ultimate death in a treacherous net carefully woven by a spider. If only he could somehow unravel himself from this irresponsible mess that was killing him in undue embarrassment! He was an upright hard-working teacher, well-respected by every section of the society. His decisions, advice and comments were accepted by everyone without question. Those were the golden old days. What abyss had the society fallen to? Even the voiceless man on the street had started dishing out advice to teachers, subtly reminding them of their duties and responsibilities, and in the process feeling superior to teachers. But, the general population couldn't just complain about the strike, they would have to realize where the next meal for the teachers was going to come from. They would have to understand that teachers' salaries were woefully inadequate; lack of respectable raises over the years and rampant price inflation had eroded their purchasing power.

He was biking furiously. His mind was spewing what Mr. Ponchanon had told him. Like a tireless bee, Ponchanon's stinging comments, "Esteemed people like you are the pillars of the society" and the rest of his sermonizing, were disturbing the peace of his already excited mind, and he was losing his concentration on biking.

"Good morning, sir!" "Greetings, sir!"

It was several of his students who briskly and youthfully jumped off their bikes and greeted the headmaster with characteristic folded hands. They were riding two to a bike.

The headmaster was so deep in his thoughts that he was almost startled. He pressed the brakes hard. The bike came to a standstill with a violent jerk. He dropped his right foot on to the ground and made a desperate effort to smile. The students had never had the good luck of discovering this man with the faintest signs of a smile. Today, he forced himself to smile because he was unsuccessfully trying to hide his absent-mindedness. He was also trying to hide his worries and embarrassment in front of his own pupils because of his unwilling participation in the teachers' strike. This rare smile encouraged the students to be forthright. One of them was the Secretary of the Student Union, the others were members of the Executive Committee of the Student Union.

"Sir, we are planning to organize a procession and a huge demonstration tomorrow in complete sympathy with your demands. Students from all local schools will participate. We will have an outdoor meeting on the lawns of school afterwards, open to everyone," the

Union Secretary sounded extremely enthusiastic.

The headmaster's smile immediately vanished from his countenance. His face became absolutely stern. "A procession? What for? A demonstration in our sympathy?" He was embarrassed that his students, for whom he was a father figure, had to come to his and the other teachers' rescue.

"Sir, we want to demonstrate clearly to our local politicians that the students are in complete and whole-hearted support of the fair demands of our respected teachers," another student explained.

"I understand. Thank you very much for your concerns for us; but, you don't have to demonstrate and bring out a procession on our behalf. The sun is extremely hot these days. The younger students will unnecessarily suffer by demonstrating under the merciless sun," the headmaster continued in his stern tone.

The boys were losing their steam. One of them tried to explain, "If we don't have a demonstration and bring out a procession, the attendance in the meeting will be low."

"So what? Why do you need to have a big meeting?" inquired the headmaster.

The students could not explain why they wanted a huge attendance at the meeting.

The headmaster started pedalling his bike again. The boys did not have anything to say. The headmaster continued as he departed, "It's not important to have a large meeting. Hold a meeting even if only a few students attend. Aren't you all tired of demonstrating and bringing out processions?"

The headmaster would never change! He was the same—inside and outside school. They looked at each other not knowing what to say and got back on their bikes. Unless they brought out a procession, it would be extremely difficult to make themselves as well as the other students enthusiastic about any cause, however just and important.

The headmaster resumed his biking. His lips were sealed tight because he was worried. His undershirt, totally wet from biking in the scorching sun was adding weight to his clothes. A merciless sense of overwhelming shame at losing his respect and upright standing in the society weighed him down. It was an immensely private loss nibbling at his self confidence; a stunning and irrecoverable loss to the lofty ideals of the twenty-five years of his teaching career. Who was to blame for this personal debacle? The teachers as a whole? The society? The local politicians? The modern times?

He made the last turn before reaching the school. The impressive buildings, the sprawling campus, the main entrance gate—they became increasingly distinct as he biked closer. It was ten o'clock, the time the school started on a regular day. He reflexively glanced at his watch.

On an ordinary day, the classrooms would have been filled with the presence of hundreds of students; their restrained voices, their noises and laughters would have filled the campus with vital signs of life, work and progress. Today, the whole campus was silent, it was as if someone had died. The bell which hung from the hook in the porch, and which with precise regularity beckoned the students to class in the pursuit of knowledge and excellence, was nowhere to be seen. He thought the absence of the brass bell had transformed the school into a set of abandoned rail cars silently standing by themselves with no demonstrable purpose. Today, the iron hook from which the mighty bell normally hung was sneering at the whole

world like an inverted question mark. The headmaster realized the cruel symbolism—it was as if some unknown spirit was hurling back all the unanswered questions of his troubled mind at him, with no comforting answers in sight.

This is a translation of a short story called *Headmaster* by Mahim Bora. Translated from Assamese by *Jugal Kalita*. The translator thanks Yvonne Dilts, Murali Krishna, and Hal Render for their comments on earlier versions of the translation.

11

The Elephant

By **Homen Borgohainee**

Translation: **Jugal Kalita**

It was early evening on a sultry mid-summer day. Balloorum, bare-chested, slouched on the steps of his house. At more than eighty years old, his eyesight and hearing were beginning to fail him. He could hear only if one shouted close to his ears. So, no one, including the members of his large family spoke with him any more unless absolutely necessary. As a result, the old man felt rejected and hurt.

This evening, his oldest daughter-in-law must have felt pity for him seeing him sitting all alone, quietly like a tree stump. “Father, it’s dark already,” she said, “Why don’t you come inside the house?”

The old man, not fully understanding what she said, scolded her indignantly, “Why do you have to always shout so close to my ears? Do you think I am deaf?”

It was immediately proved that his deafness was not as ravaging as made out to be. Suddenly, he called out, “Who is that? Is it Rutteeya?”

In the darkness, even his daughter-in-law could not notice Rutteeya’s approach. But, the old man recognized him by listening to his footsteps. It was a matter of great astonishment how the old man, who couldn’t even hear a drum beating next to his ears, always recognized Rutteeya from his footsteps.

Rutteeya, the *mahout*—a hired hand for several decades, normally didn’t respond to any questions the old man asked. Even today, he walked straight inside with heavy footsteps, without the murmur of a response.

Bupdhon, himself responded on Rutteeya’s behalf. He extended his trunk and touched the man’s forehead. On this familiar, gentle and loving contact, a spark of emotion flashed through the old man’s weak, bony body, from head to toe. He started stroking Bupdhon’s trunk as if he discovered a lost treasure, as if he welcomed a son returning home after a prolonged absence.

The daughter-in-law saw no hope of the old man coming inside soon since he would now

start conversing with Bupdhon. She gave a knowing smile and stepped inside. The old man continued caressing Bupdhon's trunk, "Oh, dear! Where did you get all these bruises? Rutteeya is out of control! He must have taken you back to the thorny jungle. I have told him so many times that Bupdhon is not well, he should spare you the feeding trips for a few days. He doesn't pay any heed to what I say any more. I have never seen such ungrateful people! Oh dear, oh dear! Oh, my Bupdhon!" The old man became silent, but continued talking to Bupdhon in the tender language of touch.

Suddenly the front yard was illuminated by the headlights of an automobile. The old man and Bupdhon turned gingerly to the motor car. They were like two lovers caught red-handed in the midst of intense conversation and intimate love-making. The two became still as if at a complete loss.

Out of the car, came down Bormoyna, the man's oldest son. He barked an order at the chauffeur, "Horreysoron, don't forget to wash the car before you leave. It's full of mud all over. What a terrible road! I would have never taken the car if I knew the road was so bad."

While talking to the chauffeur, Bormoyna walked up the steps and stopped next to his father. The old man did not see his son smirking in the dark; if he had, his blood would have boiled at the mocking smile. He was still cuddling with Bupdhon's trunk. It seemed his favorite pachyderm's enormous body shriveled in Bormoyna's inappreciative presence. It was as if even a mere animal could also perceive disdain and pity! The old man's heart melted at this realization. He continued caressing Bupdhon's trunk, pouring out his heart's emotions and compassion, in unspoken revenge.

For a short while, Bormoyna stood silently watching the open display of endearment between his father and Bupdhon. Then he spoke, "Father, there are many crazy people in the world. But no one will believe that one can be completely crazy for an animal unless he or she sees you. I am giving you one more week, father! Love him, caress him as much as you can. After that, I will be forced to ..."

Bormoyna barely finished his sentence when the old man thundered, "You've the audacity to talk to me like that! Tell me what you will be forced to do! Enlighten me about the unsavory plans you are concocting for him!"

Even though he did not see well in the pitch-black darkness, Bormoyna sensed that his father's entire body shook in seething anger. He stood silently for a few minutes contemplating whether he should exacerbate his father's anger. Then, he said more slowly and deliberately, "After a week, I must decide to sell the elephant or I must send him off to work as a beast of burden in Xodiyaa. Of these two options, I will do whichever one you choose. I will make all necessary arrangements." Without waiting for the old man's reply, Bormoyna walked inside.

The old man was dumbfounded at this disturbing disclosure and just sat there for a few more moments. Then he screamed stridently, shaking the whole house, "What did you say? What did you say, you son of a bitch? Either you sell Bupdhon or send him to draw back-breaking logs in the remote jungles of Xodiyaa? How dare you say that? Have you assumed I am dead? Oh, God! Have you all lost the human touch? Are you all possessed by the Evil One? Because every village has paved roads now, and you can drive your damned car comfortably everywhere, Bupdhon has become worthless in your eyes? Everyone knows Bupdhon is the wellspring of good fortune in our house; we have prospered steadily from

the day I welcomed him into our midst in my heady youth. Fortune has providently smiled upon us since. Now, the same Bupdhon is worse than a stray dog in this thankless house? When he comes home at the end of the day, I entertain and caress him just a little. Seeing that all of you make rude and insulting fun of me all the time! Even you, you, ..., as soon as you come home, you order your chauffeur to wash your precious car. The nuts and bolts of metal have become more valuable and more indispensable to you than a warm, living animal. I know, I know, ..., you are still young, you feel on top of the world; that's why you don't want to show the slightest respect and appreciation for Bupdhon! No, I don't expect you to show him any respect! But, that doesn't imply you have the authority to sell him or employ him in a coolie's hard job. Listen to me carefully, I am warning all your ilk. You can do so only over my dead body!"

For a long time, the old man kept yelling, handing out dire warnings.

Vicious arguments like this, between the father and his sons became a daily affair in Balloorum's house. The reason was straight-forward. About sixty years ago, when Balloorum was a young man, there weren't any paved roads like today, there weren't any automobiles. During those days, horses and elephants were the only modes of transportation for the rich. When Balloorum was a dashing young man of twenty five, he suddenly discovered that he had become well-to-do, respected all over the region for the extensive holdings of farm land he had acquired, the substantial money he had made, and the rich harvests of rice and other crops he annually produced. He contemplated that his promotion to pre-eminence in society would be irrevocably announced if he could acquire a healthy, male tusker and display him in his front yard for all the world to see. As soon as the idea germinated in his mind, he sold a large granary of rice and bought an impressive elephant. In fondness, he named it Bupdhon; it means the father's worthy son.

From that day, in his heart, Balloorum had treated Bupdhon like his oldest son. To him, he was not merely an ordinary elephant, not just a convenient mode of transportation for the affluent and the aristocratic, but the proudest living symbol of his life's success. He had never used Bupdhon as a beast of burden because the elephant was the crown jewel of his life. Once when the British commissioner of the *zilluh*—the expansive administrative district, visited the region, there was a frantic search for an attractive elephant to welcome him and pay obeissance to him. Of the five elephants in the region a panel of ranking citizens unanimously selected Bupdhon over all the others. The commissioner rode on Bupdhon for a few days, and on his return to the district headquarters, was effusive with praise. Reminiscing this glorious incident, the old man's heart pulsed with pride even now. On that day, the elephant silenced his critics and enemies forever and ushered in influence and prestige to Balloorum's home. In fact, this reflected a fact well-known in the British colony: unencumbered access to high officials and administrators was the surest path for steady financial and social success.

Gradually, Balloorum Medhey's household prospered immensely. His home was also brightened by the welcome arrival of his seven sons and three daughters. Every time high-level government bureaucrats, magistrates and others came to the region from the *zilluh* headquarters, it became customary for them to pay him a formal visit and sometimes stay overnight. The common people concluded perceptively that the elephant was the lodestone that attracted prosperity to the house, the reason the Goddess of Fortune was so generous.

Over time, Balloorum also started crediting the elephant's purported powers for his wealth and fortune. Consequently, Balloorum started treating Bupdhon like an invaluable tro-

phy; his love for the elephant also grew in intensity. Balloorum was always present when Rutteeya, the mahout, washed Bupdhon, sometimes he washed him himself. He fed him with genuine care and affection. Every evening when Bupdhon returned home, he patted, caressed and massaged him with love as if the elephant were like a lost child returning home after a long absence.

In Balloorum's eyes, Bupdhon was not an iota less valuable than his sons. He was thoroughly convinced that Bupdhon was not merely an ordinary elephant, not just a mode of transportation for the affluent and the aristocratic, but the proudest living symbol of his own life's success.

Bormoyna and Balloorum's other sons grew up to be even richer businessmen and general contractors. Suddenly, they discovered that in the extended region, in business and commerce, in power and prestige, they have become almost unparalleled. It occurred to them that if they could acquire an expensive automobile and park it in their garage, their station in aristocracy would be reaffirmed. Now-a-days, one might have money; but, if he didn't possess a fine automobile, society did not accept him as a blue-blooded aristocrat.

Of course, the sons had enough money in the bank; but, they expected to obtain a few thousand rupees selling the elephant. In these days of automobiles, the elephant served no functional purpose; even as a symbol of aristocracy, he was outdated to most. The boys discussed the matter thoroughly among themselves and gently broached it to their father. As soon as Balloorum heard the idea, he became hysterical and yelled, "Come again! What did you say? You want to sell Bupdhon to buy an automobile? No way! No way! Do any of you have the audacity to repeat it again?"

His young sons were speechless; they did not understand their father's excitement. They had proposed to sell an elephant whose presence didn't befit the modern age, especially when it was lazy and pampered, and devoured tons of expensive food. But they did not have the impudence to argue, especially after seeing their father's blood-red face.

The next day, they withdrew money from the bank, and bought a fine *Ambassador* car. The presence of an Ambassador car and the sights and sounds of its regular arrival and departure associated prestige to Medhey's home. The Medheys were once again ensconced as one of the most estimable families of the region. The promotion of Medhey's house to top echelons of society was similar to how sometimes a large lump of soft clay hardens into rock and rises to the top of a hill and establishes a towering presence following an earthquake.

Balloorum was not unhappy when his family purchased a car. In fact, he was thrilled like everyone else at home. Is there a father anywhere who doesn't feel proud of his own sons' achievements? The car was quite useful, too. One could easily travel a day's distance in an hour. However, in spite of its efficiency and usefulness, in the eyes of the old man, the car was nothing more than a product of technical advances, merely an essential appliance. How could one possibly compare the car with Bupdhon? Bupdhon was his trusted company in the journey of life. He was the symbol of his prosperous past, the focus of reminiscence for each one of his past successes; he attracted the elusive Goddess of Fortune to his home. It was impossible and grossly inappropriate to compare him with even a hundred finest automobiles! His place in the house was secure, ensconced in its core for ever.

But the old man knew that in spite of his cherished fondness for Bupdhon, the elephant had irreparably lost his prestige and utility in the eyes of his big family. Not only that, there was no more any need for Bupdhon to welcome visiting high-level bureaucrats, and

officials. It was Bormoyna's car that served adequately on such occasions. Only the logging contractors came looking for Bupdhon from time to time; they wanted him to haul heavy logs from inaccessible areas.

Witnessing such indignities, the old man's compassion for Bupdhon deepened, concluding that as he himself was the object of neglect and ridicule in the house, so was Bupdhon. It seemed to him that Bupdhon, who traveled the region with royal grace not long ago, was now distressed, his pride badly hurt. The old man's heart wailed constantly in strange pain. But, there was no one in the house and in the neighborhood to share his grief. The new world was awfully strange and inexorably distant for the old-fashioned man and his dear Bupdhon.

Balloorum embraced the elephant more possessively as the days progressed; in response, the resentment Bormoyna and his brothers felt for Bupdhon increased greatly.

Not long ago, Balloorum Medhey considered Bupdhon his prime treasure. But, now, his grown sons did not feel any pride in the elephant, they were ashamed if Bupdhon was seen standing in the front yard. They always conspired to either sell or banish him from the house! One day, they decided to rent out the elephant to the logging contractor to earn several hundred rupees a month. They thought they would kill two birds with one stone since the ungainly animal would not be seen in their home any more. Moreover, they were fiscally conservative, it was an unbearable sight for them to have an enormous elephant dawdling at home. They figured that though their father vehemently objected to selling the elephant, he would be amenable to the idea of renting him out.

The idea was barely divulged when the chrotchety old man started a great ruckus. "Bupdhon will haul heavy logs in the jungle? Oh, God! Am I still alive at this advanced age to hear things like this? What has happened to you people? Who do you think earns the food Bupdhon eats? Why the hell are you on his case so much? If I hear of such a despicable thing again, I am telling you, I swear, I will burn this house to ashes. I, I, ..., I will do something extremely drastic."

Bormoyna and his brothers were terribly annoyed. They were also more than a little surprised. What did their old man think of the animal? It was just an animal—pure and simple; it had to work like any other animal for a living. Why could their father not accept this basic fact? Their modern utilitarian perspective on the world with all its heartless assumptions could not fathom an acceptable answer. As a result, their obstinacy and defiance lost normal bounds; they became spiteful. They brought up the idea at least once every day, just to irritate their father.

The arguments would have continued until the irascible and proud old man's eventual death. But, these came to an abrupt end, in an unexpected and eventful manner. This is how the reconciliation came:

The auspicious occasion was the wedding of the old man's youngest son Conmoyna.

It was the time-honored tradition in the rural areas for the groom of rich, aristocratic families to travel to the wedding ceremony at the bride's house, in a procession riding on an elephant. Even poor people considered it a matter of pride to rent an elephant to parade at the head of the procession, with the handsomely attired groom on its back. This was the last in a long series of weddings in Balloorum's house. In each wedding, the procession consisted of not one, but ten or twelve elephants; Bupdhon proudly led each procession.

Extensive arrangements were made for Conmoyna's wedding for more than a month. Although the old man was not required to do anything, he voluntarily and nominally coordinated the entertainment activities for the reception at the groom's home prior to the formal ceremony. He would be extremely pleased with himself if the last wedding in his home during his lifetime went off well, and with as much pomp and grandeur as affordable.

A week before the wedding, he summoned Bormoyna and inquired if arrangements had been completed for the elephants for the wedding procession.

Bormoyna was surprised at the question and retorted, "Elephants? Why do we need elephants?"

This time it was the father's turn to be bewildered. "What did you say?" he asked incredulously, "You don't know why we need elephants in a wedding? Have you gone completely insane?"

It was not Bormoyna's mistake. The world had transformed so swiftly that what was natural and essential yesterday had become a matter of ridicule and curiosity today. The realization of this cruel fact of life suddenly struck Bormoyna at the second question. He answered with an understanding smile, "Father, we don't need elephants this time. We have arranged for more than ten motor vehicles for the wedding procession. The groom will go in my Ambassador—the best automobile around, in front of all the others."

It took some time for the father to absorb the answer. He shook his hands and said, "It's good that you've arranged for many motor vehicles. However, the groom must lead the procession on Bupdhon's back; it's the family tradition. Not a single wedding in the house has taken place without Bupdhon. My youngest son's wedding also cannot proceed without him. You can do whatever you want in the future, with your own sons. Do you understand?"

Hearing his father's reaction, Bormoyna smiled, mumbled an almost inaudible comment, and walked away. The deaf man did not hear him well. Involuntarily, Balloorum's mind traveled swiftly back on memory lane. In his mind's eye, he was transported back to a glorious day in his life many years ago; he was absent-minded, hopelessly lost in romantic reminiscence.

The day of the wedding finally arrived. Everyone was busy fulfilling given functions. The old man summoned Rutteeya, and the two together took Bupdhon to the river. Rutteeya washed and cleaned Bupdhon for almost two hours. They came home, and from about noon started decorating Bupdhon. Like an accomplished artist, Balloorum drew a huge heart on his forehead; he created beautiful patterns on the tree-sized limbs and other parts of his body; he tied a string of rattles around his legs. Finally, Balloorum worked on the cushioned seat of honor on which the groom would ride atop the elephant.

In the general confusion of a traditional wedding, hundreds of relatives and friends of the family were enjoying themselves. No one had noticed what Balloorum was doing. Suddenly, Bormoyna saw the senile antics of his father. Hastily, he came over to him and asked, "Father! What's all this you are doing?"

The old man was annoyed and snapped indignantly, "It seems to me that you people don't know what to do in a traditional wedding. Not only that, you are disturbing me asking meaningless questions. The wedding procession must leave for the bride's sharply at four; if we don't finish all the work on the elephant by then, then ..."

“Father, I had already told you that the groom is going to lead the wedding procession in a car. Why are you unnecessarily killing yourself decorating the elephant?”

With utmost disbelief, the old man looked at the son, and said, “Why do you keep on repeating that the groom will go in the car? He won’t do so just because you said so. Conmoyna will ride the elephant. Now, shut up; go and do your own work.”

Although Bormoyna was irritated, he left quietly. The appointed time, as determined by an astrologer, for the groom’s party to start its procession arrived. Accompanying the procession was a band with four pairs of traditional drums called *dhols*. There was a modern instrumental band also. Their loud music filled the expectant air.

Near the decorated wedding arch built at the main gate to the house, was parked Bormoyna’s Ambassador car—nicely decorated with flowers for the auspicious occasion. Behind it were ten or twelve other cars, busses and trucks. Across from the Ambassador car stood Bupdhon, his proud face filled with self-satisfaction, as if he was the pivotal actor on this occasion. The old man sat on a chair next to the elephant, awaiting the groom’s arrival.

Of course, the groom would select to ride on the elephant on this joyous journey—the old man never had the slightest doubt. His face radiated abundant confidence. Every now and then he cast a proud glance at Bupdhon, and his face lit up with tremendous satisfaction.

Just then, the handsomely attired groom surrounded by women singing traditional wedding songs, came out of the house and ceremonially walked towards the main gate. The groom crossed the wedding arch, and came on to the road. The old man busily stood up and barked, “Rutteeya, order the elephant to sit. The groom is here!” It was drowned in the sounds of the two noisy bands; Rutteeya did not hear his master’s fateful and crucial order.

The groom continued walking straight towards the Ambassador car. Seeing this, the old man lost control of himself and shouted out in deep pain, “Conmoyna!” By this time, someone opened the door of the car, and the groom was about to step in. The old man ran unsteadily toward the groom and pleaded loudly, “Conmoyna, please don’t get in the car; you’ve to go riding the elephant!”

Seeing the antics of the old man, a party-goer loudly mocked at him in merriment. The next moment, the chauffeur cranked up the engine of the groom’s automobile and his journey to the bride’s home began. Soon thereafter, everyone else went on to their respective cars, busses and trucks. Every motor vehicle followed the groom’s lead.

Balloorum Medhey, Bupdhon and Rutteeya were the only ones left standing stunned like apparitions, in front the now-empty house that was filled with raucously merry-making relatives, friends and well-wishers minutes ago.

They were anachronistic representatives of a by-gone world that had been denied a position of honor in the glamorous parade of the new; they were already hopelessly antiquated, left behind incongruously in the swift transition.

At the gentle touch of Bupdhon’s trunk, the old man came back to his senses from the self-pejorative trance into which he had sunk. With a look filled with deep pain, he ardently stared at Bupdhon; the elephant gingerly flapped his ears as if to conceal the stark affront to which he was rudely subjected. In vain, he tried to be a faithful companion in commiseration with his master. With unsteady footsteps the old man carried himself to the animal, balanced the whole weight of his delicate body against the elephant, hid his face against the dark and rough hide, and started chanting, “Bupdhon! Bupdhon!...”

Suddenly, a timely and lasting solution to the impasse dawned on him. Hastily, he straightened his slouched head and stood spryly erect. He looked at Rutteeya and said confidently, “Rutteeya, Bupdhon must not remain in this wretched and ingrate house even a split second longer. At this very moment, it is my great pleasure to give my dear and trusted Bupdhon away to you. From now on, you are not only his mahout—a humble caretaker, but also his proud master. Go, go! Take Bupdhon away to your home before they come back from the wedding. Did you hear me, Rutteeya?”

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Homen Borgohainee is a well-known Assamese novelist and short story writer.

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12

An Enslaved Mind

By **Sourabh Kumar Chaliha**

Translation: **Roshmi Bora Das**

“The children beam with joy when it snows in Guwahati in the months of November and December. Roads, roof-tops, flowers, trees and vehicles - everything gets covered with snow. It is as if the town becomes clad in a single white garment. The world appears flooded in white transparent rays of light. At times, the water in the lakes freezes. Sporting colourful caps and snow boots, the children play outdoors with their skis, sledges and roller skates. They throw snowballs at one another. They shout in abandon joy and slide down the ice. They ski on the slopes of the hills.”

“With great pleasure, Anju and Ranju also skate across the icy lake in front of their house. The water in the lake has frozen. Constant snowfall during the night has made the snow almost as high as the banks. The slopes in front of Runumi’s house are also covered with snow. She is sliding down the slopes with her little sister in a wheeled wooden box.”

“Buttoning our jackets right up to our necks, we walk outdoors to inspect the snow. The morning breeze cuts through our cheeks and uncovered ears like prickly needles. See, the boys are making a snowman! Opening the snow-covered gate, Herr Baruah walks to the main road. He is wearing a blue scarf around his neck. He had parked his car in front of the house and is now searching for it. But the snow has made it look like an igloo. Well! How can he now get into the car?”

“Frau Baruah steps out of the house and waves Herr Baruah a good-bye. She wants to check if there are any letters in the mail-box. Even the mail-box is covered with snow and ice. She warms her hands by rubbing them against her apron, and starts scraping the ice from the box.”

Frau Mueller read my German essay up to this point. Then, she took off her round ancient glasses and remarked, “Marvelous! Marvelous! There is not a single grammatical mistake!! This is very nice. Really!” However, with a note of suspicion, she continued, “I didn’t know it snows in your country.” Frau Mueller turned the globe on her table, spotted India on it, put her glasses on once again and peered at the region. “That’s right! The equator runs

below India. Here are the tropics! Now, this is Assam. Where is Guwahati?"

I promptly replied, "Perhaps, it's not marked on the globe." I wanted to evade the question that Frau Mueller would inevitably ask. So, I immediately started a description of Shillong. "This is Shillong, the capital of Assam. It is situated on the hills and is very cold in the winter. Guwahati lies just below it."

"Shillong is the land of the Khasis. There are many winding hilly roads in the city. It is just like the villages of Bavaria, although much bigger. There are many streams, passes and gorges. There are shapely pine trees everywhere. The Government generates electricity from the huge waterfalls nearby. With its cool mild climate, Shillong is a well-known summer resort. It is about a hundred kilometers from the plains if you drive. The road to Shillong is an one-lane highway; that's a real problem. But even then..."

"Okay! Okay!" Frau Mueller lowered her ruffled head of white hair. She listened to me enthusiastically, but seemed a little surprised. With a blue pencil, she marked my essay in several places.

The firm in Germany to which I had come for a training in business administration had sent me to this lady of the Pedagogic Institute. She would test my knowledge of German. At present, I was on probation. If I passed the test I would be appointed a regular employee in the company. After I completed my training, I would be awarded a diploma.

Frau Mueller said that she had read quite a lot about India and Japan. She was particularly interested in visiting India if all went well. She would also like to take along her children, Gretchen and Fritz, to visit these countries of the Orient. (Definitely not to earn a diploma!) In spite of her advanced age, she was excited about everything. "I must say that your essay has surprised me. Your knowledge of German grammar and sentence construction is fairly accurate. However, you have not captured all the nuances of the language; sometimes that may make our school children laugh if they read your composition. Even then, the essay," I detected a sign of slight indecision in her kind red face, "on the whole is good." She continued, "It was really nice, getting introduced to you."

The lady picked up few pieces of coal from the bucket by the table, threw them into the fire-place, and perhaps remembering that I came from the tropics added, "Perhaps, in the beginning, you found Germany very cold. But, from the description in your essay..." Once again, I sensed a little hesitation in her speech. "Is the room warm enough now? You can take off your coat if you are too hot." "Thank you, Frau Mueller!" I said, took off my coat, and hung it on the chair.

Frau Mueller lowered her head and scribbled a few more notes on my essay. Writing some comment on it, she asked, "Really, I don't know anything about the field of business administration. Still, tell me something! Is the field not yet advanced in your country? Otherwise why would you come from so far to get a diploma here?" With a conceited smile, she asked, "As far as I know, our economy and our companies are strikingly different from even those in other European countries. Definitely there must be pronounced differences with those in Asia as well. How, then, will your country benefit from your diploma?"

How could I faithfully answer such a pointed question? I wanted to get this diploma in any way I could, and return home in a few months. Then, however irrelevant to my job, I could haughtily exhibit it to my colleagues and superiors at work. With a German diploma, a promotion at the office was soon inevitable.

Of course, once I returned, during the first few years, I would neither be able to acquire a piece of real estate nor a car! But then, I would be back in my cherished homeland! Everyone who travels or lives abroad eventually returns home for various reasons. Life is meaningless in a foreign and inhospitable land. Why should I become an exception and try to linger abroad? If I were rich in Assam and owned a piece of expensive real estate, I might have mortgaged it to meet my expenses in Germany. Had I been really intelligent, I would have applied for and received a scholarship. But being neither rich nor bright, the only way to make ends meet in a foreign country or anywhere for that matter, was to indulge in flattery. I had come here on leave without pay from my job. I must make some money here and save a few pennies before I left.

But how could I possibly explain all these sordid facts to Frau Mueller? Briefly I said, "It will help me in my job." "Oh!", the lady exclaimed as though she did not fully follow. Hoping to end this meaningless conversation, she put the sheets of paper away, and said, "I will try to send the report on your language test today itself. Congratulations!" I knew that I had passed the test! "Thank you, Frau Mueller!"

The lady said that she would be very glad if I would let her know the decision that the Bickman and Bickman Company would make about me. "I will definitely let you know," I said. I knew I would get a raise of a hundred marks per week, although I didn't care to mention it to her. I picked up my coat, and started to get up from the chair.

Frau Mueller looked at her watch and said, "There are twenty more minutes till my next examinee arrives. He is from Iran and has come for a training in the monitoring of petroleum pipe-lines. He is very lackluster. Perhaps, he has not completed any of the work that I had asked him to do at home."

She looked at her watch again, "It's time for a coffee break! Can I offer you a cup of coffee? Now that you have crossed the hurdle of the language test, you can complete your training in six months and return home. You are so far away; perhaps, you feel homesick! Who do you have in your family?"

Suddenly, I was transported back to the day when I left home for Germany. The scene flashed before my eyes as if it was only yesterday. It was in the thick of the rainy season. It was pouring down almost incessantly. My home is in the outskirts of the town. The narrow lane from the house to the main road was already a flowing river. It was impossible to drive a car or pull a rickshaw. So, I handed my luggage to the barefoot office peon whom I had summoned for help. My brother and I removed our socks and shoes, and rolled up our trousers, and got ready to walk up the lane.

My sisters were accustomed to this lane since they walked to school every weekday. They would hold their slippers high in one hand, and lift their mekhela-sadors with the other. But on the day of my departure, I forbade them to accompany me to the main road.

The first reason was that, the moment I would get into the taxi, they would both start wailing in unison. This would embarrass me; I would also get delayed. Secondly, during the rainy season, our house is infested with frogs, snails, caterpillars and various other insects. Both my sisters had already been stung by caterpillars. They had rashes all over their hands. As remedy, they had smeared ground lime in their ears. They presented a terribly dishabille appearance. Thirdly, behind our neighborhood, near the pond that is dry except during the rains, lived immigrant people of obscure origins. They had set up their businesses of cheap wood furniture, rotten potatoes and onions, plastic goods, wallets, goggles, and

Hawaiian slippers. They are gross, undisciplined, and loathesome. I had sometimes seen their children stark naked, sitting in rows by the side of the pond, shamelessly emptying their bowels in public! Where and how their elders relieve themselves is a mystery! Now, with the rains, the water from that filthy, malodorous area had flown into our lane. All sorts of disgusting and unhealthy garbage had accumulated in small pits everywhere. A nasty, foul, and damp odor had filled the air. My sisters would develop wounds in their feet if they walked on the lane now!

I sought the blessings of my parents and other elders who had gathered to bid me good-bye. My mother was sniffing and rubbing her eyes with the ends of her sador. Rain water dripping through the kitchen walls had dampened the house. Perhaps she had caught a cold. Rain water also leaked in through the roof in the bedroom. My mother becomes testy in the rainy season for many such reasons. The concrete slab in the backyard where utensils and dishes are washed was surrounded by mud on all sides. The maid was unable to go outside in the rain and do the dishes. Dirty dishes were piled up high everywhere in the kitchen.

Between her sobs, my mother grasped the curtain on the main door, and consciously kept looking at her bare feet. She was extremely scared of the kerelua, a type of milipede abundant in Assam. Her hairs stood up on their ends when she saw these creatures. At this time of the year there were innumerable such creatures on the floors, and they form queues that look like express trains. Whenever my mother felt something stick to her foot, she jumped up, and cried out in fear, "Ugh! What's that?"

I also saw my father's feet in his cheap pair of shoes. With the hookah in his hand, my father, a retired teacher, imparted forbidding and valedictory advice to me in his characteristic rough voice. He is a rheumatic patient, and in the rainy season he is as ill-tempered as a nagging school mistress. Moreover, at this time, mosquitoes buzzed around in his dark and damp room. Also everywhere in the house, there were bedbugs now. They bit whenever one sat down. My father got irritated and scolded us at the slightest pretext. Rubbing his skin, he was smoking the hookah, lounging in his chair.

I imagined that on that fateful day, after I had left the house, and after my neighbors had gone back to their own houses, mother would give father a few pieces of sliced mango and a cup of tea. Only then would his voice soften. But this would not continue for long. A fly would rest at the very spot on the rim of the cup where he took a sip and a swarm of flies would start circling the pieces of mango.

That evening, father would not go out anywhere. How can he possibly cross this ocean of nauseating water? Lighting the kerosene lamp, he would read the Axom Bani, the popular weekly newspaper. His forehead would form a desperate knot. Floods, floods, floods everywhere! Scarcity of food in one place, death in another, plague in the third!! Definitely there would be a rise in the price of food grains. Roads were damaged in the rains, and many bridges had fallen apart. Bus and railway stations were flooded causing great inconvenience to passengers. Railway services were interrupted. Rickshaw pullers had fled the city. Mail, telegraph, and telephone services were temporarily suspended. Tens of thousand had become homeless. The floods present a perennial problem of immense magnitude in Assam, with no solution in sight. Meanwhile, the paper also reported that a monsoon festival was being organized in the District Library under the auspices of a cultural organization called The Madhugunjan, the Sweet Melody Club. The festival would be inaugurated by a distinguished award-winning author.

My brother Niren, a college student, is one of the romantic types who flock to organizations and clubs such the Madhugunjan.. I visualized what he would do after seeing me off at the airport. He would roll up his mud- stained pajamas, curse the Municipality Board, and enter the lane to our house. Manik Babu, the ward councilor lives on our lane near the main road. Standing in front of his house, Niren, in his usual habit, would give vent to the grievances that he held against the councilor. The reason for Niren's venomous outbursts was that, for some mysterious reason, only the portion of the lane up to the ward councilor's house was paved. That's how my brother displays his social responsibilities.

Entering the house, he would take off his pajamas and the Jawahar coat. He would then wash his feet and wear my sister's slippers. Asking her for a cup of tea, he would go to his room. Possibly encouraged by the monsoon festival, he would pick up the copy of the Sanchayita, a book of poems by an acclaimed poet, that lies in his book shelf. The poet declares that the purity of rain, like the grace of youth and the pulchritude of a radiant sunset, is beautiful - beyond comparison.

Normally, on days when it rains incessantly, the young ones in our house sit facing one another, and gaze sympathetically at each other. Our eyes portray a sense of sadness, because it is impossible to step outdoors. However, I must remind myself that we must keep all such derogatory opinions about the rains to ourselves. Critics abroad have amply praised the poet. So, his description is definitely truer than what we natives think and see! Of course, our country is so beautiful, so clean, so tranquil that it represents heaven on earth, an abode of peace, a veritable Elysium!! The rain further cleanses every town, every village, every road, and every forest, augmenting their paradisiac beauty and loveliness!!!

But, on return to the harshness of reality, we would confront a situation just as in my essay: Niren Dutta would step out of the house to go to the District Library. Well! Now, how could he sustain the cleanliness and purity of his vaunted intellectual existence, and still reach the main road after wading through the filthy lane? The coffee I sipped satiated me. Yes! Finally my dream was going to be fulfilled. Next month, I would send home three to four hundred marks. The walls of my father's room and the kitchen roof would be repaired. Returning home, I would have a discussion with the town councilor - Manik Babu, and arrange for paving our pathetic lane, at least up to our house. I would also persuade him to improve the situation with the sewer drainage, possibly get them covered. I would at least make a sincere effort because otherwise, my sisters and all of us face great inconvenience. I could care less about the other problems of our neighborhood. Why should I shoulder all responsibilities? Had I taken all the trouble to come to Germany to study so that I could go back home and alleviate the problems of all the people in the world? Was I so stupid?

It was time for the Iranian candidate for the language test to arrive. Rising up from her chair, Frau Mueller shook my hands, and again repeated that the description I had written in German was beyond her remotest imagination. It was absolutely flawless; it seemed like an account by an experienced author. Had she known earlier, she would have given me a lengthier and a more difficult assignment. For example, she would have required me to describe my home town after the snow starts melting.

Secretly, I flinched, but managed an outward smile. "So far as I can infer from your account, as in our country..." Frau Mueller slowly ran her fingers through her white hair and continued, "The snow slowly melts. The snow cover gradually disappears from the red roofs, the trees, and the roads. Things reveal themselves in their original shapes and colors. The cars and the buses, and the din and bustle of everyday life return. The dust, the mud

and the melting snow have made the roads dirty and produced scattered puddles. But soon the cleaning trucks will arrive to clear the snow and the slush. After a few hours everything will be as clean before. The city- fathers have taken the responsibility of maintaining public cleanliness, and the citizens need not worry at all.”

“But the trucks are not able to go into narrow lanes, and in such areas, thank God, we have learnt to take the necessary steps ourselves. For instance, take my house. Have you ever seen a narrow lane by the name of Klinkerfyugasey? The lane runs by the side of the Jacobi Church. The trucks cannot go into our lane So, my children shovel the snow in front of our house. The neighbors on both sides of my house are old couples, and are not able to shovel snow themselves. So, I have asked my Gretchen and Fritz to clear the snow in their houses as well. Perhaps in your country too...”

With a smile on my lips and a slight bent of my head I was listening to Frau Mueller. If in the future, I would have children, I would try to get my “Gretchen” married to a boy who had returned from higher studies in Germany. I would also send my “Fritz” to Germany to get a diploma. And here, Frau Mueller was telling me about getting her Gretchen and Fritz to shovel snow in someone else’s house! Was she utterly naive?

If I were asked to write an account in German, describing the appearance of my town when the snow melts or after the rain ends - how our narrow lane or the refugee colony or the thatched-roof houses reveal themselves - I knew I would not be able to write such a description. For in reality, I had no advanced knowledge of the German language. The essay that I had written was not an original piece. I had plagiarized the account from an essay entitled ‘Snow in Our Town’ that had appeared in an old German-English translation book named ‘Easy German Lessons’. I had simply changed the names and had replaced the words Our Town with Guwahati!

Rashmi Bora Das is a graduate student in Public Administration in the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This story is a translation of the original in Assamese called “Gulaam.”

13

Too Tragic to Answer

By **Atulananda Goswami**

Translation: **Khanindra Pathak and Jugal Kalita**

"Dhon! Can you come here for a moment please?"

"Dhon is not home, Grandpa. He has gone to the pharmacy to get some medicine." Rumi replied as she came out of the house hearing her grandfather's voice.

"What about Bapai? Where is he?"

"He is in the backyard. Do you want to speak with him, grandpa?"

"Not really! You yourself can help me. I need a smoke. Can you get me an ember from the kitchen for my water pipe? By the way, where is everybody? I can't seem to find anyone when I need help."

"How can that be, grandpa? Everyone is home. Who were you looking for?"

"Don't worry! You can go in now." Silently Rumi took the bowl of the water pipe and went inside.

In fact Dhon had prepared the tobacco himself for his father and left home only after putting the pipe in the old man's hand. Dhon was in a hurry. Omol had gone to the pharmacy to get medicine, but had forgotten to take the prescription for a new injection. So, Dhon wanted to meet him at the pharmacy before he headed back home. It was urgent.

Perhaps seeing his grandson run around frantically, the old man forgot all about his pipe. So the fire in the bowl got put out. In addition, the whole place seemed to have become too cold for him. He felt as if vast emptiness was starting to devour him in spite of the fact that the house was literally overrun by people. It had started resembling a busy market place. In the mansion-like house everyone seemed to be going about business in silence. Sitting on the front porch, the old man felt all alone.

He did not feel comfortable even though he was lounging on the easy chair with layers of soft rubber cushion. It is a chair that Obhoy had especially bought for him. A while back somebody had brought him a cup of tea and had left it on the small stool by his side. He drank only a little of it. The rest was too cold by now. There was a pile of newspapers

lying near him. He felt they contained only cold and heartless news!

Rumi came out blowing the fire in the bowl with her mouth. Fitting the bowl to the rest of the water pipe, she started to walk back inside. He asked her, "Has the visiting doctor prescribed any new medicine?" The resentment in his voice that had come from being ignored and uninformed had subsided. In addition, he was careful not to express the slightest weakness in his manly conduct to anyone!

"Oh, yes! He wanted to give grandma another injection."

"Has the doctor left already?"

"No, he is still inside, by grandma's side."

"Go tell him to say hello to me on the way out."

The young children in the house did not know what the commotion was all about. Like every other day, they were playing on the big front yard. But even they were afraid of approaching their genial grandfather. It was as if somebody had instructed them not to disturb him.

"How is she, Doctor?" The old man asked as soon as he saw the doctor come out with his bag in hand. His voice had its usual gravity.

"The situation is under control. There is nothing to worry, Sir." The doctor lied to him. "I have given her another injection. I want to try a more general treatment."

The old man had nothing to say. The doctor also had nothing to say. He left saying, "Good bye, Sir." Neera, his middle daughter-in-law brought his afternoon tea out to the porch. Rumi brought the pill he took daily at this time. He drank the tea without looking at anyone. Rumi continued to stand by his side. He requested her, "Come on Rumi! Walk me inside." Supported by Rumi on one hand and the walking stick on the other, he walked inside slowly. There was almost no room in the big house for him to enter. A large number of neighbors and relatives were sitting everywhere and lazily chatting in hushed voices, waiting for the inevitable to happen. Probha, his oldest daughter, who had arrived the previous day, was gently stroking her sick mother's forehead. Rumi's mother was trying to tidy up the place a little bit as he walked in. His youngest son Obhoy, a professor at a local college, was trying to give some medicine to his mother. Seeing his indisposed father walk in with his trembling steps he was a little annoyed. "Father, you don't have to run around the house worrying about mother! The whole family is here. We are taking very good care of mother. If you trip, fall down and break a bone or two, we will have another problem to worry about."

The old man stopped by the door for a moment. His wife's eyes were closed. Her face was expressionless. He wanted to stare lovingly at the shriveled face of his dear wife and admire it for some time. He was very sad and was about to cry out, "Oh dear! What has happened to the beautiful face I always knew!" But he did not express his emotion because by tradition a man does not divulge such tender feelings. Especially, when there were women present! His sons and daughters were there too! His grand-children were all there! He could never break down in front of people! It would be very inappropriate, and in fact, cowardly to show any sign of weakness in such circumstances.

Finding nothing to say he asked, "What food has the doctors said she can take? Is she having barley soup?"

"Oh, yes, the doctor said barely soup is OK. But he also said it should be very dilute." The reply did not come from anyone in the family. Of all people, it came from Ratna's mother, a neighbor. She spoke with a low voice after drawing down her veil, as a show of respect.

"Father, would you like to sit by mother for a while?," his eldest daughter Probha asked. The old man was expecting somebody would ask him that. But if he sat there, the others would have to leave to give them privacy. One woman had already suggested to place the chair a little closer to the bed. But Abhoy spoke with finality, "Father does not really have to sit here. He has nothing to worry. We all are here taking care of mother. Moreover if he sits on that wooden chair, it may hurt his back and bottom."

The old man did not want to argue with his grown son in front of everyone. He walked back to the porch. His steps were slow but steadier than before. Rumi gently helped him sit on the special chair and quietly left.

The man did not feel like sitting on the chair all alone in the porch. His mind was restless. There was no peace in his mind. As he was unable to do anything he wanted due to his advanced age, he wished he was younger, less dependent on others, and more active. He sat patiently for sometime. A few neighbors stopped by him to say a perfunctory but meaningless hello. They did not speak much though.

After a while Probha's daughter Mamoni, who was studying for an M.A. in Guwahati arrived on a rickshaw. "Grandpa!" She came in running and hugged her grandfather. She had come home after a long time. She had become more beautiful than ever. Her stylish blouse exposed her navel, her silk sari frequently slipped from her shoulders, and her colorful ornaments dazzled on her ears and neck. She had become very attractive. Her mannerisms and style of talking had also become more urbanized. She had changed a lot from the last time he saw her. But even she did not divulge to him that she had come to see her grandmother one last time after getting an urgent letter from Rumi. The grandfather kissed her on the head and said, "I am glad to see you! Everyone is here. Now, go inside and meet them."

Omol had returned by this time. Seeing him, the old man called out to him, "Come here! Walk me to my bed." The father could not walk of his own any more. He did not have enough strength to walk around for more than a few steps. The walking stick alone was not sufficient to balance his weight. He needed somebody to hold him as he walked. He also had constant high blood pressure. So he was very careful. That is why Obhoy forbade him from walking around. Obhoy did not even think he should sit by his dying wife lest it affected his very weak and fragile body. Obhoy was always overly concerned about the well-being of his father's health. He was very protective. Sometimes it required Obhoy to be harsh with his father for his own good. Therefore, the old man went straight to bed.

The old woman had been unconscious since morning. Urgent messages had been sent to everyone in the close-knit extended family. None of the sons went to work that day. The middle son Omiya was a contractor. He never had any time to stay home for long. Even he had not left home today. The three daughters had arrived from around the state. Finally, Mamoni had also just come. She was the last one of the close family to come home. Everybody knew the old woman did not have more than a few hours left. Only the old man seemed to be in total darkness about the sad inevitability. However, in spite of the fact that nobody told him anything clearly, he understood that the day was ominous. Lying on the bed the old man started musing over his sick wife. Was there anything she missed

in her life? Did she want to tell him something in private? According to the people by her bedside, she could have no regrets in life. Her life was full and productive. Nobody could build a more well-rounded family as she and her husband did. She never had to struggle for anything. Her whole life was like an well-oiled machine. All their children were now established in society. Their grown children had taken charge of the well-being of the extended family. They revered their parents. They took rather very good care of everyone. How could his wife be sad?

In spite of all that, perhaps she had something in the depth of her mind she wanted to tell him now! Perhaps she wanted to see her beloved husband alone one last time! But, had she expressed her wish, everyone would have known about it. They would have carried out her wish right away.

"Grandpa!" It was Mamoni. "What, my darling?" A drop of tear slipped out from his eyes. It was dark so Mamoni could not have noticed it. "I see! You are already asleep."

Mamoni was the oldest daughter of his oldest daughter. That is why she loved him the most. Almost leaning against the grandfather, she said, "Come on Grandpa! Let's go and sit by granny!" The grandfather also wanted to get up and get another glimpse of his wife. But he controlled himself. Mamoni also wanted to say, "Maybe, granny wants to see you." But she did not say it aloud. The grandfather consoled her, "I think there is no need for me to hobble around. Everybody is very concerned about her."

"How does that matter! Please come with me. The guests have all left." Actually, some people were still there. The grandmother had come back to her senses for a few moments. Probha felt she was looking for her husband when she murmured something. So she asked her daughter to fetch her grandfather. The night was very critical for her mother. With his trembling steps the grandfather walked in with Mamoni's help. Probha was sitting on the bed by her mother's side. Pronoti, another one of their daughters was also there holding her baby on her lap. Probha pulled the chair closer to the bed and put a soft pillow on it to make it more comfortable. The old man sat down slowly. His eyes were fixed at his wife's face. She was silent, motionless, almost unconscious. Her old and tired husband started staring intently at her face without batting an eyelid. He did not find a single word to say aloud. The history of past fifty years of their married life was written on her pale face. Her face symbolized the sorrows and happinesses of the past half a century. The old man started reminiscing the memorable days of their life together. Probha felt very sorry for her parents. Pomee, another one of their granddaughters came in. Seeing her sorrowful grandfather staring at his dying wife, she could not stay inside. Probha also went out to dry her dripping eyes. Mamoni was leaning on her grandfather's chair. She too stepped back a little further.

The old man forgot the presence of others for a brief moment. After some time he stretched out his feeble hand. Perhaps he wanted to caress her gentle face as a sign of enduring affection. But he did not. Slowly, he touched her forehead and addressed her in a low voice, "Toru! Toru!"

At the sound of her name, the frail woman suddenly woke up. Nobody had addressed her by her name during the last four decades! Those around her addressed her as a mother, a grandmother, or an aunt. As a result her real name, Toru, had almost been forgotten. Oh, after what a long period of time did her husband address her by that name!!

The ill woman suddenly opened her eyes at the sound of her almost unspoken name. Tears

rolled down her two eyes. Thousands of words wanted to spring out from the depth of her heart. Thousands of words wanted to fight with the tongue to come out together. At last with a feeble voice she managed to utter a few words, "Have you had your afternoon tea?" And, she could speak no more.

"I have had my tea, dearest Toru! How are you?" The grandfather too couldn't say anything more. His lost his voice. Her eyes closed again. Two drops of tear came out of her eyes. They looked like tiny balls of gem in reflected light. Very gently, the husband wiped the two drops dry. The woman's body and mind became numb once again.

Mamoni ran out of the room and announced to everyone that her grandmother had regained consciousness! Everybody rushed in at the encouraging news. Probha also came in and stood by the bed. She called in a low voice, "Ma! Ma!" She was unconscious again.

The old man had grasped the top of the upright walking stick with his hands, then rested his chin on the hands, and was staring at his wife's face. He was looking at the mark of vermilion on her forehead, the sign of married status for a Hindu woman. It was shining brighter than ever. Probha had put make-up on her mother's face every day she had been lying in bed. She had done it today also.

It was the old man's habit to have a cup of tea every afternoon. Along with that he took a vitamin pill every day for the past two years. The doctor had prescribed three pills a day. The afternoon pill was always given to him by his wife. Every afternoon he would sit on the front porch. His wife would put on nice clothes, put modest make-up along with a mark of vermilion on her forehead, and sit down on a small stool by her husband's side. They would chew betel nut together. She would also bring the bottle of medicine. Usually the youngest daughter-in-law would bring tea for the in-laws. The old man liked his tea with a lot of milk and a lot of sugar. He would wait till it was lukewarm before he would start drinking. Before he started drinking his tea, his wife would give him his pill. He would take the pill along with tea.

During this period they took stock of the daily events. Usually they discussed which grandson needed a hair cut, who had to go to the dentist, who was punished by his mother for some wrongdoing, which child had been detected with stomach problems, and who needed a new writing slate for school. They discussed such matters in detail. In between the grandfather read the newspaper. Sometimes he read a few items of news aloud and explained them to his wife.

They usually sat together for a long time. During that time Montu, Mina and the other children played in the courtyard. If someone needed to pee, he would come near them to get the pant buttons opened. The grandfather would then keep his newspaper aside and peer over his spectacles and would make fun of the grandmother "Be quick, mother! Otherwise, he will pee in his pants!"

The grandmother would leave the porch to go inside only if it was absolutely necessary. She entertained some of the guests on the porch itself. She welcomed them there, and later sent a message inside for tea for them.

Rumi and Omol also sometimes stopped by the porch to take a piece of betel nut from them. They would ask her sometimes to do some small chores for them. The old woman had been unable to sit on the porch for the past month. Her husband sat there all by himself. He did not make any exception in his daily routine. If that happened, his oldest son Omol would not spare anyone. His wife had been sick. It started with high fever. There were a few other

diseases of old age also. Her health gradually deteriorated and had reached today's critical state. Everyone suspected that she was not going to come out of it alive. Nobody wanted her to suffer though. She was quite old. Everybody wanted her to die happily without much pain. In the past couple of days, all the relatives had been informed. Some had already come. One of Mamoni's brothers who was still not home would arrive tomorrow. Everyone suspected the worst except the grandfather.

Now since the old woman wanted her husband by her side, the children brought their father to their mother's side. Many times earlier, the grandfather himself wanted to sit down by her side and massage and caress her head and her face. He had wanted to talk to her alone.

But he was not allowed to do what he wanted to. If he had to do the job of nursing his sick wife, what would the other people in the family do? Three sons, three daughters-in-law, two daughters, a number of grandchildren, and many servants! What would all these people do?

The old man wanted to ask his wife on death bed, if he did anything terribly wrong during the fifty years of their married life, and if there was something she wanted, but he could not provide. He felt guilty at not being able to do that. When his wife was conscious and a little better, the place was like a zoo with her well-wishers and relatives. He never got an opportunity to sit by her side. Nobody thought it might be something important to her. Whenever he limped in himself, he had to ask a few unnecessary things, make small talk and quickly leave the room filled with numerous attendants all the time. Even now he wanted to caress his wife and rest her head on his chest. He wanted to stroke her gray hairs and plead with her "Toru, I want to leave the world with you. Please take me along!" But the overbearing tradition and culture inhibited him. His wife was now unconscious. She might never gain her senses. How was it possible? The old lady was preparing to leave this world without the beautiful family she created herself. How could she spurn the care, the love and the affection of her many grandchildren? And what about her husband of five long decades? Had she not thought of his emotions, his desire to be with her for eternity?

"Ma!" Probha addressed her once again. She had regained her consciousness! It seemed she wanted to say something important. It seemed she was struggling to open her eyes.

Hearing the good news, the doctor stopped by once again. He held her hand and felt her very weak pulse. The old woman wanted to raise her hand and in great exasperation shake her pointed fingers at the sea of people besieging her and admonish them, "All of you, go away! I don't need you all, all the time. Let me be with my husband, in private." But she did not have the strength to say it in so many words. Nobody understood the desperate signals of her hands. Instead of going away all came closer. The old woman wanted to say to her husband "Where were you all these lonely days? All these days you never came to me by yourself even once and sit by me?"

"Now I am about to die. I know it will be difficult for you without me. But what can I do? I can't do anything to ease your pain! Please don't be upset with me for not being a good wife, and for dying before you!" But, the old woman could not muster the language and the strength to say all that. After a while, looking at her husband, she struggled to feebly pronounce, "Your feet!" Nobody understood what she wanted to convey. Everybody looked at each other. However, the mother of the oldest daughter-in-law Rumi, was able to guess it correctly. But she did not have the heart to say it loudly and announce it to everyone. Belatedly, Probha also understood what her mother meant. She came to her

father and respectfully touched his feet and then carried that sense of reverent connection to her mother's forehead. But the old man did not see the events happening in front of his own eyes. He did not understand anything. He did not notice the people around him who were counting time. His face became motionless, it did not show the slightest emotion. He was staring at his wife with deep attention. It was as if his still head was glued to the top of his walking stick. Without his knowledge, tears rolled down from his eyes.

Pomee is the youngest of the old couple's daughters. She was very observant. She noticed when the doctor silently left without saying a word. Then she noticed the tears in her father's eyes. She could not hold down her own tears. She started crying loudly. Her father was startled by her shriek. Subconsciously he collected all his strength, and stood up impulsively. Then he asked loudly, "What's the matter, Toru? Do you want to tell me something?" His frail legs could not support his weight. Before Omiya could grasp him, he fell, hit his knees on the side of bed, and fell on top of his wife. There was a sudden commotion. Pomee was dumb struck. Probha tried to stop weeping by biting into her clothes.

* * *

When the old man woke up, Dr. Baruah was feeling the pulse on his left hand. The man was not aware of his surroundings. Probha was sitting nearby. Mamoni was massaging his legs. Obhoy and Omiya were also in the room.

After opening his eyes the old man was perplexed for a moment about his whereabouts. He tried to figure out what had transpired during his sleep. He could not make out anything. During the last fifty years, he had been confused many times. Many times he had not found answers to difficult questions, and solutions to sticky situations. At such times, he always turned to his wife, "Well Toru! What will we do now?" If she knew an answer, she volunteered it. Otherwise they would discuss it together and find an acceptable solution. Today also, he instinctively sought her wisdom. After a long silence he asked, "Well, Toru! What is happening? What should we do now?" expecting her to be at his bedside. Probha looked the other way to hid her face and started weeping. Mamoni momentarily forgot to rub his foot and looked down to the floor. Rumi and Rumi's mother also started crying behind the door. They did not want to come because they looked shabby due to the wake and subsequent mourning.

Though there were no tears in their eyes, Obhoy and his brothers did not come forward to see their father right away. They had not shaved in three days due to their mother's death, following traditional Hindu customs. If their wizened father, with his debilitated health, suddenly grasped the untold news of his dear wife's death, he would definitely suffer the most traumatic shock of his life. It could very well lead to another disaster in the family so soon after their mother's death.

This is a translation of an Assamese short story called 'Niruttar', *Axomiya Premar Galpa* published by Lawyers book stall. Khanindra Pathak was a doctoral student at the Imperial College, London, U.K., at the time the story was translated. Currently, he teaches at the Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad. Jugal Kalita teaches computer science at the University of Colorado.

