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The Evening Tea

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My friend rightly said to me once, that the British gave us a lot, but our evening tea, it is the best – the best Assamese evening tea, the best tea after the usual, indispensable siesta.

Smoke swirled in wisps and disappeared gradually. And at last, talks turned to Rupa in the circle of people sitting in front of the fire place, now producing fire at a fountain-high length. Until then, I was absolutely trying to slough off all the small-mind talks encompassing from the brimful joha rice meal with shitol fish at lunch, the new Bangladeshi miyani who has joined as the part-time maid at someone's house, and as usual, she is not worth the earlier one; to someone's, but shared by all, inevitable gastric formation and lack of appetite for dinner. All were sitting with their evening cups of tea. I watched the fire and as it happens, when one consistently stares at the fire, an whirlpool takes one away – the whirlpool of primarily stupid thoughts as people talked, or rather chattered, pecked, squeaked, squelched, belched. It seemed so piquant to them talking their own talks that no one, in fact, was interested listening to no one. Only the perfunctory nod, meaning their consonance. It was Bhogali, the Gargantua month, the eating-and-flourishing month – when fields get empty, because all productions enter the granary bhoral at village homes. We, in the city too, try at least to touch tangentially at all the conventional customs scribbled in the age-old oral and later, written tradition: bowing down for the elders' feet as a courtesy for worship, avoiding the usual rice at breakfast, but eating instead parched rice sira with curd, solid and liquid molass, and bananas, one can also prefer sugar instead of the molasses, then to the namghar to pay God homage on especially the first day of the festive Bhogali Bihu.

So, this was one of those Bhogali evenings, when sangrangtiks the rice-pots were pot-full and the yard smelled fresh rice, with scant smell of the so-long clambering, now pot-bellied white gourds and of course, the ever-fragrant winter jasmine leaning like a parasite at the front yard gate of our house. Anil Jethu, husband of Deepa Jethai, my mother's older sister worked on the twigs and blew the red charcoal to alight the fire, let it fade. Soon, with the cup of warm evening tea and the growling fire, heat settled everywhere - at our faces, through the trousers into the legs and gradually trying to enter the crotch. It was indeed a soporific moment, after an unfinished sleep in the afternoon with snoring, blowing, cold red nose and a heat becoming more than desired. They had come for a Bhogali dinner at our place, and not quite obviously, but it was also an invitation. Sometimes, they also come, to have an evening parley with ma-piti, over the special cup of ma-made tea and finally end up with dinner. Of course, family talks are perpetual and become even more at times, with the intrusion of nostalgic scraps, not craps, during such parleys. But, it was and still is, enjoyable and favourable during the winters, when festivals are tethered at tandem, commencing with the Diwali, the New Year's eve, and then the Bhogali Bihu, the Assamese one. Stressing upon the Bhogali many times, although, doesn't make me a nationalist. It is only the tale of Rupa, and from where it all started. It is a simple, straight tale, but a true tale. People would find it convincing, if they rather not get swayed by all those story-telling theories of the Russian, and sometimes claiming to be English, Bloody-mir Nabokov, who died shouting poshlosht, poshlosht, poshlosht. I cannot gather myself to contemplate whether that man himself had a consolidated comprehension of such a word that sounded like a wild elephant, blithely splashing water with his trunk, while he is still under the chains of his torturous master, the lethal mahout.

That was the evening when our Ganeshguri remained quasi-dark. Little lights. Few shops, it was known, had their shutters opened. All business slumbered to the spell of Bhogali Bihu. After all, it arrives after the end of, always a long year. It somehow reminded me of Wordsworth's London when Xoru da came amidst entering the gate with his motor bike Pulsar 220, which he bought anew and had been watching still for unfound, accidental blotches turning his back neck and walking towards us, and briefed about the emptiness at Ganeshguri. It was, he said, it seemed like a total graveyard, our Ganeshguri, not even a single man present, and of course that was an exaggeration of what he actually saw. That was when I was still gazing long at the red charcoals. Xoru da worked, works even now, at Glacier Air Conditioners. His office is at Nine Miles, near the Ganesh Temple, where everyone throws one-two penny coins as offering to the god. I don't understand, why the gods are always in a famine, in a wretched condition? Why are they in need of money? And, why do shameless people throw them money like, to some blind pauper who is not even aware of his patron? May be, because of this I see these gods in anthropomorphic forms. Perhaps, Homer was right. Here too, the gods are... whatever. Xoru da came home at weekends. The rest, he stayed at his office guest house, where he got food and the accommodation. As always, he patted my back and shuddered me up from a lost world with a fresh verve. I suppose, he was the one who made the dead evening alive. His was a vibrant personality, it seemed as if he never ever had a sad thought, he never languished in idleness, never cried and never faced a problem in life. "Arre...what do I

see, why such silence in this Bihu day? Come on, wake up, where are you, are you still dreaming about that Handique College girl? She's going to come anyway to you, don't worry. Now, tell mahi to make me a cup of tea. And, are we starting with our uruka- Bhogali night- session tonight? What are you going to have- chicken or pigeon? Or...pork? I'm sorry, boy, our people have never ever consumed that hideous creature. Now, go...tell your ma." he teased me.

I supposed, Xoru da had missed the din, which had crumbled for some time now. Xoru da was the son of Anil Jethu's older sister, Baxonti Jethai. So, a kin to me, although a distant one very intimate to the family. People, there were, more. Kakoti Khura and his family were present.

They were our neighbors. Hargovindo da, another vibrant one, who had been a simple village lad until some days now and now after becoming a security man at a media company near Walford, in Guwahati had begun living a city life, at least he tried to imitate it by consistently covering his ears with the mobile ear-phones listening all day-long to Bihu and Kamrupiya folk songs at Oooo...lala 91.9 FM radio station. He could never afford to miss Dhole-Dogore, where the jockey chatters for three long hours in Kamrupiya, which was, is, a popular dialect in the city. He could relate to his rustic self, he said, when Dhol, a fictional name assigned to one of the two chatter-boys, started speaking. Hargovindo da hated Dogor. He said, Dogor only flaunted and exaggerated himself with his flair in the institutionalized Assamese language, he called it the likhito Axomiya- the written Assamese. Hargovindo da worked, perhaps, in the Channel News Live, which many people had abandoned watching lately after Minister Sharma was alleged of corruption by the mudslinger farmer leader Akhil Gogoi.

It was reported that the minister raised the multi-storied News Live tower worth crores of rupees only after a single year of his incumbency. To the farmer leader, and of course, how could that be possible for a minister who lectured a few days ago at Sualkuchi, the silk village, which was not even his constituency, about his vision of a free and clean Assam, with

new young people joining the Youth Wing of the Congress Party. Who cares...it is only Rupa that we care now.

Oh yes, I forgot to talk about Lahkar Khura. He, with his two daughters- Ruby and Juby and his wife, Ila Khuri – was also there, tacitly talking his turn about Madam Mephi, the Ahom festival, Lalilang, the Dimoriya festival and relating the decadence of Bihu to theirs in our contemporary society, perhaps he meant the city society. He said, of course I heard their conversations in scraps although I avoided, that the Misings, the Tiwas and the Rabhas are still intact with their customs and celebrate their festivals with total zeal, but we had forgotten everything. In the name of uruka, our youths only know how to fetch their quota of the intoxicating drink, they would drink like fishes and scream and yell, kill each other and all sorts of nonsense.

Pouting his chin towards Piti, he said, “Do you remember the news Kumud da, about the boy who was found “spot” dead while returning from his picnic party at Topatoli last week? Hori, Hori, what’s happening? Well... what happened was only for good. These youths must get a good lesson. They only know to drink and only drink, nothing else matters to them. You will observe some time, Kumud da, how these boys scream and yell out their guts in the middle of the streets. Boys of affluent families, and even if they are not affluent, these people, threaten and demand their parents for a motor bike. And once that come to their hands, who matters? No one talks about the unemployment problem these days, have you noticed that? I think, all the youths of Assam are already employed! See, was this not a burning problem some time ago? The first news immediately after this government sat on their gaadi, their so-called throne, what did the Amar Asom reported, do you remember Kumud da?(Piti as if wanting more to hear from him sighed an inexplicable nod). It was in high fonts, the first news, I still remember it: UNEMPLOYMENT, PRIMARY OBJECTIVE and below it in small fonts: The new government promises to tackle unemployment with a unique hand. So... what do we do now?

Everything is evident in front of us, like the Brahmaputra waters. We accept it now. We know everything, and still, what do we do...comfortably squat and warm up our asses in front of the fire place. This is what we do. Ours is a nonsense class, Kumud da, total nonsense. Actually, we have already learnt well to accept everything, good and the worst, everything. Nothing is at all new to us. (He laughs) The promises after the six-year long Andolan, in '85, all finished, washed away like the ashes. What will this government do, when the student leaders fighting the Andolan themselves could not stand up to their aspirations, after forming their own government? They too enjoyed it, I must tell you, they really enjoyed their days during their government. It is such a hideous state, you cannot imagine, Kumud da!! You will also see, we will be the last ghetto celebrating this Bihu. By leaps and bounds, Bihu will be erased out of everyone’s minds, let apart celebration, they won’t even know why we celebrate this damn festival? It is a very tragic state, and we are helpless, at best what can we do? Tell them, advise them, make some petty complaints...will they give you heed? No, no one, don’t expect this from anyone, at least now, in this age. Yes, that was a different time when Sarat Sinha was the Chief Minister of the state, he was the man of the masses, travelled in common city buses with common people, not covered head to heels, like now-a-days, by bullet-proof cars and what are these people called, yes, black cat commandos, and a Z-plus security convoy. What more do these people want? They become kings, they live life king-size. How can they manage time for common people, when they themselves are so worried to alight from their bullet-proof cars without a security person showing them their way? Hopeless bastards! I don’t care a fig about these people, I don’t even excuse my car when these bastards come on my way with the irritating siren and red

lights. I just give it a damn, total crap, I tell you. I am happy with my own way of living, have a stable income at hand, a fine family, with meals thrice a day, and that too I am earning myself, living comfortably. At least I am not like these vampire leeches, who coerce everything from those people, who give them the right to sit over there (pointing his finger towards the Dispur Secretariat, the ministerial building).

Listening very carefully to Lahkar Khura, as if it was live BBC news, Piti shared then his untrammelled, suppressed torrent of melancholy feelings with a frown, which remained adhered to his temple when he got worried,

“Yes...Biren -that was what Lahkar Khura was called- last time when I visited our village during Bihu, when I visited Bardadhi, it was awful, I tell you, it struck me deep inside, I mean, I was shocked to see there was only a single meji at the field and people, there were only a countable fifteen, or perhaps twenty. What did we have earlier? The entire village prepared the meji, the huge mound of hay burnt on the first Bihu day, and everyone went to burn it. After the kirtan, people cried and crowded to get their fill of the prasad and gopalbhog, you know, it is of course the blend of milk, pounded rice powder, bananas, molasses and sometimes dough. This time, there were only six-seven of them, and the rest children with their khorahis to take home prasad, I think, even their parents had not turned up for this occasion. What a sad state, what a sad state I tell you!! And, there was another meji built at the entrance of the village, where some other people, I think they have divided themselves from the rest, were casually and happily enjoying the heat of the burning meji. What has happened?

I mean, this is totally absurd, ridiculous. People no longer want to be happy as they were in the pasts. It seems, they are happy now. When you go to the village now, you will see the streets are all pitched, the trees, the huge trunked trees lying alongside the earlier soiled pathway are now all burnt down as brushwood. They are no longer there. The open sky is very much evident, earlier it was not. But, earlier it was good. At least, the people were good. They were innocent, now they have turned into knowledge gained buffoons. They only see money everywhere. You will see, like our city, each village home has at least a motorbike in their possession.

Raghunath's gumti shop is also now more or less closed; no one goes there for evening tea, as people did earlier. I tell you, there is much to it. But, it is a really sad state. And, the youths, as you already told Biren, they are all gone, they are destroyed, what a fate! I never ever dreamed of seeing such a horrible state. I think, this is all the same with the rest of the villages in Assam. Yes...how different will they be, everything same everywhere.”

“But, you know Kumud da, people in Jorhat, Sivasagar...I mean, the Upper Assam people seldom miss their enjoyment, especially during the Bihu. They are total Assamese folk, they are the real Assamese people. They eat, sing and make merry altogether, they do not even shy to dance it out. I have seen them sitting together, members of the same family, the neighbors and all, they forget everything, they do not much worry about their earlier tiffs, struggles and tugs of war at least during the Bihu season. And, that's what we call the real Assamese people.

When we talk about the Assamese people, we usually refer to them, even the outsiders, the foreigners know them to be the real Assamese, the Kamrupiya here is an alienation effect. And to be true, Kumud da, we, the people of Guwahati and Lower Assam has this thing evidently less in us. We are emerged in our own worlds, tiffs and jealousies. Fights between brothers, jealousies between the neighbors because the son of a family has excelled somewhere, division of the family land and property- the patriarchal wealth- immediately

after a son brings home his wife, et al...I know, these are found everywhere, everywhere around the world, I have to say, but, here, especially in the region of Lower Assam- Lahkar Khura was trying very hard to be specific and convince himself to Piti and the rest of the people lending their careful ears to his chit-chat – we find at its maximum, at the heights, I mean to say. That is the reason why we still lag behind in many aspects. Look at Luku, he is our Ila's maternal cousin, Kumud da, stays in Jorhat, he's got a very good job now at this Guwahati Telephone Exchange. He has got a very handsome pay scale, I think, around 15-16 thousand rupees. So, see...how sincere they are? But, people here are languishing idly. I do not say, it is an evil thing, Luku getting the job, but many people here are not even aware of the job vacancies, and they would yell and wail later, "what is the use of studying, when there's no job at all?" Arre... brother, first complete your studies, then sincerely go on looking at the The Assam Tribune for job advertisements, The Employment Exchange also comes out in a fortnight, so, what's the big deal, you just have to wait for some time, that's it. No, they don't have the patience, they don't wait, they will demand lakhs of rupees from their retired parents, splurge all the money in nonsense stuffs and return home naked crying their guts out, even if they set up a business, they do not thrive. Yes, they are hopeless in doing a business too. That's why, these Marwaris from Rajasthan are all around us, because they know the tactic, they know to sell water even to the drowning man. Even you see the IAS officers, the bureaucrats, bulk of them are outsiders, they come, all of them plunder and loot us, and go back to their native state. How can this happen?

This is because, we, especially I have to say, the people from Guwahati, are not conscious, I mean to say conscientious about what's happening around us. We are still busy fighting at homes among our brothers and sister. And, outsiders come and show the lethu, the down thumb. They go away warning us all the time and telling us, "you people are the laziest we have seen in our entire lives, that's the reason why we are able to loot you all, see what have we all snatched away from you, see." These people do not have a future, Kumud da, I tell you, our Lower Assam youths do not have a future at all.

I was still sipping from my cup of tea. There was a chasm, while I waited for some time now to listen to the blasé things that literally made a harangue of the conversation between Lahkar Khura and Piti, worth knowing anew for some totally ignorant village-man. Yes, it was nothing new to me. I couldn't fathom how the conversation commenced, and how it ended. It was like the twists and turns of the serpentine path of a river from the place of its origin. As I said earlier, I was trying very hard to slough this all off, but somehow the conversation disturbed my ears, compelling me to listen to what I never really wanted.

Then, came along Tutu da, after all these knotty chit-chats. He was a neighbor too, since long, I don't even remember when their family first came here – he stays in Bangalore, he prefers saying Bangalore to the new, never used Bengaluru, for that weather-less place, he is the managing executive in Infosys Computers, there – He was now in his holidays, the Bihu holidays, he usually summed it up at his office, as he later said to us, as the winter leave, while applying for his holiday stint at home. He had never missed the Uruka, since he had stayed in Bangalore. Even if he could not manage to turn up again in the entire year, he certainly ensured that he came and met us during the Bihu. He completed his business studies, an MBA, from one of the business colleges in Bangalore itself, some six years ago, and now he was well-settled with his job; still single. Everyone, starting from his family members were now only pestering him to confer the bridal mekhela upon a suitable girl, let the choice be his, and if he could not, all were ready, leg-raised to dig the earth threadbare. But, he always laughed at them and passed it off in a rather derisory expression, in a way saying "Well, come on, give me a break now, I will, when time comes." But, when would the

time come, all seemed to ask him repeatedly. Well, the fact was that, Tutu da was not yet married, and I hope, he would soon get married at some point of time, and live happily ever after like the Shakespearean romantic heroes. Now, what is primarily important is Rupa's tale- the simple, straight and true tale. And we not yet have started her story. These people at the fireplace were real hurdles, they were the real culprits, the hazards and the hap hazards. It is solely owing to these people that I am not yet able to narrate the true story of Rupa. But, where is she?

Ma summoned me up at that moment to bring out the cup of tea readied for Xoru da. Actually, I never went inside to tell Ma about Xoru da's arrival and his insistence for the tea. I was still gazing at the fire, and sometimes the smoke rising high and high into immeasurable heights and disappearing all of a sudden. In fact, I was listening to everyone, although it seemed to me that I was avoiding them. And, that is the reason why I am writing this story now. Had I not heard Lahkar Khura and Piti delivering lectures and sermons, and Xoru da teasing me and seen Hargovindo da listening to his ear-phones, how could I had narrated them. But, it all seemed like in a dream, a dream after an unfinished siesta, over the cup of elixir, the cup of evening tea. Now, I think again that my friend had aptly said, he was right about the evening tea. Perhaps, it was due to that cup of refreshing tea that I was still alert at mind even when stupid dreams ran down in a spree through all my organs where the heat intruded. Xoru da busied himself, he went to help Hargovindo da peel out the pigeon wings. He forgot to bother whether I went inside to tell Ma what he asked for, or not. Later, Ma herself hearing his voice from the kitchen, readied the tea, as she knew that Xoru da would obviously and patently, need that cup of tea, prepared by her. She also knew that, he never used to have a single cup of tea anywhere outside, but here.

Suddenly, I heard someone speaking about Rupa in the group. It was when I was engrossed in my stupid thoughts. But, who was she? I had never heard such a name. And, even if I had heard, I didn't know, if she really existed, and where? The name is totally Assamese, totally Indian. I didn't know, and perhaps, I still don't know whether she is Assamese, or Indian, or...both.

Rupa, then I heard, I came to know, that she was some unknown martyr of the agitation of the eighties. The Agitation which held that the people of the state were Assamese to the core, and not any migrant who came after the 1950s. It also held that sometimes the people of the state are Assamese, and sometimes they are Indians, and sometimes, non-Indians, only Assamese. Lahkar khura wanted, desired, wished that girls now should rather be like Rupa, he indeed wished that Rupa herself should return to us now. But, even if she returned now, what would she do, do to us? And, that's what Piti asked followingly.

"What will she do now, Biren? Now that we do not have an agitation, neither a revolt? We are, we are just restless, Biren, in our own peaceful world. But, yes, there must be a revolution against this too. But, yes, even if there's an agitation now, will that give fruit, do you think it will end up with something fruitful, do you think... what's that... seminal...yes, do you think, it will be a ground for something seminal? And, (laughs loud),do you think, students now will come out together bolstering an agitation (laughs again)? I tell you, Biren, even the political parties, the budding ones, those who are still in the fray, even they won't be ready for this. And, why will they agitate? Why will anyone? What problem do they have? What problem do you have? I don't know. (Lahkar khura's pale face was vivid). You know, we actually don't know, what we really want. Let us live peacefully, let us live where we are. We don't want Rupa, we don't anyone. No."

"We want Rupa, we want her, we want Rupa." Lahkar Khura silently murmured.

I don't know, where Rupa lived, how she lived. She is a name, and a name only. I heard of her, yes. Perhaps, people may have heard of some other names as such, which are Assamese as well as Indian, and sometimes only one, Assamese may be. But, was this really a story of Rupa? No. Yes. People far away may find this simple name inconceivable, distant, again imperceptible to the ears. Someone may laugh at it, ridicule, label it as meaningless. But, why should I claim to know her, when she is only a name, nothing else. She may exist somewhere inside a vague nebula, somewhere...she may be a strand between our past and our present, she may be a strand between two nations, two worlds, like Piti's and Lahkar Khura's, like mine and theirs. But, Rupa's story is a story, too.

My friend is right. I know now who Rupa is, and I do understand the story. And the evening tea...it is of course the best, the best Assamese evening tea.