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## The Gossipers

Nabanita Sengupta

It was a scandal of the highest order that pickled the conversation of every kitty party and every office lunch. Utsav watched with the disinterested gaze of an outsider as the flame of gossip leapt higher and higher growing into a lusty fire of thousand tongues that drew in all the residents of Ghumi. Utsav was a bemused onlooker. Owing to his status as a young, newly arrived bachelor, he had access to almost all the circles. While his office colleagues, all senior enough to be his father, shared with him their lunch and their gossips, their wives often pampered him to homemade evening snacks, at times even stretching up to dinners. His boyish face and the fact that he lived all alone, away from his family, earned him the sympathies of those women. So a wholesome knowledge of any current gossip inevitably found a space in his mind. This time too it was no different. Ghumi, the small township towards the southern part of Chhota Nagpur plateau area had all the attributes of a well knit but hierarchical society, quite common to those places that grow out of a single factory or industrial unit. Even a small gossip here could gather force by repeated appearances at various gatherings and get bloated into a full-fledged scandal. The vicious force of gossip mongering often surprised Utsav. It was as if some more vital element invigorated this otherwise sleepy place on such occasions. In the two years that Utsav had spent here as the junior engineer in civil department, he realised that this township gained momentum with the tiniest disturbance in its otherwise set routine. For a community which lived a disciplined life controlled by the factory shifts of work timing, any unusual activity added a bit of flavour in their lives. The interest lived like ripples in a pool moving outward in concentric circles till everything smoothed and became as calm as ever. Utsav considered this event to be one such as well but even after two weeks, the vigour of gossip remained as strong as day one. He had thought that the missing people will turn up eventually and there would be a logical explanation to the entire episode. But he was proved wrong on both counts. The sheer magnitude of this scandal, after all it was not everyday that a manager eloped with a student of standard twelfth, kept the interest alive; also there was no sign of the missing people, no clue as to what happened to them. The community believed it to be an elopement – something though not mundane, yet tangible and explicable, something that they could understand and draw a sort of pleasure from. Thinking it to be something else meant pushing it to the realms of the unknown. And the people of Ghumi were not prepared for it. They did not want any vicious unknown to ruffle feathers of their settled lives.

By any standard, it was a gossip worth a thousand dinners and the Ghumi residents were determined to make the most of it. It was ironic - how on the one hand these people took care of the girl's parents, each making some small adjustment in their daily schedule to keep some time for that suffering couple and on the other hand let loose their acerbic tongues to slur the missing people in their worst possible colours. The residents would take turn to visit the suffering parents, blame god for their misfortune, try and drag them towards the everyday activities of life; they often took some home-made delicacies to show their sympathies for their sufferings. Yet when away from that dejected couple, they could not reign in their tongues. Imaginative speculations spiced up their discussions and painted the subjects in

such deep hues of scarlet that it would put even the devil to shame. Gossip for gossip's sake - was the only conclusion that Utsav could come to.

Utsav knew Raya just as everyone knew everyone else in that place. But that small built girl with deep set eyes had always appeared to him as more of a thinker, an intellectual in the making and never as the seductress that the entire town was painting her to be. And her parents were so devastated by the unlikelihood of the incident that they had retreated into a shell, their existence betrayed only by the basic activities required to continue with life, daring only to hope that somehow their girl would return to them. Utsav pitied and sympathised with those two people, the only ones who, he thought, were genuinely affected by the whole episode.

Raya was tending uncle Malhotra's wound. She was aware of the unusual situation she had put herself in and the tension that must have by now eaten up her parents. But cut off from the entire world, she had no means of letting her people know about her existence. She also knew that her only chance of coming out alive from this mess remained as long as their captors believed her to be a kinswoman of uncle Malhotra. For some reason, though they had been held prisoners, their captors were unwilling to harm Malhotra in any way; which is why probably they kept a steady supply of first aid things in that room, and allowed her to dress Mr. Malhotra's wound. She did not understand all the hushed conversations but could make out that some kind of negotiation was on way. Mr. Malhotra was tight lipped about everything to Raya, perhaps due to the protectively paternal feelings that he felt towards her. So she continued tending the wound that Mr Malhotra had acquired in his leg in a bid to save themselves from being taken hostages, keeping mum about the actual relation between them or the lack of it.

She had straightaway walked into the trap, not set for her though, when she went to return the books that she had borrowed from him. He had an enticing library from which she greedily devoured all that she could, as much as her little brain allowed her to. In this limited township, she never got as much to read as she desired until her father's friend, Malhotra uncle came here. He had recently taken up the post of the general manager of operations in the factory here. Her father and Mr. Malhotra had been college friends and the old friends immediately bonded over their previous love for books, conversation and politics. Being a confirmed bachelor, he loved to call himself a non-radical brahmachari, he often found a seat at their dining table, enjoying her mother's culinary expertise.

Now enclosed with him in this four by six coop, she often heard him groan in pain and blame himself for putting her in such a danger, in alternating cycles. What scared her the most was the meticulous preparation undertaken by their abductors to delete any signs of crime and make the thing look like a deliberate hiding. She was scared to think of her present or future - what if people believed that she had eloped with Malhotra uncle and they stopped searching for them seriously! The absurdity of such a thought made her smile even in this situation, and she blamed her steady diet of all kinds of fiction for such outrageous thoughts. She strived to remain an optimist in spite of the tingling chill that never left her spine.

The days appeared infinitely stretched in this enclosed space, inversely proportionate to the area of their coop. Raya itched for some kind of activity to stop the buzzing in her mind. One thing that kept her sane was the long conversations that she could have with Malhotra uncle once his pain subsided. The more she heard him, the more in awe she felt of his great learning and the horizon of his interest. The kidnappers gave them food just enough to keep hunger at bay and the meal times were the periods when she suffered the most. A yearning for her home, her parents and all that she had there, spread throughout her body, making even a small movement arduous. Mr. Malhotra was most patient in such times, talking to her in a soothing voice and calming her distraught nerves. Years later, when the sharpness of that ordeal had become blunted, and the event itself had faded into a kind of faraway tale that came up only during gatherings, Raya fondly remembered Malhotra uncle's kind yet courageous words. The only times she could sense this man's seething rage were during his meetings with their abductors and even then it was masked by a cold politeness.

Utsav was drawn to Mr Malhotra's bungalow more by curiosity than any concrete reason. The place had been sealed by police to collect evidence. He could not share the community's belief in this scandal. He searched and searched the outer area, that part which was still accessible, looking for something that might have escaped notice. He thought of the evenings of serious contemplations that he had enjoyed in the library here, series of engrossing discussions that left both of them animated even long after it was over and he could not associate that past with this sordidly painted present. Something was amiss, it had to be. Those were the thoughts that led him to the general manager's bungalow. He felt drawn to something intangible but forceful goading him to that place. It was then that it struck him, his moment of epiphany. A discussion from past suddenly resurfaced and gave a whole new dimension to his view of this incident. During one of his visits to Mr. Malhotra's library he had once stumbled upon a small piece of paper with something scribbled in Hindi. He would not have glanced at it twice if his eyes had not caught a glimpse of a few more similar papers lurking out of a volume of Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi*. Curious, he pulled out one or two pieces and was alarmed. They were all threat notes of various kinds, demanding the revoking of a suspension order of a factory daily wager. When Utsav, alarmed and agitated asked him about it, Malhotra merely brushed them aside, saying that things were completely under control. Uneventful months accumulated over that particular day and Utsav forgot all about it till it suddenly came back to him that day.

Officer in charge of Ghumi police station was at a loss. He had reached a dead end and now could not decide how to proceed further. Like Utsav, he too did not believe in the township rumour, but not because he too was in awe of that missing man's knowledge; he simply found that explanation to be too simplistic to be true in Malhotra's case and too fantastic for Raya. His years of dealing with serious crimes, before he retreated to this otherwise unhappening township, has endowed him with a fair understanding of human behaviour. So when this young man called Utsav tentatively broke to him a conversation from the past, he could see the jigsaw pieces falling in place.

Utsav was taken aback by the sudden drive in the OC's demeanor. He did not expect his words to have such an impact, it unsettled him for a while though he quickly enough regained composure.

Raya tried hard to keep up her faith but each passing day eroded a bit of her confidence. The lull that encaged that coop was deafening, only broken by their conversations or Malhotra's negotiations with those people. But that morning everything appeared different. The air was differently charged. There were rounds of heated arguments and Mr. Malhotra was growing exceedingly agitated. Raya knew something was on but could not make out what it was. She only hoped that it was not anything worse.

Utsav walked into that room with a blast of sun shine. He hugged Malhotra tightly and the two men clung to each other for a while. Raya felt a surge of hope in her chest. She remembered seeing Utsav in a few of their community gatherings. His arrival could mean only one thing and that was their freedom! They had at last been found, for Raya that was all that mattered then. The hows and whys that had been accumulating in her mind simply evaporated, later there would be time for dissection and understanding. Right then returning home was all that mattered. As she stepped out with Mr. Malhotra and Utsav, the greens dazzling in the midday sun greeted her. Her eyes also espied two police vans and a few policemen close at hand. That was when she felt actually scared for the first time throughout this ordeal.

The township was once again excited, but this time it was a happy one. Utsav once again watched the preparation going on with his bemused expression.

He watched the setup for the lavish banquet, the colourful shamiana under which the Ghumi heroes will be felicitated, the chirpiness in the surrounding dispelling even the tiniest speck of rumours from the previous weeks that might have been left lingering in any corner of the town. Raya and Mr. Malhotra have returned, thanks to the action taken by their very dear OC, who had been timely tipped off by a well meaning source. And of course their dear OC will not disclose the identity of the source for safety concerns.

Mr. Malhotra was once again the venerable general manager, and bravery, the latest virtue added to his persona.

Raya was the brave heart of the township - that girl whose unfailing courage and presence of mind saved Malhotra from succumbing to his injuries.

The kidnappers, in spite of their strong connections were behind the bars and all was well in Ghumi once again.

Ghumi residents knew all these and no more. The ripples had subsided and life once again became placid; the malevolent cloud of the misconceived scandal had retreated from their immediate memory for the time being.

Looking at the residents of Ghumi, their happiness in finding the missing ones back, the openness and warmth in their receptions of these two people, Utsav could not but admire the

strength that kept this community thriving. Their amnesic attitude towards past kept them together. Yet, in spite of the apparent harmony and feeling of mutuality, he had got a glimpse of the devil lurking just beneath the surface. Still, there was a kind resilience among these people which, Utsav knew, would save the community from falling apart.

But for Utsav, with his actual knowledge of all that had transpired, Ghumi could never be the same again. He, Malhotra, Raya and the OC would not forget the event in a hurry.