Invisible Fences, Intertwined Lives

Invisible Fences, Intertwined Lives:

Stories from the North East of India

Edited by

Dipendu Das

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

The present book engages in the stories translated into English written originally in different languages of the Northeast of India that comprises the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region from time to time has remained in the news for tension emerging out of migrations, cultural interfaces, ethnic clashes, insurgency and citizenship etc. Since the independence of India, the region has often drawn public attention through the media representation of the incidents of unrest and violence. Naturally, the extant narratives on and about the Northeast of India in general and the largest state of the region, i.e., Assam in particular, abound with narratives and meta-narratives of violence, clash, strife and insurgency so far as the relationship among its multifarious constituent communities are concerned.

In this context it has to be mentioned that any discussion on India's Northeast should also include the acknowledgement of the fact there is a perspective which considers that it is somewhat unjust to use the term 'Northeast India' to lump together the largely different, multiethnic and multilingual states, since it seems to be a result of some kind of geographical, ethnic and linguistic stereotyping. It needs to be mentioned here that the communities of the Northeast are divergent not only ethnically, as often seem to appear from the popular visual and media representations, but also in terms of language, religion, and culture. For example, while Assamese and Bangla with their so called dialectical variation belong to the Indo-Aryan group of languages, the majority of ethnic languages like Khasi, Meitei, Mizo, and Naga with all their variations owe their origins to Sino-Tibetan and Sino-Mongoloid groups. Similarly, Assamese, Bengali and Manipuri linguistic identities are primarily divided into Hinduism and Islam in terms of their religious affiliations, while the Mizos, Khasis and Nagas vouch for different forms of Christianity in addition to their pagan roots. Same is the case in the domain of cultural activities, cultural performances and in fact all associated terrains. This simple break up should make it clear how fallacious it is to constitute a homogeneous identity out of all such variant identities taking violence and conflict as the defining factor.

Moreover, the very nomenclature of the region may be put under scanner which tends to question the directional name of 'the Northeast of

India' which is no longer situated at the northeast but the easternmost part of today's India.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the diversity of the region, it is also possible to discern several commonalities in the post-independent socio-economic, political and cultural oeuvre of the Northeast. It's a space connected to the rest of India by a narrow strip of land, a land ethnically and linguistically quite different from the rest of the country, a region often plagued by ethnic clashes, territorial disputes, insurgency, unrest in different forms and above all lack of required development fostering expressions of resistance in the region against the 'negligence' by the mainstream. All these have drawn largely one dimensional media attention and publicity resulting to the creation and fostering of the image of the Northeast as a conflict zone submerged perennially in the vortex of turmoil over the questions of marginality, migration, regionalism, territoriality, nationality, identity and indigenous/outsider binary, language and culture etc.

Consequently, such a representation tends to get an indelible stamp as researchers and academicians like to tread the trodden path and pursue their research works on the narratives available in the market mainly in English fostering the image of the Northeast largely as a conflict ridden space, where life is represented as not living up to the ideals of human aspirations and perfections, but a minimalist perilous survival. This incomplete image ignores the living and lived experiences and realities of the people of the Northeast, which permeates underneath the much publicized sensational images of violence and tension remaining largely unnoticed celebrating the pristine civilizational values of human society. Though the incidents of sporadic violence may only be a small percentage of the total lived experiences of the people of the North East thanks to the sensational publicity, they remain imprinted in public memory to such a measure that such representations play significant roles in the construction of the image of the Northeast as merely a conflict zone. Naturally the largest quotient, the lived realities of the love, relationships, understandings, negotiations and exchanges aplenty among the communities that inhabit the region, gets submerged under the more formidable and sensational representations of discord, dispute and disruptions.

People hardly noticed that in the second week of December 2019, when the media all over India was flooded with the visuals and news of the city of Guwahati reeling under violent demonstrations of anti-CAA stir, the tying of the knot between a Bengali groom of Silchar and an Assamese bride from Guwahati was taking place in the heart of Guwahati city reeling under curfew owing to the political unrest that fomented up

mistrust between the Assamese and the Bengali communities. Though the *Bihu* and *Dhamail* could not be played amid song and dance on the streets of the city as had been planned earlier and the ceremonial rituals had to be solemnized in a much smaller scale within the four walls of the domestic arena, the marriage went ahead with the support of the neighbours belonging to both the communities of the localities as both the parties managed to negotiate the union of not only two hearts and two families, but also the two cultures. Such markers of syncretic living in a shared space and such acts of resistance, howsoever subtle and subdued they may be, against the uncivilized orchestrated violent expressions of dissent, remain unnoticed as they lack the dazzle of sensational news value. It often gets unnoticed that the amount of the acts of violence in a given period in certain states in India is much greater in comparison to that of any Northeastern state. Even then, violence and unrest remain synonymous to the popular image of the Northeastern region, where violence and conflict are considered as the defining factors. As has been mentioned such representations commit the unpardonable violence neglecting the bonding, cooperation, love, relationships, understandings, negotiations and coexistence that the various peoples of the region have been sharing since ages.

To counter the misleading representation, the book intends to bring to the fore the narratives of inter-community togetherness and fellow-feeling which abound in the local languages of the region in various magazines, journals, published and unpublished stories and memoirs by putting a few representative voices together in English translation. This, among other things, is also an act of ethical reading contributing to collective human values.

The volume includes altogether nineteen short stories from the Northeast of India translated into English, seven of which were originally written in Assamese, nine in Bengali, one in Manipuri and two in Mizo languages.

Written by Kamalakanta Borah, the Assamese short story **'Refuge'** (*Ashroy*) begins in *medias res* with the narrator (an Assamese man) encountering an old acquaintance Minati (an Assamese woman), after a long period of time in a remote town in the hills of northeast India. The narrative unfolds as the narrator takes the reader back to the tumultuous days of Language Agitation of the 1970's. He carries a feeling of anger and disgust for Minati because she and her family had provided shelter to the Bengali Postmaster of the area who allegedly helped call the police to their village fearing ethnic violence. Years after when they face each other by coincidence, Minati invites him to her home, where to his utter surprise

he discovers that the Bengali Postmaster and the Assamese Minati have finally created a refuge for themselves in a world informed by tension of cultural interfaces.

'The Definition of Good People' by Jehirul Hussain (in Assamese 'Bhal Manuxor Sanga') is about relationships, forgiveness, and overcoming differences. It shows how people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds can connect and find common ground despite ethnic tensions. Through characters like Baani and Kamala, the story highlights the importance of empathy and understanding in bridging divides. It also explores themes of redemption and resilience, as characters navigate challenges and evolve over time. The story emphasizes the universal human desire for connection and the potential for positive change in a world plagued by communal tension and divisive politics.

'Uruka Night Confessions' (an Assamese short story 'Urukar Ukmukur Powali') by Jogesh Das narrates a group of children of different religious and linguistic communities from a fringe neighbourhood coming together to celebrate *Bihu*, the most popular agricultural festival of Assam. Most of these children come from an impoverished background, and the struggles of their existence are gradually revealed to us when the omniscient narrator tells us the stories of their parents and elders. Assam's fraught history with postcolonial territorial divisions and later disputes over land, language and culture informs the narrative of the story. In a land often polarised along class, caste and religious lines, it is through the innocence of the young children that the adults reacquaint themselves with their shared past and heritage. Through the story, the writer harks back to the past and tries to reimagine a future of communal harmony and inclusivity.

The Assamese short story '**Idris, Babulal and Me'** ('Idris, Moi aru Babulal') by Medini Chaudhuri starts off with a group of friends hailing from diverse economic and social backgrounds in a rural setting. The narrative centres on the protagonist and his childhood friend admired for his leadership qualities and intelligence. As they grow up, the disparity of the class privileges become clearer and the group's members go on their individual journeys. The poignant portrayal of the fate of the landless indigenous and the student politics of the privileged upper class provides the readers with a vivid image of the time.

'**The Apolitical Humankind'** (in Assamese 'Rajniti Nubuja Manuhbur') by Purobi Bormudoi depicts the saga of the naïve and apolitical women of a small village of Gahapur, Assam. The readers get glimpses into the catastrophic events of their lives—events orchestrated by political motives to destroy harmony and peace among human beings. The

narrative insinuates at the perennial problem through the eyes of the protagonist, Malti—the universal nature of political agendas culminating into violence, thereby wreaking havoc upon the innocent human beings—unversed in barbaric and bloodthirsty nature of human politics.

'**Siraj',** an Assamese short story by Lakshmidhar Sharma, sheds light on the magnanimous character of Siraj, a 45 years old Muslim man, who transgressed the borders set by religious and social norms to give shelter to Savitri and her daughter Sita. Taking into account the love tragedy of Kandarpa, an upper-class Brahmin and Savitri, the daughter of a working-class Bari sub cast, the story unfolds the intercultural conflicts that led to the abandonment of un-wed pregnant Savitri as a stigma to the Hindu society and her rescue by Siraj. As Savitri died giving birth to a daughter, Siraj and his wife not only gave shelter to the child but also nurtured her as their own granddaughter, dearly addressing her as Noor. But they did not convert the child into Islam, rather named her as Sita, following the wish of Savitri. They have even stopped raising and eating chickens in honour of the religious background of the girl. On the other hand, although Kandarpa expressed eagerness to take care of Sita on finding out her identity, he lacked courage to introduce the child as her own to the world. Rather he referred to her as the orphan daughter of one of his distant relatives declaring himself to be her guardian. Intercultural conflicts once again surfaced as the marriage between Sita and Anil began to be discussed with Anil's parents objecting to the marriage as being Kayastha, a top non-Brahmin caste in Bengal. This escalated with Kandarpa's disclosure of identity of Sita and Anil's rejection to marry a Sita for being the daughter of a maid and getting raised in a Muslim household. History seemed to repeat itself with Sita's declaration of her pregnancy. This time it was Kandarpa's wife Sarayu, who took the lead to abandon Sita while in case of her mother Savitri, it was Kandarpa's mother, Mrs Baruah. Thanks to destiny, Siraj was there to give shelter to Sita as he did to Savitri, while Kandarpa could only watch helplessly.

Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the language movement in Assam, **'The Riddle'** ('Santhor' in Assamese) by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, delves into the simmering tensions between two ethnic groups, the Assamese and the Bengalis, during the early 1960s. In an atmosphere thick with mutual distrust and antagonism, fuelled by political self-interest and bureaucratic short-sightedness, certain individuals embark on a path of hostility towards long-standing communities within Assam, resulting in rampant destruction. Through the machinations of a select few, the entire fabric of society is rent asunder, and the dreams of ordinary

people are shattered. However, even amidst the chaos and devastation, the story ultimately underscores the triumph of humanity.

Written by Dipendu Das, the story **'Boundaries'** (original Bengali title 'Seemana'), highlights the boundaries in its multifaceted dimensions that divide pluralistic Indian society along ethnic and communal lines and its transgressions by the common people through their shared cultural tradition like *Kirtan* and *Sufi* music. Told from the perspective of a middle class Hindu Bengali gentleman living in a small city in Assam, adjacent to the international border dividing India and Bangladesh on Sylhet side, the story explores the customs, values and problems of typical middle class Hindu Bengali family, the complexities of modern urban life, the tension between Hindus and Muslims, Assamese and Bengali, the artificiality of borders and the arbitrariness with which they are drawn, the communal tensions in the wake and following the partition of India, the problems of the refugees and above all the mutual coexistence among the people of the Northeast.

Originally written in Bengali **'A Rain Story'** ('Brishtir Golpo') by Amitabha Dev Choudhury depicts what happens when a person suddenly finds himself teleported into the lives of people whom he has never met and seen? How does he make meaning out of what is happening around him? What happens to him when he tries to navigate the fissures of religion and geopolitics and his newfound identity? Set against the backdrop of a rainy day, the story is about how the lives of people in a multicultural milieu are intertwined.

'Thlen and the Orchid of Love', a Bengali short story **(**'Thlen o Bhalobashar Orchid') written by Meghamala Dey Mohanta takes into its background the legend of U Thlen from the Khasi folklore of Meghalaya to reveal the intricacies involved in the community. Set in a remote village among the hilly terrains of Meghalaya near Cherrapunji, the story underscores the myths, beliefs, customs, rituals and simple lifestyle of the Khasi people. The story unfolds itself with the maiden visit of Ayan, an urban Bengali guy who works in a commercial news channel to his in-laws-house after his marriage with Martha, the daughter of a Khasi mother and Bengali father. As Ayan listens to the stories about Khasi people from Martha and interacts with them on visiting the in-laws's house, he begins to discover new facets of their lives. The more he delves deep into their lives, the more he discovers new dimensions of their lives and gets attracted towards them. His preconceived notion about the Khasi tribe gets transformed as he discovers the subtle philosophy of communal harmony and ecological balance that the Khasi belief systems endorse. As Ayan returns to the town, he is a changed man with deep affection for the Khasi people and renewed interest in life.

Kantar Bhusan Nandi's Bengali story **Grrrrrrr!** encapsulates the journey of a man named Animesh from vulnerability to resilience. Animesh's encounters with various events or people in his life— during past and present— provide the readers with glimpses into the linguistic disharmony and intolerance between the Assamese and non-Assamese people that marked the 80s of Assam. However, the end of the narrative allows Animesh to achieve some composure from his inner turmoil and face the rebellious hooligans with a new found sense of identity and assertion.

'**Lokkhi's Panchali'** ('Lokkhir Panchali' in Bengali) by Jyotirmoy Sengupta narrates the story of Lokkhi the daughter of a poor immigrant family from Bangladesh residing in the Indian state of Assam. Lokkhi's search for identity is a literal one as she and her husband gets embroiled in the legal quagmire of proving their identity to escape the accusation of being 'foreigners'. The story reflects a culturally specific real-life crisis in the lives of the Bengali population in today's Assam as questions are continuously raised about the legality of their citizenship – a crisis that remains largely unknown to the English-speaking readership in India and abroad.

Set in the context of Assam, '**Magenta-coloured Mekhela'** ('Magenta Ronger Mekhela' in Bengali) by Narayan Chandra Sarkar, is a short story of sibling-affection, joy and fulfilment. The story depicts the simple life-style, family-bonding of a middle-class family in a multi-cultural set-up. It deftly underlines intercultural marriage, peaceful co-existence of different communities through the exchanges of language, literature, culture and tradition.

Written in Bengali **'Hemamala'** by Kumar Ajit Dutta begins as Anubabh, a University research scholar's visit to a remote hamlet leads to an intercultural transaction as he encounters and negotiates with the sense of aggression of Modernization eclipsing the nascent identity of traditional culture, ancient heritage of antiquity still stored in unknown tales and sagas, the chronicles of famine and festivals. Anubabh's scanning eyes unveil the spiritual charm of nature pristine, the religiosity of great spiritual leaders of eastern India and he frequents to sacred sites like *Namghar and Sattra* to experience the unrevealed truths to a city-bound folk. Anubabh's exploration of Hemamala's spontaneous traditional identity constantly reminds him of the detachment of urbanity and modernized culture from the traditional roots

'The Slingshot' ('Fotang' in Bengali) by Sutapa Chakroborty is an idyllic pastoral tale about a young boy named Moyna growing up surrounded by friends and loved ones in a remote multi-ethnic village in the hills of Assam. The story narrates Moyna and his friends' adventures

in the verdant forests teeming with flora and fauna around the village. The author goes into minute intimate details about the modest beauties and simple joys of rural life in Assam– a kind of existence that is virtually unknown to the modern urban cultural milieu.

The Bengali Short story **'Bridge'** ('Sanko') by Swapna Bhattacharjee portrays the unrequited dreams of a young man that find fruition and suffer setbacks in bits and pieces as he navigates his way through his professional and social commitments in a space that is not entirely his own. Where does Anishwar find him eventually as he tries to teach a bunch of children in an obscure teagarden on the periphery of a town which is again a periphery in the political realm? 'Bridge' is an exploration of what happens when peripherals intersect among themselves.

'Yambaeni', Manipuri short story by Budhichandra Heisnamba interrogates the ideas of border and homeland through a narrativisation of the tale of love between a Manipuri (Meitei) man, Chingkhei, and a Lotha (Naga) maiden, Yambaeni. The story is set in the backdrop of the struggle for an ethnic homeland predicated upon questions of origin, space and nationality. If on the one hand, Northeast India is home to diverse ethnic collectives with distinct identities, cultures and histories of their own, then, on the other hand, it is also a space of shared social bonds and existences which the story testifies. The story not only projects the transgressive potential of love which is impervious to borders but also posits the constructedness of the very idea and reality of borders.

The very title of **'Mauruangi, Ideal Woman of Mizo Folklore'** underlines the fact folklore plays a significant role in Mizo culture, as a very large amount of Mizo literature is primarily oral. Hence folklore plays an important role in written literature of Mizoram as well. With the passage of time a good number of oral literatures have been printed and in the process a have been informed by the issues of representation, transcreation and adaptation.

'Mauruangi' is about a lovely, sweet natured, virtuous tribal girl harassed by a wicked step mother. Mauruangi depicts the relationship between a King or a ruler/wealthy man who belongs to the plains, and Mauruangi, who hails from the hills. The king rescues Mauruangi from her terrible circumstances. They marry each other by the end of the story and live a happy life informed by mutual respect and love.

'Tualvungi and Zawlpala' is another folktale from Mizoram, which deals with the love between a husband and his wife which comes to ruin. The ruin has forever been interpreted as coming from an 'outsider' a 'vai' or a man from the plains. The man named as Phuntiha covets Tualvungi and wants to take her as his wife and back to his home in the plains. His

character is portrayed and studied as an evil character that wants to wreck a marriage and thinks he can have anything he desires, because he happens to be very wealthy. However, it is also true that Phuntiha is madly in love with Tualvungi. He desires to marry her and is mislead to have the impression that Tualvungi is the sister of Zawlpala, and not his wife. In fact, the misunderstanding on his part began as a joke played on him by the two Mizo characters. Phuntiha is willing to woo Tualvungi and agrees to all the demands of wealth and material gifts that are demanded in jest of him from Zawlpala. The joke goes too far when Phuntiha actually takes Tualvungi away. The story ends in tragedy with the death of all three characters. Yet their story is symbolically represented in the story as two butterflies in flight, always followed a short distance behind them by a third butterfly. This image is very romantic yet tragic.

Written largely in the post-independence period all the selected stories mentioned above underline the voices of reason and resistance against the agencies of disruption of harmony, the undercurrent of which though remain less pronounced and not overtly visible, play significant roles in upholding sanity, compassion and other values intrinsic to the survival of human civilizations and syncretic living in a society of diverse cultures. The translations of these compelling narratives emerging out of the intertwined lives available in the languages of the Northeast, underlining, without ignoring the tension emanating out of the intercultural interface, the strong undercurrent of mutual bonding, love, interdependence, inter-community togetherness and fellow-feeling may provide a platform for inter-cultural mediation for a better understanding and in the process initiate a counter discourse to the popular image of the Northeast as a conflict zone, while providing a more comprehensive image of the region taking a holistic account of the lived experience and realities of the people residing in this region.

It is expected that the book will be able to intervene in the popular discourse about India's Northeast and initiate a counter discourse in this regard and in the process will be able to provide a more comprehensive idea about the Northeast India. The book will be able to provide resource materials for the serious readers, research scholars, PG and UG students.

Dipendu Das

REFUGE

KAMALAKANTA BORA
TRANSLATION FROM THE ASSAMESE STORY 'ASHROY' BY ANUP KUMAR DAS

I was surprised to see her, even more so when she called me by the familiar old address of *Kokaideu*[1] as she came closer. Although my feelings of revenge were long dormant in me, it felt as though they were going to be awakened. No, she is my enemy, the enemy of the village. None of us have any relationship with her now.

When I was about to move away, she came closer, and I scanned her searchingly. She didn't seem to have any bad intentions, nor did she appear distressed. She was well dressed and I noticed that even though she wasn't covering her head in the traditional fashion, she was wearing the customary red vermillion in the parting of her hair. So, she had married! Just as I was wondering how on earth she had travelled all the way to remote Bomdila, she stood facing me. By this time, I was staring at her. She was Minati, my childhood schoolmate, quite junior to me and my friends. However, we all knew her, not because we had a small number of girls in our school—on the contrary, we had many. We knew her because she actively took part in competitions during the annual school week. She truly was an adorable girl.

"Moni Kokaideu, how did you end up here?"

How could I explain why and how I had ended up in Bomdila! She must have thought that I was there as part of my job. How could I tell her that, after not completing my studies I had failed to secure a job (how could someone who didn't finish school get a job?), and was now working with a contractor supplying goods to the military? Besides, I felt a deep-rooted antipathy towards Minati and had no desire for an intimate conversation with her just yet.

"Oh! I just came here on a trip. What brings you here?"

---

[1] Address for the elder brother

“Oh! I live here nowadays. It’s been almost one and a half years. I also teach at the newly established primary school here. Alright, if it’s not too much trouble, do stop by our place this evening, my husband would like to meet you as well...”

Suddenly, she paused and I couldn’t figure out why. She was probably embarrassed. She started to smile but stopped herself midway. I was still not comfortable around her, yet I asked,

“When did you get married? I haven’t been in contact with home for almost two years, so I have no clue about who has gotten married to whom. I remember hearing about you going off somewhere to study. Did you complete your studies?”

She smiled enigmatically.

“Don’t forget to come. Have you seen the post office? The house behind it is ours. Just mention my name, and somebody will show you our house.”

“I shall try and come.”

“I’ll say goodbye for now, then. We’ll chat when you visit. Please do come.”

Immediately after she had left, a faded memory from the past welled up in my mind. It was one of the unwritten chapters of the language movement that spread across the entire state of Assam in July of 1960.

A frenzy of violence had engulfed Assam at that time. An intense animosity took root between the Assamese and Bengali people, who had peacefully coexisted for hundreds of years until then. The situation had escalated to such an extent that everyone was terrified, anticipating all manner of unthinkable consequences.

Fortunately, when all these incidents were occurring in various places across Assam, no untoward incidents took place in our small town. A significant number of Bengali people had been coming settling here permanently for years. Although they were now terrified, we, the youth of the locality, assured them of their safety. Even with that, there was a lingering feeling of anxiety due to the rumours swirling around.

That day, someone brought bad news just before dusk. Some Bengali gentlemen had consulted with the local postmaster and had telegraphed the Deputy Commissioner, requesting military assistance because they feared imminent danger. This type of news made all of us anxious. Even before the news could be properly digested, some teenagers grew impatient and went to see the postmaster. The boys demanded that the postmaster tell them who was behind the telegram. After repeated requests, when the postmaster refused to reveal the name of the person, the boys lost their

cool. The postmaster too was a young Bengali, new in his role, and had occasionally let his animosity towards the local people show.

The boys beat the postmaster black and blue and had left by the time we arrived with a few others after learning about the whole episode. We couldn't find the postmaster. After some time, we saw fires blazing from a few places across the town. Assuming it to be the handiwork of the same teenage boys, we were paralysed by fear. After racing through the town for a while, we found out that the fire was not set by our boys. Nobody knew how it started. All of us tried our best to douse the fire and were eventually successful.

As dawn broke, we learned that many people from the village had been arrested. This undeserved harassment stoked the feelings of resentment in us. We were suffering without having done anything wrong, all because of the very people to whom we had given shelter and were protecting.

I was unemployed, and I quickly realised that it wouldn't be long before the police came for me. I ran swiftly along the river bank at the back of our house and entered the woods. I kept on the move throughout the day, managing to keep myself out of trouble. Dusk had set in, but I did not dare to go near my house. Since most of the other houses around ours had at least one or two young boys, I anticipated the police lurking around them; hence I didn't dare to go to any of the neighbours' houses either, unsure of how many arrests had been made.

As darkness fell, I found myself almost four miles away from home. I lacked the courage to go home, and my hunger was gnawing at my insides by now. Although many familiar names lived around where I was, I singled out the house of an old friend, Bhadra Saikia's. I needed something to eat and hoped to gather some information about what was going on.

When I reached Saikia's house, moving very cautiously, there was pin-drop silence. I could not hear any conversations. I crept inside soundlessly. Even though we had not been very close, I had known him since childhood, and given the situation, felt I could dispense with the usual social formalities.

Pausing for a while at the entrance, I couldn't sense anybody's presence, and entered the house. In the dim light of the first room, I felt someone was there, so I peered through the gloom . A person was sleeping in the bed in the corner, covered from head to toe with a blanket. It was Minati's room. I assumed it would be her asleep. She was no stranger to me and besides, I had no ill intentions, so I approached, thinking of quietly waking her up.

"Hello, Wake up, please."

The person appeared to be in a deep sleep. When I pulled back the blanket, the person woke up, and the terrified face that confronted me was neither Bhadra Saikia's nor Minati's. In the dim light, I saw it was that of the Bengali postmaster. He recognized me, and cowered in a corner. I was furious with him. This was the man who helped send the bogus telegram to the authorities. Because of him, the entire locality was engulfed in turmoil that day. Families abandoned their day-to-day household activities as if some pandemic had seized the village. I too had been starving the entire day.

Even though feelings of revenge were bubbling up inside me, I froze. I was gazing at the man, , when suddenly my eyes lighted on the nearby table where food had been neatly laid out. Suddenly, Minati came running through the front door and shouted,

"Mani, what are you doing here? Get out, get out now, before something terrible happens."

Although she was just a little girl then, there was firmness in her voice; she would be obeyed! Of course, she was worried that I would precipitate a crisis. . Before I could say or do anything, Minati started to push me out of the room. I lost my temper. I was starving, and on top of that, a little slip of a girl was pushing me around, and harbouring a Bengali!

I slapped her across the face and shoved her out of the way. 'Mark my words, if he is still here tomorrow, we'll burn down your house.'

After that, I ran out of the house. This time, I couldn't think of where else to go and went straight home. I thought if the police were to arrest me, so be it. If all my friends were detained by the police, then I too should join them.

After many days of staying at home, when I was still not arrested, I realised that my name had not been reported to the police. The rest of the boys, except a few, had been bailed out. Gradually, all these incidents were exaggerated and turned into fodder for gossip. I didn't have a chance to follow up on the whereabouts of the Bengali postmaster. I didn't even know why Bhadra Saikia didn't report me to the police. My friends kept going to court for their cases.

A few days passed like that, and soon I didn't have any wish to stay in the village because I had lost my peace of mind. Most of my friends had moved on with their lives after completing their studies. My parents began to scold me, rubbing my unemployed state in my face. Shortly after that I left home. After roaming around a lot, I finally got a break in the form of a job, working for a meagre salary with a contractor from Tezpur.

I never could have imagined that I would meet Minati like that on one of my work trips. I couldn't talk to her freely because I was simultaneously overcome with embarrassment and resentment.

I was pondering over her invitation, wondering whether I should visit her home or not. If she mentioned those days, surely I would feel mortified. Still, I guessed she must not have any animosity towards me after all this time. My connection with my home and my village had been weakening gradually and I was sure that she too would have become quite detached after staying away from home and leaving behind the narrow-mindedness of the old days.

I decided to visit her and left for her place before it got dark. I didn't have to look for Minati's place, she was walking about outside, cradling a toddler in front of her house near the post office. Noticing me, she came forward.

"Oh! Please come, I thought you probably wouldn't come."

I refrained from acting aloof, even though I wanted to, because Minati's voice was familiar and affectionate rather than cold. I felt as if Minati were my sister.

I sat down at the corner table of the small but well-furnished government flat. Minati's smiling face set many of my doubts to rest. Even if Minati had mentioned those far-off days, I was certain I could have replied to equanimity. I could put an end to that discussion, saying that various tumultuous thoughts were running through my head.

Just then, Minati went in to the next room and reappeared carrying a small serving dish of betel nuts. This time, she didn't have the baby with her. Was it a boy or a girl? I couldn't pay proper attention the first time around because of my initial awkwardness. I resolved to take a good look this time around.

After a while, someone else entered carrying the baby. Most certainly, it was Minati's husband. I readied myself to greet him and looked up, but from the corner of my eye saw that Minati was staring at me fixedly. It was as if I could read her mind, "Once I gave him refuge from the atrocities of the Assamese people; now he is giving me refuge for life—he is that same Bengali postmaster from our town."

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THE DEFINITION OF GOOD PEOPLE

JEHIRUL HUSSAIN
TRANSLATED FROM THE ASSAMESE STORY
'BHAL MANUXOR SANGA' BY PALLABI KONWAR

That was Baani singing, Bani Mazumdar, colloquially known as Baani the bowl thief.

I moved away from the study table and peered through the window. It was true, Baani's fervent voice had raised a symphony in our garden of mangoes and jackfruit. A long *dariki*[1] was in her hands. Moving in time to the rhythm of the song, the *dariki* prodded the ripe mangoes. The song had the peculiar pronunciation of the Sylheti language. V is pronounced as /b/ and p is pronounced as /f/. Still, whenever we listened to Baani's songs, we listened in awe. Oh, how magical her tunes sounded! Ma and Aunty used to invite Baani over to listen to her songs. *Naani*, my grandmother, sat in a bamboo stool chair and untied her long hair in front of Baani and said, "Please look, I have so many lice. Please pluck a few off. Sing and pluck a few lice too."

The moment the lice plucking started, the flashbacks to the strange chronicles of Baani's erstwhile motherland began. It was either the story of the feudal land of one-eyed Netra or that of the miracles performed by the Ayurvedic physician Sri Dwarakanath Mazumdar Bidya Binod of Hanhxora.

Sometimes Uncle interrupted Baani's amusing narrations.

Baani got irritated if someone stopped her in the middle of her stories. Grandmother replied calmly, "You go on, don't listen to him. We are listening to you, aren't we?"

Baani resumed with the mesmerising stories of her aunt's daughter, cousin Shefali's, songs, and hummed one of them. Or she would speak about the frightening riots between the Hindus and the Muslims. She would accurately act out the heart-rending wailing of her elder sister when

[1] A device made out of a crooked ended bamboo pole.

she was being dragged out by the attackers, “Babago, please save me”. Precisely at this point the face of my grandmother too became melancholy.

Uncle still didn’t quit teasing her, “Wait, is it true that you have also killed a lot of people in the riot?”

Baani became pale with long-forgotten fright. She spoke in a hushed voice as if the attackers were hiding near our house, “Do you know uncle, the Muslims came chasing us with blazing torches chanting the name of Allah? They burnt down all the houses and all of us ran away and hid in the jungle. We could see from afar how our village went up in flames. The bamboo grove was making a crackling sound and the fire had engulfed the surrounding area. The people of the village were running helter-skelter. Amidst all that chaos we heard Didi shouting, “Oh God please save us”. That was the last time we heard her voice. After that, we lost her for good.”

Baani’s voice choked and a few tears fell on the floor. Ma and everyone else’s hearts too were grief-stricken. Even in this situation, Uncle teased her, “Why did they come? Tell us again.”

Baani repeated herself, “The Muslims chased us with machetes and blazing torches chanting the name of Allah, God.”

“Hey girl, what do you think of us? We are Muslims too. Wait, we will hack you down right here.”

Bani understood Uncle’s banter. She said, “You can’t possibly be Muslims.”

“Then what are we?”

She would hide her face under *Naani*’s clothes and say, “Father says…”

“What does your father say?”

“You are not Muslims; you are good people.”

Uncle laughed and caused a ruckus by mimicking her dialect. *Naani* reprimanded Uncle, “Go away, you shameless man. I can’t manage to get any of the lice picked off my head by her when you are around.”

“Hey, you crazy girl. There is no religion called ‘good people’.” The ten or eleven-year-old child Baani didn’t understand any of that. She grabb*ed Naani* from the back and said again, “No, you can’t be Muslims, you are good people.”

Uncle teased her again, “Alright we are good people, but you are Baani, the bowl thief.”

Saying, “I am leaving”, Baani got up abruptly and shouted from afar sticking her tongue out, “I am not talking to you.”

The backstory to this is that once Baani was caught stealing a bell metal bowl from the Mouzadar (tax collector) Ratna Gohain’s place. The news spread like wildfire in the neighbourhood immediately. From that day

onwards Baani's nickname was Baani, the bowl thief. The school-going kids shouted from afar whenever they saw her, "Baani, the bowl thief". Baani fumed with anger whenever she was called a thief. She chased the boys away throwing gravel, "Hey you, I am going to give you a tight slap and a kick." The boys ran away immediately shouting, "Baani, the bowl thief."

Since the early 1950s, Baani and her family had been living in Ratna Gohain Mouzadar's sapori[2], an occupied backyard located behind our house. There was a small pit on the slope of our backyard, and Baani's home was on the other side of the pit. Gohain Mouzadar had constructed a couple of huts on the sapori and had provided refuge to the migrating family. He had also built a long bamboo bridge over the pit.

Baani's father, Gopal Mazumdar sold the medicines of local Barman Company, *Jintanbari*[3], lice medication, and calendars etc. in the markets. He earned a meagre commission from this. The family barely managed with that money. Her mother worked odd jobs in Gohain Mouzadar's place and brought the leftover food home. Baani's old grandmother foraged taro, fiddle head ferns etc. from the pit. Baani had two younger brothers almost her age, who always had stuffy noses. They often went around naked. Both of them had two small bells hanging from their waist. While running both their genitals and the bells jerked and jingled. Around their necks hung the charms of the *kabiraj* of Hanhxora.

We didn't understand a single word of the gibberish uttered by the widowed grandmother of Baani. From time to time we heard her shouting and calling Baani and the two boys, "Hey Baanilo, Elo Monalo. Where have you gone?" Whenever the bald old lady approached, a stench of smoke and mustard oil filled the air. Her body was covered in a torn and dirty *sador*[4]— just like Indira Thakuran of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*[5].

Gopal Mazumdar was tall and gaunt, much like Baani's mother, with protruding cheekbones. Baani's mother was darker, while Mazumdar was pale. Returning home late at night after selling medicines, Mazumdar sought out his boys, displaying a great deal of affection for them. At the close of a long, arduous day, he would hug them, affectionately calling them 'My Pakachul and Kachachul.' The boys, with bells jingling, would crawl over their father, indulging in the cheap sweets he brought from various markets with their childlike exuberance. During these moments, Baani would either massage her father's weary body or serve him black tea alongside a bowl of puffed rice mixed with salt and oil.

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[2] The sand bed of small tributaries of Bramhaputra

[3] Locally produced medicine

[4] The upper part of a two-piece Assamese traditional attire called mekhela sador.

[5] An iconic film by the auteur Satyajit Ray

It was surprising to think how the family was surviving on the meagre commission earned by Gopal Mazumdar's vending medicines. Every now and then they had to go without eating a meal, and Baani often ate her afternoon meal at our home. The pit was full of wild vegetables; sometimes they satisfied their hunger by boiling and eating those.

One day there was a commotion at Baani's house. *Pakachul* and *Kachachul* were shrieking, grandmother was muttering and Baani was shouting. What was the matter? The entire house was in a festive mood. After a short while the source of the family's unusual happiness was found. The source was a huge hilsa fish. Gopal Mazumdar reached home early in the afternoon that day carrying a silver hilsa. They hadn't eaten any hilsa since they arrived in Assam. Gopal Mazumdar, a glutton for fish, had called for his wife swiftly from Gohain Mouzadar's place and requested for the different dishes to be prepared with the hilsa. The family was so happy that day. The old lady busied herself in preparing the spices. The bells of *Pakachul* and *Kachachul* kept jingling for a long time in Gohain Mazumdar's *sapori*[6].

It was a mystery for Ma and Aunty that a pauper like Gopal Mazumdar could afford such a costly fish. Where on earth had he got so much money? They didn't have enough money to buy rice and yet they were buying fish. Had he stolen it? It was only at night that the mystery was solved by *Abba*, my father.

The proprietor of Barman & Sons, Haripada Barman who had no son, was an exceedingly playful man. He made up a lot of ridiculous jokes about the vendors who ferried the company medicines. The pranks played on Gopal Mazumdar by Barman seemed never-ending. That day Barman coughed out a large amount of spit at his front yard, the dusty front yard of the autumn season. The spit rolled like a marble and reached the corner of the yard. Just then Gopal Mazumdar arrived on the scene. At once Barman's brain devised a unique game of amusement. Barman pulled out a five rupee note and rolled it over the dust-covered spitball, he then urged Mazumdar to pick up the note and lick it. If he succeeded, Mazumdar would get the said note. Gopal Mazumdar kept staring at the note for a while. Meanwhile, quite a few audiences had gathered to take part in Barman's amusement. Barman egged Mazumdar on, "Come on, pick it up. You can buy hilsa fish with it." The words "hilsa fish" goaded Gopal Mazumdar on. Ignoring the mockery and insults of the audience he licked the note and picked it up. Barman congratulated the victorious Gopal Mazumdar. Some of the audience scrunched their noses in disgust.

[6]The sand bed of a river

Mazumdar clutched the five rupee note and marched straight towards the fish market. He would buy a big fish with the five rupees. It was afternoon by the time Gopal Mazumdar reached home proud of his victory and carrying a huge hilsa fish.

A share of the richly seasoned and well-cooked hilsa fish was sent to our house at night by Baani's mother. Mother threw it in the garbage. It was as if Barman's spit was still there in the cooked fish curry as well.

In the meantime, Baani had already started singing a new song while she looked for ripe mangoes.

"The world is looking for me
Don't keep me tied up
Oh beloved
Please open up the restraint of your arms."

"Hey Baani", her singing stopped at my holler. She looked at me through the window and asked, "What?"

"If you find any juicy ripe mangos, please give me one."

"Go away, don't you have any shame? I don't pluck mangos for boys."

There were not too many days left before the scholarship examination commenced, if Ma heard me talking to her instead of studying, she would be furious. I didn't reply and concentrated on studying. But she passed a juicy ripe mango through the window eventually.

Those days Baani was an adolescent girl, probably thirteen or fourteen years old. During that time, *Kola Fakir*, an ascetic of Ghiladhari Mouza used to frequent our house. His body was covered up to the knees in black attire and his face was covered with his beard. He also carried a *chimta*[7] in his hand. Even though *Kola Fakir* looked old with his enormous beard and hair, in reality, he was a young man of twenty-two or twenty-three. He hummed an eccentric tune that went "*teun, teun*" by stroking the *gagana*[8] and tossing his long and unkempt hair. We gathered round him and listened to this strange instrumental music, Baani too. She became mesmerised and joined the tune of *Kola Fakir*'s *gagana*. Gradually, the music-loving hearts of Baani and *Kola Fakir* came closer. Baani's song and *Kola Fakir*'s accompanying *gagana* tune created an ocean of music. Eventually the confluence of music transformed into love. Baani was a teenager then. The Baani who used to sing "Don't keep me tied-up", was caught in the net of the *gagana*'s tune. The golden mynah bird was ensnared in the cage of Rashik Chand. Without any of us knowing, those

[7] A musical tong
[8] A type of bamboo jaw harp primarily used in traditional Bihu music in Assam.

two music lovers eloped in search of a new melody. Baani, the bowl thief was herself stolen.

After that incident, our neighbourhood buzzed with the news for a few days. A few families indirectly accused us of encouraging them. Gopal Mazumdar came to our *abba* in tears and pleaded, "Please do something, Babu. The dishonest girl has run away, and that too with a Muslim fakir. She has ruined our reputation and left."

The incident had shaken *Abba* too. *Abba* registered a complaint at the police station with the help of Mazumdar. The police reassured them, but had no clues regarding the whereabouts of Baani and the *Kola Fakir*. It was as if they had vanished into thin air. Gradually people forgot about Baani. It was only the grandmother who shouted from time to time, "Oi Baani, where have you gone, my dear child?" Baani's mother too shouted and cursed Baani and the *Kola Fakir*, and uttered racial slurs. In Baani's absence, our mango garden became a desert devoid of any melody. With time, we too forgot Baani and her songs.

Meanwhile, *Pakachul* and *Kachachul* had grown up to be teenagers, and the jingling sound of the bells around their waist had ceased. Both were admitted to Assamese language schools. One day their grandmother passed away. Gopal Mazumdar's vending work for the medicines of Barman Company continued as usual, "Pills, pills, pills! This is the famous Jintan pill of the Barman Company. Try it once and get full satisfaction."

At times, Gopal Mazumdar earned a few bucks by promoting the movies playing at the local cinema hall. During his promotional work, he wore hats like a clown, had bells around his ankles, and strapped film posters on his back. As he pedalled his bicycle through the streets, a jingling sound accompanied him. Small kids ran after him to collect the promotional pamphlets. When he encountered a crowd, Gopal Mazumdar sang, "What are you doing, Babu? 'Zindagi' is playing in the theatres today."

The family was surviving in this fashion. There wasn't too much to spare. But a catastrophe arrived. During the language movement of the 1960s, some unruly persons torched Gopal Mazumdar's house at night. Hearing the wails of the helpless family the people from the neighbourhood promptly put out the fire. A part of a house was burnt down. Ratna Gohain Mouzadar arrived at the scene carrying a double-barrelled rifle, his eyes red due to intoxication. He said with a slurring speech, "Who are the sons of bitches who came to torch a house with people inside? You rascals, if you want to attack, come out now, you so-called 'men'. I will tear you to shreds".

Gopal Mazumdar wrapped his hands around Gohain's feet, "Please save us, Sir."

Gohain jerked his feet away from his grip and shouted, "Go away you bloody Bengali! You gutless woman, couldn't you hack a couple of them with the machete? Instead, you hid under your wife's skirt."

Gopal Mazumdar replied crying, "What could I have done sir? There were quite a few of them and I was alone."

"Here, keep this gun. If those scoundrels come again put some bullets through them."

"But sir I don't know how to fire a gun."

Gohain Mouzadar roared, "Aren't you supposed to be the nephew of a zamindar, a landlord? Your wife keeps flaunting that fact everywhere. Now you are saying you don't even know how to fire this double-barrelled gun, despite being the nephew of a zamindar! Come on, you bunch of beggars. Spend the night at my house, and by tomorrow, you can repair your house. You will find the necessary hay and bamboo at my house. Come on now."

Except *Pakachul* and *Kachachul,* the other family members of Gopal Mazumdar took shelter in the house of the Mouzadar that night. *Pakachul* was terrified of the mouzadar, so he stayed at our place.

After that incident, a terrible fear gripped Gopal Mazumdar's mind. Despite the endless assurances of Ratna Gohain and the two-barrelled gun fully loaded with LG cartridges, Mazumdar was still scared. One day the family disappeared bag and baggage. Gohain Mouzadar tried looking for them initially. After failing to locate their whereabouts find them, he stood at the abandoned site of Mazumdar's house and bellowed, "Go, go away you wretched Bengalis. Go on and die wherever you want to, how does it matter to me? So many new people are waiting for an invitation to come and stay here."

We didn't get any concrete information about either the whereabouts of Gopal Mazumdar's family or what had happened to them. We just heard that they had taken refuge in Sungajan at Baani's place. We heard along the grapevine that the *Kola Fakir* and Baani had started farming in an uncultivated new plot of land and were living off that.

A new person, more energetic, arrived to sell medicines for the Barman Company. Time passed. I crossed the thresholds of the high school leaving examination, ISC, and MBBS, becoming Dr. Rahman. I joined the government and worked in different hospitals in Assam. When I was posted in Mangaldoi, I met a stunning nurse, Kamala Doimari. I fell in love with Kamala and proposed marriage to her. As she was a Bodo, Abba was livid. He had already promised a reputed Muslim family that he

would make their daughter his daughter-in-law. I ignored him, being smitten by the beautiful Kamala. Abba finally relented after seeing me adamant. Ma and aunt didn't oppose us much. Naani wanted a granddaughter-in-law soon, regardless of her community. Kamala arrived at our home as a daughter-in-law. She mingled with everyone within a short span of time. My aunt couldn't help saying, "So what if she is not from our community? She really is a lovely girl."

After wielding my thermometer and stethoscope in far-flung places, I was finally transferred back to my town. At that time the number of MBBS doctors in our small town could be counted on one's fingertips. The LMP doctors were the only saviours of the people. I was overwhelmed by the number of patients from my private practice. By then Kamala too had left her nursing job and had joined me taking the full responsibility of a wife. Meanwhile, I had completed my MD in Gynaecology. My fee had increased and so too did my bank balance. I built a mansion on my father's ancestral land. I bought the plot of Baani's home from Gohain Mouzadar along with the pit in our backyard and opened a small nursing home there in partnership with a couple of other doctors. It was the first nursing home in the town. Within just two days, word spread and we couldn't accommodate all the patients due to the rush. It was quite a lucrative business.

Abba and *Naani* had passed away, age was catching up to Maa too. Uncle's family had moved away from the joint household. Even though Kamala was ageing her former radiance had not completely dimmed. Our eldest son had been admitted to the College of Engineering that year, the younger one in Cotton College. Our only daughter Saami was due to appear for her final school examination. We led a calm, predictable and comfortable family life.

We had received a letter a few days ago from the son who was studying engineering. Apparently, he was going outside the state for an excursion and would come home before he left. Kamala was anxious from the moment she got his letter. Every time she heard a rickshaw making a sound, she dropped whatever she was doing and ran outside.

That day both Kamala and I were sitting in the drawing room and talking, Saami and Ma were inside. It was the beginning of December and quite cold. Kamala was busy knitting a pullover for our eldest son. She had to finish it before he left for the excursion.

Suddenly, when she heard the doorbell ring, she dropped the pullover on the sofa and rushed to open the door. However, the poor thing was quite disappointed after opening the door. Instead of her eldest son, a tall, dark, and fat old lady entered, holding the hand of a five-year-old girl. One

could tell she was Bengali by the way she had draped her saree. The girl was dazzlingly fair and beautiful. The red polka-dotted dress added to her beauty. She looked at our drawing room in amazement with her wide eyes. The old lady's gaze was fixed on me.

I put down the medical journal I was reading and asked, "Who are you looking for? If you are with a patient go to the hospital, I will be there shortly." The old lady didn't say anything and kept staring at me. Was she mad, I wondered? Kamala pointed at a chair, asked her to sit and busied herself in knitting again.

"Haven't you recognised me?" She was old but her voice was very sweet, as if she was singing.

I propped up my spectacles in their proper position but still couldn't recognise her.

"How will you recognise me? You have seen me after such a long time. I am Baani, Gopal Mazumdar's daughter."

"What? Baani?" I jumped up. Baani, the infamous bowl thief who had eloped with the Kola Fakir! It felt like ages ago. The memories of a past almost two decades old began playing hide and seek in front of my eyes. My adolescence, so closely intertwined with Baani, vividly came alive in my mind again.

"Where do you stay now? What happened to Kola Fakir? Does he still play the Gogona? What about Gopal Kaka and Kakima? How are Pakachul and Kachachul?" My incessant questioning overwhelmed Baani. Despite her mixed emotions, at least she was reassured that I hadn't forgotten her.

Kamala was observing us with utmost curiosity. I introduced her to Baani, saying, "Do you remember the Baani I had mentioned to you? This is her. The one who sang so beautifully. Our nursing home has been constructed on their old plot."

Baani asked about ma, "Is Masi Ma there?". Baani's face lit up after learning that Ma was there. "Masi Ma is there, isn't she?" Oh! how I have been longing to see her. It has been ages since I last saw her."

Kamala got up and brought Ma out . Ma came in with shaky steps and seeing Baani there said, "Is this Baani? Where have you arrived from all of a sudden? You have grown older than even me."

Baani bowed down and greeted Ma by touching her feet. Ma, in return, embraced her. Tears welled up in both their eyes. Meanwhile, as we were speaking, the little girl edged closer to Kamala and Saami. Her speech was clear, and she didn't show any hesitation or fear. She bonded immediately with Saami and Kamala. Our drawing room was filled with her bright laughter.