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GENERAL IMPACT FACTOR

## Harmonium

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Rima returned home early and sprawled on the sofa in a way which she normally does after a tiresome day at her office. She felt sleepy and thought of taking a short nap but she could not afford to indulge in that. She has invited few guests to the dinner tonight at her home. The moment Rima stooped forward to stand up, she sighted the school uniforms drooping from the back rest of the chair of the dining set placed at the right corner of the drawing-cum-dining hall. It was flung by Nishant and on the opposite chair is the pair of socks chucked by him before going straight to the bed room after coming from school. Nishant is her only child who is studying in class 5 in a nearby school. Rima often gets worried about the sloppy behavior of her son. Rima has been trying to instill disciplines and good

manners into him from the day he started going to school. He seemed to have been habituated well to all these traits but it is the recent pandemic to blame for his indolent behavior. His classes were closed for almost two years and staying at home had worn him out. Rima looked at the both the corners on either side of the entrance door of the drawing hall. She has filled these two corners with indoor plants: Areca palm and Syngonium Pink which she had bought online. Leaves of these two plants need dusting and a little trimming. “All these have made the drawing-cum-dining hall look messy. I have to clean these and complete all these chores right now or else I shall not get time later.” Rima murmured to herself. Rima peeped into the bedroom. Nishant was sleeping fast at that time and her domestic help, who looks after him until Rima arrives, was watching TV sitting on a stool.

“Malati, please come over to me.” Rima called her domestic help in a subdued tone so that Nishant was not disturbed.

Malati walked out of the room as softly as possible and waited at the drawing room quietly to hear from Rima.

“Please do me some help. Guests are supposed to come tonight for dinner. Get some onion and ginger paste ready before you leave. I have a lot of work to do and shall have to complete before Nishant gets up. Make some coriander paste also. I shall hardly be able to prepare these” Rima said almost pleadingly.

“OK Baideu. You don’t worry. I shall leave only after I am done with these work.” Malati answered agreeably.

Animesh, Rima’s husband, works in a private financial institution and now currently posted at Dibrugarh. Before that, his office was at Panbazar which was ten kilometers away from his home. It is nearly two months since Animesh has been transferred to Dibrugarh. He lives in a rented Assam type house with two small rooms and a narrow kitchen. In the same campus is the building of the owner who is a retired government employee and lives with his wife and the younger son. The balcony attached to the drawing room of the owner is facing the main gate of the campus. The owner would sit in

the balcony most of the time of the day and notice swing and slam of the gate when someone come in or out of the campus. The One room of his rented house is stuffed with a 5 feet iron bed which he received from the owner. He bought a plastic table and four chairs and kept them in the front room. This serves as a dining table as well as stationery table for him. For cooking, Animesh bought a single burner gas stove and arrange a cylinder from one of his colleagues. He carried a pressure cooker, a pan, two medium sized bowels and two dishes only from home when he moved to Dibrugarh. His office has a canteen run by the subscriptions of the staff where he can have lunch. In the breakfast, he usually takes either cornflakes, oats or *sira*. So he needs to arrange for dinner only. He would be going home every fortnightly and on holidays. Also his next transfer would be due in 2-3 years. In order to contend with all these hassle of transportation and shifting, he preferred to have minimum belongings as possible during his stay at Dibrugarh. Everything was going as planed until pandemic fettered our choices and freedom. Animesh could not make it to his home for the last couple of months.

Time looked tougher than ever. Nobody had imagined that a pandemic would outbreak in this modern age having cutting edge technologies in medical science. Like others, Rima had also believed that the pandemic would be momentary phenomenon and life would recuperate in a short time. Lockdown, wearing mask and social distancing would break the chain and eventually contain the spread of the virus.

Shops with essential commodities were allowed to open for two hours in the morning. Rima decided to go to the nearby grocery shop her essentials were running out of stock. There was already a long queue of customers. Rima did not want to stand in the queue. She passed on the list of the items to the sales boy and waited outside till her items were ready and observed the customers. Few customers looked agitated as a middle aged man in the queue was coughing softly under his mask. The one behind the coughing man rummaged

in his pocket. He took out a surgical mask and wore it atop his existing one and waited for his turn.

“Madam! When will the virus end? I am going through very tough time. I am managing from whatever little savings. But if lock down continues my family will have to starve.” Said the local vegetable seller.” My wife is an acute asthmatic patient and needs regular medicines. How can I get her medicines if I cannot earn!” He added in dismay while handing over vegetables to her.

Rima did not utter any words. She took the vegetables, made the payments and darted away to the opposite side of the road before more customers gathered around. It was nearly half kilometer to her home from this market point. She had groceries and vegetables and too heavy to walk with. She got in an auto which was going towards her home without any delay. Rima knew the auto drive ever since he had come to Guwahati City from his village to earn a livelihood. He lived in a rented cottage at the end of the bye lane next to her.

“I have come with my auto though running of public and private vehicles are not allowed. Police may apprehend me but I am helpless. If I can earn some money I shall buy food for our meals. God knows when we can tide over this horrible situation. I shall go back to my village once plying of public busses is allowed. Poor man always suffers. At times life becomes meaningless for us v. Because of my old mother I have to live”

Rima did not want to say anything to the auto driver. Nor did she want to listen to him anymore. That half kilometer distance seemed to be elongated infinitely. She had taken out a hundred rupee note when she was about to reach home and gave it to the auto driver so that she could rush home immediately on arrival to avoid talking to him further. Rima could not understand why aloofness had taken over her for quite some time.

Hardly had Rima switched on the foot lamp and got ready to go to bed, when she heard her mobile ringing. It’s Animesh on the other side.

“Hi Rima! Are you still awake?”

“Just getting ready to go to bed. Nishant is already asleep”

“Lockdown will be waived in phase manner next month and I shall be going home once the SOP for Covid is issued. Rituaj and me have already booked a taxi. Rituraj will drop down at Nagaon at his home.”

“I also think so. Lock down shall be relaxed next month as indicated by the Government”

“Tell Nishant about my coming home next month”

“Ok I shall tell him, Nishant will be very happy.”

Rima woke up at the daybreak next morning. Nishant was in deep sleep. She came slinking out of the bed room and moved to balcony attached to the drawing room where she could see the public road in front of her house. This road is a busy one as it connects the entire locality to the main road and the local market as well. The sun was yet to come through the chinks of the buildings. With her arms resting on the wooden rail of the balcony, Rima looked down. Haloi and Gayan uncle were out for morning walk wearing face mask. They are both around seventy and very popular in the locality. They would go round the locality and call out to everyone whom they come across. First two months during lock down, they had refrained from morning walk but with the relaxation of lock down, they have started again. Rima noticed that they had been walking hurriedly than usual and trying to walk past other passersby, known or unknown, as fast as possible as if they were striving hard to escape some impending danger.

A swirl of wind invigorated Rima. She suddenly dodged across the drawing room and moved upstairs to access the store room in the second floor as if an ecstatic idea ran up her spine. She opened the door of the room and put the light on. Rima looked at the room closely. In the extreme right corner there was an old wooden rack and on the second self of the rack was a harmonium covered with a grey cloth. She heaved the trashes lying on floor of the store room

and cleaned the cobwebs so that she could reach out to the rack safely. Rima took the harmonium out and dusted off it well. She removed the key cover and the latches fastening the bellows. After rubbing the keys and reeds with a cloth, she pumped and checked. It sounded well with proper pitch and tone.

It was a surprise gift by her father on her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday when she was in class eight. She had a fervent affinity for singing and she was going all out to sing her favorite songs perfectly during her school days.

“Oh My God! It is for me!” exclaimed Rima with an unwavering gaze at the gift until tears rolled down her tender cheeks.

“Yes! It’s for you only dear.” Rima’s father replied with jubilation. “And hope you will become a great singer and perform in front of audience playing this harmonium.” He added.

Since then, Rima considers it as a valuable belongings and kept it with her passionately.

Rima had been to a music school for one year where she learned vocal and also learned playing harmonium alongside. She learned *Palta, Raag & Taal* at the music school and excelled remarkably.

But in spite of her strong desire she had to stop going to the music school because of some ostensive reasons: she was approaching class ten.

“Rima, it is better not to continue with your music school. It’s high time to concentrate in your study as you will be appearing in class 10<sup>th</sup> Board’s examination next year. Today is the last class in your music school” Her mother hollered at her brusquely when she arrived home after her music class.

“OK Maa! I understand. I shall spare time and practice at home.” Rima said distressfully trying to put up with what her mother had decided.

Rima was enthralled by her idea that she would rehearsal music again and teach Nishant to play harmonium during the lockdown time.

“Maa! Where have you got the harmonium?” Nishant yelled in surprise when he saw the harmonium in the drawing room. “Let me try playing it.” Saying this Nishant started playing.

“Wait Nishant! Handle it carefully. It’s an old one. I shall teach you how to play.” Rima warned but he did not pay any heed.

The arrhythmic tone of the harmonium played by her son made her nostalgic. She recalled the first day when she played the harmonium: the tone was nearly same as it sounded almost years back.

Next day onwards, Rima and Nishant started practicing music. First few days she had to work on a bit harder to recall *Raag* and *Taal* which she learned in her music school. Nishant too was very keen in playing harmonium.

Rima worked out a plan for the coming days. She would rehearse music herself alone in the morning after breakfast and in the evening she would sit together with Nishant for practicing until dinner was ready.

“You can sing very well Maa, you could have become a famous singer!” Nishant remarked as he judged his mother with his gullible mind.

“Hamm! I had a dream of becoming a singer. I went to music school also. But could not continue”

“Who did get you the harmonium?”

“Your grandpa got me this as a birthday surprise when I was in class eight and wished I might become a great singer and perform in front of audience playing this harmonium”

It had been almost a month that Rima started practicing music. Music was a resurgence for Rima during trying times. It was a resurgence of long concealed pursuit as well. Now-a-days she could

hardly find time to watch TV. No more scary news videos covering funerals, patients gasping for oxygen. Nor any talk show on post covid complexity and many more. She would wake up each day with more energy and spirit.

Rima received a message in her mobile phone from one of her colleagues while she was practicing music with Nishant. It's a Government notice issuing new protocol on covid situation. Business establishment and offices would be open with limited attendance. Educational institutions will be open with fifty percent attendance for upper primary classes. Curfew would be enforced at night. Inter-district movement would be allowed in day-time. Rima gaped at the notice for a while and said, "Nishant! Lockdown will be relaxed. I shall be going to office next week onwards. We can practice together only for 3-4 days. Let's not waste time."

"Yes Maa! What about Papa? Will he be able to come now?"

"Yes! Papa is also coming and he will stay back with us for a week."

Animesh was very jubilant coming home after a long gap. Nishant seemed to have twined around his hand almost all the time except for sleeping hours. Rima was also thrilled. She felt like sitting by his side and talking to him all the hours apprising him what she had experienced and how she had spent time during lockdown.

"I have a plan. We can arrange a small dinner gathering with some of our close friends before you leave. I think this will be rejuvenating for us and for friends also." Rima suggested while she was having dinner with Animesh. She added "We could not arrange any function not even birthday of Nishant because of pandemic."

"Yes we can. Plan is good. But I am wondering who will cook and on top of that how others will respond to the invitation." Animesh seemed enthusiastic but a little dubious.

"Don't worry, I shall cook. It is not always the menu that makes a dinner memorable." Rima replied deftly and looked at Animesh to understand if he was persuaded or rattled by her words.



“OK ! I shall help you in cooking. ”Animesh said upholding her idea.

After cleaning and organizing the drawing and bed room, Rima took a quick bath. By that time Nishant got up and Malati left completing her work. Animesh had also arrived from the market.

“Guests shall be arriving by 7.30 pm. We have to make the dinner ready by 8.00 pm so that it can be served in proper time to ensure everyone reaches home before curfew is imposed.” Rima said while making tea for her and Animesh.

Nishant could visualize that his parents would remain busy for the next two hours in the kitchen making dinner for the guest and so he had to stay alone watching TV till guests arrived. He wore orange colour kurta and white pajama which he used to wear when there was any family function.

Rima almost finished cooking except for fruit custard when guests started arriving. By 7.30 pm all the guests arrived except Ankur and Rasmita who got married during lockdown. Their marriage ceremony was held in presence of family members only in line with covid protocol. This gathering was their first social event after marriage and Rasmita had been quite excited as she would meet friends of her husband.

Guests were busy in conversations. Manash shared his devastating experience during pandemic. He lost his maternal uncle in covid. No covid bed in hospitals was available during that time. His aunt survived after being treated in ICU. Darshita told how she had arrived her home from Pune by special train and spent in self-quarantine at home. Her old mother got frenzied until she reached home. Others also started sharing their experience. It seemed all were still obsessed by sudden and unprecedented clutches of the pandemic. Rima overheard their discussion from the kitchen. Animesh had made the welcome drink ready for the guests. It was instant coffee mixed with ice cubes and toned milk in a blender. He was waiting for Rima to serve. She thought of servicing the drink to pause the impasse.

“The theme of our dinner party is: Have a blast and let’s shut off our past.” Rima called out while carrying the welcome drink in a tray. “Let us sing, recite poems and crack jokes whatever we have in our store. Let’s unplug ourselves with what we could not during our past days” Rima added

Everyone appreciated Rima for her sudden but fascinating idea. “Yes! Ankur will be the first one to start with as he arrived last and host Rima will be the one to finish off. We are ten in total and each one will get five minutes for his/her turn.” Darshita announced having finished the welcome drink.

Rima had butterflies while she avidly waited for her turn. She had never performed in front of audience: large or small. Everyone was looking forward to her. Rima looked far more solemn than normal. There was silence for few seconds and she moved to the bedroom briskly leaving all guests in astound. Everybody looked at Animesh if he could give any hint to what Rima was going to do. No, even Animesh did not have any clue. After a while, Rima came back with a harmonium. Nishant also followed her with a sitting mat. She sat down on the mat at the corner of the drawing hall besides the Areca Palm. Nishant sat on the right side of his mother with the Harmonium. Everyone stayed tuned to Rima as if they were the audiences of a musical concert. “I am going to sing a song. Nishant will be my accompanist It’s a popular number by Lataji.” Saying this Rima started: “Naam Gum Jayega.....Chehara Ye Badal Jayega.....Meri Aawaj Hi Meri Pehchan hai.....”

She sang it to her heart’s content. Everyone commended her performance with a round of applause. Manash requested Rima to sing another one. Others also supported. She was overwhelmed with joy and delight. All of a sudden tears rolled down her cheeks as she had felt like she was performing a musical concert before a large number of audiences: a desire which she had been longing since her childhood; a dream that she implanted long back. Rima stooped towards Nishant and wiped her tears quietly without others noticing it.

Bandan Kumar Borah lives in Guwahati, Assam. He did master degree in science from Gauhati University and presently works in Assam Power Distribution Company Limited (APDCL). He is interested in exploring the lives of working man and women and portraying the same in fiction.



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