

High Impact Factor 8.1458 ISSN



Vol. 11, No. 3



**Double-blind
peer reviewed**



Referred Journal



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Life, Larger Than Fiction!

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In his youth, Ashish heard a Bengali proverb told quite often. The proverb in Bengali went like :

Gharer Bau ar boi ekbar barir bairey geley ar phere na.

Two things never return once gone out of home. The first one is wife. The second, a book.

In his case, the proverb could have been:

Gharer Bau ar baro meye barir bairey geley ar phere na.

The wife and the elder daughter, once gone out of home, never ever come back.

Ashish felt shattered when his wife of twenty five years left him with their two daughters. She called him and his late parents' names; cried her heart out; huffed and puffed before packing some clothes into a bag and left with both daughters close at heels. She didn't even bother to tell him where she was headed.

Ashish had seen enough of his wife to really bother to enquire about her destination. The world seemed to have come to a halt with their departure. Ashish didn't feel like eating that night or on the night next. Preferred staying in bed in the dark and rued his fate. What more surprises could Life have had in store for him?

A few days passed. Ashish knew he had to pull himself together. Not that he had any worldly duties or even attachments but life couldn't have been finished for him just a couple of years after his retirement? He had chalked out clear cut plans for the days, post retirement. He would explore exquisite locales with his family, take them to the most popular restaurants in town, watch movies and laugh his heart out with them. He was not at all prepared for the way Fate unravelled the surprises one after another in a matter of half hour.

His wife was the one to vent out her anger first. Oh, sorry. I forgot to. I mean, let me begin then with Ashish's story at the beginning....

Ashish was working as the Site Manager for HCCL (Hindustan Construction Company Limited) in Siliguri, a thriving city in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, India. Three years before his retirement, his wife had expressed her worry about the education of their daughters, one of whom was in Class Ten preparing for her ICSE and the other in Class Eight. The elder daughter had been a topper all her life. Inspired by the performance of her sister, the younger one also started showing a marked improvement in her performance as well.

Soon The whole of ASoE (Aspiration School of Excellence) was talking about how good the sisters were.

When Namrata, the elder daughter topped from her school in the ICSE, her teachers told Ashish and his wife, Meera, that they should take Namrata down to Kolkata, the capital city, for her higher education. She was good enough to pursue a career in MBBS. So, it was decided that Meera and Namrata would go down and stay in his ancestral home while Bichitra, the younger one, would stay back with Ashish. As her Boards would be over at around the same time as Ashish's retirement. They would all be reunited by then.

Everything went on like a dream initially. Namrata got admitted in a reputed school in Kolkata. Ashish sent most of his salary keeping a quarter of it with himself for the monthly expenses. Then one fine afternoon, Meera called him at the site to tell him that she had had a talk with the Principal of CIS (Calcutta International School) who had shown an interest in their younger daughter. If Ashish could manage it on his own for the next ten months or so, Bichitra could go down and get admitted in that prestigious school.

Such opportunities didn't come one's way on a daily basis and Ashish found nothing wrong with the proposal. During the weekend, he went down to reach his younger daughter home. Lately, he was getting worried about the daughter as, since the departure of her mother and her elder sister in particular, there came a dip in her performance at school. He even called Meera the night after he had met the Class Teacher of Bichitra on the day of the Parents-Teachers Meeting. Ms.Basu, the bubbly class teacher, showed him Bichitra's result in the Annual Examination and expressed her concern that something had been bothering Bichitra lately as she didn't submit her assignments on time. Her absent-mindedness got clearly reflected in her Mark Sheet. For the first time in her life, the girl couldn't even score the pass marks in Maths.

Ashish told Meera that his busy schedules did not allow him to interact with his younger daughter as frequently and as much as he would have liked. Besides, Bichitra had become quite withdrawn after Namrata's admission into the new school. She was turning out to be an extremely moody and self-willed girl. She seemed angry with him whenever he asked for an explanation of her conduct and came back late from school.

After the long telephonic conversation that night the couple agreed that Bichitra had started acting queer as she, most probably, was missing her mother and sister. Mother is the best friend for any girl of her age. In Bichitra's case she seemed to be missing two friends at the same time as both of her mother and her sister were very close to her, Finally, Meera told her husband not to worry as she would talk to the Principal of CIS and see if their younger child could be admitted in the school a month into the new academic session.

Bichitra got admitted in the school though she had to sit for a Maths Test on the basis of the marks she had secured in the subject in her previous school. Though she didn't do well, Ashish assured the Principal of CIS that his younger daughter was a topper just like her elder sister and now, with both of them admitted in the same school, she would do better than what she did in the Annual Examination.

Ashish couldn't even go down when Bichitra appeared at the ICSE and Namrata took her ISC examination. He had applied for leave which was denied as his contract with the HCL was to expire soon and his presence at the site was very much required at such a crucial time.

He was given a touching farewell by the Management and the Staff of HCL. As a parting gift, the company booked his air ticket from Siliguri to Kolkata by flight.

"Excuse me," a young girl waved at him before asking, "can you please tell me if Flight 707 has arrived or not?"

Ashish couldn't help smiling before nodding his head good naturedly at the intruder. The girl must have come to receive someone close to her.

He got into an empty cab next outside the airport and took a wistful look at the people who had come to pick up their families or relatives or friends. He felt an emptiness, an aching in his heart. How his daughters must have grown since the days of their coming down to The City of Joy!

Meera called him half way through that they were shifting to their new office the same day and she was sorry that she would be late home that day. Ashish told her not to worry.

"You know, Ashish, how guilty I feel not being able to go pick you up from the airport and all that. Don't you? Anyway, as both Namra and Bira (she called Namrata and Bichitra by those names respectively) will be at school, I asked them to leave the key on the nail by the side of the left door. Give me a call if you have a problem, OK?"

Ashish was about to tell her something to the effect of how eager he was to see her and the daughters when the line went dead in his hand.

He was getting off the cab twenty minutes later, having left the cab driver with a broad grin on his face as Ashish asked him to keep the change out of the two hundred bucks he had paid as the fare.

He had no problem finding the key though. Nor could he be any less impressed with the way the rooms of his house were arranged. The daughters must have finally grown up by now. Meera usually was the designer of the family. She would have the rooms painted in different shades every three years. Ashish liked her taste and never uttered a word about her selections, whether it was the colour of the paint, the choice of the gift for an invitation or ordering the divan for the drawing

room. Maintaining a house like theirs was not the task of a single woman, he thought to himself. He spent the next hour or so having a shower. At two in the afternoon, Meera called him to enquire if he could take the cooked food out of the freezer. He had to make rice for himself though. Ashish assured her that he was used to cooking for himself and making rice on the cooker was not going to give him a headache. As he was waiting for the rice to be cooked, sitting at the dining table, he recollected his mother from ages long past.

"Are you out there, Baba? (This is how she addressed him). Get in fast. No, no, there is no need to take the shoes off. You must be starving by now. I have already told Bula that we would have lunch together, the moment you are here.

How kind his late mother was! How very loving and understanding!

The mobile started ringing then. It was Namrata calling:

"Dad, I'm calling you at Mom's request. She asked me to let you know that I won't be home before 10.30 tonight as I have a tuition class to attend at Behala. Please don't worry, ok?"

"Could you find your way home so late in the night? Won't the streets be deserted by then especially as it is winter now? "

"Oh, Dad. Don't talk like a sissy. This is Kolkata. Here the night starts by 10. I'm getting late. I'll tell Mom about the tuition fee and all."

Ashish sat down on the chair, having just noticed the light on the cooker going off. While taking the little rice in his plate, Ashish couldn't but help feeling that things must have changed drastically in Kolkata during his absence in the last two and half decades. In his childhood, having meals together with the other members of the family was a privilege that no one wanted to miss. Inspite of being a boy, he was supposed to

be back home by 9.30 at night. The Head of the Family was still his late Baba!

Ashish started being more aware of the loopholes in his family, in his relationships from then on. There was a day when both his younger daughter and he went berserk over the way she was preparing for the Boards.

He had heard her talking outside to someone over the phone. What struck him as odd was the baby tone she had adopted while talking. On being asked, she told him that she was talking to the topper of her class. Ashish got suspicious and wanted to talk to the girl he knew well. The next moment Bichitra disconnected the line. His suspicion aroused like hell, he asked her to call the friend back. Of course, Ashish knew that the friend would not say anything contrary to what his daughter had already told him.

He could have killed his daughter that day. On their return home, both Meera and Namrata sided with Bichitra.

That was the beginning. As the days passed by the gulf between him and the rest of the family widened further. Both Meera and he nearly came to blows one Sunday afternoon after she got dressed to go to her aunt's. Ashish had been involved in many such scenes to really try to stop her. When he wanted to know if she wanted him to come along with her, Meera gave an evasive answer. The whole thing ended in utter chaos with Meera taking off her sari and commenting that he never wanted her to visit any of her relatives and all.

Things came to such a pass that Namrata, who had been a silent spectator till then, interfered to remark, "Why don't you two stay separately. It'd be much better than staying together and making life a big joke."

It was Ashish who stopped his wife from carrying out any such intentions.

On another occasion, Namrata invited her friends on her birthday. Ashish thought it made his daughter look quite cheap in the eye of the world. He stayed out of her room most of the day. Later, Meera told him how mad they all felt at his queer behaviour. Why did he refuse to be clicked with his daughter?

One thing led to another till Namrata ran out of the room with tears coursing through her eyes. Both Meera and Namra looked murderous at the time. He even heard Namra hissing out that, let alone seeing such a father, she had not even heard of one like hers!

Things came to a head when one night Meera wanted to know, cupping her phone with her hand, if he would talk to a relative. Ashish liked the man of all her relatives. They talked and joked for half an hour till their daughters crept into their conversation. Mahendra, the relative, told him that both his daughters were extremely good girls. Ashish cut him short by replying that his daughters were not his definition of a 'good girl'. He went on to point out the qualities of a 'good girl'.

"You know, Mahendra. My idea of a good girl is someone who is intelligent, educated, empathic..." He was about to add some more, when he was interrupted by the voice at the other end, who asked him,

"What do you mean by 'empathic'?"

"You know, a good girl should always feel others' pain. She would never sit hooked to the mobile while her father does the dishes and clips the clothes on the line..."

"Do you think there is any such girl in the 21 st century world, unbelievably pampered and fussed over as our daughters are?"

Anyway, after Ashish had hung up, he was surprised to see Meera turning her face to the wall, fiddling with her mobile.

She didn't turn towards him even for once while awake or in her sleep.

Ashish foresaw calamities.

The next day was Sunday. They had a nice time together after long. Meera was a fantastic cook and she had prepared the kshir, Ashish's favourite dish. The led TV on the wall was on as the daughters came into their parents' room. The lull in the atmosphere suggested something untoward was about to happen.

It was then, with her daughters sitting by her side that Meera let loose what had been there in her heart since the previous night. She never expected Ashish to complain about her daughters to Mahendra.

"What did I complain about?" Ashish asked concernedly.

"Didn't you? Didn't you tell him that you've to do the dishes and clip the clothes while all your daughters do is watch TV and play games on their mobiles? "

Some ten minutes later as Ashish was coming out of the attached bathroom, he saw Meera opening the almirah and throwing down her saris haphazardly on the floor. She had begun to cry by then.

Ashish saw a hurricane brewing as she went on saying what not, not even sparing his late parents. It was at this time that Namrata asked her Mother to mind her language. That let loose the utterance of some of the choicest epithets he had ever heard about his parents. Ashish was not one to take things lying down. As things were going out of control, Meera broke down stating that Ashish had asked him to get out of their house and she was not going to spend a minute more in the house.

"When did I ever tell you to leave? " Ashish sounded genuinely surprised.

Both his daughters chorused in, " Dad, don't deny it now. When you are beside yourself, you don't even know what you are talking about. You indeed shouted at her to get out of the house."

To cut a long story short, that was it. Finally Meera left the house, with tears streaming down her eyes and her daughters closely following behind.

A week after their departure, Namrata came home to tell Ashish that Meera wanted a mutual separation. She knew that now with Ashish retired and her working in an MNC, there was not much she could get out of him. But she would be happy if he paid their fees along with a lump sum amount.

Ashish did as he was bid. He was so dumbfounded by the turn of events that he didn't even know what he was doing. He felt devastated, shattered, used. Why was God so unjust? Why did He single him out for punishment alone? Was there no justice? Was there someone called God at all?

When Namrata was leaving, he made one request.

"Please tell your Mom to do me the favour of never letting me see her face again."

"I'll tell her. Don't you worry. I don't think she'll be interested in showing you her face either." Namrata, cool as a cucumber, answered.

Ashish wanted to scream at her but good sense stopped him from doing that.

One night Ashish received a call from Namrata. She wanted to come for some time as she had left her mark sheets in her

room. Ashish asked her to come with her sister. In fact, he went a step ahead in asking them to have lunch with him as well, if it wasn't a problem.

Man proposes. God disposes.

Ashish had thought of another alternative. He would take them to a movie at Nandan, have a simple lunch out of snacks or whatever available at the adjacent restaurant. Then he would pour out all my anger, frustration to them without anyone even remotely related to him, getting any wiser!

It was not to be, obviously.

His encounter with his estranged daughters began on a nice note though. He was hardly done with a medicated bath when he saw his daughters trooping in. Yes, with both clad in khaki pants and the bag flung across the shoulders of the sisters, they looked like some sort of a troop. She offered her father the packet she had bought for them on the way. As she took out her laptop, Namrata asked her father if she could take a short test relating to the college campassing.

Ashish was hurriedly arranging the room the next minute to make her feel at ease. With all the windows closed and the room literally shut off to the rest of the world, he finally devoted himself to having some breakfast.

Namrata called her Mother to send her some money for registration. For a brief minute, Ashish loved the sound of his wife's voice.

With his eyes on the phone, he heard Namra calling Bichitra for her mobile. Luckily, she got it in the nick of time. Next time she called her, her sister was lost in her own world with the earphones tugged into her ears. Ashish was about to get up thinking she would be late for her Test, when she told him,

"You can't do the job. Bira, can you get my wallet out of the rucksack?"

When she was done with the registration, she said:

"The test will take some 45 minutes. Is that ok?"

He looked at his mobile. It was 11.16 in the morning. That meant the test would be concluded by 12. So Ashish thought to himself. It'd be late but they could still have a delicious meal together.

He went back to writing while Namrata continued with her test. Bichitra, as was her habit, was reclining in the corner, barely existing!

When the bigger hand of the wall clock pointed to 9 and the smaller one was close to 12, Ashish found Namrata getting up.

"You're already done with the test?" He couldn't help asking her.

"Yes. It was scheduled for thirty minutes. She replied.

"Didn't you tell me that the paper was for 45 minutes? Ashish asked her again, incredulously.

Namrata, after all, was his blood. She was losing control. The poor girl must have gone through a lot by courtesy of her parents, lately.

"Baba, she told you that the test was for thirty minutes," Bichitra came to her sister's defence.

Ashish knew that there were times when he acted immature. He might even be an emotional fool at times but he was mature enough to know when not to prolong an issue.

He went out to make some coffee for the three of them. As he was pouring the milk in the pot, he kept thinking.

Didn't she tell me that the test was for forty five minutes? Did he imagine it all like his wife had been telling him from the early days of their marriage? He thought of Bira's reply as well. But she couldn't have heard her sister, glued to the mobile as she was with the earphone tugged in.

That's what the problem had been with Ashish. Once he got an idea in his head, he had to let it out at any cost. Otherwise, he would be burnt alive in the extreme heat of the thoughts in his head.

He got back into his room.

"Namra, are you sure you told me that the test was for 30 minutes?" He challenged her.

"Dad, I said the test was for 30 minutes. It was written at the top." She answered, huffing and puffing. "Why make such an issue over nothing? Ok, you are right. It was my fault. I told you the test was for 45 minutes. Happy?"

It was not so much what she was telling him as it was the tone she adopted while saying it that made Ashish lose his cool. He let out what was lying heavy in his heart then.

"Don't you think I had to find out whether I was imagining things like your Mother kept telling me every day or... your Granny...told me once! Haven't I already gone through much? Am I not losing my mind?"

He just went on and on. Later, when he was about to make coffee, Namrata informed him that she was not in a mood for it.

While the sisters were leaving Ashish heard him saying:

"Thanks for putting the idea of separation into your mother's head. I'll ever remain grateful to you for that."

Namra literally dashed out of the house. Life never stopped playing games with this family. When Namrata shrieked at her Mom on her early return to their new place, she hit Namrata with the ladle in hand.

Next day, while Ashish was in his study room, he received a call from an unknown number. His daughter was found delirious on the highway, on her way back from school. The stranger called the first number which happened to be

Ashish's. Ashish rushed to the hospital but she was diagnosed to be afflicted with Covid-19. She didn't give much time to her parents. What remained was Bichitra's scream vibrating through the walls of the room on the seventh floor long after the end had come out of the blue, all of a sudden!

A week had passed since the tragedy. Ashish couldn't forgive himself for being so naive. He felt that he was as much responsible for the failed marriage and his daughter's death as was his wife. The saying he had picked up in his youth long back, kept ringing:

Gharer Bau ar boi ekbar barir bairey geley ar phere na. If either a wife or a book gets out of home once, neither ever returns. Only in his case, how he wished that his elder daughter could return home again.

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Rathin from Kolkata, joined BCSC as an English Teacher and retired last March as the Principal of SXPS, Joypur.

An HM's Gold Medal awardee, he has been published extensively. His novel, "The Damon in Doctor's Disguise" on Web Novel along with "The Autobiography of CU's Worst Student" and "My Sis: Through My Eyes" (Pub. by ZobraBooks and Amazon.in.) have been much acclaimed. He loves writing, blogging, editing, translating, and podcasting.

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