



Fear of Sleep

Bishnupada Ray

Nirmalya finished his classes and was thinking of going to the bus stand by a toto, the popular and ubiquitous e-rickshaw, in order to board a bus for his return journey to Siliguri. The university car was parked near the administrative building, and the young driver Gopal Sahani was inside it, watching Hindi dubbed South Indian movies on phone. This car was the only official vehicle to carry them from the main campus at Siliguri to the second campus at Jalpaiguri in the morning, situated at a distance of about fifty kilometres, and carry them back in the evening. Teachers from the main campus had to come to this second campus once a week, commuting more

than hundred kilometres on both sides of the trip. Gopal told Nirmalya that the car would leave only when other teachers finished their classes. Nirmalya knew that, the car would wait till five o'clock, and it was not yet three. So, he looked for a toto. Usually, one toto used to be available on the campus, but today there was none. He saw his colleague BR Sir coming out of the ad building, and he waved at him. BR Sir was quite senior to him, and had been teaching for a long time at this university. He usually came to the second campus by his own car. Nirmalya asked him whether he was going back to Siliguri, and BR Sir told him to go with him. This was an option with Nirmalya, some days when their classes fell on the same day, they usually travelled together in his car.

The Tata Tiago car was moving smoothly on the four-lane national highway and they were heading towards Siliguri, and Nirmalya told BR Sir how his mother had disappeared mysteriously from home without telling anyone, and at that time he was just a kid, and till date there was no information about her and also how all searches had remained fruitless. BR Sir told him that mysterious things happened in his life also and that he faced supernatural moments in life. And then told a story.

“It all happened when I was in Silchar, way back in 1997, the nondescript but strategically important town situated at the far-flung location of Barak Valley in Assam bordering Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur. The entire region of the so-called North East and the surrounding areas of Silchar were politically disturbed and insurgency was at its peak. Only Silchar was like an oasis of peace. However, Silchar being a Bengali-dominated pocket area in the state, was mostly underdeveloped and lacked infrastructure. And it was just a provincial town. It was at this town that a central university came up in 1994. And I joined this university as a lecturer in 1995 and started staying in this town and I stayed there up till 1998 when I left the university. It was in 1998 that the

university shifted to its new campus in Dorgakona, but still without the quarters facility.”

Nirmalya knew that BR Sir began his career in Silchar. So, he was not surprised.

“This story is related to my struggle for finding a suitable accommodation and the agony at not being able to find one. The university had its own problem of accommodation. It was running in two buildings hired from the REC and the Polytechnic college. There was no provision of any accommodation for the teachers. The teachers were asked to fend for themselves. The town also lacked hotels and guest houses. So, the teachers had to rent houses which were also not in sufficient numbers, because people did not have any idea of such a demand for rooms and also possibly never thought of it. It was only when the university came up, they started to wake up to the new reality by building extra rooms for the purpose of rent.”

“Although the people of Silchar called themselves Bengalis, they actually were Sylhetis, and they spoke the Sylheti language. It was not just in language, but in various forms of habits and manners they differed from Bengalis, and they took pride in their distinctive cultures. Two features that were commonly noticed were their deep love for ‘paan supari’ and a particular dry fish, and their love of language. Their love of language resulted in the martyrdom of several people of Silchar, a sad but heroic event in the murky history that was later observed as ‘bhasha dibosh of 21st February’ across the Bengali-speaking world.”

Nirmalya listened to him attentively.

“Good natured and highly cultured people they were, they however had one fault, they were less kind to the outsiders, possibly because of their having suffered in the partition and because of their living in isolation from the mainland culture. And they were plainly prejudiced against the bachelors. So, it

was very hard for the bachelors to get a rented room at the households where families lived. They usually preferred married people as tenants.”

“Yes, parochial and conservative mentality. I know it.” Nirmalya said.

“It was under these circumstances that my ordeal began. First, I tried a lodge in the dingy market place, then got shifted to the REC guest house for a week, then got shifted with a colleague from Linguistics department to a nearby house in Fakir Tilla, opposite to the REC main gate, after a few months of discomfort and suffering at Fakir Tilla, got shifted to Daspara, and after a few months to another part of Daspara. There was a severe shortage of electricity and water supply those days, and the ground water contained high amounts of iron and therefore was not usable. Needless to say, the lack of basic amenities was causing me severe distress and time management was a nightmare to me. My days and nights thus were just going wasted into some malignant black hole, without any gain in my studies and my teaching arena. This lack of a proper accommodation was to haunt me for a long time to come, even after I left Silchar and returned to my hometown Siliguri, and it was one of the main reasons that I had never been able to progress in my career, it just haunted me like a curse and often put me into despair. As if I was caught into a time loop of shifting from one rented house to another, from quarters to my parental house, and so on and so forth but never felt at home anywhere.”

Nirmalya looked at him with compassion, so much misery and suffering could happen to life, which unless and until told, could never be known.

“It was a big two-storeyed house in Kuar Paar, at the outskirts of the town with no houses around, and a few Naga colleagues of mine were residing there, and it was to be my final destination in Silchar. It was the house of one Mr. Borbhuiya

who worked in the Secretariat and lived in Guwahati, and his brother-in-law one Mr. Laskar used to stay with his family in an outhouse as a caretaker. My Naga colleagues were all bachelors and they occupied the front portion of the ground floor, and the back portion was vacant at that time and which I was to occupy. The Borbhuiya family kept the top floor for themselves, because on holidays they used to come home with their Maruti 800 car which was a luxury those days.”

“Mr. Laskar showed me the rooms. The rooms were spacious, with large glass panes. The back portion was always dusky, some big trees and rows of betel nut trees and a pond just near the kitchen. The rooms appeared alright although signs of their being used were visible. It was obvious that the Borbhuiya family used to stay at this portion of the house before they completed the whole building and shifted to the top floor.”

“The weather of Silchar always remained hot and sultry, because it was a landlocked valley surrounded by small hills or mounds or tillas. The air was mostly dusty before the rain, which happened nonetheless causing waterlogging at many parts of the town and causing mud on the roads. The loadshedding and outages were frequent and sometimes we had to go without power and water for several days. At night I had to sleep with my glass window panes and a door open for better ventilation.”

“There was no respite to my woes. And to add one more, it started to happen so horribly that it broke my morale to such an extent that I decided to leave the place finally. It was a sultry night and I was asleep, it was like being in a dream that I felt a strong gust of wind with a flapping sound entering through my windows and some dark creature settling on my back and pressed down on my neck. I had a peculiar sleeping posture; I was always comfortable with sleeping on my belly. When I felt the dark creature flapping its wings and sitting on my back to press my neck down, a strange horror ran through

my body while still in sleep, and the body impulsively started to resist the creature and wriggled to escape it. I could feel it even in my sleep, as vividly as in a dream, only thing was that I was not able to move, I only felt a futile struggle of my body trying to wriggle out of the creature's heavy weight upon my back. Unable to do so, I tried the only other option, to wake me up violently from my sleep, which after several desperate attempts, I was able to. The frozen sleep melted slowly and I felt the weight falling off from my back. I woke up, all my hair and body hair risen and standing, my throat dry and a sensation of horror devouring my body. I got out of my bed, closed the door and windows, kept the light on, and burned incense sticks. I could not sleep several nights after the incident. I was afraid of sleeping, I started to fear going to sleep."

"What do you think? Ghost?" Nirmalya asked. BR Sir continued, apparently too much engrossed to hear that.

"Mr. Laskar told me that I needed rest and vitamins, which was however correct because I suffered from malnourishment in this foreign land with nobody to take care of me. The doctor gave me some medicines and supplements and called it sleep-paralysis. I was in that house for a few months after the incident. It was repeated many times, the same gust of wind and a flapping sound and a dark creature sitting on my back and holding my neck pressed against the bed. As if it was playing with me. My body was in a wreck, it was weakening with every such incident, and my mind was in horrors."

"But what about your Naga colleagues? Didn't they help you?"

"My Naga colleagues tried to help me. They invited me to their parties which they in fact held every other day. Their good friend, one Dr. Sochen from Assam Rifles and some female friends used to visit them and they threw lavish parties. They offered me fried rice with beer, pork meat with mushroom, Naga-style spicy fish curry, boiled cabbage and plenty of salad.

They used to take beef, but they never offered it to me. They were Christians, and one Sunday they took me to their church where I listened to the preacher telling the story of wrestler Jacob, and they knew that Hindus did not eat beef. Once I tried to eat a roasted hornet which they called their favourite food, but the hornet could not pass through my throat and I vomited. However, their sumptuous meal was in sharp contrast with my rice and curry type of meal.”

“But nothing helped me much. I had to leave, in order to save myself. One night I woke up with cold perspiration and a death-like sensation, looked outside through the windows in the dark, a glimmer of darkness was visible near a dusky tree, the distant lights appearing in its twinkling eyes. Crouched in my bed, I waited for the daybreak, and as soon as the sun appeared on the horizon, got my things packed and left the house, never to look back.”

“Even today the memory of the incident fills me with loathing, and my body hair especially at the neck get risen and stand on the end in terror.”

The car was approaching the state highway now, and was about ten kilometres away from Siliguri. BR Sir was silent, and concentrated on his driving. Nirmalya was thinking about the liminal spaces of the sleep world and the death world and how human consciousness was unable to cope with them.

Bishnupada Ray

Bishnupada Ray is an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Bengal, and he is a creative writer as well. His critical and creative writings have appeared in many journals, anthologies and edited books.

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