

Good news

'Good news' is an uncommon item these days, an illusion, what we may call a '*dumurer phool*' in Bengali. The other day, I heard the former Chief Justice of America, Earl Warren say somewhere: "I always turn to the sports pages first, which records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but man's failures." I do not know when he had said this. But today, even the sports page isn't about sports alone. Sports, it's as if have become a, 'merchants' game'. From the shirt to the shoes, to the cap and the ball, the bat and the racket, everything is an advertisement for cigarettes, alcohol, beverages and motor cars. A countless traders' market, bringing countless scandals, match-fixing, deceptions, drugs, stimulants, bribe, politics and violence. Today, will Earl Warren find any significant difference between the two pages? Haven't the first page and the sports page ended up looking alike? And in our state (Assam) today, the opening pages are a foul toxic rot. One can foresee its contents without even looking. Who killed who, who got abducted, who got raped or cheated, which politician toppled another politicians, which crook delivered pearls of wisdom at the death of another scoundrel, bombs exploding, trains derailing, who in the name of revolution and justice, called *bandh* and disrupted life (to earn more money or to secure vote banks?), who gobbled up funds and killed another scheme, which eminent person got involved in a daily new scam... editor of Gariyoshiⁱⁱ, Chandra Prasad Saikia had aptly said, 'If we could arrange to photocopy and send the front page of our newspapers to a civilized nation, then - '...then people in that world will be wonderstruck that there exists a nation, where lives, what one calls '*khok*'ⁱⁱⁱ in Kamrupia language. *khok* for money, *khok* for sex, *khok* for power, *khok* for fame. Nothing registers afterward, morality, ethics, self-restrain and nothing remotely humane -

So the question, of reading an Assamese newspaper for a 'good news' – does not arise. Like the way uncontrolled population explosion wiped out our noble dreams, only to give birth to a rat race of frustration and anarchy. Today the explosive growth of newspapers in Assam, has been made to give birth to hostility and division. The birth of sensationalism, shallowness, trash news and a farewell to all principles. (Perhaps no other city in the world produces as many dailies as Guwahati does). The days of journalistic integrity and moral responsibility like that of Lakshminath Phukan or Haren Boroah, is long dead. It was during the time of '*Assam Andolon*'^{iv} that this erosion started. These papers propagated great fear and distress to the people. And from that time onward, these newspapers have been preoccupied with fear on one hand and *khok* in another and perpetrated by a complete absence of moral restraint. As a result, none of the Assamese newspapers today, are worth reading. A storehouse of misplaced facts (or distorted), fake news, unappetizing headlines (even complete sleaze at times), meaninglessness, flippant, laughable English, and completely doused in sensationalism and glitz. In short, a total absence of serious talk or honest opinions. In fact, it has been sometime that I almost quit reading any Assamese newspaper (only occasionally about news on the Assamese films) - (and on a personal level – in 1996, these newspapers published stories on us, which were unnecessary, insensitive and disproportionately excessive. From then on, these newspapers are untouchables; a sense of indifference arises on seeing them. And as long as these newspapers exist, there remains no hope for this state's salvation.)

So, we do not think about writing in Assamese newspapers anymore. But as I was about to take a brief siesta that afternoon, the phone began to ring incessantly. The executive editor of 'Aamar Oxom'^{*}, Manoj Kumar Goswami. He wants a story for the first of January. A story at any cost, any story. A story that is good. A 'good news'.

I expressed strong protest. Not enough time (today 29 January), preoccupied, lack of existing ideas. 'No this is not possible. Sorry'. 'No, it is possible, you can do it. Something

short will even do. Any idea. Something for the New Year.' 'Let's see what can be done. But I cannot give you my word. Hello. Hello.' Gone. The line got disconnected.

So am I to abandon my resolve now? Of not writing for these newspapers? It appears so, given the editor's resolve. Anyway breaking a rule once will not make the Mahabharata impure. What we may say in English, "its exception that proves the rule." But 'good news'? Where does one even look for 'good news'? I got a job. I won money in a draw. My son passed in an exam. But aren't these 'good news' a little too personal? Where do I find good news for everyone? Today, do we even have the good fortune to find 'good news' in the first page or in the sports page?

I abandoned my plans for an afternoon siesta and sat there lost for ideas. Where do I find a good news? Can I keep sitting and thinking, "tomorrow I'll definitely get a 'good news'," and will that actually bring some 'good news'?

'Good news' in a way means good fortune. And how does good fortune come? By wearing some astrologer's stone? By performing Satyanarayan's puja? Is it a lucky hand of cards? Seeing someone's face in the morning? Or is it done by spotting so called lucky birds in a pair? Who knows?

In the Western societies, such a belief exists that a horse shoe in the house brings good fortune. We are students of science, we are rationalists, we ask questions, how is that possible? We seek answers. How can a piece of iron fitted to a horse's hoof attract good fortune? Isn't that irrational? Isn't this only a superstition? Or a myth? Who knows?

Being students of science, we sometimes get to read here and there about the scientists. One day I got to know that Niels Bohr hangs a horse shoe in his house. Niels Bohr is the celebrated Danish physicist, whose contribution to quantum mechanics and understanding of the atomic structure won him the Nobel Prize in Physics (he was also the halfback of the Danish national football team). One day a guest noticed the horse shoe and asked in a curious disposition, "you are a renowned scientist and without facts, you would not accept beliefs. Yet, you believe that a horse brings good luck?" "No, no," Bohr laughed and then said indulgently, "I do not believe that this horse brings me good fortune. But the problem is, even if I do not believe, it still brings me good luck." (What I intend to say is that reading some pages of science, we tend to label many beliefs as folk, superstition and taboo. But those who have explored and travelled to the end of many mysteries; understand the limits of the human mind and the infinite mysteries of nature, may be man will never even understand them all. So does it mean that good fortune (or 'good news') can come unannounced and from any direction. What if a cold, lifeless piece of iron, held such attractive power, some mysterious property?

But, it remains. Where does one find some 'good news'? I used to scribble on a notebook whenever an idea or a plot struck as interesting, hoping I would use them in creating a story someday. I used to collect a few newspaper clips as well, stashed between its pages. I opened it, hoping to find something in haste. A newspaper clip slipped out from it. A yellowing piece of paper. And this was not kept for the purpose of finding ideas. I had kept this to give myself some reassurance and courage. Its date reads, 25.10.1990, almost ten years old. It was also a time when we all were engulfed in a cloud of despair. Youth power had degenerated into greed and violence of the cowards. Human values were pushed into non-existence, and so were justice, tenderness and other finer sentiments. And like today's newspapers, even in those days, they were preoccupied with spreading terror and frustration. For some days, every morning, I used to read this newspaper clip, like people read the Geeta-Bhagavad or other holy scriptures for inner strength.

"Father's misdeed leads to son's suicide"

Misamora, 24 October: News of a 28 year old man committing suicide at the village nam ghar* arrived from Misamora. Apparently, the death was a reaction to his father's financial misdeed. According to details available, the deceased was Mr. Putul Bharali (28) an officer at the Golaghat D.I. office. His father Mr. Dehram Bharali was found to have misappropriated the 'building grant' meant for the above mentioned office. He has been

suspended and sent to judicial custody. It is worth mentioning here that only after he had been transferred to Dhansiri sub-division, that news of this misdeed came to light. He was a senior officer at the Golaghat D.I. office before his transfer....

I clung to this small paragraph, like a drowning man holds on to straw. I felt there was still hope, that all was not lost. Clearly, it is a tragic news; it is no pleasant story and neither a good tiding*. But given the circumstances those days, it seemed like a 'good news'. Today, if we look in the front pages of these newspapers; isn't it possible that we find any 'good news'?

ⁱ Since the flower is invisible, there are various idioms related to it in languages around the world. In a Bengali idiom as used in *tumi jeno dumurer phool hoe gele*, i.e., you have become (invisible like) the dumur flower.

ⁱⁱ An Assamese literary journal.

ⁱⁱⁱ A Faustian greed, excessive lust.

^{iv} From 1979 to 1984 the political scenario of Assam was swelled up with the movement called Axom Andolan led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). The motto of the movement was to wipe out illegal migrants from the State.