

Drought

There has been a power cut, the fans have stopped, and the boys are wiping the sweat from their arms and faces with their hankies. 'Practical' exams are in progress at the Nijbarama Higher Secondary School. Outside the window, the sun is pouring down molten fire; the glare is blinding. The grass on the field in front of the school has withered and dried up to take on a deep reddish-brown hue. The grey outline of Agathurihill can be seen indistinctly on the horizon; the sky is cloudless, there is no breeze, and the branches and leaves of the areca nut and the banyan trees hang limply, motionless.

After sweeping his gaze over the examinees' tables, the school's Internal Examiner, Dalim Borah, entered the tiny teacher's room. While wiping off the sweat from his face, he plopped down on a chair before me and said, "Power's gone, and there is no saying when it will be back—looks like we have a miserable day ahead. How about pulling down the curtains?"

I am the External Examiner, and after looking at the examination hall through the connecting door, I said, "No, we better not. The laboratory will go dark. I notice that there are quite a few experiments on light, and the boys will find it inconvenient. Taking readings from thermometers may also prove difficult." I then glanced at the list of names and roll numbers of the candidates and the experiments allotted to them and said, "I see that one of them is absent."

Borah went over the list once and said, "Yes, that's Bhrigu Kumar. Yesterday, he appeared late for the chemistry test. The Internal Examiner wasn't keen to allow him to appear on the test, but Dr Talukdar allowed him to appear after discovering the reasons for his delay."

That would be Dr. Pabitra Talukdar, a lecturer of Chemistry at Cotton College, who has also come here as an External Examiner. He is well known to me. We were allotted separate rooms in the PWD Inspection Bungalow, but he had moved into my room rather than staying alone and feeling lonely. I remembered Talukdar casually mentioning the boy Bhrigu Kumar—the boy had come wearing a dhoti, he had to plough their land before coming to the exam, he said, and that had delayed him – sincere boy, not in the habit of copying (a few jeans-clad

fashionable boys had meanwhile been caught red-handed while copying)—the boy couldn't do very well in the experiment allotted to him, but he did his best; he made a couple of mistakes but answered the questions posed to him during the 'viva' session more or less correctly—strictly speaking, he should not have come out successful in the test, but seeing his honest efforts, Talukdar had taken a lenient view and pushed him through.

"What makes him come late? Comes from far, is it?" I asked Borah

"It would be a couple of kilometres." Borah said, "He comes from a locality known as Kumarpara—at one time, all the inhabitants there were *kumarsorpotters*. They made earthen pitchers, utensils and occasionally, idols of Gods and Goddesses. These days, only a few households remain potters by profession; the rest have migrated to other places in search of jobs. "

"This boy has to plough their fields in the morning?"

"Yes, I, too, overheard something like that. They probably have a tiny plot of land, a few thousand square feet at the most. They are very poor – they had a little more land earlier when Bhriгу's father was alive. His father did not do too badly as a cultivator. He did two crops a year. But after his death, the family had to sell off some of the land. Now, it is only him and his poor mother. They are almost destitute. "

"How do they make ends meet?"

"Can't say. After all, how much rice can that tiny holding yield? The old woman is almost invalid; she makes a few earthen lamps and knick-knacks without moving about, and maybe she makes a few brooms with bamboo splinters. Maybe she also collects the nuts from the few areca nut trees in their backyard and tries to sell them in the local market – a market comes up near Kumarpara every Tuesday and Friday. "

I saw a bashful boy standing uneasily in the doorway, trying to draw our attention. "Come in," Borah said in a grave tone, and the boy came forward to stand by the side of our table, perspiration streaming down his face. Through his thin shirt, even the vest underneath could be made out, sopping wet with sweat, his dirty pyjama trousers were stained with mud, the time-worn Hawaiian chappals on his feet were tattered, and he was carrying in his hands the Practical

workbook. Glancing at his watch, Borah said sternly, "Why so late? We can't allow you to get in if you keep coming so late." "Sir, I got delayed a bit, Sir," the boy muttered, swallowing a little as if trying to get back his breath after a long run, "In my hurry, I stumbled on a pothole on the road. Sir, and I am bleeding, Sir." He then extended his right leg, and we saw that there was a tiny pool of blood near his big toe, and the toe was already swelling.

"Why don't you come with sufficient time in hand?" Borah commented, "You are more than fifteen minutes late. Now it is up to the External Examiner to consider your case, so you had better ask him," Borah pointed towards me. I leaned forward to take the workbook from the boy's hands and said, "Alright, I would allow you this time, but you won't get any extra time, mind you. And don't repeat this in the future. Now, go and wash your foot with water from that bucket on the verandah and come back." Looking at me with apparent relief, he stuttered, "R-right Sir, all right, Sir, I will be back in a minute, Sir," and hurriedly went to the verandah.

"Bhrigu Kumar?" I asked, and Borah nodded.

Bhrigu had meanwhile come back. Borah told him, "Bhrigu, there are only a few experiments left for you—and you are to blame for that – the easier ones have already been chosen by others. Anyway, you have to draw lots from these cards here. Pick one up."

Only four cards had remained on the table, face down. The boy picked up one and turned it over. Glancing at it, he seemed to lose heart and said, "Sir, this would be a tough one—it needs a lot of time."

"Alright. I will give you a second chance. Pick up another card." He picked up one, looked at it and said, "I'll take this, Sir."

" Alright. Go now. But mind you, no extra time."

"Alright, Sir," he said and turned to go. But something made Borah ask him, " Wait a second. Why were you so late? Did you have to go again for ploughing?"

"That's right, Sir, their pump developed a snag today, and removing it took some time. That's why the delay..."

"Alright. Go now to your experiment."

"Plough? Pump?... But I remember hearing that tilling of land has come to a complete halt this year in these parts, as there have been no rains for a long period, and there is a severe drought—"

"That's true—the fields have all dried up, and cracks have appeared all over the soil. It is the same with the plot of land belonging to Bhrigu's family. But at the other end of Kumarpara, Garga *Mauzadar*, the local land-revenue collector, is getting his land cultivated, and that is the only exception. On the foothills of that Aganthuri hill that you see in the distance, there is a small stream, and it is close to the *Mauzadar's* fields. He is pumping the water up and getting a small portion of his holding tilled. Since Bhrigu has not been able to cultivate their land, Garga *Mauzadar*, being a kind-hearted man, had called Bhrigu over and told him, "You better till my land here with your plough and later on, we will work out something about your share of the crop."—Now I hear that a little further from that place, another stream has been spotted. The local farmers wonder if they can attempt something similar to what Garga *Mauzadar* is doing on a cooperative basis. They have applied to the Government for a pump set, but then you know the way our Government works; they are yet to wake up—"

I nodded my head. The bearer boy, meanwhile, brought in some tea and snacks. While taking a sip from the cup of tea, I took a peep at the laboratory through the open doorway – the boys were busy with their experiments, oblivious to the sweltering heat (they can do that), and that day, no one seemed to be cheating or prodding one another for answers—in one corner I could see Bhrigu busy with his experiment. I thought I would finish the tea and call them up for their viva session...

Borah had already finished his tea and seemed to ponder something for a while. Finally, he asked, "But who told you that the tilling of land here has come to a complete halt?"

"It's not quite like that," I replied, "I came to know about it quite by chance during a casual conversation. You see, Dr Talukdar, who has come here as the External Examiner for Chemistry, has an uncle in Kumarpara, the husband of his father's sister. One Saniram Das —would you know him by any chance?"

“Saniram Das? Er—No—I don’t think I have come across that name before.”

“Anyway, this uncle comes to Dr. Talukdar’s residence in the city occasionally and calls on his nephew. He is also a farmer and keeps trying to make ends meet somehow. He is quite poor. Dr Talukdar’s wife has come to know that the drought has brought this uncle’s farming activities to a grinding halt – she has sent a few homemade sweets and some rice and pulses through Dr Talukdar and has asked him to find some time in between his duties to go and deliver those in his uncle’s household and also find out how he is pulling along. Dr Talukadar often tells me about going to his uncle’s and has asked me to come along.”

“Is it so? The road, however, is rugged and uneven, full of potholes and cluttered with broken twigs and jutting boulders, and now, with this drought, it has dried up to the hardness of a rock—you will have a tough time navigating it —”

The exams were over by noon, and we returned to the I.B. The power was restored towards the afternoon, and after switching on the ceiling fan in our room at the Inspection Bungalow, we sat down beneath it, and Dr. Talukdar exclaimed, “Oh, at last!” After finishing our lunch, we listlessly sprawled on two reclining chairs, the sweat and the sweltering heat dissuading us from starting a conversation. In school that day, I could correct only a few of the answer scripts and brought the rest with me, expecting to complete the work at night. I pulled out a few answer scripts from their bunch and used them as hand fans without much relief.

After resting for a while, Talukdar lit a cigarette and offered me one. He said, “By the way, Medhi, this boy Bhrigu, how did he fare in the Physics practical?” “Not too well,” I said, pulling out his answer script from within the bunch. I turned over the pages, “Both his findings are at least twenty per cent off the mark—he, of course, has followed the correct procedure and has tried honestly – but at least one of the two findings should have been accurate —usually all students manage to do that. Don’t know why he missed out.”

“What about his practical workbook and his viva?”

“ The workbook is fine, he has conducted almost all the experiments in class, and the School’s internal assessment also is alright — he didn’t do very well in the

viva—I thought he was very nervous—not that his answers were all wrong, but his conception about a couple of things is rather vague—”

“But he would get through, won’t he?”

“Er...” I hesitated a little and went over the graphs and the calculations in the answer script once more—“I Can’t say for sure —look here, for instance (I pointed to one spot with the red and blue pencil in my hand) – this here is the working formula, the data he obtained have also been inserted correctly, but his findings somehow have gone haywire—”

Talukdar glanced at the answerscript and said, “The calculations involve taking logs, I presume?” (I nodded my head) – Er... Would you be having a log table with you?” (I nodded my head again and pulled out a log table from among the papers) “... If you don’t mind, would you please work out the log once?”

Taken aback, I looked at Talukdar (I thought, he could dare make a request like that onlybecause he is a friend) . I nodded and selected a blank page towards the end of an answer script. There, I jotted down the figures from Bhrigu’s answer scriptand then put down the corresponding logarithms and did the calculations and was surprised to see that the exact correct answer had come out (up to two decimal places, in fact). Talukdar watched me constantly and remarked,“ So he had made a mistake only in taking down the logarithms, isn’t it so, Medhi?”

“Yes,” I had to admit, “You guessed right. In the exam hall, especially towards the end, boys often make such mistakes in their nervousness and hurry to finish.” I saw that Talukdar was looking at me with something akin to hope. I couldn’t hold back a smile and said, “I have to make him get through, is that it? So be it. Anyway, he will pass quite legitimately. No need for adding any grace marks to make him pass—”

“So, that part is settled then,” Talukdar said with what looked like a huge relief, “Please don’t mind if I have taken any undue liberty with you —”

“No, not at all—”

“You know what, Medhi? Many boys get through by cheating, but Bhrigu at least has made an honest effort — even after working in the field, he has tried to continue his studies, and it would be a matter of great regret if he had to give up

his studies altogether only because of a couple of marks — honest effort should also have its reward — so why not give him a chance— what do you say?”

I nodded my head in agreement.

The next day, there was a power cut at around 10 in the morning, and we had a harrowing time for most of the day. Towards the afternoon, finding that the sun had mellowed down a little, Talukdar and I started towards Kumarpara— he took a small torch in his pant pocket. He had arranged for two bicycles, too, but when everyone said that cycling would be almost impossible on that road, one bicycle was returned to its owner. We pushed the other along the road after tying the bundles of eatables to its carrier. The road was absurd, all rugged and narrow and hardly any bigger than a trail. Huge potholes would suddenly appear here and there, and splinters of rocks kept jutting outrageously all along the road — desiccated trees and bunches of wildflowers were standing rigidly on both sides of the road, their colours indeterminate under thick layers of dust. One got an occasional glimpse of a barren patch of ground, looking as if someone had abandoned it after repeatedly chopping and scarring it to ugly, irregular strips. No bird could be seen anywhere, nor did we hear insects chirping. We went ahead, skirting the potholes and pushing our bicycle along — we were sweating profusely, and after some distance, we stopped for a while to take a breather. We could see a motorcycle coming with a roar from behind us and skirting around the potholes in a zig-zag path; it zoomed past us, spraying a profusion of dust all over us in its wake. Two boys were on it; the one driving wore a helmet, and the pillion rider was bare-headed. They both took a sidelong glance at us but did not stop and went flying past us with a deafening roar—

I covered my face and mouth with a hankie and muttered, “Were not the faces a little familiar, Talukdar?” Talukdar replied, “Yes, looked like examinees of this year— the one driving is surely one of them. He had appeared maybe the day before—”

“Did you see how they left us buried in dust? They must have noticed that two of us, External Examiners, were standing here but did not bother to stop and ask about our problem. They don’t have even that minimal courtesy.”

“Their exams are now over. Maybe they are sure about qualifying —why should they bother about us anymore?”

"Must have got the motorcycle at his father's expense, surely not from his own sweat and toil — and roaring past like that at full speed!— We should thank our stars that he did not speed off after knocking us down. Boys of his ilk in the city throw all traffic rules to the wind and roar off after knocking down pedestrians, not bothering to wait and see if they have killed or maimed — that's our young generation for you— cheap uncivil behaviour, with hardly anybody having any interest in studies, no inclination of making a living through hard work and always on the lookout for cheating others and leading a life of lies— they are the ones who will grow up one day — and they are our future — what can we hope for — we are doomed — aren't we, Talukdar?"

"Hm", Talukdar grunted, as if a little uncertain," Certainly, there is a drought gripping our society too, no doubt. But can we give up the hope that it will rain again someday?"

I kept mum. After resting a little more, we again took to the road. By the time we reached the place of Talukdar's uncle, it was almost dusk. The Aganthuri Hill, not too far away, was swathed in the last rays of the setting sun; its peak, taking a reddish hue, was clearly visible. The house had walls of reed, plastered over by a layer of clay, now decaying with age. The earthen floor was bare, but the front yard was kept meticulously clean; the aunt must have been sweeping and applying a fresh coat of clay daily. Seeing us, the uncle and aunt broke into beaming smiles and welcomed us with a gush of warmth. The aunt lit a hurricane lamp, its chimney blackened by soot, and took the two bundles from Talukdar's hands (with a little impatience of expectancy, I thought). Uncle remonstrated, "Why did the sweet little girl take the unnecessary trouble of making all these? Your coming here to look us up is more than enough." but I could feel that Uncle, too, welcomed the gifts of eatables. Both the husband and the wife had frail health; one ailment or the other kept bothering them all the time, and they were leading a life of want, what with the drought and the stoppage of all farming activities. The villagers, at the end of their wits and uncertain when the drought would be over, had decided to hold that traditional remedy for droughts, namely, a ceremonial marriage of frogs — The aunt had meanwhile brought us some black tea in two bronze tumblers, and thrust two lumps of jaggery into our hands to take the tea with (they had no sugar in the house) and offered each of us in a metal plate, some sweetened balls of puffed rice and two pieces of a variety of hard, chewable sweet made from fried flour — she then tried to take out and offer us some rice cakes from one of Talukdar's bundles, but Talukdar objected,

"No, auntie, no. My wife made these only for you two. Please don't offer us any of those,"— Just then, we could hear the weak mooing of a cow coming from someplace inside the house ("It's so bad, we can't even offer any fodder to them anymore ", the uncle muttered). For washing our hands, the aunt offered water on a bucket with a ladle made from half a coconut shell pierced by a thin bamboo stick for a handle. I asked after a time, "Does a boy named Bhrigu Kumar live anywhere close by?" The aunt said, " Oh, yes. There is that bend on the road, and his house is just two houses beyond that bend —." At last, a time came when the uncle said, "You better go now; it's already dark, and the road is terrible. I am mighty glad that you have bothered to visit us despite all the hardship— tell the sweet little girl we are very happy with her gifts — I don't know when I can visit the city again; I can think of that only after the rains come, right now we are just keeping an eye on the sky, waiting for the rains to make an appearance—"

We turned the bend on the road and noted that there was still a little daylight left. Under a banyan tree, four boys were playing carom, putting the carom board over a tin drum. Close by, a boy, looking like one of those upcountry migrants, was frying savouries akin to fritters on a portable clay oven and offering some to the boys now and then. The boys were paying for the fritters and then resuming their play. I didn't feel like asking them about the location of Bhrigu's house. So, we kept going ahead. The whole neighbourhood was quiet. We crossed a couple of houses and then came across a ramshackle thatched house (it too had a front yard kept sparkingly clean); the doors were of bamboo, a couple of them were open, and through the open doorway, I got a glimpse of an earthen lamp feebly flickering in the front room. The kitchen was touching that room, but a little to its rear; the glint from metal plates, bowls, and stuff like that was coming out feebly in the semi-darkness. We both stopped, and Talukdar hollered, "Is there anybody in? Is this the house of Bhrigu Kumar? Bhrigu, are you there?"

An old lady came tottering out from inside the house with unsteady steps. Her eyesight must be failing, and she asked, in the local dialect, squinting, "Who is that?"

"It's us, grandma," Talukdar said. "Is Bhrigu in?"

"No, he has gone out looking for some kerosene— why is he wanted?"

“For nothing in particular— we just came to say hello to him — you must know that he is appearing in the exams— We are from the Nijbarama School—”

“Oh, is it so? You see, there has been no kerosene in the house since yesterday and today, till now, the oven in the kitchen has not been lit— he has gone out searching for kerosene— Come in, sons, come in and take a seat here —” The old lady had gone into the house with unsteady steps. She had come out carrying in her hands two flat pieces of wood raised a few inches by short wooden beams to form handleless seats, known locally as *piras*. We placed the *piras* on the narrow verandah where the house’s plinth was projecting beyond the reed walls, and after getting seated on the *piras*, we lowered our feet to the courtyard. The old lady continued in her local dialect, “I can’t say when my son is coming back— who knows if he can find any kerosene at all— didn’t I say cooking couldn’t be started today? There were some boiled potatoes and a little leftover rice, which were soaked in water overnight. Before going out, he had offered that to me— he had nothing for himself and is still on an empty stomach—”

“Oh, is it so?” Talukdar said, sounding alarmed, “He had something to eat last night, I suppose?”

“Last night? He must have— he had his exams, after all— I had taken a little rice and had gone to bed as soon as it was dusk— woke up only after he came in during the night— I had asked him, have you come back, son? He said yes. I asked him again if he had something to eat. He said, “Yes, I had. Now, go back to sleep.” But I don’t know when he had first come in or had gone to the kitchen— I had dozed off, you see— I don’t remember hearing the rattle and jingle of utensils, nor do I have any idea about the time he had gone to the kitchen to light up the kerosene lamp and take a few bites of something — Oh! See, that blasted lamp also has died out (the flame of the earthen lamp flickering feebly inside the house had given a sudden leap and then fizzled out, immersing the whole house in darkness) — Please, sons, would you please go and get the kitchen lamp —? ”

We both went up to the kitchen and found its door open, but it was pitch dark inside. Talukdar took out the small torch from his pant pocket and directed its beam inside. We could see a few metal bowls, large and small, stacked on one plank of a wooden shelf, maybe for keeping rice grains and stuff like that, a few wok-like pans, plates, bowls, cups, all looking quite dry, as if had not been used or washed for days, a kerosene stove and a clay oven on one side, a few slivers of

firewood on the floor and near the clay oven and atop a short wooden stand, a small kerosene lamp. Talukdar extended his hand to grab the lamp, then shook it, but nothing stirred inside; it was empty. Talukdar took out a matchbox from his pockets and, striking a match, tried to light the lamp, but the tubular neck of the lamp did not hold a wick. Talukdar stared at me dumbfounded, and I just nodded. Returning to the narrow verandah, we saw the old lady had found a stub of candle and lit it up. Talukdar said, "No, Grandma, the lamp doesn't even have a wick." The old woman said, "Don't say? But that doesn't matter, I have found this candle stub here—" "Shall I go and get a couple of candles from a shop?"— Talukdar asked.

"No, don't bother— this stub should last me for a while, and I am going to snuff it out soon and go to bed, anyway. Once the boy is back, he will do something about cooking — but the shop is so far away —"

Talukdar looked at me once more, and I only shrugged my shoulders. Hethen said, "So Grandma, we would make a move. Tell Bhriгу when he is back that we had come —Talukdar and Medhi — would you remember the names?"

"I will surely tell him if I remember."

We didn't like to leave the old woman like that but couldn't think of anything better. So we took leave of her. Once we approached the road, I said, "Remember the boy frying those fritters? How about getting a few of those and leaving them with the old woman?" Talukdar said, "Good idea," but once we reached the bend on the road and the banyan tree, we found, to our dismay, that the spot was quite deserted, and the carom players and the fritter-man had already left the spot (couldn't see any other shop around the place), and the spot under the banyan tree was full of twinkling fireflies. So we resumed our journey, pushing the bicycle along. On the way back, we crossed the uncle-auntie's place again (It was all dark now, and they might have already hit the bed). The darkness was thickening, and the potholes on the road couldn't be made out anymore, but Talukdar checked occasionally by flicking on his torch. No stars were visible in the sky, but the moon must have made an appearance in some part of the sky because the sky had become a little lighter, the outlines of the Aganthuri hill, not too far away, were visible much more distinctly—

Suddenly, Talukdar stopped in his tracks and said, "Well, Medhi, does Bhrigu have Biology as a subject?"

I was quite taken aback, "But, I wouldn't know that."

"I mean, if he had gone out in the morning to appear in the exams, it had to be for Biology practical only, or else, he had gone ploughing — but the point is, he had gone on an empty stomach, had stayed without food for the whole day — unless he had a little tea or something outside his home— his home does not have even a drop of kerosene for him to have any tea, and it is unlikely that he had used the clay oven to make himself some tea because he had not offered any even to his mother this morning; offered her only last night's boiled potatoes and some of last night's rice kept soaked in water overnight. What does it all mean, what do you think?"

"What?"

"He had nothing the previous night as well—next morning, he had offered the soaked rice to his mother, having nothing himself— he had told his mother in the night that he had taken something, but that was a lie —because for him to have something that night, the lamp not only had no kerosene in it, but it did not even have a wick. He had set aside the rice to offer to his mother the next morning. Am I correct?"

I stood rooted to the spot for a while and said, "Looks like it— that seems to be the case." We went ahead. After going some distance, Talukdar stopped again and looked at the sky. The peak of the Aganthuri hill was becoming hazy, and he said, "You know what, Medhi — I have a feeling that there are many more Bhrigus out there in the interior villages — only we are unaware. They all are keeping their eyes fixed on their targets, doing whatever needs to be done, ignoring pangs of hunger or parched throats— they have the tenacity, the mental strength, they have not allowed themselves to become mental wrecks, haven't gone astray —"

"Yes," I said, "Boys like Bhrigu are not part of the young generation we are more familiar with."

"Right, and there lies our hope," Talukdar said and looked up again towards the sky; the hill's peak appeared blunted and diffused—was it getting shrouded by clouds, by any chance? Suddenly, out of nowhere, a strong breeze started

blowing, touching us, caressing our faces, and immersing our bodies in a cool, heavenly bliss—

Talukdar remarked, "The breeze is quite moist, don't you think?"

"Yes, quite. The heat also seems to have come down perceptibly."

"So it may soon be raining; what do you say?"

"Yes, the breeze is cool; it does carry a hint of rain." On the distant horizon, serpentine flashes of lightning lit up the sky. A little later, the sound of thunder came to our ears. I looked up, and the peak of the Aganthuri was no longer visible; a large bank of clouds was enveloping the entire hill.

"Anyway, that seems to be the end of the drought," Talukdar said.

I nodded my head and looked up again at the hill, now almost invisible behind the wisps of cloud; some more clouds were piling up — the climate was changing, Bhrihus of the world were going forward, the climate was changing in our favour, there were clouds atop the peaks of our hills, our fields were going to receive the rains again —

* * * *