

The Photo

It is evening inside the pandal set up for a wedding. The pandal has been skilfully decorated by a tent house – the tiny space gained by joining the front courtyards of two adjacent houses has been expertly laid out to recreate the ambience of a royal palace. The reception area has been artfully decorated with soft carpets on the floor, with flowerpots here and there, artificial walls, an ornate canopy overhead, bunches of blooming flowers arranged on the walls, artificial storm lanterns hung from the low ceiling, and sparkling brilliance of tube lights. Guests are sitting on plastic chairs attractively arranged within the reception area into separate sections, slightly away from each other. A hum of scattered conversation hangs in the air, the exchange of pleasantries is taking place all around, and there are flashes of broad smiles and loud laughter. Young girls and ladies in expensive, fashionable, and crisp-looking *mekhela-chadors* and *Saris* display various hairdos and the sparkle of ornaments covering them from head to toe, creating a familiar and lively atmosphere. Within a separate enclosure further into the pandal, and on a small stage decorated by garlands of flowers and multi-coloured aluminium foils, is the bride, welcoming the guests with fennel seeds and after-mints kept on a tiny ornamental platter she is carrying in her hand. Two companions standing by her side are helping her. At the entrance to the pandal, someone from the bride's family is receiving the guests and taking them straight to the bride to offer her their greetings -- the bride is Jonali, the daughter of Ajoy, the eldest son of one of my maternal uncles.

As I navigate the pandal, I carry a Kodak camera, capturing these precious moments. Our large Bhuyan family, with its extensive branches, fills up half the space within the pandal. The air is often filled with shouts of glee as people come across each other after ages, their joy pouring out from their glowing faces and animated gestures. Ranu auntie of Dhubri, runs into Madhabi of Duliajan and holds her in a bear hug. I am about to pass them when I stop, take aim, and push down the shutter button of my camera; the flash from the camera makes both of them turn towards me, smiles spreading across their faces, and Ranu auntie says, "Oh, Bapu, it's you! Didn't notice you at all---"; tiny Dimpy, unused to wearing *mekhela-chador*, is trying desperately to keep her slippery dress in place while enthusiastically welcoming guests in

the traditional Assamese way by offering them pieces of areca nut and betel leaves from a stemmed platter called *xarai*. I shouted, 'Hey Dimpy, halt. Look this way—now give a smile—Click--- Ah! Lovely! Your photo will come out first class"; "Oh, Mr Borbora, come, come (to Mrs Borbora: 'How are you, ma'am?')—Oh! This must be Rinky—My, my, how she has grown! Hey, Rinky, do you remember me? I am your Bapu uncle. You look so pretty, and people will mistake you for the bride. How about a snap? – Come a little closer, Rinky-- hold on to your mother's hand—and smile, please—Click!Bah! Beautiful!..."

Sounds of rippling laughter reach my ears --- on the corner to the left of the entrance a few chairs have been occupied by Jaya, Jabaa, Junjuni, Birajabaideo, Manima, Baby *bou* and Nabaneeta, each having a bowl of ice cream in their hands and so gleefully engrossed in gossip that they are almost falling over one another with helpless laughter— I stop in front of them, focus my camera, they stare at me without stopping their laughter – I am about to press the flash button when I catch the sight of Neelu through the corner of my eyes as he is coming in through the entrance—I stop and say "Just a minute, I will be right back" and advance towards Neelu--- he is coming in awkwardly, a little shamefacedly, holding a packet of gift in his hands, looking this way and that a little uncertainly, catches sight of *majumami* auntie standing a little further away talking to another lady---*mami* seems to be taken aback on seeing Neelu and taking leave of the lady comes towards him, puts a hand on his shoulder and says, "So Neelu, you have come. It is so lovely--- didn't bring them along? Does not matter. Now come, come, and meet the bride first," and leads Neelu towards the bride. The uncertain look left Neelu's face, and a faint smile played on his lips. Looking towards me, he says, "Hey, Bapu da?" Jonali appears a little non-plussed but keeps the smile firmly fixed on her lips and says, "Oh, Neelu da, so nice that you could make it. I am so glad you could come---", and *Mami* auntie chips in and tells Neelu, "Look, your maternal uncle and your grandpa are sitting over there, go and say hello to them---"

No one expected Neelu to appear like this because, for nearly two and a half years, Neelu was evading our Bhuyan family. Until his matriculation, he was all right in his manners and doing quite well in his studies, too, but he might have got into bad company after that, came home late, and rumours were doing the rounds that he had taken to drinking. He appeared in exams but did not complete them and failed twice in his B.A. Exams (I do not know if he passed later). A maid named Bhebeli *Bai* used to come to their house as a helper. Her daughter Prabha, 14/15 years of age, also accompanied her, and

while the mother was busy doing her chores, the daughter went around the rooms. At that hour of the day only our elder sister and *Bhinti*, her husband and Neelu's father, remained in the house and Neelu also stayed back sometimes – and then God knows what happened, but Neelu announced one day that he was marrying Prabha--- everybody was thunderstruck, and *Bhinti* said, you are not old enough to marry and you cannot bring a servant maid into my house as my daughter in law -- though Prabha was not exactly a servant, she only helped out Bhebeli *Bai* once in a while to save her mother some time by sweeping a couple of rooms or washing a few clothes, that's all – but he said nothing doing, he will marry Prabha all right and *Bhinti* said, you may marry her or kill yourself or do whatever you want, only get out of my house first – and Neelu did just that, took a shed on rent in a shabby locality of the town, and married Prabha there – no one knew where the money came from, maybe his pals chipped in some --- and then Prabha gave birth to a girl child even before their marriage was eight months old. So early? What does it mean ---? Does that mean Neelu had no option but to marry when the certainty of the imminent event stared him in the face? The scandal acquired a new twist; maybe it was the source of envy and juicy gossip for others, but it was a source of immense embarrassment and shame for our proud Bhuyan family. No one openly uttered, 'Ugh! Ugh!' or 'Shame! Shame!' but the memory rankled in everyone's mind like the prick of a stubborn thorn lodged under the skin. Slowly, the memories subsided, but Neelu became utterly isolated from the Bhuyan clan; no one came across the ever-smiling face of everyone's darling Neelu anymore, but when Jonali's marriage was fast approaching, Auntie remembered him, and Uncle also said, "Yes, let bygone be bygone, after all, he is still one of the family, and it is our duty to invite him on an auspicious family occasion", and he sent Ajoy to go look for him...

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I put my hand on Neelu's shoulder and steered him away from the bride. I asked him, making it sound quite casual. "So, Neelu, what are you doing these days?"

"The photography studio opened by Sachin and I was shut down ages ago; you must be aware of that --- I mean, the Police arrested him for stocking

heroin in the studio --- actually, no heroin or anything resembling heroin was ever found there ---, but the Police made out a false case and fleeced us, took a lot of money from us ---the studio had to be shut down. Now I am trying to revive that --- Studio Ajanta --- (Yes, I said to myself, we also heard a rumour that Neelu was also into drugs), but I only said, "OK, is it doing well?"

"No, I have not even started; new equipment costs a lot of money--- trying for a loan from the State Bank."

"Yes, many types of bank loans are available these days. Keep trying; something will come your way---. Now, look at Baby *bou* and others sitting over there; come, say hello to them."

We come to the laughter-soaked corner of Baby *bou* and her companions. Neelu stands in front of them with his simple and easy smile of earlier days, and everyone is startled, and the laughter stops; they start looking into each other's eyes, and in the blink of an eye, a message of understanding gets silently exchanged among them, the substance of which possibly is, 'he has made an appearance on a festive and auspicious occasion, so don't hurt his feelings' – immediately everyone becomes busy in welcoming him. The smiles reappear on their faces, "Oh, Neelu, so you have come ---", "Hey Neelu da, you do not keep track of us any more" "Oh Neelu uncle! You are hardly seen these days—" Biraja Baideo says, "Hey Jabaa, why don't you move to that chair at the back? Come, Neelu, sit here by my side--- And you, Bapu, didn't you say you wanted to take a snap? Now go ahead and take one of all of us."

I focus the camera ---Neelu is sandwiched between Biraja *Baideo* and Nabaneeta, and at Neelu's back, to the left and right of his neck, are Jaba and Baby *bou*---

"Jaya, you sit a little closer---, Neelu, look this way—Yes, keep smiling like this, everybody – Steady - Ready- Click –"

Now, after the wedding, I have got the prints, and I am going through the photographs -- the pictures have come out quite well, the expressions on the faces have been expertly captured, and the tones of light and shade have also come out just right --- I am going through the photographs one by one---

This one here, the group photo with Neelu and others, has come out brilliantly, all the faces are glowing with happy laughter (only flaw is, a part of Junjuni's face got cut off) –

But something is not quite right, and it is bugging me. Sitting within a circle of relatives, Neelu has the easy smile of earlier days on his face —but is that possible? He knows pretty well that he no longer belongs to the Bhuyan family circle, but how come his face does not betray any sign of resentment or regret? He also realises that though close relatives surround him, their relations are no longer as easy as before. He also must feel the sorrow and despair embedded in that realisation, but the photograph does not show any trace of that. A Chinese proverb says, '*A picture is more expressive than a thousand words*', but how is it that there is no hint of his sadness or anguish in this photograph?

We may not realise how minutely movies influence our mannerisms and our expressions. Without consciously noticing it, we follow our favourite actors or actresses and imitate their style of speaking, their gait, their gestures, the stance they adopt while looking at things, their hairstyles, the pattern of their moustaches, the way they smile and express indifference, their dresses, or the way they arch their eyebrows. (An amusing example of this was seen in the film '*It Happened One Night*' when Clark Gable, the archetypal lover of Hollywood and maybe also the world, took off his shirt in one scene, and viewers saw that he was not wearing any vest underneath --- in no time American young men gave up wearing vests, the sale of vests came down drastically and a crisis gripped the American underwear industry). When Humphrey Boggart or Gary Cooper screws up one eye and lights up a cigarette with deliberate slowness, a ripple of excitement passes through the silent theatre. That gesture remains embedded in our subconscious. Girls imitate in minute detail the expressions on Sophia Loren's face as she displays elation or disdain or the subtle nuances of tacit sexuality, saturating even the routine gestures and conversations of Ava Gardner. Restless young spectators with the exuberance of youth watch with bated breath as a young Marlon Brando, looking at the ground with his back to the audience, keeps uttering barely audible, incoherent words in a low, indistinct drawl and then turns around in a flash and whips out one of his fists to knock somebody down to the ground with one massive blow...

Whenever our lives take a new turn, our memory pulls up to our mind a similar scene from some movie we saw, and we start wondering what the characters in that movie did in such a situation and how the events unfolded after that. In this case—in the case of the unbelievable smile on Neelu's face--- what floats into my mind is a movie I saw a long time ago..., Michelangelo Antonioni's incomprehensible but thrilling movie *Blow Up*---A very skilled photographer saw one day in a park, a couple of lovers wrapped in each other's arms --- He immediately took a photo of the scene. I remember that scene vividly, though there were many other scenes in the movie afterwards. I don't remember the other scenes as clearly...As the photographer developed the photograph, he noticed a look of sheer terror on the girl's face, as if she saw something terrifying in the distance with her terror-stricken eyes. Following her gaze, he could see that she was looking at the park's boundary fence, a little distance away; the gaps between the posts of the fence were covered by the dense foliage of trees, creepers and shrubs--- what was hiding there? What did the girl see? The photographer sat thinking about that for a long time. Then he went to his dark room and enlarged the photograph ---he kept watching as a couple of posts of the fence gradually became more distinct and more details of the tree leaves became visible... Still, he did not notice anything terrifying ...so he enlarged it even more --- at last it was clearly visible through the gaps between the posts and the leaves that.... But no, it would be unfair on my part to divulge that because, for those who would see the *Blow Up* for the first time in the days to come, the scene's suspense would be lost.---

I know nothing of photography (except pressing the camera's shutter button), nor do I have a dark room. Still, I, too, start thinking while staring at the photo with the smiling face of Neelu in it ... I close my eyes... and I imagine that I, too, am enlarging the image--- I can make out a few strands of grey within the black of Neelu's hair, the eyebrows and eyelashes are gradually becoming much more precise, the patterns in the clothes and some details of the jewellery of Birajabai and Nabaneeta are also becoming more distinct, but the faces of Jabaa and Baby bou at the back have become hazy at the same time... I enlarge it some more... I crop away the faces of Birajabai and Nabaneeta and concentrate only on Neelu's face. The faces of Jabaa and Baby bou at Neelu's back become out of focus and hazy; only Neelu's face appears enlarged. There is something like a fly on his collar, and half a button is missing... then the film grains start appearing...so, further enlargement won't be possible. Even then, I enlarged it a little more... grains are now covering

most of the picture, but yes, it now appears quite clearly...and there, a tiny teardrop is glistening in the corner of an eye.

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