

The slave

In November-December, when it starts snowing in Gauhati, young boys and girls, eagerly awaiting the arrival of snow, are ecstatic. The streets, houses, flowers, trees, shrubs, and vehicles all turn white under a cover of snow.

An unbroken sheet of white spreads over the entire city, and a transparent white veil seems to envelop the whole world. Occasionally, the water in the swimming pools also gets frozen. Small boys and girls come out of their homes wearing multi-coloured caps equipped with sledges, roller skates, and spiked snow boots. Their noisy, cheerful voices rend the air. They would squeeze lumps of snow to make snowballs that they would then throw at each other and get so seized with fits of laughter that they trip and slip on the snow. Some go for ski racing on the town's rolling slopes, now looking inviting under undulating sheets of fresh snow.

One can see the swimming pool in the front of Anju-Ranju's house wholly frozen. The night-long snowing has made the snow come right up to the pool's rims. Crossing the pool repeatedly on roller skates from one end to the other, Anju and Ranju are having a rollicking good time. The snow has made life very convenient for Runumi, too. The steep slope in front of their house has been almost levelled by snow. She can now safely put her baby sister in a wooden box fitted with wooden wheels and glide down the gentle slope with the clatter of wheels. As for us, going out on a tour of the snow-covered town seems a fascinating prospect. So, we venture outdoors, buttoning our coats right up to the neck. We get a taste of the piercingly chilly morning wind when we come out. A

thousand needles seem to descend on us, pricking our cheeks and uncovered ears. The cotton-soft snowflakes fall on our faces and cheeks before slowly melting. Some kids are making giantsnowmen on the snow-topped field. Herr Barua is coming out to the road and pushing open the snow-covered gate of their house with some effort. He has a blue muffler tied tightly around his neck today. Coming out to the street, he looks around, trying to locate his car. It was parked in its slot outside his house the previous night, but now he can hardly recognise it. The snow piling up throughout the night has transformed it into a veritable igloo for the Eskimos. How on earth will he scrape off that thick coat of snow and get into his car? Meanwhile, we can see Frau Barua waving goodbye to her husband. She then peers into their mailbox to see if there are any letters. But the mailbox, too, is covered by a layer of snow. Frau Barua is warming her hands by rubbing them vigorously on her apron and starting to scrape the snow off the mailbox..."

Reading my German composition aloud up to this point, Frau Muller took off her ancient round-framed glasses and said, "Excellent. Excellent. You have made no grammatical mistakes so far ... Very creditable...Yes, very creditable, indeed!" Then she said a little wonderingly, "But I never knew that you, too, had snowfalls in your place!" With her index finger, Frau Muller gave a spin to the globe standing on the table among her books and papers and located India on it. She then put on her glasses again and started to peer at the globe closely." That's right - the equator has passed right beneath it -These are the Tropics - Assam - Assam - ach, here it is... And Gauhati? -- Where is Gauhati? Gauhati seems..."

"This Globe may not show Gauhati," I hurriedly chipped in to distract her, "But here you can see Shillong - our State capital - perched on top of the Khasi hills. It is quite a cold place - and just below that is Gauhati... it should be

somewhere around this spot here." To avoid Frau Muller's probing questions, I frantically launched into a hurried description of the Shillong hills - A place of the Khasi people. It has hilly winding roads, like the ones you see in the mountainous tracts of Bavaria. It's full of streams,caves, and pine trees, similar to your 'Tane' trees...Then, there are many waterfalls, and their energy is harnessed to produce electricity. The climate around Shillong is cold but moderate, an ideal place for stone-climbing during summer. Shillong is about a hundred kilometres from the plains by road. But the road is one way, which is a tad inconvenient..."

"Oh! Is it so?" Frau Muller, an unruly mop of white hair covering her head, kept bobbing her head up and down as she kept listening to me eagerly (but she appeared a little baffled by something, I thought) and kept marking my composition with a blue pencil in between. The Business-Conducting (or Business Management) Company in Germany where I had landed up to 'learn work' had sent me to this lady in the *Pedagogisch Instituut* (or a learning school) to appear in a test that would evaluate my knowledge of the German language. Till then, I had been designated only as an apprentice learner in the Company. Once I cleared this test, they would employ me as a *Beamter* or a regular employee. Once the training was over, I would receive a Diploma.

Frau Muller said she had read a lot about India and Japan, particularly India, and that she had a very strong desire to go there once, God willing. She also wanted to take her two children, Gretchen and Fritz, to these fairy-tale countries of the Orient on a sightseeing trip (and not for getting a Diploma, it crossed my mind). The lady was quite old, but her age had not mellowed her boundless curiosity. "A-a- Herr ... what was the name? I keep forgetting. Your composition surprised me, I must say. But I must say one thing: though your German

corrections and sentence constructions are on the whole passable, you have made a couple of such basic mistakes that they will make even our school boys howl with laughter. But the composition is..." Her kindly pink face got clouded by a shadow of confusion as if something was bothering her, but she could not quite put a finger on it. "No, I mean, on the whole, okay. Anyway, it was nice knowing you." The lady picked up a few blocks of coal from a bucket standing by her table, threw them into the fireplace, stoked the fire with the poker, and then suddenly remembered that I was from the Tropics. "You must have found it very cold here initially, isn't it...? But, of course, if I go by the description of your place in your essay..." A few lines of confusion appeared again on her face and lingered there for a while before disappearing. "Is the room warm enough now? If you are finding it a bit too warm, you may remove your coat..."

"Thank you, Frau Muller", I said, and getting her permission, I took off my coat and hung it on the back of the chair.

Frau Muller dipped her head again towards the paper in hand and made a few more markings on my composition. While writing some remark on it, she asked me without raising her head, "Tell me, will you, about this 'Conducting Business' course you are attending —I know nothing of these things —and tell me, is this course not yet developed or not yet available in your own country? After all, you had to come so far to attend the course and get a Diploma?" The lady raised her head to give me an embarrassed smile. "You see, I keep hearing that our business processes and tricks-of-trade are quite distinct from all other European countries, so they will surely be even more different from the Asian countries. If it is so, how does your country gain from this Diploma?"

How does one reply to a question like that? I'll somehow acquire a diploma here and go back to my country and flaunt it to my fellow citizens...A German diploma —a promotion is absolutely sure. For the first few years after returning, I may not be able to purchase any land or even a car, but I would at least have the tag of someone who has 'come back from abroad'! These days, everyman jack of them has 'come back from abroad' by exploiting and grabbing opportunities coming their way, using all means, fair or foul. Because life without such a tag is worth nothing. So, why should I let go of the opportunity when I got it? Why should I be left behind? I would have raised a mortgage if I had some land of my own. A scholarship would have come my way if I had been a bright student. Since none of these were possible in my case, I had to resort to an enormous amount of buttering and flattering of all those good-for-nothing guys who decide these things. I had even taken leave without pay from a job in my hometown. Now, at last, I am here. I have to somehow pass the remaining months here till I get my diploma ... But there was no way Frau Muller would understand any of these things. So, I said cryptically, "It helps in getting a job."

"Oh?" she said, not quite comprehending. Then, as if to put an end to all these incomprehensible things, she gathered all the papers, set them aside and said, "Okay, I'll try to send over the report of your language test today itself. Congratulations!"

Wow! That means I got through!

"Thank you, Frau Muller."

The lady said she would be happy to be informed of the decision that the Company '*Rickmann unt Rickmann*' would be taking about me after the test results reached them.t

"I'll surely let you know," I said. Salary would increase by a hundred and fifty marks in one go... With that thought in mind, I extended my hand to pick up the coat and was about to get up from the chair and go.

"Anyway," Frau Muller said, peering at her watch, "There are still twenty minutes to go before my next candidate is due— it's an Iranian boy coming for training on the security of oil pipelines. He is quite raw, and I doubt if he has done the homework I had given him ..." She again peered at her watch. "It's almost time for our Instituut's eleven o'clock coffee break —Er —May I offer you a cup?" ("Thanks, Frau Muller"). "Anyway, now that this annoyance of a language test is over, in another six months, God willing, you should complete your training here and return home. Staying here so far away from your family, you must miss them badly —Oh, well, who are your relations back home?"

... I looked back to the day I was leaving home. It was raining very heavily during that month- almost incessantly, and in that interior part of the town where our house was located, the narrow alley (cars can't go in there, nor Rickshaws) leading from our home to the larger 'main road' was turning almost into a streaming river. So, handing my luggage to the bare-footed 'boy' from our office, my brother and I were getting ready to traverse the streaming 'ditch' after taking off our socks and shoes and rolling up our trousers. Though my two sisters always crossed that alley on their way to and from school, taking their sandals in their hands and bunching up their *mekhela-chadors* above their ankles, that day, I put my foot down and did not allow them to come up to the main road to see me off. The first reason was that as soon as I got into the taxi, both would have started bawling loudly, which could have been a very distressing state of affairs and resulted in things getting enormously delayed. Secondly, with the coming of rains,

there was a combined assault on the floors and walls of our house by tiny frogs, snails, and a legion of diverse insects, worms, and assorted varieties of hairy centipedes. Both sisters were already stung by some of those, and red welts were covering their hands and arms. Both looked hideous and grotesque, each of their earlobes carrying a white mark of edible limestone paste called *Chun*, considered an infallible panacea for all centipede stings. Thirdly, on the banks of the dried-up pool behind our house, some refugees and dubious men of unknown pedigree, totally indifferent to their surroundings and unhindered by it, had erected ramshackle sheds for making wobbly wooden chairs and tables. The whole place was reeking of rotten onions and potatoes piled up in ugly stacks. The entire place was dotted with the tents they had pitched to carry on the shady business of reselling stolen items like plastic money bags, goggles, and flip-flop sandals, known locally as Hawaii *chappals*. Their naked children were often seen squatting in a line and defecating all around the rim of the pool (what the grown-ups did was a profound mystery). In the constant downpour of heavy rain, rainwater and filth overflowed from that area and started spilling into our alley. Our alley's ubiquitous pits collected suspicious stuff that kept falling into them with audible thuds. From within the all-pervasive stench of their assorted odours, a dank, sickly smell came floating out like some ... No, there was no way I could allow my sisters to walk through all that muck: their feet would get infected and develop sores!

I had touched the feet of my father and mother in a traditional show of respect and offered my respects to the elders who had come to see me off. Mother was wiping away her tears with her *chador* and snorting wetly through her nose. The rainwater seeping through the various holes and openings in the kitchen walls must have made it damp to make Ma catch a cold. A gap or a hole

somewhere on the bedroom roof was making rainwater drip onto the bedroom floor. With the coming of the rainy season, Ma's tempers started getting frayed. Rainwater was collecting around the patch of the kitchen floor, which was kept aside for washing utensils, making it impossible for the maid to cross over to that patch and get to her work. Used pots and pans and plates and bowls were, therefore, piling up there, unwashed. Clutching onto the door curtain while weeping, Ma kept making furtive fearful glances at her bare feet on the floor (Ma had a morbid dread for a variety of red centipedes we call *kereluwa*, that look like miniature red trains on a thousand legs, and she always kept saying that the mere sight of one of these made her body go tense with fright; in the rainy season innumerable *kereluwa*-trains kept crawling all over the floor keeping Ma in a constant state of panic and if anything unseen as much as touched her feet, it made Ma leap into the air with a scream of "Oh my God, what was that? "). Father, putting his sock-covered feet inside slippers, had given me some last-minute advice at the time of my departure, telling me of the do's and don'ts and giving me instructions after instructions (Father, incidentally, is a retired teacher), with the *hooka* in his hands and in a voice that had become hoarse from constant coughing. (Father has rheumatism, and in that kind of weather, it became worse and made his temper excitable like an irate school mistress's). Further, the days were gloomy and overcast, and everything was damp. Inside the narrow room—in fact, throughout the house, an army of hungry mosquitoes kept buzzing in and around the ears. Unseen bed bugs kept biting wherever and whenever they liked, and their bites made Father scratch himself all over his body with the fingers of his hands...now, here, now there. Throughout this, Father kept up an intermittent rant, "Who made this stupid *paan*? Doesn't know a thing how a *paan* should be

made! The lime has already fallen off the *paan!*", as he sat there miserably, puffing angrily on his *hooka*.

I can visualise that after I had left the house and after my sisters and other people also had slipped away, leaving Father and Ma alone by themselves, Ma would have brought slices of mango to Father and placed them in front of him with his cup of tea. Only then would Father's harsh tone have mellowed a little. But not for long; because on the exact spot where his lips were to connect with the teacup, a fly would come to descend with uncanny precision, and the large '*bhena*' variety of garbage flies flying in from somewhere would have started swarming and humming and whining over the slices of mango.

That evening, Father would not have gone out anywhere (how could he have crossed that sea of flood water anyway?). Lighting the kerosene lantern and frowning his brows, he would have read the newspaper *Asom Bani* and read news items like: rains had destroyed standing crops in such and such place; there was flood, flood and flood everywhere; there was acute scarcity of food items in this place, epidemic in that, cholera in another. Therefore, the price of rice would be going up further. Rains eroded roads, bridges were collapsing, town roads were becoming inaccessible; rainwater flooded bus depots and train stations, and people were finding it impossible to get into them; rickshaw pullers had fled away, trains stopped, postal services paralysed, and public transport totally off the roads. Many people were losing their homes, and storms blew away the roofs of their houses...etc., etc....These were the recurrent stories year after year ...And he would also read that under the auspices of '*Madhu Gunjan Cultural Club*, '*Barsha mangal*' festival to welcome the rainy season would be inaugurated in the local District Library by the Akademi award-winning writer....

My brother Niren is in college, is a top-ranking member of the 'Madhu-Gunjan' Club, and is a bit of a Romantic. I could imagine what he would have done after seeing me off at the airport. I could visualise that his pyjamas were ruined by some speeding car splashing mud. He would have lifted the ruined trousers with both hands, cursed the car driver and Municipality, and then entered our alley. Right at the entrance to our alley is the newly built house of Manik Babu. Manik Babu is the ward Councillor. On reaching that spot, he would have cast an angry glance at Manik Babu's house out of sheer force of habit. He would have then cursed Manik Babu to rot in some infernal abattoir (because, for some mysterious reason, only that portion of our alley that extends from the 'main road' up to the ward councillor's house, is of concrete and worthy of a walk on all seasons).

His social responsibilities were thus taken care of, and he would have then entered our house somehow and removed his pyjama trousers and *jahar kurta*. Washing his feet, he would then have put on the sandals of one of his sisters and asked her for a cup of tea. After that, he would have gone to his room. I would not know if prodded by the requirements of the '*Barshamangal*' function organised by his Club, he would have then pulled out from his bookshelf that fat collection of poems '*Sanchayita*' (it would have depended on his mood) to refresh his memory. After all, the inspiration for the *Barshamangal* function is the poet who wrote *Sanchayita*. The poet says that our country's rainy season, *Barsha*, which swathes the country in the deep green of an emerald, is like a maiden in the first flush of youth. She is lovely and has unparalleled and incomparable beauty. On days like this, when on the outside there is only 'ceaseless drizzles of rain, secretive lonely domain' as the poet describes, it is recommended that the young boys and girls should sit, two of them facing each other, their eyes brimming at each other's

sorrow, and should keep staring into each other's eyes like idiots (maybe because it's impossible to go out, anyway).

(And this poet has been extolled by foreigners; therefore, whatever he says must be the absolute truth. So, we may as well put our own eyes and noses into our pockets now and agree with him: 'Our country is so beautiful, so spotlessly clean, such a restful, peacefully tranquil realm of fantasy where, with the advent of *Barsha*, the rainy season, every city, every village, each thoroughfare, every jungle become even more sparkingly clean, even more lovely, dazzlingly beautiful, it is beyond words, beyond comparison!).

Of course, the next problem would be that it may end up like my essay submitted to Frau Muller!

I could almost visualise Niren Dutta coming out of his house to go to the function at the District Library... Ah! How would he reach the bigger main road that evening and still maintain the tidiness of his intellectual's attire?

...After taking a sip of coffee, I was feeling quite contented. At last, my dreams were coming true! The next month, I thought, I had to somehow send home some three or four hundred marks or whatever I could manage. They should be able to repair the roof and walls in Father's bedroom and mend the holes in Ma's kitchen with that money, at least to the extent possible.

Once I am back home, I would have to enlist Manik *Babu's* good offices to try and get a portion of the road in front of our house metalled and have the drains widened or even to get them covered, if possible (that would be worth a try— it's terrible otherwise for my sisters and us). The rest of the area did not come within the ambit of my efforts. Was everything to be done by only one man? Had I come

to Germany at such a huge cost only to go back and think for everybody in the world? Am I a dumbass?

It was almost time for the Iranian boy to come. Frau Muller got up from her chair and shook me by the hand and couldn't resist saying that, 'that composition, that *'Aufsatz'*, '*A description of your town*' that I had written in German for the test, was beyond her expectations, it was totally free from mistakes and was a narrative by a mature hand. If she had known of my abilities earlier, she would have given me a longer (and tougher) work, for instance, if we stick to the same theme, '*A description of your town when the snow starts melting.*'

I was getting an attack of nerves but managed to somehow put up a smile.

"And had you done that, the description of your town, as I have gathered after reading your *'Aufsatz'*, would have been more or less similar to what we find here... It could have sounded something like this-- here Frau Muller, running her fingers through her mop of white hair, said slowly and meditatively, thinking, visualising, as she spoke,-- " Snow is slowly melting away from the red roof-tops of the houses and with the snow disappearing, the outlines of various objects are gradually becoming visible, the trees and shrubs are also slowly coming out from under the cover of snow, as are the tops of roads and lanes, exposing their true colours. The animated movements of vehicles and life have resumed ... initially, in some places, the dust, mud, and water from the melting snow have sullied the roads, and water has collected in the hollows on the roads to form puddles. However, the snow-removing trucks would soon come, and within a few hours, everything will be spick and span again. (Cleaning public places is a responsibility of the City Fathers; common citizens need not bother about that anymore). Of course, those unwieldy trucks cannot enter certain roads where we have learned

to care for things ourselves, thank God. Take my house, for instance. It's on a narrow lane named Clinker Feutzgasse. (Have you ever been that way? It's by the side of the Jacobean Church.) These trucks cannot go in there. My children remove the snow in front of our house using shovels. Two families reside on both sides of my house and do not have any able-bodied men. Only some old men and women stay there, so I have told my children, Gretchen and Fritz, "You should clean the snow from the front of these two houses as well" ... Anyway, things must be no different in your place, too, so...."

Keeping my smile fixed on my face with a conscious effort, I nodded a little and kept listening to the old lady. And I kept thinking, --if I have children someday, I'll give my 'Gretchen' in marriage to some boy who has returned from here and will send my 'Fritz' to come here and get a diploma. And this old Frau Muller here, why is she talking about asking her children to go and clean somebody else's house? What a stupid idea! She is not that smart after all, is she? When the snowing subsides —or rather, when the rains subside — how would the roads-lanes-drains-ditches of my town expose their true colours? In what shape and colour our pock-marked alley would show itself, and what kind of true colours would be visible on the sheds in the refugee colony behind our house (the stench there is unalterable — no amount of rain or snow will ever change that) ... I cannot write an essay, or an '*Aufsatz*', on that to hand over to the lady. Because I do not have that kind of command over the German language. The narrative I had submitted to her - it must be quite easy to guess - was an essay, 'Snowing in our town,' reproduced from an old German-English book named 'German Made Easy'--- I had only changed the names, putting Gauhati in place of 'our town'.

Translator's note: Today's Guwahati was once called Gauhati. Further, Shillong, the present-day capital of Meghalaya, was the capital of undivided Assam when this story was written (1969) and first published in the magazine Awahan in 1969. The story was later included in a collection of stories called 'Golam', which was published in 1974, and this collection of stories won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974.