

## Of springtime

We have been totally disappointed. The closed narrow room has been filled with numerous tools and instruments, with no arrangements for fan, the light from the two bulbs insufficient. The situation near the infra-red ray instrument has been on the boil, the palms of our hands, wet with perspiration, have been emitting sticky sounds, the mixed smells of the acrid benzene and ozone gases in the closed confines of the room, our bodies exhausted and our minds weary.

The first phase of the experiment has been relegated to failure.

With a downcast head, Dr. Ghosh has been disconnecting the junctions in the heat measuring pyrometer, his brow creased with thoughts. We have realized that he has been trying to find out as to where lay the defect in our method, as to why we have failed to obtain the desired point in our graph. He is not the sort of person to give up despair. In spite of our unwillingness, we too have been thinking, but in reality we do not have the desire to ponder about anything now. We have been looking at Dr. Ghosh's face, and waiting. Beads of perspiration on his nose and brow, and in his mind he has been rapidly analyzing the process from the main theory, it has not even occurred to him to take out the handkerchief from his pocket, it may be that before leaving the room, the plans for the necessary modifications to our experimental methods —.

We have been trying to locate a point, a special kind of a point, on the graph at high temperature- which is called the point of inflexion in mathematics- on locating of that rests the existence of the theory. It has been almost for a month and a half now. And now, after the eager and effortful experimentation by the four of us, Sudhangshu has now wrapped up the papers with the graphs to close the file. I have mopped my face with the handkerchief; it has occurred to me that my throat has gone dry. Dr. Ghosh gave out the signal to open the window. His brow still lined with anxiety, but his round and full face has still showed the same ability and initiative as before, with only a thin layer of fatigue over it. Loosening the knot he has pulled down the tie, opened the button at his throat, and has started to speak again: "It seems it has put us fix. Be that as it may, let us assume-----"

Having borrowed a few rupees from Sudhangshu to clear the mess dues, I have boarded the tram. On remission of this anxiety, there has been the opportunity to think about our graph. But the tram has been so crowded and hot that I have given up that effort out of annoyance. When I have got down at the stop near the Haradhan Basak's alley it was already evening, and I have noticed that by dangling the cloth-bag under the armpit Miss *Bihbala*<sup>i</sup> has boarded the tram. Today, her face has been so griefstricken and unmindful that she has not even noticed me. It has made me think, why should she board the tram suddenly when she usually commutes on foot on a sunny as well as on rainy day? Could it be something very urgent?

I have decided that this was not my problem, and entered Haradhan Basak's alley. The lane has only one lamp at the other end; the rest was pitch dark interspersed with lights from only a couple of windows. Indeterminate mixed smell of the whole lot of wastes in the open garbage bins. I have pondered if she again goes to work in some night- school in the evenings after her return from the day school, and failed to understand the reason for which she has boarded the tram today. Several possibilities have passed through my mind immediately: her salary has increased, she has an invitation somewhere (could she too

have an invitation somewhere!); an urgent necessity for a doctor ..... may be her mother's condition has turned grave again today, in that case only she has to go to fetch the doctor, because her siblings are young, and there is of course no other adult. The last possibility has pleased my mind, because the old lady, though sick, has by no means been lesser than a healthy one in her shouts, the fight with her daughter was a daily affair, her dissatisfactions and her complaints being many. If the time has come for the old lady, let her go, may her soul rest in peace, and let peace arrive at Haradhan Basak lane. But if it were one among the swarm of little locusts ..... I have not yet been able to ascertain their numbers, three or four or five .....(In fact, there are so many households on both sides as well as above and below their home, and so many children run in and out all around from each of those families that it is difficult to know which one belongs to which household). I thought that the number should still be small, it would not be possible to ascertain with the help of numerical sciences by taking a "random sample". And even if it were possible, was it necessary? Such a huge city, so many people, who could keep tabs on the others, was there any time to do that, how was one affected by the affairs of the others!

I have started climbing the dark staircase. Same one has been sounding the conch. An infant has been crying. Heated oil has been tampered with the five spices in the kitchen of one of the households (and drowning its sound a girl has been reading aloud the inflexions of the word 'man' in Sanskrit: Narah Narau Narah, Narah Narau Narah, Narah Narau Narah -----). On reaching the last flight of stairs, I have tripped. Lighting up a matchstick, I have found trunk- hold all and a pitcher heaped near the steps, some one must have been preparing to leave for somewhere. I have felt that the tip of my foot have swelled up. Such little 'quotidian problems' makes me wonder at times why I should not leave this mess to take up residence at the institute. Sudhangshu and Animeah live there, sleep, they are infinitely eager. They have been inviting me too, but I prefer to stay alone by all means. I have been staying here since my post -graduation days, it has become a habit, and I have no intention of leaving. There may be other reasons too, but I have not broached those even with myself, so I have looked out from the veranda to the veranda on the others side. It has not been understood as to what has been happening in the life of Miss *Bihbala*, because one sash of the window has been closed, and the remaining part has been obscured by a Sari hung there for drying. Even if both the sashes were open, nothing in the usual course would have been clearly visible from such a distance, especially when, at most of the times during the day- hours, the clothes hung on the string inside keep everything under the wraps. A corner inside the room is partly visible to the eyes, it appears that something like a sitar, placed on a box, has been inclined against the wall, though it is difficult to be sure from such a distance, a fact that I have noticed after a remark from Kanai Babu one day. Kanai Babu had said, "Another one of my type probably lives in this house, but that one is an absolutely silent practitioner of music. I have been living here for such a long time till now, but I have not ever heard that thing being played ..... but I have a hope, a hope that one day when I get up in the morning I shall listen to the crescendo of Bhairavi<sup>ii</sup> in the alley of Haradhan Basak, the artiste making an appearance ..... and that artiste ----- you have guessed it right ..... Anamika<sup>iii</sup> herself ....., the day will surely come." The name Anamika has been assigned by Kanai Babu, because we do not have her name yet.

Sensing my entry, Kanai Babu has come out with the slapping sound of his flip-flops. I have been annoyed. It has been my wish to be alone now. I have opened the lock without looking towards him. He has told me that everyone has been playing bridge together in his room, so he has come to me. It has sounded to me as if it were a justification, absolutely in the tone of a prayer, for his coming to disturb me. I have raised my head to look at him. The pocket of his long shirt has been stained by the ink from the pen, he has been crackling the knuckles of his left hand with his right hand in an uncertain way, and his thin face with

sunken cheeks has sunk further and looked elongated. I have been forced to admit that Kanai Babu could play the flute well, but it would be difficult to call him good-looking. He has informed that he has sent the boy to arrange for two cups of tea and that would arrive soon. (This has been one of the efforts of Kanai Babu to keep me in good humour. Laughter has welled up in me.) I have been relieved to notice that he has brought out bidi<sup>iv</sup> and a matchbox, and not the flute, from the pocket of his long shirt. At this moment, I have no desire to listen to the flute. There has been no desire to converse with anyone either. But I have gathered that Kanai Babu too has no desire to talk to anyone now, which is why he has come out of his room. If he could be alone he would have played the flute now, or he would have played here at my request. But I have not felt the urge today to encourage him in that respect, I have felt that I have been tired, I have no eagerness to listen to the story of his 'mood' for the day, still I have braced myself by lighting up a cigarette. It has occurred to me that I have in fact been happy that he has come, because, the moment I would be alone in my room, the tiring debate with my own self would ensue like any other day, bitterly, yet without result. I have started my wait, pushing the cigarette packet towards me the ignorant flute-player, with unattractive looks, has started to light up the bidi.

After Kanai Babu has left, my other self has quickly launched an attack. Probably he has nurtured an idea that he has a scientific outlook. He has said, 'How does it behave a scientist?'

"Which?" I asked, "And who is supposed to be the scientist? Me?"

"Sending off Kanai Babu in this way. He came to you with expectation; he thought you would take the hint of his desire to play the flute. At least you should have listened to him with sympathy. You have heard, but the words have not touched a chord in your mind, you have only put up the pretense of sympathy. This is hypocrisy."

"This is called good manners".

"That is not the question. The question is whether you have the ability of acceptance of the dispassionate mind of a scientist. Who is a scientist? Right question. Then you too have accepted that working in a laboratory does not make one a scientist Good. But it is probable that you aspire to be a scientist? Then, like any other day Kanai Babu's words should have acted upon your mind today as well. But the 'fiasco' at the laboratory today has on all your senses....."

"That is but an exaggeration", I have protested mildly.

"Not at all an exaggeration. Look at Dr. Ghosh. Among all, he should have been hurt the most, there was reason for his being affected the most. But what has he been doing? With a beaming face he has been trying to offer you all a new theory and a new process again from the start, and he has only said that there would be negative results from time to time. He has said, 'it is all in the day's work'"

"I understand, I do understand", I have spoken up impatiently, " After this you shall once again harp on the story of Madam Curie, the 'unimpassioned' as described by the Gita, who had remained unaffected by month after month of fruitless experimentation, whose scientific outlook could not be obfuscated by the mist of melancholy and happiness, till such time as only a few milligrams of Radium could not be extracted from tons of "Pitchblende"....."

"Or Thomas Alva Edison," without being deterred, almost in a tone of sarcasm, he has added, "Who did not have time to celebrate success or to shed tears of failure. I know what you are going to say. You will say, 'never mind Edison, the sole aim of Edison was to invent new machines every day, Edison did not even know differential calculus.' You are of this era, it would be better not to argue on this outlook of yours. There is no end to a debate. But you all have one thing, which Edison or Madam Curie did not possess, which is, the desire for fame, ambition for praise, vanity."

"Vanity!"

I have been taken by surprise, and have uttered slowly, "You do know, we did well in our examinations, we were offered good jobs, and we had the opportunity to make a name for ourselves. You do know, despite that we have joined and stuck with this small group of Dr. Ghosh on thermodynamics, there's no money it, no prospects, no possibility of anything sensational ever happening. You do see, I have not been able to leave this mess yet. You call this vanity?"

Probably he has not noticed that I have evaded his complaint, he has laughed inaudibly in mockery to say, "You, as well as I, know why you have been languishing in Hardhan Basak's lane."

"You may know, I do not," I have spoken angrily; "At least, I am not sure as you are."

"You bore me", he has said in a tone of resignation, "The modulus of your faculties has been going down the drain. It is perhaps the lack of supply. So, you better go and eat something".

I have looked at the watch to realize that it has been well past the time for having food. So, I have made my way out. While climbing down the stairs, I have noticed that the baggage have vanished, but some one had spilled the water of the pitcher onto the floor, the water that has fallen on the dusty floor has made it slushy, my slippers and feet have turned dirty. I have been extremely peeved. When I have again come up, by then the arrangements for preparing of the meal had probably started in Anamika's household, for the smoke from burning of the coal was emerging through the louver haltingly. Who has been cooking the meal? As the window has been shut, I could not be sure whether she had returned. Standing by the railing I have lit a cigarette, and continued to observe the window as if with unconcern. There veranda was; the things could be made out only with the lights from a couple of sporadic windows. Suddenly a window has opened with a bang and a small hand pushed out a tumbler to pour a little bit of water. It could be one of the smaller ones (only the tops of their heads were visible through the window). Smell from a bidi has reached me. Kanai Babu has come up after the meal. Standing beside me, he has started puffing the bidi silently and following my gaze he has looked at the window. He has told me that the "Tall Gentleman" might have had come today, the sounds resembling arguments – rebukes – shouts of various kinds had come out of the window in the afternoon, the mood of the "Tall Gentleman" probably had soured this time as soon as he arrived, "The old lady" also shouted (of course a little). After that, the 'Gentleman" had gone out in the evening with bag and baggage through the veranda. From this information, quite a bit of the happenings could be understood, and yet nothing could be made out. The "Tall Gentleman" is Anamika's elder brother (our guess – from the likeness), he is a tall man with gentleman's outfit (and disposition). He probably lives in the suburbs, appears at times and vanishes that way. I have been compelled to believe that Anamika's grief-stricken face at

these times looked extraordinarily tired, at least from Kanai Babu's point of view. I have been further forced to think that like many theories of the present world, this too was only another theory.

With a sad face, Kanai Babu has also informed that the game of bridge in his room shows no sign of let up before one or two at night, they have given up on food and sent the boy to fetch tea and singaras<sup>v</sup>. Throwing away the bidi, expressing a sign of rebellion in his face, he has entered the room. I have heard the sound of a woman ascending the stairs, tired and measured; and from the last turn of the steps the known cloth – bag has emerged first, I have quickly noticed as if a folded "Desh"<sup>vi</sup> has been pierced into the bag; I have hesitated for a moment, and then gone into my room hurriedly.

With much ado, I have rummaged through my pocket for the pack of cigarettes and wondered with great speed as to how to thwart the possibility of any remark from him.

"A propos Kanai Babu," I have spoken and lit up a cigarette, as if I have remembered the issue suddenly, "You know your insinuation is not correct, my mood was spoilt, those things in the laboratory, the oppressively hot day, the dust on the road, the inhumanly crowded tram -----"

"And the damp stink of Haradhan Basak's alley," he has said with indifference, "petty irritants of the quotidian life \_\_\_\_"

"And while Kanai Babu was speaking, a tick from somewhere had been biting me..."

"A man is as big as his irritations"

"And the tea cup was surrounded by a swarm of flies. Your sentence was surely penned by such a man, who did not know that such a country as this existed, where you cannot even drink a cup of tea in peace."

"This is the tropical zone. This is a hot country."

"America too is a hot country"

A silence has descended between us.

Staring at the louver, I have continued smoking. Like any other day, the smoke has created a grid – like pattern, then merged, then reappeared. I have been able to envision that under the louver, on the floor bed, the children have been sleeping crisscross and in a heap, the heaving of their chests and the sounds of their exhalations regular, like another pattern. That sound of the old lady's cough from the small room on the side, which too is a part of the pattern. The weekly magazine lay unopened in front of me, I have turned my gaze from the old sitar, it has appeared to me as if a vast emptiness has existed all around. And I have seen that some plates – tumblers – bowls have been lying in a heap waiting to be washed, and I have remembered that I am supposed to get up tomorrow positively in the morning. I have tried to sleep ..... I have come awake with a start at a muffled noise, the pattern has disappeared. I have looked out through the window, and I could understand that the old lady has been shouting at times, in the silence of the night – by putting up an effort with rapt attention, I have noticed that ----- a few words have been audible at such distance: " – have come after so many days" -----" I have not died" --- "aged girl ----- "

I have decided that the old hags in the world have become too numerous, and I have tried to sleep again.

"A letter for home remains to be written: They will be worried" he said sternly.

"I have been planning to write something else," I have mumbled in half – sleep, "My magnum opus..... for the benefit of mankind, of course you understand ..... A Comprehensive Treatise on the Techniques of old – Hag Elimination..."

He has laughed inaudibly. I do not know, for how many hours I had been asleep, I have again woken up. I could understand that I have not slept well. I have not been able to observe anything in the darkness. I have lunged for the packet of cigarette, and pressing my head with my hand, I have sat up on the bed. It was obvious that I had been having a dream about something, but amazingly I have not been able to recollect it any way! I have uttered, "A propos vanity. I have remembered the issue all of a sudden"

"What?"

"I had evaded the issue at that time: Feeling bad about it."

"Alright, alright. None can get away from this accusation in the depth of subconscious mind. Go to sleep"

"Then, it is not a matter of shame, is not it? At least if it does not cross a limit"

"Indeed. Even Galileo and Max Planck would not have minded reading the brief biographical notes at the beginning of the articles about them, Dr. Ghosh surely would not!"

"And, you know, even if we become successful, we very well understand that the world will not be revolutionized because of that. The recognition for so many of our inventions, so much patience, such efforts, may be a mere foot note in someone's article in the "Physical Review": Ghosh and his co –workers, however, succeeded in finding the point of inflexion at a temperature as high as ..."

"Your head is hurting", he said in a simple tone, "Take an aspirin. With a little water. Go to sleep"

I have heeded the advice.

Waking up from sleep in the morning, I have realized that I had no more headaches, sun-light has already entered through the louver, and people have started commuting in the veranda. The heat was soaring, but has not yet become harsh. I have set out for work. By noon, the head has started hurting again all of a sudden, I have felt very weak. Telling Dr. Ghosh that I would come back once more, I have returned home. I have stopped at the bottom of the steps, as I was about to begin my climb. Anamika was going up the stairs. There was a folded umbrella in her hand; the cloth- bag too was under the armpit. With anxiety I have waited for her to complete the climb hoping that she would not look down. At the corner of the veranda above, the boy of our mess has been combing his hair looking at the mirror; she has looked at him by turning her head while passing, then disappeared from view. After a while, I have climbed up. It has occurred to me that it would have been good to have met Kanai Babu, but his door has been locked. On entering the room, I have flung myself – straight into the bed without even removing the shoes. There has been an urge to light up a cigarette, but I have felt too tired even to put my hand into the pocket, I have only tried to think closing my eyes.

"It seems that you are going to have a fever," he has said, "It would be better to try not to think anything now."

"The face has turned terribly dark," I have replied, "The face has gradually become dry, turned dark, from roaming around in the sun. Even two years earlier, her face held such charm! What is the necessity of so much running around?"

"This is a hot country" he has reiterated mechanically, then enquired, "What had Kanai Babu been saying exactly that day?"

"Do not remember exactly...stupid remark ... there is not much time left before she develops phthisis .....have to go from here ..... "Tall Gentleman" shall take away the old hag and the children from here. The doctor keeps on visiting.....she shall no more be retained as an employee at the school .....malnutrition."

"Stupid remark?"

"Theory," I have said weakly, "Theory. Kanai Babu's hearsay. His conjecture. Neither he nor I know them. Unwise to theorize on insufficient data ...."

"But there are lots of symptoms ....."

The head has started hurting more, and we have put an interval. This has been a mutual understanding. After a while, I have been woken from slight sleep by a rustling sound, sat up on the bed rubbing my eyes, and seen that a mouse has been dragging a newspaper over the floor towards the side covered by a bed. I have said, "A props hot country, what is the use of repeating that? The laziness and repulsion to work, such tiredness and poverty of the mind and the life, disease and squalor --- will it do to keep on saying day after day that 'it is the tropical zone?"

"Are you trying a hand at literature?"

There was a semblance of a laugh. I have kept mum.

"What can you do?" He asked, 'What do you want?"

"Yes, I am trying some literature," I replied without a care," I want that the spring should come to the earth"

"I understand. 'To my earth has come, the spring .....' What was the tune like? Whatever be it, spring would also come. The autumn after the summer, the winter after the autumn, and the winter followed by .....If winter comes....."

"Eternal Spring," I have said.

He could not understand what I have said. "Look," I have explained and clutched the matchbox in excitement, "See, the reason that there is change of season on the earth is that the earth too goes around the sun in an elliptical orbit. Is it inconceivable that somehow we have changed the orbit of the earth in such a manner that the possibility of change of season has been done away with and on every place on the earth only the spring prevails."

"You will change the orbit?" he has enquired with delusion in his voice.

"It is not theoretically impossible to change the course of a planet." I have spoken softly, and becoming a little calmer, started to light – up a cigarette, "The point is, what change. Say we want to go to a circular orbit. Will it be difficult? If the axes of the ellipse are made equal we get a circle. We have to achieve only  $a = b$ "

"Sure," He has agreed in spite of unwillingness, "But changing the orbit of the earth....."

"Weighing the earth also appears to be ridiculous," I have stated, "But Cavendish rested only after weighing the earth."

"To know about a thing, and to do something to the thing, these two are altogether different matters."

"Absolutely not (though I do not find any context to your remark here). What has quantum theory proved? It has proved that the relation between the experiment and the experimenter is mutual, it is no longer possible to consider the observer and the observed as two completely independent things or entities, the influence of one on the other and their interactions are inviolable. Perhaps you remember, at Copenhagen Congress ---"

"You have forgotten," cutting me short, he has said, "That spring-eternal spring-may come, the spring may come to the planet, to the world at large, where is the certainty, that it will surely come to you and me?"

"You are trying to delude me," I have spoken angrily.

"Of course not. You too know that, apart from your science, there is room for development and application in many other kinds of sciences ----- you have promised to go the laboratory in the afternoon, try to catch a nap. Your head is hurting again. Take an aspirin. With a little water. Go to sleep." I have felt unable to resist the advice. I have tried to listen to the tunes closing my eyes. The pattern has gradually emerged again. But I have not looked away from the sitar and felt that, by vindicating Kanai Babu, the artiste has been trying to come alive, and I have picked up the "Desh", the southerlies had turned over its pages. I have read, numerous crimson smiles on the Ashoka<sup>vii</sup> and the Palash<sup>viii</sup>, numerous crimson clouds in the sky of the dawn, the touch of crimson rapture on the new leaves, my sky has been flooded with lights, I have filled my sky with songs, waves of life in the new leaves ..... then it is once more our musical soiree, the jingle of bangles of delight sans reason, the rhythms of dance to the beats of the tabla, the tune of the cuckoo in the strings of the sarengi ..... I have fallen asleep thinking, where had I read these. It has been dark by then, and my tiredness was gone. Washing my face I have quickly got ready for the laboratory. There were chunks of light on some of the windows; Anamika's window has been shut. Life has been going on in regular flow, I have again heard an infant cry somewhere, someone has been sounding the conch, the sound of the oil being tampered with the five spices somewhere. But the girl of Sanskrit has made some headway (Narat Narabhyam Narebhyah, Narat Narabhyam Narebhyah, Narat Narabhyam Narebhyah). Kanai Babu has been playing the flute within closed doors; it has occurred to me that the sad tune of the Raga has lost itself with slithering movements in the dark steps and the twisted verandas. There has been a slight wind below, the garbage in the dustbins of Haradhan Basak's lane and pieces of papers and rags have flown away. I know not why ---- - may be confluence of thoughts – it has occurred to me as if Kanai Babu has been playing the "Desh", but I have understood it to be a taan<sup>ix</sup> of the 'Sindhū'.

We have increased the momentum of our works in the laboratory, I have ignored my physical indisposition to the extent possible, there have been sleep deprivations at night, there have been irregularities in eating for all four of us --- we have forgotten to attend to other matters, we have not had the time --- sometimes I had only seen through the window the angry, dissatisfied, wrinkled face of the old hag passing from this side to the other side and from the other side to this side. One day I have seen, a tall man wearing a suit with a leather canvassing -bag in hand, climbing up the stairs with long strides, and by observing found him to be the "Tall Gentleman". Then one day I have seen that the sitar has not been at its usual place, may be it has been transferred (Has it been sold?) Then one day we have worked through the night, and when we have started washing our hands, it was already dawn. Dr. Ghosh said, "At least one problem has been solved!" Our experiment has been successful. We have forgotten tiredness in the charm of glory, the aura of success in our sleepy eyes, unprecedented and infinite self -approbation in our hearts.

Kanai Babu has met me in front of the house. Overjoyed, I have thought that outside of the laboratory I will then have announced to him the news of success of the first phase of our experiment Kanai Babu has informed that the house of Anamika's family was vacated today, the Tall Gentleman had taken away the old lady and the children this morning. Anamika was carried away by a hospital van. I have put up an effort at laughter, and said, "Whatever be it, a little peace has arrived." My news has not been conveyed after all to Kanai Babu; suddenly I have felt that my eyes have started closing with sleep, I have found it difficult to continue talking while on my legs.

I have observed, soft sunshine streaming into my room. Propping up my head on the wall, I have sat up on the bed, and with a voice laced with sleep, I have said, "A propos dispassionate scientist. Experiment has been successful. I have advanced a step. Are you not happy?"

"Sure. Dispassionate joy." He has said," A burden has gone off from the shoulder"

"This is an autumn morning. In such times, the kings of the yore had set out for conquests ..... This is the description of autumn. Now is not autumn. The spring too has not arrived, but I have been thinking about the spring really"

"True, today there is great joy in my mind. Spring has arrived in my mind. What else has been in the description?"

"Bright morning. After the shower at night, the air is awash and transparent. The colour of the gold in the rays of the sun, so bright, it feels as if light were emanating from the grotesque walls of our city ..... and all around us the softness of the spring is streaming down....."

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<sup>i</sup> *Grief-stricken*

<sup>ii</sup> A raga

<sup>iii</sup> Meaning a woman without a name

<sup>iv</sup> A cheap cigarette of Indian sub-continent

<sup>v</sup> A salty snack of Indian sub-continent

<sup>vi</sup> A Bengali periodical

<sup>vii</sup> A flowering plant of the Indian Sub-continent with crimson flowers

<sup>viii</sup> Another flowering plant of the Indian Sub-continent with crimson flowers

<sup>ix</sup> A kind of presentation while performing a Raga