

On a night train

When Junu Goswami boarded the train that night, he had copies of the last two days' newspapers stuffed into his briefcase, for company. He had a long journey ahead, - a long night on the train. There were so many reminiscences, - significant and not so significant, - that should have come to his uncluttered and compliant mind at this moment. He should have remembered the subdued excitement that used to fill his mind in the earlier days, at the very thought of a journey on a night train. But today, there was no excitement, no anticipation. Instead, he was impatient, and looked frequently at his wristwatch, waiting for the train to start. There are some people who are liable to think thus, - 'Yes, there is a terrible famine raging in China; but my teeth are starting to ache badly. And I am more concerned about my pain than about the famine in China.' Indeed, it is true that there are people who think in this way. But it would not apply to this middle aged, and unwilling, train traveller, at this stage of his life. He waited quietly near his allotted berth, patiently tolerating the coolies and travellers while they ran excitedly about, jamming the narrow corridor between the berths with their trunks and suitcases and various items of baggage. He waited there dispassionately for the tumult and chaos to cease, so that they could all take their seats and the train was ready to start. He had, today, no interest in his co-passengers, no curiosity about them whatsoever. He had been compelled to take this night train because he could not get the necessary plane ticket. He did not know how he would tolerate so many hours, alone with himself. So he waited impatiently for the time when all the fuss and commotion would end and he could absorb himself in his newspapers.

He had not been able to take time off from his work during the last two days, because auditing was going on in their Marketing Society, and he had been too busy to do more than just skim hurriedly through the headlines. His favourite columnist who wrote under the pen name "Politikus", had written a long and weighty article on America's 'black' problem. M. Krishnan had written two pieces comparing the food habits of North India and South India. He had noticed with interest an important editorial on the effects of inflation on our creative arts, and another on the question whether or not kissing should be allowed in Indian cinemas! He had more or less taken in the headlines at a glance. But he had not had the time to read some of the details in the inner pages that he thought would be intriguing. He wanted, for example, to read in detail, writings and news items about such subjects as to whether it was the men drivers or women drivers who caused more car accidents; about a renowned biochemist who had been honoured with the Padmabhusan award, who had said that alcohol was not actually harmful. Another news item reported that experiments were being carried out in America trying to bring the dead back to life by keeping the corpse in ice for a specified period of time! A 'sex bomb' actress was in the process of her latest divorce; some British pop singers had been beaten up in the Manila airport, and one of our leaders had opined that Russia could never legally send a man to the moon before America did so.....Such world events appeared more important to Junu Goswami today than things that affected his own life. He was not burdened with any work at the moment, and since he was in a sleeping compartment, he did not have to bother about such mundane things as arranging for his bedding, either. It was an over night journey, so he had more than enough time to indulge in whatever he liked. But today he would probably fall a sleep reading the U.N.O.'s reports about the internal problems and corruptions of the Marketing Society, and the booming population problem.....

He had been allotted an upper berth. He saw that the other upper berth was occupied by a middle-aged man clad in a dhoti and a pair of 'pump shoes', a solid gold chain on his neck and almost all his fingers adorned with rings. He had a railway timetable stuffed into his shirt pocket. He seemed to be a Marwari man, but there was no mistaking the

identity of the fat woman accompanying him. She was without doubt, a Marwari. She wore a huge nose ring, her arms were covered with thick bangles, and her face was veiled with one end of her sari. They had a huge amount of luggage with them, including a 'lota', jug, a tiffin carrier and a bamboo basket. He wondered why these people did not travel First class, - after all, they had more than enough money.... Two young men occupied the berths across from him. They were very young, - so young, in fact, that they had probably started shaving hardly about two years ago. Both were dressed alike in the height of contemporary fashion, - tapered trousers, pointed shoes, white shirts with sleeves rolled up, and buttons opened down their chest. One of them was pushing their bags through the window, while his companion caught them inside, and elbowing his way expertly through the other passengers, stowed them away conveniently. The two young men spread their holdalls on their berths, and sat watching the activities of their co-passenger on the upper berths. Junu Goswami was trying to spread his bedding on his upper berth, but the huge trunk belonging to the Marwari couple was blocking the way. It was so heavy that he was not able to push it aside. Nor was he able to cross over it and go to the other side, it was so big. Seeing this, the Marwari man said indifferently, "Babuji, if you climb up on to the trunk you will be able to spread your bed.

"Are you travelling all the way to Calcutta?" one of the boys asked Goswami.

"Yes," he replied.

The two boys looked at each other. Then the one who had asked the question said, "Why do you not take my lower berth? It will be inconvenient for you to climb up and down all the time. Besides, my berth is near the window too, so it will be more airy."

"No, no," protested Goswami., "there is no inconvenience...."

"We will be all right. Please take my berth."

So, Junu Goswami found himself on the lower berth near the window. The boys helped him bring down his bedding and spread it neatly on the lower berth. The owner of the trunk glanced sideways at them as they climbed up on the trunk with their shoes on, but desisted from protesting.

As it happens on a long train journey, they started talking. Goswami told them that he was going to Calcutta to attend a meeting of the Eastern Zone of the Marketing Society, and he asked them where he would have to change his train. They replied that he would have to change at Barauni, where else, in this train....Then he would have to travel another night from Barauni to reach his destination. He asked whether it would stop at Sealdah and was told that it would stop at Howrah. He found out that the two boys were on their way to Benares where they were studying Engineering - one was studying Mechanical engineering, and the other, Electrical. Both were from Nowgong. He also found that he had been a classmate of the uncle of one of them, while he knew about the other boy's father. But he did not think that it was necessary to divulge this fact to the two youngsters, - they must have noticed the grey hairs on his head heralding old age, and had volunteered to give him their more comfortable berth, even without knowing that he was acquainted with their elders.

Once the train had started, he did not bother to look outside. But out of the corners of his eyes, he was aware of the passing scene,-the chaos on the platform as they passed it, the engine shed flashing past, the tall lights and the signal, then again some station with its chaos and confusion. He was aware, as the train sped along, of long lines of stationary railway compartments waiting at some station, huge hoardings advertising various goods from brandy to car tires. He saw a level crossing with lines of diesel trucks, Ambassador cars, rickshaws etc., on both sides of the track, waiting impatiently for the train to pass by.....At one place he noticed large houses coming up at the suburb

of some town, and a sudden blast of some popular film song burst out from a busy restaurant. Then he saw flashes of light reflected on a dirty black patch of water, indistinct telegraph wires..... The Marwari woman sometimes peered out from behind her veil and watched the scenes as the train sped along. She had a small flat box open on her lap, together with a number of small containers from which she was making 'paan'. She handed some of these to the man, who took them indifferently from her while he sat cross-legged on his berth and scrutinized the railway timetable. A passenger came and sat on the Marwari's trunk and tried in vain to open the stuck zip fastener on his travel bag. Uncaring about all these activities going on below them, the two young engineering students had become engrossed in their own conversation. Their faces were alight with pleasure, and at times, they burst into delighted laughter. All the passengers had still not settled into their seats, and even now, people were wandering up and down the corridor. There were two military personnel among these, a small boy, and two women carrying babies. Through the veritable Babel of voices, he could hear a transistor radio being played by someone....

Cursing at the stuck zip fastener on his air bag, the passenger suddenly gave it a vicious tug, - and the chain pulled open! The man gave a shout of triumph, and everyone looked at him in surprise. The two students also were distracted for a moment. Junu Goswami noticed the Filmfare magazines near the pillow of one of them, and a packet of cigarettes. He wondered why they had not smoked so far..... He smiled a knowing smile, and pulling out his own packet, and offered it to them. After a moment's embarrassed hesitation, the nephew took one cigarette. His friend quickly took out a lighter and lit the cigarette for his friend, who drew deeply and let out a cloud of smoke from his nostrils with a practiced air.. He said, with a knowledgeable air, "The next stop is yours, - I mean for the dining car. We will also go into the dining car there. You will probably also...."

" No. I ate at home..."

The two boys did not know what else to say and became absorbed in themselves. He too stretched out his legs and opened his newspaper.

"Is it today's paper?"

"No, it is yesterday's". And he pushed his other newspaper towards them.

"It is all right. You finish reading them. We will look at them later. We have lots of time."

Giving them a small smile, he returned to his newspaper. Even without looking at them, he understood that they were relieved

He started to read the newspapers, bits and pieces of news at random, - It was not improbable that the World Bank, and the United Nations had played quite a significant role in the current inflation,.....it seems that the 'black' population of America had other methods of protest than war, rebellion etc., - there was, for example, the method of non violent protest. Martin Luther King's speech at the Alabama meeting on the problems of 'Apartheid' reminded the audience that....., In the year 1957, she had been a glamorous young woman, and had acted for the first time in Reuben Podolski's film, "Kiss Me Again," but.....

However, his reading did not make much progress. A part of his mind could not help listening to the noises of the train, to the voices around him. Through the monotonous sound of the train engine, he could hear voices speaking in a mixture of languages. The transistor was still blaring forth its loud music. The two boys were talking quietly, but he could hear some bits and pieces of their conversation. ----'after all, even if it is my own brother-in-law's house, it is not like our own home...I have some prestige and self

respect.... And she is so terribly shy..... Goswami forced his mind back to the newspaper again.... During the year 1948- 1949, at the time of the first Five Year Plan, income had increased by 8.2%, during the second 5 Year Plan, it had increased further and stood at 9.5%. But during the period of the third Plan, it had hurtled down to a mere 1.7%. Again, his attention wandered, and he became aware of the conversation around him. Random snatches of talk assailed him, - a sentence here, a word or phrase there, that had no meaning of significance for him. Yet he could not but hear them.

He consciously made an effort and tried to concentrate on the newspaper, - reports about the vicissitudes of our agricultural products. The progress of the production of agricultural items was not encouraging. If the agricultural production during June in the year 1950 was, say 100, then the rate of production during the end of the first 5 Year Plan, i.e., 1955-56, had increased to about 116.8, So by the end of the period of the Second 5 Year Plan,Again his mind was involuntarily wrenched back to the chatter around him in the train.....

In due course, the train entered Rangia Junction, amidst a lot of noise and confusion, lights flashing off and on as the train made its way to its allotted platform. As soon as it had stopped, the compartment became almost empty as most of the passengers rushed off to have their meals. Goswami, too, got down to have a cup of tea at one of the tea stalls on the platform. Many military personnel were in evidence, stomping about the platform, their heavy army boots making a great deal of noise. They were probably on their way to Tezpur. There was also a big group of Santhalis, both men and women. (Where did they come from, he wondered, where were they going?). Lighting a cigarette, he stood with his back to the closed book stall and gazed at the advertisement of Family Planning, reading the words slowly as a small boy would do. He was trying to remember something. What...? Somewhere in that vast station, in some dark area, coaches were being coupled, - there was that unmistakable clanking sound of two coaches meeting and the strong iron hooks joining them together. Somewhere else an engine was shunting, blowing short blasts on its whistle as it was driven back and forth. He tried to remember ... what station, what train, which platform, whose faces were those standing at the train windows,.....? Frowning in an effort to remember, he listened to the shunting engine for a couple of minutes, and then entered his compartment. With her back to him the Marwari woman was eating something from the various utensils they had brought. The man was not there. Goswami leaned against the window and for sometime, gazed indifferently at all the activity on the platform, before returning to his newspaper..... all those advertisements , - Binaca Fluoride toothpaste, Usha sewing machines, Air India's Slumberette class offering luxurious comfort in its flight to London via Beirut and Frankfurt, rains mar the Wimbledon tournament, Premjit Lal defeated in straight sets, And so on and so forth.

The two boys did not return when the train left Rangiya junction, -there must been a great rush in the Dining compartment. But the Marwari came back as soon as the train had started, and told his wife that water was still available in the bathroom, and she could At the next stop,- it was either Nalbari or Barpeta Road, - the boys hurried back to the compartment. He looked up from his newspaper.

"There was a frightful rush in the dining car," one of the boys said. "Some of the passengers will not even be able to get a seat before Fakiragram. What about you? You did not eat?"

"No, I am not hungry," he replied. "Will you mind if I keep the light on for some time? Will it disturb you? I would like to finish reading this paper." He had still not read M. Krishnan's article, - the odd bits and pieces of news had taken up his time.

The two lights on the Marwari's side were switched off. Gradually, most of the lights were extinguished, and the only sounds to be heard were whirring of the fans. At times,

flashes of light cut across the darkness, as the speeding train hurried past smaller stations. The two boys took off their shoes, and indifferently smoking two cigarettes, they talked for some more time, before they too yawned and prepared to sleep. Junu Goswami watched as the train went past stations there were too small or insignificant for an express train to stop at. The green signals at these places vanished out of sight as the important train flashed past. At one place a wedding was in progress in a village near the railway track, and a scene comprising of crowds of people, petromax lamps and a typical village band party, flashed past. At times, together with the cool night breeze, Goswami felt the gusts of smoke - laden air, mingled with sparks flying from the engine.

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One of the boys was saying that he would never in his life forget that scene of farewell at the station, - almost everyone was there, and probably *SHE* was there too..... Again, he underwent that same mixture of the conversation surrounding him, and snippets of newspaper reports that he read. Junu Goswami vaguely remembered a story he had read long ago. Its plot was very similar to what he was hearing from the boys. The protagonist had spent either the summer vacation, or Puja holidays, in a friend's or relative's home. There was also a young brother involved. But since 'their could be no harmonium practice in Deutakon's study room', they had invented a game of sorts. Bhaity, - or someone else, would say, "Two and one make...?" The protagonist would reply, "Three". Then Bhaity would say, "Three plus four?" And the other one would reply, "Seven." If the other player said "Five" by mistake, he would be out, and Bhaity would win. And so the game would go on, getting more and more complicated, until one of the players would tire of it, and make a mistake. In that story too, the hero realized, and the girl in question too understood, that their story would end with the end of the vacations. The story was quite complicated, and he could not remember all its finer details. He only knew that it remained unfinished. There too, everyone had come to station. The bell rang, the guard blew his whistle, the green signal was given, and with a shuddering jerk, the train started moving forward, and the words the hero had saved till the last moment were never said. He was confused and his throat felt dry, and he found that he could not utter a single word. ... She ran along the compartment as the train gradually increased its speed, looking at him eagerly, hopefully. ... But she, too, knew that the happenings of the past few days would remain unfinished, or rather, would end here, like this, with nothing being said, - just as life itself was always left incomplete, unsatisfying. At this point, Bhaity suddenly pipes up, "Dada, two plus one?" An awkward smile lit up the young hero's face, and he replied in a choking voice, "Three." Running alongside the train, they came almost to the end of the platform. "Dada," shouted Bhaity, "Seven plus eight?"

"Fifteen. Good bye, Bhaity".....

"Fifteen plus six" But that game too remained unfinished; - the train sped out of the platform and soon disappeared around a bend.

He tried to remember who had written the story, - Hairan, - no, Raihan, - Raihan what? He wondered why he had liked the story so much. Was it because, even in that far distant time, he had found in that story some intimation about the reality of life? Did the story give some sort of disheartening, unbelievable, hint that his life too would remain unfinished, unfulfilled? Would the story of his own life, and its deeds, gradually become more and more indistinct, and then almost forgotten? Half forgotten, as today he was not quite sure about the story he had once read in the 'Awahon' magazine, - why had he been so very impressed by it? Maybe, at some distant point of time, people would say of him, "Poor Junu Goswami. Such and such things happened to him. He did not even have time to marry and have a family.... ". But no one was actually either inclined, or interested, in what things had actually happened to him. - And he himself reads in detail, what was happening in the outside world!

Junu Goswami remembered that when , a few days ago, his niece had delivered her first child, he had been so busy with the hospital, doctors and other allied things, that he had not had the time to read the newspapers for three or four days. And on exactly those days, three significant events had taken place in the world: China had exploded an atom bomb, the Labour party had come to power in England, and in Russia, Khrushchev had been removed from power. On the fourth day, he had collected the newspapers of the past three days, and had greedily read all the news items thoroughly. He did not leave out a single detail, - who said what, by how many votes did the party win, which political leader defied his rival, and how,As if something terrible would happen if he did not fill his head with all the particulars of all the news of the world! ... Yet today he could not remember any of those details. At most he could say that at that time, such and such things had happened.....

He did not know that he had fallen asleep, until a sudden jerk of the train awakened him. He saw that someone had put out the light near his head, and only the night light glowed a bright blue. The newspapers had fallen from his hands. The two boys were fast asleep, and only the Marwari lady was still sitting up on her berth, swaying rhythmically with the motion of the train. The transistor too was silent, and he could hear the snores of someone, probably the Marwari. Only the fans were whirring as before.... Without bothering to pick up his newspapers, he closed his eyes. The monotony of the sound of the train sometimes changed when, for some reason, it slowed down, or picked up more speed. At times when it went through a tunnel probably, or passed over a bridge, the sound would be different. At other times, another train would speed past on a parallel line with a shrill whistle, sending a whiff of warm air through window by his berth. He could sometimes make out rows of brightly lit coaches of some other train passing swiftly by his own coach. And as he gazed at those passing pictures, he thought about the boy, his co-passenger. He was so young, so innocent , - that he could still imagine that he would never forget that scene at the railway station, - that he would forever remember the minutest details of that day in the railway platform, - as though his life would stand still at that point of his life, and that it would remain so throughout his life! ... He had no idea when his tired eyes closed once again, and he fell asleep. He was suddenly awakened by a great deal of noise and tumult, by the shrill whistle of the train, and opening his sleepy eyes, he saw a number of clocks on a number of platforms, and lines of tube lights, that seemed to be rushing towards him. The train slowed down and the crowds, excitedly screaming, shouting, quarrelling, -increased.After a while, he realized that the train had probably arrived at some station in West Bengal.