

They don't let you sleep

I have been trying to work out a solution to this problem losing sleep till very late hours of the night:

King Bahubikram had three ministers— Parambuddhi¹, Mahabuddhi² and Otibuddhi³. They were astute, but dangerously malicious. One day the king came to know that the trio of ministers was hand in glove in a conspiracy against him. The king decided to put them into the prison, but Queen Sumati explained to the king that in that case the administration of the country would not run, at least one ought to be retained outside as a minister (and then that one would not be able to conspire alone). Which one? It had to be the cleverest one. But what was the way to ascertain that? Queen Sumati advised conducting of a test. Accordingly, King Bahubikram carried three white and two black caps in a bag and showed those to the three ministers, and after that he put a white cap on each head from their behind, kept the remaining two black caps back in the bag without showing those to the ministers. Each minister could see two white caps on the heads of the other two, but did not know the colour of the cap on his head. The King said, now whoever would first be able to tell me the colour of the cap on his head, he would become free to be my minister again... After some time had passed, Parambuddhi spoke up, "Maharaj⁴, you have put a white cap on my head too!"

Question: How did Parambuddhi work out the answer?

True indeed, how did he work it out? An amazing affair! I have been restless in the bed, repeatedly tossing and turning. Once I have got up to drink water. The wall – clock has struck one, two, two-thirty..... I do not remember afterwards when sleep has arrived out of fatigue. Sleep has not been peaceful, an absurd dream about a theatrical performance. Dambaru Gogoi of our office – who gave us the problem – has dressed up as Parambudhi by wearing enormous beard and moustache (he's a huge man, has chosen the correct role) while Tarun Baruah of our office and I have been watching the show sitting on the bench in the first row. Suddenly, Parambudhi (Gogoi) grinding his teeth has guffawed menacingly, and by taking out the sword from the scabbard, has begun, in front of the entire audience, to strike both our chests with its pointed tip: 'Haven't you failed to answer? Haven't you failed to answer? Now stay in the prison for your entire lives, Ha... Ha...Ha...

So, I have got up from sleep late in the morning, but have realised that sleep has been incomplete. Along with it, the story of Parambudhi has again come to the mind at once! What kind of reason was used, what type of unbeatable logic? Was Parambudhi so much cleverer than us? Mechanically wiping the eyes, I have pressed the toothpaste tube, washed my face, and drank tea with contracted brows, all the wheels inside the brains going around with a whirr. I have shaved my face with a weary mind- seen in the mirror dark circles below the eyes, as if the eyes have sunken a bit. Suddenly, I have been very angry with Dambaru Gogoi- with myself too. Hang Parambuddhi. Who is he to torture my body? Does it make any sense in harming oneself by worrying about others' problems? Are we blockheads? Do I gain from thinking? Of what use would it be? Where do I apply it? ... But, really, how could Parambuddhi find out? Marvellous! May be he reasoned like this: There is a white cap on Mahabuddhi's head, there is a white cap on Otibuddhi's head, in case there should be a black cap on my head, Otibuddhi would think that... on being

suddenly inattentive, the blade has cut under the chin, a bloody affair. Let Parambuddhi rot in hell, let Dambaru Gogoi go to hell. He must have slept in the night with heavy snoring (he has to snore, such a gigantic man). Tarun Barnah too must have been up stretching his limbs by now after enjoying sweet dreams. The blockhead that I have been – but have they slept with such desirable peace? Two divers pictures have emerged in my mind side by side: [Dambaru Gogoi (42), in bed, at night, wearing vest and lungi⁵ (or wife's old mekhla⁶), the room spic and span. Lounging on the pillow Gogoi has been reading – a cover of the infant's napkin has been placed over the shade of the 25 watt bedside-lamp, so that wife's sleep is not disturbed. Spectacles, tin of *mixture*⁷, ashtray, water glass, watch, a heap of detective novels and documents related to properties are on the bed –side table]

Dambaru Gogoi's Problem

(a) In the morning, while coming to serve breakfast in the bed, Hoggins, the butler, has discovered that Sir William Pluknet has not slept in his bed. Within the closed doors of the library hall Sir William has been lying dead with his head in a pool of blood, someone had hit his head with a stick. But, according to the specialist from the Scotland Yard, the finger prints on the stick, that is to say, on the poker meant for stoking the coal in the chimney, have been Sir William's own. Suicide? But how could he, his own head –? Assassin? The doors and windows of the library were all closed from inside, then which way did the assassin enter? Where was everybody the night before and doing what? Why would Lady Florence not say as to who had made her the call at 9 o'clock in the night? What secrets remain hidden in Hoggin's past. Does Richard really have any illicit affair with Emily? Or is it that the matter is of no importance, the plot is thicker than that, more mysterious than that?

..... page 75 (12 o'clock) page 120 (1o'clock) Page 150 (2 o'clock).....

(b) A new branch of our company has been opened at Jorhat, it is heard that a person from here is likely to be transferred to that place. Who will be sent? Das will surely not be sent, because, without Das the accounts here will not run. Tarun Baruah will surely not be sent, because, Tarun Barmah is busy arranging songs for the radio here, he is stated to be pursuing that singer called Manjumala Neog in dead earnest these days, everyone knows that he will rather resign if transferred. Does it mean that I shall be sent?

(c) Who will look after the house that I have let out, if I have to go to Jorhat? Does it mean that I shall have to dispose of both the cows? Transfer of school too shall have to be obtained for Deep and Mamani– alas, in the midst of their annual exams!

[Tarun Barua (28), in vest and Pyjamas, is in bed, at night. Nothing in the room is in its proper place, cream-talc- shaving kit- cigarette packet- cloths- papers – record player- are lying hither and thither in complete disarray, briefs and towels are hanging from the strings of the mosquito net, pages of the calendar have not been changed for two months, there are cobwebs. A 60-watt bulb is shedding its light mercilessly at the centre of the room, looking intently at the bulb without bating his eyes, Tarun Baruah, has been puffing at the cigarette, with his head resting on the palm while leaning on the bed against his elbow. Towards his head-rest is a tape-recorder, ashes have been falling off sometimes on the ash-tray, at times on the floor, sometimes on the vest.]

Tarun Barua's problem

(a) A new branch of our company has been opened at Jorhat, it is heard that a person from here is likely to be transferred to that place. Who will be sent? Das will surely not be sent, because, without Das the accounts here will not run. Gogoi will surely not be sent, an old hand, permanently settled here, how can he leave everything and go, should he leave, how the office here will run? Does it mean that I shall be sent?

(b) But Jorhat means Mridula again – morning and evening, evening and morning. With such an uncertain mind— is it possible to go to Jorhat now? Why has she started posting two - three letters a week? How many do I have to reply to? What is the matter with her? The tone is also such –as if I have been lost in Guwahati city, as if I shall never return home—what does she think? Have not been able to reply to a single letter in the last two weeks; is that the reason for behaving that way? I have so much work, does she not understand --- but it had happened earlier too, two to three months had passed by without writing a single word. Did she ever, she had never acted this way before? And she has certainly been listening to my voice in the radio every day; I surely have a corporeal presence! Is it possible that some nonsense person has filled her in with something about Manjula⁸? How irritating – why do the girls act so funny as soon as they hear another girls' name – are we ever, we boys are certainly not so suspicious. Manjumala 'deals' with so many people at the Radio station, do I ever, I never ever—

(c) Manjumala of course gets into some very 'meaningless' acts too that are unnecessary. Why should she allow latitude to Toufik Borbora to lecture her so passionately? The relationship between a programme assistant and an artiste is just a relationship between a programme assistant and an artiste – that's enough, where is the scope for lecture here? Why does he have to go to her house to arrange programmes? Why visit her house? Why these excesses? – But how am I concerned there? In fact I have told her a little about my longstanding relationship with Mridula (some nonsense person will surely inform if I do not), so what it is to her anyway? But then, why does she send off Toufik Borbora so hastily as soon as I make my appearance- that day the poor fellow's face having almost turned to something like a Langra Mango⁹—

However, these thoughts of Tarun Baruah have been constructed on hearsay – the boy never says a word about these matters before us --- he would quickly smile and jump to another topic whenever Dambaru Gogoi is about to begin any jest – the smile however is really charming –

I have gone to the office with a sticking – plaster below the chin. It has played in my mind that it would not be bad at all if Dambaru Gogoi is transferred, my sleep at night will be sound. But, will I not be sent at the end?

At the office, I have found that Gogoi has been opening a file slowly and Tarun Baruah has been sharpening a pencil while whistling softly, a hand-rolled cigarette each in both their lips. Another problem given by Gogoi has come to my mind:

Sitting on two sides of a table, two of your friends have been puffing hand-rolled cigarettes with a tin of *mixture*¹⁰ in between them. There is a rolling paper on the tin, a match on its side. You have entered. By stretching their hands at the same time,

both your friends have pushed the tin in the middle together towards you and spoken out synchronously, "Come Das (or Choudhury or Hatibaruah), please have a *mixture*¹¹." Question: How would you know, to whom does the *mixture*¹²- tin belong?

I have remembered that its answer is – "It is his, the *mixture*¹³ in whose hand is not thick" – even Gogoi does not admit it himself, because regular smokers know that there is no advantage in rolling a *mixture*¹⁴thick, making it of habitual and optimum size only brings joy to a puff. Be that as it may, I have asked while rolling a *mixture*¹⁵ of the habitual size, "What, has any transfer order or the other come yet?"

Without giving any reply Tarun Baruah has gone on sharpening the pencil, Gogoi has said, 'No. Why, do you want to go?'

Its answer is obviously a grin indicating – 'how could you say that'.

"Me? How could you say that, Gogoi'

"Have you solved the problem of the caps?'

"Well, no. I have not found the time to think. Wait, I shall think."

"Yes, it will be solved if you give it a thought, easy, yes, why not? If you think about it just once applying your mind properly, it will be clear. Think, do think."

(Well? Does it mean that Gogoi thinks that it would not be possible for me this year! Alright, we'll see about that. Let us see.)

After that the office routine has started, that is to say, tea has come, beetle nut has arrived and in between sips we have again considered the question of 'Who is likely to be transferred?' Each one is of the firm belief that the other two will be retained here, only he shall have to pack up. But Gogoi cannot go leaving his properties and livestock. I have been attending law classes here in the evening. Why does not Tarun Baruah go? Tarun Baruah's own home is so near to Jorhat, at Sivasagar, he is a "bachelor"- a free-man, what stops him from going? Why are such objections? Tarun Baruah merely smiles; he says he dislikes Jorhat very much. As I have taken the last sip, I have realized that I have begun trying to cast our problem of transfer into the mould of the problem involving the caps.

In an office at Guwahati there are three colleagues –Gogoi, Baruah and Das. A branch of theirs has been opened at Jorhat, to which one of them from Guwahati is likely be sent (may not be sent as well). On the basis of the facts received from various sources, such as the attitude of the managing director, the information from the dealing assistant of the Shillong secretariat etc., each of them has become sure that the remaining two shall be retained at Guwahati (white caps), while there are two possibilities only in his case—either Guwahati (white cap) or Jorhat (black cap). How to know, whether he will be retained at Guwahati or sent to Jorhat?

Having met Tarun Baruah alone in the afternoon at the Tiffin- hours, I have told him that we may rather be able to solve our problem of transfer this way than worrying to death. Tarun Baruah has thought for a while whistling a song softly, then he has moved his head side – ways in disagreement breaking into that smile.

'No, probably it won't do'

'How do you know it won't? Both events are the same. That is, almost alike.'

'Probably it won't do. Because I know the solution—'

'You know?'

Yesterday, Tarun Baruah has supposedly confessed before Gogoi that he could not. In reality, according to him, lot of time gets wasted for nothing if it gets stuck in the mind; with their appearances resembling the knaves of a deck, the three ministers suddenly appear before the eyes, and it is a terror by all means. So he had blurted out, 'Gogoi, I cannot, tell me how Parambuddhi found out?'

'Should I tell?'

Endless curiosity, yet I have kept mum

So, Tarun Baruah has told me, as to how Parambuddhi had found out. He had found it this way:

Parambudhi has thought: there are two possibilities—either there is a black cap on my head, or a white cap. If it is a black cap, what would Otibuddhi think? And what would Mahabuddhi think? Let me consider it one by one, Otibuddhi would think, 'Mahabuddhi has seen a black cap on Parambuddhi's head, so if it is a black cap on my (meaning Otibuddhis) head too, then Mahabuddhi would immediately understand that it could not have been a black cap on his head, because there were only two black caps.' But Mahabuddhi has not been able to give the answer. So ...

'Ah --- I got it, I got it!' I have cried out.

'Yes, the rest is easy' Tarun Baruah has agreed and broken into that smile again.

Eh, this of course is true, an evident fact. How could Parambuddhi not think this way and think otherwise? If I were in Parambuddhi's shoes, would not I have thought exactly this way? It is for the reason that I am not Parambuddhi that ... Our similar problem of transfer, though I am *Das Babu*¹⁶ of the Guwahati office of the twentieth century, I have certainly --- am I indeed a blockhead? Such simple logic, though I have been thinking since yesterday, yet – but no. This problem is a problem of the real life, this involves many extraneous issues, there are many 'factors', and it is not simply a matter of the black and the white. The 'attitude' of the board of directors, the interests of the chairman, sundry tug- of- war, many other --- Closing my eyes for half a minute, I too have been compelled to agree with Tarun Baruah—it is true, even if our problem of transfer is arranged in identically similar way, by no means with Parambudhi's logic.....

Tarun Baruah has fled saying that there is a recording at the radio station. Closing the file, I have told Gogoi that I have almost thought up the matter, when suddenly with no rhyme or reason, Tarun Baruah has spilled the beans right away! Should he be like this, cannot keep anything under the wraps--- just like a girl. Putting up a grave face, Gogoi has said, 'Eh, he has already told you? Spoiled it, spoiled it. I have almost been sure that you would of course provide the solution before going home today, you get me Das— eh!'

As if Gogoi's meaty face has turned morose with sadness and despair.

(Great – is not it great fun, huh? Alright, let him give the next, let me see what he comes up with-----)

He has given. A man has come to the bank of a river with a pet (!) tiger, a goat and a bundle of betel leaves. A boat has been fastened to the bank. They are to cross to the other side. Only two 'things' may go in the boat, say the man and the goat, or the goat and the tiger, or the tiger and the betel-leaves, etc. But if the tiger and the goat stay alone, the tiger would devour the goat, if the goat and the betel leaves are left alone, the goat shall eat up the betel leaves. The problem is: how would the man now take all of them across to the other side?

All of a sudden, a suspicion has arisen—even a boy of the third standard can answer this! Seems like even Tarun Baruah would be able to do it!

With some irritation I have said, 'It seems like having heard this problem of the donkey when we were in the half- pant wearing age. Have you discovered only today?'

'Ah, is that so?' Gogoi has fallen from the skies in amazement. 'Alright, skip this. Have a look at this— easy, it can be solved, if you think just once —

He has given a problem of a dozen oranges; one orange among the twelve was slightly different. Alright, it seems it is time to leave now; Padma Babu has started covering the type writer. I shall think once I reach home.

But, I have not thought about it after reaching home. After having tea, I have gone to the law college, returning thereafter I have lit up a *mixture*¹⁷ and picked up a half-read novel. My eyes have stopped at the picture on the cover page. There were faces of two girls and that of a boy. Obviously, it is that of the eternal triangle. In other words, it is a grave problem. The face of the boy is not at all like that of Tarun Baruah, but the question that played in my sub-conscious mind throughout the day has suddenly surfaced:

Tarun Baruah does not want to go to Jorhat. Should he go to Jorhat, he will face the strife of marriage, there will be various pressures. Before that he wants to be sure, who does he really love, Mridula or Manjula¹⁸?

And with it arises another old parallel problem posed by Gogoi (this too relates the prison):

A prisoner is in the prison. There are two doors in the prison; the prisoner can go out through any one of these. If he goes out through one door, it would make the prisoner free for life, but beyond the other door the gallows is at the ready, he shall be hanged as soon as he goes out from that side. Two guards have been guarding the two doors. One guard always speaks the truth. The other guard always lies. The prisoner knows nothing—as to which one is truthful, which one is a liar, which one is the gate to freedom, which one is the gate to death. The prisoner can ask the either one any but one question, and whatever answer he gets for that, the prisoner would come to know from that, as to which is the door to freedom. Question: what is the question?

After tins after tins of *mixture*¹⁹ and buckets after buckets of perspiration, Gogoi has triumphantly told us its answer too: The prisoner would ask, "If I ask this companion of yours as to which is the door to freedom—which one he will show?" If he asks the liar, the liar would show the door to death (because the liar knows that the truthful would show the door to freedom). If he asks the truthful, he would also show the door to death (because the truthful knows that the liar would show the door to death). In both cases, both the guards would show the door to death. Therefore, the prisoner would go out of the other door.

Now, Tarun Baruah knows that there is no point in his asking Mridula or Manjula²⁰, because they would never provide (or cannot provide) an objective answer. There's no point in asking anyone in the entire world, because one in love would not admit to be untrue, whatever one comes to believe as true, even if a thousand contrary reasons are pointed out to one's eyes. So, Tarun Baruah may only ask himself. Experiences (say, how his mind feels like when he does not see Mridula for two days, etc.) indicate a lot, many imagined experiments too may be carried out (say, how he would feel like, should Manjumala leave tomorrow with Taufik Borbora – what an imagination! – forever to Utkamand²¹ or Mars, etc.). But as everyone knows that these conclusion are not reliable. We can very easily guide the meanings of the experiences in such directions that appear to our minds as pleasurable (though those may not actually be pleasurable to the inner sanctum of the heart). And those imagined experiments— those are bound to be affected by the prejudices of our mental states. Therefore, the correct answer has to be found out from our own inner-self, there is no other way but that. I have remembered having read about Faust versus Indian thought in a foreign novel: Faust says, 'In me there are two souls, alas.' But our scriptures say, "Why should there be only two? Are they so few? To what use, how many would you serve with only two souls? No, no, thousands and thousands of souls are there in our hearts—or you may put it this way: there is a huge soul, its name is Paramatma; we are its diverse pieces, and again in each of us there are innumerable number of pieces of these pieces. And no saint can say with confidence as to which piece is what, none can say this is absolutely white, this is pure black, this is a cent percent pious piece, and this one is sick, jaded, unhealthy and completely lewd piece. But it is no easy job to work with thousands of pieces, so for the time being we would assume as true the idea of the learned Dr. Johannes Faust ... In this way I have gradually, so to say, "put my feet into the shoes of Tarun Baruah," heated blood of ten years ago has been coursing through my veins, while whistling a song automatically I have been thinking about the matter, on my right is Mridula, on my left it is Manjumala, and in my heart, as in the case of Faust, the two souls or identities or minds or personalities, one of them always speaks the truth, the other always lies, like the two prison guards. Now, if I put this question to any of the souls (do not know, which is who): "If I ask your companion soul, whether I love Mridula, or Manjula²²"- then who would he point out? What would be the answer.....?

But in what way would the answer come? By what would it come? Through what medium would it come? Great confusion indeed!

So, at bed-time at night, I, instead of hanging the mosquito -net, have sat down with paper and pencil after switching on the table -lamp. Twelve oranges, they look exactly the same. Out of these, eleven have even the same weight. The weight of only one orange is slightly more or slightly less (it is not known whether more or whether less). There is a balance. There is no weight. I know it very well that such a situation would not arise in this life-time:

I have since lost my job. I now purvey mangoes and oranges from door to door. With me, I have the balance and the weights too. One day all the weights have been lost. A lady of a house has called out from the veranda, 'Hey, orange'. She would buy a dozen of oranges. I have told her that the weight of one of the oranges may be slightly different. The lady has suddenly taken out a revolver from her dress and pointed it at my head and spoken with an icy voice, "I am allowing you to weigh thrice, only thrice. Within these three chances, you have to show by using the sides of the balance, as to which orange is different, and whether its weight is more or is less than the rest. But beware, only thrice! Else—"

But by drawing a dozen 'oranges' in a sheet of paper, I have, with rapt attention, started numbering them as one, two.

¹Supreme Intellect

² Great Intellect

³ Extreme Intellect

⁴ An address made to a king

⁵ A length of cotton cloth worn as a loincloth in India or as a skirt in Myanmar (Burma)

⁶ A piece of cloth worn waist downward by women in Assam

⁷ Shag tobacco

⁸ Earlier the author has used the name Manjumala

⁹ A kind of Indian Mango

¹⁰ Shag tobacco

¹¹ A rollie, a roll-up or a hand-rolled

¹² Shag tobacco

¹³ A rollie, a roll-up or a hand-rolled

¹⁴ A rollie, a roll-up or a hand-rolled

¹⁵ A rollie, a roll-up or a hand-rolled

¹⁶ Mr. Das or a honorific of Das

¹⁷ A rollie, a roll-up or a hand-rolled

¹⁸ Earlier the author used the name Manjumala

¹⁹ Shag tobacco

²⁰ Earlier the author used the name Manjumala

²¹ A hill station in India

²² Earlier the author has used the name Manjumala