

Aapon Manuh

Transformation

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(SHILABHADRA (1924-2008) is one of the most challenging short story writers in Assamese literature. He was awarded Sahitya Akademi for Madhupur Bahudur in 1994. This short story is taken from ‘Aapon Manuh’ which he had written at the age of seventy-nine.)

I have forgotten many things, many significant things rather; but some measly memories are still retained in pulsating mind and those are selected memories. Now I am too old to gather new experience. Often my mind goes back to the past and the past days toll back to sense of past memories. If I have to write then I must have to stick to those memories which have trodden a long path with me because I am a witness of many changes.

Once, there was a feudal system at Gauripur. There had no feudal system as such in any other place of Assam except this region. It is termed as permanent settlement in history. Really, it was seemed to us same all alone, even today because life style of the folks of this place never get rustically changed. People who have got the patronage of landlord have had their own rhythm of living life. If misfortune would fall ever upon them, then also they would not have to be get distressed because Zamindars were there to standby. Though they lived their life lavishly, yet they never had worried of cloth and food. They never thought of anything, neither of present, nor of future; the way their ancestors lived they also were living and would hope to die the same away. They even speculated that what would happen of being much educated. They would never go to another place for doing job. But some were exceptional amongst them. Some of them had left to another place to earn livelihood. A few had continued their job for couple of months and got back to Madhupur, and worked as school teacher in the locals.

Khogen was a doctor. He was transferred to Tezpur from Dhubri. But he did not go and at last opened a pharmacy at Madhupur. But opening of pharmacy then was completely a new kind of phenomenon for the people of Madhupur, though it had a hospital having qualified doctors. There were two doctors Boro Doctor and Choto Doctor. Boro Doctor was M.B. and Chotto Doctor was L.M.P qualified. I still can remember that Lalmohon Babu, Kanai Babu and Chokrobortty Babu were Boro Doctors, and Subodh was Choto Doctor. Khogen Babu had stayed for many years, and after his departure Upen Kha came. He was Hindu. The Nawab of Bengal conferred the title ‘Kha’ to his forefathers. I called Dr. Subodh as Kakababu, Kakababu means uncle. Dr. Khogen had a pharmacy at Madhupur and his visit was one rupee. I know you people might laugh, but there was nothing to chuckling. Because one rupee was precious then, as one could buy a bit less than one kilogram rice with four or five pie, even the cost of milk was same. Hence, patient sometimes had offered him fees, and sometimes Dr.Khogen had not got any

single penny for his service. Those who were junior to Dr. Khogen had got their retirement as Director of Health Service, but it never nagged him.

I can give many examples. Profulla Da had been appointed in Oil Refinery at Digboi. But one fine morning he had left his job and came back home. Gobindo Uncle's son was not bad in study. After his matriculation, he had been got admitted into Carmichael College. He had been accommodated in hostel where he had to take thick boiled rice in meal and supper, but he had never taken such thick rice in house, because he used to take thin rice in meal. Nevertheless, he had to fetch water from a deep well for having his bath. So he had left his hostel and came back home. His grandma was so pampered to him that she had not mind his get returned and exalted that it is needless to staying with such heavy pain. She urged 'look at him, how rustically he has lost his weight. If we can, then he could also live with this much. No need to send him further. We have not have such scarcity that he cannot be feed'. This was then the philosophy of life.

II

But, that Madhupur is no more. Why should I hover about Madhupur? Everything has been changed. Change is the permanent existence of human phenomenon, and it can never be stopped. The change does not occur in our corporeal substance, it occurs in our mind. The corporeal substance of body remains same over the ages, but the cerebral transformation is there where olds are remained discount because their reflection and aspirations are assumed outdated by the fresher. Everything has been changed and transformed; even the dream, aspiration and ethics have changed its connotation. Madan Kalita is my neighbour. He expressed his wonder that day 'I could not understand what is going around. I have left almost to read daily newspaper, as it keeps me in anxiety for whole day. Newspaper holds the news on murder, brutal killing; neither young nor old are escaped ah, nauseating news. Despite, Jaylalita comes with new demand every day. The government may fall at any time. Time takes us as if in that turmoil situation when power and emperors were in transient state from Moghal to British. How one can stick to such situation so far, it strains mind.'

Here reason lies in to letting me to go to the memory lane, to the distant past of Madhupur. The people of Madhupur have forgotten me, and it is quite natural. All most all familiar faces have passed away. Most of my friends are aspired, except a few but they can neither walk nor think. I went to Apurba's house for getting his wellbeing, but he could not recognize me 'please do come. Have your seat. Do you have anything to talk with me? Where have you come from?'

Should I slap him lest he will say further? But, it was not his fault. He did not even able to recognize his family members. But he was my bosom friend. He was wise too. He wrote poems and often recited them. He was very fond of reciting Tagore's poems and often he recited Debotar Gras, Dui Bigha Jami, Nirjharer Swapnovango etc. He played Tabla too in his young days. He tried to teach me too- 'dhage, nagey, nagey, dhin'. Kaharaba is the first lesson, he said.

III

Could I remember every incident occurred in Madhupur? Perhaps I could not. That day it was around two O' clock. I was lying in bed after having my mid day meal. The calling bell got rung. I felt annoyed of sensing who has come in mid noon. A young boy has come with one of my grandsons having lineage to Madhupur. He looked beautiful and apparent. But I could not recognize him.

'You could not recognize me. But I am coming from Madhupur'

‘Madhupur! What is your father’s name?’

‘Basdeu’

‘Basdeu? Basdeu!’

‘If I would say my grandma’s name, then you would certainly able to make out me, I am Sundari’s grandson.’

Had I to give effort to remember Sundori? No I hadn’t. Sundari was a sweeper. She swept our toilets. She wore an ordinary colourful Sari. She wore thick bracelet made of silver in her wrist and leg. She used to wear silver coins of ancient times. She used a special kind of broom to sweep the courtyard of our house. That broom was fixed in a long bamboo so that she would not have to bend down to broom. After finishing her work, she took tea. There had a separate cup for her which she thrust into the straw where dry wood were kept. She never washed her cup. She rubbed the inside of the cup by the end of her Sari. One of the maid servants had poured tea to her cup keeping a distance.

But I became marvel to looking at the daring of the boy because he has not had a worthy past. But it is meaningless to acquaint him with that. I asked his name.

‘Kishore, Kishore Basphore’

‘Do you stay here?’

‘Yes, with Binu’

‘What do you do?’

‘Working in the State Bank. I was in Dhubri, recently I have been transferred here’.

‘What is your qualification?’

‘M.A. in Economics’

‘Did you do your master from Gauhati University?’

‘No; from North Bengal University, Siliguri’.

Interrupting me he asked ‘don’t you speak Deshi (local dialect of Madhupur) now a days?’

I became cognisant of whole phenomenon, and became so informal at my ease that I kept asking about the well being of my fellow mates and relatives. He also had no complex of any kind. I thought of whether it was wise enough to ask about Basudev? I contemplated that if he could tell about Sundori then what’s wrong in asking about Basudev.

‘How is Basudev? Is he alive?’

‘He is alive. He is working as Chowkidar at Transport Office. Still he has five years to get retirement. He had reduced his age pursuing an officer. He is an expert fellow.’

Certainly expert he is, otherwise it was impossible to bring his son to this success. I felt happy. I forgot all anxieties while we were talking. My grandson hindered me and said ‘grandpa, it is dusk. You were plunged in talking in your tongue in such a way that you have forgotten the time’

I became restless. ‘Yes, it is dark now. Let’s have a cup of tea together.’

I never ask boys for tea as I do not want to bother my old wife. She is not well. Once, tea was served to Sundori in neglected way. Today Sundori’s grandson has come. How do I adieu him without offering him a cup of tea?
