

# The Little Sentinels



Courtesy-**Assam Police**

# **The Little Sentinels**

**Editor**

Dr. Dinesh Chandra Goswami

Courtesy-Assam Police,  
Guwahati-7

**The Little Sentinels** : A collection of short stories for children, translated from Assamese compiled and edited by Dr. Dinesh Chandra Goswami and published by Rajib Saikia, Guwahati-781007, courtesy Assam Police.

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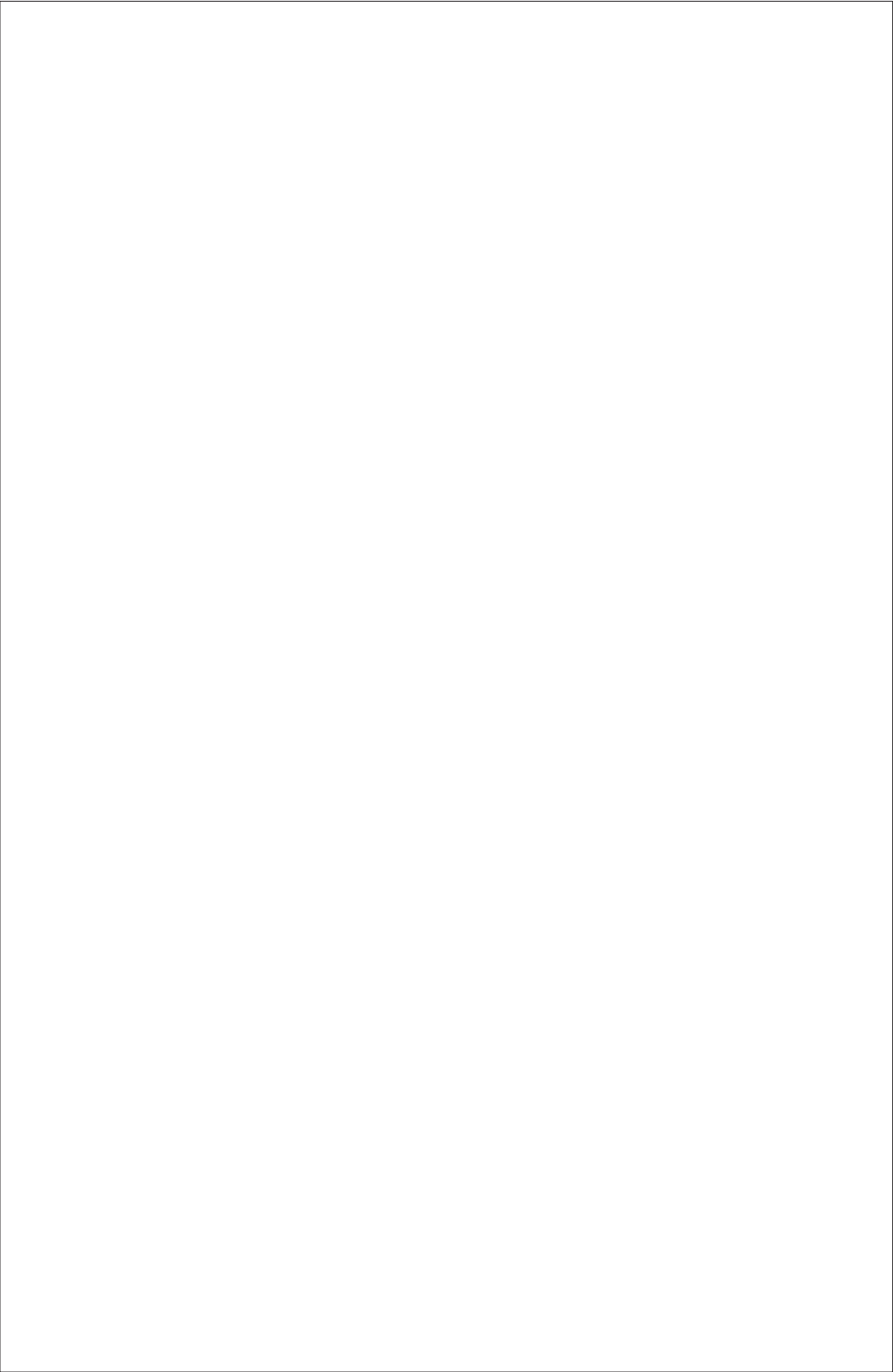
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## ***A FEW WORDS....***

Story-telling is the best medium to implant values in the impressionable minds of the children and make them aware about the varied social issues. A child after a certain age should be able to differentiate between a superstition and a scientific belief. They should be made a partner in creating a crime free environment and should be made responsive to victims of road-accidents. It is our duty to let a child know about different social menaces like drug abuse, social prejudices and witch-hunting etc. in their vicinity. What better medium is there to graft positive values and attitudes in a child's mind than to tell all these aspects of life through stories? Keeping this adage 'Catch them young' in mind, this story book with a number of beautiful stories was planned. The renowned writer and scientist Dr. Dinesh Ch. Goswami readily agreed to shoulder the responsibility of selecting and editing the Assamese version of these stories. All the writers have carefully chosen some very relevant topics as the themes of the stories. I am immensely grateful to Dr. Goswami and all the writers without whose toil this idea wouldn't have seen the light of the day. The English renderings of the stories have been done by a bunch of equally talented writers of Assam who have been successful in maintaining the original flavour and the messages keeping the target

audience in mind. I am grateful to Shri Sabah Ahmed for his efforts in coordinating with the translators. Rhinusmita Kakoty Lahkar has done a very good job of editing. All the translators deserve our heartfelt appreciation. The renowned cartoonist Utpal Talukder has embellished the tales with his own way of storytelling. We are grateful to him. I hope this collective effort of us meets the purpose for which it was made. The need of the hour is to build a better future and this book is a small step in that lofty direction.

12<sup>th</sup> August, 2019  
Guwahati-7

**Kuladhar Saikia, IPS**  
Director General of Police  
Assam

## **BABU AND THE STRANGER**

His mother lovingly calls him Babu at home. And he is now known by that name everywhere.

Babu is very popular. He is fun-loving and doesn't mind even if others tease him. He just laughs. He is full of love and affection towards all. If some gardener or carpenter works in Babu's garden or home under the hot sun, he would come out with a bottle of water from the refrigerator and offer it to the man. Perhaps there would also be one or two bananas or biscuits in his hand. He is loved by all for this nature of his.

Babu studies in the sixth standard. His father is a government officer in a village. It is about 15 kilometres away from the nearest big town. Babu's village has all facilities that are there in cities-electricity, water supply and the Internet, but along with these, there are also huge agricultural fields, ponds and lot of trees. Their village has one primary school and one high school. Most boys and girls in the area study in these schools and majority of them come walking as their homes are not very far.

Babu's father goes to office in his scooter around 9 o'clock in the morning and returns home around 6 o'clock in the evening after doing a round of the market as well. Babu's mother is a housewife. He also has an elder sister, Antara.



She studies in the ninth standard in the same school as Babu. She is, however, quite serious, unlike Babu. Yet, the two has a special bonding and one cannot live without the other, just like the two opposite poles of a magnet attracting each other. Babu is afraid of his mother to some extent, but he is quite friendly with his father. After dinner at night, the two usually go out for a stroll. His father had once told him that this helps in digesting the food but what Babu liked most about these evening walks was the heart-to-heart conversations he had with his father while walking.

While going to the school Antara leaves a bit early. That's because Babu is always late. After his breakfast, he has to literally run to his school. In the morning, there are many people on the roads so his mother is not worried if he goes alone but, in the afternoon, Babu's classes get over before his sister's and the roads are empty then. So, his mother had strictly instructed him to wait in the school for some time and come home only with his sister.

He and his sister, however, find this very inconvenient. Babu hated walking back home under his sister's control.



There are times he wants to run and times when he wishes to halt somewhere to have a guava or a mango from the roadside tree, but his sister does not allow such behaviour. He also did not like the fact that Antara's friends walk with them while all his friends leave school much earlier.

His sister, on the other hand, felt awkward and embarrassed at the way Babu exchanged words with almost everyone on the way home, talking continuously. If someone doesn't see him, he would call out to them. Everyone from shopkeepers to fish vendors spoke to Babu like a close friend and his sister did not approve. However, there was no point complaining about all this as it was a strict order from their parents and they adjusted to this routine as best as they could.

One day, while returning from school, Antara as usual was walking home along with a few of her schoolmates, and Babu was following them giving everyone on the road a customary call as usual. At one point, a young man crossed them. Neither the young man nor Babu greeted each other. Noticing this, Antara teased her brother, "What happened? You talk to everyone. How come you didn't talk to him?"

Babu felt hurt over the matter. He did not know the young man, nor could he remember seeing him here earlier. The youth must be from some other place; else he would have recognised Babu and greeted him. At one point, Babu had eye contact with the young man, but there was no sign of recognition in his eyes.

Babu did not reply his sister and slowly descended to the crop fields by the road.

"Hey, what happened now? Where are you going?" his sister asked.

Without uttering a word or looking back at her sister, Babu just raised his small finger.

"Oh, come on! We have almost reached home and you...," Antara started to say in exasperation. But her brother

disappeared behind a bush even as she went on mumbling.

Antara and her friends walked a few yards ahead to wait under the shade of a tree. She was gradually getting angry. After quite some time Babu reappeared. Antara uttered intimidatingly, "What were you doing all this while? One could have made a round of the moon in the time you took!"

Babu, however, did not say anything. As if he was in a deep thought, he just followed his sister and her friends. Reaching home, Antara started shouting in front of their mother, "I cannot bring him along from school anymore! He would suddenly go missing on the way!"

That night, Babu and his father prepared for their regular post-dinner stroll around 9 o'clock. Generally they would take the road towards the bridge nearby, but that day Babu proposed, "Dad, let's take a different route today." "A different route...?" his father asked.

"Towards our school..."

"Okay, let's go," his father nodded.

While walking, Babu told his father, "Dad, today, while coming back from school I saw a stranger."

"What's the big deal? You will encounter so many strangers," his father said.

"No dad... Here on our roads, I don't see many strangers," Babu said. "I also thought this man looked suspicious."

"What? Suspicious!" His father now gave some importance to Babu. "And why do you say that?"

"First, I have not seen that young man here before. Second, when I looked at him, he lowered his eyes as if uncomfortable, and went away fast. Third, I noticed that his glance was not decent..."

"His glance!" his father laughed and asked, "Now tell me, how's my glance?"

"Good and calm, not fear-inducing, it's comforting..."

"Okay, okay, carry on... Do you have any fourth reason?"



“Of course,” Babu continued, “The fourth and most important thing I climbed down to the fields with an excuse and hid behind a bush to see what the man did. Walking a distance, he too descended to the field and proceeded towards the thatched hut beside the vacant land near the huge crop fields.”

“Is it that small house which was built a few years back by some villagers to keep an eye on their fields?” his father asked.

“Yes, yes,” Babu replied.

“But nobody stays in that house now and it is almost falling down.”

“Right... But I noticed that young man hurriedly entered the house.”

“A stranger entering this rundown house...” his father seemed a bit concerned. “It's true...there's something fishy.”

“That's why I urged you to come this way today for our walk. I thought we could take a closer look.”

His father did not say anything and they walked ahead in

silence. The small house was not far away. In the darkness of the night, they saw a thin light inside the hut.

“Dad, look...there's a light,” Babu whispered.

Babu's father was about to say something, but he suddenly changed his mind and asked in a loud voice, “So, what happened in school today? Did your mathematics teacher say anything to you?”

Babu was taken aback and answered, “Na, nothing.”

“Come, let's go back. This is quite a long walk after dinner,” his father suggested.

They walked back. On the way, his father talked loudly only on topics related to Babu's studies in school.

When they were about to reach home, his father said, “You are right, maybe some suspicious people are taking shelter there.”

“I doubted the same...But what made you start a conversation on school? That, too, on a loud voice! And you suddenly decided to walk back...”

“So, you did not notice? Two men were standing guard there in the darkness. They might have had guns with them. That is why, I mean, so that they do not suspect anything, I changed the topic of our discussion.”

“Then we should inform the police about this tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow, son, now. We cannot delay anymore. I will take the scooter and go. Whatever be the reason, they are not in that house for any good work,” his father said.

“I will also go with you,” said Babu, adamant.

“Okay, okay,” his father nodded.

The father and son reached the nearest police station. As soon as he heard what they had to say, the officer-in-charge said, “We had got information that they were coming towards our side. Now, thanks to you, we are sure they are hiding in that place.”

He immediately stood up and called his men and started giving orders.

“They means who?” Babu asked his father in a low tone.

“Some bad elements!” his father muttered.

“Right! We will go out and tackle them!” the police officer said. “And you please go back home and don't venture out at night.”

The next day they saw the news on TV. A police team led by the local police station's officer-in-charge busted a camp of bad characters in a nearby village who were planning a bomb blast in the adjoining town. They were using an abandoned house in the village to stock explosives and other materials to make the bomb. Due to this successful mission of the police department, the citizens had a close shave from a terrible situation.

The next day, Babu had an unexpected visitor at home. It was the Officer-in-Charge from the Police Station. He gave Babu a box of chocolates and shook his hands. “Well done, son!” he said. “We are looking forward to you joining our Police force when you grow up!” Babu smiled with pride and showed his tongue to his sister.

**Abhijit Sarma Barua**

*(Translated by: Mridumoloy Lukhurakhon)*

## KNOWING THE UNKNOWN

Nilee, a student of class seven, was absorbed in reading a book. It was not her textbook but a story book. "All five had a wonderful beginning to their holidays putting up their camps in two old caravans in the place that they had selected, amidst the quiet and peaceful greenery. But with the advent of the fair folks, strange incidents happened..." she read, munching a biscuit.

Suddenly, their front gate opened with a clank. Someone's there.

Nilee put her book aside and went out to see the visitor. She saw a rather young woman sheepishly approaching the veranda.

Seeing Nilee she asked, "Is Baideo at home?"

"Who do you want to see?"

"Isn't this Chanda Baideo's house?"

"Oh yes! Please wait, I'll get her."

Nilee had a look at the woman. The clothes were not expensive but decent. She carried a duffel bag. Nilee assumed that she must have come in search of work. It was rather difficult for her mother to manage everything on her own. She was aware that her mother was looking for someone to help her with her chores and had discussed this with some of her acquaintances too. But till now no suitable person had been found.

Nilee went in to inform her mother that someone had come looking for her. Her mother stepped out of the kitchen. Nilee followed, eager to know what her mother would talk about to the woman. Hiding her excitement, Nilee's mother gazed intently at the visitor and asked, "It seems you are looking for me. But I haven't recognised you. Come up to the veranda, let's have a word."

"Baideo, you won't recognise me. We haven't met earlier. You are acquainted with Arati Baideo from Elachi bazaar, aren't you? It's she who'd asked me to see you." The woman put her bag beside the veranda wall and sat upon a cane stool. She sat self-consciously, with her eyes lowered as if lost in some deep thought. Chanda Baruah too pulled along a chair and sat near her.

She gave a sympathetic look at this young woman and asked, "Who did you say asked you to see me?"

"Arati Baideo from Elachi bazaar, the one who works as a school teacher."

Nilee's mother understood who she was referring to. Arati was in school with her. Although they were at different colleges, their friendship continued. After her marriage, Chanda Baruah shifted to the city and their ties slackened. Arati must have felt for this poor woman and sent her to Chanda thinking that it would help her. Arati's contact number can be collected if needed.

"I got it now. But I haven't asked your name yet."

"Baideo, I'm Madhu. I work as a domestic help to make my living. There's no end to the misery of the poor. I'm living only for my daughter's sake despite this hard life." Tears rolled down Madhu's eyes.

"What work can you do?"

"How does one distinguish between household chores? I can cook, cleanse, baby sit almost every other odd errand that needs to be done."

"We don't need you to baby sit. We are three in the



family. There won't be much work."

"I'm not shy of labour."

"You said you've a daughter. How old is she?"

"She's four years. She stays with my mother. In Birinajhar village.

"What about your husband?"

"He's no more. His addiction to liquor took away his life. Otherwise he was a good person."

Nilee came closer and reacted, "If he was so good why he died of drinking?"

Her mother turned her head sharply and said, "Nilee! Why are you here? Go inside and concentrate in your studies!"

Nilee didn't budge and continued to listen to this young woman, keeping a close watch on her. Nilee's mother put some more queries to Madhu. She collected the address of her village home. Birinajhar was at some distance from Nagaon, the town where Nilee and her family lived.



Finally, Madhu secured a job at Chanda Baruah's residence.

Nilee's mother showed Madhu her room and gave her instructions regarding household tasks and asking Madhu to get started, she finally sat on a chair to rest for a while.

Nilee came closer to her mother and said, "Ma, can I ask you something? Is Madhu a common name for an Assamese girl?"

"What's the matter?" Her mother asked. "Madhu can be a shortened form of so many names like Madhavi, Madhuri and so on."

"Ok...there's something else too. Shouldn't we enquire about her with help from the police before deciding to keep her? She may be lying. Do you feel that everyone else is honest like you and father?"

Hearing this, Nilee's mother became anxious for a few moments. Nilee's father was a simple man and she didn't think he would be of much help; even then, it would perhaps be good to exchange a few words with him. After talking with Nilee's father, it was decided that Madhu would be working for them but the family would be on alert from a distance.

Nilee's father said, "Suspiciousness is a disease. But it's necessary to be careful so that sudden disaster doesn't take one by surprise. Prevention is better than cure, isn't that so?"

Nilee had a quick reply, "But father, we haven't been careful enough. We haven't done the needful. Neither have we informed the police nor have we verified her home address."

"Fine, something shall be done to this end."

However, nothing was done. Nilee's mother kept an eye on her but she seemed to be quite alright. Despite Madhu's unwillingness, however, Nilee had clicked several snaps of Madhu with her mobile phone, all in different postures.

Four days went by. Madhu cooked well and prepared



tempting meals. She was taking good care of the household. One night, Nilee saw Madhu talking quietly on a phone. Till then, no one knew that Madhu had a mobile phone. It's not a sin to possess such a phone; on the contrary, in some cases, having a mobile handset proves to be of great help. Nowadays, almost everyone has one. However, to be on the phone in the dark hours of the night, to speak in whispers, hiding it away and then vanishing from the spot when Nilee approached her, certainly gave reasons to worry. She spoke to her mother. Her father too pondered upon it and cautioned them to keep an eye on Madhu.

The next morning, as usual, all were busy in their normal chores. Nilee had school, her father was getting ready for office and her mother was busy in household errands.

The house was calm after both left. Madhu was busy in the kitchen stashing away the utensils.

She was humming a Bhupen Hazarika number.

In between, Chanda chatted with Madhu about the latter's home, her childhood and marriage, her child, how challenging it is to bring up one's child single handedly, and things like that.

The milkman came and delivered the day's quota of milk.

The regular fish seller who was on his way back home, too yelled, "Baideo, there's fresh fish still left. Would you like to buy some?"

The day moved on at a slow pace, quite naturally. At school, Nilee sat beside her close friend Upama during the tiffin-break and shared one another's food as was usually done on every other day. Taking a bite from the croquette in Nilee's lunch box, Upama said, "Nilee, did Aunty make you prepare your lunch yourself today? It's not as good as she usually makes it. Nevertheless, it is not bad." "No, there's a maid to help mother with her work at our home. It's four, perhaps five days now. I was, in fact, thinking of discussing it with you. I'll send her photo to you as soon as I reach home."

On reaching home, Nilee secretly sent a few of Madhu's photographs to Upama through WhatsApp.

After a while there was call from Upama.

"Where are you? Is there anyone close by?"

"I'm in my room. Hurry up, what is it?"

"My mother saw the photograph while I was having a look at it. After looking at it carefully, she said, 'Isn't she the thief from Doomdooma?' You already know that we are from Doomdooma. Apparently, this maid my mother spoke of had secured the job of a domestic help with a family there and, one day, she mixed sedatives in their food and looted all their valuables. Nobody had taken any care to verify her address. They hadn't even informed the police. So she couldn't be traced. When your father returns, ask him to

“speak to my father.”

When Nilee's mother was told about this, she called her husband home immediately.

The events thereafter took place in swift sequence. The police arrived. Madhu confessed to her crime at Doomdooma. The police found sedatives too, in Madhu's bag.

After the police took her away, the family heaved a sigh of relief. They had been saved from an impending danger.

Nilee's parents told her, “Nilee, you have done a great thing today. Tomorrow we will get a Famous Five and a Hardy Boys for you. We know you will read them responsibly when you have no school work.”

**Soneswar Sarma**

*(Translated by: Merry Baruah)*

## THE DREAM

“Hey, your phone is ringing, why don't you answer it?”

“Let it ring. I can't hear clearly what the people at the other end says. Can't make out anything of those garbled voice. The entire exercise ends up in shouting only.”

“The handset has outlived its life. I have always been saying that I would give you a new good phone. You always disagree.”

“Is there any way out other than that? Our son does not leave even this old one for a second. If he gets a new one, then it will invite doom. He would completely forget his studies.”

“Hey, why do you think like that? It is normal to fiddle with the phone a little. Would it be nice if a boy in class IX does not learn to handle a modern handset? Let me buy you a nice phone as a Puja gift.”

“Leave it. Think of the consequence when the new phone proposed to be bought for me falls in Babloo's hand. He would have to wind up his studies in class IX itself. I know my son very well. Even without a phone he has no interest in studies. It is a miracle that he somehow got promoted to IX. Now don't get a new handset to create another problem.”

“You should fix a time for him. Allow him some time to use it and then keep it.”

“Wah, I would fix some time for him to use it and he



would just obey it.”

“Yeah, he must. He has a vast course to study. After all, he is a student of class IX, he must study well. I will explain to him. He will understand my advice.”

Babloo was listening to the conversation between his parents from the other room. He loses his temper whenever he sees the primitive handset that belongs to his mother with the push button keypad. Nothing is clear in the tiny screen. There are so many things in the new handsets available these days! Babloo feels like fiddling with such a handset the entire day. Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and what not?! Almost all his classmates including Rishav and Rajdeep have the latest models. Well, they are also students of class IX! But if Babloo's father wants to buy his mother one, she refuses!

He speaks out to his father loudly in an angry voice from his room, “Papa, please don't listen to ma and give her a new mobile phone.” “Look at his level of interest. We are

discussing here in this room and he is listening to every word from there," his mother told the father angrily.

"Okay, I would give your ma the mobile. But, have your studies been going on or not?" asked his father. "Yes," said Babloo. "Nice, very well then," said his father, "Study hard. Otherwise, ma would not get the new mobile."

Babloo drifted into a dream world thinking about the new mobile to be handed to his mother. So many photos he would take at his pleasure! He would open a Facebook account. He would collect the mobile numbers of those classmates who have mobiles and open a WhatsApp group. He has learnt from his friends many a thing about mobiles. And, ma! What does she know about that thing? She would, only if he shows her.

Babloo's guess was right. His father too took the matter seriously. He is not able to contact home from outside even on important matters. So rather than waiting till Puja, he bought a handset and gifted it to Babloo's mother the next day itself. After this, he stuck to his mother all along. His father also had to seek help from Babloo to operate it. Both his parents were amazed to see how much he knew about the intricacies of the latest model even though they did not have it at home till now.

His father had bought the phone to contact his wife at home in case of need. He continued to carry his old phone to office in the morning. Babloo too has grown up, his father thought. He also needs a phone to contact his classmates to discuss about studies. However, at the same time, he was worried about his son. He even gave a short sermon to Babloo about its advantages and vices. "Actually these phones are so useful for us. But if one misuses it, one may be doomed", said his father. Babloo appeared to listen to what his father told him. "Use the Internet and the apps only for good purposes, son," his father continued. After that



Babloo's parents got engrossed in their daily chores and life went on.

But what about Babloo? He opened a Facebook account in his mother's mobile without his parent's knowledge. He started sending friend requests to his friend circle and made a good number of Facebook friends soon. To soften his mother towards him, he clicked his mother's photo and got an account opened in her name too. Initially his mother was aghast at the idea. But as he showed the accounts and photos of her relatives and friends, she relented. So both mother and son used their Facebook accounts regularly without the father's knowledge.

Babloo took full advantage of the situation by regularly showing her updates of relatives and friends. She was swept away seeing regular updates of long detached people in Facebook, people with whom she had once been very close to. But she noticed that Babloo forgot even about food or rest when he was fiddling with the mobile. What he does by continuously touching the screen she could hardly make out. To take selfies in various poses became his passion.

Though he had to keep aside the mobile for a few hours at home under strict orders of his mother, he was internally feeling exasperated. His friends uploaded beautiful pictures riding on costly bikes and cars, pictures of food in expensive hotels and restaurants in beautiful locations. Babloo thought he was being deprived of all these. He started feeling very low. So one day he stood near an expensive car, snapped a photo of himself and uploaded it on Facebook. He liked the idea so much that he even showed it to his mother. Though she said the customary "looking good", she got worried. In a household where they cannot afford to buy even a two-wheeler, has he turned over-ambitious?! Will it spell doom?

But Babloo's ambitions had already soared too high. Whenever he opened his Facebook page, he saw his friends on outings with their family, enjoying sumptuous mouth-watering dishes that he has even never heard of! Gradually he developed revulsion towards such posts. He started feeling repugnant on seeing the posts of sightseeing in various beautiful cars in beautiful attire. How happy are they! He too wanted to live like a rich person's son and to enjoy different delicacies like one.

It was just one week till Puja. The atmosphere had already become festive. Markets were full of various attractive items. Babloo's father was browsing the newspaper sitting on the veranda in the morning when a police van screeched to a halt in front of their gate. A Sub Inspector flanked by two constables opened the gate and entered. Babloo's father stood up, perplexed.

"Whom do you want?..." Even before he could utter the complete sentence, the Sub Inspector interrupted, "Is this the residence of Nayan Kakati, I mean Babloo?"

"Yes, yes. Nayan, I mean Babloo, is my son. But "

"Is he inside?"

"Must be. Where else would he be at this time of the day?"

Babloo's father stood dumbfounded.

The group entered Babloo's room. One constable held him on the bed. Babloo and his mother started crying aloud. The officer explained to Babloo's parents, "Do you know, Mr. Kakati, what your son did yesterday?"

His father voice choked, "Don't know, sir."

"He had entered a showroom and stolen two expensive watches. He failed to realise that his misadventure would get recorded in the Close Circuit Camera installed there."

Babloo's father stood speechless. The police officer gave Babloo a mouthful and almost dragged him to the

waiting police van. His father too rushed behind them and sat in the van. Babloo's mother cried hoarse, while the car left, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and dust.

Babloo perhaps dreamed of becoming rich instantly. So he chose the "short cut". But the result was so terrible.

**Anushree Sarma Barua**

*(Translated by: Bibekananda Choudhury)*

## THE STORY OF SALT AND OTHER THINGS

“Oh mother! Come and see, the rice in my plate has turned blue!”

Pahi, after adding salt to the plain rice in her plate, was squeezing a lemon on it.

She had been running a fever since the previous night and her mother, Abha, said that she need not go to school that day. Pahi had lost her appetite because of the fever and wanted to have just plain boiled rice with salt and lemon juice.

On hearing Pahi's excited shout, Abha came out of the kitchen but was not much surprised to see the plate of rice turn visibly blue. She hardly ever paid attention to such things. Yes, only children notice such small occurrences, Abha thought. Looking out of the window, Pahi saw her neighbor, Manu, getting ready to leave for school. She called him in and showed the plate of rice.

Manu said, “I have not seen such a thing earlier. I shall ask Ratul Sir in school today. I shall also come to tell you what he says about this. You take rest, Pahi.”

Riding a bicycle, he left for school along with Nilu and Mintu who were waiting for him.

That afternoon, Manu, Nilu, Mintu and a few other friends came to Pahi's house. All were the members of the local organization called Chatrabandhu, led by Manu. They

organized programmes like quizzes, elocutions, recitations, etc.

Immediately on arriving, Manu declared: "Aunty, we will hold a meeting of our club in your living room today. The topic is 'Iodine in Salt'. We will discuss what Ratul Sir told us today in the school."

"Okay, very good. Our Pahi could also listen to it. She could not attend school today and is feeling bored," Abha sounded enthusiastic.

"But you have to arrange tea for us. We will have it after the meeting," a smiling Manu said.

"You don't have to tell me that. Coconut ladoos and pithas are ready. I shall also make some malpuas for you all."

Nilu had brought a banner prepared on a drawing sheet. It had 'Chatrabandhu: A Discussion' written on it with marker pen. Nilu was good in drawing and painting. The banner was hung on a wall of the living room. Presiding over the meet, Pahi signalled for the discussion to start.

**Nilu:** Salt is an essential ingredient of the daily food of man. Man has been taking this as food since ancient times. Long back, salt was so scarce and precious that it was called 'White Gold'. Our forefathers considered donating salt to be equal to donating gold. Salt is scientifically known as sodium chloride. It supplies sodium and chloride ions to our body.

**Mintu:** The salt produced from sea water also contains small amounts of magnesium, bromine, iodine, etc. Iodine is essential for human body. Any deficiency of iodine causes swelling of neck or goiter in our body. When there is a deficit of iodine in our body, the thyroid gland located in the lower part of our neck cannot produce hormones in adequate quantity and that results in the swelling of the neck. Iodine is essential also for the physical and mental growth of children. Iodine deficiency in pregnant women can cause insufficient growth of brain and body of the baby. That is why taking salt fortified with iodine has been made



mandatory.

Pahi: When I was taking my meal this morning, why did the rice turn blue?

Manu: We told Ratul Sir about this in the school. Sir was in fact planning to talk on this experiment during the Game of Chemistry next week. Anyway, just now, Mintu told us about the importance of iodine in salt. But, as an element, iodine is poisonous. So this is added to our edible salt only as a compound or a salt. That is why a salt named potassium iodate is added to the edible salt. The salt we take in must contain iodine at the rate of at least 15 ppm, or 15 parts per million. Rice contains starch and lemon juice has citric acid. Free iodine is released when acid reacts chemically with potassium iodate. That free iodine creates starch iodide chemically reacting with the starch present in rice. This starch iodide is blue in colour. This is what caused your rice to turn blue today morning.

Pahi: That means salt without iodine would not make the rice blue even when lemon juice is mixed with it.

Manu: Wait, I have an idea. A trader can sell salt without iodine at the same price to make profit...

All : Yes, that is not impossible...

Manu: Then we can take up a study project on this issue..

Nilu: What type of project? Will you elaborate?

Manu: We can study whether the salt sold at various shops in our area are fortified with iodine or not.

The proposal was accepted by everybody present in the meeting. The meeting ended. Everyone relished the delicious snacks prepared by Abha, and went home.

On the two Sundays after their meeting, the members of Chatrabandhu collected samples of salt from 20 shops in the nearby locality. A make-shift laboratory was established in Manu's house where they tested the salt samples for iodine. It was decided that those sample which turned blue after mixing with lemon juice and starch contained iodine and those that did not turn blue contained no iodine.

The study showed that 6 out of 20 samples did not contain iodine, i.e. 30% of the samples tested were without iodine.

They submitted a report based on their findings to the sub-divisional office of the government Food Safety Department. The departmental head showered praise on the members of Chatrabandhu for the study and assured legal action will be taken against the six shop owners who had been selling fake 'iodised' salt. The members of Chatrabandhu were also awarded for their good work in the silver jubilee celebrations of the local unit of the Assam Science Society.

One day, Nilu came up before the members of their club with a proposal for a bigger food analysis study. He had read an article in a science magazine on 'Food adulteration and its identification'. From the article, he learnt several methods to identify adulterated food items like honey, turmeric powder, mustard oil, etc. 'Adulterated' food means food that is does not have everything that it is supposed to have or has something added to it which may be harmful to

us. The members of Chatrabandhu decided to present their project on testing samples of a list of food items for any sign of adulteration in the ensuing State Children Science Congress. They have started working accordingly. Their initiative will help save many from falling ill or being cheated.

**Kshiradhar Barua**

*(Translated by: Partha Pratim Hazarika)*



## THE SAVIOUR

The brass band in colourful uniform, was playing the tune of a familiar song on their shining instruments – big drums, trumpets, clarinets – outside the marquee set up for the meeting. Had it been any other day, Geetartha would have run to the band and stood near them, observing how they played the instruments. But today was different. He controlled himself and sat still with his father in the first row of spectators. Even though he sat quietly, he felt very excited inside.

Balloons of different colours were tied to the posts of the beautifully decorated marquee. Strips of coloured paper interconnected the posts. A long table covered with a starched white cloth, almost completely hidden under beautifully arranged flowers, was laid out on the stage. Eight chairs with white cushions were placed behind the table.

Geetartha and his father were led to the front row by two men immediately after they had got down from the car a short while ago. One of the men asked if they could be of any service and when his father replied in the negative, both men excused themselves politely and kept vigil some distance away. As Geetartha sat with his father, he kept observing everything minutely. Even though it was nearly 4 pm, the weather was still a bit warm. Hence he took

occasional sips of water from the bottle he carried with him. He knew from his father that today's meeting was being organized by the Traffic Control Branch of the police and it was on Road Safety. The Director General of Police was the chief guest. Geetartha too was to be accorded a special felicitation.

Earlier, when he was younger, Geetartha had no idea what the Traffic Control Branch was. For him, 'Police' meant the men and women in khaki uniforms and caps who arrested thieves and dacoits. His father had explained to him that there were some other police personnel who controlled traffic and helped people commute better and safely on roads. They wore an uniform which had a dark blue hat with a strap, trousers of the same dark blue colour and a light blue half-sleeved shirt. Geetartha had seen such men and women at traffic signal points. But he had not known that they too were police and what their job was.

As advised by his school principal, Geetartha wore his school uniform to the meeting. His father had bought him a new shirt especially for today's meeting. Many students, accompanied by three teachers of his school, had also come to the meeting by a bus. As they got down from the bus and walked towards their allotted seats, they waved at him from afar. He reciprocated their gesture from his seat. Everyone was aware of what he had done the other day. Today's function was to honour him for his timely and smart action. Geetartha thought about the incident. He had done exactly what his parents and teachers had taught him.

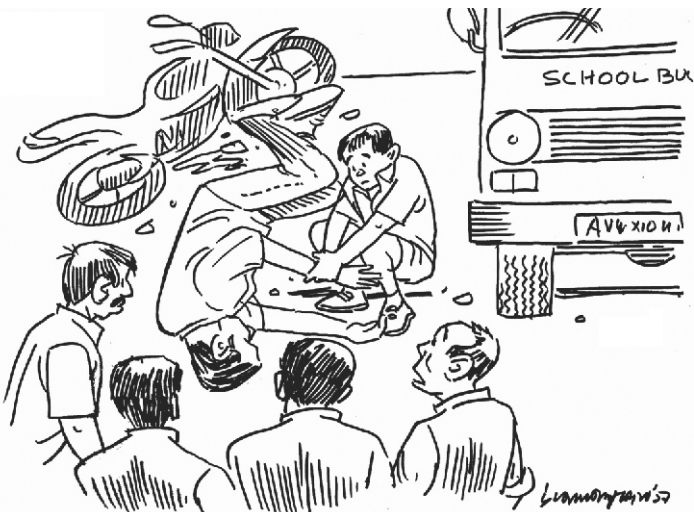
That day, after school, Geetartha and his schoolmates had boarded bus number 4 one by one and sat on their respective seats. He was occupying the seat by the window on the second left row of the bus. Geetartha used to travel by that bus everyday with Baruah as the driver. In fact everyone referred to the vehicle as 'Baruah Bus'. Along with

the students, a few teachers too used to commute by the bus. A handyman addressed as 'Kanak Dada' by the students, also served in the bus. When the bus was on the move, Kanak would stand on the foot board and when it stopped he would help the students board or get down. When necessary, he would even help the students cross the road.

Their school was located on the outskirts of the city. Hence the bus could enter the city only after covering some distance along the national highway. That day too, the bus was travelling along the highway. Only one student had got off by then. Suddenly, Geetartha noticed that their bus was passing by a crowd, honking the horn constantly. As they crossed the crowd, he noticed a man lying on the roadside. A motorcycle lay near him. Several people had crowded the spot.

Geetartha shouted, “Baruah Khura, stop the bus, an accident has taken place.”

The driver slowed down the bus but Kanak the handyman shouted, “Baruah da, drive on, no need to stop. A man has



fallen off the motorcycle. There are many people near him. If necessary they will take care of him. Let's move."

Geetartha shouted, "No khura, stop the bus." He then turned to his teacher, Hazarika, who was sitting nearby and said, "Sir, please tell him to stop. It is our duty to help people in trouble."

Hazarika asked the driver to stop the bus. When the bus came to a halt, he stood up and said, "Kanak, you stand at the door. Don't let the students get down. I'll go and see what is happening."

Geetartha held his teacher's hand and said, "Let me come with you, sir." Hazarika said, "You small children need not come. I'll go alone and see what is happening."

Geetartha did not listen to his teacher. He said, "Sir, I shall stay with you. My father is a doctor. Sometimes I accompany him even to the hospital. So there won't be any harm even if I come with you." He held on to his teacher's hand and finding no way out, Hazarika held Geetartha's hand and hurried to the spot of the accident.

They found the man lying on the roadside groaning. He was bleeding near the right wrist. His clothes were torn at many places. He had suffered injuries to the face, legs and many other parts. The motorcycle, with its rear portion badly damaged, lay some distance away from him with shards of broken lights all around.

The people gathered around him did not go near the man. Geetartha could hear them talking excitedly. One said, "The truck hit him from behind and fled away." Another onlooker said, "Riding on the highway without wearing a helmet will certainly entail such incidents." Another man said to someone, "Inform 108 immediately." Someone else said, "Don't do anything till the police arrive." Some people got busy taking photos of the accident.

Hazarika said, "Geetartha, let's go. The people gathered

here will take care of the man. There is a hospital nearby, they will take him there.” Geetartha said, “Sir, please call 108 immediately. An ambulance is needed immediately. I am going to help him till then.” Even as he said that, he let go of his teacher's hand and hastened to the wounded man. Coming very close to the man he said, “Uncle, where does it hurt? Do you have difficulty in breathing?”

The man gasped and shaking his head, indicated his wounded hand. Jets of blood were shooting out of the hand. Geetartha immediately took out his handkerchief from the pocket and pressed hard against the bleeding part with it. A man who was standing nearby brought a bottle of water and said, “Son, please remove your hand, let me pour some water first on the bleeding part.”

Geetartha replied, “The wound will be cleaned at the hospital. Right now our main concern is stopping the blood. The blood will stop flowing out only if the wound is kept pressed hard. Otherwise his condition will deteriorate. I won't remove my hand.”

Geetartha looked at the wounded man, even as he kept pressing his wounded hand, and asked, “Uncle, can you stand up?” The man nodded. Geetartha said, “If you find it difficult, sit down here. We will help you.” Seeing Geetartha's initiative, Hazarika and some other men stepped forward. They helped the injured man sit beside the road. Hazarika said, “Geetartha, you let go of your hand. We, the grown-ups, will press the wound.” Geetartha replied, “Sir, blood is still flowing out of uncle's vein. If it continues, he will become unconscious. I can't let go even for a few seconds. I am holding his hand.” He further said, “Sir, can you take some photographs of this spot from different angles?” Hazarika instantly took ten or twelve photographs. Geetartha addressed the public also that were gathered



there, “Please do not touch anything here till the police arrive.”

Just then, the ambulance arrived. As the ambulance staff lifted the injured man on to a trolley, Geetartha did not let go of his hand on the man's wrist and climbed up with them, pressing the wound. Hazarika realised he could not make Geetartha change his mind. He asked Kanak to inform the guardians that there will be a slight delay and asked Baruah Driver to carry on with the rest of the children. He and Geetartha would travel by the ambulance.

The Medical College Hospital was not very far and the ambulance headed straight for the hospital. Two men in green uniform lifted the injured man on to another trolley and pushed him inside the hospital building. Even though one of the men asked Geetartha to let go of the injured man's hand, he did not oblige and instead went inside along with them.

Geetartha said to the doctor who came forward to attend on the injured man, “One of his veins has suffered a

rupture. Since there has been an incessant flow of blood from there, I have kept it pressed.” The doctor gave Geetartha a surprised look and then took the man into a room nearby. A nurse administered saline through his left hand. His blood sample too was collected as he could require a blood transfusion. The doctor then said, “Son, you can now remove your hand. I have made full arrangements to stop the bleeding. Go and wait outside with your teacher.” Geetartha let go of the man's hand and went outside the room. He waited with Hazarika teacher near the door. After some time, the doctor came out and said to Geetartha, “You have done a great job today. But, where did you learn all this, including about veins?” Geetartha replied, “These things are mentioned in our books. Our teachers have taught us. And my father too is a doctor. He taught me how to carry out first aid in case of accidents.”

“What is your father's name? Where does he work?”

Geetartha mentioned his father's name and said that he too worked in the same hospital.

The doctor reacted in surprise, “I see, you are the son of Barkataki Sir.” He called up Dr Barkataki and told him about his son. In a short while, Geetartha's father arrived at the emergency ward. He took stock of the situation and said to Hazarika, “Thank you for staying with him throughout. You can go home now. Geetartha will come with me; I shall inform my family about him.”

“Namaskar.”

Geetartha returned to the present upon seeing the man who greeted his father. With a plastered right hand and several injury marks on the face, the man came and stood in front of them. He then turned to Geetartha and said, “Aren't you Geetartha?” As Geetartha nodded his head, the man said, “I am the man whose life you had saved the other day. Everybody has praised the bravado you had demonstrated

the other day. Of course, I too was to blame; I was not wearing a helmet." He sat near Geetartha.

Suddenly there was an announcement "The chief guest of today's meeting, the Director General of Police, has arrived." As soon as the DGP came in, everyone stood up and welcomed him. He was escorted to the dais. Soon, another announcement was made, "Today's most important individual, the person we have invited here to felicitate, whose courage saved a life, may be a young boy, but he is a smart and intelligent individual who thinks on his feet. His name is GeetarthaBarkataki. We request Geetartha and his proud father Dr Barkataki to come on stage and take their seats."

Geetartha and his father stood up. The air reverberated with the clapping of hands. The band outside played another familiar tune. As Geetartha walked up to the stage, he imagined that along with a large number of colourful balloons, he too was flying high into the sky and his friends and others down below were encouraging him by clapping their hands.

**Jayanta Kumar Goswami**

*(Translated by: Biman Arandhara)*



## INDU'S FEAR

Indu was on her way back home from her tuition class. Her house wasn't very far and she doesn't mind walking. However, the route to her tuitions was through a desolate lane which was usually not frequented by passers-by. To keep her mind away from uncomfortable thoughts, Indu pondered upon her homework and traced her steps back home in a fast pace. Engrossed in her thoughts, she was startled when a man suddenly appeared by her side and asked, "What is your name?"

Indu did not like to talk to unknown people but thought she would seem very rude if she did not reply. She told him her name.

He then went ahead and asked her where she was coming from, where she stayed, who all were there in her family and so on. Indu kept talking. Putting his hands in his pocket, he then brought out some chocolates and offered them to her. As the man was a stranger, Indu was hesitant in accepting them. Seeing her dither, the man assured her, "Nothing shall happen. Have them. I love children and so always have chocolates for them." After the man's repeated insistence, Indu accepted the chocolates albeit rather hesitantly.

She thanked the man and wanted to move away after



taking the candies. But, pointing his finger to a distance, the man said, "I stay there. Come with me, I shall give you more chocolates."

Indu was overcome with greed when she heard about more chocolates. She loved sweets! She stared at the man without a word. This time the man said, "Follow me. I'll give many other things too, apart from the chocolates."

Before knowing what was happening, Indu started walking after the man. Although she started following the man because she was tempted by chocolates, she halted after going a few steps. She felt scared. Will it be safe to follow a man who was a stranger?

Seeing Indu falter, the man said, "Come, make haste. Don't be scared."

Indu now looked into his eyes. She was really scared this time. Without saying a word, she turned her back and made a sudden run towards her home. She reached home without looking back for a moment. Her mother was

waiting at the gate. As soon as Indu reached, her mother asked, "Why are you running in this manner?" Her mother could see Indu under a spell of intense fear. With affection and care she asked, "Why are you afraid dear?"

Indu related the tale about the man who wanted to give her chocolates. Her mother warned her that she should never accept anything from strangers. She then narrated the incident to Indu's father. He immediately went out to the road, thinking that the man might be nearby. The road looked deserted but Indu's father was worried. After a while, he spoke to himself, "Perhaps, it would do good to keep the police informed." He then told Indu and her mother that if such strange incidents takes place, it is very important to inform the police. After this, he rang up the police station and provided the details of the incident.

On Saturday evening, Indu accompanied Ruku, Montu and Daisy to their neighbour, Ratna Dada's house. Ratna Dada is in college. He is very affectionate towards the little ones and has an answer to their many questions.

Indu was still perturbed by the incident with the stranger. She narrated it in details to Ratna. Ratna dada listened to her keenly. Then he said, "Indu, you acted wise by not accompanying the man." "Why? What would have happened if she had followed him?" asked Daisy.

Ratna dada continued, "Listen carefully. If you are with your parents or someone from the family, there's no reason to worry. If people you are familiar with gift you something, there's nothing to worry at all. But when you are alone, be careful. There are both bad people along with good people in this world. Now the man who wanted to give chocolates to Indu was a stranger. He might have been a good soul or an evil person. We don't know. What might be the reason that bad people lure away small children?"

Ratna dada answered his own question, “There might many reasons. Sometimes, small children may be kidnapped for money. After they are taken away, the parents are sent a demand for huge ransom or there might be other threats too. Sometimes, bad people want to cut and take the organs like kidneys from your body. Further, there are some people who derive pleasure inflicting pain upon children's bodies. It is because of these reasons that Indu's parents were worried that day when they came to know that a stranger had offered chocolates to her. And so Indu's father thought of informing the police about it. In cases such as these, the police are always the most reliable help to look out for. The police track down such miscreants and punish them so that such unlawful activities can be prevented.”

Indu and her friends felt light after listening to Ratna dada. Indu felt that she acted cleverly by retracing her steps back home that day and not blindly following the stranger although she initially did want to go with him.

Ratna dada concluded, “Remember, when someone tells you to do something while you are alone, think about it carefully. If you sense danger, then come away from it.”

**Gurmail Singh**

*(Translated by: Merry Baruah)*

## HOW THE CHANGE CAME ABOUT

Sonti and Aziz paid a visit to Arup in the evening. All three studied in the sixth standard. Sonti and Aziz were in the same school, Arup studied in the government school. Summer vacations were going on and they had played football everyday in the field in front of the government school to which Arup went. With so much construction going on, there is almost no place left for the children to play. After their schools reopen, they'll not be able to play in the field and would enrol at the stadium.

It had rained the previous day while they were playing and so the ball had to be left behind at Arup's place. Today, Sonti and Aziz dropped by at Arup's home so that they could get the ball back and ask him for a game as well. As they reached the gate, they saw Arup sitting on a chair in the veranda, lost in deep thought. Arup was so immersed in his thoughts that he didn't notice his friends coming towards him.

“Arup” said Sonti. Arup looked up, startled.

“Sonti, Aziz...when did you come?”

Aziz responded with a question, “What are you thinking about so seriously that you didn't even notice our coming?”

Arup whispered, “You know, I'm very worried. Ma's gold chain has been missing since yesterday afternoon. Like

every other day, before taking her bath, she kept the chain in a drawer. Thereafter, when Mama and Mami arrived, travelling by the morning train, she forgot to wear it. After she had served them lunch and saw them off to the airport, she remembered about it and went to put it on. But the chain was missing. It is nowhere and seems to have vanished into thin air."

After listening to what Arup had to say, Aziz asked, "Are you sure that this isn't the work of the maid who comes to work every day?"

Immediately, Arup retorted, "Our Pramila Bai definitely did not do this. She has been working here since a long time; she doesn't even lay a hand on a coin from the ones that lie on the table. And even when she needs to have betelnut, she asks from Ma. No, no, Pramila Bai can't do this. I'm so sure."

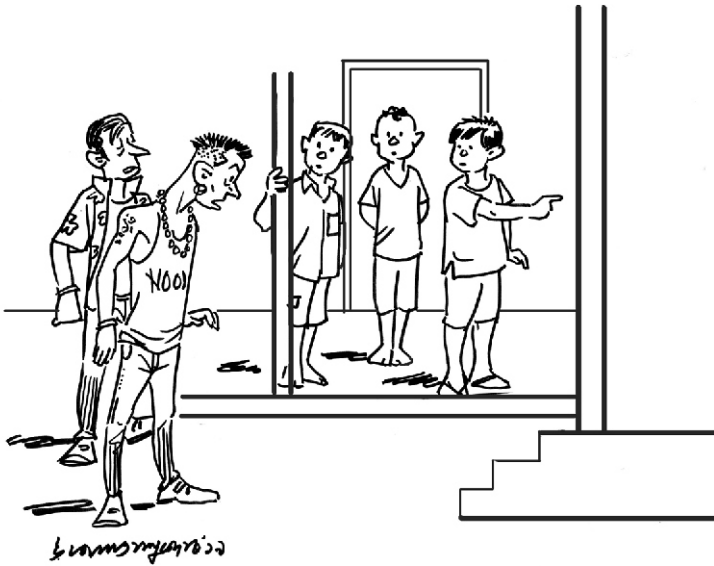
Arup's profound belief on Parmila Bai made Sonti feel glad. Aziz too said with a sense of relief, "Perhaps Aunty had kept it somewhere and now she's unable to recall. A thorough search shall help you to locate it."

Sonti said, "Fine, now you go in and bring our ball, let's go and play."

Arup replied glumly, "The ball is in Dada's room. Dada is sleeping there with the door locked. He will be irritated if I wake him up now."

Aziz replied in surprise, "But don't you share the same room?"

Arup said, "Yes, that's true. Earlier, there was no problem at all. You know, after coming back from the college picnic, Dada told me that the higher secondary examination requires serious preparation and apparently my presence in that room disturbs him. So these days I use our guest room. Yesterday, when it started raining I hurriedly kicked the ball into Dada's room!"



Sonti laughed at Arup's words and said, "It's good for you. Because of Biju Dada, at least you now have a room for yourself even though it is the guest room."

He looked at Aziz and said, "Aziz, you go and knock at Biju da's door and bring the ball. Biju da might be irritated with Arup but he won't be annoyed with you."

Biju dada is Arup's elder brother. At Sonti's suggestion, Aziz went and knocked at Biju da's locked door.

Biju da responded from inside, in a voice drowned in the drowsiness of slumber, "Who's there?"

"Biju da this is Aziz. Please give us our ball."

"There is no ball here. Please leave."

It was clear to Aziz that Biju da was irritated.

He went back to his friends and said, "Today we shall not be able to play. It seems there's no ball in Biju da's room."

On hearing Aziz, Arup burst out angrily, "How come there's no ball in that room? I kicked the ball myself and put it under Dada's study table. If Dada says that the ball isn't

there, it means that he has not been at study last night and this morning as well. Wait, I'll let Ma know about this."

Just when Arup wanted to yell out at his mother, Aziz put his hand on Arup's mouth and hushed him. Aziz saw two boys who looked like Biju Da's friends, entering by the gate.

One of them asked Arup, "Is Bijoy at home?"

"Yes. He is sleeping in his room. Please wait, I'll get him."

"You needn't bother. We'll wake him up right now."

Saying so, both walked into the house in self-assured steps as if it was their own house.

Looking angrily at the two boys going towards Biju da's room, Arup said, "These two are Dada's new friends. They have been with him since Dada had been to the picnic with the college group. But I don't like them at all."

Aziz asked in surprise, "Is that so? We knew Bishal da, Ankur da, Simanta da to be Biju da's friends. Has Biju da parted ways with them?"

Arup replied, "We haven't seen his former friends for a long time now. If at all any one of them pays a visit, Dada doesn't give company like he used to. He doesn't even exchange words. Those friends used to come over and meet me too, calling me 'Bhaity'. These friends don't even acknowledge me."

Biju da's new friends went inside his room, locked the door from inside and spent quite some time talking. It grew dark outside. Seeing the darkness approaching, Sonti said glumly, "There's no time for football today. Arup, you do one thing. Whenever Biju da comes out of his room, you go in and fetch the ball. Keep it with you so that we can play tomorrow."

With disappointed hearts, both took leave from Arup. While they were on road, Biju da's friends walked past



speedily. As they walked past, one of them said to the other, "There's no reason to worry about tomorrow. The thing has been arranged. We'll have great fun".

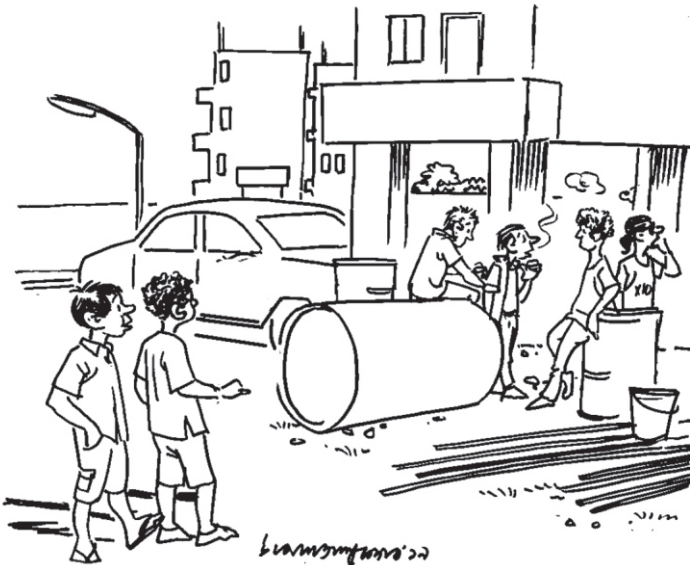
Aziz heard them very clearly. What 'fun' were these two new friends excitedly talking about?

Next day, Aziz and Sonti went to Arup's house once again at the same time. Arup looked even more morose than the day before.

He disclosed to his friends, "I am feeling sadder today than I have ever felt in my life!"

Hearing this, Aziz asked, "Is there any new development?"

Nodding his head, Arup said, "Yes, Ma is unable to find her gold ring since last evening. Since the ring had become too small for her finger, she was apparently thinking of going to the goldsmith. The most untoward episode was the dismissal of that Pramila bai from work at our place. Bai had wept pitifully. She said that she would never steal anything



even if she had to go without food for days. Father responded that it is only after considering such things, she wasn't handed over to the police; they had just asked her to leave the job. On the whole, I have lost all interest in playing today after all that has happened since morning. By the way, I got out the football from Dada's room. You go and play."

Sonti said, "I'm sorry to think of what happened to Pramila bai".

Aziz replied gravely, "Something needs to be done." Both Aziz and Sonti bade goodbye to Arup and walked over to the banks of the big pond at the heart of the city. Suddenly, Aziz said, "Sonti, look! Isn't that Bijuda? His two new friends are also with him. I feel they are waiting for someone."

Even before Aziz could complete his words, a scooter halted near Biju da and his friends. The man on the scooter handed over a small packet to Biju da and rode away. Immediately after, Biju da and his friends too walked away from the spot.

Watching all this, Aziz whispered to Sonti, "Come, lets walk at a distance behind them and find out where are they heading to."

A surprised Sonti asked, "Why?" Aziz lifted his fingers to his mouth and signalled Sonti to remain quiet. Keeping at a safe distance, they began following Biju da and his friends.

Aziz and Sonti didn't have to go very far. They saw Biju da and his friends enter a half completed building. For some reason, the construction work of this building has been stalled since quite few days now. Pretending to keep a watch on the people coming and going by, Sonti and Aziz remained hanging around the site. As time passed, they saw boys of Biju da's age or somewhat elder to him

approach the building and enter it.

Aziz told Sonti, "Let's go to the nearby police station."  
"Why?" asked Sonti.

Aziz replied, "I think I know the real reason behind Biju da's conduct. Poor Pramila Bai had to lose her job without any reason. The onus of saving Bai is on us now."

Seeing the two boys, Aziz and Sonti, who was in their sixth standard at school come to the police station, the Officer-in-Charge (OC) was utterly surprised. He asked them what the matter was.

Aziz replied in a grave tone, "Sir, please accompany us along with a few policemen. We have to get hold of some grown-up boys who have taken to drugs.

The OC asked in surprise, "What makes you so sure that those boys were taking drugs?"

Aziz replied, "Through the TV news and the newspapers, I've come to know about such incidents. Let's make a move, sir. Please make haste."

Considering Aziz's appeal, the OC took his jeep accompanied by quite a few policemen. Aziz and Sonti also came along in the jeep. At Aziz's suggestion, the jeep halted at a distance from the half completed building. The OC asked Sonti and Aziz not to enter into the structure.

"You are too young to go inside. Stay here. We shall do the needful."

After a while, the policemen went out with seven grown-up boys and put them into the jeep.

The OC told Sonti and Aziz, "Boys, you have done a wonderful job. We were not even aware that there was a drug addicts' den in this locality. You shall be rewarded for your act in due time. Let me know your name and address. I shall make a note of it in my diary."

The OC wanted to drop home Aziz and Sonti. But Aziz informed him that they stayed nearby, and that they could walk back home.

After taking leave of the OC, while on their way back home, Sonti asked Aziz how he came to know that Biju da was taking drugs.

In reply, Aziz said, “When a child keeps aloof at home, changes his old friends and hangs around with new ones, expensive articles keep vanishing one can assume that the child has taken dark paths such as drugs addiction and gone astray. If we see such changes in people around us, we should inform the police at least, even if we are unable to do anything else. Otherwise, innocent people like Pramila bai suffer without any fault! Moreover, the boys who have gone astray through addiction can be checked and brought to the right path.”

**Bandita Phukan**

*(Translated by : Merry Baruah)*

## THE DETECTIVE SQUAD OF SANKARDEV NAGAR

Much ahead of summer vacation, we, the young ones of Sankardev Nagar, had decided that this time we would organise a carrom competition among ourselves. Accordingly, the first match of the competition was fixed on the fourth of July from 10 in the morning. But, the turn of events involving Amu, the youngest and the most adorable member of the Sankarjyoti Library, sent everything into a tailspin. Hence, the rest of us were rather unhappy now. After all, the very first match was to be held between Amu and Tumtum. Now, if Amu herself wasn't playing ...

We went to Amu's house and then heard the whole story.

The previous day, Amu's father had given her ten brand new 10-rupee notes. Amu was greatly attracted towards new notes. She would put those notes carefully in an envelope and keep it in the corner of a drawer. Once in a while, she would use the notes to buy things that she needed or wanted.

Yesterday, Amu kept the ten new notes that her father had given her, on the study table. She was in a hurry to go to Tumtum's place accompanying her mother, so she could not put those notes in the corner of the drawer like she would normally do. However, the next morning, after getting up

and finishing her cup of tea, she found to her horror that the notes had vanished from the table. Who could have taken them away? Her parents were all clueless about it. Amu first suspected Rubul, the son of Sangeeta Mahi, who worked in their house. He, too, had come the previous evening accompanying his mother. So, it could well be him...

When Amu told her mother about it, she replied, "Simply because they are poor, it doesn't mean they would steal things you shouldn't suspect people like this, Amu. You must've kept those notes tucked in a book and forgotten about them. Go, search carefully again, you would find them."

But, when Amu did not find the notes even after vigorously searching the drawer and the books lying on the table, she started weeping. She was planning to buy a big Barbie doll with the saved money during the Durga Puja festival. Although her mother tried to make her understand, yet Amu stuck to her guns. If she didn't get the money back, she wouldn't take part in any damn competition.

After hearing her story, all of us were silent for a while. Finally, I suggested Let's go to Bhatta uncle for advice. He would certainly give us a very good idea.

Wait a second, if we don't say anything about Bhatta uncle at this point, our story shall remain incomplete. Dr Harish Chandra Bhattacharya, was the Director of the Science and Technology Institute. After retiring from service four years back, he came to Sankardev Nagar to live here permanently. The locality underwent a sea change following his arrival. The lanes and by-lanes all looked spic and span, plastic carry bags vanished from the shops and the market, we no longer believed stories of ghosts and demons, we got a library, all traditional events, competitions on art, debate, poem recitation, and festive celebrations were held with regularity. To put it simply, the name Sankardev Nagar was now on everyone's lips. And the

protagonist of this comprehensive change, Uncle, became a role model for everyone in the locality a friend, philosopher and guide, as they say.

Well, now let's pick up where we left off in the story. As he saw us together coming towards him, Uncle asked, "What's the matter? You have all come so early in the morning. Any problem?"

I stepped forward and said, "Yes, Uncle, quite a big problem." Then I narrated the whole episode involving Amu. After listening with rapt attention, he asked Amu to come to him and told her lovingly, "Amu, don't worry at all. The notes will have to be recovered. Just give me a few seconds to think. We shall take the help of forensic experts if need be. What do you say?"

"What's the meaning of forensic, uncle?" Sourav said. Before Uncle could utter something, Junmoni acted smart and said, "Eh, Sourav doesn't even know the meaning of forensic. Come on, be it in the newspapers or on television, we regularly hear about forensic experts visiting the site of theft, robbery, murder, bomb blast, etc."



“Okay, okay, now let it go. Someday I'll explain to you what forensic science is all about. Now you people go and start the competition. Things should always happen on time. Amu, you should go and play. I am also going there a little later,” Uncle said.

Just as he told us, we rushed back to our library. Uncle came in as soon as the match ended. Tumtum could have easily won the game against Amu but he lost deliberately, just to lift Amu's spirits. Amu, of course, didn't have a clue.

Uncle seated himself in our midst and said, “Let me give you an idea. Every one of you will have to act like a detective. Now tell me, who are going to be the detectives in this investigation to trace Amu's lost money?”

“Me! Me!” we all shouted.

“Wonderful! You all will be the detectives. Now let me tell you about the investigation plan. I have recovered the serial numbers of the currency notes.”

“How did you do it, Uncle?” Tumtum asked.

“Oh, that's nothing. Can anyone tell me how I managed to get those numbers?”

“I can do it,” Tumtum said, excitedly jumping up and down.

“Tell me how.”

“Look, Akon Khura had given Amu the first 10 notes of the new bundle. So ”

“Exactly! Hey, you indeed can become a good detective one day! Well, I asked Amu's father to tell me any one serial number of the notes remaining in the bundle. The number of the note that he has given me is 70P 698563, which means that the serial numbers of the notes in the bundle were from 70P 698501 to 70P 698600. So, the serial numbers of the first ten notes in the bundle have to be from



70P 698501 to 70P 698510. Now, if we can tumble upon any of the notes containing these numbers, we can trace the one who had stolen the notes. However, it's not necessary that anybody with whom we shall find a note or two of this series will prove to be the thief we are looking for. The one who stole the money might have bought something already, or given them to someone else for some reason, and in this way the notes might have changed hands and ended up in the hands of an innocent person as well. That's why, apart from getting the notes having these numbers, we'll also have to take into account ancillary aspects like whether that person came to Amu's place today or yesterday, or whether there was any monetary dealing with Amu. Now you tell me, how would you trace Amu's notes?" "I've got an idea. Shall I spell it out, Uncle?" Junmoni ventured.

"Yes, go ahead."

"If Rubul has stolen the money, then he would buy from a nearby shop something that he needs, say a chocolate, an ice cream, or marbles. If we give these currency numbers to all the shops located around us, then ..."

"Wow, that's a fantastic idea! Now you people go to those shops and give them these numbers, and tell them to contact you on your mobiles the moment someone comes to their shop and buys something with any of those stolen notes."

"But Uncle, none of us owns a mobile. You had told us once, remember, that mobiles, smartphones, etc. aren't very good things. That they can do a lot of harm to us. Therefore..." Sourav said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I forgot it completely. Do one thing...give the shopkeepers the mobile numbers of your parents, your brothers or sisters, so that the shopkeepers can contact them as soon as they see someone with those

notes. But, be careful, we'll have to do all this very secretly and cautiously. After all, we shall have to retrieve Amu's lost money. Now you go and do as I say. Best of luck. And hey, note down these numbers."

We all used to carry notebooks and pens with us. It was something that Uncle himself had once taught us to do. So, we noted down the numbers in our notebooks.

That evening, suddenly a phone call came from Lakipahi Store informing my father that a boy aged around 11 or 12 years had bought ice cream from the shop, giving away two notes having the same serial numbers that we had given.

Immediately, I informed everyone in our gang. Learning about the likely age, Tumtum had no doubt as to who the boy was. "It means it was indeed Rubul. I will just bash him up," he said, clenching his fist.

Bina, the eldest member of our group, said, "No, no. We mustn't do anything without asking Uncle. Come, let us all go to him now."

Uncle was upbeat at the sight of us. "Come, come. I was waiting to congratulate you on your success," he said. "But, Uncle. Is it really the right time for congratulating us? The thief has been traced but the money is yet to be recovered. We're not even sure if indeed it was Rubal who had stolen the money," said I.

"Yes, Chandan. You are right. Now you tell me, what do you think you are going to do now?"

"Rubul should be beaten up in such a way that he will never dare steal anyone's money," Tumtum said.

"That's wonderful. Now tell me who would like to bash up Rubul in this fashion? Raise your hands."

We all raised our hands.

Amu said, "Uncle, Uncle, I shall punch Rubul first, okay? He has stolen such beautiful notes from me."

"All right, you will hit him first. Now let's go to Rubul's house. Let's be sure if indeed it was him who had stolen the notes."

On the way to Rubul's house, Uncle was telling us: "Suppose Rubul is proved guilty, do you know who should deal the first blow to him? The one who has never stolen anything, from anywhere, at home or outside. Now you all ponder for a while and try and remember if you have ever taken anything, big or small, secretly, without taking the permission from your parents or elders. Whoever has never done such a thing will have the right to hit Rubul first, alright?"

We all started thinking if we had ever done such a thing before. I was 'out' already, because only this morning I stealthily gobbled up the Cadbury chocolate my father had kept in the fridge for my sister.

"What happened? You all fell silent. Amu?"

"No Uncle, I won't be able to hit Rubul first. When I had gone to Tumtum's house the day before yesterday, I quietly took away a pink pencil belonging to him."

"Amu, you are such a good girl. You've spoken the truth. I am extremely glad. What about the others, hunh?"

We all spoke in unison, "No Uncle, none of us can actually beat up Rubul, because "

"Another thing," Uncle went on as he walked. "Whenever someone does something wrong, we must not take it upon ourselves to punish the guilty. If someone within our family does something wrong, then we should inform our parents. And if that person happens to be from outside our family, then we should inform the elders. If the guilt is of serious nature, like theft, burglary, accident, etc.,

then we should inform the police. In our country or in the state, or let's say within our city itself, there are various departments responsible for carrying out different tasks smoothly. For instance, we have the Department of Education for education-related matters, the Public Works Department for carrying out construction and repair of roads and bridges, the Department of Power for electricity-related works, the Municipal Corporation for keeping our roads and market places neat and clean, the Health Department for handling public health-related issues, the Police Department for maintaining law and order, etc. Now think about it, if people from the Health Department act like the police, and vice versa, wouldn't it all be messed up? So, in order to ascertain whether a person is guilty or not, we should leave it to the police and the court of law.

“And, there's another thing. Is Rubul really a bad boy? You all have got love and affection from your parents, you have had the privilege of going to school, your economic condition is also good, and that is why, you have been able to get good stuff to eat. You have your parents, brothers and sisters to show you the right path, so that you don't do anything wrong and embrace bad company. But, think of Rubul. His father died last year. His poor mother toils so hard, sweeping and mopping the floor and washing utensils in other people's houses to eke out a meagre living. Had he been as privileged as you are, then he too might have...”

Uncle's words softened our hearts. Our eyes welled up in sympathy for Rubul.

Amu said, “No, no, Uncle, we'll not beat up Rubul. I will rather tell my father to get him admitted in a school again, along with me.”

Rubul was later called up by Uncle. No sooner were a few questions posed to him than he admitted his guilt. The story after that was rather short.

He got Rubul admitted in the neighbouring school again in class three. Not only this, he bought him his school uniform, a pair of shoes, and other school items as well. Uncle said he would sponsor his education up to the college level.

Now, Rubul is the newest member of Sankarjyoti Library. Our bosom friend.

**Padmapani**

*(Translated by : Debashish Bezbaruah)*

## THE GHOST

Tok, tok, tok!

Girija Devi was having her afternoon siesta. A few moments earlier, the speed of the fan above the bed slowed down and its sound changed. She understood that the power had gone and the inverter had come on.

Tok, tok, tok...

Hearing the knock again on the door, Girija got up from bed with a sigh and opened the door.

Sarala, her part-time help, was standing outside, her sandals removed from her feet. Fear engulfed her face.

“What happened? Come, come inside,” Girija called Sarala in.

“Come, sit near the bed with the murha”, she said, indicating the cane stool. She herself sat down on her bed comfortably.

“Tell me, what's the matter? I wasn't at home this morning but my husband said that you had already finished your chores here. Now what brings you here in a hurry?” asked Girija.

It has been about a month that Sarala's husband started a small shop. It was, in fact, Girija Devi who came up with the suggestion for opening the shop. While coming for household chores at Girija's house, Sarala would always

mutter about her lazy husband who used to pass days just sleeping without doing any work. Sarala's husband, Shankar, is a well borer, who hardly had any work these days as people preferred to engage deep tubewell boring vehicles. The water table was getting very low and Girija herself witnessed their neighbour, Rabin Bhatta, find water only after digging twice with the boring machine vehicles. At times, Sarala used to arrange odd jobs like house painting and gardening for Shankar but he wasn't very interested in such work. On the other hand, their son and daughter were also growing and expenditure is also increasing. In anxiety, Sarala would often lose sleep.

Sarala and her husband got a huge monetary relief when Amrit Bhuyan, who hails from another city, provided them with a concrete room without any rent to live in, in exchange for looking after his plot of land. Sarala's 11-year-old daughter, Sabitri, is in the fifth standard. After she comes back from school, in the afternoon, Sarala takes her to the house of a lady teacher of that school for tuition. Their seven-year-old-son, Deepak, a student of class I, would also go with her and do his homework while his sister studied. Sarala had once told Girija that she would educate her children despite any discomfort that she may have to face. They did not have to stress much though, for free textbooks are provided from the school and the lady who teaches mathematics and English, is also kind enough to take free tuitions. However, sometimes, they fall short of money to buy their children their necessary copies, pencils, clothes, shoes, etc. They also can't even buy them food they wish to have.

That's why, thinking about all about such issues, Girija asked Sarala to tell her husband to start a shop. Sarala liked Girija Devi's suggestion a lot. If her husband started a small shop nearby, she could also help him in the second half of the day as she works as part-time household help only in the



morning hours. Reaching home, Sarala told Shankar about it.

The next day, when Sarala came for work, her husband too accompanied her. He told Girija Devi that he would start the shop and sought five thousand rupees on loan. He also asked her to cut an instalment of one thousand rupees per month from Sarala's monthly salary. Shankar, in fact, already negotiated a room near their house at a monthly rent of seven hundred rupees.

Girija Devi did not object. She gave Sarala five thousand rupees. That day itself, after finishing her work, Sarala joined Shankar to buy items for their shop from the market. After they set up the shop, Sarala started coming for work half an hour late. Earlier she used to come at 9 am and nowadays she comes at 9:30 am. From seven to nine in the morning, customers usually crowd their shop, and Shankar alone cannot handle the rush. Sarala lends a helping hand during this rush hour. She wakes up around four in the morning.



After her bath, she first kneads a dough from wholewheat flour, atta, and then prepares a thick curry of pea and beans, or mixed vegetables. Shankar gets up around 6 am, takes his bath and gets ready for the day-long business at his shop. He takes the gas cylinder and stove to the shop. There, on the gas stove, he prepares tea in a big kettle. Sarala proceeds to the shop after waking up the children, who get ready for school by themselves. From 7 am, customers start coming to the shop. Most of them are daily labourers setting out for different jobs. They have a roof over their heads to pass the night but no provision to cook food. Sarala gets busy in frying fresh puris for these people. Their children have their breakfast at the shop before going to school. During the day, Shankar offers only tea and biscuit and sells other general items such as toffees, packaged snacks and pencils. He is able to manage the shop by himself. Sarala first goes to Girija Devi's house after her chores at the shop. Then she makes a round of two more households before returning home around 1:30 pm.

Sarala was very happy after they set up their shop and would tell Girija Devi that it was running well. They had also made arrangements for pakora and tea in the evenings. Shankar has now come up with the idea of selling steamed pitha, Assamese rice cakes, in the morning hours occasionally. Girija Devi encouraged Sarala, "That will be very nice. We will also buy steamed pitha from you sometimes."

However, this morning, Sarala had not show up till 10 am when Girija had to go out. She was very angry. She knew Sarala did not have a mobile phone but she felt she should have informed about the delay through her children while they were going to the school. Girija Devi thought she would give Sarala a sharp reprimand when she met her. While she was out, though, Sarala had come, did her household chores and went.

Girija Devi was quite surprised as to why she was here now at this odd hour.

Sarala did not say anything at first and wiped her tears. Then, in a breaking voice, she said, "A very serious matter, madam."

Girija Devi looked at Sarala's face. She seemed very stressed. The area below her eyes were dark and sunken.

"What's the serious matter? Tell me," Girija asked.

"It's been four-five days now, madam...When dusk sets in, somebody throws stones, brick pieces on our house. It continues for some time with some breaks," Sarala replied. "Don't your children stay at home during that time?" Girija Devi asked.

"That's why the matter is serious. I leave them at home to study and go to the shop, cautioning them against opening the door until we return. It is almost 10 pm when we reach home from the shop. I cook dinner at the shop itself and come back home with food in the pressure cooker.



Shankar comes later with the gas cylinder, stove, etc. You cannot keep anything at the shop. The menace of thieves is there for all to see! Everything was going on smoothly. Now this problem has cropped up! People nearby have told us that there is a crematorium on the other side of the rivulet, not far away. And the small children stay at home alone... that's not good. This must be the work of some evil spirit. Some people have told me that I should go to the crematorium and offer prayers to appease them. Now I feel scared about leaving our children at home alone. Our shop too is frequented by various kinds of people. We cannot take our daughter there.

“Initially, for the first few days after we started our shop, they used to go to our neighbour, Arati Bora's house, in the evening. Madam had told me, 'They can stay at our place. At night our Babul will take them home.' After a couple of days of this, our daughter told me that she won't go there anymore. They will stay at home, her brother is there and they will manage. Now look, what the ghost has been doing...”

“What rubbish! Where will you find ghosts in these modern days? Don't take people's words for granted, just don't believe them. Ask your daughter not to open the door. We will have to see who throws stones, brick pieces, etc., on your roof and door. Do one thing, inform the police,” Girija Devi said in a harsh tone.

“No, madam. First I will offer puja. Everybody is asking me to call an exorcist, a priest who chases ghosts. I have already asked a person and tomorrow the exorcist will come.”

This time Girija was harsher, “Ah, leave it... I know a police officer. We will have to tell him about the incident. Get up now, I will take you to him.”

Sarala was not interested but Girija Devi forcibly took her to police sub-inspector, Rajat Buragohain's house.

Buragohain was about to leave for the police station at that time. Knowing the reason for their visit from Girija, he took all the necessary information from Sarala. He then told Sarala, "Don't tell anything about this to anybody. And don't even listen to anybody. I will bring out that ghost. Now go, stay peacefully there, and let them throw stones as much as they wish..."

Two days later, Rajat Buragohain phoned Girija Devi around ten at night to inform her that the ghost has been caught. And she would have to visit Sarala's house immediately.

Girija quickly changed clothes and along with her husband, Mahendra Sarma, headed towards Sarala's house. Girija Devi had already informed her husband about the matter.

A good number of people had by then assembled near Sarala's house. Seeing Girija Devi, Sarala emerged from the crowd and ran towards her, she said, "Madam, the ghost has been caught."

In the meantime, Rajat Buragohain had arrived there in a police vehicle. From him Girija Devi heard everything. Buragohain had engaged three constables in civil clothes in and around Sarala's house to keep a watch on the stone-pelting incident. Accordingly, after darkness fell, one were on top of a mango tree in front of a house near Sarala's, while another watched events hiding behind trees and the third kept a vigil on the movement of people on the road from a distance. The one atop the mango tree noticed stone projectiles from the roof of the two-storey building near Sarala's house. After some time, he came down and went to the building and pressed the calling bell. A lady opened the door. Showing his identity card he asked her about the stairs leading to the roof. Placing his index finger on the lips, he asked the lady not to make a sound and said there was something on the roof and he had to catch it. The

poor lady stood still there, trembling. Meanwhile, the young cop went up and caught the ghost red handed... a ghost attired in black clothes. Seeing their colleague enter the building, the other two constables also arrived at the scene. The lady tried to shout but they had already come inside. The one who was coming down the stairs with the tied down ghost instructed his colleagues to go up and collect the sack of stones from the roof.

Suddenly there was a commotion. Seeing their servant boy tied up, the daughter-in-law of the house asked in fright, "Why he has been caught that way? He is our domestic help Babul."

Arati Bora too came hurriedly after receiving the phone call from the daughter-in-law. She was also surprised to see the policemen taking Babul away.

Somebody informed Shankar and Sarala. They too rushed in from the shop leaving behind all business. The police then brought Babul before the crowd assembled there and said, "This is that ghost... the ghost who you said threw stones. Wearing a black dress, he throws stones from the roof..."

"Ugh... I didn't know that this boy would turn out to be such a creep," Arati Bora sat on the stairs in disgust.

**Rupashree Goswami**

*(Translated by: Mridumoloy Lukhurakhon)*

## THE LITTLE SENTINEL

Ajit is a boy from Tinikonja village near Rangapukhuri town. He is the boy who usually always keeps everyone happy by dancing and prancing, talking to everyone, telling jokes. He is a student of the government school in the town. Ajit is sometimes given a lift to school by his maternal uncle on his bike on his way to office. On other days, he comes by the minibus that comes from near his home. It was this maternal uncle who had admitted him in this school.

Just six months ago, Ajit's mother had passed away and he sometimes missed her a lot. She had suffered from high fever but recovered. A few days after this, while visiting and talking with her neighbour, she suddenly lost consciousness and fell in her courtyard. She breathed her last that moment.

Ajit was taken home by his maternal uncle from school that day. Kabita's father took Kabita, Anil, Gaurav and Rumi to Ajit's place. Squatting on the veranda of the hut, with a traditional towel around his waist like a dhoti, Ajit said, "I shall go to school after all this is over. Please help me to understand the classes I am missing."

Once earlier too, the group of Kabita, Rumi, Anil and Gaurav had visited Ajit at his home. It was a tiny hut.

Wooden planks were fitted on bamboo poles to make the floor and cane stools or murhas were offered to them to sit on. His mother was jolly. They were offered coconut laddoos and tender coconut water.

His house is located at the foothills. Various types of flowering plants and fruit-bearing trees surround his house. Kabita and Anil liked the ambience a lot. On being asked by Kabita's father, Ajit's father, Gobin, had replied that day, "We have only about two bighas of farm land. Rest is what you see around the house a little over one bigha. He is able to go to school only because of support from his uncle. We can't even make both ends meet. How can we bear so much expenses?"

As he accompanied them out to the car, walking along the trail running beside the hill, Ajit's father informed Kabita's father, "Hansa contractor is always eyeing this plot of land that I inherited."

"What do you mean?" asked Kabita's father.

"Hansa Das is a powerful contractor. He stays at the western end of the village. He is always insisting me to leave this place. As it is by the roadside, he wants to erect a multi-storeyed building here. He asks me to clear some area uphill and shift there. He has even offered to bear the expenses. But..." Gobin's voice choked a bit, "How do I just leave my inherited plot where my forefathers lived? But Hansa contractor is a powerful person. Sometimes I feel afraid lest he harms us."

"Don't worry, what is there to be worried about?" Kabita's father had assured Ajit's father, placing his arm on his shoulder, "The land is yours, you can do whatever you like. How can someone else dictate your terms?"

After the rituals for his mother were over, Ajit returned to school. He was surrounded by Kabita, Rumi, Anil and all

others. They understood that he was trying to be the old funny self as before. He checked on his missing lessons. Even learnt a few new sums from maths wizard, Gaurav.

The annual exam of class V commenced after about a month. The result was out as scheduled. All of them did fairly well. During the holidays after the examination, Ajit visited Kabita's home twice to borrow story books. She has got an almirah too to keep her books. She has already finished most of her stock. The young children from her neighbourhood too borrow books from her to read. They return it to pick up another one.

Ajit took three books on the first day. The next time, he picked up a small book that had tales about ghosts and spirits, spectres and apparitions. Ajit could read quite fast. He finished one story in Kabita's house itself. It was a story about exorcising evil spirits by occult practice. At the end of the story, it was clearly evident that the strange occurrences were not caused by spirits or ghosts but just the handiwork





of some evil people.

After reading it, Ajit was engrossed in thoughts and nodding all by himself. Her mother was away in college and as Kabita carried a tray with some food and glasses of water, she noticed him nodding to himself. She asked, "What happened, why are you nodding like that?"

Ajit explained everything to Kabita. After his mother's demise, his father could not concentrate on his work. He left Ajit with his maternal uncle and became a disciple of a godman in a village a little distance away. He learnt some occult practices there and now if someone falls ill, he cures them with his occult power.

"This is not good, I mean superstition, isn't it? But father won't listen to my pleadings. He is even earning a little through that," Ajit said.

Kabita couldn't think of a suitable response. She said, "He'd leave all this once he realizes his mistake. The villagers would also learn in due course."

"I don't think so. The other day on returning home I found some old books brought by father. He said those were all related to occult practices. The more terrifying thing is that I found him keeping leaves, bones and skulls, tooth of various animals and what not at home!"

Kabita did not have anything to say that could comfort him. After some time, Ajit left taking the book on occult stories and two other story books.

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The next Saturday, Kabita's father handed her the phone saying, "Ajit calling", and went back to watching TV. "Kabita, something has happened," whispered Ajit over the phone, "I am worried."

"What happened, tell me."

"Don't tell anyone."

"Ok."



"I told you my father practices occult, remember?"

"Yes. What happened now?"

"Do you know Putul? He is about four years younger to us...?"

"Yes, I know him. His father is the shopkeeper in your village."

"I heard today that his condition is serious. Fever, diarrhoea and vomiting."

"Aren't they consulting a doctor? The Primary Health Centre is nearby..."

"No, no. They had asked father to cure him. He made some calculations, chanted the mantras and was saying he'd be okay soon."

"Then?" asked Kabita, feeling a little tense.

"Now, his condition has deteriorated and Hansa contractor has brought another famous occult practitioner, Joykanta. It is he who is looking after the boy now."

"Has he improved?"

"No, he is gradually turning worse. His father or their neighbours are not paying any heed to the advice for taking

them to doctor. They say no doctor can surpass Joykanta!" Ajit said in exasperation.

"Oh, what would happen to Putul now?" Kabita was worried.

"Someone I met today said Joykanta is blaming my father," Ajit's voice sounded choked, "Says it is all his fault."

"Means?"

"Means, as he is unable to cure Putul, Joykanta is saying that my father has used his occult power to evil use. He is not allowing the spirit that has entered the body of Putul to be released. Now he can't be cured by any doctor or witch doctor or anyone. Everything now is on the almighty."

Ajit continued after a brief silence, "I also heard Hansa contractor's son tell someone that it will be good if something goes wrong with Putul, as then my father can be killed by saying he is a witch doctor. Our house too can be burnt down. Then Hansa contractor and his family can occupy our plot lying beside the road. It seems Hansa contractor had called Joykanta for that purpose."

Taking a long breath, Ajit said in a parched voice, "What if anything happens tonight itself, Kabita? I am feeling scared!" "Don't worry so much," said Kabita and she hung up after pacifying him a bit. But the words "I am really scared" kept ringing in her ears. She could not concentrate on her studies. Should she keep it to herself? Or tell someone? Whom?

She asked for the phone again from her father, rang up Anil's father and informed him briefly about the entire development. She then said, "I too am feeling scared, Anil. So many things happen these days in the name of witch-hunting."

That night, as most people retired to bed, about a dozen men armed with sticks and machetes surrounded Ajit's house.

Then, suddenly, a few whistles were heard in unison. The mob was surrounded by the local police force. "Hands up," said an officer in a loud commanding voice. All the people were rounded up by the Police at gunpoint and taken to Rangapukhuri Police Station. The Police also arranged for an ambulance to carry Putul to the nearest hospital. Ajit and his father, Gobin was taken by the Police and left at his maternal uncle's place.

That night, the children Ajit, Kabita, Anil, Rumi, Gaurav none could shut their eyes. Next day, the news spread everywhere. Everyone learnt that after the phone call of Kabita, Anil's father realised something was wrong. He asked Anil and got to know of the entire sequence of events. He, along with Kabita's and Rumi's fathers went to Rangapukhuri Police Station. Rumi's father rang up Basanta Saud, his former classmate and now Police Superintendent, about the developments. Saud assured them of immediate action. The rest followed eventually.

The following day, police brought the arrested persons to the village. A public meeting was convened involving people from four surrounding villages to raise awareness. Good orators from several voluntary organizations too were invited to talk. A puppet theatre was organised to make people, both young and old, understand that there is nothing like witches or spirits and ghosts.

Such programmes continued for two days. Ajit's father was allowed to return to his own house. For a few days, two plainclothes policemen were stationed there to keep watch. Then villagers themselves, especially the youth brigade, volunteered to do so.

By this time, Putul recovered fully and returned home. Joykanta and Hansa contractor sought forgiveness from Gobin in a public meeting. People from the village and its precincts stopped believing in ghosts and spirits, occult

practices and witches since then. Ajit and his friends persuaded Gobin to leave his occult practice for good. Gobin said, "Actually I did it for fun. How could I treat and cure someone? Oh! Something very terrible was about to happen."

For a few days the news of the incident with interviews of Ajit, Kabita, Anil and their photograph got published in newspapers. They were given a big applause in the school morning assembly.

The police Superintendent, Basanta Saud said, "The people have now understood the truth. These superstitions are now gone forever." We would give away suitable awards and a certificate each for the little ones. They are little sentinels in the true sense, very alert sentinels."

**Dinesh Chandra Goswami**

*(Translated by: Bibekananda Choudhury)*