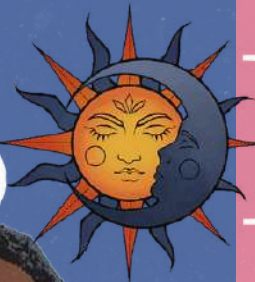


*a literary club initiative*

# SOLSTICE



*womanhood*



# SOLSTICE

a literary club initiative

## Readers' Room (18-33)

With Love Calcutta, Reviewed, Welcome Wordsmiths, Essential Environment, Hindi Serial, Bangla Column and many more. brought to you by editors, **THE SOLSTICE**

## Career Chronicles (34-39)

Debuting this year, this section will help guide students beyond school life through expert advice from our career counsellor and conversations with alumni who once walked these very corridors.

## Held in Aftersight

**3** Can I leave a bit of me with you?  
The editorial by Priyangshu Chatterjee

## Half - a - Dozen Tales

**7** As She ties up Loose Ends  
Ritwija Sarkar

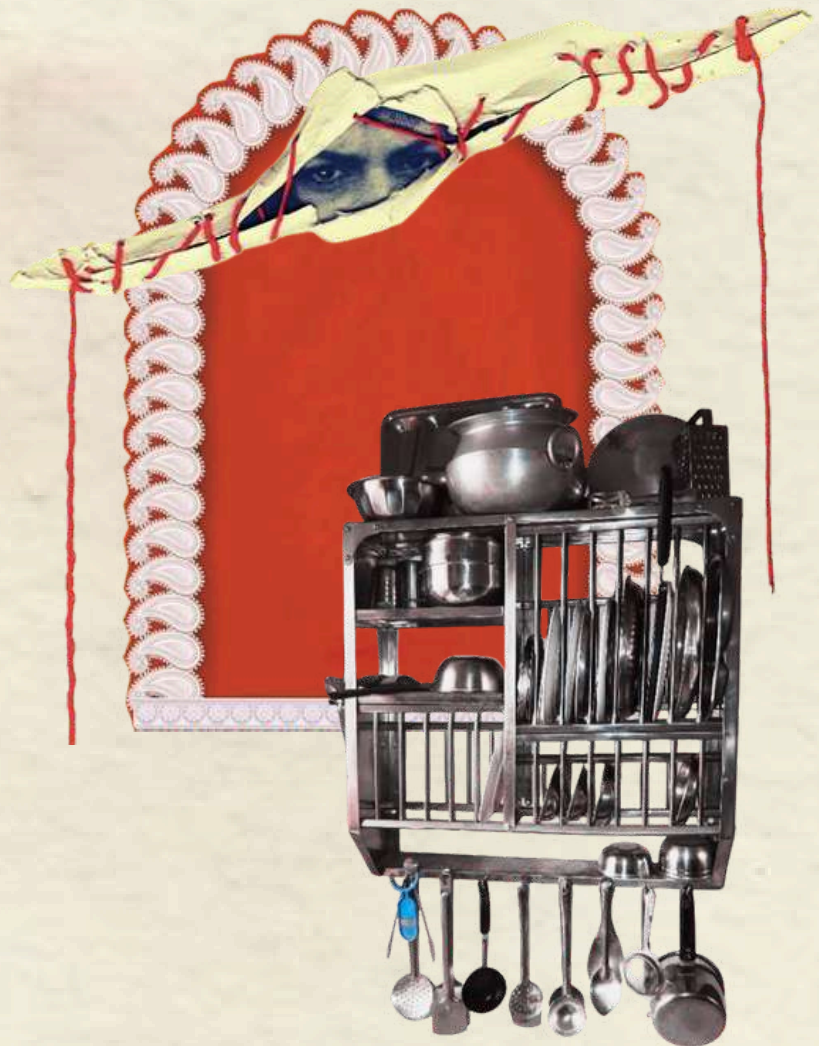
**10** Blessing  
Shridatri Giri

**13** The Inheritance of the Apple  
Roopkatha Dey

**14** All is Vanity  
Archisha Paul

**15** ব্রহ্ম কমল  
Devarsh C. Thakur

**17** বোহেমিয়ান  
Priyangshu Chatterjee



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dedicated to everyone who has ever grown, gently or otherwise, into womanhood.

# Can I leave a bit of me with you?

What would have happened if Adam picked the apple instead? I wondered, almost baffled by the possibilities. Would there be a parade, a celebration? A holiday to commemorate? Would man not find his temptation to be devilish and laud his curiosity instead? Would there be plays and songs reenacting his courage? One would never know, as the Bible dictates, that it was Eve who grew bored and weary of her captivity in the picturesque Eden, but a woman's desire for freedom, I believe, is rarely a cause for celebration.

In a crack in the hallway wall, where the plaster had chipped away, I had found a tiny triangle, back then I was tinier, but my thoughts had grown wings early on, the wall was five years older to me. I had always taken a certain liking towards it, I had seen the various photos on the wall change, sometimes the photos would change but the frames would remain the same, and sometimes the other way around, however when it came to garlands being put on certain photos, I never saw them being taken off, it was only later that I understood what it meant and even later that I realised—it was something irrevocable. I traced the triangle with my fingertip, imagining it as a mountain, one that only I had access to.

Baba scolded me for imagining things, he wanted my pursuits to be worthwhile; I smiled, knowing the mountain was mine. It was that wall, the one Baba insisted be painted. The wall that I had known for years and had loved so much, but all he saw was ancient paint. Some of it was gone, some of it was flaking, and the cracks and peeling layers were conspicuous, I could have guessed that this was what put Baba off, he is the kind of man who would slap new plaster on any crack he'd see on any wall, and paint it new, it was only perhaps the most apparent one that he could never paint new, let alone painting, it is most certain that he never saw it, or maybe he had run out of plaster. On that wall, half-hidden, I once saw a little girl holding a balloon, standing silent. No one else ever saw it, and if this were a confession, I would say I did not want anyone to see it either. Baba first handed me the paintbrush to make the first stroke of new paint, and as I stood there



silent, more silent than that girl ever was, then mistaking my silence for a general aversion to paint (something that he had also doubted when he saw me painting the sky pink, when I was five) he took it from my hands and ordered the uncle with the bucket to go about it, with his harsh, calloused hands, uncle rid the wall of the little girl, and after a few months, in spite of trying hard, i started forgetting what she looked like, and eventually, like my grandmother, I forgot her completely.

I grew up reading Robi Thakur, as the slanting afternoon sun kissed my bedsheets and caressed my hair, I would immerse myself into Sanchayita, Golpoguchho and Jibansmriti. Then came re-reading him, Maa once said to me that he was to be read in multiple phases, she said that he feels different during the night than in the day, in the afternoon than in the evening, in spring than in winter, and hence he changes with infancy, childhood, youth and so on—it was much later that I realised that her words held the secret to understand Thakur, which was that all attempts to understand him were futile, for his works never conformed to constancy and he was thus, to be felt. At large, all trials of understanding him were to be rendered nothing but ones of misunderstanding him.

On my thirteenth birthday, Maa introduced me to Chitrangada. I read it, five times, consecutively, and on the sixth night, as I lay sleepless, I wondered, if Chitrangada ever shed a tear or two? I wondered: if she did cry, would that have been read as weakness? Was she told it made her less of what she was supposed to be? Less worthy of the armour she wore? Would her father, who raised her as a son, call those tears unmanly? The burning desire to be loved by Arjun, the way a woman is to be loved by a man made her turn to Madan (although I wanted to explain to Chitrangada, that there were no norms that love confined itself to.)



“If I am softened into something recognizable, will I be loved?” she asked, but to be truly loved is to be loved the way one is, and it always has been, explained Madan. However, blinded by love, she beseeched further, and a boon was bestowed upon her, one that made her what one would call a woman.

The boon broke a year later. In the end, it is seen that Chitrangada does not reject desire; she rejects the terms on which it was offered. She chooses to be original rather than be acceptable.

And centuries later, these small attentions to the world, I carry within me, as I sprinkle vanilla perfume and pick up a tote bag, angled and held just so, moving from place to place. Feet over one another, knees pressed together, refusing to take up more space than I must. The way I hold a book, the tilt of my head, the raise of my finger when I speak, my voice—everything being watched, judged, and remarked upon. A life being dissected every so often, that it numbs down to a void of nothingness. And then there arrives a friend, who opens the door, smiles, and says in blissful mockery, “Ladies first.” I turn. I want to say something, I want to fix his ideas, and his grammar

too. "Lady first—it's singular, not plural." I wish to say "If you think it's an insult, it is not. I celebrate it—the idea of a certain femininity." And yet, I am pulled down by deafening silence and I feel it all at once: awful, lost and defeated. My hands tighten on the door. Everything I know about myself, the way I walk, talk, laugh, and exist: shards of it scatter in that instant. I stand there. But who is this I, so entitled to feel this way? Who am I, after all? A man ashamed, a man unabashed, a man who questions, a man who observes, a man who hesitates, a man who dares, a man who weeps, a man who laughs, a man who holds, a man who lets go, a man who does not conform to the masculinity imposed upon him by society, or, more important, a human. A soul.

And then on some Autumn's day, I find myself, like man once found fire. The so-called femininity in me, I reckon, named, pointed at, and dismissed as effeminate, has never been the problem. The problem has always been the need to translate it into something acceptable. But it does not matter what it is called. What matters is that I accept it. That I accept the hood of womanhood I have long carried, the woman I conceive within myself. I rejoice in her idiosyncrasies. Identity is nothing to be endlessly defended; it is to be embraced. That is what this edition of Solstice asks from us: to celebrate the woman not only in those who are named women, but in all of us who have been taught to hide her, silence her, or call her something else.

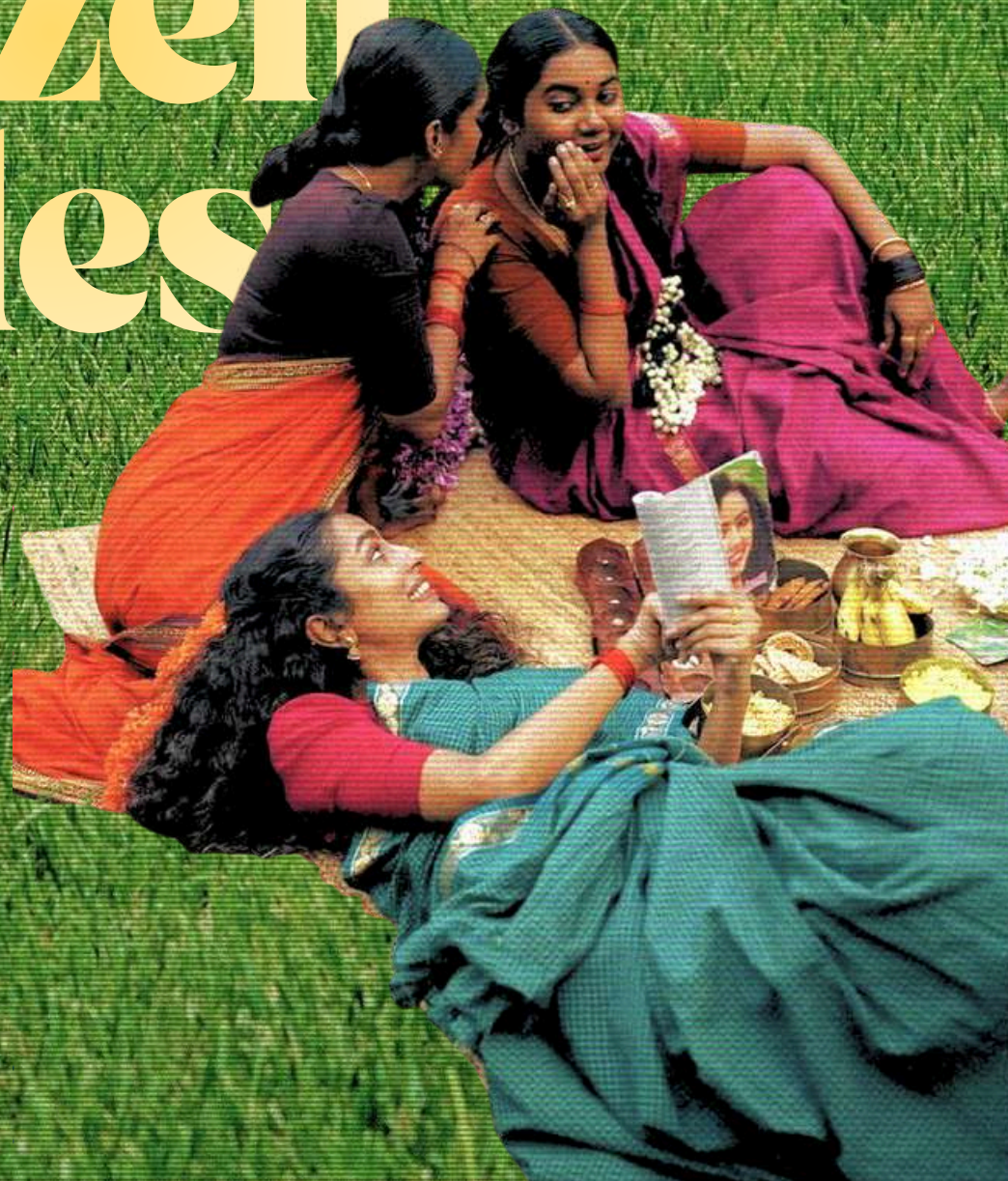
*I will not fracture myself to be intelligible to you. And if that sends me away, can I leave a bit of me with you?*

Priyanshu Chatterjee  
Editor-in-Chief, *The Solstice*



*To be a woman is to feel a thousand things at once, and to write women is to feel those thousand things over again. Here are half-a-dozen tales from the editors and writers of The Solstice.*

# Half-a-Dozen Tales



# As she Ties UP Loose ENds

Her feet clench onto the straps of her loose slippers as she climbs the stairs to board the rickety bus. With the ends of her dupatta, she wipes off the glistening droplets of sweat gathered at her temples. She heaves a sigh of relief after spotting an empty seat on the bus. She dusts it off with the same ends of her garment, gathers the entire length of the fabric into her lap and sits down. She makes sure to occupy the fewest inches of the seat she can. Whenever the bus jerks, her grip on the fabric tightens. At the conductor's crass call, she is made aware that she has reached home. As she gets off the bus, her dupatta gets stuck to a sharp corner sticking out of the door of the bus. In her hurried motions to free it, it ends up getting ripped.

"Maa, what's for lunch?" nags her son, as he tugs the ends of her recently torn dupatta. She ties it up into a knot at her waist and sets the table. After scrunching his nose at the sight of a dish his mother had cooked despite his regular protests against it, her son gives in and finishes the plate. He finds the ends of his mother's dupatta to be the most appropriate surface to wipe his hands after washing them. Her daughter's hurried footsteps echo throughout the house as she gets ready to leave. Her mother pins up the loose end of her saree into neat, rigid pleats at her shoulder. Her daughter gets into a white car, as she closes the door, unbeknownst to her, the car door refuses to set her saree's end free. The only splash of colour on the white.



The minute hand and the hour hand race around the clock. The house wakes up from its slumber to the shrill ring of the doorbell and the esoteric call of an unknown songbird. The housemaid wears a bright indigo printed saree, wound around and tucked in. She uses pieces of worn-out sarees and garments that the ravages of time have claimed to wipe the floors clean. Kept on the table under the weight of a glass jug was her monthly wage. She puts it into her so-called makeshift wallet, which she had fashioned at the loose end of her pallu. This is accompanied by the jingling sound of the bunch of keys that she had tied to the same end of her saree. With a habitual motion, she swings it across her shoulder as she lets the doors of the house close behind her.

The cool breeze makes the leaves of the potted plants sway, and the mild scent of grounded coffee beans from her mug waft through the air around the balcony. It makes futile attempts to play hide and seek with her hair, which is tied up into a firm bun. She attempts to shield herself from it with a bright woollen shawl. A threadbare album lies open on the table in front of her. Each page boasts of a myriad shades of red and gold. Her eyes stop on a particular picture. As they take their seven rounds around a blazing fire, the ends of her ornate bridal saree are tied to the chunni around her husband's neck with an elaborate knot. She wonders why it is only an accessory to her husband's attire that is so tightly bound to the entirety of her attire. But then, like with most of her other thoughts, she dismisses it as one of her pedantic tendencies. She lets the incomprehensible twittering of the birds outside fill her thoughts. She closes the album shut and returns to the warm cup of coffee in her hands.



The melody of the windchimes reverberates through the house, and the curtains twirl around as if in a waltz. The wind is the conductor of this orchestra. She, the only spectator of this concert, sits still on the sofa. The wind whispers scandalous ideas of reckless abandon into her ears. She clutches the ends of the dupatta wrapped around her neck as she runs up the stairs, skipping every other step, and strides into the deserted terrace. She looks down at her hands, presently clenching fists full of crumpled fabric. But she does not see the fabric; she sees the droplets of sweat and tears, the way it has been contained, folded small; she must not let loose. She sees the creases that have taught her to make room without taking it. She must not subvert the phantom creatures that inhabit her mind and fill it to the brim with strange things known as expectations. Or perhaps, she thinks, her thoughts are just blurred by the mild routine ache in her hands from holding on too tight. Now, in the absence of doors or chair arms, or nails on walls, or any surface conspiring to hold her back, she loosens her grip slightly, just to see what happens. Nothing does. The fabric does not fly astray. The sky does not fall.

In the wind's extraordinary ensemble, there is room for one more participant. It is only the prelude; the crescendo is yet to be reached. The unclipped wings of hope are yet to spread themselves.

wings of  
with the  
fabric of the  
imprints in places  
frequent. She  
crinkles of tiredness  
time. She understands  
today. She lets her hair down; she lets

Her eyes drift to the swiftly oscillating  
the countless birds flying in accordance  
rhythm of the breeze. The creased  
loose ends of her garment has  
that her palms always  
empathises with those  
and those wrinkles of  
the chirping of the birds  
it frolic in the air.



*Today, she sets the fabric free.*



Ritwija Sarkar  
Editor, The Solstice

# Blessing

She was still only twenty-three years of age, and married to a man of little words.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor announced. Her heart filled with joy and love as she held the tiny, beating figure in her arms. She wondered how a being so little could cry loud enough for her ears to ring.

Her husband was away, working. Her mother-in-law was the first to peer down for a glance.

Her wrinkled face clenched and unclenched. She left without saying a word. Drifting in and out of consciousness, she heard her say in her crass voice—“This is why I repeatedly told her the past few weeks to visit the temple and give offerings to the High Priest.” She did go once, her spirit young and hopeful.

The stares felt wrong, and she cried herself to sleep that night.

Her uncle, kinder with his words, placed his sweaty palm on her forehead. “It’s okay, Munni. You can try again next time.”

Alone in the dark, she clung her nursing twenty-three years of age, married to a man in his power. She saw the crowd of people. It was a boy.

child closer to her. She was still only who was cruel to the only woman on the bed next to hers.

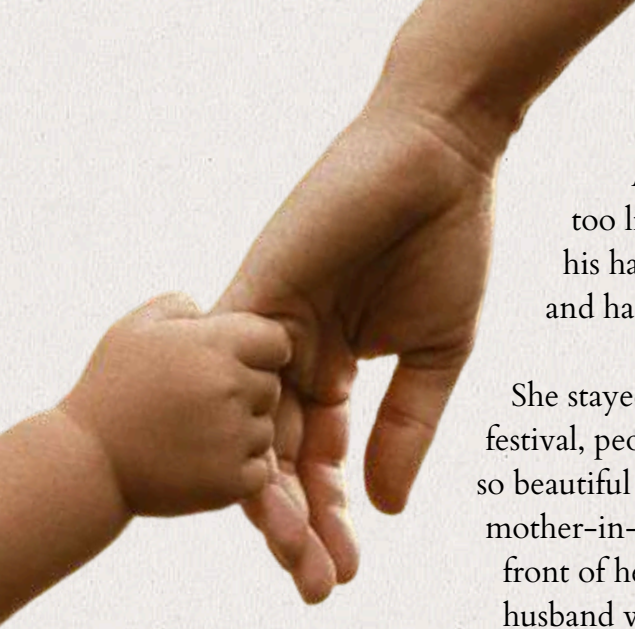
She was still only twenty-three years of age, and a lonely mother.

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Sunita knew what it was like being a woman—having only half an egg while her brother got two. Her tender fingers that had long lost feeling in the cold winter waters, washing dishes alongside her mother. Serving the guests and sweeping the floors while her brother studied. Sneaking out with her friends to watch the latest movie where the heroine found her true love, and they were dancing in the paddy fields.

She knew what it was like to feel the suffocating need to escape.





And yet, she stayed. A strict disciplinarian to her daughter, too little to understand the cruelty of her father. She listened to his harsh words without a single complaint. She loved makeup, and had her wealth of concealers.

She stayed silent and resolute, glancing down at the floor as at every festival, people pitied her “What curse must’ve befallen her to be born so beautiful and fair and yet not birth an heir?” She stayed through her mother-in-law’s snide comments, her mother’s apathy, as she stood in front of her, crying like a child, asking to stay just for the night—her husband was drinking again.

She forever remembered the empty look in her eyes as she begged only for the door to be closed on her face—“Your home is where your husband stays. Your father’s place is not where your name is.”

Her name was Sunita. A dancer, a singer, a student, a friend, an employee. But somewhere along the line, she no longer recognised the young girl who saved up money to go to the tailor and have a pretty salwar kameez made for herself “Just like the heroine from that movie, okay?”

“What’s your name, Amma?” Her daughter asked. She was five, and already understanding what it meant to be a girl. “I hate being a girl! I want to be a boy!” she would exclaim to her mother in her childish anger. Her heart broke every time, for she could give no justification as to why her little heart had to face the pain of being a girl. “It is God’s blessing,” she would whisper, drying her tears. “Then I hate God,” she would mumble, hiding in her arms, her innocence not understanding the weight of the words she said.

“Why, my name is Amma!” she said glibly, oiling her hair while she watched the Sunday Special cartoons.

She frowned, unsatisfied. “No, Amma, I mean your real name. Like how my name is Rukmini, but you call me Rukku.”

“Amma is only Amma. That is her real name.” Thinking of Sunita reminded her of the ache where the void of her identity now existed.

I didn’t know my grandmother’s name till I was ten. Supriya. Beautiful and hidden, like the shy smile behind her veil. Hunting through her prized bookshelf of yellowed pages frail like her bones, I saw her name in red ink. “Supriya Pal,” I mouthed, rolling the words on my tongue.

Later that day, I mustered up the courage to ask her for her maiden name. She said she did not have any. I felt betrayed.

“How could that be so?” I asked, pestering her around the kitchen, munching on the hot, delicious fish fry she just made. “It is so,” she repeated calmly, her voice light like a girl’s and ten times as wiser. “You will understand when you grow older.”

Birthdays came and went, but she never got to know her age. Nor did she ever claim to remember her maiden name. Even on her deathbed, breathing her last, she was the wife of her husband. I am twenty-three, and the same age as when Sunita went from being a carefree lady to a dutiful mother. She no longer dyed her hair burgundy or wore skirts and heels. It was considered inappropriate to do so, especially now that she had the responsibility of a child. She had grown up hearing the infamous saying *aurat hi aurat ki dushman hoti hain* a woman is another woman’s biggest enemy. And on days when her vision was blurred and she could barely see through her tears, she felt bitter as her daughter ran up to greet her father. She wondered if she would live to see her flesh and blood grow up to be her sworn enemy.

I came back from college on vacation, and as was my habit, I woke up at noon to Amma’s constant rumination about how I was going to fall sick if I kept skipping breakfast because I woke up late and had to hurry to my classes. And even through her gentle chidings, she came up and tied the scarf around my head. “It’s so cold, didn’t I tell you to cover your ears before you go to sleep?”

She still lived with her husband, though she needed concealers no longer. Her daughter had a voice louder than hers. She was less naive than her mother at twenty and three.

I gasped. “Amma, look! You’ve got one grey hair!” I pointed out and laughed. “You’re growing old! Do you want me to tear it out?” “No, Rukku. Leave it be. It is only natural to age.”

I remember how happy I felt. Her mother would’ve traded anything for the pretty innocence of youth. The mortality of her life fluttered its end just as she was about to grow wings. Forty-eight with the soul of a girl—she too had grown alongside her daughter. I flip through the pages of her journal, trying to not blot out the ink of her looping cursive, as I smile. Fate had her funny way of being a surprise. I wonder if I would’ve been a different person today if I didn’t grow up knowing that my badly drawn gifts were the only ones she would ever receive on her birthday. I wonder if I would’ve been any different if she didn’t give me the life of a woman stronger than what she ever got the chance to be. I wonder if I would’ve been the woman I am today, if I wasn’t born to the woman who stayed resolute and hopeful, never once backing down, even as life dealt her his harshest hands.

*I now know her name. Sunita.*

*Daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter. My mother, Sunita Pal.*

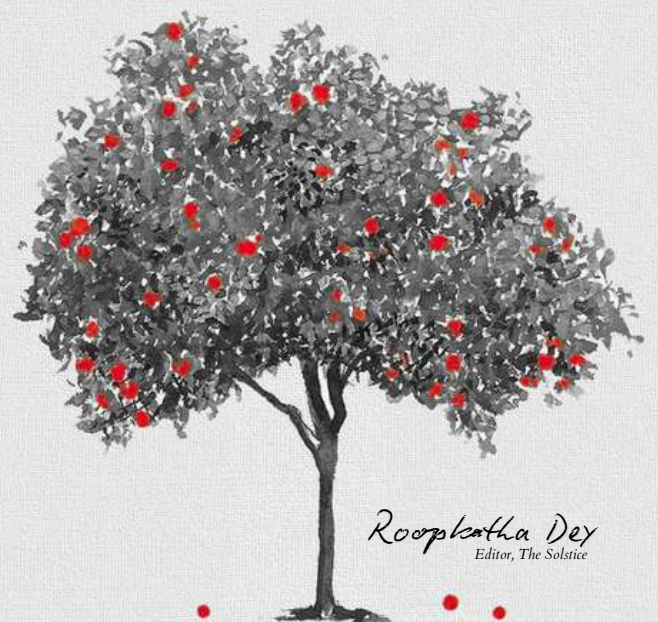


*Shridatri Giri*  
Editor, *The Solstice*

# THE INHERITANCE OF THE APPLE

If I were Eve's daughter, I would worry about God.  
Would you please tell me, Mom,  
Is there a place where my flesh isn't a battlefield, and my bones aren't taxed for simply being?  
Give me a God I can relate to, Mom, give me one achievement of Mary's that didn't involve her son.  
Tell me I won't have to bite my own skin to prove my love for you.  
Bury my brain and let my heart live. Please. Let my heart live.  
Must I cut away parts of myself to fit into the mould of holiness?  
You were a disaster, surrendering to your own hands. Mom, did people call it an act of God? Or was your fall written in His script all along?  
Will you give me a choice, Mom? It is, after all, my body to stew blood and eat my apple with.  
Mom, you were the reason for the very first scar. Do you feel it? The place where the skin broke along his ribcage.  
Was it easy being so close to the wound that you came from?  
She would tell me, "There's a quiet riot inside of us, love, we are Human with skin and bones, veins and nerves. Hair and sweat."  
I would have told her I would never be a metaphor, I would never be a question mark.  
This is a wide ocean, I am a girl with eyes and a voice, and I wouldn't commit blasphemy to protect my ruiner. I refuse to worship the cage and call it salvation.  
I am a product of the First Sin. I am a riot of the rib. Would you name an ocean after me, Mom?  
Am I the prettiest rebel you've seen?  
*(Eve is my mother, my mother is Eve, what if I am Eve?)*  
Before she bit the apple, I would be told by her, "It is my emotions that saved you. You are what your mother is. God may not be a woman, but I am."

My mother is the beginning of everything.  
*(Mom, did you find your voice?  
Did you speak or were you spoken for?  
Did the garden's gates close behind you?  
Or did you walk out willingly, head held high?)*  
Mom, tell me how to navigate a world where sin is the inheritance but choice is a distant dream.  
Why am I still paying for a bite I didn't take?  
*(Eve is my mother, my mother is Eve, I am Eve.)*  
The blood of the first woman runs through me.  
But oh,  
The apple,  
Ripe,  
The bite,  
The spark,  
The fall.



# All is Vanity

*(This poem is inspired by "All Is Vanity", a striking 1892 drawing by American illustrator Charles Allan Gilbert (1873–1929). Up close, it portrays a fashionable late-Victorian woman seated before her vanity mirror. From a distance, the entire scene cleverly forms a human skull. Celebrated as a masterpiece of optical illusion, its clever layering of imagery—with mirrors, drapes, bottles, and candles—forms the skull's features. The title refers to the famous quote "Vanity of vanities... all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). It smartly merges beauty and mortality, using optical illusion and wordplay to deliver a classic memento mori. Its elegance, wit, and cultural resonance make it arguably Gilbert's most enduring work.)*

Tell me, sister,  
What do you see?  
The beautiful dame or the Reaper's wreath.

Neatly arranged vials of fragrances and gels,  
or the gleaming whites peaking from your lips.

The raven black hair, adorned in a bun  
or the hollowed sockets of your skull.

Do you appreciate the hole that holds  
The sharp nose that you show when you're on a  
high horse?

Perhaps you notice the laced cloth furnishing  
your table  
Or is what strikes you, your sharp mandible?

When your skin shines pale like your pearls  
And the hair around the hot iron curls,

Do you see your embellished self  
Or another memorial on the shelf?

When the lead and arsenic have soaked through  
Why blame the lady's death on the flu?

Truly sister,  
What do you see?  
The near end of your priceless beauty.



*Archisha Paul*  
Writer, The Solstice

# बधा कमल

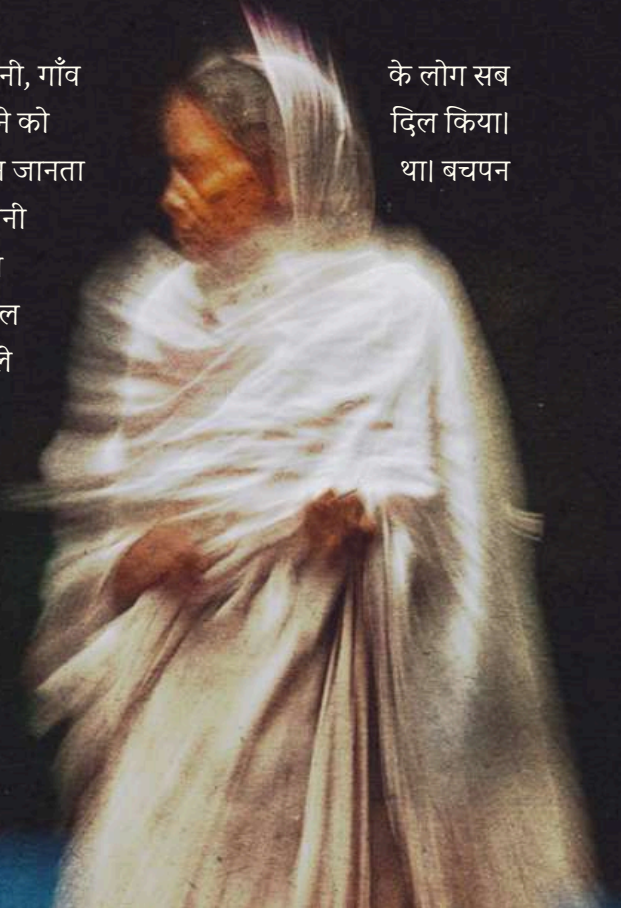
रात के घने अँधेरे में अक्सर तन्द्रा भंग होने का कारण हो जाता है- कुछ सवाल, कुछ ऐसे मनगढ़ित प्रश्न जो इंसानी हृदय की स्वाभाविक उत्सुकता से जगती है। शायद रात में हमारी आँखें बंद, पर दिल की आँखें खुली रहती हैं। कौतुकवश एक सवाल कभी-कभी मेरे दिल में गूँजती है- ठीक जैसे रात्रि काल के असीम तिमिर में एक अद्भुत मानवीय, दिली प्रकाश जन्म लेती है, क्या वैसे ही कुछ लोगों को समाज द्वारा मानी गई म्लान परिस्थितियों में शोक मनाने के बजाय अदृश्य, प्रच्छन्न खुशी मिलती है?

मेरे सवाल के उत्तर की ओर मुझे एक दिशा प्राप्त तब हुई जब मैं पिछले हफ्ते मेरी परीक्षायों के पश्चात् बहुत सालों बाद गाँव में अपने ननिहाल गया था।

जब वहाँ पहुँचा, पता चला कि मेरे नाना दोस्तों से मिलने बाहर गए हुए थे। नानी ने अपना घूँघट उतार दिया था, उनके मुख पर वह रोज़-मर्रा की क्लान्ति नज़र नहीं आ रही थी। पल्लू में चाबियों का छल्ला भी नहीं था और हाथ में एक अधूरा स्वेटर था जो वे सील रही थी। उन्होंने मुझे गाँव की स्वादिष्ट मिठाई खिलाई और दोपहर के खाने का प्रबंध करने जा ही रही थी, कि मैंने कहा कि नाना लौटने के बाद सब एकसाथ खाएँगे।

खाने के बाद, नानी के साथ बातें करते-करते गाँव की बात आ ही गयी। "नानी, गाँव ठीक है? उन टूटते घरों के लोगों का क्या हुआ?" अकस्मात् एक सवाल पूछने को "बीजी कैसी है?" मेरी नानी के घर की पड़ोसन थी बीजी। कोई उनका नाम न जानता मैं जब ननिहाल आता था, बीजी अक्सर हमारे घर में ही रहती थी। मेरी नानी उनकी दोस्त थी। बीजी मेरे साथ खूब खेलती थी, और मुझे स्वादिष्ट पकवान बनाके खिलाती भी थी। गाँव के सभी लोगों में से बीजी की स्मृतियाँ ही केवल मेरे मन में स्पष्ट थी। नानी ने कहा, "बीजी के पति कमलेश्वर जी दो हफ्तों पहले चल बसे। बीजी बहुत बदल गई है, पहले जैसी नहीं रही। न जाने क्यों बहुत-..." नानी ने अपने आप को रोक लिया। पर, उनके चेहरे पर बीजी के प्रति मैत्री के अलावा एक अजीब-सा क्रोध और नफ़रत नज़र आ रहा था।

के लोग सब  
दिल किया।  
था। बचपन



जब नानी दोपहर को सो गई, मैंने फैसला लिया कि मैं बीजी के घर जाऊँगा। जैसे ही मैं उनके घर के पास पहुँचा, गाँव के कुछ लोग मुझे घूर रहे थे, और अपनों में कुछ फुसफुसा रहे थे। बीजी का घर बाहर से एक जैसा ही था। बीजी का एक बेटा था, जो शहर में रहकर काम करता था और, कभी-कभी गाँव आता था। दरवाज़े पर दस्तक देते ही, बीजी ने मेरा स्वागत किया। "बाबू! जब तुम्हें आखरी बार देखा था, बहुत छोटे थे। कितने लम्बे हो गए हो! अंदर आओ, बेटे।" वह बिलकुल अलग लग रही थी। स्वाभाविक है- प्रथानुसार रूढ़िवादी नियम यही कहते हैं कि पति के चले जाने के बाद महिलाओं की ज़िन्दगी जीने का ढंग बदलना आवश्यक है। पर उनके चेहरे पर राहत के कुछ निशान साफ़ नज़र आ रहे थे।

बीजी का घर अंदर से बिलकुल बदल गया था। मुझे याद है कि बचपन में यहाँ आते ही, मुझे एक अजीब-सी अवसाद महसूस होती थी। पर आज जैसे उसी घर में अहसास हो रहा था मानो मैं ब्रह्मांड के वक्ष में समा गया हूँ। सारी खिड़कियाँ और दरवाज़े खुली थी जहाँ से गाँव का मनोरम सौंदर्य नज़र आ रहा था। बीजी के कमरे के चौखट पर एक बुना हुआ पायदान था, जो वह पहले शायद बिछा नहीं पाती थी। दरवाज़े के ऊपर टूटे कंगन के टुकड़ों से बना एक झंकार था, पर ये कंगन कब और कैसे टूटे थे, पता नहीं। बीजी ने मुझे उनके बिस्तर पर बिठाया, और रसोईघर चली गयी। वह चकली और मिठाई के साथ लौटी, और खुद भी पान खा रही थी। "बीजी, तुम पान कबसे खाने लगी?" "मैं तो बचपन से ही पान पसंद करती थी। खाने की फुर्सत नहीं मिलती थी, वो अलग बात है।"

कुछ देर बाद बीजी मुझे उनके बगिये की ओर ले गई। एक अवहेलित, बंजर-सा भूखंड जिसके मध्य में एक चारा आँखों में खटक रहा था। बीजी ने मुझे उस चारे की ओर घूरते हुए देखा। "यह ब्रह्म कमल है। मैं यह फूल पहले नहीं लगाती थी, मेरे कमरे में रहता था। मेरा बेटा यह मेरे लिए पहाड़ों से लाया था। यह सिर्फ़ बारिश के रात की रौशनी में खिलता है।" "मतलब आज यह खिल सकता है?" "पता नहीं।" सूर्यास्त हो चुका था। "गाँव के मंदिर में संध्या आरती देखने जाऊँगा। आप चलोगी, बीजी?" वह मौन थी, उनकी आँखें हज़ारों बातें कह रही थी।

कुछ देर बाद मैं नानी के घर लौट आया। नानी ने पूछा, "कहाँ गए थे?" "गाँव देखने। नहीं, दुनिया देखने!" मैं अंदर जा ही रहा था, कि बारिश की एक बूँद मेरे बदन पर आ गिरी। मैं दौड़के पीछे के दरवाज़े की ओर गया, जहाँ से बीजी का बगिया नज़र आता था। बीजी बाहर ब्रह्म कमल के फूल की ओर एकटक देख रही थी। खिलते हुए फूल की सफ़ेद पंखुड़ियाँ चाँदनी में झलक रही थी, और बारिश की बूँदें उनकी उजली साड़ी पर ऐसे उतर रही थी मानो कोई अदृश्य चित्रकार किसी रिक्त कैनवस पर नयी तस्वीर की रेखाएँ खींच रहा हो। उसी वक़्त मंदिर में शंखध्वनि बज उठी, और देवी के आरती का प्रारम्भ हुआ। तभी मेरे नाना बाजु के कमरे में रेडियो सुन रहे थे, गाना बज रहा था- "थोड़े ग़म हैं, थोड़ी खुशियाँ.. यही है- यही है- यही है रंगरूप, ये जीवन है...."



देवर्ष सी. ठाकुर  
संपादक, द सॉलस्टिस

# শ্রীযুক্ত চ্যাম্বী'র বোহেমিয়ান

আমার কাঁচের টেবিল ঘুমতে গেছে তখন বারোটা কুড়ি ।

কলমের চোখে লেগে এসছে ঘুম ।

রাইটিং প্যাড চায়ের লিকারে ভিজছে না আর ।

জানলা আমি খোলা রেখেছি ইচ্ছে করেই, কনকনে হাওয়া সেলাইবিহীন বোতামের ফাঁক দিয়ে  
টুকে আসে, উষ্ণতার লেশ মাত্র নেই । বারান্দার থ্রিলময় এলিয়ে পড়েছে বোগানভিলিয়া গাছ ।

তৃতীয় প্রহর, যেন আবছা শুনতে পাই মালকোষ । সময় যে এত নির্বিকার স্তম্ভিত হয়ে যায় ।  
আবহমান যেন অতি আবহমান নদী, যার প্রবাহের চিহ্নটুকু নেই; বা চিহ্ন থাকলেও চলে গিয়েছ  
তুমি, রাতের গভীর অন্ধকারে, কৃষ্ণচূড়া গাছের তলায়—

তোমার পা একবারও টলমল করেনি । তখন রাতের গল্পে, ঘাস যখন নীলচে নীলচে হয়, এক  
গোছা বনফুল রেখেছ কানের পিছে আলতো হাতে, তারা থেকেছেও চুপটি করে, যেন ঘাসের  
চেয়েও, পাহাড়ি ঝরনার ন্যায় তোমার কেশের মাঝে তারা সুখী । তুমি যেন রূপকথার মত,  
শাপলা ফুলের মত চোখ, ঝাঁঝের ডাকে তারা ইতস্তত করে না । নদীতট হতে মাথা তুলে নাও  
তুমি, বাঁদিকে চাইতে আলোকবর্ষ পার ।

এতটা শান্ত, তবুও যেন অনন্তকাল জুড়ে  
ছুটে যায় অসীমের দিকে । চাঁদের  
আলোয়, তোমার আঁচল টের পায়, দূরে  
কোথাও হরিণ ছানার দল । আরো দূরে  
নৌকো ভেসে যায়, সে নৌকোয় মাঝি  
নেই, তবুও সে আপনাআপ দাঁড় টানে,  
কলকল জলরাশির শব্দ, নাকি নৈঃশব্দ্য?  
তুমি বলেই পেরেছ অপরিচিতা, এরা  
নইলে মুখিয়ে ছিল তোমায় শেকল  
পরিয়ে, লক্ষ্মীছাড়া সাজাবে তাই ।

সভ্যতার চেয়ে ক্রোশ ক্রোশ দূরে, এ  
কোন অজানা হৃদয়পুরে, বোহেমিয়ান  
ঘোড়া ছুটে যায়? সুষমাসজ্জিত আকাশ  
কেঁপে ওঠে তারায় তারায় ।

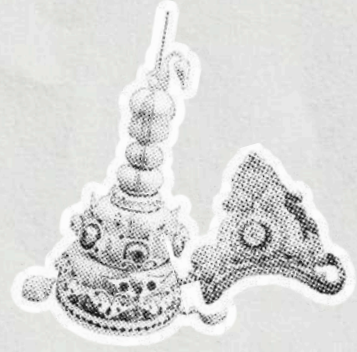


# Readers' Room

*A lazy yellow afternoon with oranges, or otherwise, and a window by your side that opens up to a different sky every time. Welcome to the Readers' Room, where the editors of The Solstice bring to you With Love Calcutta, Reviewed, Welcome Wordsmiths, Essential Environment, the Hindi Serial, the Bangla Column, and many more...*



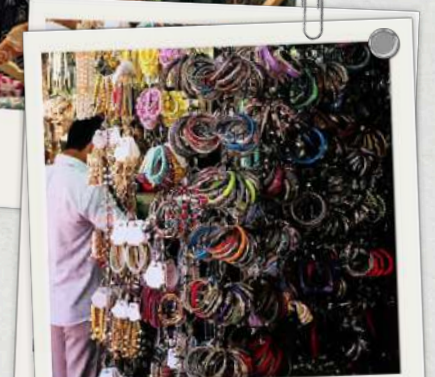
With love,  
*Calcutta*



*To my daughter, who is me and so much more,*

An infant girl cries aloud. She looks through her teary eyes at the blurry figures standing around her. Her mother, grandmother and two of her aunts. All mumbling rote expressions of comfort to her. The needle pierces through her ears, years before she would ever learn to speak her first words. Her screams travel out the open window, down to a young woman standing there. She wonders what must be going on in the house for a second before she wipes off the sweat from her forehead with her presently drenched handkerchief. She looks around at the street bustling with people. The entire stretch of the pavement is occupied solely by small shops, all selling shiny golden, silver and oxidised jewellery. She has been waiting for the woman in front of her to finish picking a *jhumka* long enough to have bought and finished an ice-cream cone. She looks up the picture on her phone again. There it was, the photo of the *jhumkas* she was going to pair with her saree to her cousin's housewarming party. The woman beside her finally seems to have reached an agreeable price with the shopkeeper.

She puts the brown paper bag into her embroidered handbag, steps down the pavement and books a cab. As she waits for it to arrive, she tries to tie her hair up into a ponytail, but despite her constant attempts, some strands of her hair refuse to stay tied up. She vows to let her hair grow out longer, a vow she knows will last only a few days. She gets into the cab and finds herself stunned to find a woman driving it. She had heard her friends narrate enthusiastic tales of finding women cab drivers at many a gathering. She rejoices at the thought of having her own anecdote. She tries her best not to make a fuss about it, but allows herself a few repressed smiles. The car moves over the tramlines and ascends the Gariahat Flyover. The driver turns down the radio to pick up a call. There is an instant lift in her countenance; the cheery and rapid conversation seems to slow down as she stops at a signal, and she bursts into loud "unladylike" laughter.



*Gariahat still manages  
to surprise me!* 8/12

*Why do they always have to  
start with the red ones?* 13/12

*And all I loved,  
I loved alone...*

'Madam, your location,' she says as she parks the car. She rolls down the windows and looks across the street as she awaits the next trip. She can hear the familiar tune of a shehnai playing from the large, new banquet hall. Outside it, stands an extravagantly designed banner seemingly to inform passers-by about the event going on inside. A girl in an ivory kurti walks into the building carrying a packet full of vibrant flowers. Inside, she is greeted with hasty footsteps and busy hands. The flowers are taken away from her, and her ears jot down another roster of things to be done next. She looks at the lady sitting in an exceptionally large, ornate chair in a corner, draped in a glamorous red lehenga and adorned with shiny gold ornaments. Her palms are stretched out in front of her. She looks at them, annoyed. 'The *mehendi* artist said it would dry in ten minutes,' she tells her mother, who then stops fixing her daughter's hair and looks down at the beautiful reddish-brown motifs all over her palms. Her mother smiles. The girl leaves the building to attend to her newly assigned chores. Beside the hall, another wing of the building is still under construction. A woman places a cement-laden shallow bowl down from her head and asks her co-worker to hand her the trowel. Her hands are stained with patterns of a special grey *mehendi*.

The pavement in front of the construction site had developed several cracks. A little girl, in a pink polka-dotted frock and sneakers, skips over them one by one, then she turns to look back at her elder sister. Her sister struggles to catch up with her, almost tripping over the cracks. Being stubborn about breaking in her new heels on that very day was not a good idea, she thinks, especially because they were almost covered by her long skirt. The two of them turn into a narrow lane towards their house. The little girl blows bubbles from the bright green bubble tube. She stands still and stares up, her eager eyes following each bubble rising above until it pops. One daring bubble rises beyond the girl's eyesight.

Way up here, I see countless rooftops. Some teal, some bright blue, some yellow, some covered with moss, some with shiny floors and some too far away to catch a glimpse. A woman in black sunglasses with wrinkles on her face and hair as white as the nightgown she wears hangs up her wet sarees and garments to dry. On the rooftop beside, a teenage girl is engrossed in what seems like a frustrating phone call. On another behind it, someone waters a series of plants and mumbles a faint prayer, with a wet towel wrapped around her head. And on another, a little girl runs up to the terrace, absorbed in the melody of a song she hums loudly. She sprints up to its edge, and she is barely tall enough to look over. As she watches every passing person and vehicle with great awe, her eyes widen.

Today, I write to you to show you who you are. To you, my daughter, Kolkata, I leave this image of us. You and I are one and the same, and stitched into us is every soul you have witnessed just now. In our spirit resides the one brushing her long grey hair and the one standing in front of the mirror with scissors, trying to give herself the new bob cut in fashion, the girl who will one day outgrow the frocks and be tall enough to look over the walls of the rooftop, the one who wears her grandmother's jewellery and her mother's *sarees* and the woman who sits and contemplates on a rocking armchair under the moonlit sky. And as the sun and the moon continue to play ring-a-ring-o'-roses, you and I are but mirrors of these scenes. I hope you will remember me fondly, for it is time for the solitary bubble that has floated too far up to pop.

*With love,*  
*Calcutta*

*Ritwija Sarkar*  
Editor, *The Solstice*





# reviewed.

*The best thing about art is perhaps the fact that it can be interpreted. To each their own. And it is these unique interpretations and perceptions that make art so special. Reviews aren't just criticisms, they are also the quiet or otherwise rebellion of expression. Anushka Chakraborti, our editor, reviews 'The Menu' a film by Mark Rylod and 'Magpie Murders' a novel by Anthony Horowitz.*



anthony  
horowitz

# MAGPIE MURDERS

*Life may imitate art – but it usually falls short of it.*

Anthony Horowitz tries his hand at channeling a Christie classic in his tricky yet comforting read. He sets up a seemingly nostalgic story of a cosy English village, twined with the vintage elements of intimate gossip and old tales told in hushed whispers, which hang motionless in the cheerful air of Saxby-on-Avon.

Except it is merely an elaborate facade- the wistful curtain is pulled off from the reader's eyes. The sentimental whodunit is patished in the editorial thriller of a story within a story. It's a delightful fancy, the final trump card of an expert magician. He gets a bit too caught up in heartily peppering Conway's tales with tiny clues and red herrings, but pulls back in time to set up a masterpiece. Magpie Murders finishes its inspired performance on a high with a fiendishly plotted twist.

*Anushka Chakrabarti*  
Editor, The Solstice

# *The* MENU



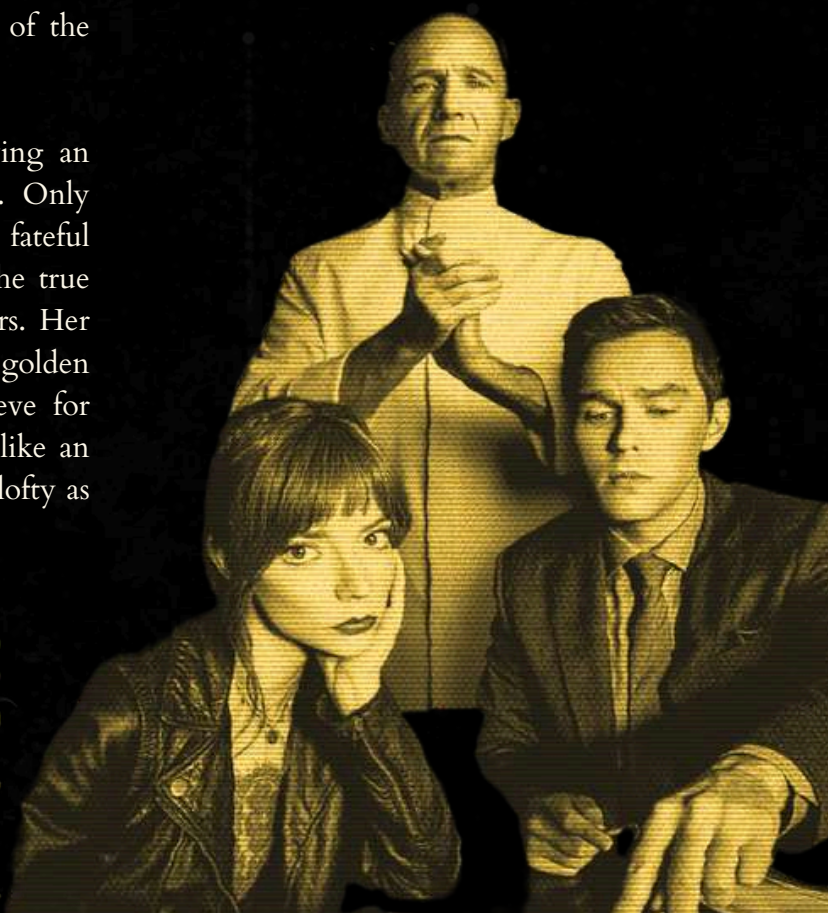
*"You'll eat less than you desire and more than you deserve."*

Ralph Fiennes, the chef protagonist of the film "The Menu" perhaps, sums it up best. A strange amalgamation of horror and satire, it poses as a psychological thriller intended to expose the hollow underbelly of Chef Slowik's pretentious clientele. The trailer and the opening scene set up the story as a parodic representation of the obnoxious divide in society. Carefully selected customers are the unfortunate spectators and unsuspecting victims of the chef's final banquet. No plate is left unturned as the unforgiving lens dives into the meat of the story. Course by course, the camera unravels the vices and vanity of the exclusive venue and its myriad cast.

However, it falls flat in its final act, giving an ordinary death to an extraordinary spiel. Only Margot, the unexpected guest becomes the fateful survivor, having managed to figure out the true purpose in the seemingly senseless murders. Her simple demand heralds our chef back to his golden heydays, granting her a temporary reprieve for her life. In the end, *The Menu* is a little like an unrisen soufflé. Delicious but not quite as lofty as hoped.

*Anushka Chakrabarti*

*Editor, The Solstice*



# essential environment.

***The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it. - Robert Swan***

Splat! Another red stain joins its brother on the grimy wall, pockmarked with a variety of stains from the vivid paan of humble beginnings to exotic marks of unidentifiable origins. The offender has already shrugged off, walking away without a care in the world. This is a common scene in India's numerous alleys and streets where small mountains of waste dot the sculpted landscape. 170000 tonnes of waste are generated everyday by an ever-growing population, of which 12-35 million tonnes lie unprocessed in landfills. Do the furiously barking dogs and weary cows that litter these narrow roads choke on the plastic that entangles in their food? Do the indifferent people care about these silent contributors of heat stress and pollution as they sweat it out through the typical muggy summers of India? When biodegradable waste accumulates and is left to rot, it produces methane, which has a warming potential 80 times greater than that of carbon dioxide and is the second-largest contributor to global warming. India's Environment Ministry has notified new solid waste management (SWM) rules of 2026 on January 27, superseding the 2016 rules which were proven to be 'ineffective'. Though well intentioned, it might prove inadequate against the red tape and infrastructural issues that have dogged such earnest efforts for decades. The nation's capital features the biggest burdens of waste - Bhalaswa, Ghazipur and Okhla — symbols of the city's historical failure to segregate waste at source. The most persistent culprits over the vast reaches of our country have been waste burning and mixing of wastes, which defeat all efforts of segregation and organic compost. We can all join our hands to be the change by using reusable bags and water bottles, buying in bulk to avoid packaging and composting organic waste. The rich greens and blues of our incredible India must be cleaned from the dirty scars on its beautiful facade.

*Anushka Chakrabarti*  
Editor, The Solstice



# Welcome Wordsmiths

*Angelou wrote in 'I know why the caged bird sings' that there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. True indeed. We at Solstice, hence encourage writers to pour their hearts out, and indulge in the cosmic pleasure of expression of thought. From the many submissions we received, here are the ones, with which we resonated the most.*

*from Debangi Tapaswari,  
Shaorn Bhattacharya &  
Ayushmita Roy*

# KIN I SEE ONE enemy I see ten

Come rest your soul, break and heal your bones,  
Beside me, my dear, as we circle the drain,  
And spend eternities waiting for them to call out our names.

The noose tightens around our sisters' necks,  
As we weave in ignorance, eyeing paychecks,  
The vulture circles us as we backhandedly vow to put all hands on deck.

I was carving a palace out of a block of limestone,  
When the god-fearing mob clutched their pearls and branded me a witch,  
For they swore by their ever-favourite - mud and sticks.

I sit scribbling in a roofless house,  
The straw they provided withered away under sun and rain,  
But the mob is not who I blame.

My dear, we cover our heads and shield our vision,  
Limit ourselves to commentary and derision,  
Because, like they fear a god, we fear repercussion.

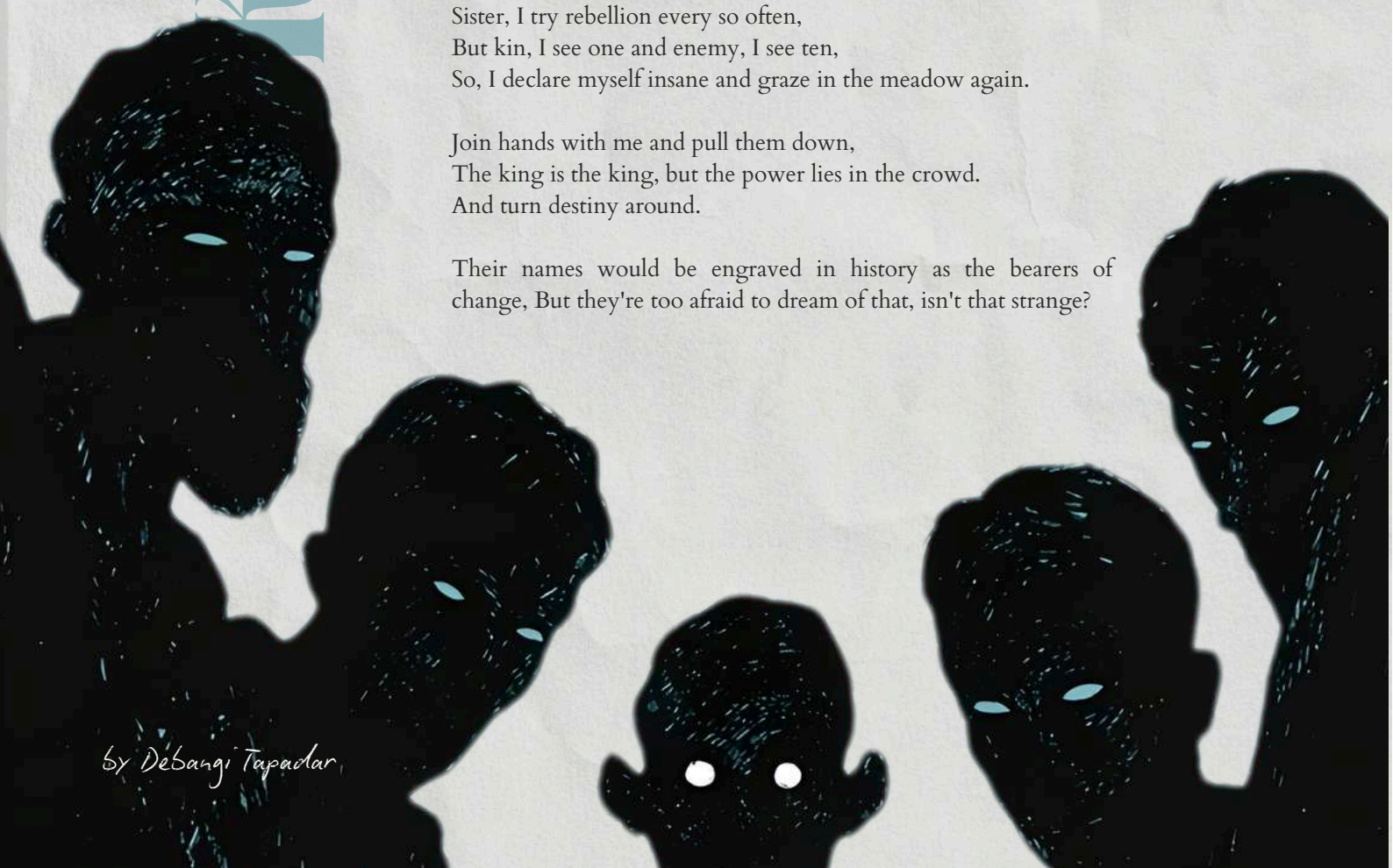
Our hearts pace like tigers in cages in the early stages of captivation,  
And we hastily change the topic when it comes to taking a stand,  
For our futures are, after all, in their hands.

And so, we do not change or grow, only complain,  
"At least we don't lose", but what do we gain?  
Leave our voices in the dust, but sing praises of their reign.

Sister, I try rebellion every so often,  
But kin, I see one and enemy, I see ten,  
So, I declare myself insane and graze in the meadow again.

Join hands with me and pull them down,  
The king is the king, but the power lies in the crowd.  
And turn destiny around.

Their names would be engraved in history as the bearers of change,  
But they're too afraid to dream of that, isn't that strange?



Shaown Bhattacharya's

Unarrived.  
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The ground ahead tilts—  
not yet beneath me,  
but waiting.

Somewhere, walls hum my name  
in a voice I don't remember  
but recognise.

A chair is empty,  
A door is ajar.  
Light pools on a floor  
That has never known my weight.

Air folds itself,  
Holding space where I should be.

*I do not touch it,  
But it reaches for me  
Anyway.*



# THE HUNGER TO BE EVERYTHING

“Oh, to wake up grateful for the pulse in my neck; to meet the mirror without dread. I need to be enough for myself.”

How lost we are in the virtuality of life. They told us we are lucky to live in an era of endless doors; of infinite selves waiting to be summoned with a scroll, a post, or a step-by-step transformation. But no one warned us of the disease it carries. Of how too many possibilities can fray the edges of a person. Our skin aches for mornings that begin with the light of dawn and not that of a screen. Before our feet touch the earth, our eyes have already wandered into someone else's world. We didn't notice when we stopped living and began watching others. We spectate others' lives yet are participants in nothing of our own. We compare the raw underbellies of our own existence to another's highlight reel. Our hopes now bloom from envy. Our bodies grow estranged. And I have become a graveyard of personas. Restless in the presence of simple pleasures. Always terrified of settling. I used to think I was failing because I hadn't arrived anywhere, but I've simply been lost in the contradiction of different maps, wandering too many paths. I carry cities I'll never walk and careers that died before a resume held their name. I mourn strangers I nearly loved, left behind in unread messages. Because what if there's someone else, gentler, funnier, easier, more aligned with me, just one scroll further?

“I am a thousand almosts, held together by hesitation; a gallery of repainted selves.”

And I am so exhausted by this constant orbit around potential. This slow bleeding of meaning. A daily flirtation with who I am not, what I don't have, and what I haven't done. Somewhere along the way, I stopped asking what I wanted and started asking what would look impressive. And what society worships shifts so quickly that mentality becomes unstable when worth is measured by trends. They said choice would taste like freedom, but not that it's an addictive sweetness. One that rots the stomach, until even our gut instincts lose their sense of direction. We do not just suffer from an abundance of options; we suffer from a lack of commitment. And I do not want more doors—I want to walk through one without looking back. I want to love something long enough to feel it love me in return. I want to lay foundations on imperfect soil and call it home anyway.

But I have lost myself in a million other people. I'm no longer fluent in my own language. I've consumed so many dreams that weren't mine, were others, and I don't recognise the hunger of my own longing. This isn't freedom. It's erosion. This is the slow disintegration of self beneath the illusion that we can be anything, everything, all at once. I am only 16, and already I am grieving a life I've been disloyal to; too busy auditioning for all the ones I could have instead. I'm haunted by the time I've given to this never-ending feed. How many sacred moments have I missed, peering into someone else's backyard, only to rip up my own seedlings and plant what they had sown?

“There is ripe fruit left untouched on every tree I’ve grown.”

But I can’t waste another season exploring other gardens. I want to return to my own. To tend it, to nurture it, to reap the fruits of my efforts. What if I told you this hunger to endure everything, this ceaseless reaching, this need to feel something more, is not curiosity, but self-exile? Somewhere along the way, you began to believe that living meant becoming exceptional; being seen; being chosen. That it meant consuming everything the world offers.

But you were only ever meant to come home to yourself. To your own food; to your own bed. And the truth is, nothing you’re chasing will hold you. Not the success. Not the admiration. Not even the healing. Because the moment you are finally still, you will hear it—your own precious life, sobbing in the corner, pleading: “I’ve been waiting for you to stop trying to be extraordinary, to stop trying to be ‘them’, all so I can love you as you are.” Let go of the performance. The great myth was that you had to earn your aliveness. But you don’t. You never did. You are, in this very moment, unfolding. And that is enough, please, let that be enough.

Darling, you don’t want to be buried with regret. You deserve a life you don’t feel the need to escape from through a screen. And in your stillness, in the tender ordinary of your unlabeled life, you will realise: solitude—true presence, is not the death of meaning. It is the birthplace of it. The hunger to be everything was only ever a longing to be loved.

But you were always worthy.  
Even as just one true, marvelous thing: yourself.  
I know you’ll learn to live for yourself, Amber.

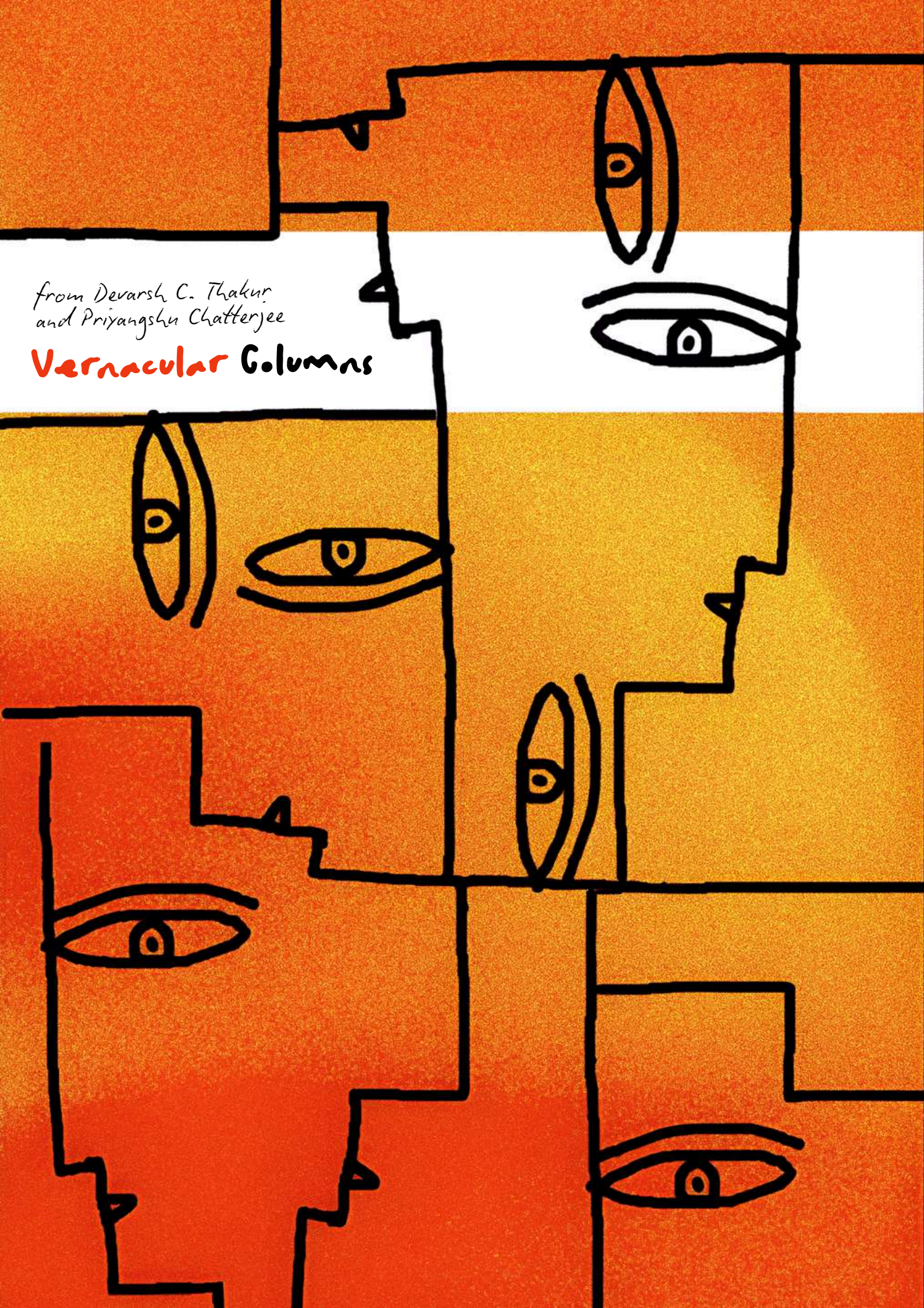
*“The world tells you that you can be anything, so you forget how to be yourself.  
It shows you everything you can become, so you abandon what you already are.  
It offers you a million lives; you choose none, and lose the one that was already yours.”*



*By Ayushmita Ray*

*from Devarsh C. Thakur  
and Priyanshu Chatterjee*

**Vernacular Columns**



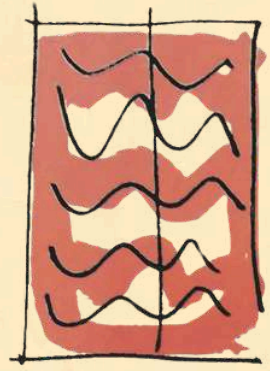
# एक दिन अज्ञानक



## पूर्व पर्व में...

मेले की भीड़ में अजनबी चेहरों को रंगों से जीवंत करती छोटी नाज़नीन चर्खी-झूले के हादसे में अपना हाथ खो बैठी। लेखक ने उसके चिकित्सा का प्रबंध किया। उसकी टूटी सृजनशीलता और कलात्मकता समाज से पूछ रही थी- क्या धर्म की दीवारें इंसानियत की बुनियाद से ऊँची हो सकती हैं?

नाज़नीन से मैंने उसके घर के बारे में पूछा। अनगिनत सवाल थे। आखिर वह क्यों यह काम करती थी? क्या उसके घर में कोई नहीं था? नाज़नीन के चेहरे पर एक अपरिचित गहराई नज़र आई। उसकी बातों से उसके मन के घाव, एक अद्भुत मानवीय दृष्टि-काँच के ज़रिये नज़र आ रहे थे। "मेरे घर में मेरी बड़ी बहन और मेरा एक छोटा भाई रहता है। मम्मी को मैंने कभी देखा नहीं। पापा रात को लौटते हैं, बातें नहीं होती उनके साथ। कभी-कभी डाँटते हैं, तो कभी-कभी बहुत... ज़ोर से डाँटते हैं। दीदी को कुछ बिमारी है, डॉक्टर नहीं दिखा पाई। भाई सुबह को स्कूल जाता है, शाम को दीदी के एक दोस्त के पास उसे रख के मैं मेले में जाती हूँ। तस्वीरें बनती थी भाई के शॉक से- उसको रंग-बिरंगी चीज़ें बहुत पसंद हैं।" "और अपने शॉक से?" वह कुछ नहीं बोली। "तस्वीरों की कमाई से ही तो घर चलता है। जब भाई बड़ा होगा, स्कूल की डिग्री से शायद अच्छी नौकरी कर पाएगा।"



"तुम्हारे पापा... मदद नहीं करते?" "वह घर में रहते कहाँ? जब वह लौटते हैं, हम सो रहे होते हैं। और बाकी समय ठीक से बातें नहीं होती उनके साथ।" "तुम ही उन सबकी देखभाल करती हो? माँ की तरह?" "मुझे जो सही लगा, मैंने अपनी हँसियत से वही किया।"

"तुम स्कूल नहीं जाती? तुम अब तस्वीरें कैसे बनाओगी?" चारों ओर ख़ामोशी थी। अस्पताल की नित्य कोलाहल स्पष्टतर सुनाई दे रही थी। "चिंता मत करो, तुम आराम करो। कुछ दिनों में ठीक हो जाओगी।"



अस्पताल के उन चार दीवारों से बाहर निकलते ही ऐसा एहसास हुआ मानों इस एक वार्तालाप ने मुझे जीवन के कई पहलुओं से परिचित कर दिया है। ज़िंदगी का एक नया नज़रिया सामने आया। सुबह के नौ बज रहे थे, रविवार का दिन था। हाथ में पड़े मोबाइल की ओर नज़रें घुमाते ही दोस्त से एक संदेश नज़र आया। "शुभ मातृ दिवस!" नीचे लिखा था, "अपनी मम्मी को यह मैसेज फॉरवर्ड कीजिये।" मेरी मम्मी मेरे साथ ही थी। मैंने उनसे कहा, "शुभ मातृ दिवस, माँ!" वह मुस्कुराई। यह मेरे लिए बिना उपहार दिए ही एक अनन्य तोहफा मिलने जैसा था। हम घर लौट आए।

घर लौटते हुए दिल में एक अजीब सी जकड़न-सी महसूस हुई। एक लड़की जो अपने और दूसरों के ख्वाबों में अपने हाथों से रंग भरती थी, आज अस्पताल में अपने चित्र, अपनी पहचान, अपना मातृत्व खो कर एक कमरे में पड़ी है। जीवन के एक पल ने उससे कितना कुछ छीन लिया!



इस शोक के चुप्पी में मैं खोया हुआ था कि बर्तनों की छनछनाहट, कुकर की सीटी, थकान की घरघराहट ने उस सन्नाटे को भंग कर दिया। मेरी मासी- हमारे घर की मूक कल्पतरु, दोपहर का खाना बना रही थी। मैंने झट से मम्मी के लिए एक उपहार तैयार किया। वह बेहद खुश थी। कुछ देर बाद, मासी ने दोपहर का खाना परोसा। आज का दिन मेरे दैनंदिन दिनचर्या से कुछ अलग नहीं था, पर आज दिल सवाल पूछ रहा था। कई सवाल। जब मैंने मासी को खाना परोसते देखा, मैं सोचने को बाध्य हुआ- जब एक लड़की का पाल-पोसने वाला विच्छिन्न हाथ उसके कला से उसको अलग कर रहा है, तब ही दूसरी ओर मेरी मासी के हाथ निरंतर देखभाल और पालन में लगे हुए हैं। दोनों ही समाज के नजरों से ओझल हैं, पर दोनों ही जीवनदायी भी हैं। एक विच्छिन्न है हादसे के कारण, तो एक और विच्छिन्न होने के कगार पर है- जिम्मेदारी से।

शाम को मासी को देखते ही कुछ और खयाल आए- एक परछाई की भाँति हमारे घर के कमरों से गुज़रती, हाथ में एक साड़ी या कमीज़ लेकर उसको सिकोड़के तह रही थी। रोल चुप रहकर मेरी रोल-मर्मा की जिंदगी में अपरिहार्य भूमिका निभाती है, वह है मेरी मासी। खाना खिलाती है, जो खाना छूता है उस होठ को जो शायद कभी उन्हें माँ कहकर नहीं पुकारेगी, वह है मेरी मासी। फुटबॉल के जूते का फीता बाँधती है उस लड़के का, जिसका जीता गया मैच कभी उनकी जीत नहीं हो सकती, वह है मेरी मासी। सँवारती है उस लड़के के किताबों को, जिसके विद्या का श्रेय कभी उनको नहीं मिलेगा, वह है मेरी मासी। पल्लू आगे बढ़ाती है अपना, आँसू पोछने के लिए उस लड़के का, जो कभी चाहें भी, तो भी उनका नहीं कहला सकता, यह है मेरी मासी।

शाम को मैंने एक और उपहार तैयार किया- मासी के लिए। उनका बेटा तो उनके पास नहीं रहता, उन्हें कौन तोहफा देगा? "यह क्या है, बाबू?" "उपहार। आज मातृ दिवस है न! हम सभी अपने माँ को उपहार देते हैं।" वह कुछ नहीं कही, पर कभी-कभी कुछ न कहना कुछ कहने से ज्यादा सुनाई देता है। वह अधिक श्रव्य होता है। मैं उनके कमरे से निकलते ही, उन्होंने अपने बेटे का हालचाल जानने के लिए घर फ़ोन किया। वह रो रही थी। यह है मेरी मासी।

शुभ मातृ दिवस!

### कश्मकश

कुछ ऐसी अनकही, अनसुनी गाथाएँ हैं कई लोगों की- जो इस कृप समाज के नीरव पोषक की भूमिका निभाते हैं। पर, इस अगीत में उनका अपना गीत होता है- जैसे नाज़नीन की तस्वीरें या मेरी मासी की दूसरों की देख-रेख करना। हमारी भूमि में नारीत्व की दास्तों भी इस मूक अभिव्यक्ति के अदृश्य सियाही से लिखी हुई हैं। ये गाथाएँ हैं उन लोगों की जो हाशियों में रहकर भी, इस दुनिया के पन्नों में रंग भर रही हैं। समाज की आदत-सी हो गई है बँटवारा करना, पर एक दिन अचानक महसूस किया मैंने कुछ ऐसी घटनाएँ जिसके बाद इस अनर्थक विभाजन के बीच मानवता को खो देने से इंकार करता हूँ मैं। उसी दिन की अपेक्षा में यह संसार राह देख रहा है, जिसकी ओर एकटक देखते-देखते आशा की टिमटिमाती लौ बुझने के कगार पर है। पर, यह लौ इसी उम्मीद में रोशनी फैलाती है कि एक दिन अचानक कुछ देखकर, महसूस कर नहीं, बल्कि नित्य एवं दैनंदिन अवसरों में ही लोगों में इस मानवीय जिज्ञासा की उत्पत्ति हो। यह लौ बुझनी नहीं चाहिए! समाज और इंसानियत के बीच के कश्मकश में यह लौ बुझनी नहीं चाहिए। क्रमशः

देवर्ष सी. ठाकुर  
संपादक, द साल्स्टिस



শ্রীমান জসসুন্দর, শ্রীমান চ্যাম্বার্সী'র

# আদমসুমারি

ডিসেম্বর, ২০১১

ভারতবর্ষের মানচিত্র সে চেনে না, অ-আ-ক-খ'র সঙ্গে তার বিশেষ পরিচয় নেই। লক্ষণীয় বলতে 'স' এর দোষ ও গালভরা হাসি। সাইকেলে করে তার দৈনিক যাতায়াত কিন্তু কাঁধে ব্যাগ ঝোলাতে তার কিঞ্চিৎ অস্বস্তি! সমাজবাদের লাল আবরণটা আমায় বলতে শেখায়, সে আর আমি এক। সে অতশত জানেনা, বোঝেও না! মার্ক্স, এঙ্গেলস, লেনিন কিংবা ফুকো কোনটাই তার পড়া নেই, কিন্তু ছোট টিফিন বাস্কে সে আমার জন্য বকফুল নিয়ে আসে, সে জানে শুভ্বেগয় কি ফোড়ন ব্যবহার হয়, মুদির দোকানে দাঁড়িয়ে সে চটপট মিলিয়ে দেয় মৌলিক হিসেব, সে মাছ ধরতে পারে, গাছে চড়তে পারে, কে জানি আরও কি কি পারে?

একদিন দেখি রান্নাঘরে অনেকক্ষণ ধরে গুনগুন করছে। আমি বললাম "কোনটা গো?" সে বলল "আরে ওইটা, আরে ওই তো!" আমি বললাম "কোনটা? কি?" কিছুক্ষণ কোন কথা হলো না সে ভাবছে, ভেবেই যাচ্ছে আমি পেছনে ঘুরলাম আর আচমকা বলল "চোখের জলের হয়না কোন রং..."

আমাদের পাড়ার পাশের বস্তিটায় সে থাকে, আমাদের তিন কামরার বারান্দা থেকে তার বস্তি দেখা যায়। বস্তি, বসতি থেকে বস্তি, অপভ্রংশে শুধু যুক্তাক্ষর এসে জোটেনি জুটেছে বধুনা, লাঞ্ছনা, অপবাদ, অপমান। সুনিতা আন্টি সেদিন এসে বলে গেছিল জায়গাটা তার মোটেই পছন্দ নয়, নাক সিঁটকে বলেছিল "ইশ কি নোংরা! কি গন্ধ!" দু'দিন পর বস্তিটায় আগুন লাগে। খবরে কেউ বলল সিলিভার বাস্ট, নীল বললো লালের দোষ, লাল বলল নীলের, সখ্গলক মাথা নেড়ে চায় চুমুক দিলেন। হঠাৎ দরজা খুলে ঢুকে এল সুনিতা আন্টি, ভীষণ হেসে বলল "দেখ দেখ বনফায়ার!" বনফায়ার শব্দটা কানে লেগেছিল খুব, ছাপ্পান্ন ইঞ্চির টিভিটার আলো আমার চোখে এসে লেগেছিল সুতীক্ষ্ণ তীরের মত, মনে হয়েছিল এক মুহূর্তের জন্য অন্ধ হয়ে গেছি।

আজ অনেকদিন সে হারিয়ে গেছে। আমায় পড়তে হয়নি পুলিশে জেরার মুখোমুখি, জবাবদিহি করতে হয়নি কারো কাছে। শুনেছি সরকার নাকি ক্ষতিপূরণ দিয়েছে ৫ লক্ষ টাকা। সুনিতা আন্টি এক ফাঁকে বলে গেছে "সে আর কম কি দু'টাকার কাজের লোক বেঁচে থাকতে কোনদিন অত টাকার মুখ দেখেছে বরং ভালোই হয়েছে কি বল?" সত্য সেলুকাস কি বিচিত্র এই দেশ! যে মানুষ অন্য মানুষের দর ঠিক করে দু'টাকা থেকে পাঁচ লাখের মধ্যে সে থাকে বিরাট আকাশচুম্বী অট্টালিকায়, আর যে মানুষটা দিনের পর দিন, আমার মা যখন অফিসে, আমায় বড় করেছে মাতৃস্নেহে, তাকে বলসে যেতে হয় দাঁড় দাঁড় আগুনে। তার দোষ? সে গরীব, তার পরিচয় পত্র বলে কিছু নেই, তার দেশ বলে কিছু নেই।

সে বেঁচে আছে কি মারা গেছে এই প্রশ্ন নারিয়ে দেয়নি শহরকে হয়নি মিটিং মিছিল প্রেস কনফারেন্স রাস্তা অবরোধ ভোটের তালিকা মনে রাখিনি তাদের নাম আদমসুমারি হলে তাদের মাথা গনেনি কেউ।

আমরা এখন উঠে এসেছি তিন কামরা থেকে দোতলা পেটহাউজে, বাবাকে যেটা দিয়েছে অফিস থেকে এখানে বাড়ির পাশে বস্তি নেই। সুনিতা আন্টি বলে গেছে এখন আমরা হাই সোসাইটি। নতুন বাড়ির, নতুন বিছানায়, নরম তোষকে যেদিন প্রথম রাত—আমায় কয়েকটা ছায়া ঘিরে ধরেছিল সেদিন প্রশ্ন করেছিল বারবার ওরা কারা ছিল? ওর বাপ, মা, স্বামী? জানিনা। ছায়া গুলোর কাছে আমি সমস্ত তেজ হারিয়ে ফেলেছিলাম আমার শরীর নিষ্ক্রিয় হয়েছিল রুখে দাঁড়াতে পারিনি বা হয়তো দাঁড়ানোর সাহস ছিল না আমার। তারা প্রশ্ন ছুঁড়েছিল আমার দিকে আমি তখন ভীষণ অসহায় ঘড়ির কাঁটা স্থবির হয়েছিল, দু মিনিটের নিরবতা পালন করে আমি পালিয়ে যেতে পারিনি। অতগুলো চোখ আমার দিকে তাকিয়ে জ্বলজ্বল করছে বিচার চাইছে কিন্তু আমি চুপ, আরো চুপ।

ঘুম থেকে উঠে, আমার কপাল ভর্তি ঘাম। কলিং বেল। খটখট। খটখট। আবার ওরা? আবার?

অক্টোবর, ২০২৫

ভারতবর্ষ চাইছে সমীক্ষার ফলাফল। এরই মধ্যে দাঁড় দাঁড় আগুনে জ্বলে গেছে আরো অনেক বসতি। সুমনের গানের লাইন সত্যি হয়েছে, আদমসুমারি হলে তাদের মাথা গনেনি কেউ।





# CAREER CHRONICLES

*Beyond the cast iron gates what awaits is confusing, yet unavoidable. This section, debuting this year, contains interviews with our distinguished alumnus and expert advice from our career counselor, that may throw some light into the otherwise inexplicably uncertain. Ritwija Sarkar and Devi Kumar, editors at The Solstice, present to you Career Chronicles.*

# After the bell rings

*In conversation with Devi Kumar*

**D.K: What's one belief you held in school that changed completely after you entered college?**

Ritika: One would definitely be that good marks are everything. In college I have come to realise that it's not just about rote memorisation and the marks you get. We rely more on our own research, self-study and open learning. So, it's really more about how you understand the content and how much further you're willing to explore. Your own analysis, criticism and conclusions that you derive from the concepts are far more important than simply memorising points in a textbook.

**It's always better to keep an open mind and not limit yourself to just study material. What does success mean to you now? How has the definition evolved since your time in school?**

Well, during my time in school, success meant being able to do everything. I danced, I sang, I anchored, I was part of the student council and participated in numerous fests and events. But honestly, that put a lot of strain on my mental and physical health. For me, success now means to do everything that I can, to the best of my abilities. To recognise my limits and sometimes to step away from a few things and be comfortable doing so.

**I'm sure a lot of people will be able to resonate with that. You're a student of Political Science. It studies power, and the institutions which shape society. How has studying these ideas changed the way you understand the world around you?**

We study a lot about public policy, institutions and administrative processes within them. And for me, that has really helped me understand how everything is inter-related. There are a lot of complex political struggles going on in the world right now, and everything is not as simple as we believe. There's a lot of thought and action behind the scenes even when it comes to making the tiniest decisions. Nothing is as simple as a news headline. The more you study the more you come to realise that not everything is black and white, right or wrong, but most things tend to fall under a gray area.

**For the many students looking to study Political Science, what does it actually involve? What exactly do you study, and what kind of career paths does it open?**

Political Science isn't just about studying power or institutions for the sake of marks. It really works only if you're genuinely curious about how the world functions. It's about understanding how systems operate, from governments to corporations, and recognising that politics exists in every institution. If that curiosity drives you, the subject becomes very engaging. In terms of careers, the scope is wide from public policy and diplomacy to civil services, corporate sectors, and beyond. The key is interest first; the opportunities follow.

**Finally, is there any advice you wish to give to your juniors? Something you'd have liked to hear as a student.**

Yes. Trust me, it's not as difficult as people make it out to be. All it requires is consistency and hard work. Always stay true to yourself and most importantly, trust yourself. Best of luck!

*Ritika Nair was a familiar face on every school stage. A Humanities graduate from the Class of 2024, she is now studying Political Science at Miranda House, University of Delhi. Whether it's singing, dancing, organising college fests, or taking on new responsibilities as President-Elect of the Rotaract Club, Ritika continues to nurture her passion for the performing arts. At the same time, she's learning to navigate life away from home and embracing everything that comes with this new chapter.*



**D.K: When people hear "board topper," they imagine perfection. What is something about your journey that wasn't perfect? How did you overcome it?**

Arnav: The word perfection is very overrated. According to me, things have to be imperfect for you to understand what "perfect" even means. During Class 12, especially in the pre boards, I was continuously scoring low in Accounts and Business Studies, sometimes in the 50s...this was surprising because I had performed well in earlier exams, and had worked very hard too. But when you actually sit for the final exam, you realise that nothing goes exactly as planned. Sometimes things turn out differently, and sometimes even better. Instead of giving up, I kept trying. I spoke to my teachers, asked what I could improve, and stayed persistent. That phase taught me that imperfection is not failure, but a step towards improvement.

**That's a common experience amongst many people, but only few continue to work hard despite the setbacks. I think that sets apart successful people. For your second question, Economics is built on scarcity and choice. What was the toughest academic choice you had to make?**

The most difficult decision was definitely choosing my course and my college. I was confused between B.Com and Economics Honours. I watched several videos, podcasts, and read about opinions online, but none of it truly helped because at the end of the day, it's a personal decision. Many people told me that since I had scored well, I should definitely go out of Kolkata and not stay back. Even today, people ask why I didn't go to DU. But I realised there is no guarantee that going to a particular university ensures success. It ultimately depends on you and how you use the opportunities given to you. I chose to trust my own thought process and stayed in Kolkata at St. Xavier's, and I'm happy I made that decision.

**I see, I'd like to ask you a question that's quite pertinent amongst my peers. As former President of the Interact Club, how did you balance leadership responsibilities with academics? What advice would you give to someone struggling to manage both?**

Managing both was definitely a difficult task. I was constantly juggling between the two. However, I realised that you cannot completely leave one for the other. Academics is important, but co-curricular activities help you grow as a person. They teach you how to interact with people, how to understand society, and how to handle responsibility. My advice would be to not give up your passions out of fear. Learn to manage your time and be disciplined. Balance doesn't always mean equal time. It's also about giving each responsibility the attention it needs at the right moment.

**What is something you miss about school that college just can't replace?**

That's a very good question, honestly. I'll say two things: I wish college had teachers, not just professors. And I wish college had periods, not lectures. That difference hits differently. In school, you attend periods, you talk to teachers, and it's warm and friendly. In college, you attend lectures. It's more professional. A teacher treats you like their own child; but a professor treats you like an adult. Of course, college has its own advantages. You have freedom, there's no uniform, and the environment is more independent. But even then, nothing can truly replace school.

**It is a bittersweet feeling having to hear our very own seniors talk about leaving school. The fact that we're next is beyond belief. But finally, is there any advice you'd like to give students, something you wish you had heard in Class 12.**

Yes. One thing I've realised is that people often leave important decisions to the future version of themselves. But it shouldn't be that way. "I have to get it done" should be your mindset. Simply hoping that things will work out is not enough. It's about deciding that you will make it work, no matter what. If you already have a Plan B in mind, then somewhere your Plan A loses strength. So believe in what you choose and commit to it fully.

*As the Commerce board topper of our school for the batch of 2025 and the former President of the Interact Club, Arnav Poddar's success was hard to miss. He is now a student of St.Xavier's College, Kolkata, pursuing Economics Honours. He is also a member of Enactus, the college's social entrepreneurship society, and recently got the chance to compete at a national level, even visiting IIT Roorkee as part of the experience. Arnav believes that whether it's academics or life choices, everything ultimately comes down to trusting yourself.*





**D.K: What part of you has changed the most since entering college?**

Sunhrit: Well, School and college are both institutions of learning, but they are very different. In school, teachers don't just teach you what to learn; they teach you how to learn. In college, professors are mostly there to tell you what to study. The responsibility of understanding how much you can do, who you want to become, that falls entirely on you. As a school student, you can explore a thousand possibilities. But in college, you have to find your footing. You're not just a student anymore, you're an adult preparing to be independent. That responsibility becomes more prominent. Another big difference is perspective. In school, things feel black and white; this is important, that is not; this is right, that is wrong. But when you enter the "real world," there's no sharp line between black and white. It's mostly gray. Adjusting to that gray area takes time. You hit roadblocks, but that's how you transition from being a school student to becoming an adult.

**Now that you're surrounded by so many successful students in college, what is one common trait you notice amongst them?**

Two things have always stood out. First, the will to prove themselves and to establish their own identity. Everyone wants to create something that is uniquely theirs. Second, the desire to not forget to have fun along the way. College is where we build our careers and ourselves, but it's also probably the last phase of life when you can truly be carefree. So finding that balance between building your identity and not losing out on the fun along the way, that's what college life is really about.

**You were a star quizzier, actor, debater and singer. In order to prepare for your competitive exams, did you have to let any part of that go? Was it worth it?**

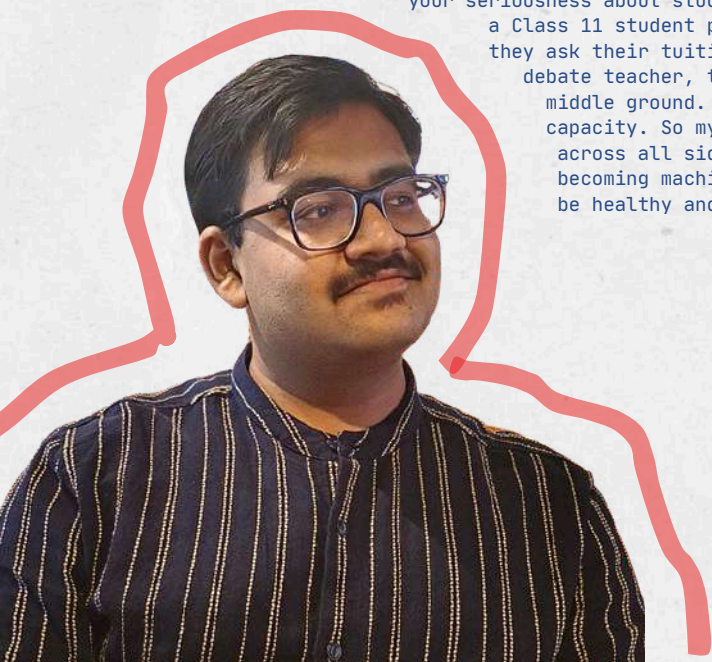
I did have to give up all of that- but only to some extent. To be fair, I didn't let go of everything until very late December, but I did have to cut down. So there was definitely some sacrifice involved. Was it worth it? I would say yes. It's that classic conundrum: would you rather live a few moments of pain for an eternity of joy, or enjoy everything now and risk uncertainty later? Most of us choose the former. I feel I've ended up in a good place, so I'm thankful for the sacrifices I made.

**Did you ever feel your identity was becoming tied to a single exam? And what advice would you give students who feel that way?**

Honestly, that question doesn't apply to me. Until the results were declared, not even most of my teachers knew which exam I would finally choose. I gave almost every entrance exam a science student could give. So I never tied my identity to just one. But for those who do, here's the thing. If someone sacrifices everything for two years, makes their identity about one exam, and reaches where they want to and they're happy, well there's nothing wrong with that. But the moment it starts affecting their mental health, if it changes how they see themselves, if they can't look at themselves in the mirror with respect or recognise who they are...then it's not worth it. Even if that happens for a single moment, it's not worth it. No achievement should cost you your sense of self.

**Finally, is there any advice you'd like to give your juniors?**

In most schools, there's a strict division between academics and co-curriculars. If you're academically oriented, you're expected to focus only on that. If you're into co-curriculars, your seriousness about studies is questioned. There's pressure from both sides. If a Class 11 student preparing for JEE or NEET wants to go for a debate, and they ask their tuition teacher, they'll be told not to go. If they ask their debate teacher, they'll get a thousand reasons to attend. But there's no middle ground. There's no one helping them decide based on their own capacity. So my advice is this: there needs to be better communication across all sides. Students should be able to prepare well without becoming machines that only produce exam results. Preparation should be healthy and not something that takes away who you are.



*In his school days, Sunhrit Paria was never defined by just one word. Our former head boy is a brilliant quizzier, an actor, a debater and even a singer. From the batch of 2025, he is currently pursuing his MBBS from Calcutta Medical College. Even today, his interests include music, cuisine, and anything that "broadens his horizons". Today, he joins us to speak about growth, identity and responsibility with a maturity that is far beyond his years.*



# the chalk just settles

*In conversation with Rajlekha Sil, Career Counsellor, DPS Ruby Park*

**A** student sits in front of the computer with shaky hands and a racing mind. A sight familiar to perhaps every student. In the next few minutes, one option from a long drop-down menu must be selected, a choice that will forever etch its significance in their life. A choice that requires an experienced hand of support to guide us. Beyond the classroom's familiar windows, the world stretches vast and complicated, full of winding, uncharted roads. On this intimidating journey, a career counsellor is the light at the end of the dark tunnel. They become the calming presence beside the desk, someone who listens, asks the right questions, and helps turn scattered possibilities into a clearer path. Today, we are privileged to have with us someone who often plays this role for many students, Rajlekha Ma'am, our school's career counsellor.

**1. In Class 10, every student must face the challenge of picking their streams. What are some important things one should and should not consider while taking this crucial decision?**

For students who are going to choose their stream very soon, the first thing they must consider is their own interests. And by interests, I primarily mean how good they are at the subjects and how the subject has served them before, or if their personal qualities and future professional goals align with what the stream requires. For example, a student can be very intrigued by the glory of physics, but unfortunately, they perhaps haven't been scoring very well in it. Therefore, students must not confuse intrigue with interest. The second thing that they should check is the future scope and career options of the stream, i.e., they should keep the opportunity cost of choosing any stream clear in their minds.

What should not be considered is peer pressure or familial expectations. And one should not be swayed by the apparent glamour of certain subjects (for example, fields like astrophysics or psychology) but judge one's own acumen in them objectively.

**2. There are many students who are confused about which stream would be best suited for them. If one feels that they have made a mistake later on in Classes 11 or 12, how flexible is the system today to accommodate changes in their decision?**

To speak very traditionally, Pure Science (PCMB) is the stream that is the most flexible in terms of pivoting their field of study to any other stream later on. However, today's system is becoming quite flexible with the introduction of the concept of 'interdisciplinary education'. These days, companies are looking for students with holistic backgrounds. Science and Humanities are no longer mutually exclusive, and neither is completely devoid of the other. But it is advised that one must be clear about the reasons for changing their stream. However, if one chooses a niche specialisation from the very beginning, they must have a complete understanding of what that entails, since it becomes quite difficult to pivot later.

**3. Science students often face a binary career choice between medicine and engineering, while those in Commerce think CA is their safest option. Could you suggest some alternate, lesser-known career opportunities for students who have taken up these streams, along with some for those who have opted out of mathematics after 10th?**

These days, with the huge disruptions in the field of technology, a lot of new opportunities have come up. For students who have science with mathematics, they can go for economics and finance, a very good career switch for those with quantitative aptitude. They can also go for the usual honours subjects like mathematics, statistics, or actuarial sciences. Those students who want to stick to science subjects can major in any of the subjects that they like and then go for research in the future, especially if they are willing to go abroad. Some lucrative fields of research are biotechnology, microbiology, bioinformatics, computational biology, etc. Some students without mathematics, who wish to practise in a clinical setup, can even go for psychology. They can do research in the same, get their doctorate and become a practising psychologist, be it in the clinical or counselling

field. Another option is the up-and-coming field of geography. These days, GIS, GPS, etc., have become very important. All of these require adequate scientific knowledge.

Now, coming to students who have commerce with mathematics, they also have the field of economics open to them. If they are looking for a less quantitative option, the field of developmental economics is a good choice. Finance is a more quantitative option. Apart from that, there is consulting, or management with specialisations in marketing, human resources, supply chain management, etc. And those with a grasp of mathematics can also go for actuarial sciences. Students with an additional computer science subject can go into FinTech, which offers very highly paid jobs alongside the career of investment banking.

Most reputed colleges these days that offer a B.Com or BBA require mathematics in class 12. So, for those who do not have mathematics, their best option is marketing; they can find colleges like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology offering BBA degrees without mathematics. These days, psychology and marketing are very closely related, like in the field of industrial psychology, which deals with the behaviour of consumers and corporate workers. And, by means of some certification courses or proficiency in digital tools like artificial intelligence, by putting in some extra effort, they can move to digital marketing, social media marketing, influencer marketing, etc. Those with BBAs without mathematics can get specialised MBAs in human resources or marketing, but they should avoid fields like accountancy, supply chain management, finance, logistics, etc.

#### 4. Humanities is sometimes unfairly labelled as a "backup" or "easy" stream. What are some upcoming career paths for humanities students beyond class 12 today?

The statement that it is a 'backup' or 'easy' stream is a myth. The reason why it seems as such has nothing to do with the subjects themselves but with the fact that fewer people over the years have chosen them, and therefore, the competition is slightly less. The ease or difficulty of a subject is subjective. Since, over the years, science has been the glorified stream, it therefore has the maximum competition and perceived difficulty.

Students having mathematics have all the options with regard to banking and economics mentioned before. Other options for those without mathematics are English, which in itself is a very holistic subject, which opens up options for research or teaching, or one can get into mass communication, journalism, advertising, PR, etc. If one studies English along with psychology, they have the option of shifting to not only clinical and counselling psychology but also social psychology, which is closely related to sociology. Moreover, certain prospects are available in the fields of history or archaeology, but they would be research- or teaching-related for the most part. But as far as subjects like international relations or political science are concerned, there are options like public policy making, diplomacy, etc., available.

#### 5. Students often face a dilemma between balancing academics and extracurricular activities. In the dynamic college application process, how much weight should each of these carry, and is it important for every student to have some extracurriculars?

Firstly, we must understand the difference between extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Co-curricular activities aid our syllabus, for example, a commerce student going to a business event at a fest and pitching a business idea. Thus, students gain empirical experience. On the other hand, extracurriculars, which do have their own benefits, have little to do with one's academic syllabus, for example, students engaging in the performing arts.

Practically speaking, extracurriculars are mostly optional for students. However, co-curriculars are no longer optional. The reason for this is that students must feel the need to transcend the constraints of their theoretical knowledge. Co-curricular activities open up students' world to the scope of the subject in the empirical world. The other thing is that we cannot completely ascertain our own acumen in a subject just from theoretical studies. It is only when we apply these things practically that we can truly understand whether we are cut out for a particular subject as a career. Obviously, other universal things one learns would be teamwork, leadership, communication, crisis management, etc., which are all essential skills. Gone are the days of employing people who only rely on bookish knowledge. One must learn to present oneself and manage people. Most colleges still go for the quantitative aspect of a student's academics; however, some colleges in India and those abroad always look for not just test scores but also qualitative aspects by asking for CVs, essays or conducting personal interviews. However, it is the student's responsibility to strike the right balance of academics and activities and prioritise accordingly.

#### 6. With rapid technological advancements and the steady infiltration of Artificial Intelligence into the job market, what are some steps students can take today to keep themselves updated and ready to face the competitive workplace of the future?

These days, everybody is trying to learn artificial intelligence blindly and arbitrarily. The first step every student should take is to choose their field of choice and study how artificial intelligence is going to affect that field. For example, the field of robotics combines the disciplines of mechanical engineering, medicine, and AI and machine learning, something that will always require human intervention. Another thing is students must stop blindly going into computer engineering, since software development is a job that is under threat. Comparatively, core engineering subjects, where one can also learn the foundation of computer science, are unlikely to be completely automated very soon. And lastly, one can become a developer for artificial intelligence itself, making their job irreplaceable. Therefore, even for incorporating AI, humans are required. Artificial intelligence merely offers a large set of efficient and effective tools, and learning to use those tools in one's field of expertise is the key.



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