

Translations



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Third Class

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*Translated from Assamese by **Pratim Das*

The train was yet to arrive. The signal light was on. Nitya walked slowly from one end of the station to the other. The station seemed completely new to him. A lot has changed in these two years! The north-eastern corner of the railway line was a small, forested area then. Now a long colourful military barrack stood there. These were newly built houses for the workers. A new factory has been built on the other side. A good deal has changed in these two years of war! Passengers were jostling at the station. Getting a ticket was no less than winning a small battle! He longed to talk openly with someone, but there wasn't a familiar face! People were not interested in talking to strangers! Everyone was busy! No leisure! No time! Everyone wore neutral coloured jeans suits with cigarettes sticking from their mouths. Such heavy boots and double socks too! And such serious faces! No chance of breaking into a conversation! They all glanced at his dirty clothes. But they got busy again with their own work, briefly imagining him to be a convict of forty-two. None came forward and spoke - or showed any interest in knowing about him. Nitya remembered those exciting days two years back. A strange sensation was seen in the village at that time. There were a lot of agitation and people were imprisoned and they had protested. But within two years there was a sea change . People had become crazy about money. The fiery days of forty-two were only a memory!

The black head of the train was seen in the distance. The station became agitated. The coolies started running along with their carts holding on to the handles firmly. Nitya, with a small bundle of clothes under his armpit, walked towards a third-class compartment. Many passengers got down at the station. Locating a vacated bench, Nitya stretched on it. If he did not occupy the bench, someone else would do so! The opposite bench was occupied by some Hindustani men and women. The compartment was dirty, strewn over with roasted peanut and pear shells. But he did not mind. He lay down and gazed out of the window as far as his vision permitted. The train started moving slowly.

He went over the plan once more in his mind. Would it be wrong to go to Jaya's place instead of going home directly? The last two months in the prison were turbulent. The pain of two years in jail became unbearable in those two months. He did not receive any letters from home in the past two months either. Maybe that's why he wanted to go to Jaya's, instead of going home. Jaya's mother had treated him with motherly affection during those three months when he was in the camp.

He laughed to himself. While sitting in Jaya's house after returning from the camp, her grandmother would come and twist his ears on some pretext. He pretended to look like a fool not understanding where his fault lay. When the grandmother's hand began to ache, she would break into a lengthy lecture about why he was being punished. "If you're a hero, don't you have time to comb your hair while serving the country? Look at yourself, getting thinner every day! How will you rescue the country from the British with such a frail body?"

Jaya must have laughed at his helpless condition, inside her room. Then, as soon as her grandmother moved away, she would bring a mirror and a comb and whisper – "Did you mark her words? Comb your hair now while there's time - or else she'll come back and grumble." But he remained still! Jaya was forced to comb his hair then. She was the editor of 'Prathamika'. In the house, from the young to old, everyone seemed so busy and excited. He recalled the boys he had trained at the camp—so fearless and yet so simple! They embraced him as their own in just two days of their acquaintance with him!

.....He can't forget that night! Article 144 had been imposed throughout Assam. In some parts of India, firing was going on, tear gas was used. Warrants too! That day, one of his fellow campers went out for a walk with two volunteers. It was too late to come back. On reaching Jaya's house, he found out that the entire village was surrounded by the military. Many boys from the camp were arrested. A few could escape. The camp was set on fire. Asking the boys with him to run away, he entered Jaya's house. The room was dark. When he called out, Jaya emerged with a lamp in her hand. Placing the lamp on the table, she shook with emotion and almost hugged him. "Why did you come? A warrant has been issued for your arrest. They'll take you away," her voice was choked.

He gently released Jaya from his arms and, with a gentle scolding, said, "How can you be an editor when you become so restless? Do you think we're going to rebel, and the authorities will just sit back while we fight this life-threatening war? Go burn all the papers of your 'Prathamika' or hide them somewhere."

Just then, Jaya's mother appeared. She was seeing the military for the first time in her life. All her old laughter had ceased. Whispering, she said, "I've hidden some papers in the rice husks and kept the rest inside the weaver's pole. Do we still have anything to fear?"

"Don't worry, go and cook quickly" he turned to Jaya, "And listen—first, arrange something for my escape and a cup of tea at least!"

"I've boiled the water for tea. You sit," said Jaya's mother to her, as she left the room. Jaya picked up the lamp from the table, placed it back, and stepped forward. "I had prayed to God that *dada* wouldn't come in the midst of this trouble. I had hoped hard that he wouldn't, on hearing the news of the military raid here. But here you are! Haven't you heard that the people in Nada-Nagaon, Kaliabar, Chatia are being tortured?"

Nitya still smiles when he remembers her condition that day. Hearing about the atrocities of the military, she was naturally scared, but she always concealed such feelings outwardly. That day, she could hardly contain herself at the thought of the military presence in her own village.

"Where have all the old people gone?" Jaya's mother asked.

"They went to Bhola's house with the papers," replied Jaya.

After drinking some water, Nitya turned to Jaya, who was standing nearby. "Can we go to the back field? Will you be able to do it?" Jaya pondered for a moment and then went inside.

"Getting arrested and jailed are not my goals - I have to escape anyway," he declared.

After a while, footsteps were heard outside. Nitya couldn't eat anymore. He quickly drank the tea and stood up. Jaya's mother thrust him inside the room. Jaya hurriedly held a pair of *riya mekhela*. "Put this on, come on!" she said, helping him with the dress, taking his hand and guiding him.

Jaya didn't leave. Moving closer, she spoke in a voice filled with both excitement and urgency, "Like this, tie it here... no, here. Stand up, I'll help you put it on." She swiftly adjusted the attire herself.

"The order is for the women to leave; the house is going to be searched."

They slipped out through the back porch. Nitya moved cautiously and positioned himself at the field's entrance. Parents and children emerged. Jaya grasped him firmly and urged, "Go, this way."

He gripped Jaya's hand, trying to reassure her. "There's no time to explain. Keep calm. Don't worry about me," Nitya said softly.

...Then, there was a significant turn of events! He and his colleagues were arrested while lunching at a place.

He jolted upright, unsure if he was sleeping, awake, or dreaming. The train had pulled into a station and halted. Time seemed to have slipped away! He got down from the train for a cup of tea, scanning the compartments for a familiar face. There, in the first class, sat Tapan Chowdhury, a former classmate, impeccably dressed! An expensive cigarette hung from his lips. Nitya asked tentatively, "Are y-you Mr. Chowdhury?" Chowdhury looked for a moment at the unshaven man's face without a clue! Nitya approached again hesitantly, "If you don't recognize me..." Chowdhury suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, Nitya, come here!" Nitya showed him the ticket and said, "Third class passenger!"

"Still stuck at forty-two, huh? ... Come up here! You can get down later," Chowdhury said. Nitya struggled his way through the crowd and eventually found some space to sit in the compartment. As he sat down, Chowdhury made room for him and remarked, "These days, there's supposed to be no more class discrimination. Have you seen the state of first class?" He poured two cups of tea from the flask and approached Nitya, asking, "So, what's new? You look like you've just come out of jail! You have also changed a lot!"

He smiled and continued, "After college was over, you left; I failed my BA and started working with a Punjabi contractor. Now I'm a contractor myself."

"Very good news! Where're you headed now?" Chowdhury asked.

"To Jorhat. There's work at the military camp. Are you alone? Won't you drop at home?"

"I'll also head to Jorhat. There's a bit of work there," Nitya replied.

Chowdhury took out two cigarettes and offered one to Nitya. After several failed attempts, he managed to light his matchstick. Seeing Nitya's struggle, Chowdhury tossed away his burning match and handed him the matchbox instead.

"What poor quality matchsticks these days!" Chowdhury remarked.

The train whistle blew. Nitya stood up. He had to get back to his compartment.

"Why don't you sit here..."

Nitya just looked at him and smiled.

"I'll see you later," he said.

Jaya's house was quite a distance from the station. Along the way, Nitya met a boy named Ratneshwar whom he had previously trained at the camp. Ratneshwar welcomed Nitya with a hug and accompanied him home. After a shower and some food, Nitya retired to bed. During their conversation, Ratneshwar brought up Jaya.

"Oh, Jaya?" Nitya inquired.

"Don't mention them anymore," Ratneshwar sighed, leaning back in his chair and gazing out the window. "They have become influential people these days."

Curious, Nitya turned to Ratneshwar and asked, "Why do you say that?"

These days, they've befriended influential people, even the contractors. They've secured the contract for that camp," Ratneshwar paused for a moment before continuing, "She's made a lot of money!"

"What else could one wish for? Otherwise, running a household isn't easy," Nitya responded and turned away his face.

"But being the secretary of 'Prathamika'...." Ratneshwar began.

"Do you think the secretary of the 'Prathamika' does not have hunger and thirst?" Nitya asked with a smile. Looking out of the window, he pointed to the whitewashed houses and asked, "Did you do those?"

"They've gathered more bricks and wood; they're going to build a bigger house," Ratneshwar added.

As Nitya stepped into Jaya's house, he sensed significant changes both outside and within. He paused to admire the beautifully arranged pictures. There was a group photo of their camp where Nitya sat at the center. The table was adorned with a lovely tablecloth and two American vases, showcasing a knack for home decoration. 'Who knows, maybe they've found out he's coming,' he mused to himself. 'But how?' Nitya had never mentioned anything.

Just then, a part of Jaya's face appeared on the other side of the curtain. Recognizing him from behind the drawn curtain, she emerged, her face lit up with surprise and delight. Quickly composing herself, she simply said—"Nitya *dada*, I recognized you at first sight. Please sit down. Let me call mother. Are you okay?" Jaya continued talking as she went inside. In her conversation, he noticed a new tone—more modern. Jaya's mother came and addressed him, "Come inside." He responded with a smile and bowed his head. However, noticing the absence of her usual laughter and banter, he began to miss the old familiarity.

Jaya's mother brought in various snacks. Jaya stood nearby. Glancing at the room, her mother said to her, "The living room is a bit messy. Fetch two new tablecloths."

Jaya left to do so. "Oh, these snacks are delicious," he commented as he ate. "Did Jaya make them?"

Jaya's mother smiled and wiped her nose. "By the grace of God, we haven't faced much hunger. Plus, we're expecting a guest today. Jaya has been preparing these since last night."

Upon entering the house, he had assumed as much. When the topic came up again, he asked, "Where is the guest from?"

"Say no more. You'll find out everything later". She said with a meaningful smile. Just then, the sound of a motor outside caught their attention. Jaya's mother moved forward slightly but she suppressed her eagerness.

She whispered to him, "Eat, son. How about it? There's a betel leaf in that box. Someone's arrived. I'll go."

The food seemed unappetizing to him. He quickly gulped down a glass of water and stood up. Neither Tapan Chowdhury nor did he expect this meeting! But they hid their true feelings!

"I searched for you so much yesterday, but we missed each other. Let's go to our camp. My motor will leave tomorrow; you can ride with me," Tapan said.

"No, I must leave today. It's been two years - I still haven't visited home," he insisted. Just then, Jaya's mother standing nearby intervened, "Stay here today; it will be good. You can leave comfortably by motor tomorrow." She smiled and glanced at Tapan.

The smile she wore was so like the smile he had seen on Tapan's face on the train. He stared at the photo on the wall. Picking a few betel nuts and spices from the box that Jaya had brought in, Nitya said, "I will take leave *now*."

"You're leaving?" Jaya's mother was surprised.

"Yes," he bid farewell and started moving out. Jaya's mother stepped in front of the door and whispered, "I'll inform you in due time - but you must come!"

About the Author

***Mahim Bora (1924-2016)**-writer and educationist hailing from Assam. He received Padma Shri in 2011 for his contribution to Indian literature. He also received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001 and Assam Sahitya Sabha conferred on him the honorary title of Sahityacharyya in 2007. He has several short story collections, novels, essays, children's fiction, poetry collections, Radio Plays and literary articles to his credit.

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