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WHY DOES THE BLACKBIRD SING

Anubhav Chakraborty

"This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

Shubhro's speech was by far the best in class. It was not surprising; he had been the stand-out elocutionist amongst his peers, and had time and again, represented this school of two thousand at inter-school competitions. The teachers reveled at his eloquence, and his friends looked at him with dreamy eyed jealousy!

Oh what fun to be the apple of the teacher's eyes!

Even the most notorious truant, hiding himself in the refuge of the second-last bench, to skip the eyes of scrutinizing Saha sir, was privately heard mentioning: "If only I could speak like this, I bet I would've been saved of all those canings!" Shubhro's father was a successful MBA, who held a powerful job in one of the biggest corporate offices of the small industrial town. A noted speaker, many ascribed Shubhro's talents to him. Although, there were whispers that Shubhro privately took classes.

For most, monthly elocution classes were a source for unspeakable terror. Some were scared to speak in public. Some were scared of Mr.Saha. And most were hesitant about the idea of a two hundred plus crowd staring at your half-baked arguments carelessly joined like a cheap kindergarten puzzle, just a couple of hours before Judgement hour! Nathu's classmates had been accustomed to regard the ideas of 'Correct pronunciation' as paramount. Any lapses in error resulted in a death stare from Mr.Saha - Nightmare inducing! The insurmountable perils of the seventh grade!

Nathu however, secretly looked forward to these classes. He wasn't that bad a speaker, and secretly he enjoyed researching on the social topics that everyone seemed to abhor. Of course he had to deny it during recess, and play down his skills in front of the rest. He had to belong alright! After all no one wanted to be like the sweeper-boy Aurobindo, did they?

Aurobindo wasn't the best-fighter and the smartest kid in town. He was neither a Sawyer nor a Finn, and they told him Aurobindo had no friends. Parents warned their children against any association with the boy, and his menacing eyes were enough to scare even the seniors. Like a sprawling weed, he was everywhere, and yet no one really took any notice. He was a blackbird. And to Nathu and his friends, the idea of being like Aurobindo scared them into late night revisions an hour before their semester.

Aurobindo sang sometimes! Old Bollywood songs. Late into the afternoon, when the scorching heat made the dusty grounds of the school premises unbearable, and everyone huddled into the shades of school corridors, alone sat Aurobindo, on one of the flaming red-painted benches that burned along with the sun.

"his wings are clipped and

his feet are tied

so he opens his throat to sing"

No one really knew where he was named thus! It was a popular joke that ran amongst the students and their parents of St. Andrew's. And although Aurobindo was an honest man, who worked hard at his job, and took no favours; to them, he was always an outsider, not like Hari uncle, or the kind Rabeeen chacha with his friendly whiskers. The Principal was a kind man, they said. He had offered Aurobindo the job, and had tried to educate him in the language of the true Lord. *Aurobindo did not learn*. Nor did he ever try to befriend Nathu's friends. He rejected them, just as much as they rejected him.

"What an ungrateful boy!"

"Why aren't your clothes pressed? Are you trying to be like Aurobindo?"

Discrimination was as of yet fledgling concept as for these middle class boys. Most hadn't heard of it. Their fathers were all officers at the city's many industries. They lived in the industry's sprawling townships whose structures resembled that of the Soviet dachas. Their mornings began early in riotous cacophony in school buses. On weekends, the likes of Nathu, Shubhro, and Kabir ate lunch at each other's, and went for movies in the city's new shopping complex. Ishaan's head was bald after his Upanayana, interspersed with spikes of protruding hair, and when he crept over to Nathu's bench to say: "What kind of man uses King as his surname", he seemed like a hen which had been recently plucked out of its feathers. Nathu's Upanayan was due in another month. He didn't want a shaved head!

The end-note was Saha sir's emphatic speech about community tolerance in post-independence India: "We have wiped off all forms of caste distinctions in this country. Nothin' separates a man to another anymore" He said. "Our society has progressed a lot" he said.

Nathu tried to wrap his head around the ideas of casteism in his society. Mr.Saha's speech appeared to him a bunch of gibberish. He hadn't yet fully grasped the notions, and he wasn't alone in this. He remembered a protracted discussion between his father's friends during a dinner party a couple of years back, which was not particularly joyful. Banerjee uncle had lost out a coveted promotion to Mr. Murmu, and that had left the gathering of the Banerjees, Chakrabortys and the Mukherjees in a grumpy mood. Banerjee uncle was late to that party. When he finally arrived in the dying hours of the evening, driving his Maruti Alto, and went straight for the section exclusive for the men, Nathu felt the whiff of the palpable tension of the women in the house in the air that carried the whispers. *UNJUST. UNJUST*. The party spoke with a voice. Grabbing a glass of the colored liquid, which Nathu thought to be Apple juice, Banerjee uncle sat down, and ranted to the nodding approvals and exorbitant outbursts of his colleagues.

"Ridiculous, this is ridiculous! Why shall we pay for what happened a thousand years ago!"

"We earn the same. Why will he get the benefit?"

"There's no place for talent no?"

"All of this is for votes, I am telling you. These governments they don't care about us!"

"Bloody rascals, getting through everything with a goddamned surname!"

"Class of parasites. Barbers and sweepers, that lot!"

"Listen listen, I am saying ki give economic benefit no? Give money and all, why reservation? This is undemocratic!"

"This is why our best talents go off to America."

"Why reservation anymore? Arrey why, what difference is there? He can do everything that I can? Nothing like that exists here anymore!"

"Arrey last month, I took my cousin's daughter for admission counselling at Kolkata. You know my cousin na? Sales Manager? Yes, yes! You know what happened? There was this boy from somewhere in the north. Scored 10% less than my neice, but he got through, but my niece didn't. Why? Why will this happen? His father was total jhopar-patti types. Didn't even look from a respectable family. But his son will be there, my niece won't. You know why? Because I am a Mukherjee"

"Now we are the oppressed ones..."

"Bloody Ambedkar... (*something*)"

Nathu didn't understand what reservation meant. He wanted to share the grievance of his father. He wanted to belong. It pained him to think that some other boy would go ahead of him in life because of his surname. At that dinner table, Nathu carefully listened to his father's diatribes, and two years later, after the presentation, he was heard telling his peers that casteism had been wiped out root and stem in their country, and that everyone was a free citizen, and that everyone was equal, and that all of it was guaranteed by the court. The school hours was breathing its last. The rhythmic and pulsating motion of lectures failed to contain the souls that wanted to escape its iron-clad bars. Eyes, hopeful and tired, looked at the ice-cream shops outside; and struggled to contain their excitement. The body had failed. It's time was over. The soul had slipped past even before the first round of echoes of the final knell were heard. They were free. They had escaped, never to be restrained again. On his way out, Nathu had a strange fleeting impression - He had left something back. What was it? What could it be? He tried hard, but he could not figure it out.

But somewhere he heard a voice cry: Unjust. Unjust.

They had cause to look forward to that afternoon. It was the start of their vacations, and they were to mark the occasion with a much looked-forward-to party. Summer meant prolonged hours of sunlight, which tantamount to prolonged hours in the field. There was swimming in the early hours of the morning, and bottles of cold fruit-juice and icy popsicles to beat the heat. In the absence of his parents, Ranjan had organized a picnic at his place.

GTA-5. Music. Akash's PlayStation. Pre-ordered good food. Ranjan's dog.

Bliss!

Jhilik mashi had left the kids to themselves and was waiting for the children to finish their lunch. When Mrs. Mukherjee had told her that she could leave early, she was happy. She had finished her chores even before the children arrived. She had washed

the clothes, and had them neatly lined in the rope lines. She was done with her lunch way before her usual time, and had cleaned it and tenderly placed it in the clearing below the cabinet which held the utensils. The plants watered, she sang to herself while placing the dog's yellow dish, in front of the Golden brown Freddie. Freddie wagged his tail, and stared at her curiously. "What is she singing" he wondered. Jhulik Mashi only heard an affectionate "Bhow!" She was happy that day. Her days usually started at 7, and ended at 8. By the time she returned home, she barely had any ounce of energy left to play with her granddaughter. The children were late with their lunch. Very late! It was 3:30 already, if only she could leave. Inside her, she felt a burgeoning rage which made her spite the loud, and dirty little kids who had made the house a mess. As she counted the cars that went past her two floors down below, her restless body was alert to any signal that would've come out of her little master's rooms. Amidst the chorus of unerring blabber, did she mistake her grand-daughter in one of those fancy silver cars?

The signal came, in a manner unexpected. The boys had decided to serve themselves, and Jhulik Mashi was excused for the day. From the corner of her eye, she saw two enthusiastic stout boys serving the others clumsily. They spilled some. They stained some, and had evidently no interest to follow any of the regular rules. They picked up things not meant for the occasion, and ate on the sofa. In this Dionysiac riot, she saw Ranjan hungrily gobbling off a piece of mutton from the plate that's *solely meant for her*. But, off she went sprinting from door to door, carrying her moth - eaten blue handbag. Her slippers showed signs of age and poverty, but that day, who could tell Jhulik Soren any different from any heavenly nymph waltzing her way into her heavenly spring?

Back at the house when the Mukherjees had returned, Ranjan was severely reprimanded for eating out of *Jhulik Mashi's dish*. He locked his eyes to the ground, lamenting the unfortunate end to his long-planned picnic. Nathu was silent. Neither of them had fathomed the cause of the alarm. Later, while staring into the darkness of a city asleep, Nathu thought that *he heard the Blackbird singing in the dead of the night*.

BIO-NOTE

Anubhav Chakraborty is pursuing a Master's in English Literature at the University of Calcutta. His articles have been published in the Telegraph, and Ananda Bazar Patrika. He works professionally as a copywriter and a playwright, and many of his plays have been performed on stage and on air, at 91.9 Friend's FM. He says, "sometimes, I 'rhyme/ to see myself, to set the darkness echoing' (Personal Helicon, Seamus Heaney)".

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