Towards the truth (Book Review)

Journalists have always been at a unique vantage point. But, with it comes great responsibility. Journalists, by the demands of their profession, have to be impartial witnesses to wars, uprisings, corruption and disasters. There have been innumerable instances of brave journalists being killed while covering conflict in the world's troubled hotspots. That is why Swedish-Austrian journalist Bertil Lintner's remarkable book *Land of Jade – A Journey from North East India through Northern Burma to China* is truly inspirational – not only for the brotherhood of scribes, but the layman as well. For here, Lintner, and his young Burmese wife, Hseng Noung and baby daughter cross the border between North East India's Nagaland and Burma (Myanmar), secretly infiltrating that unknown, enigmatic country sealed off from the world.

It is October 1985 and the couple are undertaking a terrible risk to discover for themselves what lies beyond. Once across the Indian border, Kachin guerillas escort the family through Northern Burma to the Sino Burmese border. This epic journey, full of unexpected dangers, hardships and survival under the most daunting circumstances, helped Lintner write about the ground realities of Burma, the life of the rebels in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in 1987 and his book *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma*, published in 1990. When he wrote this present book in 1989 in Danish, there were over 25,000 - 30,000 odd insurgents in Burma. Praising the discipline and fighting skills of the Burmese Army, he hoped that they would be able to channelise this force into a more honourable task than fighting against the country's own ethnic minorities.

Land of Jade is an indispensable read for anyone keen to have a deeper insight into the fluid geo-political realities of South East Asia. Through it we understand that the problems of the North East can only be tackled by placing them against a wider context of India's neighbouring countries. The Lintner couple's odyssey is also a heartwarming love story of a man and a woman who stand by each other when chasing an impossible dream. There is no arm-chair analysis here. Lintner, in fact, was the first Western journalist to enter Burma. In this 18 month, 2,275 kilometre expedition, he has revealed to us unforgettable vignettes of the ordinary people, caught up in the struggles between the government, the insurgents and the local opium lords. His take on Naga-Manipur insurgency is very relevant.

This book is the third South Asian English edition, published for the first time by Spectrum Publications. Krishan Kumar deserves our approbation for making this valuable work available to readers.

Land of Jade – A Journey from North East India through Northern Burma to China

Highway to trouble (Book Review)

Sudeep Chakravarti's country roads do not take him home. In an obscure corner of North East India, the intrepid author traverses a highway through hell. Highway 39, spanning a distance of 436 kilometres from Numaligarh along the southern bank of the Brahmaputra in Assam to Moreh in Manipur, at the border of Myanmar, links states convulsed by numbing turmoil and political misunderstanding that is ruthless and exploitative. With his ear to the ground, this courageous journalist and author, whose previous book, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country,* humanised the government-Naxalite conflict, now combines reportage, anecdote and analysis to document the fluid reality of a fractured land.

The eight States of India that comprises the North East are surrounded by boundaries with China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan. But strategic location is not enough for the mandarins at New Delhi to sit up and take notice. It is as if its 46 million people have been sucked into a black hole, as it were, and figure nowhere in the national radar. The author uses the term outland to signify this. Chakravarti took a road trip along Highway 39 and things just fell into place. The road, as he puts it, "offered itself as a broad *sutra* for storytelling both about conflict and the coming out of conflict." He sees at close range a society strafed by insurgency, ill-governance, poverty, loss of hope and identity. Real people drift in an out of the narrative, threaded together by their sense of hopelessness. But even in this dark eclipse, all is not lost and Chakravarti clearly senses a "momentum of progressive thinking and economic aspirations". The dark epoch of Nagaland's sanguine history is examined by the author's interaction with academician-writer Temsula Ao and the Naga Mother's Hoho. There is a rare transcript of a meeting between Prime Minister Morarji Desai and Angami Zapu Phizo, founder of the Naga National Council. The author's forte lies in the clarity of his observations, the unconscious narrative style and his ability to effortlessly switch from statement of facts to presenting his wide cast of real life characters to move his story forward. Chakravarti has researched extensively from books, media reports, the inputs of think tanks, research organisations, NGOs, political and armed groups. And yet, there is none of the dry as dust presentation of facts. In conclusion, this knowledgeable and very readable book will certainly open a window for the world to peak through and understand us.

Highway 39
Journeys Through a Fractured Land
Sudeep Chakravarti
Harper Collins Publishers
Price: Rs 450

Gateway to adventure (Book Review)

Writing a book is an adventure, and no one knows it better than young author/illustra- tor Tara Goswami. Tara's book *The Bogoli Phut Days – Pitki's Adventures in Assam* not only

journeys to the recent past of the author's childhood, but dives into the heart of timeless tales penned by the doyen of Assamese literature, Lakshminath Bezbarua. Pitki's actual childhood of car journeys between Shillong and Sekoni TE, doting grandparents, wide vistas of emerald fields, tea gardens and ponds filled with fish are woven seamlessly into evocative descriptions of Bihu and hilarious tales like that of the purblind son-in-law. The lively artwork and the spare prose gives the narrative a quick pace and immediacy that is refreshing as well as stimulating. A visit to the Orang National Park not only acquaints Pitki and her brother Dondi to the denizens of the jungle, but also the quaint tale of the *toon tooni* bird. Factual details have been incorporated and give a clear picture of Assam, and the blend of facts and stories has given it a travelogesque character.

The book came about in the form of her dissertation project for the Shristi School of Art Design and Technology, Delhi. Tara studied different styles of drawing and executing an idea. Researching on graphic novels and children's books, she realised she wanted to create rich, layered images. So, creating a huge archive of textures by using a technique like mono-printing. computer skills enabled her to collage textures, pictures, etc.

The five stories of Lakshminath Bezbarua's iconic *Burhi Air Sadhu* were translated by Tara, her mother Roshmi Goswami and friend Priyasree. She is hopeful that books like this will present folk tales and Assamese culture in a more exciting light to children of the region and beyond. She has been inspired by Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl and illustrations of Quentin Blake, Sara Fanelli, etc.

As the author herself says: "Being exposed to folklore, colloquial phrases, dialogue and expressions that are so integral to every culture gave me a sense of looking to Assam even though I have never actually lived there. I hope books like these will be able to instil a similar sense, at a time when modernism has set in and families have become increasingly nuclear."

The Bogoli Phut Days – Pitki's adventures in Assam
Tara Goswami
Harper Collins,

Beauty basics (Book Review)

It was Khalil Gibran who said that beauty is "eternity gazing at itself in a mirror". Through the ages, beauti-ful women, whether it was Rani Padmini or Helen of Troy, Marilyn Monroe or Maharani Gayatri Devi, they have had an aura about them that continue to catch the collective imagination of the people long after their departure from this mortal world. Many years ago, this reviewer had asked Khushwant Singh what was his idea of a beautiful woman. He said, "A woman need not have perfect features or be cast in a classical mould.

But she must have that spark, that vivacity which animates her and draws others towards her. That is my beautiful woman for you."

Beauty is big business today. The cosmetic industry thrives on women's insecurities about their looks. The good old herbal remedies of our grandmother's time are forgotten as women race for chemical, quick-fix solutions for split ends or blemished skin. Glitzy beauty pageants are watched on television in millions of homes. And let us not even venture to the minefield of anorexia and size zero aspirations.

These observations, however, cannot take away the fact that in India there have been beauticians like Shahnaz Hussain and Blossom Kochhar, who have revolutionised the beauty business. Their products have helped women to look their best, defy age and meet the world head-on with poise and confidence. Monika Bose has been a respected and well-known name in beauty therapy in the region for more than three decades. She has won the Rastriya Ekta Award 1999 and the Rashtriya Ratna for her work in this field. Besides being a columnist for a national daily, she has also been widely interviewed by the media. Drawing from her knowledge and experience, Bose has penned the first of a series of books aimed at guiding the aspiring beautician as well as the lay woman on some vital aspects of the art of beautifying oneself. The book – *Beauty Collection – Professional Make-up,* is marked out in several well-demarcated segments – the purpose of make-up, space and light, implements and materials used, make-up cosmetics, creating the base, determining facial balance etc. Choice of colour in make-up, colour in relation to season, corrective make up are other aspects Bose throws light on. Her language is crisp, to the point and very reader-friendly. Liberal use of illustrations adds to the usefulness of the book. Colour shade cards and photographs of models to demonstrate the step by step method of make-up application will certainly prove to be invaluable to not only those in the beauty business, but also every woman who wishes to look beautiful. After all, the quest for beauty is timeless and universal.

Beauty Collection
Professional Make-up
Monika Bose
PR Publishers & Printers

A new kind of reading

Book lovers are considering the ad-vent of reading devices like Kindle with some degree of ambivalence. While the hip set is embracing the new technology, downloading e-books free or buying them from Amazon with ease and enthusiasm, there is the more cautious and conservative lot, who insist there is nothing like turning the pages, or inhaling the smell of a new book and browsing through the friendly neighbourhood book store. But the purpose of

this piece is not to go into the pros and cons of e-books. In fact, it is to mark and celebrate the advent of the first audio-book – *Bhromon Biroti* in Assamese, a milestone that has not generated the media interest it certainly deserves.

First thing first. What exactly is an audio-book? An audio-book is a recording of a text being read. It is not necessarily an exact audio version of a book or magazine. A bit of history is needed here. Spoken audio has been available in schools and public libraries abroad since the 1930s. Many spoken word albums were created much before the advent of audio cassettes, DVDs and compact discs, often of plays rather than books. In the 1980s, this audio form seemed a feasible profit generating option for book retailers and audio-books appeared at display windows. In India, audio-books now have a big clientele through the online portals like *audiobookmedia.com.*

The first Assamese audio-book, *Bhromon Biroti*, is dedicated to Saurav Chaliha, the State's enigmatic genius whose literary works have proved he was far ahead of his times. The brainwave for the audio-book came to Dhanjit Das, a graphic designer who set up his advertising and printing firm Rain Soft in 2005. He began doing book and magazine covers and dabbled in writing, with pieces published in *Bismoy*, *Dainik Asam, Ranghar, Pubali* and *Natun Dainik*.

"I first mulled over the idea of creating a distinctive calendar for our firm", says he.

"As I loved literature, it was only natural that I choose my subject from that field. We shot eminent journalist and writer Homen Borgohain in some of his favourite Guwahati haunts – Dighalipukhuri, Nabin Bordoloi Hall, Cotton College. I titled it *Down Memory Lane*. That was in 2009.

"We did the same with the 2011 calender, only this time it was distinguished folklorist and singer Birendranath Dutta, with various shots of him taken at his home. In 2010, we used Utpal Dutta's photographs and Pranab Barman's poems for the calender. Another calendar that explains our cultural legacy through visuals is the one featuring artiste Anwesa Mahanta executing Satriya dance moves expressing the nine forms of emotions – the *navarasa*s. This is the 2012 calender". Dhanjit's creative efforts were lauded by cultural aficionado and eminent theatre personality Girish Karnad, who even wrote to say: "It will have pride of place on my office wall".

"My friend – eminent critic and journalist Utpal Dutta has been a guiding force in these endeavours", says Dhanjit. Along with him, his wife, writer Namrata Dutta, formed our team. In 2010, we brought out an audio CD of young rebel poet Pranab Barman's verse collection *Cithibor ghurai nukhujiba*, with a printed book as accompaniment. People liked the CD format a lot and that was how we warmed to the idea of an audio-book. But it had to have a curiosity value. So we set about creating an audio-book of poetry. But it had this interesting twist. The poems chosen were of eminent short story writers ... tale spinners who you would never suspect also wrote poetry. But they did, and we got thirty-three of

them. The project did not require heavy funds. What was more challenging was to persuade the writers, all very busy people, to hunt for the rare poem or two they had penned or would pen at our entreaty. The writers whose poems feature in this unique audio-book are Dr Bhabendranath Saikia, Nirupama Borgohain, Atulananda Goswami, Dr Lakhinandan Bora, Khanindra Dev Choudhury, Dr Birendranath Dutta, Prabina Saikia, Kula Saikia and others. The poems have been recited by Dr Birendranath Dutta, Abani Bora, Dr Anjanjyoti Chowdhury, Arunima Goswami, Chandrima Sarma, Bonti Senchowa and Manjyotsna Mahanta. The music has been provided by Diganta Sharma. Namrata Dutta has directed it and Dhanjit Das is the producer.

“I just wanted to do my bit to promote our culture”, explains Dhanjit with a shy smile. “I hope our youngsters take pride in their unique identity and heritage when they listen to this audio-book”.

Bhromon Biroti was released at the North East Book Fair, last year. Word of mouth publicity and mention in local print media as well as web portals like *Enajori* and *Assam Times*have elicited a positive response. At a time when we are assailed by doubts about the future of our language and culture, young people like Dhanjit, who wed imagination to technology to create something new and exciting, can certainly make a difference and bring us hope.

That thing you do

21 November 2012 at 12:11

Recently, there has been a new ad on television, and one that contains the germ of an idea which led to this piece today. It plugs a cola brand and is heartwarming in its simplicity and feeling. It shows a young boy stuck in a Godforsaken place, treeless and desolate, with no means of getting away. Waiting gloomily, he sips a cola. Suddenly, little dancing figures appear on the bottle and voila! There is this bus before him, lit up like a Christmas tree, and the driver yelling that it is bound for Delhi. You see the look of pure delight on the youth's face as he springs forward to board the bus... back to civilisation. The wait is over for him. That got me thinking. Aren't we all always waiting for someone or something? Waiting is an activity that is experienced across all cultures, all strata of society. It is a great leveller of sorts. How you wait also tells about the kind of person you are. If you are the miserable whiner, you will make the wait unbearable not only for yourself, but also for those around you, who, in case you haven't noticed, are waiting too. If you are a tough bird, you will weather the waiting period without a single feather being ruffled. If you are the philosophical type, you will wait with an admirable degree of equanimity.

However, through this piece on waiting, I am not going all Kafkaesque on you, and will leave Godot out of this. I am also swearing off writing about waiting for TV commercial breaks to end and condemned prisoners languishing on death row. Not to speak of women in beauty parlours with hair in curling tongs and gooey face masks, waiting to be transformed to Helen of Troy. America had been waiting for ages for a black man to occupy the White House. And Barack Obama, whose speeches have been always inspirational, had said, "Change will not come by waiting for the other person or another time. We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." His words ring true for all nations and the whole of humanity. For instance, many Indians speak of the need for another Mahatma Gandhi to lead us and give us a sense of our national identity. This sort of wishful thinking presupposes that only one man, and not many, can achieve this goal.

Ayn Rand, the author of Fountainhead, questioned whether dreams of heaven and greatness were waiting in the grave, or were things to strive for in the here and the now. There are many among us who piously isolate themselves from all pleasure and merriment, certain that this piety will reap rewards in the after life. But it does not end with that. They resent the enjoyment of others, and their censure hangs like a brooding cloud over the people around them. If God indeed meant us to be puritans and wait for the afterlife in this world, with so much self-flagellation, then why have we been given so many distractions, so many opportunities for pleasure? Are they mere traps to test our forbearance? I don't think so. It is we who have fashioned a petty, malicious God in our own image.

But it is not always we humans who play this waiting game. As Carl Sagan so famously said, 'Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known." It could be something as vast as a lost continent, or as tiny as another species of the dung betel. It could be intelligent life in outer space, or the secret in our bodies that contains the clue to becoming immortal. It will not do for us to wait for it to unfold. We will have to probe the frontiers of knowledge with all our ingenuity.

While we are waiting, something else is waiting within us. The great Japanese martial arts maestro Morike Ueshiba wrote, "Your heart has fertile seeds waiting to sprout." When these seeds sprout in a human heart, it is as if he/she has discovered destiny, and found both meaning and fulfilment in life. It could be the love and influence of another human being, or a fortuitous coming together of events. And as one waits for this to happen, one must be receptive and patient, knowing there is a time for everything. After all, life is all gates, all opportunities, and all around us are strings of tension waiting to be struck.

A particular group of waiting people deserve all my sympathy. These are the first time fathers. Here is the scenario. The young man is pacing up and down a hospital corridor. He is pale, sweating, with an Adam's apple which is going berserk. One moment he feels he should be facing the firing squad for subjecting his wife to this. The next, his chest swells with pride at the nearing possibility of being a patriarch. The clock sounds like booming cannon to his ears, and the scurrying nurses look scaryingly non-committal. All at once he feels pretty redundant, a sense of being on the sidelines, away from the great drama of

birth. From now on, he will have to vie for the attention of his wife with a very small, shrill, wriggly and often smelly human being. Already, his ego is bruised and the wait is doing nothing for his badly frayed nerves. Then he hears it ... beyond the door of the labour room, a small, thin wail, very indignant and yet so helpless... a baby announcing its own arrival. The father stands transfixed. His knees are wanting to buckle, his tongue is going to swallow itself, his heart is beating like a drum. And then the nurse emerges with a little bundle, with a tiny pink foot waving out of the swaddling clothes, and a face screwed up with the effort of emerging into the world. The father wordlessly touches the newborn. And his long wait is over.

Or is it? Our new dad may not realise it, but his life is just going to transform into serial waiting. Waiting for his kid's first steps, the first tooth, the first words. Then the first day in school. Before he knows it, he will be waiting to catch his kid smoking in the garage, or returning home on tiptoe after a wild teenage party. It just doesn't end, does it?

On the subject of school, there is a particular kind of waiting that all self-respecting kids would rather avoid. This is the waiting in front of the headmaster's office. It is so much worse than the new dad's waiting. At least the dad gets a baby at the end of it. No such luck here, I'm afraid. You have flunked some exam or socked some guy on the jaw. And now you are on a hard bench in purgatory, awaiting your just desserts. There's a lovely scene about this in the coming of age film Udaan. A much younger offender jauntily asks the older boys what they had been up to, as they wait for the headmaster. The headmaster often knows that waiting is part of the punishment. It wears out the most unrepentant sinner. After that, he will humbly extend his palms for caning, meekly swallow all the insults and sidle out, head hung low. The wait is over, and he is eager to resume his rudely interrupted life.

Compare this with waiting in a restaurant for your order to arrive. There is no dread, only the anticipation of gastronomic delight. Already there are appetising fragrances floating in the air. As you wait, you dart surreptitious glances at what others are eating at neighbouring tables. Their dishes look so much more appetising than what you ordered. If you are too hungry, you might nibble a pickled onion or two. You might subtly bully the waiter to stir things up in the kitchen and get your food pronto. If you have kids, by now they are making rockets out of paper napkins and throwing them at each other. If the music was not so loud, you and the wifey could have had a hissy fight about who brought up the kids so badly. By now, you are even more furious, because the couple who came after you, are already being served. But just as you are readying to give the manager a mouthful, the waiter is laying out steaming dishes at your table, and you are ready to believe it was worth the wait, paper rockets and all.

A doctor's waiting room is also a place we would rather not frequent, unless of course, the body plays spoilsport. So there you are, hunkering down for a long wait. In your lap are CT scans which look horrendous. You can't believe your insides can took this sinister. The reports might as well be written in Hebrew, for all the sense they make. You are sure it is the big C and you bitterly wonder why you have been chosen for this particular form of

annihilation. The person next to you seems to be having just a common cold. That natty dresser texting on his cell seems to be just plain faking it. Nobody wants to identify themselves or their illnesses. Its classified information, mate. They also avoid eye- contact. Because eye-contact could elicit small talk, and then, sympathy. And before you know it, Mr Smart Alec would grin ingratiatingly, mumble, "Just showing my report" and beat you to the doctor's chamber. So, everyone is suspect. No quarter given or expected. Waiting at a dentist's is a much more tense business. The more you wait, the more vividly you imagine the drill whirring remorselessly into your helpless mouth. In the dentist's waiting room, conversations are most often too painful to be attempted. Each stares at the other in wordless curiosity, drawing comfort if someone's jaw looks more swollen than one's own.

It's occurred to me that the more modern amenities we have, the greater the waiting. You have to wait in line for gas cylinders, to pay your electricity bills, to withdraw money at the ATM, to fill up your petrol tanks. Think of the time spent in mundane waiting periods, time which could have been used to read a book or gaze at a sunset. But if one kind of waiting has ended, it is the waiting for the postman. The romance of getting letters from loved ones elsewhere is replaced by the cold business like print of instant e-mails. Gone also is the wait for theatre tickets. In my childhood, I had seen cinegoers come to blows for a ticket. Even people with tickets fought to get into the hall first. These days, when we catch a late night show, it is eerily deserted and I get the creeps looking at the sea of empty seats around me.

If you hate waiting in queues, give the city malls a wide berth. Recently, I managed to get myself a trolley and left it for a second on the aisle, when some lowly species shopper dumped my stuff somewhere and stole my trolley. Another time, I was so fed up of waiting at the end of a queue that I abandoned my shopping furtively at a corner and walked out, a free woman. Perhaps there are other kinds of waiting that I've not touched on here. Some people make waiting a virtue. Waiting is also sometimes just an excuse for being lazy, and not taking any initiative. As management guru Lee Iacocca once put it, "The trick is to not die waiting for prosperity to come."

We are not alone...?

16 November 2012 at 13:02

We humans like to believe we are not alone, that somewhere in the Milky Way or even beyond, there flourishes a superior race, wiser in mind and stronger in body, with mindboggling technological marvels to its credit, a race which has eliminated hunger, disease and death, to live in a kind of sanitised, timeless and pain-free bubble we can only dream of. If we didn’t believe in this collective vision, perhaps the only thing that unites us at all, we wouldn't have had *Star Trek*, *Close Encounters of The Third Kind*, *Aliens*, *2001 A*

Space Odyssey, and the recent *Avatar*. Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov would have never been in this business of sci-fi writing and nor would there have been breathless, garbled accounts of UFO sightings and alien abductions by prairie farmers and U-Haul truck drivers.

A comedian once quipped that the surest proof there is intelligent life in outer space is the fact that they have made no contact with us. That figures, considering we took this long to find water on the moon, or that we are clueless about how to prevent that huge asteroid coming this way from hitting us and ending human civilisation as we know it.

While the Martians may have no interest in fraternising with us, we really do need to send out feelers. Our reserves of fossil fuels are getting dangerously depleted and we need some tie-up for alternative sources. You don't want your car rusting in the garage because there's not enough oil to go around. Humans are also multiplying like rabbits and we need extra space, so we don't step onto each other's corns. And with the pandemics like swine flu around, we want to be at a safe distance when someone sneezes.

We also need someone before whom we can show off. This is quite logical and to convince you, I will draw an analogy. You've spent the best years of your life building a house. It's got all– weathercoat paint, genuine teak doors and windowframes, great views from the balcony, state of the art kitchen, Art deco furniture, Kohler bathroom fixtures, flat screen TV, Bukhara rugs, you name it. But it's not enough. You must have visitors to give them a grand tour, pointing out each acquisition, each embellishment, till they are bug-eyed, open mouthed and badly in need of a drink. You want to see the shocked envy in their eyes, the shame that they will never live upto your accomplishments. And as the euphoria hits you and you gloat, you think it's all been worthwhile... the blood, sweet and tears of thankless labour. It is exactly the same in this outer space context. We need these visitors because we want to show off our skyscrapers, our malls, our freeways, our futuristic gadgets and computers, our miracle drugs, genetic engineering, our space shuttles and cruise missiles. We want to take them on this grand tour, dropping the broad hint that after starting out life swinging from trees, and gobbling bananas, this indeed is a vast improvement. They will be certainly impressed, but I hope not enough to abduct all of us to outer space.

Developing further this theory, however far fetched it may sound (outer space is indeed very far, remember), I also wish to say that mankind is obsessed with the idea of encountering an alien species. Not knowing about denizens of the great beyond is sheer torture. He is sick of hearing that nebulous species is intelligent. How intelligent is an alien? Man wants to pit his wits against an extra-terrestrial. He is spoiling for a fight. He is bored witless of watching twenty-four hour cable television and being nagged by his wife. He is sick of excluding sugar from his diet and sadly examining his beer belly in the mirror. He is sick of politics and traffic jams. He wants something big, something so humungous that it will rap him awake. He won't mind if Martians attack. He even imagines working under a Morgan Freeman type of figure to save the planet, all fitted out in combat gear and laser guns. It would certainly be more macho than toting up sales figures at his dreary work cabin. The earth presents no new challenges, no new discoveries. Everything, from the highest

peak to the deepest fathom of the sea has been probed and catalogued. There is a danger of all of us collectively dying of boredom. If, in some parts of India, the marriage of frogs brings about the rains, perhaps it is time to wed some other species to get those spacecraft landing, and little green men walking up to us, beeping and buzzing 'Take us to your leader'. There is yet another reason why we've got to get those aliens visiting. It's an issue as old as mankind — yes, you've got it. The gender wars. Mankind has fought countless bloody wars and won decisive victories. Empires have grown and crumbled out of these skirmishes and maps have changed. Warmongers have been brought to justice and treaties have been signed. But, the gender wars continue, with no end in sight. Men and women continue to be sharply polarised and yet, unexplicably, there is so much fraternising with the enemy (check it out this Valentine's Day). Men and women can't live with each other. Problem is, they can't live without each other too. They are always snooping and sniping at each other. A man will never understand why a woman needs to match her handbag with her outfit, in much the same way she can't figure out why he forgets they have an anniversary. They react to the same situation in a completely different way. She is described as the weaker sex, but it is he who faints when she is giving birth. One human has also penned a persuasive book on how they hail from different planets. It's only because there is no oxygen, water and beauty parlours in other planets that women are forced to herd with the male species on the same planet. But I digress. All these details lead one to the conclusion that in this never ending war of attrition between the sexes, we need a referee, an arbiter, a tribunal if you please, an impartial observer who is neither man nor woman and has no interest in siding with either gender. This space referee would help us complain about each other, pick on each other's faults and generally let off steam. But who would want to be in that hapless referee's shoes? You side with one gender, and the other comes at you hammer and tongs. I have a sneaky feeling aliens have stayed away precisely because they don't want to get caught in this gender war crossfire. If that is so, their superior intelligence is beyond question.

Talking of UFO sightings, why is it that such reports come mainly from America? Is it that the Americans are on some hidden agenda, to prove that they are the Chosen Ones in alien landings? Would UFOs and the little green men choose this highly overrated country just for Starbucks coffee and McDonald burgers? Hello, is anyone going to tell the ETs you get it in other countries too, thanks to a thing called global franchise? Or is it because Americans are friendlier than the British, less hoity toity, not stiff upper lipped? Is it because the Americans bathe more often than the French, and are less voluble than the Italians? The aliens need to be told that after the Lehman Brothers fiasco, Americans are in no mood to play host. And it certainly is a very dimwitted idea to land in such a thinly populated country. They'll have to walk miles to reach civilisation. India is the best bet, with people crowding around you without breathing space, and touts offering to get you a taxi and hotel.

In conclusion, we are sadly divided by our idea of the alien. While one group sees them as potential invaders, ruthless and armed with scary weapons of death, the other group sees them as pacifists, benign and highly evolved, absorbed in music, poetry... Aw, come on. They sound like the sixties hippies in batik kurtas, tripping so high on LSD that they landed

right in outer space. Where's the thrill of encountering such a namby-pamby species? Give me the mean Martian any day, with evil, metallic voices and incinerating infrared eyes. They could really spice up our existence... or end it forever. I have to sign off now. Gulp, I think I am having a panic attack.

Unheard voices

12 November 2012 at 13:39

Think Bollywood hero and what comes instantly to mind is someone with the strapping good looks of a Jat or a Pathan, astride on his bike, or with a chick on his arm, as at ease taking on the baddies as romancing in a Swiss idyll. But the Indian movie-goer is restless. He wants to venture beyond this comfort zone, challenge himself to confront alternate realities. Suddenly, he is open to new explorations, with a new receptiveness to other influences. This could explain why we have so wholeheartedly welcomed the arrival of Natha (of *Peepli Live* fame), the unwashed, dwarfish loser who is out to take his life so that his family can get the rupees one lakh as compensation. Natha is India's rural Everyman, the eternal victim lashed to his cruel destiny. It is the height of black comedy that his impending death should so arouse the passions of politicians and the media, but Natha's death-in-life, the pathos of his helplessness and poverty, invite no attention at all. The ultimate irony is that, with millions geared to watch Natha die, the little man makes good his escape to the anonymity of a city. In the end, as the credits roll, Natha is seen clinging tenaciously to life, though his lot is no better than before. So, this is a man who cannot live, and cannot die.

Something about Natha's predicament reminded me of Franz Kafka's celebrated short story *The Hunger Artist*. A man, a hunger artist, fasts for up to forty days at a time while sitting in a straw littered cage, as hundreds of curious onlookers surround him. The butchers guard his cage at night to see that he does not sneak in food. If the spectators milling around that hunger artist are there because they love to see suffering, and the prospect of someone's death, we, too, sit in our air-conditioned theatres, munch tomato-cheese popcorn and are filled with quiet, guilty pleasure that our lot is infinitely better than Natha's. Suffering is a spectacle too and that is why, when a man pierces his cheeks, walks over coals, when bulls gore matadors, there is always a crowd for a ringside view.

Which brings me to share with you a word I learnt recently, and which seems so relevant to what I am attempting to say. This German word is *Schadenfreude*. *Schadenfreude* means pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others. The awareness of this human failing existed since Biblical times and is also mentioned by Aristotle. There have been a number of scientific studies on *Schadenfreude*, as reported in the *New York Times*. Many such studies are based on the social comparison theory, the idea that when people around us have bad

luck, we look better to ourselves. Other researchers have found that people with low self-esteem are more likely to feel *Schadenfreude* than are people who have high self-esteem.

It was Mark Twain who famously quipped: "Remember the poor, it costs nothing." But remembering the poor does come at a price, as I found out very early in life. Sometime in the mid-seventies, the redoubtable Sister Linda, she of the contralto voice and lively gait, sold us the idea at school of going to the poor and seeing their lives first hand. We were indoctrinated to see poverty with Romantic idealism, as if the poor, the sick, the suffering had a Christ-like asceticism and indifference to material needs that we had to somehow emulate. I think our ready enthusiasm for the project had more to do with getting away from the stuffy classroom than any altruism. So, on the appointed day, a group of us girls, clad in neat grey and white, our hair demurely braided, dainty hankies pinned to our shirts, walked single file along the city streets. In no time at all, we were under one of the city bridges, in the thick of a loud, squalid slum. Women in torn saris filled water from a tap, carrying on shrill, slanging matches. Men sat on charpoys, swatting flies or playing cards. Babies rolled in the dust. The buzzing flies, the stench of the open drains, the proximity to strangers with serious hygiene issues..... all this was so overwhelming that we went into group shock, our eyes glazed, our movements frozen. But Sister Linda was urging us forward, instructing us to hand around the food and clothes coupons, little red and pink squares of paper, to as many people as we could.

Two days later, our project reached its culmination. We were ready in the school's front courtyard. There were sacks of rice piled neatly, along with a huge mound of blankets and saris. The poor came in, a thin trickle at first, then a stream, and then a roaring deluge. The school gates were hastily closed, and the alms given out through the compound grilles. I shall never forget the faces that peered in through that wall – eyes maddened by greed, twisted grimaces of fury, skeletal forms, barely human, raging against fate, against the world. In those moments, I learnt there was nothing romantic about poverty, that to be poor was a curse, a crime, and being poor was the most degrading of all human experiences.

After our project was over, poverty was never mentioned again. Perhaps we had wanted a toneddown, sanitised version of it. We wanted the feelgood quotient of having done something good. What we got instead was loud gate-banging, angry curses and the dismaying feeling that we had done too little, too late. Our good intentions were a mere drop in an ocean of need. Significantly, no one in that batch of fifty girls went on to become a social worker. But I know all of us roll down our car windows and tip the little beggar child at the street corner. It's not charity, just a reflex action.

Years later, as a student of literature, I remembered those sacks of grain in our school courtyard again when I read Bhabendranath Saikia's masterpiece *Rats*, later made into the film Kolahal. Little Moti, running between trucks to steal grain, is killed by the toppling sacks. One of the sacks, stained with Moti's blood, is delivered to his mother's hut. At first, she shouts that she does not want it. Then, as days pass, some rats make a hole in the sack and the rice grains fall out. Finally, she cooks the rice each day and in the end, warms herself

with the bloodstained sack. The stark beauty of the story underscores the inescapable truth that the poor do not have the luxury to grieve. For them, the struggle to live must go on, and tears must dry as soon as they well up. In his Sendur, a fish seller inadvertently cuts his hand when cleaning fish. Instead of tending to his bleeding cut, he wipes his bright, red blood on the fish, hoping to attract customers. Even in his film *Sandhyarag*, the character of the young maid played by Runu Devi is encouraged to marry the elderly driver, who everyone knows is impotent. You realise then that for the disadvantaged, it is enough just to have a roof over one's body and two meals to keep away starvation. Other human needs must be cruelly suppressed.

These days, when my relatives who have settled abroad come for a visit, they all exclaim how things have changed here and are embarrassed that the Ferrero Rocher chocolates and other goodies they have packed for us are all available here. They marvel at the number of our television channels and the variety of cars that purr along the streets. They cheer the computer savviness of our school kids and are grateful for the efficient travel agents. They think times have changed in India and we play along with them in this little, sly game of make-believe. We take them for cosy meals at the new Italian joint in town, show them around the malls and discreetly point out how our daughters, too, dress like Hannah Montana. But we don't tell them that in a village close to the city, a woman dies at childbirth because there is no doctor at hand. We don't want them to know that young girls are trafficked to brothels because there is nothing to eat at home. We would rather not show them the ruins of a schoolhouse where only cows shelter. And no, we'd rather not know at all about those who sell their blood, or their kidneys, so that their families may survive. In the villages of India, things are exactly as they were when Ray made *Pather Panchali* in 1955. A village going to pieces, doors shaking in the storm, an old woman swallowing pitiful balls of soggy rice. Everywhere it is the ulcer of poverty deforming life. And yet, the poor in Ray's film have a certain poetic dignity about them. However, in *Peepli Live*, you sense that poverty, the imminent tragedy of a suicide, has been commodified as news/entertainment for the television viewer. The more is this issue drummed up, the more certain everyone is that Natha will take his miserable life, the higher the TRP ratings. And all the politicians, of differing affiliations, are in the thick of it, milking the issue to their own advantage. Natha is besieged with gifts – a television set, a hand-pump, but they take away his choice, his chance to tell his side of his story, and his very dignity. Natha must take us outside our comfort zone. Only then can we be the change we want to bring.

Enduring images
9 November 2012 at 13:23

THIRD EYE EDITION



Is writing a lonely craft? Many wordsmiths seem to want the rest of the world to be lieve it is so. But I think this is nothing more than a snobbish affectation, meant to give off an appearance of being exclusive, insulated, as it were, from the hurly burly of common life. Writing is not about renouncing life. As you write, you are not on your way to attaining nirvana. That experience is best left to levitating yogis in freezing Himalayan caves. A writer draws vital sustenance from life as much as a baby does so in the womb through the umbilical cord. And if imagination is the highest kite one can fly, it would do good to remember that the string ascends from earth, is tethered to it, and it is from this rootedness that the kite and the wordsmith must search restlessly in many directions.

Then there is this question that the reader/fan/layman asks the wordsmith – how do you write? Trying to answer this is a bit of an unnerving experience. Do you dare to be candid and sheepishly admit you are no more than an overgrown kid playing with words like they were Lego blocks? That too, when others are healing the sick, taking electricity to the remotest villages, crusading against dams and designing robots that understand how we feel? Even funnier is that no one asks a lawyer how he defends his client, an engineer how he builds the freeway or a doctor how he brings back a patient from the brink of death. But a writer, or anyone practising the arts, is always quizzed about the creative process. This curiosity of the public may have something to do with the fact that in the arts, be it writing, painting or film making, it appears as if the finished product has materialised out of thin air. It is as if we are able to pull out rabbits from top hats. There is a definite hint of some trickery involved.

There's another way of looking at the link between writing and life. Think of man's relationship with water. Remember the first time as a kid when you stepped gingerly into the pool, the river, the sea? First, it was the water lapping at your toes. The feeling was delicious, the water was teasing, a playmate calling you in for a game. Then, it rose to your knees, your hips, your chest. The water was now different. It was overpowering you, making your heart thump with fear. From a diversion, lapping at your feet, it was reaching now for your very life. In creating a story, a painting, a film, you have to wade into the water, to the deep end of the pool, and come up shuddering for air. Then, your words, your images will be alive, pulsating, with minds like a thousand bells ringing.

Far from being a solitary craft, the act of writing seems to me an exciting, complex and collaborative effort. This piece would not have been possible if I had not been invited to two

events, and given the wonderful opportunity of witnessing how people around me are expressing themselves. The first occasion was the cultural procession competition of students belonging to nine hostels of my alma mater, Cotton College, on the concluding day of the Annual College Week celebrations last Tuesday. While the office bearers of the Cotton College Students Union conducted the proceedings with admirable elan, scores of young boys and girls braved the morning chill to walk from the KBR auditorium, right around the Dighalipukhuri tank, even beyond and back. As I accompanied them, I marvelled at how they had given free rein to their imagination, reinventing themselves as characters from myth and history, becoming animal and god, martyr and hero, the tyrant, the oppressed and the rebel. That unforgettable and euphoric march had echoes of man's ancient love for storytelling and also the need to belong. If there was Kanaklata, clad in a homespun *chador mekhela*, holding the tricolour aloft, there were girls dressed as victims of the Jallianwala bagh massacre, lying supine in a handcart. There were ethnic groups in their distinct attire, much fist raising against injustice of many kinds, even roles of helpless rural women tortured for being witches. If there were radiant brides in all their wedding finery, there were also fierce animals growling with an authenticity that could have fooled the real species! Their enthusiasm, creativity and discipline, as well as their skill at teamwork, made it an event whose memory I will cherish.

The other event was also at Cotton College, in the KBR Hall, a collaborative documentary screening organised by the Internal Quality Assurance Cell, Cotton College, North East Network and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati. The event, the first of its kind, marking this year's 20th anniversary of 16 days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign, aspired to raise awareness about social injustice and gender-based violence among young people and strengthen the call to eliminate all forms of discrimination in the society.

In the darkened auditorium, packed with students from all over the region, there unfolded a vista that encapsulated the sheer scale and magnitude of the disparity in India. Sexual harassment (*Jor Se Bol*), manual scavenging by the Dalits, (*Vande Mataram*), peace-building in Nagaland through soccer (*Reconciliation Soccer*), the wary encounter between two men of two communities in post Godhra Gujarat (*Sirf Jhaag*), an eloquent critique of the Subansiri dam building (*The Story of the Golden River*), and finally, three poignant, but life-affirming explorations of disability – *Gold Medals*, *Respect my existence* and *They can* – all these creative and idealistic experiments are proof that many filmmakers are using this medium with a finely honed social conscience. Today, endless words and images from radio and television manipulate public opinion or disorient people's perception of the world they live in. Television channels divert bored viewers from massacres, starvation and scams to fashion, rock stars and film gossip. No wonder, this screening seemed both a breath of fresh air and a wake-up call.

If you think about it, the world changes according to the way people see it and if you can alter, even by a millimetre, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world. For all those young men and women at the hall, in the spring of their lives, this was a way of

empowering themselves, not only from the information gained, but also the awareness and hope that real progress can be possible only if we have a sense of responsibility for each other's welfare. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.

The film on eve-teasing/ sexual harassment was an eye-opener. Along with the indignant protests of the girls, it also featured eveteasers explaining why they teased the other sex. It was another way of asserting a male prerogative, a form of peer pressure or rite of passage. By doing this, they labelled women as virtuous (modestly clad) or easy (trouser clad). Men kept count of the number of women they have teased, and have hoped their amorous advances would win the heart of some girl. And girls, afraid their freedom will be curbed by worried parents, and even their studies derailed, often choose to remain silent, till a tragedy occurs – in an India where a rape occurs every thirty minutes.

In Nagaland, where conflict has cast its ominous shadow from the very birth of independent India, a small, glimmering hope is born when Naga men mend bridges from a divided past and, under the Forum of Naga Reconciliation, play soccer in a spirit of forgiveness and letting bygones by bygones.

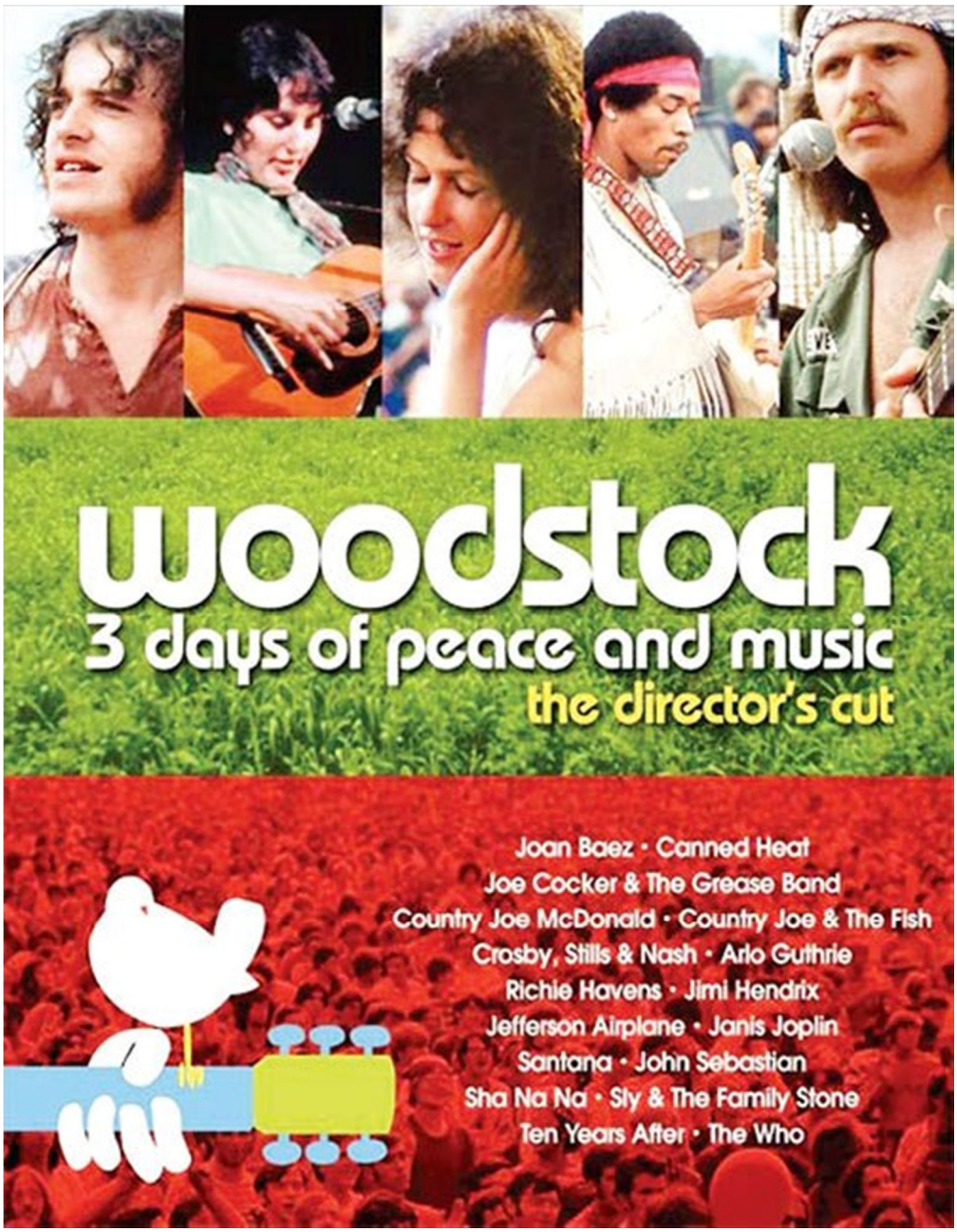
Then it was time to look at the dark underbelly of society, the voiceless Dalits cleaning our sewage, mired in filth, armed with the most primitive implements, working under hazardous and unhygienic conditions. Are these people less important than other professionals and service providers? Or, are we still so rooted in our old caste prejudices that we deliberately keep mum about their plight? This film raised such troubling questions. AR Rahman's soaring *Vande Mataram*, dovetailing with the shocking images of man's indignity and deprivation, succeeded in jolting us out of our apathy.

That communal violence is nothing but the sinister conspiracy of groups who profit out of social unrest is driven home by Sirf Jhaag , which beautifully uses a taut storyline, great sound effects, psychology and humour to prove that the common man wishes to just get on with his life.

A dancer moving expressively to a breezy anti-America song simply bowled me over with its originality and wicked humour. The message was serious, but the medium – rollicking good fun.

At the end of the show, when I looked at the thoughtful faces of the youth around me, I was reminded of the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."

That Sixties feelin'
5 November 2012 at 12:18



It is usually a book which is turned into a movie. When this is done, the whole world seems to be neatly divided into two groups, one rooting for the book and the other for the movie. In my case, this piece is the reverse – it is prose inspired by a movie I recently watched – *Milk*, where Sean Penn plays the role of Harvey Milk, the first gay American to hold public office – he was a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, and was assassinated by colleague Dan White. In one of the scenes, a character tells Harvey in an annoyed tone, "You are too old to be a hippie." Somehow, that single sentence triggered off a whole new train of thought. I began to muse about many friends, casual acquaintances, people in their

forties and fifties who had revealed to me on many occasions their nostalgia about the Sixties. The overriding impression that I always got was that these people regarded that decade as not a mere chronology of time, but a state of mind, an age of innocence, when people were natural, spontaneous, loving the abstract like peace and love, almost indifferent to material possessions. Think Sixties, and you visualise Woodstock, 400,000 people in Max Yasgur's muddy farm, celebrating three days of music and peace. Names roll off your lips – Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Joan Baez. The Beat poets – Ginsberg, Kerouac, feminists Angela Davies, Erica Jong. It was a time when people experimented with everything – be it relationships or drugs, music or art. And yet, you cannot dismiss the Sixties as an age when people were just dharma bums, long-haired, beaded, flowered, clad in batik kurtas and clogs, tramping to the hills of Kathmandu to dope themselves out of their minds. It was an age of intense political consciousness and activism – whether it was the Black civil rights movement, the feminist movement, or the anti-Vietnam protests. Even John Lennon, whom we are quick to slot as a dreamy visionary, was scathing and realistic in his satirical song, Taxman – *If yu drive a car, I'll tax the street/If you try and sit, I'll tax the seat/If you get too cold, I'll tax the heat/If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet*. A lot of the Sixties continues to influence us even today, to the extent Bob Dylan says, "People today are still living off the table scraps of the '60s. They are still being passed around – the music and the ideas." The Sixties generation were aboard a ship, as it were, that was going off on a voyage of discovery to a new world. Perhaps that world was never found, but there was this brave attempt to glimpse at the possibilities. And if that movement imploded, in spite of its great ideals and noble intentions, it was because of the self-destructive excesses, which made some of the iconic figures poor role models. Even Lennon realised their naivete when he admitted that they were like children who sulked because they didn't get a wonderful world of flowers, peace, happy chocolate. They retreated to their rooms, did rock and roll all the time and nothing else. Hippies may seem irrelevant today, charming cultural antiquities, but we must remember, as Timothy Leary said, hippies started the ecology movement. They combated racism. They liberated sexual stereotypes, encouraged change, individual pride and self-confidence. They questioned robot materialism. In four years, they managed to end the Vietnam war. As Number 6, in the cult TV show of the '60s, *The Prisoner* says: "I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, numbered. My life is my own."

This piece is a search for people who are still in love with the idea of the Sixties, and with what it stood for. For musician Rudy Wallang, who was born at the very start of that magical decade, the Sixties are associated with colours. Not the psychedelic colours of a drug induced haze, but the glorious profusion of flowers he saw in picturesque Shillong. There were few cars on the roads and the rhythm of life was gentle, unhurried, in tune with Nature. The atmosphere at home was suffused with music. "That my father Toto Wallang was a musician helped," he says in retrospect. "Dad and his friend Bulu Bordoloi performed at Shillong Club and Pinewood quite often. There were regular dance nights. Rudy's band, Soulmate, has completed eight years and with his girlfriend, Tipriti, he has performed all over the world. He has also had a long association with music legend Lou Majow's Great Society. He has two albums – *Shillong* and *Moving On*, and has written his own lyrics. "I like to introspect on life as an observer, and reflect the pain, love and anger of the common

man. Yes, I did experiment with marijuana in my teens, but it's a bad idea. Music is my only high. Mine is a blues band and I am inspired by the Beatles, Elvis, Tom Jones, the Troggs, Carlos Santana. I have proved that it is possible to get there with a Blues band. I believe in change, and it begins with the inward journey."

For journalist, television talk show host and commentator Wasbir Hussain, the Sixties are not just about flower power and camaraderie. "The Sixties were critical for India, especially the North East. The Dalai Lama had just entered India in 1959. The hostility between two superpowers – India and China, culminated in the 1962 war, and we are still bogged down by these differences. That decade also saw the Naga rebellion at its peak, as well as the Mizo uprising in 1966 – for the first and last time, the helicopter gunships attacked Indian citizens on the ground in Mizoram. Many villagers were resettled elsewhere. These were serious human rights violations, but I guess the media then was not so powerful as now, and there was not much of a furore. It was in the Sixties that the West began to be influenced by Indian lifestyle gurus, beginning with the Beatles."

For eminent writer and columnist Arup Kumar Dutta, the first writer from the region to achieve international renown, the Sixties were a period of dreams and expectations for the future. He had just left school and entered college. "The environment was very conducive for an aspiring writer. There were lots of magazines like *The Illustrated Weekly*, *Junior Statesman*, *Shankar's Weekly*, Youth Times, where you could send your work. Even newspapers regularly carried fiction in their weekly supplements. In those times, the society was not so complicated or competitive. We had leisure to pursue our interests. The Sixties were infused with much more idealism than today. Many became leftists out of disillusionment of the prevailing order. In the Jorhat of that decade, I felt I had a lot of space as a writer. There was also space in a physical sense – lots of wide, open fields, which had a liberating effect. There was a strong community bond. Many of us students demonstrated in front of the Chinese embassy in Delhi to protest against the '62 war. The globalisation of today is nothing but corporatisation. In the Sixties, the local, the national and the international were united more in terms of beliefs, ideals and attitudes."

For Dhruva Sarma, founder of the pioneer Friends band (1978-79) the most lasting impact of the '60s was on music. He grew up immersed in the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Traffic, The Band, Freddy Mercury. Lennon has been his idol and he has held "Give Peace a Chance" concerts in his honour for three years. "Music in the Sixties was natural, not airbrushed by the electronic effects of today. I must concede good music is being produced even today, but when I was in Bombay attending a Deep Purple concert, the young people had never heard of the band. "There's a lack of melody now", he laments. "The headbangers today are getting weirder. Their screeching which passes for music is an assault to the senses. The audience does not feel any emotional involvement. A lot of the bands in the North East took to drinks and drugs initially, but that phase is over."

For musician Ambar Das, music was a family affair, with his brother Bhaskar Das, a cousin and uncle having their own band – the Fiddles Music Cadenza or FMC for short, which

regularly performed in Shillong and Nagaland. It was a rock n roll band and they soaked in the musical ambience of Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. It was a pretty Bohemian existence then, and Ambar remembers life as an endless party. Bhaskar's Assamese song *Jonaki Parua Pohore Pohore* was a big hit then, and he sang and played the guitar with Jayanta Hazarika for twelve years. The Sixties generation musicians, Ambar admitted, felt they had the creative licence to experiment with drugs and alcohol. But, he now wishes to remember that decade as a time of intense spiritual soul searching, exuberant creativity, quest for freedom, idealism and an anti-establishment attitude. Owner of a sound recording studio, Ambar believes history is a cycle and that the Sixties will be back.

Musician Utpal Barsaikia learned the piano at St. Edmunds in the Sixties and was active in the school band. He treasures a grainy black and white photo of him playing double bass in the school band. In 1964, he was at Cotton College, playing the guitar and turning into a semiprofessional performer. He got himself a Fender Stratocaster guitar played by Hendrix and Clapton. "It was my baby. I went everywhere with it." Even when a student of BITS (Pilani) he was performing in Delhi and elsewhere. For him, the Sixties were not about excesses. He himself picked up martial arts skills at that time for a fit body and mind.

Nurul Amin Laskar says, "Being born in Shillong in the early fifties and growing up there, there are lots of memories of the Sixties – most of them fond and a few bitter. It was perhaps in the Sixties that the Government of Assam declared Assamese as the official language of the State, and there was resentment in many areas. We found Naga Hills, which was very much a district of Assam, emerging as a full fledged state – Nagaland. There were troubles in Cachar District. Demands for statehood in Meghalaya and separation from India in Mizoram also started brewing. The process of vivisection that started in the Sixties is showing no signs of ending even today.

"1962 was marked by the Chinese aggression. Unlike Delhi or Bombay, we were not far away from the battlefield. Many people in the mainland thought that Assam was gone. Prime Minister Nehru went on record to bid farewell to the people of Assam. But the silver lining of the Chinese aggression was that the country took notice of the North East.

"There was a spate of patriotic movies in those days. While *Haqeeqat* was a tearjerker, Manoj Kumar's *Upkar* had everything in it in addition to patriotism – songs, dances, fights, romance and what not!

"In 1969, we – a bunch of boys and girls from various colleges of Shillong - went to Pondicherry to attend the World Parliament of Youth. We saw Auroville and met young representatives from all over the world. We returned home enriched."

"Some of us would devour chicken chow sitting in New India Restaurant before and after the movies, while the adventurous lot would experiment with grass, marijuana, etc., for this was also the age of the hippies, the flower children. They would do just the opposite of what the society expected of them. They would wear long hair, stink, listen to pop and soul music,

wear bell bottoms and pointed shoes. They were rebels. We used to buy *Junior Statesman*(JS) weekly, and many of its pages would be filled with news relating to them. Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, Boney M, Abba, Beatles, Connie Francis, Brenda Lee are some of the names from the music chart of those years that I still remember."

Like the best things of life, the Sixties defy definition. But, we continue to cherish its essence.

The vanishing act

2 November 2012 at 18:02

Where have all the good, old fashioned ghosts gone? Every celebrity out there is doing his or her bit to save tigers and dolphins, crocs and rhinos, but hello, have any of you noticed that ghosts are vanishing too, melting into oblivion just like the icebergs? Why is there no data on them, no PETA-like campaign to bring 'em back from the brink of extinction? No, I'm serious. When was the last time you heard a really scary ghost story? When was the last midnight you felt someone was watching you from the foot of your bed? Scratching your head? What did I tell you? Ghosts are FINITO and this is going to haunt us for the rest of our lives.

Of the many reasons I can think up to explain the demise of the incorporeal beings, the first that comes to mind is, of course, the real estate boom. Once upon a time, in this very city, you had these lovely cavernous houses with wooden floors, enormous rooms, dark

corridors, gardens of thick shrubs and shady trees. The perfect ambience for our spirit friends to glide around, sigh, melt through the walls, turn door knobs and knock down stuff. But greedy people demolished ancestral homes, sold the land to developers and overnight, you now have ugly, overcrowded apartment blocks, filled with flats that resemble each other so exactly that it confuses the ghosts. The ratio of people to spirits is so unfair to the latter that they feel discriminated against. They miss the vast spaces and dark shadows of the old dwellings. These new pigeon holes cramp their style. Without the proper background, they feel silly trying to haunt anyone. When we talk of depriving tigers or elephants of their natural habitat, it is hypocritical not to admit we have robbed ghosts of their natural habitat too. And the poor things, like the animals, can't really protest, you know.

The people who could really spin a masterly ghost yarn are gone too. My grandfather was a great one for ghost stories. A doughty old timer who had settled in Shillong from the time it was a one-horse buggy town, he regaled us with morbid tales of star-crossed lovers throwing themselves into Ward's Lake, phantom carriages rattling along empty streets, robed women, long dead la di dah English ladies strolling with their equally dead poodles, and all sorts of macabre accounts delivered with a deadpan expression and I suspect, conjured up on the spur of the moment. His penchant for tall stories backfired on him one evening, when he blustered about how, when he was on his way home along Kench's Trace, a tree spirit shook her long black hair on him from a high branch with an evil cackle. This was too much, even for naive kids like us, and we burst into peals of laughter. Grandpa, of course, went into a sulk and refused to spin yarns for a few days. But looking back, I feel so grateful that he put in so much effort to keep us entertained. Look at the old folks now. Everyone is living longer, but refusing to be called old. The grandpas of today are taking up jobs after retirement, playing golf, gallivanting around Europe, taking courses, selling insurance or petitioning the government on some boring issue like municipal waste dumping. They are so hyperactive, they can't sit still and tell a nice ghost story. So, they are as much guilty as you and me of marginalising our spirit friends.

Ghosts were aplenty on mother's side of the family too. Every holiday afternoon in our ancestral house in that distant Upper Assam Town, the grown ups settled down on their long siesta. This was the time my brother and I loved to run wild in the vast outdoors, eating tiny tomatoes, playing among the bushes, watching dragonflies hovering over the pond. But we were told, in frightening detail, about the witch that lingered near the pomelo tree, and her weakness for tender meat. So many afternoons were wasted indoors due to the spectre of that witch. It needed a whole lot of growing up to realise that the witch was no more than a spectral baby-sitter who minded us as our mum and aunt slept, an unpaid nanny, if you please. No self-respecting ghost would ever put up with such indignity. No wonder she never showed up. Ghosts are not meant to have such prosaic uses. They are meant to add a mysterious element to our lives, a heightened awareness that there is a realm beyond our humdrum concerns, a dimension that makes us question our lives, death, the afterlife and God. With ghosts not playing an active part in our lives today, it is almost as if we have stopped questioning, and wondering, about that unknown world. We have become cynical

smart Alecs, using logic, rather than intuition. We are desperate to show we are educated, enlightened, and laugh off anything supernatural as old wives' tales. But infinite universes can exist side by side, with our consciousness passing through all of them. All possibilities exist – we are alive in some, long dead in others. Ghosts may simply be people of other dimensions, going about their daily business of living.

Technology, too, has its dark role in bumping off ghosts. Take for instance, the television. First, it killed conversation. When you switch it on, even the most besotted lovers tend to talk in monosyllables. With conversation in rigor mortis, the ability to tell ghost stories has become a casualty too. Television has also killed the imagination. Everything is visualised for you, including the blood splotches on the murdered victim. Endless babble about politicians, floods and the jinxed Commonwealth Games drive all other worldly thoughts from the mind. But the telly does remind you of other ghosts – the ghost of Bofors, Union Carbide, Godhra, Dantewada – that haunt our netas and parties. Much to their acute discomfort.

Ibsen once wrote of ghosts sliding between newspapers. Nothing encapsulates this better than what is going on in the countdown to the Commonwealth Games. It is almost as if there was a malevolent spirit, in fact a whole battalion of them, throwing a spanner in the works. You have flood waters taking over the athletes' track, A R Rahman delivering a musical dud, athletes from Canada and Australia pulling out, terrorist threats, a foot bridge toppling in a most unbecoming manner, and the stadium ceiling following suit. This is like a Ramsay horror flick with a sporting angle, or a Ram Gopal Varma chillfest with the plot going awry. I am surprised that no one has thought of hiring some witch doctor and conducting a full scale exorcism before we are accused of ghosting the games, rather than hosting them. With our national prestige at stake, I think, and I am saying this with a straight face, that we must not be above resorting to some mumbo jumbo to keep the games afloat (pun strictly intended.) How about a huge government order for lemons and chillies, for starters?

Another way of killing the ghosts is by making them hip and cool. Look at the Twilight series. When you have a vampire as cute as Robert Pattinson, where is the fear factor? The media is abuzz with who he hangs out with, what he wears, what he twits to his fans. Back in the old days, did you ever hear of Christopher Lee or Bela Lugosi (of Dracula fame) jiving at a discotheque or skiing at St Moritz? So you believed they were actually vampires and you cold sweated in the movie hall till they were righteously impaled. Vampires are meant to be cold, not cool, and you must want to run away from them, not date them, for God's sake!

Technology has, however, taken ghost hunting to a whole new level. I often watch the ghost hunter shows on TV. The crew wear hip trench coats and carry a lot of equipment like EMF meter, IR camera, dowsing rods, recorders to decode electronic voice phenomenon. So, there they are, cooped up in some old house with a cellar. They are bathed in a sickly green light as the machines measure the electromagnetic fields, trace the slightest vibrations. Then they show you a wispy shred of mist and certify it as a paranormal presence. Or a raspy sound on the tape is supposed to be a voice. The wait for a sighting is so long and

tedious that most of the time I am sleepy, and the next thing I know, it is bright in the morning and time for work. Works better than a cup of warm milk, I tell you.

They say ghosts are a metaphor for memory and remembrance. Jacques Derrida reminds us "Psychoanalysis has taught us that the dead – a dead parent, for example, can be more alive for us, more powerful, more scary, than the living." Perhaps we should look for ghosts not in haunted houses, but within ourselves, for the people who have left us, the people we may have not loved enough, and also our former selves – the lost child, the lost youth, whom we abandoned in this journey called life. The past itself is a ghost, and it always hovers in the periphery of the present. And, when we look back on the Holocaust, or the partition of India, the Khmer Rouge genocide, we feel that the belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary, man alone is capable of every wickedness.

Let me end with an account of the ghost in the machine. Even as I write these lines, there is panic and disarray around me. There are constant announcements on radio and television. It seems certain phone calls made through six cell phone numbers bring doom to those who answer them. Not only does the screen filcker an evil red, but the phone explodes, the person gets badly burnt and some calls have also proved fatal. We all laughed at first, but you know what mass suggestion is. I, who prided myself on being a sophisticated city slicker sceptic, have gone into panic mode, and saved the numbers so that I do not answer them at all, and to be really safe, fling the phone away when it rings. The whole thing seems so far-fetched and yet, the fear around me is so real and palpable, that being rational seems a bit overrated. So, this then is the ghost in the machine. It is a ghost without any sense of aesthetics or atmosphere. It doesn't drift around poetically in beautiful old houses with antique furniture. It doesn't play the piano and wear diaphanous gowns. It just catches you in the middle of a busy day and blasts into your ear. A ghost without any manners and good breeding. Ah, how I long for the good old days...

Nature's Esperanto

29 October 2012 at 16:03

It is not in a woman's nature to remain silent and listen, but these days, I am making an exception. The rains have returned like an old friend carrying a knapsack of tales from faraway lands. The rains not only beat on the roof, but also drum an insistent tattoo on one’s heart, part memory, part desire, a nebulous, half-awakened consciousness of time passing by, the mortality that awaits implacably at the end of this road. So, I listen to the language of the rains, that which is Nature's Esperanto, a universal second language that bridges divides. In its gentle or hurried cadences, I can sense the presence of ghosts, pieces of souls, voices unsung, thoughts repressed and love unrequited...

THIRD EYE EDITION

They say the best thing to do when it rains is to let it rain. Rain is Nature's way of telling us who is the boss, and how there is nothing much we can do about it. Rain is the great leveller, causing the humblest pony cart and the sleekest luxury car to get stranded on streets swirling with muddy water. There is great comfort in knowing you are not being singled out for the wet treatment; that you are all in it together for the long haul. And even if your intellectual level is of one who reads only the comic strips, you are still able to figure out, during the rains, that God never promised days without pain and sun without rain. And that you need both the sun and the rain to magically coalesce in that moment when a rainbow is born, which takes your breath away. I think no one is so jaded, so cynical, that he can entirely escape that tiny little gasp in his soul when he watches that fairytale band of colours span the earth and sky.

It is also ironic that the rain, which confines us indoors or wreaks havoc on our schedules, also sets us free. At that moment when silver raindrops are sliding off trembling trees and a grey, melancholy shadow falls over the earth and the sky, all at once you are set free from the gridlock of the present and the shackles of your external identity. Your mind floats along the breeze of memories, the breeze that gently wafts you to the farthest reaches of a lost childhood, when you remember the peal of thunder that made you bury your head in your mother's lap, the dripping umbrellas on the hall of your lost home, the wet hair of that unknown girl you stood with for an hour under the college bus shelter, your heart too full for words. Waiting for the shower to turn to a drizzle, you find the time from this mad rush of living, to be just yourself, to renew your acquaintance with the real human being inside you – the one who dreams, who hopes, who doesn't care a fig about political correctness or climbing any ladders, the one who hums old Kishore Kumar songs, while the outside you obsesses over your investment portfolio. It is that real, genuine you, that perpetual wideeyed innocent that exults in the smell of the wet earth and the emerald rejoicing of every leaf and blade of grass. It is that you, concealed all along, who traces the name of a loved one on a misted car window, who enjoys the squelchy sound of his ruined shoes and salivates about piping hot pakoras spiced with wicked chillies and onions. But today, perhaps it is only the fortunate few who house a real person within. So many of us are today just full of bluff and bluster, parading our degrees and career profiles, riding the highway of life with eyeballs glued to some destination where the streets are paved with gold. That is why we have so many phrases in popular usage which make it clear that people regard rain merely as an annoyance, an inconvenience. Phrases like "don't rain on my parade," "save it for a rainy day," "rain out," "raining cats and dogs..." These seem trivial when we consider that rain is a universal metaphor of life, an exultant supreme creative power, dispenser of divine grace and plenty. And like so many other phenomena of Nature, the rains also have a duality, an ambivalence that forces us not to take it for granted. It stands as much for life and nourishment as for death and destruction. We may have staged rain dances and seeded clouds to bring in rainfall, but we are still clueless about how to stop them from coming.

In Hawaiian mythology, it is believed that when a great soul leaves for heaven, the skies rain tears in a thundering deluge. Many monsoons ago, when I was a girl, I was reading a true

account about an American family which settles in Hawaii and how a tropical storm salutes the death of a noble chieftain. The mood of the book was in perfect tandem with the gusty squall of that Shillong twilight. Suddenly, our postman, struggling manfully with his rebellious umbrella, arrived at our door. He was carrying a letter from my maternal aunt. The letter had taken a week to reach us from Upper Assam and carried sad tidings. Our beloved great grandmother, who was almost hundred, had passed away. We wept at the memory of the beautiful honey skinned woman and her steadfast love for us. We remembered the butter soft, loose folds of her arms and the delicate lace work of her thousand wrinkles. We would never hear the high octave of her girlish voice. But, in that moment of grief, I was suddenly aware of the rain outside and the Hawaiian myth. A strange feeling of comfort came over me as I felt Nature was raising a toast to her.

The rain also has two other associations with members of my family. In the mid seventies, my brother was a schoolboy. We had newly relocated to Guwahati and we, the kids, had to manoeuvre our way home through strange new streets. One afternoon, a storm was brewing and my mother was beside herself with worry. I had reached home but my brother hadn't. The skies were dark, the wind blew, the thunder growled. And there was brother dear, plonking down the road in his adorable curls and schoolbag. As lightning flashed, he quickened into an alarmed trot. I still see my mother on the porch, her arms stretched out, and he rushing forward, with an advancing silver curtain of rain close on his heels. I still remember her laugh of sheer relief when he was in her arms and the feeling that all was right with the world. Amazingly, in a surreal moment of deja vu, this little mother-son drama was played out two decades later. This time it was again a sudden evening storm. This time it was I who stood in the balcony, eyes strained towards the road, trying to get my first born cycle home from tuition through sheer force of my will. My panic mounted as the wind rose and then, just as the first plops of warm rain were falling off an overladen sky, my boy, satchel on his back, was pedalling home like a battle weary veteran back from the front. In that moment, I understood exactly how my mother had felt all those years ago, and like her, I sent up a humble prayer of thanksgiving.

But not everything about the rains is so poetic. Rains tickle my funny bone in a number of ways. Have you noticed how panicky people get when it starts to rain? Drivers slam their feet on the accelerator, commuters try to burrow into already overloaded buses, people flee from the sidewalks, and I have actually seen a lively quarrel end midway as the two adversaries ran helter-skelter in the squall. Why are homo-sapiens so scared of getting wet? Other animal species don't display such obvious signs of panic. Is it a residue of our atavistic fear, as our ancestors cowered in the caves and bowed down everytime lightning flashed, as a terrified acknowledgement of some angry God? Of course, lightning still strikes hapless people, but scampering around in a mild shower as if they were on the brink of catastrophe is ridiculous. Not to say unbecoming of an uber-cool been there, done that 21st century race. But the rains are an occasion not just to laugh at other people, but also at myself. One monsoon morning, a sea of water on the streets impeded my entry to office. I convinced an auto driver to drive me through waist high water. We crawled through, the water gushed in, the engine sputtered and I was alone with a very indignant man who openly questioned the

logic, or lack of it, behind my foolhardy decision. Just then, a city bus stopped by the side of our auto. I am hopeless in maths, but even I could deduce that the height of the bus would render me more safe from the swirling water. I paid up quickly, grabbed my bag, and feeling very Lara Croftish, stepped onto the bus step straight from the auto. After this death defying stunt, I sauntered into office with cool nonchalance. Ten minutes later, with a little sick feeling, I realised I had left behind a beloved Truman Capote novel and my brand new umbrella in the auto seat. So much for my stunt. Every time it rains, I still feel a pang for the Capote. I don't miss the umbrella, though. It would only have prevented me from experiencing the sweet pleasure of getting drenched.

Dreamin' in the dark
26 October 2012 at 17:42

The black night of darkness has repeatedly come to my doorsteps. The only weapon in its hand was the distorted fakeness of its pain.

***Tagore**, The Black Night of Darkness.*

The sense of deja vu is unmistakable. Once again, exactly a year later, I am in the picture perfect environs of the Sarala Birla Gyan Jyoti, Amingaon. Once again, I witness a school play directed by Pranab Mukherjee, the maverick crusader of Alternative Theatre. Last year, he had talked to me of going off to Cambodia, his unflinching gaze fixed on the dark amphitheatre of human atrocity – newer methods to kill, newer methods of die." In this new play, *I haven't booked my face, yet*, the tragedy of East Timor is played out in its visceral intensity on the screen — terrified civilians caught between implacable ideologies, shot, maimed, silenced. The scene then shifts to Sri Lanka, and it is the same story of man's infinite capacity for bestiality. Strung with these images is the text crafted out of Tagore's poem *Africa* and excerpts from *Post Office*, a letter to Tagore by the mother of Wilfred Owen – Susan H Owen, poems of Verrier Elwin and some improvised material, with a part of it involving the young actors lobbing questions at the Prime Minister of India. Pranab is a relentless sleuth, exposing hidden agendas, questioning the system sowing the seeds of protest. No wonder his drama is more of chronicling and unmasking than a mere artistic and aesthetic exercise for its own sake.

This time, meeting him again, I confer on him the title of 'soldier of peace' and it enthuses him immediately. It is a role he takes with utmost sincerity, moving restlessly from Chechnya to Vietnam, because he says that in the heart of human conflict and horror, he finds stories of hope. And yet, one parent raises a point that perhaps next year, the students of Sarala Birla would stage something more positive. All of us who have raised children are

guilty of wanting to present life for our children in a tetra pack — sterile, packaged, spillfree, convenient. We shield our young from hunger, poverty, disease, death, darkness. We believe they must spend their young and impressionable years in a make-believe world of sweetness and light, where their mothers will wash their clothes the purest white and produce endless plates of noodles, where fathers will piggyback them with tireless energy. But the television beams its images of bodies lying on streets, train coaches bombed into charred frames, desperate, outstretched hands in refugee camps. What will this shielded child make of this real world? Will he pretend it does not exist? Will he decide that he must live his own life, and to hell with the others? Pranab is trying to make this connect from the safe world and the real one, between the sanitised space and the lethal minefield. But, in order to understand the convictions of this crusader, one needs to go back to his childhood, where it all began.

An only child, Pranab was born in 1973. His father was a specialist in Labour Relations and a corporate communicator. Through him, Pranab developed an early affinity for the underdog. A homemaker, Pranab's mother studied ancient Bangla poetry. They were, he says, a left of the centre liberals and not really communists. It was Gorky Sadan, which he visited regularly since childhood, rather than Don Bosco, Park Circus and Jadavpur University which prepared him for life. He avidly soaked in the rebel poetry of Anna Akhmatova, the films of Tarkovsky, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. It was here that he honed his chess playing skills, outwitting rivals in many tournaments. Life was a breakneck journey of experiences and ideas glowing with possibilities. And then, one day, he entered then beautiful, derelict Sindhu Bhavan opposite Globe Cinema in Kolkata. He climbed the twisted wrought iron staircase and through a door, saw a group of men and women enacting drama under the watchful eyes of legendary theatre icon, the father of Third or Alternative Theatre, Badal Sircar. He plunged into the workshops that Sircar organised, absorbing the key elements that would shape his own dramatic approach — no discernible plot, no concrete characterisation, actor’s freedom to interpret roles, multilayered subtexts, blurred border between audience and drama, no space restriction and use of body language rather than facial expressions.

However, some of the frenetic urgency and spot on contemporaneity of Pranab's work was derived from another source – his stint as a journalist for six years with Asian Age and then, *Sangbad Pratidin*. He was the first journo to reach the site of the infamous Purulia armsdrop. He broke the story of a scam involving a major Indian company, leading to the arrest of two CEOs. When he was not covering custody deaths, he was sipping wine all night with 92-year-old iconoclast legend Nirad C Chaudhuri) who called Subhas Bose more romantic than revolutionary, and prophesied the fall of the CPM in Bengal. Pranab covered Wimbledon, the World Cup in France, quizzed people as far apart as Sheikh Hasina and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

His North East connection began with a story on the Naga Mothers' Association in 1997-98. Soon he was hooked to the land, its mystic detachment from the outside world, the gripping drama of its unrest and alienation. Today, he is an old North East hand, analysing,

questioning Dhemaji and Kakopathar, North Cachar and Manipur, using these stories as subtexts for his revealing plays. He finds the local in the universal and vice versa. A series of independent fellowships have enabled him to carry his work forward. Today, the Kolkata Campus Theatre he founded is eighteen years old and he has a theatre collective which has transcreated great Indian literature texts into English, including Sri Aurobindo's *Conversation of The Dead*, Tagore poem *They Also Work* and Mahasweta Devi's *Breastgiver*. One of his most daring and original experiments was the staging of *Troilus and Cressida* on board the toy train from Ghoom to Darjeeling, with passengers as much the cast of the play as the actors. He was the solo actor in the adaptation of Kalidas' *Kumarsambhava*, which he staged in Ghatshila, on the banks of the Subarnarekha, close to where Bibhuti Bhusan had penned Pather Pachali. The poor, rural viewers were thus given access to a timeless classic and this was his way of blurring boundaries and turning ideas on their head. In the discrimination against Shylock in the Venetian days of yore, he also finds the prejudices, overt and covert, against a Bodo, a Dimasa, a Rabha or one from the tea tribe.

No wonder then that Anubha Goyal, Principal of Sarala Birla Gyan Jyoti school, has invited him to come every year to do a play with the children. She feels his knowledge, his experiences gleaned from his travels, and his commitment to issues that affect all humanity will continue to benefit the children. This year's play involved forty two children from classes IX, X and XI.

Over the years, this indefatigable soldier of peace, when not walking the wild side in some of the most dangerous hotspots of the world, is fashioning plays which are cerebrally exciting, visually stark and performances which throb with the pulse beat of a larger humanity. His scripts are a collection of image texts, presenting a theatre of collages, sliced memories. His cast wears unisex clothing — black shirts and trousers, figures of protest. Cardboard boxes, stepladders, ropes, table edges, yellow post-its are used with stunning effect. What comes through is the rigorous physical demands made on the cast. The mind and body connect is invigorating for the children and they enact complex ideas with consummate ease. And Pranab's piercing gaze uses other modes of expression too — his graphic novel on legendary Naxalite Kanu Sanyal comes out next month.

So, it is time for Pranab to leave, this time for Vietnam. His is a lonely trajectory, following the footprints of the wounded, the displaced. The little boy who sat transfixed by the Russian revolution in the books at Gorky Sadan finds himself in the ceaseless ebb and flow of contemporary history. He tries to make sense of it all and find a pattern where there is none, hope where there is none. The future is just like his plays, open-ended, inconclusive. The search continues...

Cheers to Curry Imperialism...!

22 October 2012 at 17:47

"What was the last thing you googled?" This was a question lobbed at a photographer, writer and make-up artiste on the latest issue of Vogue. So there, I've admitted it. I read Vogue like any other female airhead and moon about clothes that would cost me an arm and a leg. But my point is, what you google accurately sums up the kind of person you are. It's a Rorschach inkblot test in the cyber world to explore the intimate spaces that house the real you. This is not to say there is a permanent you, an immutable you. We are constantly reinventing ourselves, coming under the influence of people, events, ideas and then receding from them. Sometimes this happens with a rapidity which is truly alarming.

Like everybody else, I google quite a bit in my spare time and the topics could veer wildly from Leela Naidu's memoirs to Enrique Iglesias' latest album. In between, you can throw in some images of hot bod Jacqueline Fernandez and George Carlin quips. It seems that about the worst gaffe you can commit on cyberspace is to google yourself. I did that a couple of times before I became aware of its no-no quotient, so I suppose that doesn't count.

Now, what I google cannot possibly be of interest to anybody, but the last name I googled was Joel Stein. Joel who? Well, he's a '71 born US journo. The Wikipedia pic has him grinning into the camera with that clean-cut easy, all-American charm which is hard to resist. But this Joel dude is bad news. He is making the fur fly and creating bad blood between people. Joel Stein is the Time magazine columnist whose piece My Own Private India is the literary equivalent of a Ku Klux Klan racist attack. His insulting comments on the Indian immigrants of his hometown, Edison, New Jersey, has raised a storm of protest, with Time handing out an abject apology. My favourite comedian, George Carlin said comedy means knowing where to draw the line and crossing it. In the realm of the comic, nothing is sacrosanct. Some of the most persecuted people of the world – the Jews, are the subject of numberless side – splitting jokes. In Chaplins' hands, the feared German megalomaniac became vastly entertaining. Cracking jokes at the expense of a certain community is actually a backhanded compliment, if taken in the right spirit. This was underscored when a colleague from down South taped "Hotel Keralafornia" – that whacky musical ode to all things Mallu, and cheerfully played it for us over and over again. But my quarrel with Stein is not just his racist attitude. The piece rankles because it is not funny enough. He is guilty of not being able to tap the comic potential of his boyhood encounters with Indian immigrants. Instead of helping us gain an outsider's insight into our quirks, his piece leaves a bad taste in the mouth. America has been the land of opportunity for people around the world. No one needs to apologise for being there. It embraces multitudes and gives everyone out to try his luck a level playing field. And then suddenly, one of America's most respected magazines carries a piece that reeks of everything that is provincial, thick-skinned and bigoted.

What really are the contents of Stein's piece? Simply put, he is deeply resentful of the presence of too many Indians in his hometown Edison, New Jersey, where the inventer Thomas Alva Edison set up base. He is not at all amused by how old landmarks are being replaced by an Indian sweet shop, Indian grocery, Indian restaurant. After the first wave of doctors and engineers, the merchant cousins, and then the less bright ones settled there. The alleged stupidity of the later day immigrant convinces Stein he knows just why India is poor. He thinks "dotheads" is too light an insult for a people whose gods have multiple arms and an elephant nose. He ends with the sneering remark that young Indian immigrants are looking like Italians these days – with their gelled hair, gold chains and unbuttoned shirts. Stein barely skims the surface of the Indian community. There is a schoolboy pugnacity that suits a bully in the playfield, not the hallowed precincts of Stanford (which he attended) and Time. He also talks of his own youthful stabs at shoplifting, watching R-rated movies, and carousing in drunken parties. Given this track record, it can be safely assumed that Stein is no role model and his views hardly worth taking seriously. The kind of high decibel noise Indians are raising show we are still way too touchy about our identity. With a numerical strength of one billion, an economy thriving in spite of the global recession, and a membership to the nuclear club, it will take much, much more than the cheeky words of a small town American ignoramus to make India blink. Even so, words must be used with responsibility, and Stein has no business giving a tacit nod of approval to India-baiters under the guise of raising a few laughs.

When all hell broke loose, Stein wasted no time in putting the phone off the hook. Then, he twittered that he truly felt stomach-sick that he hurt so many people and also that he expected the reactions to be Gandhian ... that we Indians would simply turn the other cheek, because pacifism was our national legacy. Stein's twit made it worse for me because it confirmed what we had guessed all along. Stein's cruelty is the cruelty of the bully who picks on the weakest victim, someone who is not likely to hit back. He thought our Gandhian ideals would render us defenceless. All that uproar has proved otherwise. And Stein can be stomach-sick all he wants, not for us, but his own prospects in the career scene.

However, America and India are not as polarised as Stein would have us to believe. Writer Rana Dasgupta says that the two nations share the same arrogance, identical assumptions about their importance and superiority, as well as their self-obsession. But this in no way should make us feel smug. For, in aligning ourself to this country, we would lose our timeless character, the intangible sum of what makes us Indian. As Raja Rao wrote in The Meaning of India – "India is not a country, it is a perspective, it is not a climate but a mood, in the play of the absolute - it is not the Indian who makes India, but India which makes the Indian."

Former BBC chief of Bureau and writer Mark Tully, an India watcher for years, make an astute observation about modern India in his book No Full Stops in India, which is worth recounting. According to him, colonialism still exists in the minds of Indians today. The most successful students may no longer knock the doors of Oxford or Cambridge. They now prefer Harvard or Yale. But do they learn what is relevant to their country? The scientist are

trained in reducing the role of human beings in production, though labour is India's greatest asset. The doctors want to practise medicine which uses the latest and most expensive techniques of healing, whereas the country needs public health, preventive medicine and simple cures. The business school graduates learn to head huge corporations which will cripple small enterprises. This is the sort of criticism about India that we ought to be sitting up and taking notice.

Racist prejudices against India seem understandable in the context of India's growing influence in all spheres. What in the sixties was a fad of Westerners for yoga, transcendental meditation, rudraksha beads and Hare Krishna chants is now a full-fledged curry imperialism that shows no signs of abating. There are more Indians on the Forbes list of millionaires, more Bollywood premieres in the West, more whizkid Indian techies heading start-up companies, writers winning international awards. The thrifty, hard-working, family-oriented Indian is everywhere, from transplanting hearts to changing car wheels. He is ubiquitous, unstoppable and cruising smoothly down the highway to El Dorado. And if somebody sulks because Indians are holding the trump card, that's too bad. Because racists are all under the delusion that God made a creative mistake when He brought some people into being. And prejudice, after all, is the child of ignorance.

When I first read Joel Stein's piece, I knew at once that it had an Assamese connection. After some hard thinking, I knew what it was. Edison. That's the town he writes about. And that is the very place on which S'Mitra Kalita, a journalist at the Washington Post based her book of narrative non-fiction, Suburban Sahibs. I interviewed Mitra some years ago and read her book. It traces the lives of three immigrant families that make their way from various parts of India to the suburbs of New Jersey. It sheds new light on the pursuit of the American Dream for the estimated 1.7 million Indians living in the United States. Middlesex Country, New Jersey, is home to one of the largest Indian population in the world outside India. And as they achieve economic success, their desire for political and social parity grows stronger and their acceptance in the US is less of a question and more of a reality.

We Indians are comfortable with the idea of goggle-eyed Westerners falling in love with our elephant rides and delirious festival dances. We want them to fingerlick the curry off their plates and wear turbans to get into the Oriental spirit. But peddling such exotica is not always the smart thing to do. Sometimes, we must let them know we mean business.

And that, they had better not mess with us.

Mind games, anyone?

THIRD EYE EDITION

Recently, we went for a late night show of the psycho-thriller Karthik Calling Karthik. The suspense of reel life spilled over onto real life right at the very beginning, when the ticket guy and the doorman, dismissively eyeing us, the half a dozen moviegoers, shook their heads, expressing serious doubts if the movie would be screened at all, given the pathetic number. With the exception of me, the only lady there, the five other male moviegoers used their collective lung power to frighten the doorman to submission. We filed into the hall, feeling vindicated, and the credits rolled.

Farhan Akhtar was spot on as the grey, faceless office worker tormented by an imagined childhood tragedy, in love with his colleague, eye candy Deepika, who seems so out of his league. His loud boss seems to trample all over him, the landlord stalks him, and our loser is a sorry mess, till a voice on the phone, also claiming to be Karthik, turns his life completely around. Then, of course, it all unravels and now the voice is a malevolent force which Karthik must outsmart. The images are stark, brooding, the acting understated, the rather slow pace compensated for by some scary moments. A reason why Karthik Calling Karthik worked for me was because the hall was so empty (we were the only ones in the balcony). We were not distracted by people talking, laughing, fidgeting with popcorn packets or sssshing their kids. All around us were vacant seats and a rather distinct possibility of spectral presences floating down the aisles. In an atmosphere like that, you are more receptive to the terror that Karthik experiences, even if it is the result of his own self, or rather, the many selves within him.

THIRD EYE EDITION

Call it coincidence, but the previous film we saw, earlier in the week, My Name Is Khan, is also about a mental affliction, Asperger's syndrome, a form of Autism. Rizwan Khan (Shah Rukh) is an immigrant living in the US with his brother (Jimmy Shergill). He has a peculiar walk, refuses to make eye contact, is terrified of the colour yellow, and seems imprisoned in his private bubble. That doesn't stop him from loving and marrying Mandira (Kajol) and being stepfather to her son. Then, the horror of 9/11 is let loose and even the most neighbourly whites turn cold, distant or outright hostile. Muslims are attacked, their shops looted; Mandira's young son is a tragic victim of a hate crime. Then, Khan begins his heroic cross country trek to meet the American President and tell him his name is Khan and he is not a terrorist. Rizwan's isolation from normal life is, ironically, what gives him the courage and hope in the belief that he can set things right. It is his very naivete that makes his heartwarming mission possible. If he were a normal Muslim young man, all he would have felt were rage, hate and cynicism. Only someone so socially isolated as Rizwan would not feel the visceral fear that people of his faith felt after 9/11 and be crippled into inaction.

Bollywood seems to have embraced illness, especially the mental ones, with a vengeance. There was Aamir Khan's Taare Zameen Par on dyslexia, the earlier Black on blindness and dementia, Paa on progeria, Ghajini on amnesia, even Bolo Raam hanging on the psychological take of a boy accused of murdering his own mother.

However, is the Indian audience really ready for a cinematic genre that explores complicated psychological states that speak of conflict and pain? Let us not forget that cinema, after all, is the biggest escape route there is. The average cinegoer strolls into a movie theatre for a couple of hours of fervent wish fulfilment. He may have messed up the balance sheets at office, his wife might be a harridan, but in those hours, our moviegoer is the larger than life hero battling the baddies with his six pack abs, romancing his girl in Alpine glory and breezing around in his red Porsche. He wants his paisa-vasool of phoren locations, designer wear, foot tapping music and sumptuous homes. Who cares about the workings of a sick mind? That is why Indian directors rely on big stars – Aamir, Shah Rukh and Amitabh – to deal with these issues. The average cinegoer is not in his seat because he, suddenly, cares for the afflicted. He just wants to see how his favourite star is able to pull off this new role. And sadly, in keeping with the limited attention span of the viewer, Indian filmmakers only manage to oversimplify or just skim the surface of these issues. That is why you have Karthik, when he is not in despair, geared out in designer threads and dancing in trendy nightspots with his lissome lady love. Let the truth be told – the Indian male refuses to accept a flawed male as the protagonist. He still hankers for a hero who is in charge, who is capable of superhuman feats, and is not cowed down by, of all things, disembodied voices whispering in his head. The typical Indian male, with his domination hang-ups, refuses to acknowledge such weaklings exist. No wimps for him.

But some of the greatest filmmakers have regarded cinema as an exploration of the mind in all its mystery and complicacies. It was ennui that fuelled Stanley Kubrick's genius and it becomes all too clear when he says, "The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meaning. If it can be written or thought, it can be filmed." Ingmar Bergman, who

suffered through a lifetime of crippling self doubt, said: "No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the very room of the soul." The latest Hollywood films confirm that psychological issues can be brought into cinematic storytelling without hampering popular or critical acclaim. In the Oscar line-up, Precious is a grim story about a father raping his own child and a mother hating her daughter, but moviegoers come away feeling profoundly different about their own lives. The animated Up, the story of a grumpy old man adrift in the sky, underscores what psycho-researchers have said all along – that social contacts are vital to health and happiness. In The Blind Side, the Sandra Bullock starrer, a black boy is raised by a white family. Michael Oher's IQ soars, he gets a good education and stars as an NFL football player, thanks to a family that gave him a home and a dream. This is positive psychology at its best, affirming the value of kindness, courage and how to overcome adversity Though many moviegoers will go to see Up in the Air because they want to check out how George Clooney is getting even better with age, they will no doubt absorb the message that all the technological conveniences of the world-planes, laptops, phones – can never make up for family, friends and love.

There is no space in this piece to discuss A Beautiful Mind (Schizophrenia) and Iris (Alzhemier's) and other remarkable films that explore the realm of the mind. But, no piece on this theme is complete without raising a toast to Alfred Hitchcock, who was the first filmmaker to use psychoanalysis in his movies. As he so famously said, "There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it." His films play with the cinegoers' nerves, sexual or tabooed areas play a central role in his plots, like the latent homosexuality of Strangers on A Train, the parody of an Oedipus complex in Psycho, and the traumatic remembrance of repressed memories in Marrie. His work is testimony to the fact that one can achieve popular success even while dealing with subjects that may seem arcane to many. But until Bollywood unlearns its proclivity to tackle these subjects with syrupy sentimental flavours and as having mere novelty value, the realism of the subconscious is best left alone.

Climb every mountain

15 October 2012 at 18:58

Going to visit Nasim Akhtor on one of the coldest days of the new year gives it a significance I had not thought of till I was sit ting in her warm and cosy living room, with its tasteful velvet sofas, a chaise lounge, pictures on the walls and a beautiful antique Kashmiri jug of burnished silver gleaming in a corner. As expected, she is not wearing socks, nor too many warm clothes either, while I was bundled up like a bear, and shivering in spite of it. Warm and smiling, she had me seated and promptly switched on the heater, more for my benefit than hers. When I looked at her, I knew it was easy to slot her as an outgoing, single school

teacher, someone who was house-proud, liked everything in its place, frankly speaking her mind, absorbed in the womanly interests like cooking, crocheting, gardening perhaps, and dressing up. She did not at all look sad to be single, or melancholy at the absence of a spouse or children.

But Nasim Akhtor is far from an ordinary lady. She is the one who broke tradition, the iron hold of her community, to venture into a field that called for almost superhuman courage and endurance. Her memories are not of meals cooked and flowers embroidered, but of tramping through a blizzard in zero visibility, dangling from a sheer rock face tethered to a slender nylon rope, her crampons digging into unyielding ice, the ominous rumble of an avalanche, the terrifying depths of a crevasse, the lungs screaming for air, every muscle of the body aching and sore, and then, the last triumphant step on the summit, the stunning view of range upon range of mountains lit up by a rising sun, a silence so perfect it was like a symphony. Nasim has experienced all this, victory and heartbreak, elation and despair. This little tete a tete in her pretty sitting room is only a lull between her struggle to strive, to conquer. Her place is truly there, among the snow and whistling winds. The mountains have long ceased to intimidate her. But, she continues to be inspired by them.

When did it begin, this wanderlust, answering the call of the mountains? "I was born in Guwahati", she says. "My parents were Majida Begum and Abdul Haque. I lost my father, an army contractor, when I was only two. My mother had to bring up three daughters, I was the youngest, and a son single-handedly. I admire my mother not only for the courageous way she took up her responsibilities, but also the staunch support she gave me when I ventured into this field. She had faith in my dream and encouraged me to cross all the boundaries society and our faith imposed on me."

Nasim was different from other girls of her age. Unlike her sister, she had no interest in playing with dolls or dressing up in pretty frocks, trinkets and ribbons. She did not like sour fruits, and was teased about being like a boy. She was a hyperactive tomboy, chasing balls, climbing trees, and fishing in the shallow ponds near her home. The Guwahati of her girlhood was a thinly populated, open spaced rustic place where Nature waited just outdoors and Nasim insists on saying, "I was born in Guwahati village."

All that running around was mainly a currents, the people, crops, forests, plains and mountains of different lands. All that was vague, intangible and imagined became real before her fascinated eyes, arousing a restlessness to venture beyond the four walls of her home. Then began her college life in Handique Girls' College. By that time, she was climbing the hills around the city, enjoying the physical exertion and sense of accomplishment when she reached the top.

Then, in 1972, she went trekking to Sandakphu, in Darjeeling, with a team led by the legendary Rohini Bhuyan, who had first brought mountaineering to Assam. It was a team of twenty-six members, and only five were women. It was then that she met Tenzing Norgay, who had climbed the Everest with Edmund Hillary. "He told me the Himalayas would be the

love of my life. I came to understand his words only later. Everything about that trip was magical – the drifting powdery snow, the dilapidated house where we took shelter for the night. It was then I felt that first hypnotic spell the Himalayas cast on me. I began to write letters to Baba, the Himalayas becoming a God to me, someone who solved my dilemmas, gave me the courage to go on, who, with His permanence and vastness, revealed to me what was petty and fleeting in life. That is why mountaineering is much more than a sport. It is nothing short of a pilgrimage."

"Now, convinced of my true calling, I enrolled for a basic and advanced course in climbing at the Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (WHMI) at Manali. I learned how to walk on snow wearing crampons, climb down from a vertical cliff top, emergency steps to take in the advent of an avalanche, how to set up and dismantle a tent, how to use an oxygen tent and a hundred other tasks."

"When I came back, I discovered that all around me, people were laughing at my pursuit of this goal. They just did not know what to make of me. But my brother, sisters and mother stood solidly behind me, protecting me from all that scorn and animosity. My mother said that there were lots of examples in history that people opposed anyone who tried to do something new. She said I needed strength to overcome all challenges and ignore all that criticism. Interestingly, my mother was also familiar with all the climbing gear and equipment I used and could identify each item by name. She had a premonition and told me that if anything happened to her while I was doing something related to my climbing, I was to go on as if nothing had happened. And on the day of Idd, when recruits were to report for a national rock climbing meet in Guwahati, she passed away.

"I continued to test my limits, climbing in Kashmir, Garhwal, Kumaon, Nepal. But then, I realised I also needed to bring more women into this field. I encouraged many to train and in 1986, a team of seven women, myself included, went on an expedition to Leh. We climbed the 21,132 ft Kangyisay Peak. We were the first all-women team there. Very few Indians visited Leh, and there we were, climbing a mountain. The army gave us free rations, the Air Force gave us walkie talkie sets and sent a helicopter to the base camp. Mountaineer Magan Bisha said he was eager to meet me as I had persuaded the armed forces to grant us all these concessions. We were warmly felicitated and interviewed on radio."

In 1987, Nasim led a group of eight Assamese girls to the White Needle Peak of the Kashmiri Himalayas (22,000 ft). From Kargil, the girls went to the Zangskar range, travelling in trucks, staying in tents and crossing rivers on horseback. The stunning landscape and Nature's fury left a lasting impact.

Many such feats followed and Nasim gained respect and recognition at the national level. She became the first NE member of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in 1993. In 1998, she became one among the thirteen governing council members for ten years. Talks are on to set up two mountaineering institutes, one by the Army and one by DoNER.

Today, Nasim is upbeat about an Everest expedition she will lead in March 2011. Selections will begin in June this year. Men and women have already undergone training to gear up for this challenge. They will be sent to Kanchenjunga first to acclimatise themselves. Some team members include experienced climbers like Colonel Neeraj Rana, Lavraj Dharmashutra, Kushang Sherpa, Tempa and Pranoy Bordoloi.

At an age when most women would choose to put their feet up and live a life of quiet leisure, Nasim readies for yet another challenge, tuning her mind and body like an instrument before a performance. She does yoga, eats the right foods and believes that a never say die spirit is what keeps her going. Like Aideo Handique of Joymati, who could not get a groom because of her acting in films, Nasim, too, has to lead a single life. But she is very much a mother, a deeply caring one at that, to a number of girls who live and study at her home. She yearns to go back to her beloved mountains and nothing can stand in the way. It is not just her calling, but her salvation as well.

Halo of the outlaw

8 October 2012 at 12:02

Sometimes, you have to literally put years and years between some experience and yourself to figure things out. Take for instance, a poem we studied in our final high school year. It was a bitter sweet year. On the one hand, we were ready to venture out to the wide world beyond, on the other hand, we wanted to cling to this safe world of mother hen clucking nuns, non-negotiable rules and chewing gum stuck under benches. It was in this last summer that we endlessly recited The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes. Looking back, it seems surreal and rather hilarious that a bunch of wide-eyed convent school girls, too timid to say boo to a goose, in a forgotten corner of a country lost by the Empire, should commit to memory a poem about an English robber so clearly on the wrong side of the law. At an age when even chatting innocently with a member of the male species could condemn one to mass censure, here we were, secretly cheering for the black-eyed Bess, who not only loves the scoundrel, but blows herself up to kingdom come to save him. Really, this poem, with its unapologetic rooting for the outlaw and the dark undercurrent of forbidden passion, had no business creeping into any schoolgirl's curriculum. But I am glad it did, for it awakened in us the fact that as humans, we have in us a peculiar moral ambivalence, a willingness to bend the rules, and that nothing is black or white, but a fascinating amalgam of the two. As girls on the brink of womanhood, we didn't care a fig how many wayfarers the highwayman robbed. We didn't want to know about his loot. But yes, we cared deeply that his love for Bess was true, and that, like a true lover who would never go back on his word, he would gallop in the moonlight to be with her. Enraptured by the rhythm of the lines, caught by the hypnotic spell of its imagery, all of us let out a collective sigh, wishing to find in our own

drab lives a man so reckless and daring, so true to his love. Whether or not we ultimately did has never been discussed. That old magic has dispersed, and when we meet now, our children and their futures are our consuming passion.

The outlaw is a figure which looms larger than life on the popular imagination. He is so much more layered, more nuanced than the do-gooder hero, and his very daring in questioning the establishment rules wins him grudging admiration. Michel Foucault, the great historian and philosopher, said that the lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of the outlaw... the great social nomad, who prowls around the periphery of a docile, frightened order. If you look around you carefully enough, you will see men are rewarded for learning the practice of violence in all spheres by money, admiration, recognition, as if their masculinity has been proved. In male culture, the police are heroic and so are outlaws, males who enforce laws and men who break them. It was around this same time of our girlhood another literary figure-Heathcliff of Wuthering Heights rode into the edges of our uneasy awakening. Like countless readers, we fervently wanted to give this brutal man the benefit of the doubt, but the creation of a misunderstood antihero who is pure gold within continues to be a cliche used by romance writers to this date. And we are still unwilling to accept that some bad pennies are beyond redemption.

All these random thoughts were generated when we went for a late night show of Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai, the new Bollywood take on one of the most charismatic of our underworld dons – the late Haji Mastan. Haji Mastan strode like a colossus in the Mumbai of the 1970s. Displaced from his home due to a flood, he survives as a child by smuggling gold in the Mumbai docks. As he rises in power, he carves up the dream city into clearly demarcated areas for the other dons to rule peacefully, and puts his foot down on taking human lives, or smuggling drugs. Finally brought down by his own protege, Haji Mastan was revered by the poor he supported all his life. If this film has not created too many waves at the box office, it is less to do with its own making than the fact that the jaded Indian public has ceased to be surprised. The public, thanks to Bollywood again, can speak the bhai lingo. Even a five year old can tell you the meaning of supari these days, or stage an "encounter" of the class fatso. We have indeed come a long way since the days the only villains were characters from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The demons then gave way to cruel Zamindars, and unscrupulous money lenders. Filmmakers of the 1990s like Ram Gopal Varma turned their gaze on the world of organised crime and the underworld. Today, the villain is more antihero than villain. Unlike the villain, the antihero is typically a man forced by circumstances to embrace his dark side. But when we talk of outlaws, it would be unjust to make it gender specific. I would like to discuss three women outlaws in celluloid. The first, of course, is Shekhar Kapur's Bandit Queen. The story of Phoolan Devi has taken mystic proportions in Indian folklore. Born to an indigent sharecropper family oppressed by India's rigid class and caste system, a prepubescent Phoolan is married off to a man thrice her age. After running away from this abusive husband, a cousin lets her be kidnapped by marauding brigands. With her lover Vikram Mallah, she unleashes terror on the countryside, robbing and killing. After the killing of her lover and her gangrape by the Thakurs, she is believed to have massacred twenty of them at Behmai. A vigilante liberator of the class struggle, she

finally surrenders to police forces. Bandit Queen chillingly endorses the truism that evil begets evil. Another powerful female outlaw film is Godmother by Vinay Shukla, starring Shabana Azmi. It is based on real life don Santokhben Jadeja. When an imminent drought threatens to ruin their crops, Rambhi and her husband Veeru move from their village to the city. Through threat, violence and blackmail, Veeru makes a career as a mafia don in a corrupt political setup. But he is killed by a powerful lawyer. Rambhi steps in, exacting a terrible revenge for her husband's death and fighting the political system. In the end, she is shown paying the price for trying to unite a Hindu girl and a Muslim boy.

Perhaps one of the most pitiless evocations of female evil is Charlize Theron's portrayal in the 2004 Monster. The grotesquely made up Charlize plays serial killer Aileen Lee Wuornos, who murdered seven men before she was executed by lethal injection. Unloved and abandoned in her teens, abused by men, she was only giving back what she got. Like Phoolan, she was as much victim as perpetrator.

Every actor worth his salt dreams of playing the antihero with conviction. If Marlon Brando's name instantly conjures up the raspy-voiced, saturnine Vito Corleone in The Godfather, Al Pacino will always be associated with Scarface and Michael Corleone. Leonardo Di Caprio pulled off a very believable Frank Abagnale in Catch Me If You Can. John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd echoed the desperate times of the great Depression in America. Whether it was Jesse James or Bonnie and Clyde, their elusiveness, their ability to stay one step ahead of the law, have fired the imagination of the common man, who is too weak to circumvent the system, and so projects his secret fantasies on these, outlaws. As far back as in 1969, Eric Hobsawm's Social Bandits argued that a few individuals in the history of crime and politics transcend the status of the criminal to become truly representative of an oppressed group struggle. This has lead to the birth of a new theory – the Robin Hood principle. This implies that the targets are the privileged, and the beneficiaries are the deprived. If this applies to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, it would also apply to David Murcia Guzman of Columbia, who started out as a snot-nosed kid in a Bogota slum, and went on to create a hydra headed money laundering scheme that siphoned off billions of dollars. In the end, he says, "My only law is that I dreamed."

The public today, even more so than previously, is inclined to take a lenient view of those on the wrong side of the law. This is hardly surprising, as politicians, bureaucrats, the police, all conspire to subvert the system and take the state hostage. The outlaw at least is unapologetic about his misdeeds, and so doesn't appear a hypocrite, Another point worth noting is that in the recent film Raavan, the kidnapped Aishwarya displays the classic symptoms of the Stockholm syndrome. It is a term to describe a paradoxical psychological phenomenon whenever hostages express adulation and have positive feelings towards their captors. It is named after a bank robbery in Stockholm in 1973, in which the hostage bank employees sided with their captors and defended them after their release. The term Stockholm syndromes was first coined by criminal psychologist Nils Bejerot.

So, while outlaws are born every day due to the flaws of society, they will continue to be chronicled in our collective memory, in our songs, films and plays. They will provide us chilling glimpses of human depravity. And somewhere, there will always be a bored schoolgirl in a ponytail, dreaming of a highwayman galloping to her rescue.

Confessions of a wedding guest

29 September 2012 at 11:49

Winter is not just about pulling out your moth-balled woollens from the closets and screwing up your face after the first sour orange hits your tongue. It is also about keeping your wits about you as people ambush you when you least expect it and rain you with wedding invites. All on a sudden, you can kiss your life-as-you-knew-it goodbye for some enforced, heavy duty socialising. In America, perfectly able-bodied young men used to dodge the Draft and avoid going to war. No such luck here, I'm afraid. Unless you are flatlining in some ICU, you've got to show up. If you are cool about being a social pariah, then I guess you could stage a no show.

The world has changed at dizzying speed, but one look at wedding invites, and you'd think Father Time has stood rooted to the spot. The cards are ornate, with gods, butterflies, palanquins, flowers and conch-shells reinforcing the traditional statement. Red and gold tassels add to the quaint, archaic effect. The hierarchy of kinship is evident from the order in which names are placed, as well as the font size. By my own candid admission, I was never very good at geometry, but aw, come on, surely there are more shapes than the staid old rectangle? Why not try a triangular card? Or a hexagonal one? Marriage is complicated business. Often, you don't emerge from it alive. So why that same, simplistic shape? Is it because it symbolises the tedium of the conjugal state, a tedium we embrace because we are too chicken-hearted to be alone, or explore alternatives? Every card given to me silently screams the three words – play it safe!

Sadly, the more the merrier doesn't apply to wedding invites. It's actually the more the scarier. First of all, you have to do the math. You have to tick the wedding dates on a big all-month page calendar. You have to figure out which ensembles go to the dry cleaners, what jewellery items need to be taken out of the bank locker, if the fruit facial could be stretched to three wedding appearances. Perhaps some of my more glam lady friends even go for an emergency botox treatment, but I am on unfamiliar territory here. But the rather fixed

smiles at the venues make me suspect the procedure is more popular than anyone cares to admit.

If you have more wedding invites than you can cope with, here is a simple elimination trick. How important a guest are you really to the hosts? You are at the workplace and there's a lone card tacked up on the notice board for the fifty of you. Yep, that's easy to wriggle out of. Then, the parents of the bride or groom send someone with the invite for you. Well, you are tempted to send some other guest to stand in for you! Then, they spell your name wrong. How dare they, you think, and then, a slow smile spreads on your face .... ah, you've just spied the escape hatch!

But the truth of the matter is – most hosts are brilliant strategists. They telephone you before coming, or come when you are most likely to be at home. They consult you earnestly before they write your name on the envelope, and insist that all of you, the family, turn out for the event. Before I can open my mouth about the logistic impossibility of dragging my kids from Delhi for the happy occasion, they sweep out to complete their campaign with military precision. I often wonder if they have stop watches to allot their time in each household. I know they mark the city into grids, and cover each section with frightening thoroughness. I have had hosts who – casually and very ingeniously – ferret out information about the addresses of other guests. So, they evolve into such veterans of house to house calls and information gathering that I think it is a shame all this enterprise, this energy and ingenuity, should be confined to just a wedding. Why can't these veterans be enlisted as census volunteers? I can't think of anyone better qualified for this job. Is the government listening?

If you are lucky enough not to have muddled the dates, then you are all set to attend the nuptials. I know fighter pilots have performance anxiety and so do Olympic athletes, but the performance anxiety of a wedding guest has never invited any serious research. For the women especially, it is a period of troubling dilemmas. Should she be caught wearing the same mekhela chador three weddings in a row? Would her new heels make her tower over her husband, and set off titters? Was blue eye shadow passe? And where the heck was her sequined bag?

Feeling overdressed, inadequate and worrying about parking space at the venue, the guest couple drives glumly to the event. Two minutes to their destination, a feminine shriek emanates from the car's interior. There is a screech of brakes and the vehicle does a sharp about turn.

What seems to be the problem? They forgot to buy a present. You see, presents are a big deal. It's like trying to board a plane without tickets. You have to be crazy to try it. But enterprising shop owners are hitting paydirt capitalising on this muddled oversight. Hurray! You don't have to go through the bother of choosing a gift and then packing it. Instead, you have pre-packed gift items you can pick in a jiffy, never mind you'll never know what was in them. Time is of the essence when your make up is in danger of getting blotchy and the

hairspray refuses to work overtime. So you have this respectably large box, which is less gift and more meal ticket. It gives you a kind of credibility nothing else does.

At the entrance, I am often fuming inwardly that my husband has flatly refused to wear a tie, but smile radiantly and often short-sightedly at the people before me. I am surprised at my own genius when I can spot the hosts among a sea of people. Meeting the bridal couple is a poignant experience. They are a brave team who weather an onslaught of hands reaching out to shake theirs, countless shiny gift boxes are thrust under their noses, an invasive video camera (and several camcorders) are zooming in to capture their tiniest gestures, not to speak of the ignominy of having to dive down and touch the feet of elders they don't remember ever meeting before. It could be a deeply bonding experience for these newly – weds, or they may be already blaming each other for this ordeal. I like to think it's the former.

You know good old tradition rules as you survey the seating arrangements. The meal may be fusion, the bride may be phirang, but males and females are strictly segregated. I highly disapprove of this gender isolation, not because it smacks of old fashioned moral uptightness or that I am eager to prove how liberal and progressive I am. There is a practical difficulty here. If I am prised away from my spouse, we end up eating at different times and I don't at all fancy the task of locating him teetering precariously in my heels. But I suppose this segregation has its uses. I think a man would be overwhelmed if he is in close proximity to the bejewelled female species and escaping to the safety of his fellow males is calming for his nerves. Women, too, need to sit close to each other to assess make-up, attire, jewellery and other accessories. They also compliment each other profusely in the hope that each kind word is generously reciprocated.

But it is not as if the hosts are willing to leave you alone for long. Wedding venues are like airport terminals, and you are only waiting to embark. It is a strictly temporary phase and sometimes you have barely settled into your chair before a determined looking matron, with a forced smile and a steely glint in her eyes, marshals you to the dining area. When I stand in line with the rest, I cant help thinking of soup kitchens for homeless people. It's only six in the evening, you don't sup till eleven, and the sight of so much food makes you turn slightly green, as if you are seasick. Thank God, they have cards in front of the food warmers, so that you know what you are dipping the ladle into. I say thank God because everything looks the same – a thick brown sludge that conceals fish, chicken, vegetables or anything else. If you are the dithering type who dawdles before each dish trying to make up your mind, get ready for glacial stares and annoyed tongue clickings. Further down the line, you realise that most of the food items are just what your doctor didn't order, and with a guilty grimace, you sneak in yet another tandoori chicken piece.

Now lies the challenge of looking for a seat. None are available. So there you are, a handbag on one arm, a heaped plate on the other, feet wobbling in your shoes, your cell vibrating with useless smses and you in mortal peril of stumbling. Short of a nuclear disaster, I can't imagine any human being in a worse predicament. But you keep your smile in place,

delicately poke your fork into the food, and pretend you are having a swell time. And if you are really gifted at multitasking, you could chit-chat with other guests and find out what the groom does for a living, or if the pair belong to the same caste. But these days, many guests are more interested to know if the bridal couple have been living together before the nuptials. Does that really matter now?

Then you are back at the former seating area. Funny how they always escort you to the dining area, but leave you alone to find your way back. Several ladies in different pitches of tone and emphasis now want to know if you have eaten. It almost seems they are desperate to ensure you don't die of malnutrition. But the subtext of these queries is clear – if you have eaten, what are you dawdling here for? Can't you see the rush? We need your chair.

So you send that subtle signal to your significant other across the room – a slight roll of the eyes, or an incline of the head, a technique perfected by married couples who are veterans at attending weddings. There is the last minute fluster of locating the patriarch or matriarch to say farewell and pay your compliments on the arrangements. With the pious feeling of having done your duty in the midst of the most arduous circumstances, you clamber thankfully into the car. It doesn't matter if your husband refused to wear a tie, or the naan wiped away your Color Stay lipstick. The important thing is – one wedding down, only nine more to go!

The love bug

24 September 2012 at 18:40

It cannot be a worse time to write about love. The countdown to Valentine's Day is ticking like a bomb in the attache case of a Cold War double agent, and I wait uneasily for the bedlam to be let loose. When you are in the throes of a nasty flu, love is expected to be the last thing on your mind. But wait, aren't love and the flu similar? Both make you breathless, your eyes water, render you unable to sleep at night, and they haven't found a cure for both. Like flu, love hits you when you least expect it and brings that tell tale flush to your cheeks. But when you can get over the flu with some over the counter pills, a cold compress, hot water bottle and bowls of chicken soup, you can't ever get over love. The wheels of love leave their rutted tracks on your heart for a lifetime, changing not only you, but how you perceive life. Perhaps the flu is easier to overcome because there is no second person involved. The most scary reflection of all lovers is that their fate, their happiness depends on the object of their adoration. They have gladly, willingly, handed over the keys, as it were, to that other person. If all goes well, this surrender will be honoured for all it is worth. And if not, it will perhaps end in the headlines of tabloids, a tragic statistic reminding us about the fickleness of the human heart.

Many years ago, in this city where the pace of life was gentle and the people more wide-eyed and innocent of the ways of the world, a tragic love story unfolded. A beautiful young woman ceased to love her beau. Nobody knew the reason why, but she told him not to meet her again. He pleaded, ranted and raved. He bared his very soul. His pale, haunted countenance troubled his friends. But the young woman was unmoved. That chapter of her life was over. Then, one day, on her way to college, he was waiting for her at the foot of a bridge, wrapped in a shawl. When she drew near, he took a last look at that beloved face he had seen so often in his dreams, those eyes that had lighted up at his approach, and then plunged a glinting dagger again and again into her body, till she was on the ground, bloodied and writhing in agony. The murder created shockwaves across the city, and when the young man sat impassively in his cell, indifferent to his fate, crowds of curious people thronged to the jail just to see him, to understand from his stony countenance the sea of emotions that had washed over him, the darkness that had eclipsed two lives. They say the whole world loves a lover. In the same way, the whole world loves a failed lover too, for his wasted life comforts those who have not found love in their lives, and makes them feel smug about not having ventured into that uncertain path.

Is love, then, overrated today? Is it just a hyped up Archies and Hallmark generated emotion that stops you from living reality and working for solid achievements like degrees, career, wealth, self-esteem? In an American soap I was watching recently, a character throws up her hands and asks, "I don't feel the need to have a boyfriend, to be kissed, treated to chocolate, soft toys. Am I wired wrong, or what?" That is the point I'm driving at. From a mad, wild flight of fancy that makes one rebel against society and exclude all but the object of one's desire, a lot of young people fall in love these days because it is the done thing. It reinforces their need to belong as much as piercing your navel or getting a tattoo. You may top maths in your class, but if you haven't got arm candy, you are zilch. You must wear the same brands, have the same colas, the same chips, the same kind of relationships. A partner is not a person, but your accessory, proof that you conform to popular expectations. Love occupies a rich internal world, a world of feeling and imagination. Its sweetest moments are when the two steal away from a prying world to create a heaven on earth, or at least an approximation of one. But when it is just a means to align yourself with your peers, just a dry statement of your single or commitment status on Facebook, it is only a pale imitation of the real thing. You are fulfilling no other need than the need to belong, to conform, to say you are one with the herd, and seek safety in numbers. Love has nothing to do with safety, with conforming. It forges its own path, lays down its own rules. It takes all or nothing. It awakens what is noblest and finest in you, and makes you feel the impossible is easy to achieve.

One of my favourite poets Pablo Neruda wrote, 'only that love is romantic, which is unfulfilled.' Perhaps the greatest hurdle to romantic love, at least in India, has been parental opposition and you only need to go through the Bollywood chronicles to confirm that. Differences in caste, wealth, status in society, any or all of these factors were enough for the enraged father of a girl to bay for the boy’s blood. Pitted against such a powerful adversary

was enough to make the cornered and embattled lovers even more committed to each other than they would otherwise have been. It is quite comical to watch the transformation of a hyperventilating patriarch into a benign presence in the happily ever after nuptials. But such melodrama are things of the past, as antiquated as Ambassador cars and gramophone records. Today's parents, mainly those in the middle class segment, are so anxious to be cool about their progeny having romantic partners that they pull out all the stops in welcoming this entity. A back-slapping dad will congratulate his son and talk frankly of his own salad days, a mother, more like an older sister, will give tips to the daughter on what to say on dates. Oh no, parents, far from being villains of the piece, are eager accomplices, stocking up fuel in the family car, increasing pocket allowances, extending curfew hours, so that Cupid can have its way. But, just as you cannot hear a stream sing without stones, you cannot have love without impediments. When love becomes too easy, too comfortable, too unchallenged, it becomes dull, plebeian. It is just a convenience, a deal brokered for mutual profit. It knows nothing of the madness, the frenzy, the despair of true passion. It knows not the pain of parting, the aching uncertainty of a clouded future. And when love becomes easy, it loses its poetry, its music, its colours. Its bonds slacken and finally, snap. That is why, young people break up so easily these days. The fault perhaps lies not in themselves. They are handsome or beautiful, sensitive, funny and intelligent beings. It's just that being together is not dangerous, it's not a challenge. And when they are not threatened by a common antagonist, it somehow never seems intense enough.

The way lovers will empty their wallets and purses this Valentine's Day, you would think they have clean forgotten about the recession. But the point is, they are making an investment too. Not an investment in terms of stocks and shares, but an investment on the relationship. When a boy or a girl eyes a cuddly teddy, a box of Godiva chocolates, sterling silver cufflinks or the Hidesign bag, he or she is making a statement of his assessment of the relationship. He or she is hoping the gift will make up for the little flaws, the little rough patches in the relationship.

But is love just about receiving that perfect gift wrapped in satiny ribbons and tissue? Is love about agonising near the card rack about which card sums up best what you feel? Is it gong to the toniest joint and dancing cheek to cheek as they play silly, sentimental tunes and heart shaped balloons float around? Love is, just is, perfect in itself, shunning all extraneous elements. You sometimes miss the cue entirely when all your energies are directed towards creating the atmosphere for love, the mood for it. And in that distraction and running around creating that mood, you miss the heart of love, its silent, self-contained power.

When I write these lines, I am reminded of the anecdote about writer Henry Miller's wife – Hoki Miller. Hoki was a Japanese, and was studying for her MA in Los Angeles. In order to make ends meet, she used to play piano in a restaurant and sing French songs (in Japanese). Miller had supper there and loved the songs. They went out a few times, and then he asked her to marry him.

Many years later, the writer Paulo Coelho met her in a Tokyo bar. She told him of her wonderful days with Miller. Miller was long dead and the heirs from his other marriages inherited everything, including the rights to the books, but this didn't matter because the experience she had of being with him was priceless for her. Then, with tears in her eyes, Hoki played the piano and sang a song Miller loved – Autumn Leaves (Feuilles Mortes).

'Love was enough', she said at last. Yes, love is enough. Love is.

When words merge - I

4 September 2012 at 17:00

Confluence. There are some words that are loaded with meaning, possibilities, whorls of associations. It wakes in the mind the imagery of an intricate lacework of little rivers gliding past distant fields and forests, bounding impetuously down rocky hill slopes, and bringing with them the songs of their journey, the silt of lands left behind, offering all to the Red river, the Old Man River who gathers them in his mighty arms and sweeps them grandly to the sea. A confluence is an endless, fluid point of merging, flowing together, becoming one, and going forward.

Throughout the course of history, great streams of humanity, of many races and ethnicity, have merged with each other, giving birth to great civilisations, as also conflict and bloodshed. Poets, playwrights, writers have recorded this saga of man's restless search for home, for love, for peace, and something greater than themselves. Books are humanity in print. Each wordsmith is a faraway little stream singing and surging towards a distant river. And books are the carriers of civilisation. Without books, they say, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill.

'Confluence' – the Asia International Literary Festival, is a milestone in that, for the first time, a galaxy of writers from our neighbouring Asian countries, other parts of India and from the North East came to Guwahati to share their experiences of life and the written word, their personal sagas of struggling to speak the truth in the midst of turmoil and repression, as well as their willingness to meet wordsmiths they had never met before and forge ties of friendship and understanding, thereby transcending all boundaries.

In 1997, a group of writers in the region, who had been writing in English, got together to form the North-East Writers Forum. Though they write in English, their outlook has never been elitist and clearly reveal a deep love for their land, and an abiding commitment to expressing and celebrating the intricate tapestry that is the North East. What began with readings, comprising original works and translations into English, aimed at mutual support

and incentive to creativity, went on to create bridges of friendship between writers of the eight states of the North East. In their own words, "Romance of thought binds us together, a romance that sweeps down from the snows of Sikkim, through the mist of Arunachal Pradesh, cutting across the mystique of Nagaland, down into the green vale and hills of Manipur, still further down into the realm of Tripura and then climbing up once again to the beauty and splendour of Mizoram, on the poetic Meghalaya, finally verging down to the long, green and blue land of Assam." What sets the NEWF apart from other such literary forums in India is that it is the first and only one at present that has as members, writers writing primarily, often solely, in English. With each passing year, this undaunted band of wordsmiths, bound by a love for literature and carrying in their winged words the fragrance of this corner of the world, have promoted creative works, written originally in English, and have been encouraging translations from regional languages to English. That this endeavour, with its modest, informal beginnings, has led to such ever widening ripples, is best exemplified by the December 3-5 Asia International Literary Festival, inaugurated at NEDFi Hall by Jnanpith award winner Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami. A galaxy of high profile writers, ranging from Narayan Wagle (Nepal), Anisul Hoque (Bangladesh), Bernice Chauly (Malaysia), Linda Christanty (Indonesia), Chindawatana Pongsakorn (Thailand), NS Madhavan, Mark Tully, Gillian Wright, Sheela Reddy, Mahesh Dattani, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Kula Saikia and Monalisa Changkija (India) shared their unique insights into life and creativity, using years of experience to discourse on themes as diverse as literature of this region, literature as a mirror of societal violence, selling the Orient to the Occident, the playwright's quest, literature of dissent, etc.

Nepali author and journalist, creator of the iconic novel Palpasa Cafe, spoke of travelling to the remote outreaches of his mountainous country to report firsthand the Maoist uprisings, about being interrogated by the police in the wake of the mass pro-democracy movement against the monarchy. Tall, with striking good looks, Wagle was heartwarming, as he, in his quaint lilting accent, spoke of an entire nation's striving for justice, equality and the need to open old, grimy windows of tradition, to let in the fresh winds of change.

Novelist, poet, playwright and journalist Anisul Hoque of Bangladesh spoke eloquently of freedom and national identity, and how literature is the catalyst in the forming of national sentiment. When Ezra Pound published Tagore's work in 1912, and the Bard was honoured with the Nobel Prize the next year, it awoke such pride in being Bengali that it was natural to resist the imposition of Urdu in erstwhile East Pakistan. This led to the 1971 war of liberation and a fledging nation was born. Controversial writer Taslima Nasreen and Hoque wrote columns for the same newspaper. When the fatwa compelled her to flee, they lost touch for two decades. Then they met at a Geneva conference and both burst into tears, overwhelmed. While the literary quality of Nasreen's body of work is debatable, he declared that a hundred years from now, she would be hailed as the lone woman who bravely inspired her kind to speak out against patriarchal subjugation and claim their rights and dignity.

With her gamine looks, nerdy glasses and throaty voice, Bernice Chauly is a walking, talking embodiment of the touristy catch phrase Malaysia-Truly Asia. Writer, photographer, actor and teacher, she is a single mother to two young daughters. Of Chinese-Punjabi descent, she is at once haunted and exultant about her half-breed identity. A curse emanating from a dusty Punjab village wiped out the menfolk of her family. As her own life story became unbearable, she delved into other people's lives, writing about people with AIDS, sex workers, about indigenous peoples' rights, filming anti-government videos in the Sarawakian rain forests. Her family members faded to the realm of oblivion, but Bernice defiantly resurrects their stories. But this love for the word is not easy in a country that has no free press, where race, religion, sex and politics are not allowed to be discussed, or written about. Historical amnesia left behind the sour aftertaste of not knowing where one truly belonged, of being rootless and painfully alienated.

And yet, Chauly, Hoque and Wagle's honest soulsearching inspired us all, for they confirmed our belief that the word grows wings even in the deepest darkness, and soars in the midst of the whirling storm. In the concluding part of this column, we shall meet Mark Tully, Gillian Wright, the incredibly brave Linda Christanty of Indonesia, scholarly writer N Madhavan, Book Editor of Outlook magazine and author Sheela Reddy, diplomat TS Tirumurti, as well as a host of writers from this region.

A couple of days after the event, members of the close-knit family called NEWF have reason to be quietly jubilant. According to Dhirendra Nath Bezboruah, eminent editor, translator and one of the key members of NEWF, "We were promised a lot of monetary help by the government, which never materialised. That we were able to hold 'Confluence' with only half the money at our disposal is reason enough to feel a sense of satisfaction. This meet is definitely a beginning, with many possibilities for the future. What I feel, however, is that the standard of the academic discussions could have been higher. But, for a debut event like this, it was not feasible to get top-ranking writers. We could definitely work on this in future."

Sheela Reddy, Book Editor, Outlook magazine and author, comments on the festival.

"With India's publishing industry booming as never before, the North East Writers' Forum did the right thing by hosting a litfest this year. Till five years ago, the idea of a litfest was a novelty. The Neemrana litfest, for instance, planned with so much money and publicity, ended up as something of a fiasco, only because the time was not right — not enough publishers, not enough bookshops and no litfest culture in the country. Whereas, now, we have litfests happening all over the country — besides the Jaipur one, there have been two in Kerala — the Hay litfest and the Kovalam literary festival; one in Mumbai, another in Bangalore, several in Delhi, one in Dehradun and one, I hear, in Hyderabad as well. Besides, there are the smaller litfests happening in campuses all over India, including the IIT Kanpur. With so many litfests happening, publishers say they are hardpressed to send writers to all of them. This is where the Guwahati festival had a huge advantage: location. Not a single

writer who had been invited to participate at this festival turned down the invitation – only because it was the North East, and everyone wants a chance to visit."

"The warm hospitality of the organisers is another reason why I think this literature conference will long linger in all the invitees' hearts. It had the same quality of personalised attention and intimacy that one saw at the Jaipur litfest in the first couple of years. Interesting sessions, an engaged audience, great venue — what more can any literature festival need? I think it should become an annual affair because its fame will spread by word of mouth, as it did with the Jaipur litfest."

Arup Kumar Dutta, president of NEWF, sums up. "It was a confluence of minds and I would definitely call it an achievement. It was unique in that we not only had writers from abroad and other parts of India, but that writers from the eight States of this region converged to take part. In this wide spectrum, all had their rightful places. As a writer, it was an intensely pleasurable experience and for me, the high point was the intellectually stimulating discussions on topics as varied as literature as a mirror of societal violence, literature of dissent and the role of technological evolution in writing and publishing."

When words merge - II

17 September 2012 at 19:05

Much water has flown down the bridge, so to speak, since I wrote the first part of this series on Confluence – the Asia International Literary Festival, held in Guwahati from December 3 to 5. It would be natural, even expected, that the giddy euphoria of those magical days

would by now have given way to a sort of cautious sobriety, along with the feeling that we need to tone down the airy hyperboles all of us who were present at the fest were using to describe the tapestry of thoughts, ideas and stories weaving, it seemed, of their own accord, binding us as a family of man, cocking a snook at barbed wire, guards with guns, and warmongers who tell us not to trust each other.

Close on the heels of this festival, I had the opportunity to meet Professor C. Mathew Snipp of Stanford University. The Director of Stanford's Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity (CCSRF), Professor Snipp's focus has been to promote scholarship, teaching and research about race and ethnicity within a comparative framework. This method highlights the differences, as well as similarities linked to particular racial and ethnic communities. Interestingly, with the collaboration of Dr. Deepa Dutt, visiting scholar at Stanford, Professor Snipp is about to engage in a comparative research study on the identity assertions of indigenous populations, with special reference to the Native Americans and the indigenous peoples of Assam. The identity assertions of myriad groups of indigenous people in the region and State have shattered the cohesiveness of society, giving rise to hostility, widespread unrest, and even attempts to wrest independence from the State.

Seen against this backdrop, this litfest does seem like a miracle. With our imagination, idealism and the power of hope, we have gone beyond the ever-present resentment against a callous Centre, swallowed the bitterness of being belittled by the uninformed Indian elsewhere, withstood the storm that rages still in our midst and made possible a resurgence of our identity in the most peaceful, creature and generous way possible. The medley of voices from this region, be it Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Monalisa Changkija, Ananya Shankar Guha, Jodha Chandra Sanasam, D Kuoli, not to speak of writers from Assam – Kula Saikia, Dhruba Hazarika, Mitra Phukan and Srutimala Duara and so many others, rises like a triumphant hymn of hope and affirmation, of truth and all-embracing humanity.

Preeti Gill, in her foreword to The Peripheral Centre, Voices from India's North East, writes of "this corner of the world resonating with a deep silence. A whole way of life is dying, slowly melting away into the shadows of the unknown." This change, which would have otherwise taken place gradually, imperceptibly, under normal circumstances, is accelerated by the grim onslaught of insurgency, counterinsurgency, state and non-state violence. When one's very life is at stake, customs, rituals, the artifacts of every day life – fashioned with the skill and artistry of many generations – all are jettisoned. That perhaps explains why we feel the urgency of words spilling over through our pens, and the keyboard. We want to capture that moment of flux, of one world dying, the other struggling to be born. And this unique first-time international litfest has tried to transform the enigmatic, remote, insular silence of the past, the volley of gunfire and bomb blasts of the present, to a tremulous, hopeful blossom awaiting the silver dawn, a dove of peace spreading its wings.

Take for example, the craft of Padmashree Temsula Ao, a professor at the department of English, and the dean of School of Humanities and Education, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Among her eight books, I particularly recall a riveting story in her anthology of

short stories– Laburnam For My Head. A simple question is the story of an illiterate village woman's blunt question which rattles an army officer and forces him to set her husband free. The illiterate Imdongla has a firm grasp of the history and politics of her village. Holding her own against underground forces and government soldiers, Imdongla keeps vigil in front of her imprisoned husband, asking the army captain "What do you want from us?" This enraged, defiant sentence questions the validity of the Army's presence among the people, a question hurled in silent accusation by Irom Sharmila, our larger than life icon of protest.

In the lucid recesses of Mamang Dai's poetry, we discover a timeless world of magical monsters and roaring rivers, living forests, history, legend and personal memoir mesh to take one's breath away. Dai's poems are almost painful in their lyrical intensity, and yet, paradoxically, a soothing balm for the soul. If Temsula's story painted the portrait of the earth mother-rooted, strong and fearless, Mamang's Adna Anime, the protagonist of her second novel Stupid Cupid, celebrates, with quirky humour and wistful tenderness, the young, mobile Northeastern woman claiming a precarious toehold in India's capital city, straddling the two worlds of the old and new, tradition and modernity, fighting for her identity, freedom and love. Adna is the fictional prototype of the thousands of young people who leave the region for education, a job, a quality life. The difficulties of this relocation is made all the more harsher when the rest of India call them derogatory names, ask if there are cars and electricity back home. The reports in the mainstream media about the unrest and violence in this part of the region reinforce common assumptions by Indians that the Northeasterners are nothing but trouble. It is deeply humiliating for our young when their attire, food habits, physical features – everything is under scrutiny.

What should we do then? Do we continue to live in silent resentment? Do we cover our tracks, so to speak, so that no one can trace where we come from? Do we tell our young not to speak their native tongue, never to make the mistake of singing our songs and dancing our dances? If that is not enough, do we tell them to change their names? In the anxiety to belong, to be accepted by that India, do the Indians of this region have to efface their identities? Of course not. We have to understand that those we meet in the rest of India have no idea of the kind of people we are. They simply never had the opportunity to do so. We are not in their school, college texts. It was never easy for them to come here for a holiday. They are confused by our features, which have so much resemblance to the people of South East Asia.

Today, many of my young friends of this region, based in other cities of India and abroad, are passionate about issues social, political, cultural, relating to the North East. There are blogs, online literary journals, groups promoting causes which prove that we are finally getting over that vacuum, that remote silence which has been our lot for so long. The translation of our works into major Indian languages and English is a part of that effort to bridge the distance between minds.

All of the people whose hard work and unflagging enthusiasm got the litfest off the ground feel that something almost impossible has been achieved. Srutimala Duara speaks of the pre-fest worries of raising funds, the endless meetings to chalk out the programme, the reaching out to writers in India and abroad.

Like others, she will treasure memories of not only the formal interactions, but also the teasing, the bantering, the deep connect between people who would perhaps never have met at all.

Says Mitra Phukan: "Confluence–the idea, has been with the Forum for years. This kind of international meet of writers from Asia was a dream, and it is because of the hard work and concerted efforts of all members of the Guwahati Chapter of the NEWF that it came true. The President Arup Kumar Dutta, especially, deserves kudos for focusing on the event single-mindedly, and moulding the diverse personalities of the members into a cohesive unit, alloting them specific tasks, and they were done well, and on time. The interactions with the invited authors were a humbling and learning experience, listening to them read from their works, with the Brahmaputra flowing tranquilly outside the windows, an occurrence that happens only rarely."

Literature is, in conclusion, not an elite, leisure-oriented pastime. It is a throbbing, vital thing, ever changing, ever growing. It has its roots in the masses. In that lies its power, its justification for existence.

Last train to innocence

21 August 2012 at 20:14

If you want to experience the giddy-headed, heart-thumping buzz of being in the scariest place on the planet, I suppose you've got to be bobbing perilously in a dinghy as a tropical thunderstorm sucks the breath out of you. Or you would be skiing frantically downhill as an avalanche of snow and rocks roars behind you. Or would it be when you are face to face with a monster grizzly, growling, teeth bared, as you grope for your flimsy hunting knife? We get a vicarious kick out of watching these scenes on National Geographic and one is willing to put up with the boredom of our plodding, routine lives because it offers us safety and hopefully, no nasty surprises. Sometimes, about the only scary thing you have to put up with is when the ATM doesn't work.

But the fear factor can creep up on you even in the midst of everyday life, with its minor goals and small irritations. It happened to me last week, when I found myself caught in a school project. No, let me rephrase that. I was the school project. So, one day, when we

should have been having iced lemonade, or indulging in an afternoon siesta, or doing whatever it takes to cope with the blazing heat of a muggy September afternoon, I sat before a group of school students and their teachers. They had a sheet of questions for me to answer and as they waited expectantly, my brash self-confidence turned tail and fled. I could actually feel my words shrivel up and vanish down my throat. With a sinking feeling, I knew that what I had to say was nothing more than shopworn platitudes and dusty cliches. I had nothing new to offer them, no directions to give. I wish I could have told them, "Hang in there, it's not so bad. The best is yet to be. That stretch of the road is slippery, watch that pothole. Always alert, avoid accidents. Sharp curve ahead. May the evil eyed one have his face blackened. Don't try to overtake and keep an eye on the rear-view mirror. Enjoy the view - the wind among the trees, the glistening river beyond, the humble people going about their lives. Take a detour now and then and treat yourself to surprises. Savour the journey, don't obsess on the destination. We will all get there, by and by."

But, of course, I said none of these things. I was not even sure I was supposed to provide a road map to living. I did talk about books though – both reading and writing them. And to my dismay, none of the faces lit up with anticipation. May be the word book conjured up an arid world of facts and figures, lessons to be learnt by rote, endless hours spent cramming the distilled wisdom of the ages. Then I spoke about how books could set us free. A glimmer of interest there. Yes, they were teenagers. Freedom was dear to them, freedom from parental supervision, the tyranny of school, the bondage of homework assignments. They were galley slaves rowing the boats of their parents' dreams. They were often told to shut up and not ask questions. It was dinned into them that life was about rules, about conforming, seeking the safe and tested path. The road less travelled? That was for losers and weirdos. And I promised them this – they could escape from the boundaries of their controlled lives through the pages of books. They could be anywhere, be anyone. They could dig for treasure or lead a revolution, be a man, a woman, a child or a bird or even an Arctic sled dog. They could walk down a foggy Londonmountains of Sierra Maestra with Che Guevara. Books were not just dry facts, but unexplored worlds of experience and perception. You could laugh, cry, fear, despair, hope and remember as if what happens to the people in that magic kingdom of the imagination is what happens to you in real time. And then, with a sense of wonder, you realise that it is almost as if, like a cat, you have nine lives, and this gives you a heady sense of liberty, a sense of being free, as boundless as the sky above. When that happens, no class test can get you down.

If the young are not reading these days, I think we have to think beyond blaming the consumerist culture and modern stress. A class friend of mine is one of the last lingering human species who loves books. When we meet now and then, we animatedly discuss the books we had recently read. One day, he sheepishly admitted his eight year old was not reading books and he wanted a quickfix solution.

"Why not read him bedtime stories?" I suggested. "Read to him every night. It would help you bond and also fire his imagination." In a short while, his wife came to the room with tea. "Well, dear," he said cautiously. "I've got a job for you."

“What?” she asked, good humouredly, making a face.

“Well, she suggests that I read bedtime stories to Vicky, to make him like books. Now, I think that’s your job.”

So, they went back and forth, mildly arguing about who would read to the boy. I knew that Vicky would not have the cats’ many lives, but only one, and he would be denied entry to an enchanted world just because for his parents, reading was more a chore than a passion. If we have more people like that, you would have to one day, buy tickets to see books in museums, locked in glass cases.

I think I also talked to the children about the magic of everyday life. Now, my mother is an expert on this. Many summers ago, when we lived in Shillong, my mother would throw open our living room windows and trill excitedly: “Isn’t it a marvellous day?” It was the same old scene, dreaming houses lining a zig-zag street, may be a pony cart clip-clopping along, but her words were infectious and suddenly, we seemed to see with new eyes the blue sky, the cotton tuft clouds, and felt the naughty little breeze on our faces and our spirits soared. Anything was possible on such a day – an unplanned picnic in Hydari Park, racing to infinity in the Golf Links... anything. And in April, when the peach and plum blossoms burst open on the twisted branches down in the ravine by the chattering stream, she would spy the pink and white confetti and with a cry of pleasure, send our Nepali maid scurrying to get big armfuls. These she would arrange in her vases on the mantelpiece above the stone fireplace, and I think she had tears in her eyes, moved by the beauty of those blushing flowers and it was like a prayer of thanksgiving, this daily realisation of heaven’s bounty.

When talking about the magic of everyday life, I also remember a great scholar of Assam – the late Krishna Kanta Handique. I was a very close friend of his granddaughter and once, she confided to me how she spent her holidays in her famous grandfather’s home. Access to him was difficult. He was closeted for long hours in his library. But once a day, she met her grandfather. Seated at his table, among his books and papers, he would lift his head and ask her the same question every day. It was “What have you learnt today?”

She told me that she was often terrified of this question, and could never quite think up an answer to satisfy him. And today, I think not one but two girls were powerfully moved by this simple question. Decades later, I have never forgotten it, and feel that a day spent without learning anything new, be it from books or life, is a day wasted.

We adults like to think we are doing the best we can for our kids. But we conveniently forget all the little cruelties we inflict on them. We worry endlessly what the child will become in the future, yet, we forget that he is someone today. When we were children, at the end of the day, we would always listen to Radio Rangoon, which aired a wonderful programme of western classical music. As we sat entranced by the Chopin and Debussy symphonies that seemed to conjure up vast, sweeping seascapes or towering mountains, my father would

very often ask us: “A penny for your thoughts?” I think it was this little game by which Dad encouraged us, in his gentle, unobtrusive way, to express what was abstract, the nebulous. We were thus able to make observations on everyday life. I think we found our voice. Even more than that, we got the dignity of being taken seriously. What we thought and experienced mattered to him, and that gave us that much needed belief in our individuality. I think that “a penny for your thoughts?” is the foundation on which my entire future was based, because when I realised my thoughts were worth a penny, I spent the rest of my life expressing them, for all they were really worth.

Together with this awareness of individuality, we also need a sense of identity. They say we must give our children both roots and wings. I think parents these days are quite manic when it comes to giving their kids wings. From tennis lessons to summer camps, motivational lectures to Boy Scouts, Junior is made to cover the whole nine yards. It is almost like coaching for the world triathlon. But roots? I am not so sure. Families are breaking up into smaller and smaller units. First cousins have to be actually introduced at family functions. Grandparents barely get to spend time with grandchildren, let alone spin fairy tales. The child has no one but his parents as emotional anchors. This alienation is very difficult to cope with. Even more so when next door neighbours are strangers who keep their doors bolted and want nothing to do with you. There is no sense of community, no feeling of belonging. It is as if the world doesn’t care. And without the experience of sharing one’s life with others, a young boy or girl is incapable of developing loving, supportive relationships. This is a disability that requires the urgent attention of parents, teachers, mental health experts and social workers. It is every bit as serious as a physical disability, for it will act like a canker that eats into the very fabric of a family, and then, a society.

Writing then, is so much easier than meeting children. You don’t have a ring of expectant faces around you. You don’t have to pretend you are more interesting than you are. You don’t feel like some scam artist, selling impossible dreams. But meeting the young is good medicine for your ego. You realise you are no wiser than when you first started out, and perhaps even more clueless than them. That sure is a sobering thought.

April rhapsody

THIRD EYE EDITION

They say you are never really alive, or get the true sense of being so, unless you have tasted fear. That rush of adrenaline through your blood, the prickle at the nape of your neck, and the goose bumps breaking out on every available space on the skin gives you a very different perspective of life and is worth every bit the botheration. Whatever I am narrating here is not first hand wisdom. Far from it. People have been doing really bizarre things like bungee jumping and playing Russian roulette just for this very purpose. The sense of well-being after the danger is past is unbelievable. I am in the wrong gender to get into action at a bull fight. Nor do I particularly care to be confined to a pit with crawling, hissing snakes. In fact, I do get my dose of therapeutic fear without the need for contact with any disgusting animal, reptile or insect. Twice a month, with mouth drying, gut clenching inevitability, I surrender to fear. This fear stems from the same source – my mind-numbing inability to write anything even remotely interesting for my column. What begins with a vague uneasiness, slowly ascends to the level of pure, unalloyed terror. I clamp on my headphones and am assaulted by jabbering RJs and mindless Bollywood music. I ponder which is worse, and realise I hardly have the luxury of pondering on those issues when reams and reams of pristine white paper, as blank as my mind, are staring up at me in wordless accusation.

I was seated like this, sunk in gloom, long after my usual office hours, wondering if a recent, guilty binge consisting of nutritionstarved junk food was responsible for my addled brains,

when suddenly, a playful Spring breeze swept in without so much as a by your leave, and scattered my blank pages. They just flew off my table like a flock of doves flapping their wings in startled flight. And then, in a moment of pure epiphany, I realised Spring was telling me, “What are you waiting for? Can’t you see I’m here? Write about me. This is what is wrong with selfproclaimed intellectuals like you. You don’t see what is right under your nose! So, go on, write. I have better things to do than blow off papers from your desk.” And then, as if on cue, my headphones filled with the rousing beats of a Bihu song, and I felt fear ebbing away like a retreating wave. I was yet to begin writing, and yet, I was sure of the journey with words, plotting the way with little detours, letting the mind take over, drawing on memory and experience.

On hindsight, I realise that Spring has already wreaked havoc on my structured life. Every evening, I venture out for an hour’s walk. Usually, I prefer the quiet byelanes as they are less polluted. But, rising instances of young goons on bikes making a swipe at jewellery, handbags and cell phones made short shrift of this. I have begun to stick to the main road, but recently, Nature has played spoilsport to this beloved solitary activity. Every evening, as I venture out, flashes of lightning, intimidating peals of thunder, lights going off, and sudden pelting showers have done their best to discourage my innocent pastime. But, I am made of sterner stuff. With an umbrella, waterproof shoes, and even a heavy, old fashioned torch (the kind with which you can whack goons out cold), I have grimly, resolutely, stuck to my evening constitutional, and am truly proud of my refusal to bow down to my adversary. My husband refuses to endorse this glowing testimonial. He calls me plain stubborn. You know men. This Nature defying act has gone on like a cat and mouse game every evening. It is a battle of wits, and I return home drenched, almost blinded by lightning, my umbrella blown inside out, but feeling very smug, pleased as Punch with myself, and just in the mood to snuggle on the couch with coffee and another hilarious episode of *Two and a Half Men*.

April may be the cruellest month for poet TS Eliot, but for me, it invokes a season of blessings. My father and my two sons were born in April. When poets wax eloquent about newborn lambs frisking in green meadows, I think of my sons in my arms, and the sleepy, puzzled way they looked up at me. I remember their thin, quavering wails in the night, and their gap-toothed smiles. Just as Spring is the promise of new beginnings, for me, they embody a new turn in my life. Along with one’s offspring, a newer being emerges from within you, a being that looks at the world through the eyes of your children, and is filled with the anticipation of even greater joys in the future.

So, we are in the thick of Spring, surrounded by glorious sunshine, brilliant blue skies, playful, skittering breezes, and a perfumed profusion of flowers which show what God can do to a drab and dirty world. If you have never been thrilled to the very edges of your soul by a flower in Spring bloom, maybe your soul has never been in bloom. And it is said that an optimist is the human personification of Spring. He may be in the autumn of life, his body may be as infirm as that of a battle scarred veteran, but in the shadows of the darkest night, he will see the faint blush of dawn. He will believe even the worst things happen for a

reason, and because of this, there will be a freshness in his aura, an energy that will touch others around him.

No piece on Spring is complete without a word on love. Our lusty Bihu songs capture the ardour and impatience of lovers seeking reunion with gusto. The demure lass, a rosy blush on her cheeks, and blossoms in her hair, waiting by some solitary river bank for her secret love, is an image cherished by every true blue Assamese. And yet, the innocence and true passion of the past have been replaced by artifice and big money changing hands for Bihu gigs. Bihu in the arclights is a carefully orchestrated affair, and the dancers are not youth enraptured by love, but blase professionals making the best of a profitable season.

It is tragic that in this season of joy and youth, a murky drama is being played out on our television screens. We have a menage a trois, in which an overweight, bespectacled and embittered woman lashes out at a celebrity cricketer and a tennis player. The whole unholy circus, with its shameless playing to the gallery, its insinuation of betrayal and greed, has made a sham not only of love, but marriage, too. One possible fallout of this whole sorry episode could be that more young women will want to starve themselves to be accepted by their partners/boyfriends. On the upside, women will not take injustice lying down.

Whatever it is, I don't want to sit and watch this revolting circus. On this Spring evening, with the cool, balmy air, and the glow of the sunset still upon the land, it is time to venture out on my evening walk. And always watchful, the April storm lets out it first warning flash. Ah, the cat and mouse game begins...

Gazing inward

THIRD EYE EDITION

A great lot of people regrettably, take New Year's Eve as a chance to get royally plastered. Which is about the worst way to greet the new year really, because you have to meet something coming head on with a clear, not foggy, mind and your senses all alert. And the first day certainly deserves more than your miserable hangover. When I was this prim and proper schoolgirl in the convent run by the nuns, one thing made a powerful impact on me. When you are young, raw and painfully naive, I suppose just about anything makes an impact on you. But I've simply got to share this with you. Every year, the nuns, not all of them together (or the school would disintegrate into anarchy), would disappear from sight.

THIRD EYE EDITION

They, we were mysteriously told, were having a retreat. For some time, I am ashamed to say I thought it meant a luxurious vacation at a retreat, probably a Goan heritage hotel, where they sipped pina colada and soaked in the sun. Later, I learnt they actually became recluses, and spent the time in silence, contemplation and prayer. For me, it seemed a novel thing to do and still does. Now, wearied by twenty-four hour television, with their coverage of despicable men like the molester Rathore and the antics of Rakhi Sawant, the incessant chatter of FM channels with their false cheer and exaggerated accents, the deluge of spams an my gmail account, I, too, wish to retreat from this cacophonic, hyperactive world to a silence so perfect, you can hear a leaf falling. For us women, it is most essential to get away to someplace else where nobody can see us. It would be a win win situation for sure. You won't have to colour or perm or straighten your hair. You won't have to bother about fashion fiascos, and can combine your track pants with a feather boa without anybody being the wiser for it. You won't have to eat out your heart out watching the hour glass figures of other females around you, because there, in that isle of silence, there are no humans in sight of any shape or size. In that magic place, you can actually believe you are God's gift to man. The audacity of hope... though I doubt Barack Obama was referring to this. Was he?

Even otherwise, I believe withdrawing into a retreat is a wonderfully detoxifying thing to do. Just switch off your mobiles, shut down your computers, cancel all meetings and appointments, and get ready to open your inward eye, that eye which shut tight because you were barking orders on the phone, or twittering inanely, or being cowed by a pushy salesman into buying yet another gizmo you don't need. Just get to know the real you inside yourself. Listen to the self remembering the past, complaining of old hurts, articulating brave new hopes. Give that self the importance it deserves. Because that self is the genuine part of you, that natural part of you that doesn't really care about your sharp suits and swanky car and cool duplex apartment in the poshest part of town. It only wants you to figure obut what's important in life, how far you have come, the people you love and are loved in return. It reminds you of your lost childhood, with its evocative smells and remembered faces; your lost youth with its fist bunched bravura wild bike escapades, canteen politics and fevered romance. It helps to cope with the middle-aged self, with its tell-tale crowsfeet, sagging body, defiant children and crippling mortgage. And the best time to go into this retreat, this voyage of self-discovery, is close to the new year, for this is the time you must do an inventory, so that you don't drag the excess baggage of one year to the next, so that you start with a clean slate, a tabula rasa, so to speak. If more people did this, I think we would have fewer credulous fools rushing off to godmen to handle their woes. We would not have sham astrologers merrily divesting us of our money with fancy gemstones.

How you look back on the past year also tells a lot about the kind of person you are. While someone would remember 2009 for the bandobast of Shilpa Shetty's celebrity wedding, others would say the election of Barack Obama, the Copenhagen summit, and the presence of ULFA leaders back home were the high points. This columnist consciously avoids all references to Bollywood, but makes an exception in this case. Years ago, in 1988, in the runaway hit Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak, Aamir Khan strummed his way into millions of hearts with the song that spoke of Daddy's hopes that his son would achieve greatness one day.

THIRD EYE EDITION

This year, with Aamir Khan astonishingly playing a college kid yet again, there is a sea change. It is not about living upto your Daddy's dream anymore Instead, you are speaking out about how Daddy taught you about bribery. You want out. The straitjacket of parental pressure, insurmountable academic goals robs you of your childhood and youth. You want sunshine, you want rain, you want to grow up once again. The disillusionment of today's youth permeates every frame of this candid film. For Bollywood, always eager to create technicolour escapist illusions, this is certainly an achievement in 2009.

This is the time of the year when journos go to town with a whole lot of lists. Lists about the ten most important political events of the year, the ten most discussed books or films, the ten most powerful men and women... you get the drift. I am a journo, too, but I'm afraid I'm no good at making lists, except the one listing the many times my better half let me down (I've run out of paper). Anyway, I am thankful I don't have to bother making a list, because the category I'm about to mention doesn't need other names at all. So, the person you felt most sorry for in 2009 is... no prizes for guessing... Tiger Woods.

I mean, what was he thinking? Here he was, with this perfect career, a perfect family, luxurious homes, generous endorsements, a squeaky clean public image and then whoosh! It came down like a house of cards. How do we know if the outraged wife was actually going after him with a golf club, instead of dutifully extricating him from the car? Soon, all his indiscretions were crawling out of the woodwork – fourteen at the last court, and the paparazzi are like little boys in a candy shop. Most of these women, a good lot of them blonde – are fun time gals, who are both easy on the eye and the morals. Elin is, of course, going to take him to the cleaners, her hiring up a hardnosed celebrity divorce lawyer is an ominous sign of things to come. Woods may even lose custody of his kids, not to speak of paying millions in alimony. Accenture and other brands have distanced themselves from him, and his career is on indefinite hold. Woods must be ghunly pondering over the year 2009 as the one that did him in. I think this is enough for any man to be put off by women forever. But I wish to end on a more cheery note. Though Tiger won't read this (he'll be too busy poring over the fine print in the divorce papers), I just want to say that all these years I haven't paid him much attention. Okay, so he was this amazingly successful golfer with a haircut as neat as the golf course he played on. But that was about it. He was too perfect, too goody goody. He made you feel inferior somehow, as if you didn't give your best shot and he did, literally. Now that his smarmy private life is spread out across the tabloids, he somehow seems more human, simply because he is fallible, and in obvious misery. You feel sorry about the bloke and relieved that you wont be in his hind of mess, at least not on the same scale anyway. There is a lesson in that somewhere, a modern day morality tale, but no one cares much about it as they pick on the more delectable bits.

This then, is the first piece of the year. Like always, it has been an attempt to catch the fleeting moments with no other aim than to amuse and nudge you into a train of thought. Like all of you, I look back on last year with mixed feelings. Some things could have changed. Some should not have. I was no wiser than I was the previous year. But hey, who wants to grow up?

Candle in the wind
4 August 2012 at 11:57

Life calls upon us to perform strange tasks. And we are made to carry them out as best as we can. It was this thought that ran like a refrain in my mind when I was present at Shilpgram, Guwahati, for a book release. It was a beautiful autumn evening, the sunset a deep salmon pink and grey as we walked on the grass towards the auditorium. The long, harsh summer finally seemed to be on the wane and one could imagine the arrival of cool days, kohuwa flowers and the radiant Goddess. Under that quiet starlit sky, we were all the more keenly aware, as it were, of the ceaseless rolling of the wheel of time, the hands of the clock following each other, the cycle of seasons and solstices, that universal rhythm which ruled our lives, and is somehow so reassuring because of its very predictability.

But life itself is not predictable, and not so reassuring either. It can take a moment to change it, and with that, all the dreams you have treasured. No one can tell you this better than Atul and Rupali Borgohain, our hosts for the evening. As they receive us graciously, and go about conducting the evening's programme with quiet thoroughness, they are the picture of rectitude, and it is you, the bystander, who feels your eyes turning moist.

I have lost count of the number of book releases I have attended, some of them under duress. They are tame, pedictable affairs, with speakers lauding the book, and a celebrity releasing it. There is hope expressed of future efforts, and a general self-congratulatory air. Twenty-four hours later, you will certainly have forgotten all about it.

This, too, is a book release. But with a crucial difference. It is like an elaborate play with the central protagonist missing. And yet, it is she, the missing young woman, who is the most palpable presence throughout, haunting, wistful, appealing to you for your understanding and acceptance of her brief life and startling poems.

Perhaps the greatest burden a human being has to carry is the one of his/her dead child. It is a bitter fate, and one that leaves one questioning the very existence of God. Writer Isabel Allende's book Paula recounts in excruciating detail the coma and death of her daughter and is one of the most eloquent tributes in literature to the bond between a mother and her child. In Ajeet Cour, the Punjabi poet's autobiography – Pebbles on A Tin Drum, she relives the nightmare of watching her daughter succumb to burn injuries. After World War II, Otto Frank sought comfort in spreading the words of daughter Anne Frank, who had perished in a concentration camp, all over the world. In very much the same way, the Borgohain's are hoping to resurrect their beloved first-born, the beautiful Atreyee, who passed away on

October 2, 2009, by compiling her poems in a lavish production – Reflections of Atreyee Borgohain.

In trying to write about Atreyee, I am reminded of artist Bikash Bhattacharjee's Doll series of paintings. In one particular painting, an adorable little girl, precariously perched, is rummaging for something in a drawer which is clearly out of reach. You cannot see her, for her back is towards you, and you have the disquieting premonition she may lose her balance and fall. I have this same feeling when I listen to the words encapsulating Atreyee's life. I cannot know her, she already has her back to me, her melancholy poems show she was trying to reach something beyond her grasp – peace, love, freedom from her inner demons. And like a shroud of mist around all this – the feeling of some impending doom.

This is what I meant when I said life calls upon us to perform strange tasks. Here I was, called upon to talk about a young woman I had never met, and to say goodbye before I had even said hello. And yet, the task was surprisingly easy, because her poems were so real, so honest, that it felt she was confiding in me, baring her life, and reminding me that in our dreams, anxieties and loneliness, in our brave and heartbreaking struggle to find the real, rather than the illusory, we are all not so different after all. Today, we should desist from going into the details of her tragic demise. Instead, we should rejoice that her literary endeavour has fashioned for her a kind of immortality, just as eminent critic and translator Pradip Acharya, when releasing the book, described it as "the most lyrical tribute parents could have given to their child."

The young woman as a tragic heroine is a well entrenched literary stereotype, ranging from Antigone, Cassandra, Desdemona, Tess, Hester, right to Rahel of Arundhati Roy. There is even a literary term for them – wilted flowers. That evening. I could feel a sense of that abstract Atreyee, a tragic real life literary figure almost on the hues of Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath. What is inescapable is the fact that her greatest strength, her ability to look beyond the brightness and superficiality, the razzle dazzle of life, to the heart of darkness, also proved to be her Achilles heel.

Atreyee was just what little girls have always been – sugar and spice, and all things nice. She came into the world on January 17, 1989, sharing her birthday with the great cultural icon of Assam, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. But from a very young age, it was not enough for her to pamper her stuffed doll, or take a healthy interest in baby pink nail polish. Once, on a holiday at Tenga valley, she penned her first, faltering lines, about "birds that fly, the rivers pass by", about red flowers. It was a poem any precocious child could have scribbled, and any parent proudly displayed as the first flowering of literary genius. But Atreyee's poem held a last line which seems unusual, even a little disconcerting, for one so young. She asks "Why am I sad?" And indeed, why was she sad? She was a cherished first-born, born to privilege, an easy heir to all the comforts of affluence, with successful parents and a happy home life. While all around her, her friends chatted about school and term assignments, MTV and hair colour, Atreyee wrote of being a little lantern in the sky, a lone candle burning in the darkness. It is as if she is raging already against the dying light, as it were, and the

"plastic reality of time". In one poem laced with quiet hysteria, she details the agony of a young, bulimic girl, who throws up her food after a dance, ostensibly to win the approval of her beau. Running through many of her poems is also a vein of urban angst and displacement. They give voice to the deep alienation of young people today, who have lost the sense of warm, enfolding community, the feeling of belonging. The grey alleys and impersonal structures speak of nothingness to Atreyee, and also the ugly truth that love, friendship can be purchased, like goods.

Strangely, in a preface to a poem titled Roshni, Atreyee writes, "A tribute to all those who lost their daughters to the world, all the people who had the courage to accept fate, all the parents who never knew when they had last seen their child, the last words they spoke, the wishes their child had – still in their heart while they were transformed into Angels..."

This book is clearly a labour of love and a work of art. Atul Borgohain's magical photography captures the delicate beauty of a blossoming girl. One sees a close knit family bond at home, or when enjoying holidays with the carefree informality of all happy families. Atreyee's poems are beautifully juxtaposed against pristine Naturescapes, acknowledging her deep love for earth's bounty.

In the end you are left with the impression that Atreyee's poems, in spite of their dark, melancholy strain, are a quiet affirmation of life. She was painfully aware that life was transitory, but that did not stop her from questioning it, engaging in its many dilemmas, and thus leaving her own mark on the rock of time.

Atreyee's poems are not meant to solve the riddle of her life. Nor are they meant to be theorised about. We must just rejoice she wrote them, and through them she remains with us still. As she herself writes – "for every dark night, there's a bright blue day. For every tear that falls, there a hand to dry it away..."

Buried lives

30 July 2012 at 19:52

Sometimes, reality and fiction merge to reveal truth in its stark, unvarnished form. This is what happened a couple of days ago. I was reading Lovely Bones, a novel by Anna Sebold, which deals with the brutal rape and murder of a young American girl in a small town by her innocuous neighbour. The story is told in the girl's voice, as she watches life go on from her

vantage point in the afterlife. The poignance is heartbreaking, and there is the very disturbing realisation of just how vulnerable girls and women are to sexual and other forms of violence. Even as I was turning over these pages, a macabre drama was playing out on one bank of the tranquil Dighalipukhuri. A single woman, college teacher Bibha Devi, hires two men for some repairs in her official quarters. Her mobile phone goes missing when these men are inside the flat. As she raises an alarm, she is brutally attacked and murdered. When television screens beam her inert form on the floor of her home, we are filled with horror and outrage. If this can happen in the heart of North East's premier city, what hope is there for the safety of people, especially women and children, in the less policed towns and villages?

But there was more to come. And this time, the crime is even more chilling, for it is perpetrated by one's own, the family. Twenty-two-year-old Nirupama Pathak had everything going for her. She was pretty, had a job as a journalist in a respected newspaper, was deeply in love and planning to marry a young man. But this man, a Brahmin, belonged to a sub-caste lower than hers. This was enough for her family to forbid the union. And when verbal threats did not work, the wheels were set in motion for a sinister plot. A plot that involved a false message to Nirupama that her mother had suffered a fall and that she was to come home. She did, and never returned. The family said she had ended her life, even producing a suicide note to show to the police. Claiming no one but her mother was in the house at that time. And yet, her brothers and father were absent from their offices at three different cities on those crucial days. In a letter to her a month previously, her father had written to Nirupama of the consequences of straying from faith, and how dharma was thousands of years old compared to the Indian Constitution, which was only sixty years old. Here was a family which had educated their daughter, but denied her free will and the dignity of making her own choices. This dichotomy is apparent in the case of the majority of young Indian women today, who are allowed to perceive the limitless shy, but not allowed to spread their wings. Now, in a twist to the case, her lover is being questioned for abetment to her alleged suicide. Legislation to protect women alone will do little unless there is a change in the mindset of the average Indians caught in a time warp. All this surface gloss of a resurgent India, these feel good images of a country on the move cannot hide the fact that in many ways, we are still very much in the thick of the Dark Ages, with honour killings having the tacit and silent consent of a bigoted community. If Sati, female infanticide, female circumcision, dowry deaths, human trafficking and rape were not enough, now honour killings occur with grim regularity.

These recent events brought to mind the work of Nilima Sheikh, a prominent Indian artist who derives motifs and inspiration from contemporary reality. In 1984, Sheikh created a set of twelve paintings, which she titled When Champa Grew Up. She had been struggling to depict the brutality of dowry deaths and was in search of a mode that would not reduce the theme to a cliche. Then, a neighbour's daughter died of burn wounds, allegedly killed by her husband's family, barely a year after her marriage. Champa was the daughter of a Class-IV employee of the University at Baroda and grew up in the campus. She was pretty, the darling of her indulgent parents, and had a quietly independent spirit. Yet, she was married

off when still a minor. Sheikh knew nothing more until one day, walking past the chawl where her parents lived, she saw a group of women keening in ritualised mourning. Champa was dead, she was told by a bystander, dead by the ubiquitous kerosene stove. A year later, Sheikh started her series, capturing with brush strokes the vignettes of Champa, her girlhood, the cycle she claimed her independence by, the swing, then how she must have got married, gone away to a small town, into a new home, the kitchen with its kerosene stove. Sheikh used traditional Gujarati oral traditions to work as texts to offset the effect of the paintings. The story of Champa encompasses within it countless invisible and forgotten stories of young lives snuffed out by barbaric tradition and human greed.

“The roots of violence against women can be traced to three areas – namely anthropological, psychological, and economic,” explains a leading mental health professional. “In the anthropological area, there is territorial aggressiveness, seen also in sharks and other sea creatures, whereby its territory is marked and no one is allowed to transgress its limits. This would explain the concept of clannish insularity and how women are considered as property belonging to the patriarchy. The very questioning of this dominion is often enough reason for retribution in any form. It also explains the personal space of each individual that not even the bond of marriage can intrude. There is a tragedy just waiting to happen when this private domain is intruded upon.

“In Freudian psychology, every human has ingrained in him the duality of Eros and Thanatos. Eros is defined in terms of libido, libidinal energy or love, which is the life instinct innate in all humans. It is the desire to create life, and favours productivity and construction. Eros is in constant conflict with the destructive death instinct of Thanatos. The Thanatos concept would explain the negativity and violence of interpersonal relations, as well as genocide. The other factor is economic. Man’s economic activities have transformed from the agrarian to the industrial. The dividing lines between a man’s work and a woman’s work is getting increasingly blurred. But, instead of this being a unifying factor, it has tended to antagonise and divide the genders. The increasing freedom and economic self-sufficiency of woman has wreaked havoc on traditional institutions like marriage. The intense pressures of a competitive society and the punishing schedule of one’s job results in both spouses being on a short fuse, and verbal and physical violence breaks out on the most trivial of issues. The old values of mutual respect, trust and faith still hold true and no relationship can survive without them.”

For Bina Kakati, OC of the Women’s Police Station at Pan Bazar, Guwahati, meeting battered women is a daily affair. This all-women police station was set up in 1993, and has helped hundreds of women raped, beaten or driven out of their homes. This year, there are already sixty cases registered against offenders who have committed crimes against women. “The cases we register fall under section 498(A) of the IPC. But we need at least four all women police stations in different zones of the city. It is not possible for all victims to travel such a long distance to seek help. We also need a counselling centre here because the victims are traumatised, and trained counsellors can help them calm down and reveal their problems. After all, our job is only to bring the culprits to book. We question the victim, find out all

details, send her for medical examination. Sometimes, a woman requests us just to warn an abusive spouse. At other times, she is ready to file an FIR and move out of the home. When the FIR is registered, we prepare the charge sheet and issue an arrest warrant against the offender. If it is not safe for the woman to stay with her husband, we send her to the State Home."

Bina Kakati recalls her most shocking case. "One day, in 2006, I came to the station and found a young woman waiting for me. She had been beaten so badly by her husband that she could not even sit or stand properly. After her medical examination and treatment, I sent her to her parents' home in Pathsala. Her husband lived in Baihata Chariali. She had two young sons and her brother's wife was very hostile, unwilling to let her live with them. Meanwhile, the husband, getting to know of the police case against him, staged a panchayat meeting, promised in public not to beat his wife, and got the police case withdrawn. Many months later, the woman telephoned me to say she had returned to her husband's house as she had nowhere else to live. Somehow, I still feel very sad when I remember that woman. She was a college graduate, and yet, had to make this bitter compromise just so that she and her children could survive. Her story reminds me that for us women, things have notreally changed – even though we live in a new age."

Interpreting Eve
29 July 2012 at 19:30

Strange, indeed, are the workings of the human mind. You don't have to be Franz Kafka to figure that out. Nor do you have to help yourself to some hallucinogenic stuff on the sly and float to an astral plane. Because, to rephrase my first sentence, strange are the workings of the female mind. And where else do I find a laboratory to put this premise to test? My own mind, silly.

But let us not confuse between mind and brains here. There is no grandstanding on my part on the issue that I have a first rate brain. The absence of the aforesaid brain on certain occasions is what unites three generations of males in my family – father, spouse and sons and gives rise to their unseemly hilarity and tedious retelling of anecdotes (how I forget who someone was, the misplaced spectacles which were actually perched on my nose during the whole frantic search, you get the drift). This embarrassing specimen of a brain mysteriously absents itself when I am confronted with bills, tax forms and bank statements. It is frozen with shock by numbers and its fading memory increases my panic over my advancing years... With such an inconvenience of a brain, it is no wonder, I never made it to NASA. It is enough for me to know what NASA is. By this time next year, I'm not sure I'll remember...

Anyway, to cut a long story short, (I've got to be kidding, what kind of woman cuts a long story short?) now that my modesty regarding those few grey cells in my uncertain possession has been established, I want to get working on the mind. Ah, that's a different kettle of fish altogether. One of my favourite quotes is by Albert Einstein (he of the lovely white halo of hair and theory of relativity, don't ask me anything else). Einstein said that knowledge is limited, but imagination embraces infinity. Sure, men have knowledge. They know how to build bridges, argue cases in court, put a new heart into an old bloke. They know how to make piles of money and thwack a ball with a bat wearing gaudy jerseys with company logos. But imagination? That is a realm that women stride with assurance. They are all spirit, all intuition. They have a heightened awareness of things, a knowledge of subtleties about which the other gender is totally in the dark.

For the male segment of my readers, I am compelled, out of the goodness of my heart, to break down this premise to easy to digest, bite sized portions. Okay, here is the scenario. My superior imagination, thanks to my life-long membership of the female sorority, can already hear your low growl as you read these lines. You think – here goes another home-grown feminist using the cover of humour for a sneak attack on the male. Let me hasten to add that it is never my intention to belittle the male imagination. But, it is limited to the material world – the car, the duplex, the piece of real estate, the IPod. The woman refuses to be so limited. Her imagination is so powerful, at such a high pitch, that she imagines what has not happened, thus always existing in an alternate reality. She looks at the mirror, and sees herself fatter than she really is. She sees wrinkles where there are none. She actually thinks she hears women laughing behind her back because her Hidesign bag is fake. She is a mind-reader who knows the exact sequence of thoughts running through her man's mind as yet another pretty woman crosses his line of vision. The minute she is out of the kitchen, she will smell something burning. If her kid is late from school, she can almost see the ransom note in the mailbox. She knows her man is only pretending to love her cheesecake, and is secretly remembering his mother's version. When they are out on a drive, she sees imaginary pedestrians making a dash in front of the car. Her alarmed screams help her man control his urge to hit the accelerator. That actually keeps our roads safe, now that you think of it. She imagines herself growing old, being unloved, not having nice clothes to wear, her body drooping as much as her spirits. This ability to dream up worst case scenarios helps her to work harder at preserving herself, to look thirty when she is fifty. This, of course, leaves her with no time to worry about multicrore scams or why England messed up big time at the World Cup and the fuel revision roster or all that talk of state fiscal stimuli in the G20 Summit.

But, this doesn't faze her one bit. Those who are secure and confident have no need to play games of power and domination. As men are dragged into the rough and tumble of politics, sports or commerce, she is secure in her world where the only quest is for a wrinkle-free, sun-blocked existence. Her refusal to be drawn to the heat and dust of the arena is not to be construed as a sign of cowardice. Far from it. She knows her place in this world. Besides, of course, the rigours of making a home, raising kids and these days, also earning a living, she is a creature of myth and poetry, whose fragrant, bejewelled persona exists to brighten this

planet and wreak havoc on the pulse and heartbeat of any male within sight. She has no higher purpose than to inspire the artist, the musician, the wordsmith, the lensman into creating their best works. She is here to remind all that God must have a great sense of humour, for He made her so full of contradictions and puckishly avoided giving her any sense of direction, any ability to change a tyre or encounter a mouse without screaming blue murder. Her infinite vanity ensures that millions of home fires keep burning due to her manic need for clothes, shoes, bags, cosmetics, jewellery, cutlery, perfumes and anything that is on Spring sale. Her anxiety about not having anything to wear, even when her closet is bursting, ensures that a nation's economy is always healthy. The fact that she can't make up her mind about any item, and ends up buying a variety of them, also helps. Her long shopping lists compel her man to put in long hours on the job, leading to increased productivity, though there is the very real danger of him drowning his sorrows in drink.

There is a general tendency among men to joke that women cannot be friends with women because they have a built-in radar that sees each other as rivals. So, all that cosy fraternising, the girlie talk over mojitos, the exchange of secrets and recipes, that griping over men's boorishness is just a put on. Scratch the surface and you are face to face with deadly adversaries who expect and give no quarter, can kill with looks because daggers aren't nearby, and are quick to use every trick in the book to stay one step ahead. They not only compete with each other in looks and ensemble, in the flatness of their abdomens and the bounce of their tresses, but the rivalry extends to every area of their lives – their front lawns, their homes, their dinner parties, guest-lists, floral arrangements. It covers their children's marksheets, husband's promotions, holiday destination choices, club memberships, you name it.

But, if you think this obsessive rivalry is petty and juvenile, you are sadly mistaken. Civilisation has moved forward because of this feminine combativeness, this prickly refusal to be second best. I can almost hear a cave woman gloating: "My man killed a five hundred pound wild boar today. I saw yours come back with a rabbit." I can see the long march of history, men being prodded to win empires, invent machines, pen masterpieces by tenacious women used to having their way. Of course, sometimes women can be given credit in a roundabout way. Think of Socrates. His virago of a wife, Xanthippe made life so miserable for him at home that he stood in the street-corner and turned a philosopher. A shrew has her uses. And I like to think that remembering this nag took away the bitterness of his poison.

Women have always laid more importance on beauty than brains. Don't we talk more about Marilyn Monroe than Simone de Beauvoir or Ayn Rand? Why do you think this is so? It's because we know men see better then they think. And women throw up their hands, flutter their eyelashes, and look up in adorable helplessness not because they are in any need of assistance, but because they are wired to make the man feel special, and thus get more entangled in her net. That dumb act is just another dazzling example of her histrionic skills and boy, she capitalises on it from the age of six to seventy.

So, in the end, I guess all of you gentlemen have figured out that women are a force of Nature. Just make sure she is on your side. Or else...

Parents? You must be kidding!
26 July 2012 at 20:36

To my eternal regret, I have never belonged to a single club. I have never had the golden chance to make an off the cuff remark about some elite club of which I was a card carrying member and watch eyeballs pop. Club memberships continue to be an effective way of stating to the world that you have arrived, and that you are among the chosen ones. I was almost a member of a highly respectable club once, a club known for its service to society, and I say almost, because I was supposed to attend three meetings in a row. But after the first, I forgot all about it and on the other two evenings, when I should have been out there creating a good impression of myself, I was happily strolling on my evening walk, and another day, cracking up with laughter watching an episode of Frasier. So, I guess it doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that I don't have an ice-cube's chance in hell of ever getting admitted into any club. Clubs are about rules and subscriptions, they are about being cordial to the other blokes at all times because you belong to the same pen. They are about feeling proud of rubbing shoulders with people who don't care about rubbing shoulders with you. They are about conforming and getting whittled down into stereotypes. Nah, I like flying solo.

But on hindsight, I guess I belong to a global club which can beat any club hollow in the sheer volume of its members, a club that demands no subscription fees, does not enforce any dress code, has bewilderingly changing rules, leaves it to you to decide if you are a worthy member and finally, the catch is ... you can never get out of the club, at least not alive. No matter what you do, they won't take away your membership. That last one seems tempting enough, right? So, what is this club I'm talking about? Simple. It's the Parent Club. All of you who have brought those adorable brats into this world would qualify as members. All of you who have stayed awake nights, rinsed foul smelling diapers, followed those staggering baby steps with your handycams, band-aided scraped knees, told bedtime stories, sat stoically through parent teacher meets, banned television, banned phone talks with opposite sex, banned beer, Kurt Cobain, wept at graduation ceremonies... yes, all of you are in. You have earned this membership by your tenacity, your ability to choke back swear words, your fortitude in the face of report cards lined with screaming red ink, your insistence on their eating vegetables and brushing their teeth, and your touching optimism that your kid is actually a misunderstood Einstein.

THIRD EYE EDITION

I have only two children, but unlimited theories on parenthood. But I suspect that what is fundamentally wrong with theories is just that — they are theories. Theories are dreary, dry as dust speculations which miss the wood for the trees. Theories state what should be, rather than what is. Parenting theories pretend to lay out a map of what is actually a dark continent, a place where, as you are admiring some gushing waterfall, cannibals are creeping up behind you. Parenthood is a journey, one filled with great views, memories and unexpected perils. It is an end in itself and success in it is purely a matter of perception. If, once your brats have flown the nest, you are still standing, still sane and still have your sense of humour around you, then you've done it, mate. Welcome to the next level-the Survivor Parent Club.

The thing with parenthood is — it is a lot easier to get into than wriggle out of. Parenthood is not a job, it is an adventure. I would say parenthood is alarmingly like bungee jumping. Like this mad sport, parenthood also ties your legs with ropes. It involves a leap of faith into the unknown. It causes a hollow at the pit of your stomach and the rush of adrenaline. It also involves coming back with a whoosh to the point where you started. When children grow up and fly the coop, that is when parents come back with a whoosh to the point where they started years ago... when they were a couple and the stork was yet to visit.

It is then you realise that this parenthood stuff has a peculiar contradiction — just when you are experienced, you become unemployed. Just when you have perfected the art of outstaring your rebellious teen, that darned kid has done so well in his exams that he has relocated to another city and is out of reach. And talk about the fool that cuts the tree it sits on. You raise your kids with the loving attention to detail of a Swiss watchmaker, brick by brick you build their career, and voila! They are gone, and there is no one to heed your advice, hear your silly jokes, tussle with you for the TV remote and laugh at your dress sense.

The transition from Parent Club to Survivor Parent Club occurs just when children fly the nest. Talking from experience, let me tell you that you get actual withdrawal symptoms. When I came home from the airport after the younger one, too, had left, I got the weepies which lasted almost a year. The first thing that hit me was the silence. Thick, impenetrable silence. No Dire Straits playing on the music system. No fridge door banged shut and hour long phone conversations. No teen friends with fingers pressed long and hard on the calling bell. No tap-water pouring out of a full bucket, forgotten. No stereophonic yells for Coke and Spanish omelettes and french fries and clean vests and towels. I wanted all that noise back. In retrospect, they were sweeter music to my ears than Beethoven's Fur Elise.

Being a sentimental fool is part of the deal when you are a Survivor Parent Club member. I am no different. I have my children's smiley balls, cricket bats, slam books, birthday cards, Charlie Brown comics, GI Joes and all the paraphernalia of their childhood around me, drawing comfort from them as they awaken memories. Of course, I use the bats to open the ventilators, and I also stumble over them in the dark and utter unladylike imprecations which will no longer corrupt my absent offspring.

After the weepies and sentimentality, you are hit with the next aspect — you suddenly have nothing to do. You don't have to set the alarm at five for junior's tuitions, you don't have piles of laundry to tackle, no parent teacher meetings, no arguments over pocket money or curfew hours. Instead of setting a good example, you can lounge around unshaven in pyjamas, have breakfast in bed. Slowly, your voice, which had always worked on high decibels due to slanging matches with the brats, now comes down to normal. Even as you miss them, you realise the electricity and phone bills have come down. But the time you have on your hands is truly unsettling – suddenly you feel irrelevant, out of your depth, definitely disoriented. A king is a king only if he has subjects to rule over. A parent is only a parent if he/she has offspring present to nag, advise, fuss over, bully — as the case may be. And when they move away, our power too is gone and it is a pretty dismaying feeling. From the exalted and authoritarian pedestal of a parent, with your sceptre and book of wisdom, you are suddenly pushed down unceremoniously to the common dust, where you are back to being a mere human being.

With the loss of authority also comes the dissolving of your structured daily routine. Suddenly, you can do anything you like, go anywhere you like. You can also have nice, full-fledged fights with your spouse without trying to lower your voices and fake a false sense of cordiality when you are actually dying to get at each others' throats. But do you fight now, when you are demoted to being a parent in exile? Oh no, you are so miserable together that the thought of even passing a malicious remark doesn't cross your mind. You are scared of the silent, empty house and are only too grateful for the company. You suddenly see the spouse clearly for the first time in years, because your attention has been diverted by booklists, doctors' visits, pizza deliveries, slumber parties, annual day functions and tennis lessons. What you feel for the spouse at this point of time, is not really romance, but the gritty camaraderie of two soldiers who have survived Iraq. You were in it together, in the middle of the sniper fire, covering for each other, taking out the enemy. Hurt Locker stuff, that. So now you hang up your boots together, but agree this quiet, civilian life is not your style. You want to get back to where the action is, only it ain't gonna happen, not if your kids can help it.

So, when you graduate to Survivor Parent Club membership, you need a crash course on long distance parenting. This is a course which clearly doesn't involve outstaring your progeny, considering their distance from you, nor is a raised voice going to do the trick. Long distance parenting consists of asking all the right questions to ferret out information, listening to their voices to measure the exact state of their health, cautious enquiries about classes, logical, persuasive pleas to stay away from hotel food, tippling friends and sundry nuisances, and a last desperate exhortation not to stay up all night. These phone calls (almost always from your side, missed calls from theirs) is the last vestige of your claim over them. You know they will do exactly as they please, and will not even remember what you look like when they knock back that chilled Foster. But your call gives you the pious satisfaction of knowing you have done your duty.

I end with a note of warning. Your final, ignoble descent from parent status is when your kids have the gall to actually parent you. We are sternly admonished if we take a night out to gorge on biryani. I am witheringly told to switch from fiction to more realistic reading material (ugh!). When junior comes visiting, I scurry around hiding my salty snacks, books on crime and certain shades of lipstick. My other half staggers home pretending he has returned from a marathon walk. We both are on our best behaviour when they are here. And, when they leave, we are back having dinner in front of TV, doing all the things we once forbade them to do, including leaving the toothpaste tube uncapped. We are feeling absurdly liberated, something very close to fun. Giving up the reins of parenthood doesn't seem so bad, after all.

The Mondaze effect
17 July 2012 at 20:40

Let me start with a little confession. I have this love for picking up new words and phrases in the same way omen love to pick up anything that is on a bargain sale. Which is to say, the overriding factor in acquiring it is because it is free. But once your have it, there dawns on you the dismal realisation that it is of no earthly use, it does not gell with anything you have in the house, it has a rather cheesy feel to it and four words arrange themselves in an accusing sequence inside your head — what was I thinking? But where I score over the others of my species is that acquiring words and phrases does not entail stuffing them into already stuffed bottom closets. You are not tempted to return them to the store. The vocabulary you acquire (unless, of course, you begin to swear like a trooper) remains an invisible part of you, dwelling in the recesses of your memory, to summon when you need to make your point. As a ten-year old girl, my proudest possession was a Cassell's Compact Dictionary my dad bought me at a book fair in Shillong. I blush as I say it now, but I lugged that tome in my schoolbag every single day, staggering under the weight of my school bag. Too shy to make friends, and terrified that the boisterous volleyball team would knock me down (they did, eventually), I would spend lunch hours poring over words. In a very real sense, words became my friends. They helped me express what was in my heart, and to make sense of the world. Through them I am knitted to the fabric of humanity, and in this belonging, my loneliness dissipates like mist at sunrise.

Acquiring new words does not always mean an intellectual affectation, however. The world is changing at a bewildering pace and there is a virtual torrent of techno terms like hard copy, soft copy, desktop, PDF format, DTH, pen drive, etc., that you have to keep pace with if you have to make any sense of what is happening around you. Language is also a potent tool in overcoming the generation divide. This concept is best summed up in one catchy slogan – ifyou can't beat them, join 'em! In order to be clued in to my kids' lives and not appear Neanderthal, I avidly picked up their teenspeak and got along with them like a peer buddy. I even went through a phase when I would impatiently wait to use the expression duh (a slang term used to remind a person that he is stating the obvious). From those distant childhood days of striving to be informed, now I seem obsessed with the need to be informal. Perhaps this climb-down is a knee-jerk reaction to the fact that books are

disappearing from the lives of modern man. Our city is getting crowded with glitzy malls, eating joints, gyms and lounge bars, but hello, can anybody show me a new book store? There's a lovely cafe in a quiet city street, and it has a great collection of books for people to browse as they wait for their cafe au lait and chocolate chip brownies, but everytime I am there, the young are huddled together with their high pitched babble and all those books just add to the decorative value of the joint. The few who are alone are either waiting for their dates or talking incessantly on the phone. So, all those words I've hoarded over the years won't do me much good in this new age when people communicate more than they connect.

Even so, acquiring a new word continues to be a source of pleasure. The new one I caught on my net this week is Mondaze. This is a word created by blending two words. In this case, 'Mon' from Monday is added to daze to create a noun that signifies a state of being. Therefore, a Mondaze is the state you find yourself in on a Monday at work, when really, you'd rather be still in bed. A Mondaze serves to explain all the stupid and sloppy things you do on this day — losing your car keys, not saving a file, not getting on the same page as the boss. Usually, your's truly is always bright eyed and bushy-tailed on Monday morning. After all, there's only so many Friends reruns you can stomach over the weekend. I have a healthy aversion to housework and a home without my kids has a strange, unlived air. Without the telly on, it's positively haunted. So, I need the buzz of a work week and the feeling of being useful to society. But just after I learned this new word, I got a nasty spell of Mondaze myself. Last Monday, as I was positioned in my work station as a respectable card carrying member of the fourth estate, I checked my mail and all the blood drained from my face. Besides my face, everything else in my life, too, paled into insignificance. For right there, on my inbox, was a grim, accusing and downright hostile letter awaiting my attention (and panic).

There's a back story to this. Two weeks ago, in my previous column, I had indignantly shot down Time magazine's anti-Indian diatribe by Joel Stein. I had hardly done anything extraordinary, just underscored the fact that we Indians don't take insults lying down. While I am under no illusion that Mister Stein or the august magazine he wrote for will ever see my words, I just thought that the outrage I articulated was what all of us had felt at that moment. One week later, we were all ready to move on, and then, here was this gentleman stranger in my inbox, questioning why I had this anti-American feeling (displayed during my Stein-bashing) even in this twenty first century. Besides the fact that I was not at all anti-American, and that I would have argued against Stein even if he was Polish, or a Hottentot, if you please, I want to remind my detractor that America has more enemies today than in other centuries and I think the World Trade Centre bombings established that beyond any doubt. Now I am no think tank on American foreign policy (I know an awesome number of George Bush jokes, though) and so, cannot go into all the bad blood business. I can only speak for myself and swear on my cheeseburger that I not only love America, but lived under the delusion that I was one as a child. When my uncle came from that promised land every now and then, I would unleash a torrent of Hollywood trivia, popular songs, Al

Capone's derring do, Mark Twain anecdotes, Kennedy lore, flying around him like a demented canary.

However, my detractor was not done yet. As I scrolled down the lines, another accusation was lobbed at me like a grenade. I had written: "This Joel dude is bad news." According to my San Francisco based antagonist, and I quote his exact words: "An Assamese woman does not speak like this, with so much venom." Let's clear some things here. I've got nothing personal against Joel Stein. Never heard of him before. He could be a wonderful guy, holding barbecue parties at his backyard, taking his kids to Disneyland, helping little old ladies across the street. But he wrote irresponsible words that hurt. His words had the potential to goad mischief- mongers into action. Standing up for your own is a natural impulse. It's funny that the only thing I truly love doing, writing, is today disqualifying me from being a genuine, 24-carat Assamese lady. A genuine Assamese lady, at least the version approved of by my inbox stranger, is a gentle, meek soul with honey on her tongue. No matter what the provocation, she is under duress to prove her good breeding. So, she must never retaliate, not even with printed words. She must swallow all insults, stifle her patriotic sentiments, and allow the dignity of her people to be trampled upon. Well, if she is so lily-livered, she might as well go the whole hog and keep her head covered, her eyes to the ground, and walk ten paces behind her lord and master. She might as well go back to slaving over smoky fires, no family planning, illiteracy, and early death. This is a kind of woman even my ninety-year-old grandmother would indignantly refuse to be. To add to my inbox stranger's anguish, I have other traits that disqualify me as a proper Assamese lady. This lady here does not write in her native language, wears ensembles with legs, looks at her other half straight in the eye, and doesn't even know how to weave gamochas. But yes, she can make a fabulous tenga anja, with ou tenga if you please, quartered and lightly crushed in the pestle, and fresh coriander sprinkled after the last boil. And every day of her life, for the last two decades, she has sat in her desk, toiling to transmit through this newspaper – that embodies the Assamese spirit – news, features linked to the music, drama, literature, history and other facets of this corner of the world. If speaking out against injustice is unladylike, if being patriotic is unladylike, so be it. I belong to the land of Joymoti and Kanaklata. Standing up for what is right is inbuilt in our collective psyche. Given a choice, I would rather be strong, than ladylike. Thank you very much.

You mean we are friends?

16 July 2012 at 15:26

Hi, I'm your Facebook friend!"

Whoever voiced these words sounded warm and cheery, but quite clueless about the time and place for such social pleasantries. I was tearing down the corridor that afternoon, racking my brains for a real smart and peppy headline for a travel piece on Singapore, the

people downstairs were amping up the machinery to print the pages and the compositor was as sour as a lemon about having to miss lunch. When the whole of me was in combat mode and each second seemed to detonate inside my tense cranium, those breathless, expectant words, followed by a dim visual image in the dark corridor of a row of pearly white teeth, fluffed chick hair and the regulation jeans/T-shirt combo – just threw me off gear. How was I supposed to react? Was there some Facebook etiquette to be observed when one is taken aback in real time and space by a friend one has absent – mindedly made in cyberspace? Or was it this fluffy haired friend instead who had broken protocol? It's like this. If she in indeed was my Facebook friend, she had no business facing me in real life, not to speak of scaring the hell out of me in that dark corridor. I wanted her to remain in that invisible network of all the friends I have made so far, to be contacted at a more opportune time. Opportune for me, that is. But after that initial flash of irritation... (she had, after all, caught me mid – stride in my hurricane act). I was all cloudless sunshine. I was gracious, warm, generous, engaged, solicitous and all the words I have no time for (I am racing the clock at this very moment too. Readers, reach for that thesaurus).

It now occurs to me that you may jump to the conclusion that my sudden about turn from cold, frosty to warm, fuzzy owed its genesis to all that guilt eating into me. And yes, you are spot on. I was feeling guilty. Why, I was overdosing on guilt. Here was this adorable spring chicken who had taken the trouble of sending me a friend request. And I had clicked 'confirm' without really bothering to know who was this face smiling hopefully from her profile pic, the family she came from, the sunshine and rain of her life, her thoughts about the boy she loved, or perhaps hadn't even met. There were entire worlds within her that I would never explore, but she had trustingly offered her friendship. I wanted to make it up to her there and then, giving myself exactly thirty seconds, almost hearing the massive machinery groaning juddering two floors below, awaiting the pages like a ravenous monster. By the end of thirty seconds (I was getting real good at deadlines, after two decades), I was clasping her little hand, beaming her a big smile, and fervently promising to stay in touch. Since I forgot to ask her name, I am spending all my spare time these days hunched over the computer, peering intently at the profile pics of all my cyberspace friends, trying to superimpose over them my vague, recollection of my adorable corridor cutiepie. Sigh. They all have big hair and pearly white smiles.

There's, however, another reason for wanting to be nice to Miss Fluffy Hair. It is more for what she didn't do than what she did. She didn't call my Aunty. Nobody has been that humungously kind to me in a long, long time. She freed me from all the messy stuff that follows you like a nasty swarm of bees when you are Aunty. Aunty is matronly. Aunty is over the hill. Aunty is full of advice, most often with a voice that is shrill. Aunty is too sensible to wear wedges, or to approve of belly-button piercing. Aunty is always offering you food, till your eyes have a glazed look in them. And yes, Aunty is always complaining about maids, or rather, the lack of them.

By compassionately axing the awful Aunty word when addressing me Miss Fluffy miraculously restored me to my younger avatar. My mid-life crisis, or whatever I imagined I was having, dissolved like ice-cream on a defrosting freezer. It seems as if a whole life was yet ahead of me, and my Aunty-less future seems rich with possibilities. I am breaking free of the middle-aged thought patterns, the stifling, respectable conventions that induce

yawns. Though I would still draw the line at wearing wedges, I don't think anyone should question why Justin Bieber cheers me up on my MP3. I'm getting there.

A few days from now, students from some of the most prestigious colleges of the country will converge at Cotton College for an annual national debating event. Interestingly, one of the topics goes like this. "The Social Network has replaced personal interfaces while creating an exclusive and intimate space, in contemporary times." Whether social networking is vilified or serenaded, it will no doubt be done with a lot of passion as well as logic. While on the subject, I cannot but point to some pat assumptions. Assumption one – GenY is deep into Facebooking. The middle-aged are not. Assumption two – Those fuddy duddies who are into it are there only for the Botox-like remedy for defying age. But I know at least one young man who has steadfastly refused to type in mindless inanities for all the world to see. I also know another young man who has simply closed down his Facebook account to read books, write and have real life one to one friendships. Then there are senior citizens who keep themselves clued in to their children across the world and happily tap tap their way out of old age blues.

So, we come to this loaded question – Is social media killing personal relationships? While I would never make the gaffe of presenting a grand, sweeping statement, I cannot but resist retelling two anecdotes. The first concerns the twelve-year-old son of a family friend. A regular buck – toothed little tyke who lives on a diet of colas and potato chips. Bright in class, but always getting into scraps in the play field. His mom is so keen to protect him from all evil that she disconnects the cable. After all, even *National Geographic* has its birds and bees moments. A TV addict myself, I feel sorry for the little fella. He might as well have been in a monastery. Then comes along his computer class projects. Mummy and Daddy are out of their depth. Going into a huddle, they make that fateful decision. A PC is brought and installed. The internet connection is made. Little Tyke's fingers fly over the keyboard. His parents beam with pride. Why, they have an Einstein right in their midst! Soon the little rogue is doing more than his computer projects. He opens a Facebook account, fudging his actual age, which is eleven. The awed parents are convinced Facebooking is rocket science. So they have no intention of blocking the trajectory of his flight. Then an older cousin comes to visit. The Little Tyke brags how he Facebooks all right, and has an eye-popping number of four hundred friends. Another huddle – this time the cousin and the parents. Mummy is hysterical. Papa blames Mummy. Vice versa. Then Junior has a mighty tantrum. Cyber hell breaks loose. Junior hates his nosey cousin, and he hates his parents even more, in fact, more than maths homework. He loves his four hundred unseen and unmet friends a zillion times more than the two people who have created him. Moral of the story? That it would be a better idea to raise kids on a deserted island? That seems kind of dumb, even to me.

The other anecdote is about a young, newly married couple. They've had a classy wedding, spent their honeymoon snorkelling in Mauritius, and then set up house in a nice flat at a tony, upscale neighbourhood. Besides cooing sweet nothings, they also work hard on their jobs and check out online shopping sites for snap deals. She even tries out Vietnamese recipes on weekends. They are that uber cool. But cool was the last word on their minds as they got into this nasty spat one evening. The hep missus, it seems, had just been voted the first among the ten cutest friends of a cyber gentleman who had no business commenting on the looks, cute or whatever, of a woman who was now, for better or for worse, in

sickness and in health, bound to another in holy matrimony. The cool dude hubby was now suddenly an enraged Othello. The new winner of the Cute crown was indignant. You don't own me. Why get so uptight over a compliment? Are you really like this? I'm calling Mama right now. Moral of the story? It takes more than snorkelling in Mauritius to make a marriage work. Travel agents, sue me all you want.

If social networking sites helped Anna Hazare's anti-graft movement to gather awesome strength, on the downside the rioters in Britain made villainous use of this media. Which means we have to see it as a neutral medium with potential for both use and abuse. It is not the new ogre on the block and after the precautions, this media gives the user a sense of belonging, a way of staying in touch, connecting with people who share our interests and having a picture of our life as it unspools from moment to moment. But personally, computer mediated communication still seems an awfully sci-fi way to bond with fellow humans. When someone posts an my wall and asks me how I am, I long for the physical cues of the real person – like the voice, the smile, the proffered hand, the tilting of the head. Deprived of that, the small, typed words seem cold, inert, each letter a drowned ant. If that person were on the telephone or before me, I could have made some witty, rueful remark about the killing work schedule, or the atrociously bad Bollywood movie running at a local theatre. We could even have discussed how Hurricane Irene has made New Jersey the new Dhemaji. But all such possibilities are lost as I, not called upon to be warm and funny and engaging, simply type – I *am fine*. Next morning, there is an answering smiley.

Let me sign off here. I have several smileys to send. That's how it works. I guess.

Taking a guilt trip

16 July 2012 at 15:22

Now let us be absolutely honest about this. We all love a bit of drama in real life, provided we ourselves are not in the thick of it and stewing in our juic-es. One afternoon, last week, I was plodding along the groove of my boring, predictable life (yawn) when, ahead of me – near the post office, I saw an anxious crowd of people. Not the usual, sulky line of commuters waiting for the bus to appear, but a thick, buzzing crowd of random humans united by one overwhelming desire to know what was happening – plenty of head craning, elbow thrusting, conversations ending with exclamation marks... you get the picture. Seconds later, I caught the virus too, and joined the head craning fraternity, deciding no man is an island, and a woman – most definitely not.

The object of our fierce, collective interest turned out to be a somewhat scruffy, middle-aged man sitting on the pavement, his slippers lying by the side of his banged-up scooter. Somebody had grabbed a jug from a nearby momo joint and was pouring water rather gleefully over his head. The man had one hand gripping the back of his cranium, scowling darkly at a malevolent god who had made sure that an overloaded trekker drove close enough to knock him unceremoniously off his two-wheeler. I saw a dark stain of blood on

the pool of water at his feet, and more on his head. Feeling faint, I at once opted out of the fraternity, vanishing to the comforting tedium of the workplace. A couple of hours later, out of the workplace and on my way past the post office, I suddenly remembered. What had happened to the man? Had he been taken to the hospital? Would he live? The pool of bloodstained water had by then evaporated, and so had the crowed. Gulping down my guilt at somehow letting down this down on his luck stranger, I asked the friendly neighbourhood *paanwallah* as to what became of him. "Oh, he went away," he said dismissively, slicking a green, wet *paan* with a small dollop of snow white lime. "Went away?" I asked blankly. "Didn't you take him to the hospital?"
"Oh no. He wouldn't let us. We called 108. But he just walked off."
"But, he was hurt!" I said, unable to wring my hands as I was holding the bag and files.
"Huh!" snorted the man, splicing open a betelnut. "He had it coming, *Baideo*. Who told him not to wear a helmet? At his age, does he want to be a hero? We told him that. We said, "Why didn't you think of your woman and the kids when you left the helmet at home? If you were dead just now, who would look after them? Would you have them beg on the streets?"
"But.... the hospital."
"Oh no, his Highness got angry. He showed us he could walk. That he was fine. Not a word of thanks. His kind of men never learn."
I turned homewards, indignant about that man's carelessness, which could have ruined the lives of his loved ones. But somehow, this man's bravado in walking away from the crowd, holding the rags of his tattered dignity together, his refusal to be daunted by a bad knock on the head seemed the stuff we attribute to heroes. Maybe he had too much self-respect to be scolded by pitying bystanders. Somehow, this little roadside drama, so commonplace in this chaotic urban existence, remained with me, gnawing at the edge of my consciousness like a rather determined rat. And slowly, it dawned on me that this accident victim had chosen not to be tended by these strangers because, as if it were not enough to land on his backside on the asphalt and split his head and lose his slippers and have his vehicle damaged, they were forcing a burden of guilt on him. They were accusing him of deliberately, callously putting his kin at peril by not wearing the helmet. Here he was, all shook up and bleeding and scared silly, and a ring of cruel faces were mouthing accusations. His bleeding head, his thumping heart, and the disorienting feeling of being without slippers was so much more endurable. He would get stitches from a doctor, new slippers, in a short while his heart would behave sensibly. But the guilt would straddle his shoulders, keep him awake at night, an invisible cut – never healing...
Guilt. A little word with big effect. So loaded with meaning, with layers that made your weep, the way onions do. It never really went away, not even after you have blubbered for your deliverance at confessional boxes and taken dips on chilly dawns at the Ganges. The little boy who steals his classmate's lunch box knows it. The serial killer knows it. Lady Macbeth's frantic hand washing confirms it. Strangers at the bar, and on train coaches, tell each other things they have trouble admitting even to themselves. Guilt is universal, a language that we all know, but pretend we can't speak. It casts its dark stain upon all lives in a greater or lesser degree. One long ago evening of my lost childhood, I had my first unexpected and deeply troubling encounter with guilt. As I stood leaning dreamily out of the

window, watching the sunlight fade over the blue, rolling hills, a sparrow flew in, wings fluttering, its panicky twitter filling up the room. I reached over and slammed the window shut. I knew suddenly I wanted a bird, a feathery pet I could stroke and sing *Edelweiss* to, feed breadcrumbs and let sleep on my pillow. As the trapped bird finally crouched in a corner, its wings drooping, I tied a string on its leg, fastening the other end to a chair. It was mine! I left grains of rice on a saucer for the night, and went off happily to bed. I heard piteous screeches in my dream, and thought nothing of it. In the morning, the horror dawned on me. The cat got my little bird, tearing off its wing. It lay mangled on the floor, lifeless, unable to escape because of the string I had tied on its leg. I have never forgotten that, my first burden of guilt. I could not bear to hear the song *Una Paloma Blanca.... I'm just a bird in the sky* for years after that. So, early in life, I knew guilt was harder to endure than a scraped knee, a teacher's anger, or geometry.

For many years, due to some mixed up mailing list, we used to regularly get copies of the *German News*. I had by then been taken by the good nuns to see movies on the Holocaust and idolised Anne Frank. So, when I flipped the pages of this magazine, I think I expected to see people and places awash with the horror and gloom of the Fuhrer's regime. I expected to see penitent citizens praying, laying flowers on graves, not having birthdays, not shopping, not going to carnivals. But what I saw instead were healthy red cheeked *frauleins,* beer drinking fests, exquisite gardens, canals, bustling streets and majestic buildings. Huge steel plants, the Black Forest, statues of Goethe and Max Mueller – My twelve year old heart was suddenly smitten, I knew that deep down, I wanted to be in that awesomely cool place. But I also knew that there was a nasty little voice inside which would make me guilty in the thick of the Oktoberfest, reminding me I had let down six million Jews. How it could make the faintest difference to anyone never occurred to me. At twelve, you do tend to have an inflated sense of your own importance.

Back to the present. A couple of days back, out of sheer curiosity, I took time out to see *7 Khoon Maaf,* Indian film *noir* at its best and also, funniest – the Vishal Bhardwaj take on the Ruskin Bond story *Susanna's Seven Husbands*. A gorgeous woman doing away with her husbands in fiendishly creative ways – throwing one into the jaws of a black panther, burying alive one in the snow, sending one down a well of serpents... after a time, you just can't wait for her to wed so that she can write the macabre postscript. Even her faithful retainers are unapologetically mirthful as they dispatch the victims to kingdom come, breaking into a merry jig moments before one murder. You feel proud our cinema has come such a long way, unleashing on screen the dark side of our personas, letting our female protagonists, after aeons of submission, exercise such liberating, violent options. Ah, this is empowerment, with a twist, of course. But our *femme fatale* takes one last step that had me sighing in disappointment. Our serial murderer can't handle the accumulating burden of her sins. The guilt is too big to get rid off in a confession or two. So there she is, in a nun's habit, seeking redemption. Even if she had perfectly valid reasons to bump off her husbands, a bunch of cads, she cannot but help punish herself.

Perhaps that is the power guilt holds over our lives.

Someplace else
16 July 2012 at 15:20

I have this deep, persistent uneasi-ness about scientific research which shows no signs of abating. I can, of course, justify it. The mad, white-coated geniuses at the labs caused worldwide panic that cellphones will be the death of us. Now they've made this volte face that we can call and text and play games all we want, because there's no proof cancer will come calling if we do. Now I'm confused as to whether they have sold out to the cellphone companies or they had made an honest mistake. Now their next tall claim is that, within the next two decades, we would master the art of living forever. I don't know about the rest of you, but if I want to live forever, it's only because on the other side of the veil, I'm not sure there is twenty-four hour cable TV or my favourite brand of orange blossom organic tea. But Aubrey de Gray (he does sound like a seventeenth century French marquis, doesn't he?), who is, make no mistake, a biomedical gerontologist, says we would soon have the means to banish disease and extend life indefinitely. All we would have to do is to visit the doctor regularly for maintenance, which would include gene therapy, stem cell therapy, immunity-stimulating sessions and so on. Of course he is not going to let on about how much all this is going to cost. Read the fine print, silly. The truth of the matter is, and by the way, the truth really hurts, the only people who will live forever will be the rich and famous and the ones who have raised fine, decent kids who will gladly foot the bill for their parents' shot at immortality. Since I don't belong to the first club of lucky geezers and I don't have the heart to let my kids go bust just to keep me breathing, I guess I will keep away from all this tinkering with the human body. In my old fashioned way, and as a lover of literature, I would like to point out how Mary Shelley proved that messing with God's creation could make it mutate to a real hellraiser called Frankenstein. And if truth becomes stranger than fiction, duck for cover.

I am also not very convinced that doing away with diseases altogether is such a bright idea. If no one is paying you much attention, and you want a dose of good old TLC, just go ahead and catch a bug. Fever up enough to crack the thermometer, break out into scary rashes, double up in agony. Soon your family and friends will be running pell mell to plump your pillows, dab that forehead with cold compresses, call for the doctor, tenderly spoon chicken soup into your mouth, bombard you with get well cards and surround you with so many bouquets that you'll be puzzled whether you've just got married or given birth. Even though being ill is something of a nuisance, it is indeed amply compensated for by the looks of loving concern on the faces hovering over you. You have the privilege of doing absolutely nothing, being spoilt like a child and eating your meals in bed. But of course you need to have your finger on the pulse, as it were, and know exactly when to get better. If you languish in bed too long, the fuss will die down and you will be left feeling pretty foolish.

Though I have stated earlier that I harbour this deep suspicion when it comes to scientific research, I can't seem to control myself from citing just such sources. Researchers now claim that people who go on holiday are likely to have happier lives than people who don't. I am a bit flummoxed as to why this should be so. Would anyone be happy enduring the stress of making airlines and hotel reservations, packing, facing the dangers of lost luggage, stolen documents, food poisoning, missed flights and beaming for the benefit of the camcorder,

when you are actually fuming inwardly about the insolent room service guy? I guess happiness doesn't ensue from dazzling beaches, thrilling joyrides and exotic ruins. It comes later, when you've dragged the suitcases in from the cab and your home enfolds you within its walls. It is a small piece of this vast earth but it is the only place that you can call your own. Its curtains may not match the colour scheme of the walls, there's an inch deep layer of dust on the sideboard, well-thumbed magazines are all over the couch. But then, that's exactly what puts you at ease. It is not perfect, and neither are you. Holidays help you to appreciate this and it is indeed so very restful to resume your normal, humdrum existence with its familiar rhythms and small expectations.

I have been on plenty of vacations myself, trotting up steep hillsides, being almost submerged by waves and making snowballs but somehow, there is always someplace else that beckons my wandering soul. Family lore has it that my ancestors were wanderers, endlessly on the move, carrying with them the arcane arts of meditation, unfettered by walls and fences. Perhaps the only way I have held on to this legacy is by travelling through books, boundless and free, slipping through time zones and spanning continents. When we travel, we are on a voyage to explore new sights, enjoy new experiences and create memories we will cherish for a lifetime. But when I ascend the hills and wait for the bend in the road that will reveal to me my childhood idyll-Shillong, I know I am not there to find anything new. What matters to me is the quiet assurance that the old familiar sights and sounds still exist – whether it is the luminous stained glass windows of the cathedral, the musical cadences of the Khasi language, the frisky boys in their wooden carts careening down the hill slopes, the soughing of the pines, and the silvery – orange fish leaping in the waters below the archway of the wooden bridge at the lake. When I see the schoolgirls in their long socks and blue gym-skirts, I am one of them, pine cones in my pockets and dreams in my head. There I am in my overcoat and ponytail on a freezing December evening, chomping my way through my sixth *jalebi*. There I am at the Kelvin, cowering in my seat as King Kong lumbers menacingly over the skyscrapers of New York city. In the Shillong of today, as I hurry back to the hotel in the pouring rain, I remember that long ago girl who loved to slip her shy self into her red raincoat and pretend she was invisible. How I wish today that some things about this place were invisible too.. the bumper to bumper traffic jams, the black, poisonous puffs of exhaust, the red, naked hillsides savagely stripped of their green cover. I wish the litter in the streets was invisible too, as also the tacky souvenirs displayed for the tourists. This once beautiful place is losing so many of the features that have always drawn people to her from across the country and even beyond. But maybe this is just what people would call development, and if there are those who make a decent living from running hotels, shops and taxis, perhaps I have no right to peddle this sentimental drivel.

Last weekend, we were not into boating, cave exploring or even catching a bird's eye view of Shillong. What worked for me instead were the quiet, dream-like hours spent on a cozy sofa by the glass windows of Bread Cafe in Police Bazar. Sipping my coffee (they had created a perfect white heart on the foam, don't ask me how), I looked down at the rain slicked streets now and then as I dipped into Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. I flitted between the worlds of eighteen year old Mario, a law student who falls scandalously in love with his Aunt Julia, the 32 year old divorced wife of his cousin in a Peruvian town and

that of Shillong awakening to life on a muggy monsoon morning. Further up on the square, men stood with bundles of newspapers, next to the wizened women in shawls expertly splicing betel nuts for the glass bottles atop their battered packing case shops. On the other side, the mall selling Chinese shoes and Korean T-shirts was gearing for the hard sell. The staff at this cafe had still not taken down its Christmas and New Year decorations. The strands of silver confetti and tinsel balls, the plastic mistletoe was just my kind of sentimentality that outlives its time. There is more evidence of this trait in me when I drop in at a bookstore that evening. The elderly Khasi gentleman in charge recognises me from my previous visits down the years. As I browse desultorily, I realise it is getting late and he wants to close shop. I too find nothing I want to buy. But he looks hopeful and I don't seem to have the heart to walk out just like that. Then I spy a stack of books at a reduction sale. The usual winning friends and influencing people tomes. Finally I hit pay dirt – a collection of dusty, frayed at the edges letter-pads – autumn trees, soulful girls with long tresses and porcelain skins – haunting fairytale pictures in faded imprints on notepaper meant for secret missives of a lost, courtly age. These were the notepads we had fallen in love with as giddy-headed young girls, though we were never sure there existed boys sensitive and artistic enough to pen fervent epistles on such paper for us. The gentleman in charge quoted a ridiculously low price for them, wryly noting that nobody wrote letters these days. I promptly picked up no less than ten of these letter-pads. I have no real use for them but to me, they are some of the last relics of a lost age, a time impossible to imagine for the generation after mine. When I keep them fondly on my study table, I will have a feeling that there is at least something of the tenuous past I can hold on to, even though the little girl with pine cones in her pockets and dreams in her head seems as elusive as ever.

Road less travelled

16 July 2012 at 15:19

A piece such as this can often be described as a column in search of a character. Character not as in the fictional mode, a person conjured up by the airy imag- ination of a pen-pusher, but a real life individual who breaks the mould, as it were, and embraces life on his own terms, forging his own trail, alive to the infinite possibilities of adventure. There has to be so many nuances in him that others appear mere cardboard cutouts. Surprisingly, many of these real life characters who have jauntily breezed in and out of this column have been Americans – a Pulitzer prize winning novelist, a faith healer, a Native American scholar of race and ethnicity, a beautiful *femme fatale* conflict resolution expert, a celebrated travel writer, and the latest to get on board is Brian Orland – all of twenty six, with tousled brown hair, a disarming grin and riveting anecdotes of his wanderings all over India. "I must be the

only *firangi*around" was his sardonic comment when our interview started. I had just laughed when he said that, but now I wish to say that writing about Brian is certainly not a nod to our colonial legacy. We have long lost that fawning servility towards the *Gora Sahib*. What appealed to me instead was that – here is this young man, affluent, highly educated, certainly headed for a glittering career with all its attendant benefits in America, but he chooses instead the road less travelled, works in a leprosy hospital near Vellore, hangs on for dear life on the straps of Mumbai's local trains, learns Hindi in Mussoorie, drinks Old Monk with his chums and strums a guitar by the water tower at J.N.U, Delhi, criss-crosses the remote Assam countryside for the experience of seeing – first hand – entire chunks of land disappear into a raging river. Far from home, depending on his wits for survival, he crosses geographical and cultural borders with an insouciance that is truly worthy of envy.

Life for Brian Orland began as a small town boy in Pennington, near Princeton University, New Jersey. His father still runs Orlands, a funeral parlour set up by Brian's grandfather. At thirteen, he helped push a casket for a funeral ceremony at church. So, death was therefore a very familiar presence in the life of the little boy, rousing neither fear nor any pensiveness about the transitory nature of life. He remembers how he would listen to eulogies about the dead person by his friends and loved ones. He had never known the man or woman who lay for the last viewing in the open casket, immaculately groomed and dressed. But through those eulogies, it was possible to understand who they were and what they meant to those left behind. "I have grown up seeing corpses filled with embalming fluid, bathed, shaved, combed, perfumed, dressed in beautiful well-tailored clothes. So, when the mourners see them, it is as if they are merely sleeping and not dead. I have a problem with that because we are then caught up in the illusion that they are going to come back to us, when we should actually be accepting the finality of death and moving on."

But it is not that Brian was always watching from the sidelines. He was the centre of attention at his Bar Mitzvah at age 13. Bar Mitzvah is the coming of age ceremony of the Jewish community, and on that day, he read the Torah for the first time. My next question was of course, the most obvious one – As a young American Jew, was he haunted by the Holocaust? Wasn't it deeply embedded in the wounded psyche of his people?

"It wouldn't be honest to say I'm not troubled. I've been to Israel twice and feel that if there is another Holocaust, that is one country we can all go to. But rather than being preoccupied about what happened in the past, I am more concerned with the genocide taking place in different parts of the world today. That is what troubles me deeply." Brian was in Mumbai during the 26/11 attacks when the Jewish community was targetted at Nariman House. But, as he walked the streets and mingled with his Mumbai friends, there was no sense of unease or foreboding.

As a high school student, Brian worked part time at a wood shop, building a bed which took two years. As a picture framer, he picked up the skill of paying attention to detail, striving for perfection inch by inch. My boss at the picture framers told me: "I don't care how long you take. You have to be proud of your work.'" Later, as he waited tables at an upscale restaurant specialising in French country cooking, he used his intuition to anticipate how he was expected to behave at each table. Some wanted their waiter to be invisible, others loved to chat, still others needed that little extra bit of pampering. This experience was to

prove invaluable when he navigated across other lands, befriending strangers and winning their trust.

After high school at Pennington, he moved to Davidson College, North Carolina, one of the top ten Liberal Arts colleges in the US. Graduating in political science, he then did his post graduation from the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, specialising in South Asia and International Economics.

India first appeared on Brian's radar when he took a course on Asian contemplative traditions. It involved the effort to understand the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, tenets of Buddhism, the *Heart Sutra*. "The meditation we were taught," he explains earnestly, "Was not just terminology, you know. We were taught the purpose of meditation, the process, the awareness of its deeper level... Then we, a group of sixteen Americans, came to India for three and a half months as part of the Study Abroad programme. We attended classes at Madras Christian College and then went on this really long tour of Kerala, Mumbai, Agra, Khajuraho and Lucknow. This trip gave us a good exposure to India. But it was also a very sheltered affair, we didn't have to worry about tickets, lodging arrangements, money and stuff like that.

"Coming to India was no doubt a culture shock," admits Brian. "Along with it comes a certain sense of guilt. When I come out of an upscale hotel in Kolkata, I see a man on the street who will never earn the equivalent of what I paid for my room even in a whole year. I want to understand the suffering of being poor, or debilitated by a cruel disease. My most wonderful memories of India are those of working at the Karigiri Hospital at Vellore, spending time among the leprosy patients. Yes, I know what you are going to say. My friends too ribbed me "Oh, now you're going to be the next Che Guevara. I wanted to see how lepers are marginalised in Indian society. I have seen up close the lives of these afflicted, forgotten people. They had stumps for hands, some had their noses eaten away, many were blind. I would set up games for them, like throwing hoops around a stick, or watch how one man led his goat home with the rope clutched between the stumps of his hands. There was suffering, but there was also courage and resilience, faith and fellow feeling. I once asked my friend, the elderly Pattu, who was blind – if she was not curious to know what I looked like. When she said yes, I took her hand and guided it over my face. Shunned for years by other people, living the sad life of a forgotten outcaste, Pattu could not believe that I trusted her to touch me and broke down, weeping uncontrollably." But it was not merely being a bleeding heart that life there was all about. Brian says he would often gad around the countryside in his battered scooter, have long, meaningful conversations with the beautiful Grace and treat himself to generous dollops of sweet *palgoa*. Then it was time to move and he found himself in Professor Ramu Manivannan's farm. Run by this scholar of Gandhian economy, in this grassroots initiative, Buddha Smiles, he attended a natural building workshop, toiling with volunteers from around the world to build a tree house with mud, sand and other inexpensive, eco-friendly materials.

"I have taken more from India than I've given," he says with feeling. "I have learnt so much here, and I have never ever been cheated or robbed. When I fell very ill, once at Mussoorie and then at Dhakuakhana in Upper Assam, people have gone out of their way to help, even in the middle of the night."

From funerals, to the poor, the lepers... now his gaze is directed at the trials and tribulations of poor families at the mercy of the capricious Red River. When he first saw the vast stretch of the Brahmaputra at the Dibrugarh *ghat*, it took his breath away. “Man!” he had whistled, “This isn’t any river! It’s an ocean!” Soon, he was trudging all over the sandbanks, swarms of children clamouring after him, and women offering him plastic chairs to sit, right on the sandy stretch. With a Tata grant for this study, he was a volunteer for NGOs like River People and Sanjoy Hazarika’s CNES. Travelling aboard a boat clinic to the remote *char* areas, Brian became painfully aware how a combination of factors, from climate change to rising population, were threatening the very survival of these people. According to him, dams are the last thing we need. The peripatetic Brian has been just about everywhere – Jorhat, Majuli, Dhakuakhana, Dhemaji, Rohmaria and all the way down to Dhubri. Whining mosquitos, muggy tropical nights, strange food, bumpy bus rides, getting lost, no phone network – he has taken everything in his stride. If his unique and moving experiences have honed his conscience, they have also finetuned his quirky sense of humour, so evident in his wonderful blog http:// jalebi yatra.tumblr.com. As he explains, “my blog means sweet journey, *yatra* means journey – often to a religious pilgrimage site. Journeys have paths, and if my paths indicate future ones, then the circular overlapping shapes of the *jalebi* is a good representation of my likely path on this...”

As Brian rises to leave, he says he is going to be back in the North East before long. I wonder if any educated urban Assamese youngster of his age has the kind of exposure to the State as he has had. Our youth are expected to gain degrees and land a well paying job the minute they are out of university. As parents, we would never want them to venture thousands of miles away from home to find out about the world and its people. That is perhaps why many of our young are indifferent about how the other half lives, what they go through, and how they can be helped. We must cease to close our minds to the road less travelled. Because, who knows, it could lead to an undiscovered horizon.

River of tears

16 July 2012 at 15:17

Winter is not just a season. This time, it is a damp night, heavy with our tears. It is about fragrant petals and their sad withering, the solemn flicker of a thousand candles braving the wind. All at once we huddle together, the family of man, as if we are lost, abandoned and afraid to be alone. We had known this day would come, but when it did, we did not how to face it. To let Bhupen*da* go is to give up a part of ourselves, that indescribable, abstract totality of how the many hued threads of his songs have seamlessly stitched the life we have lived – the rosy blush of first love, the burning zeal to pull down walls, to change the world, and the wanderlust that guides our dusty feet to the farthest reaches of the world. He had words for all we have ever felt and gone through in this world.

In the gathering dusk of that November evening, I was in Rabindra Bhawan – the hall was filled with young students hearing a debate in progress. On the wings waited the cultural troupes, beautiful, lissome girls in ethnic attire, promising the sweetness of song and the throbbing joy of their movements. Then, a judge of the event came on stage to announce the bard's passing. You could see the shadow fall over those young faces and the stunned silence that filled the hall. Just moments ago, they had been pitted against each other in proving whether Facebook was a boon or bane. It was a battle to support or denounce what had been once thought of as a futuristic means of communication. But, at that moment, when our mythical folk hero slipped into a realm from where he will never return, Facebook was forgotten. For here was a man who reached millions of hearts not by logging onto a networking site, tapping on any keyboard, or updating his status, but by telling us, in that rich baritone that had the power of thunder and the tenderness of new leaves, about simple, elemental truths of life – the restless, surging ebb and flow of tides in the mind, the heart's deep longing for peace, and a love that transforms not just a beloved, but binds man to man in kinship. Like the mighty arms of the Brahmaputra he loved so much, his songs run through us, awesome in their elemental power, nourishing us, lulling us to sleep, waking us to hope and youthfulness, instilling in us a sense of what is timeless and soars far above the petty and the mundane. Yes, he has given us the vision of the limitless sky, and the dawn we might one day make possible. For Bhupen*da* spent a lifetime making us understand there is no crystal ball. The future is within us, and it must be born from our deeds, our ideals and not the conjunction of constellations. Each of us is, in his rousing words, a spark of a flaming era.

On the day of his tearful homecoming, late afternoon and as the light faded outside, a kind of hush fell over the city that otherwise shrieks and roars and surges with the whirlwind of a frenetic existence. On both sides of the main road, on the pavements, people were gathering, their faces turned to the west, for the cortege to arrive. On that day, it was as if – of their own accord – heeding the call of their hearts, all the people tore off their masks, crumpled them and flung them away. It was as if they saw each other for the first time, and suddenly, felt that life was so much more than chasing deadlines and clinching deals, completing chores and getting past each day. Young Yuppies with camcorders, silver haired grandmothers barely able to stand, weary men with baskets of vegetables, autorickshaw drivers for whom he wrote a song, fathers, mothers and children – everybody came together as if they had never been apart. It was as if, in his passing, in his last act of love, he has breathed new life into all of us.

Since then, his mortal remains have been consigned to the flames. But his name reverberates like temple bells in the vault of this night. You hear it on the lips of people passing by on the street, in homes, shops and offices, on television screens, in the cheap transistor of a *paan* seller's tiny shop or in a jeans-clad teenager's room on Youtube. Young men in motorcycles have roamed the city streets singing his songs. Everyone has a Bhupen Hazarika anecdote to share. The air is awash with stories – floating like dust motes in a golden beam of light. These stories tell of his childlike simplicity, his readiness for a good laugh, even at his own expense, his generosity and utter lack of concern about money, his love for pigeon curry with a tongue scorching sprinkling of pepper, his yen for losing his

heart many a time and most endearingly, his lack of awareness that he had become a legend in his lifetime.

"What can I say?" The normally ebullient artist and filmmaker Pulok Gogoi's sorrow lay heavy in his voice on the phone. "I owe so much to him. When I was a struggling artist in Mumbai, we would meet very frequently, sitting by the Arabian Sea by the Gateway of India, munching roasted peanuts. Once, something strange happened. A couple passed us by and the man kept looking backwards at Bhupen*da*. He then came back and, with folded hands, asked me if the person seated by my side was Bhupen Hazarika. I said yes and queried, "Have you met him before?" "No," he shook his head. "I have never seen him in my whole life, until now." We were stunned. How then did he recognise *Dada*? "I heard him on radio, when he was giving an interview in the Lucknow station. I heard him speak to you now and knew at once it is him. His is a voice you cannot forget, once you have heard it," the man said. I have done several paintings of Bhupen*da*, and so many sketches I can't keep count of. I created a painting celebrating his passionate love for a lady he serenaded in *Bimurta mur nisati*. I showed it to him when he was with her, years ago in Tezpur, and he wanted to know why I had blotted out the moon with black paint. *"Dada*," I told him, "Forgive me for saying so, but you are a possessive lover, and you would resent the moonbeams touching your beloved". He was very amused by my answer and rewarded me with his famous, full-throated laugh.

Author Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Roving Minstrel* is a slim, beautifully produced biography of the legend in Rupa's Charitavali series, published in 2002. Dutta deplores the lack of archival materials related to the singer. Describing how he pieced together, through many recorded interviews, a remarkable, often tumultuous life of heady triumph and hearth-breaking despair in the book, Dutta says he consciously strove to acquaint Bhupen*da* with the common man in the rest of the country and the world.

It is with pride that I write of my own Bhupen*da* connection. My aunt, dancer, singer and actress Krishna Das Nath of Tezpur, was the child star of Bhupen Hazarika's film *Shakuntala*and also starred in *Pratidhawani* and *Chik Mik Bijuli.* "I had won the first prize in the dance drama *Shakuntala* at Tezpur. He penned a few words in my autograph book that inspire me even today. He blessed me to be India's Chitralekha and that on my every step, lotuses would bloom. Before I knew it, he cast me as Anusuya, the youngest of Shakuntala's companions in his film of the same name in 1960. Directing me during a scene when Shakuntala leaves the *ashram*, Bhupen*da* told me to weep. I was terrified. What if I could not cry? He had a fiery temper. Rooted to the spot in front of the camera, I desperately tried to think of all the sad experiences of my life. I was only twelve. What could a girl of that age be sad about? Then Bhupen*da* understood and slowly, in that deep, tender voice, he described the atmosphere at the *ashram,* of how Shakuntala would forever leave behind her friends, how they would miss her... and sure enough, I was sobbing uncontrollably, much to his relief. He okayed the shot."

For those who journey beyond Assam to follow their dreams, Bhupen*da*'s songs carry the memories of home.

"I never was in love with Bhupen Hazarika," says Omar Sharif, a young professional based in Mumbai. "But today, when I look back, I discover that he has been seeping into me in drops all this while. When we were in school, we'd sing *Luitor saaporit* on Teachers' Day. Then the

most popular *Bistirno duparore* and *Buku hom hom kore* followed in the teenage years (in between our daily overdose of Hindi songs). In the days of self-inquiry, when meanings were searched, we discovered through his songs the Assam Agitation and the *Bhasha Aandolan* – revolutions that we had never witnessed. If *Maznisa mur endhaar ghorot* was a protest then, it has transformed into self-discovery today. Very few of the new generation know that history, even fewer discuss it. These songs are the arresting pointers which a hardbound history book fails to bring to attention. Far from home, listening to *Aai tuk kihere* in my hostel room and remembering the warm lap of *Ma*, I would often cry. In the years that follow, we discover a *Modarore phool*, a *Kijey tumar songo priya*, a *Bideshi bondhu*, a *Tezore komolapoti,* and so many others seeping into us. It is so gradual, this seeping, like our growth, from a child to an adolescent to an adult, that we hardly discover it."

Pathways to peace

16 July 2012 at 15:15

A remaking of our jaded history/has metamorphosed all for me/like a snake slipping out of its old skin/today, hope imbues my life anew/beacons from a brighter future beckon me/in my mind's eye I picture/the frail mingling free with the mighty/at this promising hour/a spirit of love and tolerance /reinforced by a sense of equality/infuses the ambience and an explosion of hope, /as it were greets everyone./When the curtains go up.
– Excerpt from a poem by Irom Sharmila, translated by Kshetrimayum Chetan.

This iconic woman from one of the re-mote corners of this vast country, waif-like in her frailty, the skin stretched tight across her wan face, her hair un-kempt and the fire smouldering in her eyes, was a compellingly present absence at the Gulmohar Hall of the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi as Zubaan, which has completed twenty five years of feminist publishing, presented Cultures of Peace, Festival of the North East on January 28 and 29 this year, in collaboration with Kali for Women and the Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation, India. Irom Sharmila Chanu's peaceful, non-violent means of passive resistance to protest and call for the repeal of the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) is the longest fast in political history. And for the people of this trouble-torn part of the country, her Gandhian act is a vindication of our faith in peace.

They say faith moves mountains, and it was faith that brought us together, a circle of friends – writers, poets, journalists, activists, academicians, looking back at our collective memories of clouds of smoke billowing out of burning homes, rivers red with blood and bearing away putrid corpses, and sleepless families waiting for footsteps that never returned. The sun had long been eclipsed in our land and it was as if, Prometheus-like, we would have to steal the light from heaven, and to push the wheel of life towards a blessed peace. All of us who sat

on the different panels at the event and shared experiences, grappled with one of the key issues that had occurred to us individually, but perhaps anticulated for the first time as a group. Is it possible, in a reality where despairing people are caught in a vice between insurgents and the State law enforcing agencies, to create literature that will stand the test of time? Does conflict motivate writers to write for peace? Is it feasible for them to move from the sidelines to the vortex of tumult, to rally together in a proactive way for peace? The answer seems a foregone conclusion. Without an endeavour to transform reality, without the desire to devote oneself to a cause that would bring hope and succour to the greater family of man, literature seems a narcississtic, self-indulgent diversion, and a writer's work irrelevant to society.

The last six decades and more of violence and unrest in this region has spawned a remarkable body of powerful literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Even reportage from this hotspot is a vital genre. BBC's bureau chief for East and North East India, Subir Bhaumik provided a gripping insight into the perils of reporting from this region, and the death threats his friends and collegues have defied to uncover the truth. Another speaker at the round table was Temsula Ao, whose books like *These Hills called Home*, *Stories from a War Zone* have explored violence, the psyche of the Naga people and their search for identity. She believes that "Our racial wisdom has always extolled human beings living at peace with themselves and in harmony with Nature and with our neighbours. It is only when Nagas re-embrace and rewrite this vision into the fabric of their lives, in spite of the compulsions of a fast changing world, can we say that the memories of the turbulent years have served us well. Other speakers at the first round table were distinguished writer/academician Arupa Patangia Kalita, poet Ananya S Guha, Aruni Kashyap, Pradip Phanjoubom and myself, with Nilanjana Roy as moderator. Arupa Kalita later expressed happiness about Zubaan's endeavour to present the literature of the region to the rest of the country: "I think they have done it in a very democratic way. All our individual views and opinions were assimilated. I wonder why our Asom Sahitya Sabha or, for that matter, the Sahitya Academy could not initiate such an event. We Northeasterners have this grouse that mainstream India neglects us. But the mono act by Ojas shows how a Malayali scriptwriter and a Marathi girl could unite to tell the story of Irom Sharmila of Manipur through the powerful mono act *Le Mashale*."

After the inauguration of a photo exhibition by Uzma Mohsin – which exposed the vulnerability of young women from this region in the metros of India, the second round table deliberated on how the creative artist chose various literary and cultural forms of expression – oral narratives, poetry, theatre, music, etc., and as to why the English language has become the dominant medium of expression. Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, Bijoya Sawian, Rita Chowdhury, Mona Zote and Omar Sharif, with author and editor, Zubaan, Preeti Gill as moderator, explored how far there have been new experiments with new form and content, and about the question of the relevance of older writing styles and oral narrative in the present literary scene. Sahitya Academy award winner Rita Chowdhury, author of remarkable historical sagas like *Makam*, said she wrote in Assamese as she was comfortable with her mother tongue. She spoke of her years as an activist of the Assam agitation, and how her people took to the streets against immigration of illegal migrants into Assam and to air their grievances against a callous Centre. She stressed the need for the

literature of this region to reach an international readership. While Mona Zote lamented the lack of a creative culture of literature in Mizoram, Arunachal based writer Mamang Dai said, "Our literary tradition is oral and we have a rich repertoire of Adi and Nyshi songs which must be translated into English. The debate about the North East versus the mainland only feeds the conflict."

Author of the novel *The Collector's Wife* and other books, Mitra Phukan said that only the medium, English, in which she and others write is different, but the concerns are the same. She spoke of the spontaneous stories knitted into *Ainam*s and *Biyanam*s, as well as the music of Sankardev and, how the violence and conflict of the present is at odds with the peace and tolerance of the past. Meghalaya's Bijoya Sawain, whose book *Shadow Men* narrates the chilling murder of a *dkhar*, an outsider, in Shillong, has vividly shown how violence has seeped with its dark stain into the very fabric of everyday life. She spoke of the common man's despair and his disgust at the corruption in politics. Later, talking to me, Bijoya praised the effort by Zubaan to inspire people to cross physical and mental borders and barriers, to interact, discuss and understand each other.

At the round table on Crossing Borders, award winning journalist/writer Monalisa Changkija spoke of her single-minded mission to lay bare the truth under the most hazardous circumstances. Inter-subjectivity through literature was a subject that needed introspection, she said.

Author, filmmaker, journalist and policy analyst Sanjoy Hazarika underscored the need to study ethnic groups closely for a deeper understanding and said that the imagination is free to transcend all borders. This round table, with Uma Chakravarti as moderator, also had Uddipana Goswami, Aruni Kashyap, Triveni Goswami Mathur, Rajesh Dave, Rupa Chinai and Dhiren Sadokpam as speakers. Uddipana spoke of the wariness and ignorance displayed by North Indians when she went to Delhi in the mid-nineties, and the tumultuous days of the Assam movement and insurgency. While Aruni spoke of sharing stories of the North East with the world beyond, Triveni Goswami Mathur stressed on cross-cultural communication through translation. The moderator for this session was writer – publisher Padmashree Urvashi Butalia.

Rupa Chinai, a veteran journalist covering this region during some of the most eventful years, said the most remarkable transition has been the lifting of despair and darkness and the flowering of creativity, which started with a movement for truth and reconciliation led by the village of Khonoma.

"Struggles have to be across geographical boundaries", asserted scholar and activist Deeptipriya Mehrotra. Hazarika summed it up forcefully when he said, "We are in the periphery, but not peripheral or peripherised." Aruni Kashyap is euphoric about the exciting writing produced from the region. Poet, academician Ananya S. Guhan describes this event as the first attempt of any publisher to create an opportunity to discuss creativity and peace. "However, we need to examine how our writing is a reflection of peace."

Later, Mona Zote spoke on the phone from Aizawl: "It was particularly rewarding to see the perspectives – via performance, of the Manipur situation. One was an enactment of the Irom Sharmila story. The other, Rojio Usham's take on the State's descent into chaos. These impassioned efforts were arresting and ultimately, create a distance from the issues, taking

them to the real of visual narrative. The event was an occasion when the North East was reshaped, rewoven and transported to a different place.
On the last evening, as Soulmate, and its beautiful couple, Rudy Wallang and Tipriti's powerhouse vocals electrified the jam-packed amphitheatre, we were awash with pride. We were being heard. At last. And we were breaking that long silence, not with gunfire this time, but with the heart's outpourings. Now, anything seemed possible.

Mystic connection
16 July 2012 at 15:14

Does this ever happen to you? I am sure it does. Every now and then, there's a new catchword that buzzes around you. It is a minor irritant, like a fly that makes its sly, swooping little circles to land on your nose. With a bit of hand waving, or the smart use of a handy fly-swatter, the problem of the fly is solved without having to resort to any unseemly cussing and swearing. Regrettably, it is not so with the catchword or catch phrase. It pops up everywhere, slipping out of the mouths of friends, colleagues and neighbours. It is there is print and bandied around by impressive talking heads on TV. Soon, there is such a surfeit of it that it sets your teeth on edge. You hear it and can at once feel your jaw tightening, your hands clenching of their own accord and a glazed look settle on your face. I have had my share of these verbal pests. One of them is the phrase paradigm shift. I have sat through numberless meetings feeling like a complete moron because I didn't know what the heck a paradigm shift was. The suited speaker with the stately line-up of abbreviated degrees was too intimidating for me to ask him to keep it simple. And then there is this thing which works against us journalists. We are supposed to know everything. We are also supposed to go everywhere only after having done our homework. Give me a break. My sons have outgrown homework. Why shouldn't I? At first I thought paradigm shift was some deep, underground thing, a conspiracy by the tectonic plates to sneakily move towards each other, cause an earthquake and scare us silly. It's no wonder then, that the increasing use of the paradigm shift phrase caused me to shift uneasily in my seat and look anxiously for the nearest exit. But the careful observation of other people around me at these meetings revealed that they were not in the least alarmed by any shifts, paradigm or otherwise. So, I went back to my long neglected homework and consulted my good friend Google. And what do you know – paradigm shift is nothing but a change from one way of thinking to another. It is, I quote my pal Google, it is a revolution, a transformation, a sort of metamorphosis. It just does not happen, but rather, it is driven by agents of change. After this bit of useful information, I am glad to inform you that my adrenaline is not working overtime, pulse and

heartbeat are near normal and the pupils of my eyes are not so dilated. In other words, the paradigms can shift all they want, I'm cool.

One word that gets my goat has a kind of irony to it. Let me paint the scenario for you. I am not much of a morning person. I find the sun too cheerful and everyday household noises too mundane. I am actually annoyed at the maid if she arrives on time, because then I don't have my chance to give her a earful. The shrill whistle of the garbage boy out with his cart always makes me jump and spill my tea. It gives off a sinister feel of the Gestapo in house to house searches for Jews. Darn that runaway imagination. Then, there is that morning staple – the newspaper. After covering the wedding of the century and then the killing of the terrorist of the century, it's embarrassing to read about petty thefts and irrational acts of obscure, jilted Romeos. And just when I am feeling as low as one can get, I discover that element of irony in a page which makes me smile. Go to the top of page three. You will see a four column photograph of a country scene. Well, this pic is certainly not going to be used by our government propaganda machinery. Nor is it, I suppose, ever going to make it on the Assam Tourism calendar. To cut to the chase – the photograph shows an old wooden bridge leading to some forgotten village that we city slickers never knew existed. It is a rough-hewn bridge with crooked planks that are clearly rotting. Some of the planks have fallen off already. You can see a man gingerly trundling his bicycle over this pathetic apology of a bridge. He looks as if he is not sure he can make it to the other side. Below the photograph is a caption deploring the condition of the bridge and the apathy of the powers that be. Maybe the floods will sweep away this bridge in the monsoon. But there will always be some other bridge tottering, in its last legs, waiting to be photographed.

But wait, the story isn't over yet. Move your eyes to the left of the page. And there you are – there's a news item about this sleek, well-fed central minister, on a two-day visit to this God forsaken part of the country, giving his take on connectivity. Mind you, connectivity. He says how vital it is for our economy, for the movement of goods and people, for the defence of this strategic and sensitive geo-political region. His spiel sounds so neatly woven, so well-worded, that you forget all about the old, tottering wreck of a bridge featured alongside, and imagine little dots all over the North East connected with criss-crossing lines. Then you realise it took three days to find a VIP victim of a recent air crash. Some connectivity, that.

But, if you look beyond news photos, there is something eternal and romantic about bridges. They are a metaphor of our desire to span distances, to cross hurdles. It does not mean only engineers can build bridges – though I suppose theirs are the ones of most practical value. But writers and artists also build bridges with words and brushstrokes. Claude Monet's haunting bridges come to mind. By conveying the deepest emotions common to all, they build invisible bridges that hold the family of man together. As a student of history, I used to be fascinated by the drawbridges of castles. In times of enemy attack, the drawbridges would be lifted and the surrounding moat would make enemy intrusion impossible. They may be relics of the past, but drawbridges exist today in a different form. We, in one way or the other, are guilty of lifting our drawbridges and withdrawing contact with people. We have only a hazy idea of what our next door neighbour looks like. We visit our relatives only if we are invited. We confirm Facebook friend requests maybe because we know we don't need to go through the bother of getting

face to face. That is why we are getting all weird and neurotic– we have forgotten drawbridges were to be lifted only during enemy attack.

There were two bridges that played a big part in my childhood. One originates from that magnificent scene from *The Ten Commandments*. As Moses leads his flock to the edge of the Red Sea, the soldiers of Rameses are closing in. Moses spreads his hands wide, and the waters of the Red Sea magically part. The exiles rush through that divine bridge across that vast churning sea. But the enemy must not be allowed through and Moses then causes that divine bridge to vanish, just as his people reach the other shore. I can never forget the sight of the horses and soldiers of Rameses scrabbling frantically as the waves wash over them. That scene played over and over in my mind for years. Then there is the cult movie *The Bridge on the river Kwai*. I heard this magical title from my father, a diehard movie buff. When Colonel Nicholson builds this bridge for the Burma-Siam railway, he feels it is a monument to British character. The POW workers toil bravely against daunting odds, little knowing there is a plan by the Allies to blow it up. I never much care for war movies, maybe because there are no women around, but this film remains a favourite.

Francesca Johnson, of the *Bridges of Madison County*, may well be Everywoman. Raising a family, always putting herself second, plodding through unending household chores – her life seems to reach a dead end. The wife and mother overshadows the woman in her. And then, with her family away, a tall gangly stranger comes asking about bridges for an article in the *National Geographic.* Those four days of love last her a lifetime, and in her will, she requests that her ashes be scattered over a certain bridge that marks their love. That stranger, whom she never meets again, has also had his ashes scattered there. That bridge is thus the meeting point, symbolising the union of two people in the hereafter. It is one of the best selling books of the twentieth century, and one that is bound to make your eyes bright with unshed tears. If the movie garnered some bad reviews, it must be because we live in a cynical age.

I conclude with a few words about the picture accompanying this piece. It has been taken by Omar Sharif, a gifted young photographer in a remote corner of West Siang district in Arunachal Pradesh. What strikes one at once is the visual poetry of this apparently fragile bridge made of bamboo lashed together. It is a triumphant monument to human ingenuity. I envy that lone man standing halfway on the bridge. I imagine he is listening to the music of the gurgling waters, the birdsong and gulping in mouthfuls of clean, fresh air. He is at leisure to cross and recross that bridge all day long, maybe even humming Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge over troubled waters*. I imagine he's never heard of that word connectivity, but he sure knows how to reach the other bank – that too without the help of some sleek, fatcat politician.

All shook up

It is a given in our times that what was breaking news just hours ago rapidly disintegrates into something as stale as leftovers in the fridge af-ter a long nights' loadshedding. So why

should I even toy with the idea of penning a piece based on the big quake ten days ago, is beyond me. Do I want to commit literary harakiri in full public view, sheepishly warming up the sorry looking leftovers because I cannot rustle up a gourmet meal, so to speak? We all know how much this tremor figured on the Richter scale, its epicentre, the collateral damage, our singular lack of disaster preparedness, the possibility of more to come...

The facts and figures that every other man and woman around me can rattle off at a moment's notice is as awesome as the tectonic upheaval that started it all. Everybody has an incisive, analytical, know – it-all take on earthquakes. Many, in fact, sound like they have a portable seismograph, one as handy as a swiss army knife, which they can fish out of their pockets and handbags the minute things rattle around them. I can imagine people crouched under tables and door jambs, or sprinting on a mad dash out to the open, intently peering into the small lit-up screens of their accurate, digital, seismographs and figuring out their chances of escaping unscratched.

It would be futile on my part, therefore, to even try matching up to the average person's empirical knowledge about this literally unsettling natural phenomenon. But then, all that matters to me is what lies beyond the whys and wherefores – for I suddenly discover a treasure chest of little stories floating in the air around me, little anecdotes that people have been telling me about what they were in the middle of when that terrific shudder caught them unawares, what their thoughts were as they were fleeing to safety, how their whole lives flashed before their eyes and how they continue to cope with the fear that this was only the prologue to bigger things to come.

In moments of peril, it is our instinct to remember the people we love and may forever be prevented from seeing. This is a very real fear and people as strikingly different as an Eskimo and a Zulu tribesman will identify with it, thus understanding each other with perfect clarity should they ever be thrown in together. For me, personally, a tremor somehow always comes with a sudden and urgent remembrance of my geography teacher in my staid convent school. For it was she alone who initiated me, and the rest of my classmates, with the knowledge that this good earth was not so much grass and rose bushes with some nice, poetic, shady trees thrown in. Deep within the earth, there was a zillion centigrade hell hole with liquid fire pushing its way out as volcanoes. As we sleepily tried making sense of it all, sticking chewing gum under our desks, she droned on about tectonic plates, fault lines, their irresponsible restlessness, and how the Himalayas was once the Tethys sea and India – two separate landmasses. Madam geography, with her kindly, maternal tone and crisp, cotton saris, made us painfully aware that the ground beneath our feet was as untrustworthy as the boys who hung around hopefully outside the schoolgates every evening. To be forewarned is to be forearmed and my teacher so effectively put the fear of the underground into me that I have been like a coiled spring ever since, prepared to flee at short notice.

In between these long years of dreaded anticipation, I have come to know, along with everybody in this corner of the world, that the word underground has another connotation, one equally sinister, one that we could perhaps have prevented, but history had other plans. We talk about that underground in hushed tones, too, and how it unleashes its savagery on us is sudden, and as arbitrary as the other underground.

Over the last few days – as I have been saying, I am consumed by this intense curiosity about what friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances and neighbours were doing when the window panes began to rattle. Their revelations tell me so much about human nature, and proves without doubt that though we belong to the family of man, we are also so different. I was talking to my friend on the phone, a college lecturer said an acqaintance. She was complaining in general about her husband, starting with his unwillingness to go *puja* shopping. She then started taking my recipe for pigeon meat curry with sesame seeds. Panic, what panic? We went on talking right through. It was only forty seconds, right. I just repeated the list of ingredients, problem in case she was distracted.

The quake? My journo friend grinned, "I thought it was all my fault."

"Come off it," I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "You sure have an inflated sense of your own importance".

"You got me wrong there, lady." He said in an injured tone. "I always have a peg or two lateish in the night, after work. So when things started spinning around, I was at first sure I was plastered. So it didn't bother me in the least. Then I realised I hadn't taken the tiniest sip the whole evening. Even so, I wondered if it was the previous night's peg, delayed effect and all that. It was only when I saw people running that I finally got it. The problem was outside, not inside me.

"Sorry, the clothes are not ready," said my tailor. Normally, I would be annoyed, disappointed, inconvenienced. But my new, all consuming interest makes non-delivery of clothes irrelevant. So what was Master Tailor *Saheb* doing when the earth was all shook up, Elvis fashion?

"I was playing chess." I gaped at him with new found respect. From a humble man who took measurements all day, slaved away at his Singer machine, bit thread with his teeth and was bullied by his all-female clientele, here emerges the nobleman of Awadh, straight out of Ray's *Shatranj Ki Khiladi*, moving his queen and knight even as all hell broke lose.

"Didn't the chess pieces fall off?" I asked "No, I did. Fell right off the chair. Hurt my hip. The cess pieces have magnets – they stick to the board".

So there you are – two new revelations - a chess playing tailor and a chess set specially made for playing during earthquakes.

Next is my elderly family friend. "I'm seriously thinking of making a will. I've put it off for years. Your aunty and I were figuring we'd give the property to the son who looks after us right till the end, you know. Then, with everything rattling and shaking, I figured we may never get a chance to test our children's loyalty. So might as well carve it all up between them while we are still on the earth's surface and have our my wits about us."

"No going to the movies for some days," announces a friend. "Can't bear to spend my last moments watching some hideous item song." "Never go to the mall", warned another. I was in one during the quake, I had whole racks of baby diapers, breakfast cereal and herbal creams fall on me. But the worst part? Joining the screaming push-turns-to-shove queues for the exits. Pure mayhem." My neighbour says, "I used to keep a bag by the living room front door – with a flashlight, band-aid, Maggi packets, medicines, water bottle, glucose biscuits, candles, matches, even extra spectacles. That evening, as we were making a mad dash for the door, I was confident the bag would see us through the worst catastrophe. But to our shock and horror, the bag was gone. We are badly shaken. Of course, I mean due to

the missing bag, not the quake. We suspect the part-time maid. “We have a new bag now.” “And the maid?” “Oh, we fired her at once. Can’t have her playing with our lives, can we?”

Lead, Kindly Light
16 July 2012 at 15:12

From delusion lead me to truth
From darkness lead me to light
From death lead me to immortality.
– ***Brihadaranyaka Upanishad***

Is it the inflation or is it just me? I am wondering why Diwali for me this year is without its usual zing. In all the TV channels I have been flip-ping through, people are buying jewellery on *Dhanteras* costing staggering sums of money, cameras are panning into the homes of Bollywood A-listers, with breathless voice-overs of who is wearing what and who has come with who. Anchors, even the news ones, are dressed as if they have a walk on part in a *Saas-bahu* serial. Everywhere you have sightings of adorable, *kohl*- eyed toddlers lighting sparklers. This is the good part – the brighter side. And then you have the other side, the dark part, the evil twin if you will. They are showing ragged, emaciated kids slaving at a Sivakasi firecracker factory. Gloomy looking families are being interviewed about how they are having to cut corners due to reasons ranging from fuel hikes to higher interest rates on housing loans. Some environmentalist is grimly handing out a reality check on Diwali-induced pollution. There is a scrolled news item of someone dying, engulfed in flames after a cracker-busting spree gone horribly wrong.
When it comes to light, God had it so easy. All He had to do, in His infinite wisdom and power, was to say “Let there be light”, and there was light. Man is made in His image, or so we are told. But though primitive man lit fires long before he could speak, let alone write about this illuminating experience, it took him thousands of years to figure out how to light an electric bulb. If we had no electricity, think how impoverished we would have been – who could have thought up those zany lightbulb jokes?
My own encounter with fire began on some dimly remembered Diwali evening of a lost childhood. Just as the pale, burnished gold of the November light yielded to the velvet darkness of dusk, Mother pushed me gently, but firmly, to the front terrace. My task was to light a dozen spindly candles and place them upright on a stone ledge still warm with the sun. One could not think of more adverse circumstances in which to light candles. I was too young, too cold, too clumsy and too jumpy, what with the fire crackers going bust all around. Worse, there was a sniggering kid brother in tow, who cheerfully expressed his utter lack of confidence in my candle-lighting skills. Several broken matchsticks later, one lit up and my trembling fingers applied it to the first candle wick. A weak sputter, then black,

accusing darkness, followed by the gleeful cackle of the sibling. Finally, the candles were lighting up, one tiny flame at a time. When the first flicker of a flame began, I would cup it with my palms, saving it from the nipping wind, coaxing it, entreating it to gleam. I would then feel my palms warming, the flame expanding, dancing, and then emanating a steady, unwavering glow. After all that fumbling, the clumsy, stiff fingers, the smell of sulphur from the matchbox and hot, melting wax setting off startled yelps, my reward lay before me, a row of flickering candles, each warm, dancing flame a part of that feeling of triumph, a sense of having achieved the impossible.

There is so much that we can learn from light. How it always gives and shines on both friend and foe, and how its generous giving does not diminish it. The Maoris got it right when they came up with the idea that you have only got to turn your face to the sun and the shadows will then fall behind you. It is amazing to think of the infinite range of light – sunlight, moonlight, starlight and then candlelight, neon light filling our roads with an incandescent glow, lights inside our refrigerators and our cars, floodlights for night games and torchlights to read Charlie Brown comics under the blankets. Light is so much more than wattage. It is a metaphor for hope and goodness, knowledge and a realisation of the divine. A hero kindles the light, but the saint is himself the light. In the words of Tagore, “faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.” When the Buddha lay on his bed, ready to depart to the next world, he saw his disciple Anan weeping. He asked him why, and the disciple said: “Because you are the light and we cannot live without you.” The Buddha put his hand on the disciple’s head and said gently, “Anan, Anan, be a light unto yourself.”

One of my most poetic memories is that of a childhood picnic in Golf Links. I remember running after a red ball in the green, undulating meadow, with the previously mentioned bratty sibling in tow. Far away, beside a chequered cloth laid out with sandwiches, oranges, boiled eggs and a flask of tea, sat my parents. We ran further and further, right into a copse of slender, young pines. It became dark, there were grey clouds looming overhead, the sun obscured.

Opening out within the circle of pines was a perfect grassy knoll, with clumps of white daisies growing wild. And then, before our very eyes, a strange thing happened. Whereas the ring of trees remained dark, shafts of sunlight fell on that circle of grass, like a kind of celestial spotlight. It was eerie, Nature’s very own special effects and it took our breath away. And in a trice, that moment was gone. It started to drizzle and our picnic broke up in a rather hasty fashion. It took me many years and a whole lot of living to understand that there was another place where this endless drama of light and shade played out.... deep in the labyrinth of our minds, where dreams are born, and our secrets sleep. The mind is the refuge of darkness and light, each seeking to subdue the other. But we must not condemn darkness, for creativity begins in it, and fear, despair, anger, the children of the dark, have propelled man to pen sublime verse and paint masterpieces, compose divine music and seek answers to our most challenging problems. As Khalil Gibran put it so pithily, we reach dawn by the path of the dark. We must not deny ourselves from looking into the darkness in us, for that is where our passion and energy lies.

Coming back to Diwali, which is the point of this whole exercise, here is a thought. The denizens of Ayodhya welcomed Lord Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, as they returned from their fourteen-year-old exile. It was a triumphant homecoming, the return of a beloved future

king. I think of Diwali from the perspective of Sita. Here she is, back in the bosom of her family, rescued from captivity by her brave husband and brother-in-law. Was she at all aware during that golden moment of return, as petals were showered upon her and countless lamps glimmered, that there were sly murmurs and nudges by people in the crowd, malicious innuendos made about her chastity? Rather than the gentle, flickering light of the *diya*, it is the trial by fire, the *agnipariksha* she underwent later, that decided her destiny, and symbolises till date, the precarious existence of all women marked pure and impure by a callous, patriarchal society. Sita may have proved her purity, but it was still she who had to pay the terrible price. The people who welcomed the three to Ayodhya were also the ones who cruelly wronged an innocent woman.

Darkness remains a metaphor of injustice and suffering. Many years ago, I had come across a poem by Bengali poet Urmila Chakrabarty. Titled *Loadshedding*, it describes an old grocer looking for his son in the half-light of a hurricane lamp, in a road darkened by loadshedding. It speaks of many lanterns swinging with their clouded chimneys in the futile search for lost sons, young men who had perhaps turned Naxalites, and had disappeared from countless homes.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Janaka asks Sage Yajnavalkya: When the sun has set, the moon has set, and there is total darkness, what light does one have? After some thought, the Sage answers: “The *atman*, the self, is his ultimate light.” We must carry our own light. And like the clumsy, fearful child who set out to light the first Diwali candle of her life, there is in each of us a hopeful, undaunted being striking that matchstick, shielding that little quivering flame from the wind, and exulting in its glow. Perhaps that is all there is to life. Lighting candles in the dark.

In cold blood

16 July 2012 at 15:11

Imagine this. At the end of a long, exhausting workday, you want noth-ing else so badly as to reach home, get under the shower, grab a bite and settle down for a few hours of passive, zonked out telly watching before calling it a night. Problem is, too many fellow denizens of your city want pretty much the same thing. So there they are – in bicycles, rickshaws, autos, buses, trekkers, cars, bikes, trying to race ahead of each other, braking, accelerating, glaring, faces contorted with rage, cuss words pouring out in spurts of pure vitriol. So you are purring along peacefully in your car, the music and air-conditioning on, shutting out the angry, jittery world clamouring around you. Then you stop at a fast food joint. Junior loves his teatime treat – a juicy, fingerlicking chicken roll. There are eight others ahead in the line. Hurry up. Hurry up. That is the refrain, each customer coiled like a spring. It finally gets to you too. Your voice rises when you are told they have run out of sauce packets. The salesboy with the gold ear stud looks insolent. Driving along one of the inner

lanes, you almost collide with the bike driven by some long-haired maniac. You see the mountain of refuse rising on the dumpster, the mean dogs snarling among the rotten food and plastic packets. The country is going to the dogs, you think. There cannot be any argument about that.

I have this *deja vu* like experience almost every day, and maybe you do, too. I am at my most vulnerable after this daily collision with the palpable hostility of this urban monster swelling in size before our very eyes. That perhaps explains my very real and urgent need to replace this angst-ridden, alienated, dehumanised dimension of reality with something completely different. And it is the telly that promises succour. A glorious medley of images and sounds – loving, picture perfect families, cars gliding on roads like velvet ribbons, ethereal brides in diamonds and insurance people who care deeply about you. And I want more... sunshine under a Tuscan sky, lobsters cooked in red wine, the dream mansions and yachts of the rich and famous. This is the daily fix we all need to make us feel life isn't so bad after all, and the world not quite the dark, menacing place we imagine. Or is it?

But sadly, sometimes the cure is more deadly than the ailment. Back home after work, having crossed the car-choked main road with a mixture of panic, bravado, whispered prayer heavenwards and this-too-shall-pass rationale, I am safely back in my spacious, noiseless home, and switching on my route to nirvana. I wish I hadn't. For there, on the screen before me, was a man walking a city street with the decapitated head of his wife, a man striding along in a leisurely amble, looking perfectly composed and quite ordinary, as if he were just carrying a bag of groceries from the market. The voice -over is full of suppressed excitement, each shrill word chosen to shock viewers into dropping their remotes. There is this promise of more horrifying visuals to come, sensational revelations about to be made. We were not to go anywhere, or even think of switching channels. There is a small square mosaic over the woman's head, but that hardly matters, for the scene hits you with visceral force. On the face of it, it is a familiar tale of an allegedly cuckolded husband, a straying wife, and a marriage coming apart at the seams. As the mikes are thrust towards the man, with a harsh, drawn face and cold pitiless eyes, he mumbles "I cannot speak now. I am outside my brain."

Outside my brain. That seems about as phantasmagorical as a man turning into an insect in a Kafka story. I wonder how one can be outside one's brain, the sole organ that is aware of life even it its last moments. The killer is clearly distancing himself from the fiendish brain that dreamed of and executed this macabre deed. He has fled from it, because the brain's twisted logic drove him to end the life of a woman who had borne his children. But there is more lined up for you, the viewer. I cannot even begin to describe the outrage I felt when I heard a news reporter asking one of the sons: "Where is your mother? Where is your mother?" The dazed little boy blinks at the camera, his eyes darting to the reporter, the people around him. When the question is lobbed, you can see him flinch and recoil, as if someone has struck a body blow. His face then crumples up and you hear his heartbroken keening. "He killed her," he wails. "He killed her." Satisfied, almost triumphant, the reporter moves away. Then you are rewarded with a last soft – focus visual of a beheaded mother's corpse, clothes in disarray, lying in the shadowy interiors of a shabby home. Investigative journalism at its best.

THIRD EYE EDITION

Film director Quentin Tarantino once said that violence is one of the most fun things to watch. But then, who among us will own up to that? We blame the media for the compulsive, manic coverage, but aren't we hooked to it? By a sort of tacit complicity, we put a cloak of respectability over a naked, mindless criminal deed. We listen to experts analysing the incident, about premeditated crime and one committed in a fit of rage. People in the know appear in panels and offer their take into what is wrong with this modern age, how social and familial bonds are loosening, why people crave for material things, how people are provoked at short notice. We try to look at a vast, ever changing and complex reality through the prism of a crime which does not have the scale of war or genocide. Large scale killings do not interest us. It is the intensely personal ones that do. And after everything has been said and conjectured upon, and everyone gets their fifteen minutes of fame, we have pigeonholed this deed and find closure. A month from now, nobody will even remember the names of those two little orphaned boys.

So, the logical question that follows is – Are we programmed to be fascinated by violence and evil? I must try to answer that in Door's musician Jim Morrison's words: "Violence isn't always evil. What is evil is our infatuation with it." However, it is clear that this addiction is not anything new. Violence has been depicted in art longer than we care to admit. Think of hunting scenes in prehistoric caves. Christ on the cross, his agonised, emaciated form nailed savagely to the wood. And Picasso's immortal *Guernica*, trying to interpret newer forms of horror, man's endless appetite for violence. Created in muted grey, black and white, it has human figures scattering from a bomb exploding in the centre of the canvas. They separate like shards of grenade, a horse whinnies in fear, faces scream, yelling, screaming. Cut to film – the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, while succeeding brilliantly in the aestheticization of violence on film, could not but help include the moral element. Which is why, in *Psycho*, we are shown that the protagonist Marion Crane stole money from her boss, before being murdered by the crazed Norman Bates in that classic shower scene. Was that her comeuppance? Looks like it. Even Norman Bates' act is not a random, criminal one. He is someone pushed to the edge by a dominating mother. Fast forward to the present and you have *Kill Bill,* a breathtaking landscape of art and violence that presents a pure, aesthetic experience. Talk about celebrating gore.

But in real life, you cannot comfort yourself that it is only make-belief, that you can switch it off if you don't want to watch. Within the space of a few weeks, there have been several suicides by young people in the city. The common thread running through these tragic episodes has been unrequited love. Author Anthony Burgess had it spot on when he observed: 'Violence among young people is an aspect of their desire to create. They don't know how to use their energy creatively, so they do the opposite and destroy." Social commentators not only tread the moral high ground, but roundly condemn everything from cell phones, Facebook to western influence and parental neglect. But one element not so clearly emphasised is that romantic relationships these days is not so much a meeting of true hearts, but a fashion statement, a vindication of one's desirability among the opposite sex. Your partner may care just enough to skim only the surface of the person you are. You both may have absolutely nothing in common. You are often held together only, I repeat, only, by the pressing anxiety of not being exposed as a loser, a misfit among the peer group should you ever break up. Rejection by a partner then is not just a private matter, but a

spectacle open to a nudging, winking and shoulder – shrugging group of friends. Sadly, many youngsters these days do not have the emotional intelligence to nurture and sustain relationships. And their sense of the self is so fragile, so brittle, that a break up is enough for them to implode. They cannot cope with the fact that love is not a Hallmark card, with syrupy words and entwined hearts. For them, life is not the larger circle embracing their family and aspirations for the future, it is only a tunnel vision of a phone call not answered, and an after class date rudely cancelled. Where did we go wrong with our young?
There are no answers. And that is the most frightening thing of all.

Happy hours
16 July 2012 at 15:10

"Happiness?" The voice at the other "What a cliche".
So there I was, holding the tattered remains of my idea. Experience should have taught me that no self-respecting columnist should consult an iconoclastic twenty something young man who has made it his life's mission to demolish egos, starting with his mother's, about anything she plans to write in her column. And hadn't this same young man made his own debut in this page as a bratty schoolboy? But no, I had to seek his counsel, his approval in going ahead with my grandiose plan to pen a profound price on happiness, the achievement of which is proving as impossible as a cure for cancer or the standoff in Libya. Though I was seething inside, I steered the phone conversation towards more neutral territory such as food, exams, internship and the temperatures in Delhi. But even these topics got me into trouble. Discussing what one ate was plebeian. Exams were his business, not mine and could I lower the sizzling summer temperatures for him? So why was I even asking? And after his own rapidfire questions to me – Are you going for walks everyday? Are you staying off mayonnaise? Did you watch the YouTube documentary I told you about? – we ended the conversation with me being a wee bit confused as to whether I was the parent or the child.
But I had much more serious things to do than grapple with this sudden identity crisis. Happiness was, in retrospect, indeed a cliche, and it has been done to death by dudes ranging from Aristotle to Martin Seligman. Think happiness and *Readers Digest* articles flash before your eyes – easy flowing prose with neat subheadings promising you a magic escape from your blues and your neuroses. The human effort to be happy seems to me like a cat pawing a ball of wool. He goes at it tooth and claw, working it and spinning it around, and all he gets in the end is a messy tangle. We are all in the habit of treating happiness like a Rubik's Cube – we try to get all the colours together on one side, make sure that everything falls into place, and presto, the Holy Grail is ours. But it doesn't work that way and so,

unable to get the real thing, we settle for something low down on the happiness sweepstakes – the feel good factor. You could have a really lousy life – the boss hates you, somebody stole your car, your kid answers back, the wife says "You are no George Clooney" to your face. In this bleak Apocalyptic scenario, happiness is out of the question. Ah, but the feel good factor? – that is a whole new ball game altogether. Catch a feel good film in which families are perfect and always on vacation. Have a feel good doughnut and pick up a feel good Smiley T-shirt in canary yellow. Go on, just indulge yourself with small, distracting pleasures that often cost big money. The euphoria is temporary, your problems don't go away but what the heck, you deserve to pamper yourself. And what's better, you can afford to.

But hey, you don't even need to part with your moolah for a slice of the happiness cake. Ever heard of Richard Wiseman? Well, he penned the book *59 Seconds* and it takes that little time, a mere snap of the fingers, for you to stake your claim to instant nirvana. And the tricks are so simple-man, even a child could pull em' off. For instance, he advises we wear colourful clothes. Try shocking pink, electric red. Try screaming orange and murderous blue. You will be so blinded by colour you will forget to brood. People around you will be holding their sides laughing at your fashion fiasco. As tears of merriment roll down their eyes, all their poisonous toxins will be released, the blood will pump more vigorously, the cardiac muscles will get exercised and endorphins will create feelings of happiness and well-being. If you want to do your bit for humanity without all the privations of being Mother Teresa, go for that hideous yellow shirt or sari buried at the bottom of your closet. And the second trick-it's easier than the first and will not even draw unwelcome attention. Talk in a slow, relaxed way. That's it. Enunciate each word slowly. Better still, take a deep breath between words. There is, of course, the danger somebody will think you are some kind of retard. They are entitled to their opinion. But this trick is not without bigger perils. Imagine, for instance, you are in this crowded bus and elbowing your way out to the front exit. You must make it before the bus zooms off. How can you then deep breathe through words? And then this domestic scene. It's already eight in the morning. Your kid hasn't brushed his teeth. You have to drop him at school and make your presentation at the office. How do you convince your kid you are going to wallop him in that calm, reasonable tone? He may even get the wrong message and think you are so harmless, he might as well stumble back to bed. The wise Mr. Wiseman tells us to use words like love and bond very frequently in our conversations. I don't think it will work at all well with lawyers, tax-men, your in-laws and the incorrigible cable*wallah*. And I think most men would rather not sound namby pamby using these soft words. We are also advised to put a spring in our step. That's easy enough to do, considering how we are always in a tearing hurry, either because we are late for an appointment or our doctor told us to sweat it out. If the faster you move, the happier you get, then wouldn't being chased by a pack of street dogs lead to the highest level of happiness? Nah, I don't think so.

Another problem we have in this universal quest is how we muddle up needs with happiness. All the feel good advertisements persuade us that a dream duplex apartment, a high end car, split level AC and surround sound plasma TV will have us beaming like the paid models with perfect teeth. But material assets just fulfil our needs and make our lives comfortable. Comfort and happiness are not to be confused. If money were to be the only

indice to gauge happiness, billionaires would be happier than millionaires, and people in slums would be busy trying to bump themselves off. But that is just not how it works. In fact, comfort is suspected to engender unhappiness because you now have time in your hands to look inwards. Since you have everything you need, there is nothing more to wait for, to acquire. The novelty of owning everything wears off before you can enjoy the phase. And when you realise that you are not in control, that simply buying your way out of unhappiness is a dumb idea at best, your ego goes for a toss and the caviar and Dom Perignon are nothing like they are hyped up to be.

A word here about laughter clubs. They say laughter is contagious and a sure-fire short cut to happiness. Like cities elsewhere, Guwahati too has some laughter clubs, mainly formed by senior citizens who gather at an unearthly hour in the morning to scare late risers with their laughter. I have been told that few members bother to read up jokes and anecdotes to amuse the group. Instead, right on the dot, they break out into collective guffaws apropos of nothing. How they manage to inspire themselves in this activity, and how they can sustain it for thirty minutes or so, beats me. Do they laugh in isolation, all looking into their private, individual memories? Or do they cackle at the absurd sight of each other earnestly trying to soak in the benefits of this therapy? No study has yet been made on whether these jolly early risers are happier than those who ignore the alarm and continue to snooze. But they go about it as conscientiously as taking flu shots or switching to a low-cal, sugar free diet. Surely it can't be fun?

If you don’t particularly care for such group activity, you could skip this collective silliness and just make your own happiness box. I know this sounds suspiciously kindergarten, but hey, this is the only way you'll get any younger. So get cracking, find yourself a cardboard box. Decorate it with glitter, stickers, paper hearts. Fill the box with pictures of your loved ones, photos of places you've gone on holiday, ticket stubs, sea shells, childhood dolls, personal accounts of your happy memories. Then put away the box somewhere safe. When life looks bleak and you are down and out, the box could be your saviour. It is the reverse of the Pandora's box and I think that’s where the inventer stole the idea from. The way “thinking out of the box,” phrase is being bandied around these days, I suspect everyone has his own, secret happiness box. Good for him.

Perhaps being happy is not rocket science as we believe it to be. Albert Einstein once said that happiness was so simple to attain – “a table, a chair, a bowl of fruit and a violin.” There's a catch here, though. If you are not much of a fruit person and you can't tell a violin from a zither, let alone play it, your chances of finding happiness with just a table and a chair are pretty dim. But, it strikes me that at this moment, I am very happy with only a table and a chair, because I am at the end of this piece and hope to prove to my sneering son that happiness may be a cliche, but you could write reams and reams just skimming the surface. So there.

For whom the bells toll

16 July 2012 at 15:08

For the first time ever, the theme of this column is a foregone conclusion. I have always been a passionate, read that as stub-born, advocate of free choice, and so nat-urally, when I find my hands tied in knots, and have no say in my own column, I see red. It is almost as if I can hear the Queen of *Alice in Wonderland* say about me: "Off with her head!" My thoughts, for all they are worth, are being scarily remote controlled by an over-pampered, underachieving, dysfunctional family thousands of miles away aka the British Royalty. All because one of their princes, after dithering for an embarrassingly long time, finally decided to walk to the altar with his bride.

Received wisdom has it that if you have had chicken pox when you were a kid, you didn't get it again when you are an adult. But royalty fever? Bad news, chum. It comes back again, and worse, in a more virulent form, and you had better believe me, for I speak from experience.

When Prince Charles wed Diana, I was this giddy young woman who was pretty darn sure life was a fairy tale, with a prince just waiting to happen. And all you had to do while waiting for this amorous miracle to take place was to just continue being fluttery-eyed, wasp waisted and coldly dismissive of all the gangly youths with zits on their cheeks who sang off key on the roadside as you passed regally by.

I also remember how I actually got goosebumps when I saw Princess Di in a black and white newspaper photograph for the first time. Could anyone be this beautiful? To my eyes, and the eyes of my besotted female friends, Di was no less than a nymph, a Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Helen of Troy, Venus de Milo and Aphrodite all rolled into one, and she nearly caused our hearts to stop in collective amazement. And among the dumber, or if you please, less academically inclined girls among us, there was pure exhilaration. If Princess Di didn't get past high school, if her grades were the stuff of parental nightmares, and she could still be wooed by a prince, they had nothing to be ashamed of! In fact, they could actually flaunt their dumb scores so that some prince would sit up and notice.

But, as a rule, we Indian women are not so hung up on princes. I would even go so far as to declare that in a country whose history is teeming, almost crawling with kings and princes with jaw-breaking names and mind-numbing accounts of their conquests, Indian women wouldn't bat an eyelid if a prince even went so far as to kneel down on one knee before her with a ring. And by the time my generation of girls metamorphosed into women, this country had long moved past dynasties, past even colonialism and claimed her rightful place as the world’s largest democracy. And where was royalty? Oh, Indira Gandhi abolished their privy purses, even put Maharani Gayatri Devi behind bars. So the royals were a faded relic of the past, skulking in their crumbling, deserted palaces, and even turning them into hotels to keep the home fires burning. So, giddy headed though we were, we were also sensible enough to realise that no Prithviraj Chauhan was around to daringly carry us off on horseback. Added to this was the endless trouble Indian royalty got us into. For us, beleaguered students of history, royalty was not so much about glittering chandeliers, ballroom dancing and wearing tiaras 24x7. It was about mugging up dates of battles, time span of dynasties, unravelling the Gordian knots of internecine squabbles, and so on. And I

think the day I read about what the Russians did to Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family, I firmly concluded that being propositioned by a prince was highly overrated, if not downright life-threatening.

All this changed with Princess Di's wedding. As the countdown began, I remember my friends and I jabbering away all the princess related trivia we had gathered. How she had taught the prince to tap dance and hated the countryside. That her stepmother was related to romance novelist Barbara Cartland. That Di had won an award at school for taking good care of her guinea pig – I swear I am not making that up. She was only an inch shorter than the prince, and towered over him in stilettoes. We went into a swoon over her 10,000 pearls encrusted puff ball meringue wedding dress, the never ending train and the quaint glass coach that carried her to St Paul's Cathedral.

Three decades down the line, this Prince William – Kate Middleton wedding feels surreal. So much has changed for us girls. We are all aunties now. Our children's fathers are no princes – we are just happy if they don't complain about the burnt toast. The princess we idolised is no more in our midst. Worse, she was unloved, cheated on, stalked by the paparazzi and hounded to death. I cried when I heard Elton John singing *Candle In the Wind* at her funeral – I think I did so not only because I mourned for Princess Di, but also because I finally learned that life peeled away your illusions and left nothing to hold on to.

So, till just a few days ago, I was planning to be this tough nut, sceptical woman of the world who is too clear eyed to be taken in by two out-moded dinosaur institutions – marriage and royalty. Then again, Kate is young enough to be a daughter. Like any exasperated mother, I think I want to tell her: "Look honey, being a princess is not what it is cracked up to be!!" I want to warn her that sometimes, if you kiss a prince, he turns into a frog. And would she want only this royal wedding to be her 'crowning achievement'?

And then, to my mortification, this wedding thing just sucked me in. Anchors of television channels were going into nudge nudge wink wink mode as they shared tantalising details of the nuptials – Kate's hairdo, jewellery, shoes, make up, wedding gown... Posses of ceremonial guards are endlessly being beamed tramping the London streets. All this pomp and pageantry is wearing down my resistance and I am ashamed to admit that right now, I am no better than a bug-eyed matron from Dorset, digging into her fish and chips, wearing a Union Jack hat and exclaiming what a jolly good show it is going to be. All my plans about telling that cautionary tale to Kate has gone up in smoke as the world turns into a giant television screen.

The marriage will be a crowded affair. You think I'm referring to the crowds outside Westminster Abbey – got you, didn't I? I'm referring to a different kind of crowding here – remember that laconic Princess Di quote about her marriage being a little crowded because Camilla Parker Bowles was there? Well, Kate's having it worse. There are clearly going to be four people in her marriage – she, William, Lady Di and Prince Charles. Endless re-runs of her in-law's wedding day is enough to give the most hardened Gen-Y woman the jitters. If today the public compares Kate with Di in terms of fashion, media savviness, crowd pulling quotient, angelic Bleeding Heart activism etc., they are going to follow her all through her new life with a magnifying glass. Is life in a fish bowl a life worth living? Kate seems to think so. She's waited awfully long for it.

If I am hooked to the *tamasha* that the royal wedding promises, it may well be because deep inside, I want to get back the old me – the young woman with her head in the clouds, believing illusions to be real, dreaming of life in technicolour. And I think every man and woman out there in this vast world following this royal wedding wants to shed their cynical selves and become born again Romantics – at least till the next sleazy tabloid headline. In recent years, we have all united to witness some great human tragedies – the Gulf War, 9/11 bombings, the tsunami in Japan. We are weary of fire, rubble and human remains on television screens. We are pretty sick of the word recession too. We want a pretty world – a world of floating balloons, radiant brides, confetti, cheering crowds, clip clopping horses and men who are in uniform but not killing each other. We saw what happened to the earlier marriage. But we still think there can be something called a second chance.

To conclude, here is a family anecdote. Some years ago, during the embassy parties at my brother's residence, my little niece would station herself in a corner of the room, watch the gathering and chuckle to herself. When my father asked her the reason for this jocularity, she told him, "They are so funny!" I must salute this wise little observer of human nature. Indeed, the British Royals are really high in the funny stakes. Prince Charles talks to plants. That's one of his moves to save the environment. Prince Phillips' favourite pastime is to put his foot in his mouth. Most royals love horses more than human beings. Prince Andrew is in cahoots with shady millionaires. All the Queen's children, except Prince Edward, are divorced. As Katie gets all set to join this batty, Wodehousian club, we settle into our couches, order pizza, click the remote and tune into the longest running reality show in television history. Enjoy!

Dare to stare?

16 July 2012 at 12:57

Ah, the kindness of strangers! If it were not for a certain Mister Michael Sanguinetti, from the Land of the Maple Leaf, I would have been racking my brains this cruel summer evening, looking for ways to fill up this ominous white space below my nose. Thanks to Michael, he of the maple leaf land, this is a story unspooling in high decibel media bytes even as I put pen to paper, on a theme very close to the hearts of all women who walk this earth. One freezing January day this year, our man, a Toronto cop, put his big foot in his big mouth and raised howls of feminine protest that are still echoing and reverberating all around the globe. This is a kind of global warming no one had been quite prepared for, least of all our Michael, who must have felt pretty macho making that one comment that will assure him a notorious footnote in feminist history, but who has, since then, probably imploded into a nervous wreck. At a crime prevention meet organised by York University for safety precautions, our Maple Leaf Michael smugly expressed his view that women had to avoid dressing like sluts if they did not want to get raped. Talk about waving the proverbial red flag before an enraged bull! Those insulting words set off in motion what has been

termed as the most successful feminist action in twenty years. After the April 3 SlutWalk in Toronto, the movement has spread across sixty cities – ranging from Toronto, Melbourne, New Delhi to San Diego and Sao Paulo. Thousands of women waving witty and defiant slogans – *My clothes are not my consent, March on Misogyny; Believe it or not, my short skirt has nothing to do with you. A dress is not a yes; I am not braille-you don't have to touch me to understand me* – donning skimpy shorts, fish net stockings, halter tops, feather boas and T-shirts that look like they had been spray painted on them – marched through the streets holding placards, fists waving, singing, daring the male species to label, profile, criticise, trivialise, judge and assault them on the basis of their clothes. Many men too have joined the parade. Though there has been an atmosphere of fun and in your face bravado around this street carnival, it's subtext affects all women and must continue to engage us long after the footfalls and fanfare has died down. As SlutWalk co-founder Sonya Barnet, Jesica Valenti and Heather Jarvis have stressed, "Women are tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming, of being judged by our sexuality and feeling unsafe as a result." To view women primarily from the prism of sex has been the norm throughout history, and proving it wrong has been an ongoing crusade for the second sex, an inspiring saga of courage and endurance, defiance and solidarity. If the critics of SlutWalk see the movement as license for scantily-clad fluff-heads to assert they are free to do what they want, they are entirely missing the point. The women out there are refusing to apologise about their bodies. They are refusing to accept the blame for testosterone driven, morally crippled thugs out to debase and dehumanise them. And if attracting attention to their protest is by donning a garter belt and purple eye-shadow, so be it. It is all for a good cause, and entirely appropriate for us women pushed to the edge and at the end of our tether. As part of the damage control exercise, the Toronto Police has swiftly backpedalled, saying that dress advisory is issued as part of risk management. Does that then imply a man is an angel with a halo gleaming softly above his head, till he sees a chick in a mini and abracadabra! He grows horns? Puhleese. In fact, feminine clothing having an impact on rape is a myth feminists have tried to debunk for decades. One could even go as far as to say that it is, in fact, the other way round. In many primitive, tribal societies, where women go around more or less with fig leaf versions of clothing, rapes are not common and females enjoy a level of equality that is truly empowering.

Delhi had its own SlutWalk recently, organised as SlutWalk Arthaat Beshaarmi Morcha. Socialite Shobhaa De, who got her Jacqueline Susann of India tag with fast tales of fast girls, dismissed the walk, saying it was not relevant to our cultural ethos. Surely the women in Delhi didn't brave the sun out of a pathetic need to ape a western trend? Indian urban society has undergone a sea chance, with more and more women staying alone/away from home for careers or academics. Whether for a cyber stalker or a streetside Romeo, a taxi driver or rich, drunk boys in BMWs, these young women are vulnerable targets, and their attire, worn for comfort and functionality, is regarded as an outward sign of their moral turpitude.

Right now India needs a movement far greater in impact than the SlutWalk. Here, it is not just about women defending their right to do what they want, date who they choose to, wear what they like, and that the word slut be their badge of honour. For Indian women, their very survival is at stake. We've had seven million girls missing since the last decade, a

whopping fifty million untraceble over the past century. It is number four among the world's most dangerous countries for women. Even Africa doesn't have forced marriage, dowry or child marriage the way we do.

"New Delhi should not just be renowned as the capital of India, but also ashamed to be the a rape capital of India," says Sriparna Pathak, a young professional. "I have travelled to various parts of India, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Gujarat, Kerala, Meghalaya, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, to name a few, and nowhere have I been harassed as much as I have been in New Delhi. I have lived here for the last nine years of my life, and the mindset has not changed at all. As far as the misconception on women dressing provocatively is concerned, I have a few personal experiences to share. I have always been dressed in "appropriate" clothes. Yet, I have been stared at and commented about. What exactly is "appropriate dressing"? In any case, if one were to study the rape cases closely, what is shocking is that most of the rape victims have been in sarees when they were raped. But isn't the saree a symbol of India's tradition? So does that make it inappropriate? In any case, the way one dresses herself is the way she expresses herself. Article 19 (1) (a) of the Indian Constitution gives each citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression. So why is there an attempt to curtail women's means of expression through dressing? The SlutWalk in New Delhi was an attempt to speak up against these forms of discrimination and abuse."

Psychologist Peggy Drexler recently remarked in the *Huffington Post*, "On a crowded and endangered planet, we don't need brutal, arrogant, cold men any more than we need passive, fluttering, subservient women." One of the ways to rediscover our strength also lies in refusing to regard the body as our only self, to starve ourselves and get breast implants and nose jobs for an elusive perfection, to be devastated by wrinkles and sagging skin. It is time for us all to make peace with our bodies, to achieve a fine balance between cultural expectation and reality. The female body is not just a sexual statement, but a repository of a woman's experiences of a lifetime.

I conclude by recounting an incident a couple of months ago. A television producer asked me if I would attend a group discussion on sexual harassment. "Would you be comfortable doing it?" Her voice sounded cautious on the line. "Of course", I replied at once, "Why wouldn't I be?"

Cut to the studio. A lady lawyer and I sit facing an all-woman audience. All the chirpy chatter at the lounge has now given way to an uneasy silence and some nervous chair scrapping. As the lawyer reads out the Vishakha guidelines pertaining to this rather grim subject, the audience shifts gears from bored to numb. It turns out all that male mischief at the workplace is a non-issue for these eves, as nearly all are housewives, and the one career woman looks intimidatingly capable of resisting all advances. Then, one by one, several of them speak out about being ogled at and groped in public buses. Why didn't they strike back? Give the perverts a mouthful? I ask, quite impatient with their sheepish, apologetic confessions. "Oh, it would have looked bad," explains one lamely. "I feel so ashamed when it happens. Now, I don't go anywhere," admits another. I am so crushingly disappointed by these abject replies that I go into some breathless hectoring, which ends with the extreme suggestion, "Why don't you learn taekwando?" The titters it sets off makes it clear the ladies are not too keen on standing up for themselves. And when one of them ventures in a

plaintive air: “But madam, how can we learn taekwando?” I decide my motivational spiel is a no show and explain, “It was just a figure of speech.”
If we have a SlutWalk in Guwahati tomorrow, I know a bunch of women who would never take part in it.
It would look too bad, no?

All fall down!

When I last turned my gaze on the little island that had once been a mighty empire, things had looked pretty hunky dory. A gawky prince with a toothy smile was at the altar with his radiant bride, the ceremonial guards were out in full strength, fairy tale carriages were rolling, the hymns soared up the vaulted cathedral ceiling and best of all, the loyal subjects were in their best behaviour, lining the streets, waving soppy, sentimental placards and blowing their red noses after the all too public display of affection for their beloved royals. For a world lurching from fiscal debt to famine, phone hacking to a fanatical Norwegian killer spraying young people with bullets, Ye Olde England seemed, till a few weeks back, the Neverland that would never change, never mind her shrinking size and being way past her finest hour.
That is why, as the first images of orange flames, smashed shop windows, hoodlums hurling stones, brandishing hockey sticks and hapless Bobbies with shields and water cannon were beamed into our living rooms, this chaos and anarchy seemed to suit every other city but London. As if that was not surprising enough, the rest of that country erupted as well, and like Hamlet, we all came to the gloomy conclusion that something indeed was rotten in this state too.
I have no pretentions to being a political analyst. The whys and wherefores of these riots, so alien to the principles of British justice, fairplay and fellow feeling, will be best debated upon by those in the know of things. As an aside, I am tempted to point out that while the denizens of that country were roughing up innocent people, plundering stores, burning property and making off with television sets, i-pads and jewellery, the common Indian citizen is at this very moment joining hands in a heroic stand against corruption. It is a movement unprecedented in the history of post Independent India. This massive crusade by the *AamJanta*, the common man proves without doubt that there is in us the pulsebeat of *Bapu’s* ideals. Here we are, in the August sunshine, all of us equal, fired with the vision of a clean system, a society ruled by values of truth, justice and uprightness. At this moment of time, we cannot help but tread a moral high ground.
The bleak landscape of Britain today seems to sadden some among us more than the others. We are those who belong to a tribe that lays claim to an invisible citizenship of that country; a sense of entitlement pervades our consciousness. I speak here on behalf of all those who have studied English literature at college and university. Our understanding of our colonial

masters and their homeland has always been derived from the novels, the plays, the poetry that have seeped into our consciousness, fashioning for us an England frozen in time, a country of abstractions, an England that is a state of mind, rather than a tangible, prosaic and fluid, evolving reality. In a sense, much as I feel uncomfortable admitting to it, our band of Eng Lit acolytes have still not let the sun set on the British Empire. We continue to bask in its tender afterglow and willingly put on blinkers so that we do not see the smoke and fire, the rage and the rubble of today.

One Englishwoman single-handedly colonised readers in fair flung corners of the globe, leading us all like a Pied Piper to a country that we could hereafter never ever bid goodbye. Enid Blyton's books have sold 400 million copies and her addictive fiction lulled us to a state of soporific bliss, wafting us to a world where freckled kids eternally rode bicycles along country roads flanked by bushes of honeysuckle, said, "By Jove!" and "Gosh!," tucked into hot buttered scones, jam tarts and meat pies, lived in quaint places like Haycock Heath and Sheepridge. The crimes they solve are never too gruesome, even the policeman has his cute Bobby tag, and life is a round of picnics, midnight treats and fireside *bon hommie*. In the heat and dust of our tropical existence, among malarial mosquitos and outstretched begging bowls, I know many of us are guilty of wishing to be in Blyton's kingdom by the sea. Annointing oneself as an Eng Lit student meant moving a step closer to that utopia. I speak for many when I say I am guilty of being more acquainted with Keats than with Kalidasa. When I read the poems of Neruda today, they have an immediacy and passion that move me more than Wordsworth wringing his hands rather helplessly on the human predicament. And yet, Mahfouz and Chinua Achebe, Toni Morisson and Kazuo Ishiguro, Llosa and Tagore were denied to us, and we were made to believe that our former masters' creative legacy was the only one worth knowing. So we waded through a long river that stretched from Chaucer to Virginia Woolf. But, on hindsight, it does appear that many a time English authors gave away secrets of the actual England and its peoples with their works. Elizabethan dramas were rife with violence and intrigue. The greed of the nouveau riche, a suffocating feudal order, the mindless pleasures of the aristocrats, the dysfunctional family, the pitiable working conditions of miners, the abuse and neglect of orphans have all been revealed through the written word.

In as much as we Eng Lit types are still hung up on our own imagined Britain, the prize for the most diehard loyalist must certainly go to the irascible Nirad C Chaudhuri (he of the *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian fame*. In the dedication to his book published in 1951, he wrote a passage that ended with the words "Because all that was good and living within us/was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule." Chaudhuri had to pay dearly for this. It touched a raw nerve among many in the political and bureaucratic establishment of a newly independent India. He was hounded out of government service, deprived of his pension, blacklisted as a writer in India and fired from his job in AIR. Though he claimed his dedication was actually a piece of mock imperial rhetoric, he could not live down this controversy. In his Oxford years, he continued to be a quaint sight, a brown *sahib* in top-hat, pin-striped trousers and polished walking stick, trotting along the streets, a little sparrow of a man who wore immaculate *dhoti kurta*s of the Bengali *bhadralok* at home and loved his fried brinjal and *shukto*.

For us, the younger generation, it is easy to idolise the country that gave us the Beatless and Alfred Hitchcock, fish and chips and Dylan Thomas, classy beauties like Audrey Hepburn and dreamboats like Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton and Michael Caine. A cigar chomping Churchill stirring the Brits to rally against the Third Reich is the stuff of legend. The giddy headed Asian girl's idea of an English boyfriend would definitely be a Hugh Grantish fellow – full rakish charm and that adorable clipped accent. Jack the Ripper would certainly not qualify. The English men we know and chuckle over are P.G. Woodhouse's immortal Bertie Wooster and the factoun Jeeves, the high strung John Cleese of Fawlty Towers, and the hilarious gang of Monty Python.

The English riots may have been quelled, but their shadow is bound to linger over a society that claims to enjoy a vibrant multi-culturalism. Our *tikka masala* and *bhangra* rap may have won hearts there, and hip-hop may be a hit at parties, but Brits are yet to stomach the idea of the immigrant being equal, being British, being successful and standing on their own feet. The welfare system has bred a class of idle, doped-out, no good bunch of hooligans who think it more macho to let loose gang warfare than lay bricks, mend pipes or man the convenience store. The death of one man in the hands of the police made it very convenient for them to rob and plunder under the guise of expressing solidarity. Worse, affluent, educated people with jobs took part in this free for all, as if breaking the law was the new cool quotient, a new way of belonging, enjoy a delusion of being in the middle of a Quentin Tarantino movie. It will certainly need more than a generous swig of ginger ale for the Brit to cheer up after this national disgrace. Maybe it would be a good idea for Prince Harry to wed. Me thinks it would be the perfect way to cover up an imperfect country.

A crusade with conscience

As we well know by now, noo-dles are not the only stuff that is instant these days. Along with many other things – much more than I care to admit, actually – opinions too are subject to this procedure. If you are educated, reasonably well-informed, and can argue till you are blue in the face, then local television stations will roll out the red carpet for you, always at short notice, of course, avidly recording your take on everything ranging from the annihilation of the planet to the lack of a viable waste disposable system in your city. The catch is – your opinions have to be more than instant. They have to be strong, no holds barred, capable of making the viewer sit up boltright on his couch. You must be committed to not yielding to others on the panel. If your argument doesn't hold much water, you could of course shift gears to high decibel. Once you are warming up to that level, you can bet your bottom dollar that the camera will linger lovingly over you and the anchor's voice, announcing the resumption of the discussion after a short commercial break, will be full of barely suppressed excitement.If you have made a good impression at your very first appearance, it could be that you will be called again, and then some, so that before you

realise it, you are in this loose, informal sorority, this brotherhood of panelists who keep televised discussions alive. It is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. For one thing, just think of the tremendous reach of this medium. So, if you are to be taken seriously at all, you have to do all you can to sidestep the obvious and throw light on aspects of the issue that are not so discernible to the layman.You have to back your arguments with facts, data, the findings of specialists in the field. And you have to decide whether you want to be politically correct, or truly honest. While being a commentator on this highly visible medium does give one a degree of well earned satisfaction, it is also a double edged sword. There is the risk of too much familiarity or overexposure, as well as the pressure to better your performance each time. Not to speak of the weird coincidence that the cleverest lines and the most profound insights come to mind only just after the cameras stop rolling.All these thoughts have resulted from my declining to appear on telly to express my views on whether the transparency revolution spearheaded by Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev will be successful. My point is that this revolution is a work in progress, new events are unfolding every day. Fasting, satyagraha, non-violence once brought the greatest imperial power to its knees. When we see candlelight vigils to bring Jessica Lal's killers to justice, or thousands sing and dance to patriotic songs to cleanse the rot within, we cannot deny the hope that rises with this power of collective action. But revolution is not just about taking to the streets and expecting miracles overnight. If today we are elated that so many are together in this crusade, we must also acknowledge that we are all unitedly responsible for corruption – all of us, from the celebrity criminals now in Tihar Jail to the most anonymous of us bribing our way through for a gas connection, a ration card, a seat at a school or college, a job. Everything is up for grabs. And the highest bidder wins. According to Transparency International, a reputed German NGO, India is the sixty-ninth most corrupt nation in the world. Cameroon is the most corrupt and Pakistan is more corrupt than we are. I think it is good to know sixty-eight countries are ahead of us in this road to perdition.I have a friend of mine who is never tired of narrating this story. Here she goes again. “One evening, I had visitors at my home. My cousin, her husband and their ten year old son dropped in. My cousin is a housewife, whereas my brother-in-law had a government job. He is pretty junior in rank and I could not help noticing that they had done pretty well for themselves, the swanky car, her gold choker, the bandying around of high end brand names. The boy is quite a brat. The little tyke even broke my porcelain ashtray. Anyway, to get to my point, after tea I told them I had to get my daughter home from her tuition classes. So they said of course, they would drop me there. During our conversation at tea, my cousin had let me know that very recently, besides their house in Guwahati, they had also bought a flat in New Delhi. So, teasing my little nephew in the car, I said, “You know what, I’m going to stay in your new flat in Delhi. Will you let me?”“He turned to me, his eyes wide with alarm. “Shhh!” he put a warning finger to his lips – “Sssh! Not in front of the driver!”“But why?” I asked mystified, “If they find out, they will handcuff Papa and put him in prison!”At this point, my friend always shakes her head in disbelief and tells me that the man’s corrupt ways did not shock her half as much as the little boy’s awareness about the whole shady business, and his complicity in keeping his father protected. So, while I was watching the transparency revolution live on TV, my friend called me and said, quite disheartened. “Nothing’s going to come of this, is it? Don’t you think it’s a bit too late?”You cannot have a pat answer for a question like that.

Nor can you harp of a past which you believe was pure as driven snow. But, let's face it, more than ever before, we have become indifferent to the wheeling dealing that goes on all around us. If we tread on the moral high ground about not indulging in it ourselves, we are also guilty of not doing anything to stop others who do so. People who have too much integrity to accept bribes are seen as relics of a dead past, eccentrics out of sync with the real world, or just not smart enough to have an eye on the main chance. Bollywood doesn't help either. I have lost track of the number of movies I have watched which were nothing but cautionary tales about what happens to the honest police officer, the idealistic school teacher et cetera. Instead of inspiring us to stand for what is right and just, they suggest that clamming our mouths shut and keeping our heads down is the secret of longevity.Here I am tempted to recount another story, also a true one, about one man's tragic defence of his innocence. Decades ago, there was a family living in a small town in Assam. The man was a middle level government official, and the family lived simply, almost frugally. The three children were in high school and the man's salary just about covered the household expenses. Festivals were always a time for worry, for relatives descended from all over, but otherwise expenses were carefully minimised. Like any other middle class family, there was some money put aside, a bit at a time, for the daughters' weddings. The son was expected to aspire for a career in medicine, or engineering. All this changed the day the man was summoned by the director of his department. He listened, pale and trembling, as he was accused of deliberately fudging up some records and pocketing money meant for some government work. It was a small amount, laughable in these days of mega-crore scams, but for this man, it was as if someone had struck a blow to his face. Speechless with shock at first, he began protesting his innocence, swearing on the heads of his children, offering to go through the books again, telling his boss he could never even dream of doing such a thing. But, the wheels had been implacably set in motion. A departmental enquiry was ordered. He was suspended from his job. By the next day, everybody – his colleagues, his neighbours, the townsfolk – knew about the black stain on his honour. He could not bear to face anybody around him. Three days later, the world stopped seeing this man. No, he did not take his life. Perhaps that would have been better. Instead, he sequestered himself – to waste away in a kind of living death. He simply locked himself up in his tiny, windowless room... for days, months, years. He did not see the rain, the sunlight, or felt the wind on his face. The seasons changed, the children grew up, left home. His wife's hair grew white. The home became shabby, decrepit. He emerged now and then like a shadow to bathe, and slipped in again. His wife learnt to leave his meals outside his door, wash the clothes he passed out. On the other side of the door, there was this deep silence, a dreadful stillness. There came a time when not a single word escaped his lips. Nobody knows what came of the enquiry. Some say it was a conspiracy by a fellow colleague. But his life ended that terrible day. And years later, when he actually breathed his last, that town had long forgotten who he was, or what had made him such a shadowy, haunted recluse. By today's standards, when scoundrels wave jauntily to the crowds on their way to jail, this man would be no tragic hero, only a pathetic fool and a loser. I wish someone proves me

After the deluge...

14 July 2012 at 17:47

The strange thing about childhood is that afterwards, you remember not only the things you got when you were there, but with equal clarity and yearn-ing, the things you didn't. Today, I look back on this slice of memory because it has a poignant link to something that the whole world has watched in recent times with a deep sense of loss and shared sorrow.

At middle school in Shillong, on Saturday afternoons after the weekly test papers were handed over, there was a pleasant slackening, an easing of our tedious study routine, and much eagerness to make funny faces, giggle and share girly confidences. All this was carried out during the library period. Now this library period was nothing much to speak of. Instead of being taken to an elegant wood-panelled hall of books, we simply continued to sit in our classes. The headgirl carried in a pile of rather shabby dog-eared books which were distributed randomly, without the slightest consideration for our reading tastes. Among that jumble were fifteen books, each devoted to a particular country. They were beautiful illustrated books about countries as diverse as Holland and Mexico. Once or twice, the book on Japan fell into my hands. I would stare entranced at the glossy cover of the lofty, snow-clad Mount Fujiyama, an airy pagoda, cherry blossoms against a cerulean blue sky and on exquisite kimono clad girl shyly fanning herself. There was a stillness and peace that spoke like the comforting whisper of a loved one. Inside were more delights – pictures of lily ponds and landscaped gardens, gracious tea ceremonies, delicate calligraphy... so much refinement and artistry...

But all too soon, the library hour was over and the books rudely snatched from our hands. Many weeks passed by, the book on Japan continued to be circulated among us. I would wait for it to fall into my hands and would anxiously trace its unpredictable journey from one girl to another. It never came back to my hands again. I moved on, we moved on, to the next class, and then the next. Today, even my children are far older than the girl I then was. And on that terrible March day this year, when I saw Japan's sun on the eclipse, and the implacable wall of water change its history forever, my mind, as if seeking to escape from the horror of the present, reached to the farthest recesses of memory. And like the comforting whisper of a loved one, the images came back – the airy pagoda, the cherry trees, the shy kimono-clad girl. That is how I would always like to remember that great country, and that is how I wait for it to come back again.

There were other childhood associations with that island country and its hardy, artistic and sometimes enigmatic people. One of these was a little item of great fascination for any little girl preening before the mirror, conscious of the idea that perhaps she was pretty after all. The Love in Tokyo. This was something a little more than a rubber band – a rubber band with two entwined plastic roses. You tied your hair with it in a pony tail, and the roses added just the right feminine and aesthetic touch. Today, I doubt if it was indeed made by the Japanese, because the name Love in Tokyo is no doubt derived from the eponymous hit Bollywood film of 1966, showing the average Indian family's wariness about accepting an

exotic bride, and a Japanese one at that. The song *Sayonara* from that film echoed through many afternoons of *Fauji Bhai* and *Vividh Bharati*, in radios across our sleepy town. It was, therefore, hard to imagine that this nation, shown on screen in its visual splendour and a fluttery lashed Asha Parekh at her fan-waving, flirtatious best, also had its dark, sinister side. In March 1944, during World War II, the Japanese began their offensive into India. They tried to destroy the main British and Indian forces at Imphal, resulting in some of the most ferocious fighting of the war. In Shillong, a little boy and his siblings were suddenly plucked out of school, and the large, unwieldy family, with hurriedly packed luggage and dismayed backward looks at the beloved house they were so rudely uprooted from, descended the hills and put up with relatives as far away as Goalpara. That little boy, suddenly free of parental supervision, due to the adults' anxious preoccupation with the war, fell into the spirit of adventure like Huck Finn, hitching rides in army trucks of Allied soldiers, accepting their chocolates and generally running wild. The danger abated, the family ascended the hills with sighs of relief, the little boy became my father, and his fund of stories of those eventful years had us hooked. Evacuation was not a scary word for us at all, and for a little boy on the lookout for escape, it opened up some swell opportunities. Something Japanese also brought much joy to our lives as children. This was the Hitachi tape-recorder and player my youngest uncle lugged all the way from San Francisco on his annual trip home. More fascinating than the music of Tony Bennet, Andy Williams and the Carpenters was the sound of our own childish voices singing as the tape unspooled, and it was the closest I got to the feeling I had a doppelganger. I am glad we did not have television then, for the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not cast their shadow upon us, and we were innocent of the ways of human depravity.

Meanwhile, the varied and subtle influences of that invisible and exotic country continued. At annual horticultural shows in town, Ikebana, the Japanese art of formal flower arrangement, with its quiet fusion of balance, harmony and form, seemed so much more sophisticated than the profusion of chrysanthemums bursting out of homely pots. Someone told me that a Japanese man could tell at once what mood his wife was when he came home and checked out her Ikebana floral arrangement in the sitting room. But the art of self-expression had macabre forms too. The ritual disembowelling of oneself to uphold one's honour was something that stayed in my mind for years, with a morbid curiosity to know what went on in the mind of a Samurai preparing for this ritual of harakiri.

Somehow, the idea of Japan as a land of not only cherry blossoms, but also of deep melancholy continued to abide. This was driven home all the more piercingly by the story of Madame Butterfly, an opera based on a true story by John Luther Long. A fragile young geisha, Madame Butterfly, starts a new life as the wife of Lieutenant Pinkerton, who converts her to Christianity and isolates her from her kin. Pinkerton leaves her in Nagasaki, promising to return soon. Butterfly gives birth to a son she names Joy. Pinkerton returns with his American wife Adelaide, who demands to have the child. Madame Butterfly chooses to kill herself, as she has lost everything that she has cherished in life. To me, this story seemed to put across powerfully how vulnerable we are when in love, and how great is the possibility of being betrayed and broken. It has been made into an opera, a film and the doomed heroine is a figure which has captured the popular imagination.

And then, scribbling on endless sheets of paper, the pen trying to keep pace with the galloping stallions of a fevered imagination, the distilled *haikus* of Basho showed how a few words, a single, tenuous strand of thought, could be a glistering dewdrop of immortality – *An old pond!/A frog jumps in/The sound of water.* Or this – *Won't you come and see loneliness? Just one leaf from the* Kiri *tree...*

I never outgrew Basho – but there were other, equally fascinating literary voices to read – Ishiguro, Murakami, Banana Yoshimoto... And it is by a strange coincidence that I was actually reading a Murakami story when something caught my attention on TV – boats, cars and houses afloat in a surging tide of grey water, taking in its wake entire lives, ending stories, leaving holes in families. As I watched, stunned, Murakami's words took on an eerie significance – "Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. Over and over you play out, like some ominous dance of death before dawn. "But Murakami is not speaking of the tsunami, the tragic fate of his people. It is not about the storm that blew in from far away." The storm is inside of you," he says. "And you have to make it through that violent, metaphysical symbolic storm." And when I silently watched the visuals coming in from Japan, and saw an old man stumbling dazedly among the rubble of his home, trying to retrieve at least a photograph of his lost family, I knew the storm had come for this man – both from the sea and the depths of his soul. The final battle of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is brought in a violent outpour of rain, the foes slithering in mind. These hardy people are today pitched in an epic battle to live when Nature has conspired against them. And like their *haiku*, their ikebana, their choice of death rather than dishonour, the harmony of their lily – pooled gardens, their survival in these chaotic times is what the rest of the world can draw inspiration from.

A world of silence

14 July 2012 at 17:35

Two children, sitting on a rocky boul-der which was as timeless as the sky above them. It was their favourite spot, and their favourite time of the day– a golden afternoon of summer idleness. Monkeys were leaping on the branches of the trees around them, chattering and staring at them with wizened, comical faces. Butterflies flitted among the shrubs. Just down the road, the bells of Kamakhya pealed, carrying the music that had accompanied them through their childhood. She was a little older – a slender girl with her straight hair tied in a ribbon, wearing a pink frock buffeted by the wind, her arms and legs tanned nut brown by the sun. Her pretty, oval face was innocent, trusting and always wore an amiable expression. She was plucking tiny white flowers as she sat, bent low over the grass. The boy, as brown as she was, could not be still for a moment. He hopped around, as nimble as a

goat, picking up little pebbles and flinging them far down the hill. Then he sat by his sister, linking her arm companionably through his.

They stared at the scene before them. It never failed to take their breath away, this city spread below them in an endless, sprawling vista, tiny matchbox houses and streets like ribbons, a magical kingdom shimmering in the light. And then the broad, tranquil arc of the Brahmaputra sweeping by, the column, tiny as a needle, of the Urvashi island, and the tiny ferry boats chugging to and fro. Now and then, a train, like a tiny earthworm, passing through, and if they were lucky, a droning helicopter flying over the city.

The little boy could not sit still much longer. He stood up, cupped his palms around his mouth, and shouted to the wind. He screamed out his name in that void, and the wind carried it off, like it always did. He screamed louder and louder and then turned to his sister, grinning, nudging her. She too cupped her hands, opened her mouth. He watched her, anxious, waiting. With a sinking heart he saw the muscles of her neck stand out, rigid cords under the skin. But no sound came out of her mouth. She looked at him, helpless, dejected. He solemnly picked up her flowers and took her arm. It was time to go home.

This is the poignant, heart warming and truly inspirational story of that little girl – Adity Das, born deaf and mute, and of the family who have fought bravely against great odds to give her a normal life. It is the story of a devoted couple moving heaven and earth so that their beloved first born Adity, or Sumi, would never feel the pain of living in a world of complete, profound silence, never being able to mouth the words to express herself.

Sumi was born on a cold November day in 1989. “From the very beginning, she gave no trouble at all,” recounts mother Jina Das. “She never cried much and was a healthy baby. She sat up, began to crawl– all the normal things children do. But at twelve months, she still hadn't started talking, calling out *Baba* or *Ma*.”

“There was another thing that worried us,” broke in her father, Naren Chandra Das. “Even if something fell right near her, she did not cry out in alarm. She did not look at me when I clapped my hands. Something was wrong and we had to find out fast. We took her to the late Dr N K Agarwalla, an ENT specialist. He saw that she was not responding to the bell he rang close to her. So he told me to get a BERA test done at the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital.” BERA (Brain evoked response audiometry) is an electro – physiological test procedure which studies the electrical potential generated at the various levels of the auditory system, starting from the cochlea to the cortex. So, one day, as little Sumi lay on a hospital cot, sucking her thumb, electrodes were fixed over her scalp and stimulus transmitted to her ears with a transducer. The diagnosis was chilling. Sumi had Bilateral Profound SNHC, with severe hearing and speech impediment. “But they never really told me what that meant,” says Das, remembering the heartbreak of those early years. “I don't know why. May be they did not want me to lose hope. The doctors told me to take her to a speech therapist. Very early on, my wife and I decided that we would take her to the best specialists. We are a working couple. We are both employees of the Assam Police Radio Organisation posted at Bhuvaneswari on the Nilachal Hills. We live in the government quarters there and often cut corners to manage our home. But where Sumi was concerned, no expense was too great. I took my girl to Dr N N Dutta of Downtown hospital. He in turn sent me to speech therapist Dolly Dutta Senapati. She told me to get her a hearing aid. But

that was of no help at all. We were unable to help her hear anything. By now, we knew our daughter's problem was far worse than we had imagined."

"In the beginning, I could not handle the guilt," says mother Jina. "I had been having medicines for high blood pressure during the pregnancy. Did that cause our daughter to be born a deaf-mute? Was God punishing us for something? Or was it the forceps used during the delivery that injured her delicate head? Such things have been known to happen. I have never stopped wondering."

But Naren Chandra Das was made of sterner stuff. He did not think much of those who bemoaned fate or wallowed in self pity. This tough man with a quick smile and no-nonsense air about him put all his energy, resourcefulness and dogged determination into one goal – to give his beloved little daughter a fighting chance in life. In an India where baby girls are snuffed out in the womb and young women killed for honour, this father's unconditional love and brave struggle to give his daughter a life worth living is truly inspiring.

For two years, Das drove his car down the Nilachal hill come rain or shine, with little Sumi beside him, on their way to Senapati's clinic. The speech therapist involved him too, and he carried out the therapy sessions at home, standing before a mirror with Sumi, slowly and deliberately pronouncing syllables, words so that she could lip read. The little girl always looked intently, smiling, nodding. She was cheerful, outgoing, eager to befriend strangers, neat and tidy in the way she arranged her toys. When she was three and a half, Senapati gently suggested: "It's time Sumi went to school."

"Kalpana Bezbarua *Baideu's* Sahayika was her first school," says Das. "She was so happy, running around the playground, being with other children, looking at picture charts. But she was not mentally retarded. So *Baideu* told me to transfer her to a regular school. This time, I enrolled her at Sister Nivedita's school. The authorities there were doubtful if Sumi could cope. I pleaded with them. Just let her sit in class. She is quick to learn. You will have no problems at all. And Sumi proved me right. She was getting such good grades, without hearing the teachers speak, or ask questions. My girl would never let me down."

By this time there was an addition in the family – Sumi's baby brother, whom she adored with all her heart. Thankfully, Shivraj is perfectly normal.

Sumi's personality was now flowering. She had definite likes and dislikes. She wanted her Ma and Baba to be always well-groomed and wear nice clothes. She hated to be late for school and gave a resounding slap to her kid brother if he doodled on his school copy instead of studying. Not a thing was allowed to be out of place in that household. And every single day, Sumi would pray to Goddess Bhuvaneswari, with flowers, joss sticks and incense.

For a couple of years, after being promoted to the next class, Naren Ch. Das enrolled her in Cambridge Public School and Maharishi Vidya Mandir, Kalipur. From winning prizes in athletics, fine arts, and a certificate of participation in both the opening and closing ceremonies of the National Games held at Guwahati in 2009, Sumi was blazing her own trail. In 2008, she matriculated through the National Institute of Open Schooling, with letter marks in painting. Now nothing could stop her. Das enrolled her in CINCAD (Centre for Information and Career Development) in the arts course. Very early on, her quick-witted father realised that Sumi would be able to get a job more easily if she was trained in Computer Science. So when Sumi completed her HS, he made sure she did a BCA

programme at the Krishna Kanta Handique Open University at Cotton College. She is at her second semester there at present.

When I meet this brave family, Naren Chandra Das shows me Sumi's certificates and medals, lovingly preserved over the years. Among them is a vital document that may be the key to Sumi's future. It is a government ID, a Disability Card issued by the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Assam in 2009. She is training in DTP at the Vocational Rehab Centre at Basistha, under the Government of India's Ministry of Labour and Employment. Das also drives Sumi to another computer training centre under a Government of India Community Development through Polytechnic scheme.

"We are hoping she will get a job soon," he says. "It is no use just sitting back and expecting someone will help your disabled child. You have to educate and train him/her in some vocation. You have to get the papers that will help them avail of government schemes and job opportunities. There are so many parents out there who lose heart and don't know what to do. I feel proud to look back on all these years when my wife and I, with our modest means and God's blessings, tried to do our best for our little girl."

Overcome by emotion, Das bows his head and busies himself with arranging her papers in the file. Sumi looks at him, and at me. She is as pretty as a picture in a pale blue *salwar kameez* with net sleeves and satin flowers. Her face, with its clear skin and warm eyes, looks trustingly at me. Her silent world shuts out all harsh words, the cacophony of madly honking cars, the grating sound of machinery. It is a still, peaceful world within her, and maybe, just maybe, this silence is a blessing.

A toast to the sole

14 July 2012 at 17:30

I was a bit tempted to title this piece "The Big Truth about Small things." But I dared not, because my version of the truth may not be as big as you would anticipate and I would then feel even smaller than I really am. Then again, it can be summed up in this somewhat playfully mysterious premise – what happens when a runaway imagination encounters a static pair of abandoned sandals. On one of my recent evening perambulations – which are pleasantly aimless and provide me the opportunity to observe the endlessly amusing antics of my fellow bipeds, my eyes alighted on a pair of ladies' sandals ignobly abandoned right where the pavement levelled down for the entrance to a lane. That they were ladies' sandals was a particular cause for concern. Goons shedding their footwear when escaping after an interrupted theft, or drunks too plastered after a tippling binge as to bother if their feet are shod or not – these I can understand. But a pair of women's sandals carelessly abandoned, as if in a moment of great desperation, seems to hint at some dark, Chekhovian tale involving a young, beautiful, but foolishly naive protagonist and her life of chaotic turmoil. A little description is in order here. The sandals in question were cheap, of a sickly

dark maroon colour, with thick, ungainly single straps and a shiny buckle on each. The heels were worn out and there were deep indentations of the wearer's toes on the fake leather and that awoke in me a sharp twinge of pity for the unknown woman. Perhaps she was one of the countless young lasses who arrive in this city every day, seeking a job, a mate, a way out of their old lives, old privations. I did not want to wonder if she might have been abducted by car borne hoods at this very spot some recent, menacing night. Nor did I care to imagine she let go of her slippers in the abandonment of grief, possibly after a lover's betrayal. I would instead, prefer to comfort myself with the probability that she gave in to her vanity, that she had impulsively bought a pretty, new pair from a nearby shop, and euphoric at the sight of her feet so pretty in the new sandals, just plonked her old, ungainly ones on the road. Perhaps her tastes are evolving, as is her ability to earn better wages. Perhaps all there was to it was that these muddy slippers, all ghastly maroon and tarnished buckles, marked a woman's reaching for the stars? I shall never know, of course. I only wish it were true.

I've decided I'm not going to be an old fashioned fuddy duddy and be sweepingly dismissive of today's mall culture. Malls have definitely helped us be smarter. Instead of falling for the salesman's glib flattery – "Your complexion suits all colours, Madam", we are learning to make our own choices, patiently rifling through a trillion hangers to find the one *kurti* or *sari* that defines who we are or want to be seen as. But even in malls, when it comes to shoes, you still need salesmen to help you try them on. When the shoe salesman slips your chosen footwear onto your feet, he also expects you to walk up and down in them along the length of the shop to see they don't pinch, you feel at home in them et cetera. I suspect they secretly enjoy the prank of making you toe the line. Everytime I try on new shoes under the supervision of these encouraging sales folk, I feel as I am walking for the first time in my life – gingerly, self consciously, wobbling a little, feeling surer after every step, then, raring to go. This is one of the last, old shopping rituals that looks like its going to stay. Oh no, they are not going to do away with shoe salesman yet, because wouldn't we then all try on the new shoes and just walk away with them? And what's worse, leave behind heaps of beat up, worn out, muddy, smelly shoes?

What is it with shoes and women? I should, of course, have long been able to figure it out, considering I am myself a card-carrying member of this enigmatic species. But then, even women mystify each other. While everybody from Beyonce to the most obscure wannabe model from say, Jhumritalaya buy shoes as if they have as many limbs as a freaking octopus, I myself have no patience to focus so much on the lower extremities, when there are so many ways to amuse oneself with one's brain. I also have a healthy aversion to high heels and believe that tottering around on them, just with the hope that someone will admire this acquired height, is the very kind of feather brained stuff we women have to get rid of if we are to be head and shoulders above others in the cerebral and meaningful sense of the term. Forgive me for that preachy patch. Don't know where it came from. All right, all right, away with this tall, high brow posturing, and out with the bare truth. I frankly cannot afford to have a shoe fetish, and all those Jimmy Choos and Louboutins, the Blahniks and Ferragamos are never going to find their way into my humble shoe rack. There, I've said it.

Those of you who have young children will know the feeling when you see your toddler venture forth into the world in his first pair of squeaky shoes. His squeaks intrigue him, he

only has a vague idea where they are coming from and he stamps about delightedly like a demented little troll. Shoes do figure a lot in children's literature. Think Puss in Boots. If you scoff at an overly virtuous person as Miss Goody Two Shoes, you can trace the phrase to the eponymous children's story, a variation of the Cinderella one. The Cinderella story seemed illogical the moment it was read to me as a child. I am not claiming to have been precocious but, I thought, if there were specific, well demarcated shoe sizes, wouldn't Cinderella's glass slipper fit hundreds of others? Why then did the author say that it didn't fit anyone else? And didn't the lovelorn prince have nothing else to do but check out a shoe size? What kind of a ruler would this self-obsessed royal make? I could imagine indignant and rebellious subjects finally marching to the palace and giving him a George Bush and Suresh Kalmadi kind of shoe treatment.

Hemingway's image is that of a grizzly bear of a man, the ultimate macho hero driving an ambulance in the war, fishing, hunting, delighting in blood sports like bullfights. Even his prose is male – pared down, shorn of all superfluity, tough, so that you can reach right down to the elemental things. Legend has it that Hemingway entered a bet with a couple of his drinking buddies that he could write an entire short story in six words. And true to his word, he came up with this six word story, considered the shortest complete short story ever. It goes like this "For sale; Baby shoes; Never used." Everything is implied here – a man, a woman, and a baby which did not survive to wear the new shoes. It is a theme of loss, as well as the inevitability of having to move on.

My favourite poet, Maya Angelou named her fifth in the series of memoirs as *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. In the mid Sixties, Angelou spent time in Ghana, discovering the country of her ancestors. The turbulent time of the civil rights movement is vividly captured here and she speaks movingly about the plight of the people forced to leave their homes. Travelling shoes here is a metaphor for the grit and endurance that people must have when facing and opposing injustice and exile.

The popular culture of Hollywood has memorable shoe links too – Charlie Chaplin chomping through his boots, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers tap dancing as if their shoes had a life of their own, not to speak of Sharon Stone's *femme fatale* stilettos. Like people, shoes too have personalities. They can be sturdy and dependable, boring or intriguing, utilitarian or creative, sensible or flighty and frivolous. And like people, shoes too have stories to tell, and carry in them the dust and weariness of the distances they have travelled. No one perceived this better than the anguished genius of Vincent Van Gogh, who painted several pairs of shoes with his intuitive understanding and compassion. He lavished as much attention on humble, beat up, unlaced farmer's boots as on a beautiful landscape. These paintings speak of his finding beauty in everyday things and not taking them for granted.

In Indian art, you cannot allude to shoes without referring to the legendary Maqbool Fida Hussain and his quirky habit of not wearing them. One of the late maestro's closest lady friends writes of his strange sartorial tastes, especially during his early phase, donning clothes so flamboyant and outlandish that people just crowded around him to make some sense of it. Hussain may have gone barefoot as a gimmick or it was his way of protesting against the elitist club which once denied him entry as he was not wearing proper shoes, or he may have genuinely wished to connect to the earth beneath.

Our shoes define the person we are and there are as many kinds of shoes as there are people. It is hard to imagine a brutal prison guard's hob-nailed boots, used to kick helpless, unarmed people, and a ballerina's tiny, velvet pointe shoes placed together. And contentment is perhaps all about being comfortable in our shoes, knowing who we are, with all our strengths and limitations, and accepting, maybe even forgiving ourselves. In the end, I'd say we do need shoes every step of the way, but we should also remember to steal away now and then, kick off our shoes to run barefoot in the grass, or wriggle our toes in a dreaming pond, among the reeds and darting, silvery fish. That, I reckon, would be really good for the sole, er, I mean soul.

A moment's magic

14 July 2012 at 17:28

I am penning my first piece of the year, and somehow Bob Dylan's words "The times, they are a-changin" is running like a re-frain through my head. They say nostalgia is the first sign you are getting on in years and if it is indeed true, so be it. What is a few grey hairs and tiny crowsfeet compared to the joys of being a raconteur and telling the young what a beautiful and innocent place this planet had been in the spring of our childhood and youth? In this bone chilling winter of our discontent, I warm my hands, metaphorically speaking, in the crackling fire my grandfather got going in a faraway backyard, so many Magh Bihus ago. I feel my cheeks getting rosy in that welcoming heat, see that sudden shower of sparks and ash on the glowing red embers, feel in my nostrils the pungent odour of woodsmoke. Koka is gone and with him, a whole world of associations has slipped away too. As I sit at my table, snug in the chequered Tibetan poncho my younger son got me from Mcleodganj, I cannot help but think of the things we have left behind – gramophone players, posted letters, fob watches, grandfather clocks, clunky telephones, fountain pens with inkwells, one *anna* coins.... and photo albums with silver or golden paper corners that held the four edges of B/W snapshots on stiff black album pages.

What got me into this train of thought was a pavement encounter recently with a very enterprising photo studio employee. Carrying a mysterious black box, he greeted me effusively and launched onto this spiel about an amazing, futuristic technological innovation which made it possible for a person to have his whole life permanently embossed in an album, a definitive, immutable sequence of Kodak moments, as it were. He was dead sure that sentimental as I was, proved by my frequent visits to his studio to develop even my phone photos, I would gladly embrace this revolutionary technology without a moment's thought about the cost involved. So, thanks to his mysterious black box, no more photographs stuffed into cardboard boxes, no more favourite photos filched by others from the cellophane flaps of albums. Permanent imprints on laminated pages – so professional, so organised. But I had a problem with that. How was I to sift the memorable from the not

so memorable? Was I to start from my own babyhood, or my children's? Which relatives to feature in this album, and who were best left unseen? I believe you must keep photographs the way life is for all of us – chaotic, full of surprises, catching us with our guard down. I cherish my huge, bewildering collection of photographs (which defy cataloguing in the way I, too, refuse to be slotted) not only because they are my only tangible link with a past receding with the swiftness of a tide, but also that each snapshot, picked at random as if in a game, has a back story which I revel in retrieving and telling anyone who I've invited to share this viewing. Even the grainiest, most faded photograph is a window that draws me to gaze through.

When I am on Facebook these days, I see novel ways of people posing before the camera. The trick seems to be to make the pics look informal, spontaneous and interesting. But we, the in-between generation, vividly remember the studio portraits of yesteryears. Our fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts posing as couples soon after the wedding. The man looks stern, ill at ease in the company of his new wife, his hair combed sideways like a schoolboy, and trying hard not to betray any joy his new conjugal state must have brought. The bride has a bouffant, looks docile and resigned, though a smile, not too wide as to appear triumphant, shows she is thrilled to be wearing all that finery. Every pair looks exactly the same. Then, a couple of years later, back to the studio, not blinking at the camera flashing on the tripod. Now they range on both sides of their children, equally solemn little people with frilly frocks, butterfly clips, baba suits and knee high socks. The formal record of these milestones are then slipped into gold and silver paper corners pasted on thick, black album pages.

In photography, there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more than reality. With camcorders, handycams allowing virtually everyone to make their home movies, YouTube videos going viral with such rapidity and frequency, the power of still photographs that have captured a piece of history somehow seems to have declined. In our times and to some extent even today, some photographs have captured a defining moment of history in a way that has caught our imagination. As a child, the picture of a little girl screaming and running from a napalm bombing in Vietnam became the stuff of many a nightmare, the toddler John F Kennedy Jr saluting the coffin of his slain father never failed to bring a lump to the throat. The Beatles jauntily trooping over a zebra crossing in single file is now on my screensaver – my way of hanging on to the Bohemian Sixties. My favourite photograph of Indira Gandhi is of the one she is shyly perched on the edge of Bapu's bed, a frail waif of a child, her mournful eyes luminous on her finely etched face. Bapu lovingly clasps her arm, and she looks wistful and cautious at the same time.

Singer producer Usher, speaking about Michael Jackson, recently, said: "Michael always told me that every moment is a piece of history." The lensman restlessly aims his viewfinder at random images of a world in ceaseless motion, and if he knows when to click, his picture will distil the essence of that moment. Today, we remember the communal riots in Gujarat from the unforgettable image of a man weeping, his hands folded, terror writ large on his face, as he begs his attackers to spare his life. For me, the horror of the Tsunami is brought home not by the cold statistics of human lives lost, but the image of a lone woman on a beach, face down and arms outstretched in the sand, as if trying to claw apart the earth which had

swallowed her loved ones. Her body, rigid with shock and grief-in the middle of a silent, indifferent stretch of sand, is almost unbearable to see.

Think photography and some names instantly come to mind – Alfred Stiegitz, Yousuf Karsh, Henri Cartier Bresson, or our own Raghu Rai and Dayannita Singh. Closer home, two people whom I personally know – S.H Patgiri, and Prabal Das are shutterbugs whose unique personas are evident in what their lens choose to zoom in on. Prabal's Naturescapes are sheer visual poetry and complement his deep love for tranquil and unspoilt Nature. In an exquisite coffee table edition tracing the history of the Church in this region, brought out by the Don Bosco Institute, Kharghuli, Guwahati, Patgiri is in his element. A fisherman, precariously balanced atop a flimsy boat on a brown river, swings his arm upward to spread his net afar, and the billowing net, suspended in air, hangs like a cloud over the waters. A lone Manipuri matron, seated pensively amidst her intricately crafted cane stools, mats and baskets, speaks of a lifetime's patience and an everyday quest for beauty. Standing before a humble thatched cottage almost smothered by lush bushes and shrubs, a young couple and their baby stare at the camera in startled astonishment. The baby has just been bathed, the mother holds the plump cherub in her arms, the man has his trouser legs rolled up, a bright yellow towel in his hand. The three of them look complete, happy in their solitude, playing out the roles Nature has mapped out for them.

A good photographer is passionate about dealing with things that are vanishing. With my weakness for all things transient, I could not help but be drawn to the pictures of Omar Sharif, a young professional and an amateur photography buff from Assam, now working at Mumbai. I first came across his snapshots in his sad, funny and quirky blog *www.pollenflight.blogspot.com*. There are no people in his compositions, just the flotsam and jetsam of their existence. A cup of tea on a table as weak winter sunshine glows beyond the iron bars of a window: A wooden chair, its legs rotting, sags tiredly in a damp, mossy backyard. An old brass vase holding flowers on the edge of a table strewn with newspapers – there is a sense of melancholy, desolation which is somehow unnerving. At the same time, the invisible presences of people who exist in these environs become so very real for the viewer. You get a sense that this is a home so lived in, so drenched in the quiet beauty of ordinary things. But it also carries within it the slow, crumbling decay of an ancestral home that will not have voices, footsteps, the familiar sounds, sights and smells within its walls much longer. It is as if Omar has already said his goodbye to his grandmother's house in an obscure corner of Assam. And this abode of yesterday sings its silent swan song.

These days, a drive to the airport to fetch or drop a loved one is a prosaic affair compared to the days of my childhood. My youngest uncle, who was a one man personification of the American Dream for the clan, flew into the bosom of his family about twice in a decade. After much gift giving, feasts and viewing of eligible brides, Hiren Uncle was given a farewell worthy of a royal. The clan turned out in full strength at the airport, the women red-nosed and swollen-eyed with weeping, the men trying vainly to bring some sense of order, and we children playing raucous chasing games in the lounge. The highpoint was the group photograph, always taken with Uncle's new fangled Polaroid camera. Today, I look back with great affection at all those people ranged together in a tight-knit group. Some have left for the realm beyond, some I have lost touch with, some are just a phone call away and yes,

some I am not on talking times with. But, in that magical moment when we surrounded a much loved uncle, in the pre-internet days when contact was a tenuous, uncertain thing – we were all together, held by kinship and love, a final image of solidarity that Uncle would carry back to California as a precious memento of his visit.

What is missing in a snapshot is as important as what is within it. I have an early seventies black and white photograph, where I am among a group of women sitting on a cushioned floor. It is my aunt's wedding and the sheen of their silk clothes give off a soft radiance. I am the only child in the group, learning against a young woman to my left. She is not particularly pretty, but there is something graceful in her posture, and her eyes do not meet the camera, looking away shyly. She looks reserved and unresponsive on this happy occasion, when the others may have been singing rousing *biya naam*s. Several years later, I came to know who she was and what happened to her not long after the wedding. I still get goosebumps when I see that photograph. This shy, withdrawn woman and her siblings were lured to their home from different places by their father. He then murdered them one by one, in a macabre tragedy that sent shockwaves through the State in those days. That may well have been her last photograph and the shadow over her face seems, on hindsight, to have been the portent of the fate awaiting her.

In the first years of photography, and among people cut off from modern life, the camera is believed to capture the souls of people who are photographed. Though that seems laughable today, we hold on to our photographs because we hope to find in them the persons we really are. I know myself as a doll clutching baby, a schoolgirl in braids, a college fresher decked out in Saraswati *Puja* finery, a bride flanked by in-laws, a mother hugging her children. They are all different persons posing as me, jostling for space in the canvas of my life. Photos help us travel backwards, discover the old joys and heartbreaks, the scars and the healing. Where would we be without them?

Taste the thunder

14 July 2012 at 17:12

Taste the thunder

Thunder. Read that in capital let-ters, followed by asterisks and ex-clamation marks. A pen-pusher of a certain age, to put it euphe-mistically, does not begin with those words. Such words are touchingly juvenile and fit only for slam books of acne and angst-ridden adolescents. But right now, in the grey gloom of a dying day, what stands between me and a completed column is thunder. Yes, thunder, not as in taste-the-thunder cola chirpiness, but high decibel peals of heavenly wrath booming from some vindictive, supernatural source and echoing around the surrounding hills.

To put it very mildly, thunder is not good for my nerves. That is perhaps the most honest, unequivocal statement I have made in a long, long time. In the cussed, defiant mode of the

so called emancipated female, I like to assume, as do the rest of the sisterhood, that I can take on anything, that nothing fazes me and my invincible femininity is enough to stop any antagonist dead on its tracks. That's what Oprah says. That's what they write in Cosmopolitan. But thunder? Thunder is a whole new ball game altogether. When thunder strikes, suddenly I find I have no weapons in my arsenal. All this growling and booming from the skies sets off some panic button embedded deep in my psyche. This, of course, has serious consequences. One, I have this distinct feeling of being disempowered. Two, all my chutzpah goes up in a puff of smoke. In those heart-pounding, clammy palm moments when I can hear that warning crack from above, I am back among my ancestors – on their knees, bowing to an angry God.

In this consumerist society we live in, how often are you tempted to buy something and get one free? This marketing gimmick has made fools of us all. In Nature, too, we get two for the price of one. With thunder, lightning is thrown in for free. Somebody Up There sure has a macabre sense of humour. As if that audio attack is not enough, there are now blinding flashes that light up the city, the hills, the streets, the trees – everything, in a momentary, incandescent glow. This great view is totally wasted, of course, because my eyes have a kneejerk reaction and shut so tight that I have to coax them open again with some sweet talk. This clash of celestial cymbals goes on for well over thirty minutes and at the end of it, there is not only relief (such blessed silence), but also the feeling that I have made a journey – this fear propelling me rapidly inwards to the child I had so determinedly put behind, me, the child who had lain awake, whimpering, head buried in the pillow, on some rainy midnight of a long ago time. Gail Sheehy, in her 1970's hit, Passages, wrote that we go through many crises in our adult life. Many of them are predictable. But most importantly, these crises should be seen as opportunities for growth. In that light, if this storm has been an unsettling experience, at some level, however, I also realise I am vulnerable, irrational, imperfect. There are things beyond my control. This is exactly what I, and all of us actually, need to keep ourselves all sorted out, and grounded.

The account of one woman weathering a storm comes with a happy resolution and a personal epiphany. But you don't need a storm to whip up fear among the masses. Fear is everywhere – screaming from newspaper headlines, television close-ups, shrill sirens of ambulances, angry, waving fists and unclaimed bags in bus terminals. We inhabit a world that is, at every moment, gearing for an eventuality. Climate change is no more an esoteric academic term confined to conference rooms. The dressed chicken in your freezer may be carrying the bird flu. Even as you talk shop in your cell, cancer cells could be multiplying in the squishy insides of your brain. They are now saying the water you drink is radioactive. Criminals can get away with stalking you in cyberspace, posting embarrassing pictures and videos, helping themselves to your bank account, your ATM cards. They can steal your very identity. And the government? They are capable of anything – giving away land to a foreign country, building killer dams ... space constraints forbid me from going on. And on.

There are two ways to react to this mass proliferation of fear. One is to become so neurotic that every breath you take is saturated with suspicion. The other extreme is to say what-the-heck and feel all nonchalant and superior to the paranoid souls around you. I have taken in my stride all that breaking news breed of investigative journalism about the synthetic stuff they mix to create the likeness of milk, the naphthalene balls they forcefeed goats so

they swell up in size as the kidneys collapse (there goes your rogan josh). It seems they even lovingly wipe mangoes with some chemical that makes them look bright yellow and really juicy. A couple in Delhi met their Maker after drinking glassfuls of gourd juice to add years to their lives. Only they never reckoned with the pesticides in it bringing them to a grinding halt.

The last time I switched on the telly, which was two days ago, there was this chilling voice-over and visuals warning that fluoride levels of leading toothpaste brands in India were much, much higher than the permissible limits and that you could actually be brushing yourself to kingdom come. A white coated lab assistant was squeezing toothpaste into glass beakers. Anyone who sees this kind of thing is going to go right back to the good old neem twig days. But there is grimmer news for the vain gender. Whaddya know, that lipstick you are gliding over your lips is laced with arsenic. The first time I read about arsenic being used for homicidal purposes was in an Agatha Christie whodunit. If they are going to bump off the women with lethal lipstick, won't the cosmetic giants go bust? Or is it that there will always be more and more women coming under the fatal spell of lipstick hardsell – Luscious, shimmering, candy lips for the eternal woman in you. They are not being entirely untruthful. Death is eternal.

So, that's the reality check. Our food and water and cosmetics and medicines are not what they seem. But come on, even people are not what they seem. If everything were exactly what they seemed, there would be no conjecture and suspense, cloak and dagger sting operations and breaking news. Things and people and issues not being what they seem is just the thing humanity needs. It makes us put on our thinking caps, look for clues, figure out the missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle, not take things at face value, use a pinch of salt. The awareness about the unexpected keeps the adrenaline flowing and fine-tunes our survival skills. We understand that the meek will not inherit the earth. So we become feisty and pretty in your face. And if we can pass on this sassiness through our genes, mankind will continue to lord over this planet.

From thunder, to the evil machinations of people, to lethal elements lying in wait in all the everyday food and objects around us – looks like all are in a conspiracy to keep us in a state of permanent jitters. Of late, however, something new has been added to my personal Fear Factor list. Very simply put – it is the fear of encountering cliches. Cliches abound in the printed material I read, cliches pour out from the lips of vapid socialites, smug television anchors and B-town celebrities. Cliches sap my energy, spoil my mood, make me grit my teeth and mutter oh no, not again. They should expunge the term feel – good. It is a one-size-fits-all cliche that is an adjective for everything ranging from a Karan Johar movie to bathroom tiles. And I've just had it with "edgy". The anorexic model in the trench-coat and army boots is edgy. The latest boy band creates music that is edgy. It's time to edge out edgy. And what do they mean by over the top? Is wearing too much bling at a party enough to qualify a human as over the top? I'll give you over the top. I think Salvador Dali was over the top – timepieces stretched out over a landscape, the glorious surrender to the imagination. Salman Rushdie is my kind of over the top, taking us an a giddy ride through a carnival of literary fantasy. Akira Kurosawa's films – raw, compelling, melodramatic – are twenty-four carat over the top. Who decides the parameters of being over the top and below it? Look around, Nature is so over the top. Everything in it is extravagant – the rolling

mountains, the restless seas. Have you seen the strange shape of the armadillo, the riot of colours in a cockatoo's plumes?

It's been a pretty long time since somebody told me to relax. Everybody tells me to chill. Chill is the new relax. Which is a contradiction in terms, because if you are chilled, then you are in rigor mortis and that means being stiff. And then I text my apologies for skipping an event to the person who sent me the invite. "No issues," pat comes the answer. The first time I got it, I thought that it was an affirmation this person was childless. We Indians do use the word issue in place of children. Then I was wondering why everybody was claiming to have no issues. Were we collectively trying to beat China, with its one child policy, with our no issues agenda? It seems not and what is this thinking out of the box? Nobody admits to thinking within the box anymore. Boxes are useful things. They bring order to chaos. Society always needs structuring, a plan, in fact, even a plan B if the first one fails. If everybody is out of the box, we will all be caught up in the muddle of good intentions and experimenting for its own sake. This thinking out of the box, if you ask me, is highly overrated.

Half an hour after the storm, I now have no issues with my nemesis, thunder. The evening definitely had an edgy feel and now that I look back on it, all those blinding flashes and rolls of drums were somewhat over the top. Very in your face, if you know what I mean.

River of tears

19 November 2011 at 15:40

Winter is not just a season. This time, it is a damp night, heavy with our tears. It is about fragrant petals and their sad withering, the solemn flicker of a thousand candles braving the wind. All at once we huddle together, the family of man, as if we are lost, abandoned and afraid to be alone. We had known this day would come, but when it did, we did not how to face it. To let Bhupenda go is to give up a part of ourselves, that indescribable, abstract totality of how the many hued threads of his songs have seamlessly stitched the life we have lived – the rosy blush of first love, the burning zeal to pull down walls, to change the world, and the wanderlust that guides our dusty feet to the farthest reaches of the world. He had words for all we have ever felt and gone through in this world.

In the gathering dusk of that November evening, I was in Rabindra Bhawan – the hall was filled with young students hearing a debate in progress. On the wings waited the cultural troupes, beautiful, lissome girls in ethnic attire, promising the sweetness of song and the throbbing joy of their movements. Then, a judge of the event came on stage to announce the bard's passing. You could see the shadow fall over those young faces and the stunned silence that filled the hall. Just moments ago, they had been pitted against each other in proving whether Facebook was a boon or bane. It was a battle to support or denounce what had been once thought of as a futuristic means of communication. But, at that moment, when our mythical folk hero slipped into a realm from where he will never return, Facebook

was forgotten. For here was a man who reached millions of hearts not by logging onto a networking site, tapping on any keyboard, or updating his status, but by telling us, in that rich baritone that had the power of thunder and the tenderness of new leaves, about simple, elemental truths of life – the restless, surging ebb and flow of tides in the mind, the heart's deep longing for peace, and a love that transforms not just a beloved, but binds man to man in kinship. Like the mighty arms of the Brahmaputra he loved so much, his songs run through us, awesome in their elemental power, nourishing us, lulling us to sleep, waking us to hope and youthfulness, instilling in us a sense of what is timeless and soars far above the petty and the mundane. Yes, he has given us the vision of the limitless sky, and the dawn we might one day make possible. For Bhupenda spent a lifetime making us understand there is no crystal ball. The future is within us, and it must be born from our deeds, our ideals and not the conjunction of constellations. Each of us is, in his rousing words, a spark of a flaming era.

On the day of his tearful homecoming, late afternoon and as the light faded outside, a kind of hush fell over the city that otherwise shrieks and roars and surges with the whirlwind of a frenetic existence. On both sides of the main road, on the pavements, people were gathering, their faces turned to the west, for the cortege to arrive. On that day, it was as if – of their own accord – heeding the call of their hearts, all the people tore off their masks, crumpled them and flung them away. It was as if they saw each other for the first time, and suddenly, felt that life was so much more than chasing deadlines and clinching deals, completing chores and getting past each day. Young Yuppies with camcorders, silver haired grandmothers barely able to stand, weary men with baskets of vegetables, autorickshaw drivers for whom he wrote a song, fathers, mothers and children – everybody came together as if they had never been apart. It was as if, in his passing, in his last act of love, he has breathed new life into all of us.

Since then, his mortal remains have been consigned to the flames. But his name reverberates like temple bells in the vault of this night. You hear it on the lips of people passing by on the street, in homes, shops and offices, on television screens, in the cheap transistor of a paan seller's tiny shop or in a jeans-clad teenager's room on Youtube. Young men in motorcycles have roamed the city streets singing his songs. Everyone has a Bhupen Hazarika anecdote to share. The air is awash with stories – floating like dust motes in a golden beam of light. These stories tell of his childlike simplicity, his readiness for a good laugh, even at his own expense, his generosity and utter lack of concern about money, his love for pigeon curry with a tongue scorching sprinkling of pepper, his yen for losing his heart many a time and most endearingly, his lack of awareness that he had become a legend in his lifetime.

"What can I say?" The normally ebullient artist and filmmaker Pulok Gogoi's sorrow lay heavy in his voice on the phone. "I owe so much to him. When I was a struggling artist in Mumbai, we would meet very frequently, sitting by the Arabian Sea by the Gateway of India, munching roasted peanuts. Once, something strange happened. A couple passed us by and the man kept looking backwards at Bhupenda. He then came back and, with folded hands, asked me if the person seated by my side was Bhupen Hazarika. I said yes and queried, "Have you met him before?" "No," he shook his head. "I have never seen him in my whole life, until now." We were stunned. How then did he recognise Dada? "I heard him on

radio, when he was giving an interview in the Lucknow station. I heard him speak to you now and knew at once it is him. His is a voice you cannot forget, once you have heard it," the man said. I have done several paintings of Bhupenda, and so many sketches I can't keep count of. I created a painting celebrating his passionate love for a lady he serenaded in Bimurta mur nisati. I showed it to him when he was with her, years ago in Tezpur, and he wanted to know why I had blotted out the moon with black paint. "Dada," I told him, "Forgive me for saying so, but you are a possessive lover, and you would resent the moonbeams touching your beloved". He was very amused by my answer and rewarded me with his famous, full-throated laugh.

Author Arup Kumar Dutta's The Roving Minstrel is a slim, beautifully produced biography of the legend in Rupa's Charitavali series, published in 2002. Dutta deplores the lack of archival materials related to the singer. Describing how he pieced together, through many recorded interviews, a remarkable, often tumultuous life of heady triumph and hearth-breaking despair in the book, Dutta says he consciously strove to acquaint Bhupenda with the common man in the rest of the country and the world.

It is with pride that I write of my own Bhupenda connection. My aunt, dancer, singer and actress Krishna Das Nath of Tezpur, was the child star of Bhupen Hazarika's film Shakuntala and also starred in Pratidhawani and Chik Mik Bijuli. "I had won the first prize in the dance drama Shakuntala at Tezpur. He penned a few words in my autograph book that inspire me even today. He blessed me to be India's Chitralekha and that on my every step, lotuses would bloom. Before I knew it, he cast me as Anusuya, the youngest of Shakuntala's companions in his film of the same name in 1960. Directing me during a scene when Shakuntala leaves the ashram, Bhupenda told me to weep. I was terrified. What if I could not cry? He had a fiery temper. Rooted to the spot in front of the camera, I desperately tried to think of all the sad experiences of my life. I was only twelve. What could a girl of that age be sad about? Then Bhupenda understood and slowly, in that deep, tender voice, he described the atmosphere at the ashram, of how Shakuntala would forever leave behind her friends, how they would miss her... and sure enough, I was sobbing uncontrollably, much to his relief. He okayed the shot."

For those who journey beyond Assam to follow their dreams, Bhupenda's songs carry the memories of home.

"I never was in love with Bhupen Hazarika," says Omar Sharif, a young professional based in Mumbai. "But today, when I look back, I discover that he has been seeping into me in drops all this while. When we were in school, we'd sing Luitor saaporit on Teachers' Day. Then the most popular Bistirno duparore and Buku hom hom kore followed in the teenage years (in between our daily overdose of Hindi songs). In the days of self-inquiry, when meanings were searched, we discovered through his songs the Assam Agitation and the Bhasha Aandolan – revolutions that we had never witnessed. If Maznisa mur endhaar ghorot was a protest then, it has transformed into self-discovery today. Very few of the new generation know that history, even fewer discuss it. These songs are the arresting pointers which a hardbound history book fails to bring to attention. Far from home, listening to Aai tuk kihere in my hostel room and remembering the warm lap of Ma, I would often cry. In the years that follow, we discover a Modarore phool, a Kijey tumar songo priya, a Bideshi bondhu, a

Tezore komolapoti, and so many others seeping into us. It is so gradual, this seeping, like our growth, from a child to an adolescent to an adult, that we hardly discover it."