

## Grabbing eyeballs



Serendipity. How I love the word. It flows out of the mouth in a sibilant, velvet glide. But today's piece is not about toying around with words, however exotic they may be. Serendipity means happy accidents and, like the princes of the isle of Serendip, I, too, recently found something I wasn't quite looking for, a pleasant discovery, delicious in its novelty-one grey monsoon morning recently.

Every ten minutes or so, for the last two decades that I've sat at my desk in office, someone or the other wanders into the room, wearing question marks on an anxious face. Someone wants to rent a flat, find a perfect match, publish a poem, announce an award, denounce big dams, remember a loved one lost, or just directions to the news room. There are silver haired old gentlemen – a jaunty, post-retirement spring to their steps, bespectacled academicians, fresh faced Tantra T-shirted teenagers, Swamiji's in dramatic saffron, even grim faced men in uniform. All through the day these people surge and eddy about like a wave and it's a miracle how we staffers remain afloat and still manage to get things done. So, early one morning, as a well-meaning colleague ushered a young woman into the room, my instant thought was "Well, here it begins, all over again."

Ranima Sonowal, the young lady in question, was a complete stranger. Among all days, she had chosen to come to our office on a morning I had come in really early. That is serendipity for you. Rani is plump, with smooth nutbrown skin and silky, waistlength hair. Her generous

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form snugly fitted into a loose pastel *salwar kameez*, glasses perched on her cute button nose, she was holding a largeish folder close to her chest. A job applicant, I presumed.

But it was infinitely more than that, as I was soon to discover. This subdued, geeky young woman, by opening her folder, simply took my breath away. For spread out in front of me were dozens of stunning photographs that she had taken of the world around her. And it was a world of great grace and beauty, constantly revealing as well as concealing, waking a half-remembered dream buried in the whorls of memory, making the heart ache and yet, rejoice. Through Rani's eyes we see the dramatic span of a vulture's midnight black wings silhouetted against a powder blue sky. A glinting dew drop trembling on the pointed tip of a blade of grass – about to slip and disappear, embraces within it a dying sun, an entire universe. Two surprised deer stare into the camera, their ears twitching, every hair on their coats distinct in the slanting, late afternoon light. On a frying pan of tender *betgas* sizzling in oil, Ranima's restless lens even capture a quirky black and white smiley that eerily resembles the mask of *Scary Movie*.

But I did not discover all this that morning. She was given a standing invitation to visit me at home the following Sunday. Part of me sniffed a rollicking good story in her, another part was driven by the instinct to mother any unwary young female in the vicinity. The rain tried to play spoilsport. As puddles grew deeper on our lane. I called, concerned. Don't come if it goes on raining like this. But Rani came splashing happily through puddles and all, flashing her dazzling teeth, eyes crinkling behind misted spectacles. Perched demurely on the sofa, Rani set about proving she was even more loquacious than me. The only girl, that too the youngest, with four older brothers, she always hung out with the boys and never had a doll in her life. It was diving into the pool, shooting birds with catapults, climbing rocks, angling for fish or just horsing around after school that made up life in her native Pengaree, a tea estate in tea country sixteen kilometres from Digboi near the Assam-Arunachal border. After school, she found herself in Digboi Mahila Mahavidyalaya studying Assamese honours. Her love affair with the camera was not smooth sailing. She did not dare touch her father's camera, it was much too precious. Her family sold enough betel nuts to get her a second hand SLR Analog. But that was only one part of the problem. Who would teach her to get the perfect shot? What were the rules of this complex art? Were there even any rules at all? For Rani, taking pictures is savouring life with great intensity, every hundredth of a second. She wanted to rely on her spontaneity and intuition but knew, deep in her heart, that the world would demand that she get formal training, that a diploma or degree or whatever in photography would be the only way to earn a living and continue to do what she loved most in the world. Money was often scarce at home. The protective brothers frowned on her dream. She bought a Nikon with her scholarship money. Her tolerant father cut her some slack. "But Ma is on my side." She lets on cheerily. "She wants to give me the freedom she never had. I was not that good at studies. But I came to do my postgraduation in GU (Assamese) because I thought I would somehow be able to pursue photography. I finally did my course at ITI Rehabari, Guwahati. I teach photography at the new department at Hajo's, Suren Das College. But students are hard to come by."

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She is far from bitter. Call it small-town naivete, or youthful bravado, but this girl chuckles easily and her face, so alive, is a joy to watch when she is emoting. I especially fall for her comic outlook “Look at this egret here” she jabs a finger on a glossy print. “He got nervous when he saw me trying to click him. And then he heard a plane flying up in the sky. So there he is, looking at me and his head lifted towards the plane – double danger, you see. And I clicked.”

Restless Rani’s favourite haunt is the Assam State Zoo at Guwahati, though she can barely afford the fifty rupee fee for taking the camera inside. But seeing her enthusiasm, the guards nowadays are kind enough to wave her inside for free. Walking along the bustling crowds at Hayagriva Mandir at Hajo, her lens catch the flaming scarlet of *polash* flowers fanning across the sky. She leaps out of the car on a serpentine Cherrapunjee road, taking in the humble, fragile beauty of a lone hut standing in the desolate, windswept landscape. Chunks of pork roasting at an outdoor spit give off that earthy, rustic charm that is so characteristic of much of Rani’s work. And she herself is caught in the cusp of being innocent and the street-smart, the traditional and the modern. She pores over her laptop, typing with ease, admits how the resolution of one photo wasn’t satisfactory. And she is always drawing on her own experiences of growing up in a small place that time forgot.

One of Rani’s best photographs is also one that is the most disturbing. The scene is played out at a railway track. In the foreground is a man’s form, clad in jeans, shot from his sneakers to hip level. He stands as if blocking the way, waiting. In soft focus is a young girl in a simple frock, her splindly arms and legs bare. She seems to hesitate, to be alert of some danger. On the side of the tracks there are a few other humans – all wrapped up in the minutiae of their precarious lives. Is it a stalker and his victim? Is there an innocent reason for the man waiting? Rani has captured the ambivalence of human nature. “A good photograph must grab eyeballs” “she says with quiet satisfaction. “Everyone asks me about this picture.”

Says her Bishnu Dhar, faculty, ITI, Rehabari, Guwahati “Rani is an outstanding student. I am proud to be her teacher. She is mature, totally dedicated, with a great interest in literature. She was a speaker on a topic at our Golden Jubilee celebrations. Tarani Barman, who gives her assignments now and then says “I was her external examiner at ITI. She has a thorough knowledge of her craft, Quite remarkable.”

All Rani wants today is a break. Just as her dewdrop contains the sun, there is a world of possibility in this talented young woman.