

THIRD EYE EDITION

Where we come from...

They say that to understand the present, you've got to go back to the past. In this piece, that is just what I am about to do. So rewind to the Shillong of the early seventies. What could be exciting for a small town girl in those years? It wasn't just doll weddings, hopscotch and going berry – hunting at tiffin break. The war clouds were looming and one saw olive green trucks thundering past, carrying soldiers, each moustached face grim in anticipation of death. In the Indo-Pak war radio broadcasts Dad listened to, there were terse bulletins that crackled with a sense of impending doom. Some words like Mukti Bahini, Dacca and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman were endlessly repeated. There was, of course, no television then. On some nights, when the air raid sirens went off, people switched off their lights and waited for the bombs, crouched on the floor. Over a darkened and cowering town, we saw enemy planes flying past, with twinkling lights and a low drone.

We won the war. We knew some of the brave men in uniform came back in caskets. But there was a sort of complicity in deciding not to wonder about it, or even allow oneself to feel a pang of loss. The elders were full of praise for the Iron Lady who had brought victory and aided in the birth of a new nation. Living in the cottage next to ours were a brother and two sisters, exiles from what was previously East Pakistan. Shankhu was a lean youth with a shambling gait and a mournful expression on his face. His sisters were braided, sari-clad women who loved to sew and embroider. I never knew what Shankhu did for a living, but like to imagine he was a failed artist. Often, walking home on some winter dusk, hands thrust deep into pockets, Shankhu would burst into song, snatches of which would drift through our window. I could not understand the dialect but could sense its painful nostalgia, its evoking of a home left behind – emerald fields, ponds of silver fishes, a copper noonday sun after the rains, yes, that is perhaps what he sang of, as he bided his time in a cold, misty town where he did not belong. Were Shankhu and his sisters able to end their exile after the war? Were they back in the world Shankhu had kept alive in his plaintive songs? I would never know.

Then came Anton. A cousin of mine, an Assamese settled in England and married to Ann, an English Rose, chose to name his son after one of Russia's greatest writers. At that time, however, I was yet to fall under the spell of Chekov's timeless stories like *The Lady With The Dog*. One cloudy afternoon, we were having our tiffin break when a car stopped right in front of our school gates. Out tumbled a whole lot of people but my eyes were fixed on the English Rose and her baby boy. Ann, the English Rose, was a pale, slender woman with a blonde bob and a blue summer frock with a floral pattern. In her arms wriggled Anton – also blonde, with blue eyes and a skin like milk and freckles on his button nose. All of us girls just gawked at the pair. To my astonishment, my father climbed out of the car too and I was whisked away for an impromptu family reunion, perhaps without even a by your leave of the authorities. My cousin, the husband and father of Ann and Anton, pointed to his wife all the pretty sights – the lake, the cathedral, the Hydari Park. In the backseat, two aunts and a cousin were teaching Anton to say *Bor Ghoror mekuri soru ghoroloi jai...* (the cat of the big

THIRD EYE EDITION

house goes to the small house). And the adorable imp of a three year old could say it perfectly, lisping out the words and cackling as everybody tickled him. You could say it was a joint effort of the Assamese side of Anton's family to give him a feel of our culture. And yet, when it came to lunch at Pinewood, the boundaries of our differences were sharply drawn. An elderly uncle ordered an Indian lunch for all, but Ann and Anton were treated to roast chicken and baked potatoes. So much for cultural integration.

All these thoughts came to me when I was presented a copy of Tara Goswami's *The Bogoli Phut days : Pitki's adventures in Assam*, brought out by HarperCollins. Tara is an artist, storyteller and *yogini*, among other things. Assamese by birth, she grew up in Shillong and spent, as she describes it, much of her childhood wrapped in a world of her own imagination. She sees life as a journey made up of an assortment of magical experiences. *The Bogoli Phut days* came about in the form of her dissertation project for Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Delhi.

Explaining how the idea of the book came about, Tara says, "I had been pursuing my interest in illustration for about a year before doing this book and when it was time to decide what my diploma project would be, I was also working on another children's book for my teacher called *The Banana Book*, a book about creating awareness about composting and the environment in general among kids. I had the choice to continue working on the Banana book and take it further... to another level, as my diploma project. But somehow, it didn't feel like "my baby". And so I started thinking of ideas of making my own book. That's when my mother suggested that I illustrate some tales of *Burih Ai'r Sadhu*.

"In the year running up to my diploma project, I focused on illustration. I spent a lot of time looking at different styles of drawing and executing an idea. I researched the work of various artists and illustrators, looked at graphic novels as well as children's books. I also created and worked on various illustration projects of my own. I was interested in creating rich, layered images. So I explored various mediums, created a huge archive of textures using a printmaking technique called mono-printing. The use of the computer allowed me to collage textures, pictures, drawings, etc.

"Like I mentioned earlier, it was my mother's idea that I should do a book on the folk tales of Assam. Once I decided that this is what my diploma project would be, we went to Assam, where my mother and I sat and listened to my *Aitama* tell those stories again. We shortlisted about five stories, which we then attempted to translate. It was like a fun group activity, not just my mother, my father was also involved in the process. He's very artful in the use of the English language. Whenever we want to find a way to say something in beautiful sounding words in English, we always ask my father.

"This process of translation went through many drafts, but the final drafts were arrived at between my mother, my friend Priyasree and I.

"Of course, my mother's role also extended to being my quick encyclopaedia. Any question I had, I would call and ask her. Whether it was something about Assam (like the different

THIRD EYE EDITION

Bihus) or some memory that I needed to be reminded about. If she didn't know, the question was often passed on to my grandmother.

"My teacher, Poonam Bir Kasturi played a very vital role in the way the book turned out. Without her, it might have well been just a beautifully illustrated book. But she kept nudging me to extract something that was much more valuable in it."

"Do you think books like these will give children of our State a sense of identity?" I was curious to know.

"Hopefully this book and books that will be produced in the future will present folk tales and Assamese culture in a more exciting light to our kids. Being exposed to folklore, colloquial phrases, dialogue and expressions that are so integral to every culture gave me a sense of rooting to Assam even though I have never actually lived here. I hope books like these will be able to instill a similar sense, at a time where modernism has set in and families have become increasingly nuclear."

"Are you sad", I asked "that children today cannot experience the childhood you enjoyed in the lap of Nature?"

"I most certainly am," she asserted. "I think growing up the way we did, we learnt many of the important lessons in life in a very "organic" way. We learnt lessons in humility and sensitivity from plants and forests, we learnt compassion from being around animals, we learnt to share and appreciate things, because there wasn't always plenty of everything. But most importantly, we learnt to just be... without the need to be constantly entertained by an external stimulus. We created our own magic instead of being observers of somebody else's interpretation of it. I think the interaction between my brother and I as siblings was also much richer as we actively engaged and entertained each other."

"In your book you have described life as a journey," I said. "What has been the journey of the Assamese – from a shy, insular people to ambitious achievers spreading to all corners of the world?"

"I don't think I'm in a position to comment on the journey of the Assamese as a people, but I would definitely say that as people's boundaries have gotten bigger, the world has gotten smaller. Travelling and communication has become easier, with information just a click of a mouse away, people know a lot more. There's awareness, there's an intermingling of societies, cultures and minds. It's a very interesting time."

How tough is it to write for children?

"I can only speak for myself here. I think it all came out the way it did, because it is an account of things that actually happened, remembered as the child did and told with utmost honesty. I think kids, more than anyone else, can appreciate something that is sincere and

THIRD EYE EDITION

true. When I read bits of the book now, I still feel the urge to giggle at some of the incidents recounted ... the same feeling with which I giggled then as a child when the incident actually happened."

Through Shankhu's plaintive songs of loss and yearning, in Anton's giggly renditions of *Bor ghoror mekuri* and now Tara's magical evocation with colour and words, culture defines who we are and where we come from.