

THIRD EYE

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Even as I write this, there are innumerable videos on YouTube with deeply disturbing visuals of illegal Indian immigrants sent back from the US, shackled in chains. There is, as is to be expected, a lot of brouhaha at our end, condemning the blatant insult inflicted on us as a nation by this act. But there are also detractors saying we need not make such a noise about it, considering these people used illegal means to get there. After all, not one of them even thought of India when they made secret plans to get there. Be that as it may, what concerns me at this juncture is the suffering of these common people who have risked everything to gain a precarious toe-hold into what they believed was the land of milk and honey. Instead, what stared starkly at them when they got there was unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and the ever-present fear of being pounced upon and ignobly sent back. But can we really blame anyone for trying to seek a better life? Yet everywhere in Europe, Australia doors are slamming shut on the dispossessed.

Phoren-returned, bilat-pherot — these were the prized appendages before the names of men and women who had prestigious degrees from Harvard, Yale, Oxford, Cambridge, etc. Back in India, their families lost no time in finding a suitable life partner, preferably of the same caste. The phoren-returned was the toast of the entire clan, wedded to the most beautiful, accomplished, convent-educated belle.

More than half a century ago, a young woman, my exquisitely beautiful older cousin was very much in love with her brilliant tutor. Then he went abroad to study architecture. Lovesick as the couple was, separated by an enormous ocean and countries, he booked a ticket for her — who had never even flown before. They exchanged wedding rings as soon as she landed in the US. Another uncle, now in his late 80s, is a retired engineer with permanent citizenship. He lives in California and is well blended in American society. In fact, he actually won the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Trophy in Ballroom Dancing. Can there be more proof of his American orientation?

These belong to the older generations of immigrants — well-educated, solvent, welcomed with open arms by a country which was keen to use their talent and expertise for creating an America stronger, more prosperous than any other. It worked beautifully for Indians. They were close knit, both as a family and community, hard-working and won the trust and respect of others in this new country. Somewhere along the way, America began to be flooded by immigrants without degrees, totally unaware of the social, cultural mores of the country. Many took up the most menial of jobs, were paid a pittance, unable to afford housing. Frustrated, desperate, many took to crime. Sadly, many families back home had mortgaged land, taken huge loans and done everything in their power to see their loved ones prosper in a land they believed had streets paved with gold.

Indeed, so pervasive is the immigrant issue in nearly every country in the world today that there exists a rich body of literary work termed as immigrant literature. This explores the complex lives of people who have emigrated to the new world. These include books such as Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, in which a tight circle of Punjabi Indian women living in London grapple with the idea of not being Indian enough or being excessively so.

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* is a fine, delicately wrought account of 30-year-old Nina who goes to Canada to live with her new husband. Against a background of loneliness and alienation in a foreign land, she also experiences the slow unravelling of her marriage. It is the heartbreak of both being an NRI and experiencing a failed marriage.

No one explores the Indian diaspora experience with more eloquence and authenticity than Jhumpa Lahiri. From her magnum opus *The Namesake* to *Unaccustomed Earth*, she has etched the delicate balance her characters have to strive for when leaving home and seeking to keep an even keel in a strange, new way of existing.

Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* casts a scrutinising eye on the repercussions of colonialism, which occur in unexpected ways. My earliest exposure to diaspora literature was through Bharati Mukherjee's remarkable short stories, novels like *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, and *The Tiger's Daughter*. She was the earliest of the Indian diaspora writers. According to her, the truly creative and courageous immigrant was the one who had assimilated and not one who clung to the past.

Back to reality. As hundreds of the displaced and traumatised people are awaiting return, they will inevitably have to fall back on the same old hunger, poverty, and countless privations after their homecoming.

Still, somewhere in our hearts, as our eyes gaze at those sad images, we cannot but marvel at the sheer tenacity, the courage and the enduring spirit of these people. Braving blizzards, raging rivers, menacing forests, they have clawed their way towards a hope that has sadly dissolved. As they return lost and defeated, in my heart I feel that in spite of everything, the legality and illegality of it all, their sheer grit deserves to be acknowledged.

IN AND OUT OF LOVE

Come February and I always let out a groan. My birthday falls in this month and it is not the most cheerful thing to be reminded of one's age and the creeping advance of mortality. As if that is not enough, barely one day later, is the giddy, syrupy, highly corporatised ode to love — what else but Valentine's Day. And in every year of my three decades here, I have been compelled to doff my hat to love — supposed to be a state of being so intense and overwhelming that you could as well be on, well, hallucinogens.

Hang on, does love exist today, among the mostly cynical Gen Z? Can the exquisite tenderness of two beings trying to be one possible through dating apps? When young women proudly proclaim themselves to be feminazis, don't young men back off, terrified? When there is a suffocating pressure to perform well in academics and careers, where do young couples find the time and space to romance, murmur sentimental nothings and dream of a time when, waking up in the morning, they see themselves together?

Is India becoming anti-love?

Exalted icons like Narayan Murthy and that what's his name SN Subrahmanyam share a diabolical vision of creating a society of drones... slaves chained to their work stations for a punishing 70, 80 hours a day. If a man is raising the productivity of a company 80 hours a week, what about his family? I mean, doesn't a bloke have the conjugal right to stare at his wife, if he wants to? People like Murthy and co are trying to set up a dystopian society where all human feelings, love, family are to be sacrificed at the altar of Mammon.

Recently, I saw an advert that got me fuming. A young couple is boating on a river. Very everyday folks, not at all glam. The girl is clearly upset with the boy. She is scowling at him, because, as promised, he had not brought her a gift. Humbly, like a slave, he timidly offers her a velvet box on which nestled a pair of diamond earrings. She is now smiling, happy, rather triumphant in an unseemly kind of way. Most men are coerced into endlessly appeasing their sweethearts, at least till he goes bust. And frankly, don't such women have any self respect at all?

I want to share a true-life anecdote which is very funny and perfectly sums up what I am trying to say. On one of my regular evening strolls, I came across a group of gawky adolescent boys standing in line along the footpath. They were transfixed by the sight of a group of girls traipsing past them. They all had silky hair, wore amazing clothes, stilettos and what appeared to be high-end phones and bags.

Suddenly, one of the boys blurted out to the others. "Hey you, just look, okay? You get mixed up with them and you will have to get them shampoo, shoes, lipstick, understand?" I chuckled all the way home.

At this point of our civilisation, love is truly facing an existential crisis. For young men and women there is too much stress, too many distractions, a general cynicism regarding romantic relationship. They change jobs, cities countries, well, the grass is always greener on the other side. In such circumstances, how realistic is it to expect steady, nurturing relationships which need to be spread over a length of time? Too much exposure to love in films, music, celebrity hook-ups confuse them. And you know what the biggest enemy of love is? Simply put, it is the gradual decline of parental and societal opposition to love affairs, love marriages, etc. When lovers are ranged against the whole world, theirs is a heroic, death-defying resistance that binds them more tightly. And now, when you actually have your own mother wishing your girlfriend on her birthday, where is the suspense, the fear, the do or die spirit? The greatest

lovers in the world — from Romeo and Juliet to Shirin and Farhad faced censure, condemnation, hostility and had to give up their lives for love. Some years ago, on an impulse, I impulsively signed up for a diploma course on counselling conducted by Father Matthews at the Peace Centre in the city. We were a motley group of about 30 men and women from all walks of life. We had a swell time listening to Father Mathews' inspiring talks, taking notes, etc. Then we had some mock sessions. Four of us were to form a group, narrate our deepest, darkest secrets and counsel each other. I don't know what I shared, most probably some cock and bull story. But what has remained powerfully with me is the confession of a gentleman. He shall, of course, remain nameless. His account went something like this:

“Some years ago I used to live and work in Shillong. There I met a Chinese girl named Li Yen. It did not take us long to fall in love. She was gentle, understanding and so beautiful. We sat for hours by the lake, trying to understand each other in two different languages. I felt she would be my one and only love. Then, one day, what I feared the most happened. She was not to be found — at her hostel, at the shoe shop she worked, the lake. She had vanished. Then, a week later, someone told me she had gone back to China. That sorrow remains with me till today. I finally got married, had children. But I cannot feel that kind of happiness from my family. I will never be happy.”

I listened, deeply moved. How would I console him? This is what I said. “It is very sad indeed and I wish I could lessen your pain. But look at it this way — millions of people have never experienced love. But you have known its beauty, its magic. Some things are simply not meant to be. She could not bear to see you hurt and left without a farewell. Value the blessings of your present life. We must not let the past darken our lives. Is it not fair that your family cannot get your love?”

Did he heed my words? Wasn't it just a bit of very amateurish counselling? The answer came years later, when I bumped into him at an office. He recognised me instantly and gave me a warm smile, his eyes lighting up. In that moment I felt that my words had not been in vain. This isn't so bad — I still remain an incurable romantic — senior citizen or not, finding love is discovering a whole new continent.

A TIME TO FEAST...

Back in the day when the Earth was young, the school teacher invariably gave us two essays to write. About the first essay – town life vs country life. It ran the risk of being made to visualise, in graphic detail – a robust rustic in a dhoti duelling with a suited and booted citified dandy. Every clumsy essay was the exact replica of the other. We lauded villages with paeans on Nature's beauty, the simplicity of rural life, the hard work of the farmers, vast expanses redolent with peace and tranquillity. We praised cities as modern, with good schools, hospitals, railway stations. We never wrote that cities and villages needed each other to survive. Even today, we still idealise villages and often demonise cities. What we don't think of is that like the four villages that merged and created the city of Kolkata, countless cities rose from villages. A

friend of mine often rues that his native village has changed beyond imagination. The roads are pucca, televisions blare from brick and mortar houses. Maggie and chips packets hang from roadside shops. Everybody is on the phone and sadly, village belles are discovering the charms of jeans and t-shirts.

Today, villages are emptying as never before. Farmers struggle to till the fields, harvest the crops as young men and women are gravitating towards the cities for study or work, or just be in the glitz and glamour of an urban setting. A young man would rather be a cook in a down-at-hill café, an underpaid security guard at an apartment block or drive a cab to keep the body and soul together.

Along with the young rural populace, Magh Bihu, the harvest festival, as well as Bohag Bihu, have inevitably travelled to cities. The gradual morphing of the two celebrations has evoked mixed results.

Many years ago, my maternal home was in the middle of a huge farm that yielded everything from cherry tomatoes to pumpkins, coconuts and fish. Two days before Magh Bihu, my grandfather oversaw the setting up of a giant bhelaghar. Friends, relatives converged from everywhere. Enormous bins of pitha, laru lay open for us to plunder. All around us were vats of curd, cream and liquid jaggery. Goats were slaughtered, fish scaled and cleaned as a roaring fire gave out warmth and light, kerahis of curries bubbled in the kitchen. We sat around the bonfire. Tales were exchanged, jokes were cracked. The cows mooed in the sheds. Koka let us children poke small twigs into the flames; an act mankind has done since primordial times. Our dog Toby raced around the farm, scaring thieves who traditionally carried off fencing, vegetables, etc., on Magh Bihu night. On the dawn of Magh Bihu, after baths in freezing water, the meji was lit. There was a roar and a crackle. Coins, pithas were showered on the flames. That was Magh Bihu, full of bounty and gratitude.

Cut to 40 years later, Magh Bihu in the city. Bonfires on roof top terraces. The food a hotchpotch of Assamese and North Indian cuisine. Punjabi rap music playing on the deck as revellers, most likely inebriated, swaying to the beat of the deafening music. Motorcycles race around the city streets, as if the rider is hellbent on killing someone, himself or both. Nobody even cares about the struggle of the farmer in the noonday heat and freezing cold – working to fill our tables. Some have vaguely heard of the Farmers' Agitation but think it is too far removed for them to care.

The spirit of Magh Bihu seems somehow lost, hollow. It is time to believe in our identity and do something meaningful together as a community. Wishing all readers a very happy Magh Bihu.

THE FUTURE IS HERE...

So here we are, in the cusp of the old and the new. The shower of sparks lighting up the sky, the toasting and merrymaking, the warm fuzzy feeling that mankind is one, that's done with, though hangovers and syrupy nostalgia is still awash.

Well, stating the obvious, the future is here, but it comes with a rider. No less than Elon Musk has grimly predicted that AI is all set to be the greatest peril to mankind, short of a giant comet hitting the Earth and obliterating us to kingdom come, some of us are no doubt scrambling to re-read Orwell's dystopian 1984. Just think of it, America, the land of the free and the brave, negates the very spirit of the inscription on the Statue of Liberty.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me..." Every time Trump reads this, I imagine he has a teeth gnashing meltdown. If Musk is right, then what future are we talking about here?

It is in human nature to plan for the future, while animals have no such goals. They live in the moment, eat as much as they want, make no pretence of being pals with the enemy, mate with whoever is in the vicinity and stay far away from mutual funds.

Sadly, we are not that cool. In fact, we are quite foolish. We are endlessly struggling to create a secure future. It consumes our every waking moment. I meet people all the time, people with glum faces, worry lines on their forehead, telling me how they wished their offspring completed their education, sooner got a job, married and finally settled down. I have a problem with this settling down.

What is settling down, anyway? I thought only dust settles down. The truth be told, one of the greatest tragedies of contemporary life, especially more so in India, is the mental torture the young — from five-year-olds to 20-year-olds or more — are subjected to by their own parents. Instead of being nurturers, they have morphed into sadists who push their offspring forward relentlessly, with a cruelty that somehow becomes tragic. And when their progeny fall into depression, try to take their lives or begin to use drugs, the tyrants blame the internet, friends, the educational institutions, anything but themselves. So we have young people moving to the future without a chance to be themselves, to enjoy being alive. Like Sisyphus, they keep moving their boulders up and down the hill, metaphorically, unhappy, frustrated youth, think of them studying for this competitive exam and that, wondering what kind of future awaited them. In the coming year, one hopes parents would be more sensitive and career institutions honest enough not to make false promises.

My take on the future is not all that modern mumbo jumbo like scenario planning. The future is not next year, month or week. Every next moment is the future. For a brief, tremulous moment it is in the present and poof! It is in the past. People dwell in the past, also called nostalgia,

because we are all shooting arrows in the dark. Recently I acquired my classmate Nandinee Kalita's amazing book on the old houses of Assam.

Going through the lavish pictures of old, gracious homes with their cool verandahs, stately rooms, sloping roofs and quaint furniture, sepia-tinted photos of ancestors hanging on the walls, I am overcome by sadness that my children, grandchildren will not even see those houses, far less live in them. Our square box-like apartments will continue to be built in the future, because that is all we consider a home — a place to live, functional replicas of each other and utterly without soul.

It goes without saying that there is more to the future than our dreams and wishes. My octogenarian mother, week after week, forecasts that I will be popular, have good health but look out for some financial loss. Through gritted teeth, I remind her how there are millions of Aquarians in the world and was she, with her infinite muddleheaded kindness, looking out for all of them? Mom, the future is not flu coming my way but technological advancement, dystopian societies, Artificial Intelligence, space exploration, time travel, parallel universe and extraterrestrial life. It is about Sunita Williams, with incredible grit and bravery, suspended in air, fighting for her life.

What does the future hold for marriage? Atul Subhash's chilly testimony reveals what women are capable of, using Section 498 A to emotionally and financially ruin their husbands. Subhash's suicide starkly reveals how law, almost always on the side of the woman, seals the fate of men. If this is the way marriages are morphing, men and women are turning into deadly antagonists, even though celebrity weddings continue to hold our eyeballs.

Well, sorry for that venting here. I am of a certain age not at all flattering to my appearance. I can't have a whole lot of food items! But I am happy. I tell stories before gatherings. I am still making new friends. I have tonnes of unread books which last me to the end — I think of the future as a link between me, my children, and grandchildren. I do not qualify as the grand matriarch because I am silly and temperamental. That is when my sons get the chance to scold me. In this New Year, three generations of us will be together. I am as excited as my grandchildren.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!

Sadly, people no longer want to live within their means. And they are trying every trick in the book to acquire more...

"Mummy! Mummy!" Piklu ran into the sitting room, where his parents were watching television, and burst out, "What is a fugitive?"

"Is that in your lesson?" Aparna asked, worried.

"I couldn't find it there, Mummy. Everyone in school is talking about it. They'll laugh at me tomorrow if I don't know."

Arun, her husband and Piklu's dad, took his parenting duties very seriously indeed.

"Well, son, fugitives are people who run away after they have done bad things."

"What bad things, Papa?"

"Like taking money from people and promising to give them back double."

"I knew it!" Piklu yelled, vindicated. "Avi took 50 rupees from me today and promised to return it tomorrow. I don't believe him. That's a fugitive, Pops!"

"Hold on, hold on!" said Arun, trying not to laugh. "Fugitives are people who have also done more serious things than taking people's money. But my boy, remember that all fugitives are chicken-hearted. At the first hint of trouble, they flee like bats out of hell."

Piklu climbed up on to the sofa, homework forgotten. "Go on," he said, "So they run away... what are they scared of?"

"Oh, lots of things — the police, media, losing their money, which, you must remember, is not theirs in the first place."

"But," said Piklu, his brows furrowed, "Where do they go, these fugitives? Where do they hide?"

"Oh, all over the place... they vanish into small towns, big cities, hill stations, forests, even countries abroad."

"Like Vijay Mallya? Right?" Piklu said with enviable sangfroid. Arun's jaw dropped. He looked at his nine-year-old with newfound respect.

"Well, to get on with the story, some get caught by the police before they get a chance to become fugitives. That, as you can guess, saves a lot of fuel and head scratching by the cops.

"Papa, what's the difference between running and hiding — a little bit? At school all the guys are chanting it and laughing like crazy."

"Oh, that's doublespeak. But I bet she never turned a page of George Orwell."

Aparna came in with four tall glasses of cold coffee. "I hope you've not been filling his head with all sorts of nonsense," she looked at Arun archly, handing him a glass. Just as Piklu reluctantly returned to his homework, Sneha, their pretty 17-year-old daughter, strolled in.

"Well, Mom," she began, "You want me to go for UPSC coaching? Fine I'll do it. I'll crack it, like an egg. But think of it, Mom — will I earn enough to own a Gucci bag, Manish Malhotra outfits, suites at the Burj Al Arab, and someone brotherly enough to gift me a teddy with roses all over?"

Aparna stared at her daughter, horrified. Then she began to sob, hiccuping at the same time. With a wink at her dad, Sneha hugged her mother. "Stop it, cry-baby. I was joking, silly, and you fell for it. I have never even wanted those things, Would a future police officer care for a teddy

bear? I would love to live simply, do my work well and maybe you guys will see me on television wearing a medal or two.

With a deep sigh of relief, Aparna picked up the empty glasses and took them to the kitchen. The bell rang. It was Vivek, Arun's close friend and neighbour. With him was a distinguished gentleman in thick glasses.

"Hi, Arun!" said Vivek genially, "I want you to meet Dr. Shanbag. He is a psychiatrist from Mumbai. We go back a long way. He's staying with me and I thought of presenting him a case study of a typical Assamese family — yours."

The three men laughed and settled down.

"Not watching TV?" asked Vivek, puzzled. "They caught the couple. I must say I could not recognise her without make-up."

"We turned it off a while ago. Piklu has been showing an unhealthy interest in the affair."

"No one can beat my favourite fugitives."

"Sssh," said Arun, fearing Piklu was standing behind the door, listening.

"Arre yaar, Jay and Veeru from Sholay. Their Ye dosti song still brings a lump to my throat," Dr. Shanbag began, "I caught a re-run of Leonardo Di Caprio's con artist movie, Catch Me If You Can. It's based on the exploits of the real-life Frank Abagnale; he pulled off acts as a Pan Am pilot, a doctor, a teacher and an attorney. That's what I call conning with real 24-carat brains."

"Dr. Shanbag, your views on the psyche of the Assamese people from this..." asked Arun.

"Well," said Dr. Shanbag, stroking his beard. "It has been a real eye-opener. Many years ago, when I was here, I got the impression that the Assamese people made frugality a virtue. They were deeply scornful of the nouveau riche and their garish lifestyle. In those times, wealth was seen as somewhat immoral, vulgar, as was the pursuit of it. The upright schoolmaster with holes in his umbrella was much more admired than smug moneybags flaunting phoren cars. How things have changed! There is this what you would call an all-pervasive greed for money. Sadly, people no longer want to live within their means. And they are trying every trick in the book to acquire more and more."

"Right!" nodded Vivek. "I actually had a colleague telling me that people are waking up to the possibilities of creating wealth and how we might lose our old inertia and get our adrenalin kicking."

Dr. Shanbag smiled, "That is pure idiocy. The people want money but are clueless about making it. They are not a patch on the Tatas, the Ambanis. All they do is hand over money to some smooth talking stranger and wait for wealth to rain from the skies. And the scamsters? Instead of covering their tracks, as all self-respecting scamsters would do, they are all over the place, taking great pride and joy in other people's money with an amateurishness that is, well, making me have doubts on their IQ."

Vivek and Dr. Shanbag rose to leave.

Just then, Piklu rushed pell-mell into the room.

"Papa!" He cried out, his face flushed. "Avi is not coming to school tomorrow. I think I'm not getting my money back. I knew all along, he is a fugitive!"

Dr. Shanbag raised a brow and said teasingly, "Young man, so you have those even in your class? Hmm, things are more serious than I thought."

WRITERLY WOES

Here is a bit of a confession. It has taken me three decades and more to introduce myself as a writer. People of every other profession are gung-ho about calling themselves doctors, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats, careers which have a sheen on them that my calling somehow doesn't and now, what with vloggers, bloggers, podcasters, influencers of the new world, a writer like me is a mournful antiquity that is fast sliding to oblivion.

For starters, there is no stamp of academic authority in a writer's portfolio. There are, of course, creative writing workshops here and there, where hosannas are sung to Neruda, Rushdie and others with unpronounceable names. That is about all. Then, coming back to me, there is the difference of the voice and tone. People of important professions, people whose voices boom, do not make eye-contact with the cattle class and usually wear a lot of rings on their fat fingers, for planetary support, I guess.

Their confidence, smugness, the bristling self-importance is at sad odds to my own timidity. When asked, "So, a writer?" I nod feebly, as if the cat got my tongue. I always felt like an imposter in those moments.

"No, I mean, what do you really do?"

I wanted to say, "I mostly sit at my desk and hope things happen."

"My kids don't read books." The streaked hair says. "After I joined the Pilates classes I just need my energy drink."

I turn to go, my world imploding.

"Listen," she calls. "Do you write about sex?"

"Kind of, when the story demands."

"Oh, sorry then. I thought of hiring you as my son's tutor."

"I AM A WRITER!" I was shocked by my voice. It was loud, strident and a menacing don't-you-mess-with-me growl to it...

I was elated. I was a writer, a bona fide one at that and I was ready to shout from the rooftops. All at once, in a happy spell of serendipity, there were newbies actually flocking around to know how characters are created.

You kidding me? I don't create characters. They creep into me and won't let me be. In this vast city, I have come across innumerable people who seem to have crawled out of the pages of an unwritten book. Blind minstrels, hijras clapping hands, the ash-smearing sanyasin seated cross-legged under a tree year after year, dark-skinned fisherwomen with flowers in their buns and mouths red with spittle, drunks singing an immortal Kishore Kumar number comically off key...

Then, the other day, a character and my paths crossed. A woman pushed the glass door of a tony beauty salon and staggered in, sizzled by the summer heat. I was there too. Watch how I observe, evoke, play with truth, untruth, contempt, compassion with nothing but words. Perhaps I am still trying to justify myself.

There were eight beauticians in red and black, tending to their clients.

"Girls! Girls!" She called out in a raucous voice, "Look, here I am!"

"Welcome Ba!"

"Only a welcome?" She bunched up her eyebrows, pretending to be offended. "Not even a cup of tea?"

"The machine is not working, Ba."

The woman flounced off to a settee and sat there cross-legged, a pose somewhat unseemly in the classy environs.

It was her ensemble that first aroused my curiosity. It was a light, gauzy affair, with loose pants, an unwieldy top and a strange turban wrapped over her head. A large gold ring hung from a nostril and her kohl-lined eyes made her look foxy, curious.

“So what will you do today, Ba?” Asked Deepali.

“Everything!” She chortled.

“Grow my hair, smoothen my cheeks, massage my tired body, paint my nails, soften my hands, paint my nails.”

The girls laughed gleefully, “Ba, are you getting married again?”

She covered her face like a shy bride. It was grotesque.

“It’s my son’s marriage next month. The girl’s father is a doctor. They have land at Sonapur. Only daughter. So no hassles.”

“And your son, what does he do?”

“Works in America. I can’t pronounce the name of the city.”

“Ba, what did you buy for your bride?”

“Oh, five sets of jewellery, clothes.”

“My younger son drove me around for the shopping. He is my dearest baba. He takes such good care of me. He has a foreign car.”

“And when will he marry, Ba?”

“Oh no, he is my son, my baby. Maybe he will marry after I die. My older son is marrying.”

“The bride is beautiful. I liked her soft voice. With her doing most of the housework and all, I think it will be best to lock up her jewellery in the bank.”

The girls began to work on her, silently. What could they do about this cruel hag; she had so much money. Good for business.

In two hours, they did what they could — hair colour, facial, threading, manicure, pedicure. She paid up, bargaining crudely and muttering under her breath.

No foreign car was waiting for her. She hailed a rickshaw and reached home just as rain began to fall. She unlatched the door and switched on the light.

“I am back,” She called out cheerily. “What about a cup of tea?”

There was no answer. Everybody was long gone... on trains, planes, on the shoulders of pallbearers. A tight knot formed in her throat. But even in the desolation of that empty house, she was too proud to cry.

The New Normal

When the doc, with his assuring nod and firm voice pronounces your heart and blood pressure to be normal, normal is suddenly the most valuable word ever uttered by man. After a cyclone or a riot, when the news has it that planes, trains and cars are running normally, your relationship with normal kicks into high gear with a full blown love affair.

I think the average person craves normalcy. Whether it is the same breakfast cereal day after day, the same route to and from home, the same banalities exchanged with the wife, the colleagues, the same visuals of floods, netas, crime and lathi charges, the common man values predictability over surprise and sudden change. Normalcy is kind to his nerves, his anxiety, bolstering his desire for peace, stability, and well, utter boredom.

So, well, then, normal is all about conforming to a type, standard or regular pattern. But, as is to be expected, normal is not a constant. It adapts to the times and is constantly changing in a number of ways. Take the case of schooling. In our times when dinosaurs were still around, it was the norm to admit the child, most often to a missionary school charging modest fees. Other than that, little was required of the parents than signing the marksheets. Parents did not have to attend PTA meets. Cut to the present. My little granddaughter was having Grandparents' Day at her Delhi school, and she would be heartbroken if her Aita was not there. So her Dad got into action, booking my ticket and taking care of all the other details, till I was there at her school, clapping enthusiastically as she twirled in a synchronised dance. I think, in retrospect, this is a very sensitive initiative of the school, binding three generations in some magical moments of caring and sharing.

However, the new normal is also about many people choosing schools that pamper their vanity and reaffirm their elite status. The new normal in these temples of learning is a state-of-the-art infrastructure. But then, many such privileged kids do experience a kind of surreal disconnect with the real world, and often lack the street-smart skills one does need to overcome the challenges of a brutal world.

In our lane, close to the Gandhi Mandap, life was very different 20 years ago. It would be a lively place, with boys careening by in their colourful bicycles, whooping in glee. Excited dogs would race after them, barking in a chorus. I saw every kind of hawker, from the one with fruits, vegetables, the man with the basket calling for old newspapers. In the deep of the noonday heat, the cobbler would squat under a tree, a sleepy cow lying companionably by his side. The ear-splitting revelry of Diwali, and the squirting of colour guns during Holi were a sight to behold from our balcony.

Then the new normal began. The children grew up and left for other cities, to study, to work. The hawkers are all but gone. Householders would once carry home bags of groceries. Now shopping is just a dial away. Now meals ranging from Malabar prawns to dum biryani arrive at your front door, piping hot. The lady of the house has lost all interest in cooking. Maybe she is using the time to work from home. Families eat on the couch, watching Netflix. The children retire to their rooms at night to update their Instagram, trawl celebrities, doctor their photos,

google forbidden topics. These go on far into the night, oblivious of the stars and moon, till dawn finds them red-eyed, exhausted, fearful of facing a real world, a real day. Parents wonder with dread what their offsprings have been up to. Sometimes it's too late. That is the new normal, and it creeps me out.

There are still some beautiful Assam-type houses in Guwahati. Seeing them is like travelling back to a past where time moved in a gentle rhythm, birds twittered on countless trees, each gracious house had a lawn and flowerbeds. The lady of the house had her own kitchen garden, cherry tomatoes, lemons, xaak and chillies growing in glorious profusion. The houses had tall sloping roofs, wooden pillars, deep verandahs, often encircling the entire house. The rooms were cool and dark, keeping out the heat of summer.

But the new normal in a city dwelling is a different ball game altogether. People take a home loan, source out a property dealer and if they are lucky, they get a boxy, square, ugly flat in some floor of an impersonal, intimidating apartment block. Scores of families live here, coldly ignoring each other. The lift is then out of order, the taps run dry. The society fees go up. The dream nest is now a nuisance. But it is the new normal, and they must live with it, unhappy or not.

Now I am about to deal with a delicate matter, but one that needs to be brought out in the open. For the last decade or so, thousands of young men and women have flocked to Guwahati from the rest of Assam and the North-East. They enrolled in colleges, coaching centres or worked. They created a niche for themselves in a throbbing, restless city that could often be ruthless and alienating. Roofless, young, with no family to lay down the checks and balances, slowly things took a dystopian turn. Previously, many of these people lodged in paying guest hostels. They were secure, were ensured regular meals and it proved quite affordable.

But many of them chaffed against the rules and regulations. So now the preferred alternative was renting flats. Often these men or women shared the rent and revelled in the freedom that was now theirs. But what could be done with this freedom? Ideally, it could mean having the space and privacy to pursue one's goal. I said ideally. Freedom is a heady thing. Freedom is a double-edged sword. These young men and women organised drinking parties. Heavy metal was played. Laughter and carousing all through the night. In the morning, absence from college, from work. Only hangovers.

Then, the case of the women. Arriving from distant places, rural, backward — each young woman straightened her hair, changed her wardrobe, learnt to put on flawless make-up, tottered on stilettos. She had a boyfriend. Then another. And another. Her seat at college was filled up by someone else. She called home. Yes, she was having exams. Could they send more money? She had to pay her fees.

You see, this is the new normal. And they say the youth are the future of the country. Famous last words.