

I don't need to fear, do I?

Nabarun Bhattacharya

Biren was one of those people, you come across or talk to almost every day and then forget immediately afterwards. Maybe in every *para*, every neighbourhood, one can find a few people who may be our Birens or may come very close to Biren-like figures.¹ Not many of us remember him today though. I have tested that. In various places, small alleys or streetside roaks, in houses or in STD phone-booths, in clubs or in markets, in small *pan*-cigarette shops, I had tried to raise the issue of Biren by throwing a quick reference in a manner one throws an unused coin so that somebody would pick it up and Biren would suddenly appear with his dirty shirt, untrimmed beard, dishevelled hair, big gray eyes, sunken cheek and safety-pin strapped slippers. And having appeared, he would do something which he always did, speaking about a thing which had no meaning whatsoever, hundred percent *bhat*.² No, he would not talk nonsense always. He would also speak of other things, the hot topics – such as death-by-hanging, cricket, vote, whatever was on the card. Biren would unfailingly place his hand on the shoulders of the person talking to and pinch him as he spoke. It would happen almost every day that the person, Biren started talking to, would give him an excuse in order to skip his nonsense and try to go past; but Biren would follow up and walk together without a pause in his words.

There is only one reason for saying all this. I noticed something yesterday. There has been a new, and quite big, sweetmeat shop in our *para*. They sell very expensive and famous sweets there, many of which I don't even know by name. Anyway, let that be. They have installed a machine in that shop which reads – the “insect flasher”; two heavy powered tube-lights burn there, slightly bluish in colour. Attracted by that light, many flies or insects of that kind, sometimes I've seen butterflies too, go near it; and then their bodies writhe, and twitch, and fidget in the warm light and then burst in a cracker. Looking at that machine, Biren's image flashed in my mind. Also how easily have people forgotten him altogether. For a few days, there was no talk save Biren's in our neighbourhood. When was that, just a few months back, and people have already started to forget him. I thought of all this, looking at the warm-light insect killer machine.

Biren was never a faker. He used to work in the Corporation Office, but did not like to go. He did get his salary for many months. But when they arranged for a strict monitoring on workers' attendance, he went to the office regularly on time, and then on a certain day without talking to anyone he just left his job. People like me who work in small places were completely puzzled by this. Anybody would. I work for a company that supplies the cartridge ink of the printer to go with the computers. I have two partners with me. We go to various DTP units or offices. We have to

walk long distances. You got to have some tiffin, snacks, and water with you. Buying bottled water is so costly! We fill in our bottles in known offices. And taking a short break, we eat some *rooti-tarkari* standing under a tree.³ On some days, we carry food, some *batasha*, sweet granules from home. They are chopping the trees. There is little shadow anywhere these days. We save the transportation costs. Biren decided to quit his job when these insect killer machines started to be used in many of the shops! However, he did not last long thereafter. Biren's wife now stitches blouses, applying falls and Pico on petticoats. Biren had a son. Last time I heard, he was about to take the 10th standard Madhyamik examinations. O yes, Biren's mother is still there.

Since we are talking about Biren today, let us give a sample of his bhat. I was buying ten packets of *biri* and three Flake cigarettes from a street-shop and Biren suddenly appeared.⁴

- Boss, do you have a cigarette?

I gave him one. And lighted a biri myself. Then he began,

- Yesterday I caught him on phone, you know. He was speaking, and speaking fine, but suddenly said that he could not hear me for the hustle and bustle outside. You heard me all this while, said yes and no to my words, and suddenly honking and bustling put you off?

- Yes, quite so.

- Then he said, call me half an hour later. I did call him half an hour later.

Saying this, he turned his hand upside down, nodded his head, and started again,

- The phone is switched off this time. Some ringtone is playing, and a girl is saying something. What do you say to that, can you say anything to that?

I said, it's alright, I have to rush for my office now. See you later. And Biren stopped there. Who he called to and why—no *scene* of telling any of this.⁵ Just some odd pieces of information. How would you define this kind of thing if not some bhat?

So what happened once was that, on a particular evening some extortionists rode a motorbike to promoter Hari Dutta's office and charged hand-grenades; they fired some bullets too. Nothing happened to Hari Dutta. Some of the neighbours around said though that they had only charged the grenades. Bullets and stuff were a complete lie. But that was not true. While passing by Hari Dutta's office, I had glimpsed that the glow-signboard "H Dutta Construction" had two identically small holes in it. But I cannot be entirely sanguine on that since the small ball-bearing elements that are stuffed in a grenade could also make those holes. Sheikh Binod is in jail now. The miscreants who came that night were touted to be Binod's men. And based on this incident, a rumour started doing the rounds that a murder would take place soon. Nobody could prevent that. Today or tomorrow, the murder would definitely take place.

Biren began his new bhat around this time. Two or three people might have been talking to them in a low voice, Biren would go and stand close to them. A loose shirt. Unshaved. Untrimmed

moustache, turning tawny downwards and the brown-stained and long-unwashed teeth.

- How is it?
- What's how's is it?
- I'm hearing stuff, you know, hushed stuff, rumours in the air. What I was saying is, I don't need to fear, do I?
- It will happen to those who are associated with it. What's that to you? Go home and hide for a few days. Don't just come out.
- That's a good idea. But I'm feeling very scared, you know, some hunches say...
- Will you go now, you nonsense-speaking asshole.
- I'm going, going. Everybody is hot-tempered these days; everyone says the same. Yes, home is a better place.
- If you know that, why do you get your ass fucked here and there? Just fuck off...

After Biren had left the place,

- This fucker is a great bastard.
- There is tension all around. So he might be scared.
- Leave that. He's one big sister-fucker. Leave him and his deep-shit nonsense.
- He's surely insane. Or, who would quit his job in these terrible times?
- See this is the result of a particular type of gene. I bet his father did not do any work either and fed himself on his mother's income. Everything is a game of genes, you understand.

We have a club in our para, Mahamaya Sporting Club. A big cemented house. Day and night you'll see people playing card games there. Many have seen Biren's face stuck to the window there, especially on evenings. He would never do that before. When someone would go to a nearby shop to buy a cigarette or, say, pee in the dark market-alleys, Biren would rush to catch him up and ask,

- Did you hear something?
- What thing?
- The thing that everybody is talking about, something like a murder.
- No, I don't know. And what will you do knowing either?
- No, actually, what I wanted to know is, I don't need to fear for that, do I?
- Don't you have anything else to do? Don't just blabber and waste my time now. Go home. If a murder has to take place, it will.
- Yes, that's right. I should rather go home. So you are saying that...
- Will you fuck off?

There would be a rumour almost every day. Near the Thakurbari temple pavilion, an unknown Tata Sumo car was seen parked with the lights off. Did anybody go and check that? I don't think so. The

car was rumoured to be there for twenty minutes with the engine on. Some people from the neighbouring dark houses were told to have seen a few heads inside the car talking to their cell-phones. Who came that night and waited there burning the fuel? Were they the goons of Hari Dutta? Hari has a good connection with the Party. Hari is also rumoured to donate to the Trinamul.⁶ Did he set his goons ready following a hunch that something might happen that night? And even if he did, those goons would never come empty handed. Never. There was surely a machine-gun in the Tata Sumo. Rather, the question is: how many machine-guns were there? We don't know that but the Tata Sumo incident indicated firmly that the case was now rolling towards a murder.

After the incident of murder had taken place, our para doctor Shyamal confided in me that Biren went to him. Biren would often go to his chamber; the doctor might be busy with the patients, he would suddenly put his head through the door-curtains and ask,

- Doctorbabu, are you here for some time today?

He wouldn't get an answer.

- Ok, alright. I will come back half an hour later. I've to talk to you about something important.

The doctor would not say anything to that either because he knew that Biren says this every now and then and never comes back.

The doctor Shyamal said that there was no patient then. Biren came back.

- Doctorbabu, I came to know something. I'm hearing stuff, you know. People are being hush-hush about it.
- What?
- Things that I'm hearing you see. Here and there. They are saying that it can happen anytime now. A murder. A murder will happen.
- What? I have not heard anything like that.
- Then hear from me. The situation outside is not very good. I'm sensing it always in the air. There will be a murder any day.
- What nonsense you speak of. Murder takes place every day. You open the newspapers and there is a murder there. What's that to you or me? If it has to, it will.
- No, Doctorbabu, the thing is I'm feeling a bit scared. My hands are always sweaty. I can feel them shaking sometimes. What I mean to say is, I don't need to fear for that, do I?

Doctor Shyamal confided in me all these things later, maybe from a sense of guilt.

That Biren was associating himself with the murder which would take place in near future and was getting scared of that was known to many people. Somebody reported to have seen him coming out of the local police station and walking towards the para. He was also seen to visit the local Party office and ask our LCM Kali-da – "I don't need to fear, do I?" This had happened when

Bishu of the Saha Medical Stores was there. Bishu was a good boy. Why would he tell Biren's name to anyone? Actually, once frightened to the core by something mysterious and unknown, anybody could act like Biren. Especially when everyone firmly believed that there would be a murder soon.

The incident afterwards was heard from Buro. Buro, Salman, and Moglai were drinking beer in the field behind Thakurbari. It was a hot summer day. The evening had rolled on. Salman and Moglai started cursing people in their talk. They were Hari Dutta's boys. Buro was not into this though; he had a family business of selling potatoes at the market. They saw that Biren was coming. Salman raised it,

- Let's startle Biren-da.
- Why disturb him for no reasons whatsoever? Let him go.
- Just see, it'll be great fun, believe me. Hey, Biren-da. Biren-da. Listen. We have some news for you.

Biren came forward,

- Where were you going?
- To my house. Things are not good these days.
- Not good? Say, the worst. Danger is all around us. Do you know what it is?

And he brought it out from his pocket. Black. Rough polishing. A Chinese Revolver. Biren stepped back. Buro felt nervous,

- What is this? What are you doing? If it fires shots...
- Shut up you fucker. No magazine inside.

Biren told them with horror on his face,

- I'll scream, please, take it away!
- What! Stop that nonsense, Biren-da. Hold it in your hands and see the fun. Do you know how to fire? Very Easy. Hold it like this. And press the trigger.

There was a sound of gun-firing. The cracking sound dashed through Biren's body into the field, somewhere in the distance. Moglai ran first. The people around also heard the sound of gun-firing. Buro followed Moglai. Salman too.

Hari Dutta gave Salman the Chinese Revolver to keep it. Hari Dutta did not know this. Neither did Salman. Even if you take out the magazine from those models, a bullet is always stored inside. Many such revolvers entered Calcutta during 1971-72.⁷

----- **Translated by Sourit Bhattacharya**

Glossary:

(“Amar Kono Bhoy Nei Toh” which is translated here as “I don’t need to fear, do I?” was published in the literary magazine “Baromash” in 2004)

¹ Para in Bengali stands for neighbourhood. Usually a line of houses on either side of a street, para has a historical significance. It is associated with the partition of Bengal and the close settlement of the refugees from East Bengal in various parts of Calcutta and around.

² The word bhat has a specific urban use which means fabricating stories or speaking nonsense, or rather trying to make an “important” point out of a nonsense talk. So it carries both the meaning with it – partly funny and partly annoying.

³ Rooti-tarkari is a round flatbread with curry. It is an everyday Indian cuisine.

⁴ Biri is a native form of smoking tobacco. It is made of tobacco wrapped in dried leaves and tied with thread. It is very cheap compared to cigarettes. Flake is an Indian brand of cigarettes.

⁵ The author uses the phrase “scene-scenery” to mean the need for clarification. The use of the word scene here is related with the sequence of scenes in a film which makes a “showing” of the “telling” of a tale, a sequence of things.

⁶ The Party is the Communist Party of India (CPIM), while Trinamul is the Trinamul Congress Party. When the story was written, the CPIM was the ruling party and Trinamul was in opposition.

⁷ 1971-72 was a politically turbulent time for Calcutta. The Naxalite movement, which was violently crushed by the State, was followed by the Bangladesh War of Liberation (again close to West Bengal). There was a deep social and political crisis in West Bengal.