What Ronjon Can Do

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I'm imaging the morning. Bird sounds arrive, to discover a new day in the rediscovery of the limbs of the yard's trees beyond the window. Scraping and pot-clanging of the kitchen variety arise; and perhaps the squelching beat of clothes being washed will wander up from the household pond's makeshift *ghat*. There should be the sound of voices creeping about, discussing morning matters in sleepy tones. Do the waking fussy quacks of ducks and first contemplative cow groans bring greeting to the day?

There must be other signs. The coolness of air is a giveaway to mark the winter, while the sunshine's warmth can easily represent the other seasons. Sometimes it might be that the damp kisses of wind-and-rain find their way, through the window, on the forehead, on the cheek. The firmness of the wooden bed and cloth feeling of bedcovers are among the welcomers surely, not less than the shuffling of feet, the finding of sandals in somewhere-down-there places on the cool mud floor.

What is morning like in Rundia village? What are the usual signs that greet 45-year-old Ronjon Biswas as he starts each day?

"My husband can do everything," says Shopno Biswas. "He can catch fish. He can cut paddy." His father Porimal Biswas says it was Ronjon who found those lost jewellery items at the bottom of the pond when nobody else could.

It's already afternoon by the time we've arrived in the village of Narail Sadar Thana and the crowd of family members has gathered in the yard. They're excited to share experiences of Ronjon's abilities. From him the family takes pride. And it's a sign of love, isn't it – all that focus on the things he can do? Yes, as sure as the swishing sound of the broom that must shuffle about that house each morning there's love in their descriptions of him.

Acceptance seems to have long ago taken up residence in the Biswas household, to have triumphed over that unimaginable despair and brokenness that must've engulfed the family originally, when Ronjon, as a three-year-old child, became blind.



"The day I learnt to fully repair a machine was really memorable for me," says Ronjon Biswas.

They blame chokh utha, conjunctivitis – a common and usually mild disease that clears up without treatment, though eye drops or rinsing the eyes with fresh water might be of help. As likely it was trachoma which is sometimes linked to poor sanitation and conditions familiar to those living in poverty or indeed, as refugees. Whatever the exact cause, it took just twenty days for blindness to take hold – as short a time as that.

There's history's turmoil in his blindness. The last sights he saw were not of Rundia but of India. It was 1971 and like many Rundian families, his had left for India's safety upon hearing that the Pakistani army was on its way. Uprooted, after fleeing for their lives, it was in the chaos and uncertainty of the refugee encampments of Duttapukur near Barasat that Ronjon's world grew dark. There was no chance for treatment.

After liberation the family returned to Rundia, but in Rundia there's not a great deal of assistance for a child who cannot see. Ronjon could not attend school – and of course he had to learn his way about the house, his way through each day by himself, with his family's help.

When he understood there would be no recovery for his son's eyes, Porimal Biswas held no hope for him. How would he survive as the years passed?