

# SLEEP

SUMANA ROY

(Concluding part)  
Whatever bravado I might show to the world, only I know how greedy I am for a night's – even a single night's – sleep. I have read an encyclopaedic amount of literature about insomnia, I have heard lullabies in thirteen different languages, I have tried lavender aromatherapy and temple massage techniques. Every night, I hold my wife tight, wake her up into concern, ask her to remind me when our day should begin, I do all this with my eyes closed so that she can't see what's in my mind. My eyes are worse than bad breath – they give my immediate past away. Semanti pats my eyelids, draws their outlines, and even after all this indulgence, when sleep does not visit, she scolds me – she can't bear to see how sleep deposits itself into fossils of wide nights below my eyes, she says.

"Why do you not try, Prakash?" she pleads with me some mornings. Then she pets me. And then I don't regret being sleepless all night.  
Every night it is a new word. It is Moby Dick to my Ishmael. I chase it all night. I catch it in its middle age. If only I knew where it comes from and where it wants to go, I know I shall be cured. But all night we play serve and volley. No one wins. Though I am defeated. Semanti sees me as victim all day. Sometimes I just give in: "How do you sleep so soundly?"

I know the question is in poor taste, it is ambitious in an ugly way, too much the poor man's jealousy at the haves and so on. But if I can't ask my wife, who can I ask this to?

"I switch off completely," she offers kindly, making sleep sound like a technological invention. Clearly, I'm a Luddite in this regard.

"How?" I ask, like my mother-in-law asking "where" when asked to "Enter" on her cell phone.

"You know you forget the day, you forget your work, you forget the maid, you forget your enemies, you forget your friends, you forget yourself, you forget your partner ..." she chants.

I'm clearly not hypnotised, rather alarmed, "You forget me?"

"Yes," she says cruelly.

To sleep one must be cruel: that is the lesson I learn for the day.

To begin with, I wash only my plate and glass after breakfast. I spend an eternity in the bathroom. I fill only my bottle of water from the water filter. But Semanti doesn't even notice. Selfishness, I learn, is a social vice, entirely a comparative one. I have failed. And so I cannot sleep.

"I'd like to be Rip Van Winkle, Simu," I tell her at midnight. She pats my face in her sleep, indulgent, like a mother who tells her six year old son that he'll play cricket for India one day.

The rest of the night is spent working against that ambition. I'm again a deep sea diver. Sleep is a speck of dust forming into something precious inside an oyster. One day it shall be mine. Though I deny it to everyone, including Semanti, I try to obey the sleep therapist's dictums to the dot.

The first principle is to shut your eyes, he's told us. I do that.

The second is to flush out all office gossip from one's being. I do that.

Get all the gas out of your belly. I think I've managed that too, Pawanmukta Asana.

I run all the 11 dictums in my mind. I tick mark them. If sleep was a theoretical exam, I'd be first boy in class.

When I wake up the next morning, I am confident that sleep will come to

me that night. The last night was a dress rehearsal – I've got all the props ready, also the costume, the stage is set as it were, sleep will begin its night-long monologue and I shall wake up to claps the next morning. It can't get wrong the next time. I've got everything ready to perfection.

With that knowledge I go to Sleep Therapy class after office. I am the first one to sign in. The therapist (it's hard for me to call him Sleep Professor; I've known many sleepy professors in my life) asks me to sit in the front row. "Which word was it last night?" he asks.

No one's ever asked me that question. I think hard and say the word: "Secular".

"Secular?" Clearly, he'd been expecting something sexier.

Yes, I say sadly. That's my fate – chasing such words at night when my friends and colleagues are adapting to

saath?"

I smile. Can I tell Suvir? I'm not doing anything illegal or immoral after all, I convince myself. And Suvir is my closest colleague, and even though I envy the way he sometimes snores at office meetings, I think I can trust him with this bit of a secret. Some day, when I'm a master of sleep ("M. S." – Semanti's wicked title for my M.S. degree), a real pro, I'll be able to laugh about the fact that I had to take tutorials for sleeping. Who remembers one's first bicycling lessons after all?

But before I can answer, Suvir begins speaking again. "I asked Semanti about you. She seemed to fumble for a reply. I didn't probe any further." His right hand is now on my shoulder, "Dekh bhai Prakash, Semanti is a nice woman. She is attractive, even at this age. She packs your lunch box, yaar. Which wife does that these days? Listen to me. Keep her happy. Be happy with

same day," I say.  
"Really?" he asks. "Or is that a joke?"

"It'd be a joke if Michelle O paid for the President's sleep therapy classes. America couldn't sleep if its President was counting sheep at night, could it?" I reply.

"Did you suffer any head injuries – collisions – as a child?"

"No."

"Do you think about your dead parents a lot?"

"No."

"Religion, if you don't mind?"

"I'm a convert. Buddhism it is," I say self-consciously.

"You're a Buddhist?" he says in disbelief.

"Yes. Why?" I ask.

"I never thought Buddhists could be insomniacs, you know," he confesses.

I am irritated. "Why, sleep is easier to find than nirvana?"



Elle Loge La Folie, oil on canvas, 1970 by Roberto Matta.

wet dreams Version 3.0.

"So what did you do with 'secular' all night?" he asks like a policeman speaking to an underage boy caught red-handed in a nightclub. "I mean, you surely couldn't have chased secular in any sense?"

I fidget for a response and then I am suddenly angry. "I didn't run around trees with 'secular', if that's what you mean."

"No, I thought you chased proper or common nouns in your sleep. I still can't fathom how one could chase concepts, especially in a sleepless dream."

"I'd rather a very common noun called sleep chased me," I say, trying to sound clever but also meaning that sincerely.

"Imagine chasing 'democracy', ohmygod!" he says, shuddering at the thought. His facial expressions make of me a Cartoon Network Pied Piper figure who lures a billion men and women into a polling booth. "Have you done that ever?" he asks sincerely.

"I think I did a few days back, I'll have to look," I reply.

"Look? Where?"

"People write what they did during the day in their diary. I record my night life in it. Every morning I write down the word that killed my sleep the previous night."

He makes me promise that I shall get my Sleep Notebooks for him the next class.

I find myself unable to tell friends the truth about my evenings. I'd have found it easier to tell them if I was being treated for infertility.

"Is it a new woman?" Suvir asks me in office one day.

Before I can guess where that question is coming from, Suvir proceeds to help: "I saw Semanti alone at the DLF Mall the other evening. I don't find you in any of the office parties. Kahan rehte ho yaar? Kiske

her. Ulta seedha mat kar. Don't sleep with some young woman, yaar."

Suddenly I am very angry. "Sleep?" is all I find myself being able to say.

"Ha, don't sleep with a girl, yaar. Don't flirt even. These days you flirt with a girl and the next thing you know – she wants to sleep with you."

"How do you know, Suvir?" I ask. It's my time to get back at him.

"I know."

"But how?"

"I see it in the movies ..."

"Which movie?" I ask, genuinely curious. I once tried watching a home video that Semanti made for me – a set of songs where the characters are in bed, singing or being sung to, adult lullabies, love songs, snippets of conversation followed by the Beatles' "I'm only sleeping ..." and so on. All was going well until I came to the last bit of a film credit. The film was Sleepless in Seattle. Semanti had clearly forgotten to erase that portion.

Perhaps I'd have fallen asleep had that disastrous title not hit me, who knows. One can never guess with sleep. It's like a thriller.

"I can't remember," he says and walks away.

So on a Friday evening, I sit before this man in his fifties. His specs are dust-spotted, I have never seen him from so close. My fingers itch to scrub out what looks like a drop of solidified dal. I notice that the black thick-rimmed glasses hide the man's dark circles.

"When were you born?" he suddenly asks me.

I am hesitant about declaring my age. I know I look younger than many – the women who sit in the first row, who can't sleep because they worry about sons eating beef and dying of mad cow's disease; men who wake up in the middle of the night thinking about white men in their daughter's beds.

"Obama and I were born on the

He offers me a glass of water. I refuse.

"If you slept – please, please imagine this as a hypothetical situation – would you snore?" he continues.

"That's like asking whether I'd be able to blow out all the candles on my one hundredth birthday cake!"

His phone rings. He looks at it and makes a face, his first show of familiarity to me, and ignores the call. The phone rings again. "I'm busy with counselling, dear," he says. I overhear a woman's high-pitched tone passing down what seems like instructions. It is an unfamiliar language: Semanti never speaks to me like that. After he's hung up, he smiles like a schoolboy and says, "My wife ... just woke up. She couldn't find the toothpaste tube?"

"Now?" I ask. 4:52 pm. "She doesn't live in the country?"

"She works at a call-centre. Inbound Call Centre," he replies, stressing the name of the BPO.

"Oh, you mean, you don't sleep together? Sorry, I mean at the same time? That's interesting."

"Interesting?" he asks, clearly peeved.

"Yes. I mean ... how does it affect a marriage if the husband and wife don't sleep at the same time? Together? That is interesting," I say, fumbling for words and thinking of how Semanti would have scolded me for this.

"How does it affect a marriage if the husband remains awake while the wife sleeps beside him? Like yours? Isn't that interesting?" he asks.

The next morning, when I note down the word that kept me awake the previous night, Semanti tells me, "I couldn't sleep a wink last night".

"Fraternity," I write down. Above it are last week's words: "Justice" and "Equality".

Sumana Roy writes from Siliguri, a small town in sub-Himalayan Bengal, India.

# TWO SONGS

Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by: Dr Fakrul Alam

(Bipode more rokhkha koro)

I pray not for you to guard me in danger time and again

But so that I can remain undaunted then

It's all right with me if I'm not consoled in sorrow

But do enable me to conquer sorrow!

Even if I lack a mate, let not my resolve dissipate

If bad luck mars my home and I feel deprived,

Let me not feel abject and defeated

I pray not to be relieved whenever I'm in pain—

But to be able to stir on my own then

It's all right with me if you don't lift my burden

But do enable me to bear it on my own

In happiness, I'll bow my head and thank you

But when I feel depressed and forlorn

Let me never harbour any doubts about you!

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(Antoro Momo Bikashito Koro)

O innermost one—open wide my heart

Purify it; illuminate it; make it beautiful!

Prepare it; lift it up; make it fearless.

Bless it; enliven it; clear it of doubts.

Meld it with everyone; remove all blocks.

Let your serene rhythm guide its moves.

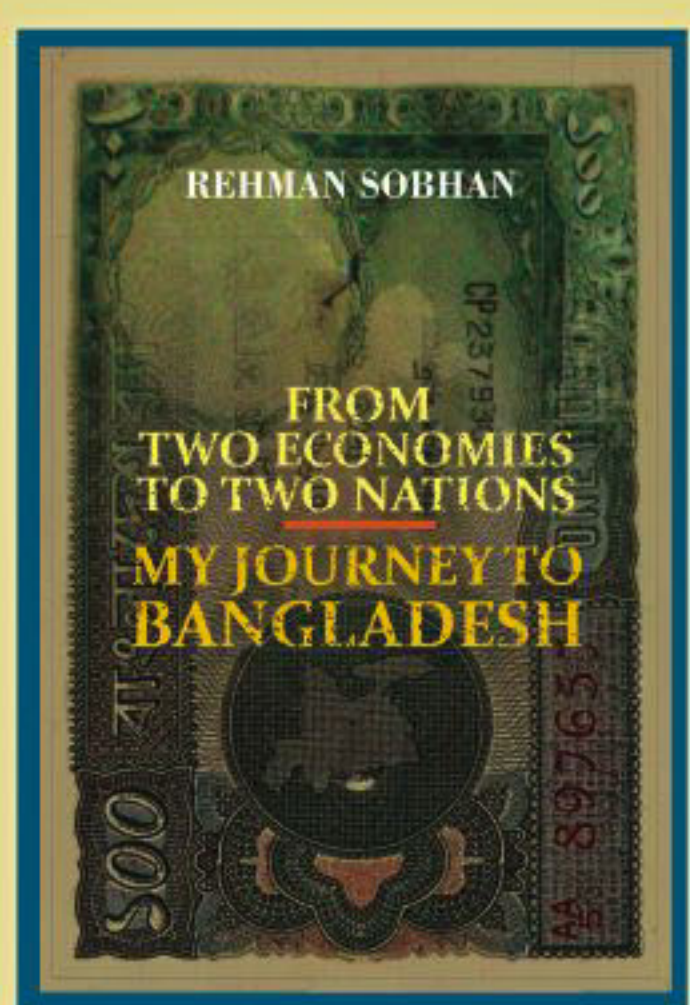
Mould my mind at your beautiful feet

Hearten it; hearten it; hearten it!

Dr Fakrul Alam teaches English at the University of Dhaka.



The only known signed flower painting by Ustad Mansur, signed "Jahangirshahi, the work of the slave of the Presence-Chamber", Mansur Naqqash; circa 1610.



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