

Our society is one that really cares about its people. Through a series of questions that may at first seem a little daunting, society chooses to show its undying affection for all its members.

The overwhelmingly thoughtful questions that not only irritate but sometimes traumatise as well, are asked from the heart, with a need to make the person questioned feel important (read: humiliated) enough.

Because we Bangalis absolutely love making others feel important (read: humiliated).

So what are these very caring, and very familiar-to-every-Bangali-in-the-planet questions?

One of the very first questions a Bangali will ask you, at the very first meeting is "Desher bari kothay?" (Where is your home district?). Now, one may wonder why this information is needed. But, let's look at it from society's point of view.

In our country, each district has a distinct set of characteristics associated with its people. So when they find out you are from Noakhali, whether they ever meet you again or not, they will know to keep dinner invitations short. If, say, you are from Barisal, in the two minutes that you spend with this caring stranger, you will come off as someone in an eternal bad mood. If you are from Comilla, you are supposedly selfish, even if you are kind to the enquirer. If you are from Chittagong, you are all things terrifying ("gasp" Chatgaiya?). With such information, it is easy for society to analyse and dissect your character to judge you better, you know, for all that 'importance' they have to give you. Your *desh bari* dictates most of who and how you are -- which has nothing to do with your manners, your morals, or your charming smile.

The next question on the list, more often than not, is "Matric/inter kon shale?" (Which year did you sit for your SSC or HSC exams?). This question is society's caring, and very cheeky (or so they think), way of finding out your age. Following this very question, they will want to know what your GPA is, what your major is, whether you are getting a master's degree, if not, why not, are you too stupid for a master's degree, yadi-yadi-yada. Again, all these things matter very much, because without answers to these very crucial life questions, one cannot find enough material to judge

BECAUSE SOCIETY *COUGH* CARES *COUGH*

NAZIBA BASHER



Another thoughtful question is: "Bachchar result ki?" (What are your child's exam results?). Because who doesn't love watching parents crumble in embarrassment if by any glorious chance there is a child who did not get to flash the infamous 'v' sign this year?

you with (very lovingly, mind you).

Another thoughtful question is: "Bachchar result ki?" (What are your child's exam results?). Because who doesn't love watching parents crumble in embarrassment if by any glorious chance there is a child who did not get to flash the infamous 'v' sign this year? Whether they have passed the exams or not is the least of their concerns,

although if they have failed, society instinctively thinks "Hallelujah! We got a failure and it's not mine!" They have to know the specifics -- the exact numbers -- for how else can they compare your child with theirs and everyone else's? If your son has scored 98, you must tell them that. So that they can tell you that their son and their neighbour's daughter scored 98.5 and 98.2 respectively, which

HUMOUR

means your child is good-for-nothing next to these two Einsteins! And it's society's duty to make sure you know that, out of sheer love and concern, of course.

My favourites though are the ones that come specifically when you enter adulthood. Becoming an adult in a Bangali society is such a phenomenon. While you are already conflicted with your own questions regarding what you want to do in life, society, being as caring, loving, and warm as it is, never fails to remind you that you are always falling behind. Behind what, no one knows. But your time is somehow 'running out'. Forever.

Any wedding you attend after the age of 22, applies to both males and females nowadays, is "Biye kobe korba?" (When will you get married?). Because how many suitors you have and which one you pick (or picks you) is all you have left to 'achieve'. And society wants you to 'achieve', don't you get it?

If, luckily, you have someone you will be getting married to and if, 'luckily', society knows it, you will face questions such as "Meye ki phorsha?" (Is the girl fair skinned? Note: cannot be foreign, lest you want to become an outcast, but has to be fair like foreigners), or "Chhele koi chakri kore, salary koto?" (Where does the boy work, how much does he earn? Note: because if you are a woman, you cannot be the one making the money. You must be making the sandwich with the bread he buys. And society must know if he can buy you that damn bread!).

And if, by any little chance, you are already married and thinking, "Hah! No more ridiculous, beyond-personal questions now!" you will be slapped on the face with a "Bachcha kobe niba???" (When will you have kids???). What's it to them, you wonder?

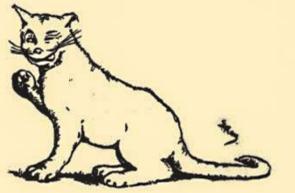
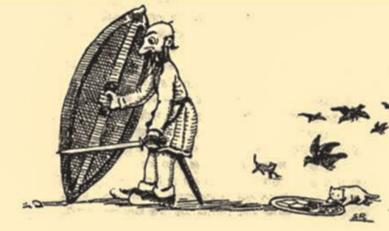
Like every other information about your personal life and choices, it's everything to them! They need to know why you should be married and having conjugal relations with your husband/wife without a reason (i.e. baby-making, because what else is the point of getting married really?). They need to know whether you are unhappy in your marriage and whether that is why you are not having their long-anticipated baby. They need to know if you can make your husband/wife happier than they can make theirs. And they will one day need to know this child's results too!

They need to know all of this -- out of 100 percent love and concern -- for your health, mental and physical, your well-being, and the life they want for you! Because society *cough*... you know. ■

LITERATURE

Silly rhymes, nonsensical verses, absurd characters - that's how Sukumar Ray introduced poetry in to my life with his book *Abol Tabol* (Rhymes without Reasons), an amazing collection of classic Bengali nonsense poetry.

I don't remember who got us a copy of Ray's *Abol Tabol*, but I can still



SUKUMAR'S MYTH AND MAGIC

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

clearly picture the copy we owned. Over the years it has become crinkled, its spine bent, a coverless copy, earning an iconic status in our bookshelf. Crinkled because we would read it over and over again. Coverless because we used it as a tantrum diffuser for my little brother who loved the poems, and who, once, in anger, peeled off the cover.

The book remained a favourite to us, nevertheless. We could quote verses from *Baburam Shapure* (Baburam, the Snake Charmer) and *Katukutu Buro* (Old Tickler) anytime and anywhere.

The very name of the book implies that its contents made no sense, but despite the poet's apparent intent, the poems were not mere gibberish. In fact, poetry has an entire genre reserved for nonsense, and in Bengali literature, nonsense poetry, especially those meant for children, has had a long oral tradition. It has been a common practice for Bengali

households to pass down rhymes to the younger generations, as a tool to placate them, to ignite the seeds of imagination, to encourage reading. These poems mostly had rural settings, and would detail the everyday, seemingly mundane events of life, and contain made-up words that only make sense in context.

Sukumar Ray earned his fame, and a special place in Bengali literature, for his nonsense poetry in *Abol Tabol* and *Ha-ja-ba-ra-la*. While he was in college, Ray ventured into the world of nonsense by publishing his handwritten magazine about humour called *Thirty-two and a half fries*. Later, he took over his father's magazine *Sandesh* and enriched Bengali literature with a vast collection of nonsense literature.

Ray's poems defied all logic and made us believe that there is no absolute reality. Through his poems, we learnt pun and word play. To imagine and believe in mystical lands and absurd creatures. In fact, soon after reading *Khichuri*, one of our favourites -- a poem where he introduced portmanteau words and anthropomorphic characters much like Lewis Carroll and Lear, the legends of nonsense -- we would call each other *Hasjaru* (swan+porcupine), *Girgitia* (chameleon +parrot) or *Singharin* (lion+deer).

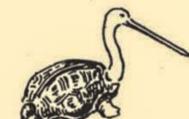
Through his poems, Ray opened up a realm of new words that were absent in the mainstream dictionary back then. I learnt that the absurd, the odd and the exaggerated had its own beauty. Along with other characters, I would embark on a journey to *Bombardia*, where everyone, starting

from the king to a musician, had their own peculiar customs. The king of the land kept his precious *aam shotto* (dried mango) safe by having it encased in a gilded frame. The queen, on the other hand, preferred going to bed with pillows strapped around her head. What is the reasoning behind their peculiar actions? He gives his readers the freedom to comprehend. For me, I felt an affinity for the peculiarity of the people of this land who do and say what they please.

My siblings and I grew up with *Ramgarurer Chhana*, and I remember my younger cousins eager to join in our impromptu performance of the poems. They would try to enunciate the bizarre words long before they could even recite the rhymes. We would share them while getting ready for school, or when we sat for a meal together or at family get-togethers, clapping along, following its steady beat.

The funnier the poems, the crazier our enactments. As a child, Ray's nonsense verses, filled with whim, totally made sense to me. After all these years, even today I find it worth flipping through and delving a little deeper into his unusual poems.

Because that's how I fell in love with poetry.



THE SONS OF RAMGAROO

SUKUMAR RAY
(Translated by Satyajit Ray)

To the sons of Ramgaroo
Laughter is taboo
A funny tale will make them wail:
"We're not amused, boo - hoo!"

They live in constant fear
Of chuckles far and near
And start and bound at every sound
That brings a breath of cheer.
Their peace of mind forfeiting
They sit and keep repeating:
"We believe in only grieving;
Happiness is fleeting."
They shun the summer breeze
That whispers through the trees
For fear the stir of leaf and bur
Their funny bones should tease.
They keep a wary eye
On the autumn sky
For signs of mirth above the earth
In foaming cumuli.
The darkness of the night
Brings them no respite
As fireflies extemporise
Their dances of delight.
Those of you who are jolly
And feel to woe is folly
Must not refuse the Ramgaroos
Their right to melancholy.
The Ramgaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair