



FICTION

The Greatest Gift

ROSHMI BHAUMIK

It is a bright Sunday morning in spring. Most of the Boulderites are enjoying the outdoors. The curious sunbeams peek through the kitchen window to greet a slim girl with curly hair. Her name is Geeta Kulkarni. She is busily working on her dishes.

Her apartment is situated close to her office, making her commute short. As per the trend in IT industries, she has to work long hours. Geeta is a software engineer at a startup company.

She had moved to Boulder six months ago. Since then she has made quite a few friends among her colleagues. She turns twenty-four tomorrow. Mondays are very busy at work. So she decided to call a few co-workers over for lunch and celebrate her birthday a day ahead.

A perfectionist by nature, Geeta sets high goals for herself. She has made an elaborate lunch menu to impress her guests. Now she is racing to finish it all up on time. She gobbles her breakfast of milk and cereal, while stirring and adding spices to her dishes.

A shy girl with no siblings, Geeta was encouraged by her parents to excel in studies. She was on the honors roll in her high school. She completed her engineering degree with distinction from a well-known college in India.

Her adherence to traditional customs has been out of habit. Intrinsically, she has an open mind to adapt to changes that the time demands. Lately, she has been paying attention to her communication skills and wardrobe to put forth a confident look at work. Her sultry eyes and bright smile often belie her insecurities within.

Tears trickle down her cheeks as she chops the red onions into thin slices. The repeated sound of the knife on the wooden board sounds monotonous. She has a tendency to fall in love with people easily. And lately she has fallen in love with Mike Cooper, her manager at work. Mike is a brilliant engineer working his way up the corporate ladder, early in his career. He is an avid biker and in great shape. Geeta's heart



missed a beat when she met him on her first day. Stunned, she dropped her folder with papers. Mike flashed a killer smile before helping her pick up some of them from the floor.

Last month, after discussing her new assignment, she lingered. "Can I ask you a personal question too?" Geeta asked. "Sure! Get the door if you need to," said Mike. After closing the door, Geeta assumed it was safe to tell all that was on her mind. "Um... I have feelings for you. Do you feel the same way?" she blurted out foolishly. She needed a clear answer from him if he felt the same way. Mike suppressed an instinctive smirk and then put on a serious face. "No, I am married," he said simply. Trying her best not to appear upset, Geeta quickly added, "I understand." She turned around and left, cursing herself for assuming too much. But she knew that there was interest on the other side as well.

The next few days were uncomfortable as Mike avoided her.

Geeta struggled with rejection. She reasoned that her feelings were irrational. Luckily, after about a week, Mike was his normal self again. He smiled and even joked like before. Work was busy and challenging and a month went by fast. She forgot about her blunder.

In the present moment, Geeta concentrates on her cooking and adds some final touches while laying out the table. Rice pilaf, mashed eggplant with Indian spices, creamy spinach with paneer and chicken curry are laid out. She places the warm dishes over bamboo mats.

The guests arrive at around 1 pm. Ed arrives with his wife Sophia and their twins. Sophia, Ed's wife has brought a big tray of tiramisu. The little boys get busy with the small things that lay, unsuspectingly, in her apartment. Geeta is on her toes trying to get these out of their way. Within fifteen minutes, Gauri and her boyfriend, Amit arrive at the door, holding hands. Geeta looks at

them and cannot help feeling a little jealous. Mike left last Friday on a short term assignment, overseas. Like a fool, Geeta was still mooning over him.

During lunch Geeta feels somewhat confident and afterwards she suggests they all go to the nearby park. When they go to the park, the boys run to the slide in excitement. They are having a blast, coming down on their belly. Ed and Sophia are running behind the kids to keep a watch on them.

They are all about to leave the park when Geeta's cell phone starts ringing. "Hello," says Geeta. "Hi, Geeta. This is Vanessa from HR," says the voice at the other end. "We want to inform you that your contract ends this Saturday," Vanessa continues. "Please send us your badge via USPS and do not make any further contact with any person in Grasshop," are her clear instructions. Geeta stands there dumbfounded. Seeing her upset, Ed comes and asks, "Is everything alright?" "My contract has ended," Geeta explains fighting back her tears as best as she can. Her co-workers hug her and wish her well before leaving.

Back in her apartment, Geeta starts to sob, uncontrollably. She is overwhelmed with self-pity and buries her face in the pillows. "Am I not an effective worker? Is it wrong to love a married man? And I didn't even know." She calls her parents to tell them about this mishap. "You will find another job very soon," her Dad says.

But for Geeta days seem long and nights even longer. Sleeping is hard when negative thoughts are crowding her brain. She takes out her diary reading through the dreams she had built in her mind. "Why didn't I foresee this coming? Why am I such a fool?" she thinks, "Did he end my contract because of the question I asked him a month ago? He must have hated me ever since." She sighs and runs to the kitchen. She picks up a knife. Her left wrist shows a prominent vein. She tries to cut it in haste. As if beyond her control, the knife slips and lands between her feet.

Everything around her seems to change as if she is transported to another dimension. An invisible feeling of love surrounds her. Overwhelmed by it, she does not feel small anymore. Joy and wonder wash away her fear. "I am here to exist... to experience ... to enjoy," her heart echoes back.

Suddenly, a shrill note pierces the peaceful ambience. Geeta answers her cell phone. "Hello," she answers. "Wanted to wish you a Happy Birthday!!" greets Amit from the other end. "Thanks for inviting us. The food you cooked was absolutely delicious..... Geeta!" There is a slight pause as if Amit is searching for the right words, "I am sorry for how the party ended for you. By the way, I saw the news on TV about a huge layoff at Grasshop. There were about 50 employees who were laid off. I know this does not help but you were not the only one. Geeta, cheer up! I have an opening in our team. Why don't you apply? I will send you the job description via e-mail. Are you available for an interview, tomorrow afternoon?"

After finishing her application on the company website, Geeta goes to the bathroom to wash up. In the mirror, she confronts herself. Her wet eyes are glistening. In the midst of her loss, she discovers a simple truth-- she is living. She is whole. What else is more beautiful than this fact? A confident smile brightens up her face.

The interview with Amit and his team goes well. Geeta enjoys meeting smart people and hearing about new products and market challenges. "If nothing else, I had an enjoyable day and learned lots of valuable information that I can make use of in other interviews in future," she reflects.

A week later, Amit calls Geeta again and offers her the job. He hesitantly adds, "Are you free to help me cook dinner tonight?"

Roshmi Bhaumik is a software engineer and lives with her family in Boulder, Colorado.

REVIEWS

BRUSH STROKES OF HISTORY AND A PERSONAL BRUSH

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

Itihasher Korcha, Mahbub Alam, Kathaprokash, 2018.

This is an aberrant situation...well, read on. Alam, in his *Itihasher Korcha*, quotes the Natore-born eminent historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar, wondering if any descendant of the brave ruler of Sandwip, Dilwar Khan is still to be found in and around Dhaka. Lo and behold, there are many, including yours truly who became aware of the fact some years back. My mother was a direct descendant; her first cousin, Mujahidul Islam Selim, the first elected VP of DUCSU in independent Bangladesh, and also a freedom fighter, is another. Notice my quandary? I am, in a way, reviewing a part of my ancestry. Now, on to the small book under review.

Mahbub Alam, a former career diplomat who served as a Bangladesh Ambassador to several countries, was a student in the History department of DU. His love for history has carried on well after his formal retirement from service, as exemplified by his feature writings and essays, and he has from time to time collected and presented them in a string of separate books. *Itihasher Korcha* is the latest of such endeavours. Strictly, Alam writes of the fringes of history, eminently readable, and so often of much importance to the major events that have taken place, and then recorded and analyzed by historians/historiographers.

Alam opens his string of ten succinct essays with a pen portrait ("E Kon Birbal") of Mahesh Das, more familiarly recognized as Raja Birbal, one of Emperor Akbar's nine court luminaries, whose rank included Raja Man Singh, Raja Todar Mal, and Mulla Do-Piyaza. The author reiterates the rectification of the confusion that several people have had regarding Birbal and Do-Piyaza as being the same person. They were two distinct prominent personages in Akbar's court, but the confusion could well have arisen on the basis of both having the endearing qualities of wit and wisdom simultaneously. In

addition, Birbal was also an accomplished poet, singer, and a skilled diplomat. Furthermore, he was an astute military commander who lost his life in Swat (now in Pakistan), leading an expedition of Mughal forces against Pathans. For all his great accomplishments, and being a particular favourite of Akbar, he attracted a number of powerful enemies, some from the very court of the Great Mughal, who cast aspersions on his character. One of the more prominent was the historian and religious scholar Abd al-Qadir Badauni, although the negative comments only gained popularity a hundred years following the end of Akbar's reign.

The next piece ("Mogh Dhaon") is largely about the many exploits and undertakings of the Mughal Subadar of Bengal, Shaista Khan. There is an interesting and informative discussion on the Moghs and diverse pirates prominently of the Portuguese variety, as well as the perspicacity of the seasoned warrior Shaista Khan, who garners praise for understanding that alongside military means, diplomacy was critical to winning wars. Dilwar Khan, also known as Dilir Raja, makes his appearance in a related context, parts of which I will endeavour to elucidate on from my own knowledge. Dilwar Khan was an admiral in Emperor Jehangir's navy. He was sent on an expedition to suppress a Mogh revolt in Sandwip. He did just that and then, not uncommon in those days of monarchical rule, promptly revolted against the emperor and declared himself the independent ruler of Sandwip in 1613-14, and ruled for 50 years, seeing off both Emperors Jehangir and Shahjahan. He repelled Mughal attacks twice, but lost to Shaista Khan during Aurangzeb's reign. He fought at the ripe old age of over eighty,

was defeated, brought to Dhaka in chains, and died in 1665. While his older children were imprisoned with him, his younger progeny were given lands, the bulk of which eventually was located in Savar (mostly in Ganda). And that is my mother's ancestry.

A poignant tale of British India's, particularly Bengal's, peasants is addressed in the satirically titled "*Nil-Dangshan*." Wherever the indigo producing plant was

were vying for supremacy over each other in various parts of the world, as a result of which the blue dye climbed high in the global markets, but for which a steep price had to be paid by Bengal's peasants, workers, women, children, and other exploited people in relevant places on the globe.

A particularly interesting piece is on the time when Rabindranath Tagore was placed under the watch of the British intelligence apparatus ("*Goyenda Nojardarite Rabindranath*"). As a result, he was adorned with the appellation of I.B. Suspect Number 11. He might well have worn it as a badge of honour! Although he was involved in the movement to stop the Partition of Bengal, he was averse to the use of terror and violence as means to an end. The poet-politician had a quixotic experience in the context of him being placed under surveillance. When, in 1913, Viceroy Lord Hardinge decided to award (then) Calcutta University's honorary D.Litt degree to Tagore, a senior officer of India's central intelligence, Charles Cleveland, ICS, objected by claiming that Rabindranath's allegiance to the British was suspicious. Hardinge overruled him and directed Bengal's governor Carmichael to go ahead and award him the degree.

"*Kohinoor*" traces the fairly well-known account of the Indian gem becoming the crown jewel of the British (India itself becoming the jewel in the crown of the British Empire), while two short essays on the humungous *punkha* ("*Punkhar dinguli*" and "*Punkha nie aro duchhotro*") include both humorous and poignant anecdotes of the various people affected one way or the other by a massive fan majestically swaying monotonously, though gracefully, being powered by stoic labourers. Alam does not fail to include the observation that the

humanist in Rabindranath Tagore deterred from using the services of any *punkha*-swayer even as he toiled away writing in the unbearable heat at Shantiniketon.

The essay "*Ingrej Amole Jelar Chhoto Hujur ba Chhoto Hakim*" begins by recounting the folly of Governor General Lord Cornwallis (who had just been defeated by George Washington in the American War of Independence) in putting a halt to the ambition of educated Bengalis in aiming for the highest civilian positions in the empire. The Bengalis, including prominent ones like Bankim Chandra, D.L. Roy, and Nawab Abdul Latif, had to make do with ending up as Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector. Only the introduction of the Indian Civil Service examination for eligible Indians enabled the later Bengalis to join the elite service and attain high positions. Latif used the power of his office to ameliorate the lot of the indigo farmers. This is indeed an informative and thoughtful essay.

"*Shei Shob Ganeshera*" provides an interesting account of scribes (always in the shadows, but they also served) in British India, while "*Banglar Palajor*" is a short treatise on an endemic disease of India that never failed to take many lives, malaria, and discusses the exploits of Dr. Major Ronald Ross, Nobel Laureate, in analyzing the disease so that its control was facilitated. *Itihasher Korcha* is not a tome, but a storehouse of snippets of history, of events that might be footnotes or the undercard to the main event, but which are often vital to understanding the core of that occurrence, and to the course of history. The reader could do much worse than going through the slim volume in one short go.

Shahid Alam is a thespian and Professor, Media and Communication Department, IUB.



cultivated en masse in vast fields, the accompanying factors of inhuman treatment, exploitation, slavery, and cruelty towards the poor peasants and workers were prominent, and successful in lining the pockets of the colonial exploiters. That is the point -- the abusing owners were from Spain, France, and England, who themselves