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The Jurassic Egg

Satyajit Ray

Originally written in Bengali with the title *Pterodactylar Dim* and was published in the famous children's magazine *Sandesh* in February -March, 1962.

Translated by *Saptarshi Roy*, Lecturer, Department of English, Bankura Sammilani College, Bankura, West Bengal, India.

Badanbabu doesn't come to Curzon Park of late.

Gone those old days! He used to sit a few moments under the statue of Suren Banerjee, waiting for the rush to reduce in trams. Only then he would take slow strides to his Shib Thakur Lane home.

Now-a-days trams have stretched routes inside park, so no relaxation possible. Though it is equally tough to go home by 'hanging' on transport, sweating profusely!

And not only that. Badanbabu feels his life a failure if he is unable to spend at least an hour, cherishing the natural world still offered by Calcutta. Though a clerk, he is a die hard visionary. This Curzon Park has long been his seedbed of multiple stories. But he was never able to pen them down. Where is time for all that? He believes that he may have earned quite a name by writing.

Although, not all his stories have gone to ashtrays.

His physically-challenged boy Biltu has grown to 7 now. Unable to move from bed, most of his time swings in listening tales from parents-- known tales, printed ones, ghost stories, funny, all sorts of fairy tales-- everything have gone past his ears in the last 3 years. Minimum a thousand plots. Recently Badanbabu has begun to fabricate a new story each night. They are created in this very Curzon Park.



Though for the last one month that tradition broke many times. The tales that he delivered failed to become a hit for Biltu. And why not? On one side tremendous work load in office, and on other end his simultaneous loss of a resting place and scopes of ruminating.

Post leaving Curzon Park, he tried to find abode beside Lal Dighi. Not good. That gigantic Telecom House there has encroached capital amount of the sky, leaving no space for thinking.

Even later this Lal Dighi has also become an area for tram routes, and Badanbabu has thus been forced to flee for newer shades.

Today he has come to the south of Outrum Ghat, on the Ganges. Beside the rail line there is a bench.

No, it's not lonely anyway. There are files of boats in front, with some buzzing of sailors. In a faraway distance there's a Japanese ship. Even further one can find bunches of mast and pulley just kissing an evening sky.

Hmmm... Nice place.

Let's sit on the bench.

There's Evening Star, visible dimly through steamer smoke.

Badanbabu felt that perhaps he hasn't seen this much of a sky for long. Wow, this is huge! Enormous! How can ideas be flying without such greatness?

Badanbabu took off his shoes to sit comfortably. Like a babu. Today he will spin multiple plots to make up for all these days.

He can see the vision of a much happier Biltu.

"Namaste!"

Oh! Even here!



Badanbabu turned his head only to find a skinny figure of nearly 50 wearing a brown coat and pants, a jute bag hanging from his shoulders. Dim evening lights are not helping much to see, but even then the eyes can be traced as unusually glittering.

And what's that? Stethoscopes?

Two tubes can be seen that have entered into his ears from a machine lay hanging over his chest.

Smiling gently, the intruder said "hope I'm not disturbing? Please don't mind. Haven't seen you here anytime before, that's why..."

Badanbabu became truly annoyed. Was enjoying this loneliness! Why come and chat? Everything gone out of brain. What explanation he now will give to poor Biltu?

Though he timidly said "I never came here before, so you haven't seen me. In such a big city 'not-seen's are more in numbers than the 'seen's. Isn't it?"

The stranger ignored the irony of Badanbabu, "I'm coming to this place regularly for 4 years."

"Hmmm ".

"Right here. In the same place. This bench. Actually it's my space for experiment!"

Experiment? What experiments one can do in this open fields beside the Ganges? Is he crazy or what?

Or he might be a ruffian? You can never tell in Calcutta.

My gosh! Badanbabu got his salary today. 2 new hundred rupees are with him, tied to his hanky. Also his wallet accounts for 55 rupees and 32 paisa.

Badanbabu stood up. Prevention is better than cure.

"What? Are you leaving? Angry with me?"



"No, no. Not at all."

"Then? You have just arrived. And leaving so soon?"

That's true! Why is he behaving so childish? What's his fear? Within 30 yards there are nearly 100 people in those boats.

Even then Badanbabu said "Yep, it's getting late."

"Late? But it's only 5.30.

"Have to go a long way."

"How far?"

"Baghbazar".

"Shame shame. Could have told me Srirampur or Chinsurah--at least Dakshineswar."

"Not that near though, I guess? Takes an exact 40 minutes by trams. Then it's 10 minutes more to walk."

"That's right."

The stranger suddenly became serious. Then came his murmured voice, "40 plus 10 is 50... I'm not that easy with hour-minutes pattern. For us it's... Please be seated! Just a couple of minutes."

Badanbabu took a seat.

The stranger possessed something unknown in his voice and gaze, what made Badanbabu unable to deny. He thought to himself, that's perhaps called hypnotism.

The mysterious man said "Generally I don't ask people to sit with me. You seem to me a thoughtful person. Like the other 99.99% folks who stick to this Earth with their endless measurements of rupees and coins, you don't look that busy. Am I wrong?"



Badanbabu hesitated, "You know..."

"And you're humble too. That's good. I don't prefer people who boast. If anyone could have ever boasted that's me."

The stranger stopped talking. Then opening the tubes from his ears, said "I feel afraid. If in darkness the switch gets pressed by chance, that would be disastrous."

A question was waiting upon the lips of Badanbabu. It slipped out--

"Is that instrument a stethoscope or what?"

The stranger ignored his quarry totally. How ill-mannered! Instead of an answer he asked something irrelevant, "You write?"

"Write what? Stories?"

"Anything. Cause I don't. I wish I could. All my achievements, experiences, experiments should be preserved for future generations."

Experiences? Experiments? What's this fellow saying?

"How many varieties you have seen of a traveler?"

Really this man asks utterly nonsense questions. Isn't seeing a single traveler a rare fortune?

Badanbabu said, "I never knew that travelers do have more than one type!"

"What! Three types are most common to guess! Terrestrial, aquatic and airborne. First group consists Vasco da Gama, Columbus, and Captain Scott etc. The terrestrials are Hsuan Tsang, Mungo Park, Livingstone, even our globe trotter Umesh Bhattacharya. And in sky let's take Professor Piccard, who went up to 50,000 feet, and that newbie Gagarin. Although these are merely considerable. The travel that I'm talking about don't belong to aquatic, terrestrial or airborne categories."

"Then?"



"Time."

"I'm sorry?"

"Roaming around time. Time travel. Journey to the past, back to the future. At will. I don't bother about the present."

Now clouds got a little clear for Badanbabu. He said, "You are talking about H. G. Wells right? Time machine? That bicycle like thing. You ride and pull a handle to go to the past, and another for the future? That very story which was made into a foreign bioscope?"

The gentleman smiled with snub. "That's a tale. I'm telling you a reality. My reality. My experiences. My machine. Not some tell-tale of a foreign writer."

Somewhere a steamer whistled.

Badanbabu shivered a little, and then slid his hands into his woolen wrapper. A few moments later nothing would be visible except little lights from the boats.

In that darkening milieu Badanbabu looked at the face of our stranger. His eyeballs were now reflecting the residue hues of the evening sky.

The man looked at the sky. Then after a brief pause said, "I feel laughing. Some 300 hundred years ago, right here, near this bench, an alligator and a stork on its head was basking under the sun. From the position of that boat over there, a sailor from a Dutch schooner shot that croc with a desi rifle. Just one bullet was enough. The stork flew away, and a feather glided on me. Here it is."

The stranger brought out a marble white feather from his bag.

"What are these red spots?"

Badanbabu's voice is now heavy with anxiety.

The man said, "Alligator's blood sprinkled on that stork."



Badanbabu returned the feather.

The eyes of the stranger were glowing dim. Weeds were floating around the Ganges. Nothing was visible. Water, sky, and earth everything have turned into a single smudge.

"Can you guess what is this thing?"

Badanbabu took into his hands-- a triangular tiny piece of iron, with a sharpened head.

The stranger began, "Some 2000 years ago, in the middle of the river, a ship with colorful sails was trading towards the sea. Perhaps a merchant one. May be going to Bali for doing trades. I could hear the distinct sound of oars right from here."

"You?"

"Who else? Right here--in place of this bench--hiding behind a banyan tree."

"Why hidden?"

"Had to. This place was incomparably dangerous. History don't record such things."

"Tigers?"

"Much more than that. Humans. Short height, small nose, dark savages. Earrings, nose-rings, tattoos. With bow and arrows. Arrows with venom tipped."

"What are you saying!"

"Telling the truth."

"You actually saw that?"

"Listen please! The month was Baishakh. A wild storm had begun. That merchant ship drowned before my eyes."

"Then?"



"A man reached the shore with the help of a log, struggling against sharks and crocodiles. And then... Oh!..."

"What?"

"If you only could see with your own eyes, what those savages had done to that man... Although me too was unable to see. An arrow hit the banyan tree. Collecting that I switched back to the present."

Badanbabu felt undecided on choosing between cry and laugh. Are this tiny instrument and two tubes really containing that much magic? Is it possible at all?

Perhaps the stranger guessed the question of Badanbabu. "When you insert both tubes of this very instrument-- pressing the right hand side switch transports to future, whereas left switch drags back to the past. At what time, in what era you want to go, that can be adjusted by rotating this marker on the dial. Although 20-30 years might be miscalculated, it's a minor issue. Cheap thing, you know. So not that accurate!"

"Cheap?" Badanbabu is now more surprised than ever.

"Cheap regarding the cost. It contains a legacy of 5000 year's scientific knowledge and intelligence. In our country scientific research is hidden from view, unlike the West. Think of history. Do you know the painters of Elora caves? Who created Bhairavi tune, Rig Veda? Do we know the actual contributors of Ramayana or Mahabharata? Say what primal component changed Mathematics in a revolutionary way?"

What component? Badanbabu knew none of them.

The man said, "Zero."

A bolt from the blue for Badanbabu.

"From 1 to 0. There's nothing more in Maths. All calculations are based on them. And you know from where these figures came? India. Then went to Arabia. Then to Europe and the whole world. Understood? Do you have any idea what was the system before?"



Badanbabu again shook his head in negative. Really, his knowledge is so limited!

"It was Roman numerals. No numbers, only alphabets. I was 1, II was 2, but 5 was V. No specific rules. For a four-lettered year 1962, you had to write MCMDCII, total 7 letters. For 888 you have to use a dozen letters DCCCLXXXVIII. Can you imagine what would have happened to scientific formulas. People would have gone bald within 30. And Moon expeditions won't have taken place for another thousand years. Just think. A witty concept from an unknown man of our own country changed Mathematics forever."

The stranger paused for a second to breathe.

Gongs were heard from the Church. It's 6 in the evening now.

The stranger continued, "It's same even now. There are many persons in our country of whom nobody knows a word. They just sit quietly in some lonely corners, solving huge formulas inside their brains."

"Are you one of them?" Badanbabu inquired very timidly.

The man said, "No. Although I came in contact with one of them. In some distant hills. I was younger then. Used to travel a lot. That man was incredible. Name was Ganitananda. The 30 miles radius of his habitat was filled with mathematical scripts written on the stones. From his Guru, he came to know time travel. I got knowledge from him that there was a higher mountain than Everest that was destroyed 47,000 years ago by an earthquake. That same quake gave birth to a spring which is the source of this river, rippling in front of us."

Badanbabu wiped his sweats on forehead. "You got this instrument from that sage?"

Our stranger said, "Actually he told me the components. I collected them and made it myself. This tube is not made from rubber; it's a branch of a wild shrub. I bought nothing from any shop to build this. All of these are natural elements. Although it malfunctions sometimes, because it's hand-made. The switch to the future is not working of late."

"Have you ever been to future?"



"Just once. Not far though. In the mid 30th century."

"How is it?"

"Well, you know. In this spot there's a big road. And I'm the only person walking. Nearly escaped from getting crushed by a peculiar car. After that, I never went back there."

"And how far have you gone in the past?"

"That's another issue. With this instrument you can't reach at the moment of creation."

"Really?"

"Yes. After trying hard and fast I reached at a time when reptiles have already arrived."

Badanbabu felt dryness in throat. "What reptile? Snake...?"

"Oh, no no. Snake is but a kid."

"Then?"

"Suppose, Brontosaurus, Tyrannosaur, Dinosaur etc."

"You went to that land too?"

"Mistake! What lands? Do you think they were not here?"

"They were?"

"Right at this place. Beside this very bench."

A chill ran through the spine of Badanbabu.

The stranger continued, "Ganges was not here. All these places were marshes. Near this jetty there was a moss-laden pond. With the help of marsh lights I saw a pair of red eyes. Just like the Chinese dragon of the drawing book. I understood that's stegosaurus. It was coming forward while chewing leaves. I knew it's herbivores, but even then I couldn't breathe out of



fear. As I was thinking of switching back to the present, I heard a sound of wings. To my shock, I saw a pterodactyl, neither bird, nor animal, nor a bat. It attacked the animal. The cause of this rage became known when I saw a stone heap nearby. There was a glossy white egg. Pterodactyl's egg. I couldn't control my greed even in that situation. On one side a fight had begun, and here I easily collected the egg...ha ha ha ha."

Although Badanbabu haven't felt any laugh at all. Can these happen beyond the realm of books?

"I could have given you the instrument to try, but..."

"But?"

The veins on the forehead of Badanbabu began to vibrate!

"Only a fool's chance to get succeeded."

"Wh-why?"

"Even so you can try. No gains might be, but no losses at least."

Badanbabu stretched out his neck. Oh God! Please don't disappoint!

The man pushed instrument's tubes into the ears of Badanbabu. Clicking the switch he grabbed the wrist of Badanbabu.

"Have to measure the pulse."

"Past or future?" Shivering like a scapegoat Badanbabu asked in low tone.

"Past. 6000 B.C. Shut your eyes tightly."

Badanbabu waited with utmost anxiety nearly for a minute. Then said, "Nothing is taking place."

The stranger pulled out the machine.



"The chance is one in a crore."

"Why?"

"If both of our heads contained even number of hairs, then the instrument might have worked."

Badanbabu felt like a punctured balloon. Alas! Alas! A chance like this perished in such way?

The stranger again slid his hand into his bag.

Now everything was clearly visible because of the moonlight.

The stranger passed to him a white rounded glossy thing.

Quite heavy. And wonderfully smooth.

"Give me that. I've to move now. The night is falling."

Badanbabu returned the egg. Who knows how many experiences this man possessed.

He asked, "You're again coming to this same place tomorrow. Right?"

"Let's see. So much work is left. Have to verify historical data. The issue of the establishment of Calcutta should be looked into. People are making a fuss about Charnok. Bye. Good God!"

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Badanbabu had to get off the tram just after getting into it, providing a lame excuse. Because he fell from heaven as his hand reached the pocket.

His wallet has vanished.

Walking towards home he said with a sigh, "Got it. When I closed my eyes, and that man took my hand to measure the pulse... Shame, shame! What a fool I have been made today!"



When he reached home it was 8 p.m.

Having seen his dad Biltu's face became illuminated with smile.

By now Badanbabu too is feeling much at ease.

As he was opening his shirt he said, "Today I'll tell you a good story."

"Really? Not like other days?"

"No my dear. Really."

"What the story is about, papa?"

"Pterodactyl's egg. And many others. Won't finish in one day."

To tell the truth, what this one day has provided him for the happiness of Biltu, isn't that accounts for at least 55 rupees and 32 paisa?

(Shortened a little on purpose by the translator)