

# Growing Up and Growing Out

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When the Bangladesh war broke out, I fell in love. The then Pakistan Embassy was at the backyard of the Hindu Hostel of St. Xavier's College and shared a wall with the hostel playground. From the balcony of the Hindu Hostel, we witnessed the employees of Pakistan Embassy lowering the Pakistan Flag and raising the Bangladesh Flag on the top of the Embassy. We congratulated them by shouting out, "*Joy Bangla, Joy Mujibar Rahman*" from the balcony of the Hindu Hostel. Some of us burst out singing "*Oh Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomai Valo Bashi*". That triggered some real attachment to the struggle for liberation of Bangladesh.

The Hindu Hostel boys decided that we must do something. We all decided to go out and collect money. Tapanda became the leader and Suman was next. Magically, without any visible effort, the Lady Brabourne College was co-opted. It became a true story of love, struggle for independence and justice. Truly good-looking boys and girls, most of them from affluent backgrounds, went to the posh streets of south Calcutta to collect money in cans. Boys stopped the cars and good-looking girls and boys shook the cans for donation. This touched exactly the epicenter of philanthropy of the passengers of these vehicles and they poured in money generously. The drive was a huge success and we raised a ton of money.

This drive for raising money ended when Tapanda was hit by a car. I knew that I did not have any leadership quality, so I already established myself as the number one "challah" of Tapanda. The car owner was kind enough not to speed and escape. He sincerely tried to help and offered to take Tapanda to the hospital. I hopped into the car to assist Tapanda. The boys and girls waved hands at Tapanda. I knew nobody was waving at me; I still waved back at them. It felt good. Tapanda was essentially crying and scolded the car owner "dur moshai, ami baro adure manush hoechi" (you mister, I was brought up in a very affectionate manner). The car owner apologized for that. It was determined that Tapanda had a fracture on his leg. The car owner brought us back to the hostel. Next day, Tapanda's brother came and took him back to his home in Chandan Nagar and Suman took control of the leadership position.

Fundraising effort ended with this episode. By then we collected a good amount of money and the focus shifted to the discussion on what to do with the funds. We had lengthy meetings with the ladies from the Lady Brabourne College. Some women suggested in extremely pleasing and persuasive voice that we should buy ammunitions, point-three-not-three bullets and likes. In spite of this

opportunity to impress these girls, I understood that the boys did not have much inclination to mess with ammunitions to show militancy and heroism. Money was given to some charitable organizations. Pakistan army surrendered on December 16, 1971. Having reached the goal to liberate Bangladesh, it was most natural that the boys and the girls would continue their quest for everlasting love and happiness, ever after.

Several girls from the Lady Brobourn College continued their visits to the Hindu Hostel. One wonderful evening, three girls sat in the front yard of the Hindu Hostel and one of them sang "Piya ki ghar hai ea, rani hu me, rani hun me ea ghar ka". About thirty boys sat in a circle, all of them shell shocked and spell bound. All of them (well quite a few of them) fell in love with these three girls. With all the admiration and affection out pouring, the girl who sang "Piya ki ghar" was given the nickname "Piya". Kamala looked more simplistic and down to earth. She did not have the charm that these three girls had, nor she was anywhere near the leadership circle. Like me she was studying mathematics honors. My friendship with Kamala started budding.

Over the next few months and a couple of years a lot of things happened. Soon enough, Suman had a meeting with his close friends, including my roommate Partha. Partha told me "tui kichu bujhbina" (you are not mature enough to understand such complexities). However, Suman came to our room and told Partha "He, He, He, ... Guru, ami er madhaye nei" (Guru, I do not want to get into this). By then I understood that "Piya" is in love with Suman (or at least Suman thought so). I was perplexed why or how anybody could walk away from the love of such a wonderful woman who sings "Piya Ki ghar" at such an appropriate place and moment of the day (godhuli lagan). Partha told me "tui kichu bujhbina". To this date, I am still perplexed. I was never able to solve this puzzle.

It seemed to me that everything was going great with Prashun. He did very well in the Part-I theory exam and was expecting a first class in theory. However, he consulted a fortuneteller. The fortuneteller used a "kulo" (made of bamboo, traditionally used to separate rice from paddy residues), suspended from a string, to make predictions. Apparently, one asks questions to the kulo. If the kulo moves and turns that means the answer to the question is yes. Prashun asked whether he would pass Part-I examination? The kulo did not turn. Prashun told the fortuneteller "tomar kulo ami hat die ghurie debo, result berobar por" (I will manually turn your kulo after the exam results are out). I realized Partha was conferring with Prashun time to time and Prashun did not look the same. Partha told me "tui kichu bujhbina". In the evening after Prashun's practical examination, Partha told me that "Prashun practical exam-e kichu kare ni, shudu kedeche" (he did not perform during the practical examination, just cried). Partha tried to motivate him before the examination, talked to the examiner who also tried to motivate him, and baby-sat outside the examination hall for him. He was in love

with Piya and she did not care. Predictably, Prashun flunked the Part-I examination.

My friendship with Kamala flourished, and we were in love. Unlike me, Kamala was motivated and hard working. She motivated me. I was smarter than her (well, I thought so). We worked together. Sometimes met in her study room on the third floor of her house in Kalighat; Askok and Subrata also joined. Often not much was accomplished, the four of us just gossiped (“gave ad-dda”) and had good time; Kamala’s mother gave us refreshments (luchi, curry, sweets and all that). We went to movies, walked in Victoria and other parks, spent time in coffee house, discussed career plans and opportunities. I became more interested in mathematics, and with that grew my ambition (survival instinct). Kamala was also ambitious, but she also spoke about an early marriage in combination with ambition and good career. My B. Sc. results (grades) were not any where near what I expected or hoped. Kamala did much better and got an admission for M. Sc. in Calcutta University. However, I got an admission in Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) for M. Stat through their admission test. That came with Rs. 125 stipend per month, which was such a god sent assistance that I desperately needed. This was something I really wanted. Both Kamala and I were very happy with where we were. While in ISI, it became clear to me that I wanted to go for a PhD. Kamala encouraged me and did not want me to compromise any of my ambition. However, she gave me the news that women need to get married before thirty. I thought this could be done with a research fellowship in ISI.

Samantha was junior to me in Hindu Hostel. Like me, he also came from a modest background, from a village in Bankura. He was doing chemistry honors and appeared very bright and promising. I had friends and juniors in the Hindu Hostel. Baijnath Prasad became the hostel superintendent. During one of my visits to the hostel, I noticed Samantha grew long hair down to his shoulder. He was good looking. I was skeptical about this transformation of a village boy to someone with long hair. I had my prejudices. As a senior, I had the dada status. I asked him, "Samantha, tumi rong dekhcho" (are you seeing colors)? He just smiled. Samantha took a job as a chemist in a reputable organization and rented a place near Hindu Hostel. I believe he had to support his family back in Bankura. During one of my trips to the Hindu Hostel, I learned that Samantha took his life. Baijnath told me, Samantha was also in love with Piya, who did not care. All the hopes and aspirations of his parents and family dashed into nothing.

I got into the PhD program in ISI, with a fellowship and Kamala decided to take IAS and other competitive examinations. We started talking about marriage. I also learned from my teachers in ISI that Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in Mumbai was the best place to do mathematics in India. In late spring, Ashit brought to our attention that TIFR had invited applications for their PhD program. They will pay one-and-one-third train fare. Some of us thought we could

go for a tour of Mumbai at TIFR's expense. I told Kamala I will never leave my beloved city Kolkata nor would I complicate our relationship in this way. Four of us went for the interview. In spite of our frustration and skepticism regarding our performance, Ashit and I got selected. First, I thought I was not going. Our teachers made it clear that they want us to stay in ISI and they were proud that two of us were selected. Professor Ashok Maitra, then director of the institute told me that he wants to be honest with me that TIFR is the right place to do mathematics in India. It was the premier institute in India. My head started spinning and I became interested. I talked to Kamala. She was very supportive and did not want me to compromise my ambition. We discussed various possibilities, including the possibility of getting married and live in two cities.

I left for TIFR in early fall. I came back during Kali puja in November. Kamala came to receive me at Howrah station. She asked me to visit her family on the day of Bhai-Fota (a yearly festival when sisters put dots on brother's forehead and exchange gifts). I visited her house. Kamala sat next to me and took my hand. She told me "aj theke tui amar bhai" (from today you are my brother). She told me that I have a bright future and she does not want me to compromise with my career. She told me again that women need to get married by thirty and there is no way for us to get married without compromising my career. She had accepted the advice of her parents to get married through negotiations. They would find a match for her through their contacts and newspaper matrimonial ads. She was very resolute. I was not expecting this and I did not know how to react. Soon her mother walked in. Precisely at the moment when I needed, it was the greatest reassurance to me from her that any responsible father (yes, she said "father") would be happy to give his daughter's hands to me, when I am ready. But in this case, Kamala needs to move on. I did not say very much. I did not know what to say.

Both of them went out. Kamala and her mother came back with lamps (pradeep), grains (dhan), grass leaves and other accessories for bhai-fota. In a proper and full ceremonious way, with her hands crossed, by her two small fingers Kamala put bhai-phota on two sides of my forehead. She presented me a plate with a deep red heart at the middle, covering half the diameter. They gave me very appetizing refreshments and sweets. I never refused sweets. I ate all the sweets and declined some of the rest. Before I left, she told me that if I mess up my PhD or career then I would not be her brother any more. While coming back I was trying to comprehend what has happened. I wondered whether a choice between Kamala and TIFR might have also been made deep in my head and heart. I felt that I did not want to lose my newly acquired status as a brother of Kamala. My true feelings were a mix of guilt and confusion. It also dawned on me that the burden of a marriage when I was not ready was suddenly gone.

I broke the news to my friends. Many were sympathetic to me. Manubabu

consoled me that she made the decision, not me. If she truly loved me she would not “betray” me like this. But Sukhendu was furious at me. He accused me in an indignant voice that I had become a “careerist”. Like a “careerist”, I chose to go for a PhD and “betrayed” her. Proper thing for me would have been to look for jobs and get married to Kamala. He called me selfish and “characterless”. I neither had any interest in defending myself nor did he give me any chance to ask what my chances would be of finding a real job to support a family?

I came back to TIFR with all the confusions and heavy heart. Bhaskar-da took me to the Rongoli restaurant on Marine Drive. He joined TIFR as a post-doctoral from US. He quickly became a mentor and a friend of mine (a real Dada). We had some beer. Alcohol was a new adventure for me in Mumbai. I told him all that happened between Kamala and me. How we started, how we shared our common career goals, aspirations, some intimate moments, plans to get married and how it ended. He was very supportive of me, while he continued to give his patent skeptical smile. I told him about my feelings of guilt, confusion and the relief that the burden of a marriage was suddenly gone. He told me that a couple can “grow out of each other”. When two people get into a relationship at young ages, their lives and aspirations may grow in two very different directions. While separation or divorce is always very painful, such realities of life are more easily accepted in US society. A husband may remain a blue color worker, while the wife studies to get a PhD. A wife may remain a secretary, while the husband studies medicine. They may find themselves in two entirely different paradigms at the end.

Bhaskarda rationalized that Kamala and I might have grown out of each other. While we shared a lot during our early stages as students, our aspirations are not the same anymore. That was a shock to me. Drops of tears started rolling down my cheeks. He gave his smile again and asked me whether my emotions were under the influence of alcohol?

Soon enough, Kamala got married and eventually I got married too. My wife has been tolerant enough not to get rid of that plate that Kamala gave me, with the deep red heart. When my wife is not around, my favorite dish is the one with the deep red heart in the middle.

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