

YOUNG MAN (1971)

Jawhar Sircar

19 years of age, in 'Oh, Calcutta' magazine (now defunct), Kolkata: October 1971 issue

Young-Man, You take a good look at yourself in the mirror, comb in hand. Set down forcefully that obstinate bunch of hair sticking out rebelliously. That is right. Just fine. The trousers need a bit of pressing but will do for the day. So, all set, you pick up that exercise book, tuck in the pen on to your vest, under the shirt and come down the stairs on to the streets of Ray's 'Mahanagar' Calcutta.

It is not 9 o'clock as yet. The last 'via Wellington' bus is about a quarter-hour away. So you stroll down to the 'stop' leisurely, past Bhanu Da's tea-shop, past Doctor Babu's porch, the haunt of the local boys.... No, not past that! For, a shrill "Hey Guru!" stops you in your tracks. You turn back to see 'Bente' Bablu, one of the local 'mastans' grinning at you – "Guru, you were ignoring us! Of course, you are such a busy babu now..."

"No, no, certainly not", you reply, "I've got to catch the 9 o'clock bus. You see there is a class at 10".

"But Boss, there is a lot of time left. Come, let's go into Bhanu Da's shop. I've got something very urgent to tell you and the others are all waiting".

You take a look at your watch and say, "Okay, let's go". You follow 'Bente' Bablu and enter the tea-shop. Around the central table, an antediluvian antique indeed, you see the other local youth sipping tea and politics, in gulps. A couple of them get up with broad smile, "Sit down 'burra babu'".

Whatever you may feel, you know you cannot sidetrack your childhood friends and companions today just because some of them never went past class six, or because they talk tough.

Santu drawls, "The market's bad and so we were thinking of publishing a souvenir".

You know the rest and so add, "And you want me to get some advertisements"?

“That’s right, Boss, you’re a genius!”, they all exclaim. “You know, Guru, you have got so many Marwari and Madrasi friends. You can get us at least ten advertisements”.

‘Marwari’, for them (with all apologies to those concerned), signifies all Hindi-speaking people, including Gujratis, Marathis, Biharis, etc. while ‘Madrasis’ are all South Indians Tamilians, Telugus, Malayalis and Kanarese. All ‘Marwaris’ are rich at least to them, and all ‘Madrasis’ are well-placed executives. Simple!

You know it is no use arguing, so you say, “Look here, I’ll try, but it’s getting to be nine. It’s time I left to catch the bus”. Start walking away.

“But Guru, ten advertisements! We’ll come to you later”.

You start walking briskly towards the bus-stop followed closely by Subir, who trots and pants to keep pace with you. The ominous, yet familiar, wail of the siren breaks your pace into a sprint in the direction of the ‘stop’ with Subir still following. At your destination, you stop to rest and catch your breath for the bus is yet to arrive. “What’s it, Subir?” you ask.

“It is”, he gasps for breath and continues, “it is about that job, I told you about that day”.

“Oh! I had almost forgotten about it”.

The expectant expression on the young man’s face drops into one of shocked disappointment. He pleads desperately, “But Guru, you can’t do that. You can’t feel, you just don’t know how much I need it! It means my life! It means Chandana.....”

“Chandana?” You cut his passionate rhetoric abruptly, “What’s it got to do with Chandana?”

“Dammit, Boss, don’t you know that her parents are getting her married this season?”

“But she’s still in school!”

“That’s precisely what her accursed parents will not see!”, blurted Subir. “All they want is to get rid of her before...”

And before Subir could expand you interrupt him hastily, “But look here, Subir, you haven’t passed your School Final or Higher Secondary in three attempts till now; how can you expect a job?” You know fully well the wrath of the vast majority of your generation at the age-old system of arranged marriages, but you also know fully well how little a chance boys like Subir have for a job in Calcutta.

“I’ll do any job, any job! For any pay!”, he begs emotionally. “That darling choice of Chandana’s father is only a 350-rupee railway clerk”.

“I’ll try, I’ll try”, you say hurriedly and walk off swiftly to board the last ‘via Wellington’ bus.

The bus starts, lurches forward and rumbles away, much to your relief. Yet, over the din and bustle of this moving piece of national property, you hear the last of Subir’s words floating up to you “And that man’s half-bald....”

You half-smile and say to yourself, “Crazy boy! That Subir, eh?”, when, suddenly, though not unexpectedly, the force of the crowd behind, in the most physical sense possible, propels you up the stairs to somewhere closer to the upper-deck of the bus. From there, with the compelling exertion of your fellow-passengers no more ‘backing you up’, you twist and turn and wriggle your own way through the forest of hands, legs and perspiring bodies up to the present heights of your ambition the upper deck. There, you stand with your neck and head at an awkwardly acute angle to the low ceiling, and your torso distorted into a spitting-image of the ‘Hunchback of Notre Dame’ all in your daily attempt to fit your un-Indian six feet into the five-foot requirement of the State bus planners. Your period of penance is soon over as the familiar faces of a couple of your regular passenger-friends beam at and beckon you to join them.

Thanking them sincerely, you park yourself between the two of them ,one that Esplanade ‘stop’ Tamilian, who works somewhere near the Corporation building, and the other, that Harrison Road Gujrati, who manages his uncle’s shop or something.

“Your factory’s reopened hasn’t it? The one in Sibpur or Howrah?”, you enquire on your left.

“Oh yes!”, he nods.

“So you must be taking in new hands now?”

“No, not exactly.”

“You’ve put up the advertisements for them, I guess?”

“Advertisements? What for? Krishnan’s getting his youngest brother from Samsatipur to take over.”

You sigh.

“Oh yes”, your left side man goes on, “come to think of it, we did put up something in the papers, but that’s only for the law, you know”. He laughs, as did your other companion. So you, too, laughed dryly.

“You aren’t thinking of a job now?”, your right hand companion asks, jokingly.

“No, it wasn’t for myself, for my...I mean, for a chap I know”.

“Was it for that guy talking to you at the bus-stop?”, asks your left-side.

“Yes, it’s for him”.

Your companions look shocked, “That street loafer!”

You smile, you are supposed to smile, and add weakly, “He needs it badly”.

“Who doesn’t?” they laugh. You smirk again.

At Esplanade, when one of them alights you sit more comfortably. College Street soon appears and you get down with some other companions. You bid them bye and move into your college campus.

Right there, in the portico, all your College friends squat as usual, smoking, chatting and debating away with vigour that would have done credit to Zeno’s Stoics of the Athenian Painted Porch. You join them in their vociferous condemnation of Mankad’s batting, and Nayeem’s tripping-tactics, to equally vocal eulogies of Wadekar’s leadership, Dilip Doshi’s bowling and Gaurov Misra’s tennis. Then Dipankar insists that ‘Dastak’ is better than ‘Anand’ while Anup is there to brand all Hindi films as ‘cheap trash’. While the grand debate ensues and new interests invade from ‘that fair girl of Economics’ to that irritating ‘hero’ of the first year, the College bell rings with its clanging persistence.

Hours later, the main dreadful classes over, and ‘proxies’ arranged for the rest, you stroll with your gang to Coffee House. As usual, it is packed to the full, but you are too familiar with its ways not to be disappointed so easily. Your patience is soon rewarded when Tilak waves at you from that far-away table in the corner. You tread your way through majestically, past and between the clumps of chairs, tables and waiters to reach that chair next to Tilak’s. Before you have even seated yourself, Abhijit demands, “Okay, you decide isn’t India heading for Fascism?”

And, a hot political discussion ensues.

And while the fire rages, you sit quietly, glad, that the politicians are too busy to notice you, sip down the coffee that they had ordered which was getting cold anyway.

Your job done, you naturally discover another friend sitting a couple of tables away and so, excusing yourself from the broil, you walk away coolly to that table. Rudraprosad welcomes you with a smile and continues to recite the latest poem that he has composed before the gathering of ‘entels’, those budding ‘intellectuals’. You sit down for some time in silence, wondering how some people manage to find lyrics in the burning heat of summer, the blinding blaze of the sun, the molten tar on the roads and the hot wind, that’s closer to a furnace blowpipe’s emission than to the cool melodious Zephyr it is compared to. You never did understand mod poetry, pop art or jazz music, but you never did express this to anyone for fear of being branded a ‘Philistine’. But ‘entels’ will be ‘entels’ even in summer and as soon as Rudraprosad relieves you by ending that crude home-made jingle of his, the others begin to shower him with their thoughtful comments. “It’s just superb!”, sighs Swapna with her sweet Santiniketan sophistication. “Grand!”, comments that pseudo-poet sitting in front of you, caressing his appropriate growth of beard. “That’s right, it’s grand”, you repeat, while Gyanda lowers his spectacles, sips his coffee, coughs twice, and begins his philosophical views on Rudraprosad’s composition. Pouring out, come examples from Sartre and Sukanto to Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Satyajit. You stand up before this College Street Socrates can drag in Neruda or Gurudev, and say that you are getting late for an urgent appointment. They request you to stay and discuss with them the problems and prospects of starting an intellectual fortnightly but as you have already had over a dozen similar experiences, none too happy, your enthusiasm is not exactly rocketing. So saying good bye to them, with the broadest of smiles of course, and promising to visit the Birla Academy to see Swapna’s sketches on exhibition there, and to hear more of

Rudraprosad's unparalleled poetry and Gyan Da's peerless philosophy, you depart with more than a sigh of relief.

It sure does take all types to make a Coffee House, you contemplate, as you reach the bus-stop. No bus is visible within a mile; you curse under your breath and prepare to wait until eternity for one of those two-storied knights of the road to rescue you from grief. Suddenly, a flashy red Herald screeches to a halt right beside you and a grinning face pops out of the window with a "Hiya old boy! So you're still existing!" You are startled for a second, but soon recognize behind those go-go glasses, with Napoleonic hair, long grizzly sideburns and that droopy Sgt. Pepper style moustache, a face you had known in school. "Hello!", you brighten up like a flashbulb, as you move toward the driver. "Hello Sandipan, I mean, Hello Sandy how's life, pal?"

"Going home?" he enquires, "then hop in, I'll post you home".

Most relieved, you scramble into the back seat, for the front is occupied by some "Miss...".

"Just passing this area, you know", Sandy resumes, "came to pick up Sweetie here". He thumbs at the girl next to him.

"Oh!" is all you can utter.

"By the way, buddy, meet Sweetie, my Sweetie mind you", he adds with a wink.

The girl turns round, all smiles, as she says cutely, "Hi! you see, my pappa calls me Sutapa, but Sandy and the gang insist on 'Sweetie'. So I guess I'm Sweetie saccharin, if not sugar".

The joke flies over your head. You laugh all the same.

"My God!", Sandy exclaims, "what have they done to you in that native college you're almost a 'pucca' native yourself!"

Coming from a member of the mod class, you know that comment was no compliment.

"Look at us, sport! We're living life while you go on rotting in that god-damned College, among those uncouth Bongs".

You can no longer keep up with your golden silence, and so interrupt him, “But Sandy, you know I could never fit in much with the swinging group either. Besides, my college boys aren’t that untouchable, you know”.

“But they are definitely boring”, quips Sweetie sweetly. “Yeah pal, they don’t dance, they don’t swing, all they do is gobble politics and block the traffic with their regular processions”, says Sandy.

“And they burn buses and trams”, adds Sweetie, “They’re destroying national property”.

You smile. At least the Sandy -Sweetie type know what is their national property, even if they do not know their national culture, custom, dress or language.

“I still say, you leave those bores, come and have a life, man”, Sandy rambles on. “There’s a party tonight at the Shalimar apartments, and there’s another tomorrow. We are throwing that at Bobby’s. You’ll meet a hell of a lot of your old chums and quite a lot of more interesting people, mostly you-know-what”.

You break into a twisted smile, and reply, “You know I go in for a different type of parties, political!”

Sandy gives up. “Boy! Boy! You’re the same old guy still. Some characters rarely change”. You nod.

Sandy and Sweetie drop you off near home. You thank them, and with the thumbs-up, “Cheerios”, “Addioses” and “G’byes”, you stroll off.

Weary and tired, you stagger up the stairs and come to your door. Just a minute, there’s something in the letter-box. You open the hatch to find a card addressed to you. You open the door, enter, and shut it behind you. Flinging off your exercise book to the table, you switch on the fan and flop down on to the sofa with the card in hand.

“A seminar”, it reads, “A seminar on the YOUTH OF CALCUTTA - THEIR PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS”. Below, the small type requests your participation in it.

“The youth of Calcutta”, you wonder, “Who’s that? Is it Bente Bablu and Santu of Bhanu Da’s shop? Is it Subir plus his Chandana, minus his job? Is it that Esplanade stop Tamilian and the Harrison Road Gujrati? Does the College portico gang come in? Are Tilak and Abhijit in it? What about

the ‘entels’ of Coffee House? Or does it mean Sandy and Sweetie? Are they all in it? How can they? You rake your brain how can they? The whole lot?”

“Yes, they are all youth, they all reside in Calcutta. Yes, but they live in different worlds. Are they all in? God only knows”, you sigh, and get up. A haggard face, with a bunch of hair sticking out, stares at you, somewhat stupidly, from the mirror. Yes, you! You yourself! Are you included? This, you bet, even God does not know.

.....