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4 + 1

(English Translation of Nabarun Bhattacharya's Bengali short story, "4 + 1")

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One

It rained throughout that day. Though not with a force to flood the roads. Cold wind. A weak light during the day. Though the tram-driver was not much discreet, he put the brakes in time. And the tram was not in a high speed as it just turned from a crossing. The collision took place before the friction of the tram's stopping was heard. The two people in the front got a little injured. The two behind was safe. One got his forehead cracked. The other got a nose injury. Also on the gum and teeth. They were bleeding. It was known from them who came rushing to the spot. Apart from the four there was another who was dead. Wrapped with a black plastic and tied up in a rope on the cot. Generally in this type of dead body bearing cots bunch of incense sticks and flowers are to be found. But here there was nothing. Later it came to be known that beside the corpse's head there were a broken black optical glass, some pieces of chalk, some torn pieces of paper, and a half-eaten thin arrowroot biscuit—all wrapped in a dirty piece of clothe. It was expected that in the paper-pieces there is to be found some clue. There was none. There were some meaningless scribbles. Perhaps some meaning could be delineated if the imagination is stretched too far, but even that is worthless.

The tram-driver was the most scared of all. There was no reason not to get scared in fact. Because, just after turning from the crossing, he saw them coming head-on straight towards the tram. Four men with a dead body. Direct towards the tram. He was puzzled and stood inside his cage. There were not much people on the street. Still a small crowd was formed. Then everyone got scared. A call was made. The police came.

After the head-on collision with the tram the four corpse bearers stood still and did not move since then. They did not pave the way for the tram until the police came. The two in the front were bleeding from their mouth. The people told them to move away. Some over enthusiastic young men thought that the four people were so intoxicated by some drugs that no urge from the public did enter their ears. On one hand, it was cloudy, raining, shadowy, on the other, in this part of the city, the buildings are old though very high and they had brightly lighted shops at the ground floors. No sooner the afternoon falls shadows engulf the place. That day the shadow was much more than any other day. The intelligent citizens, those who can estimate what lies beneath what by analysing things, said that it was a skill or stunt. The man whose dead body was over the top is actually alive. These four are also actors. The whole thing is a charade. It might be an unruly advertisement of a theatre group, or a poor joke of some queer and awkward jocose. The police who actually came in the beginning also thought the same. However, they did not look like the flippant youths who disguise like this

in order to make fun during Holi, the festival of colours. They must be intoxicated by heroin or something like that. Ordinary men, ordinary police think like this way. Extraordinary men, extraordinary police think beyond that. The young IPS Officer who newly got the job also thought like that. It was not that the disturbance was great. Some trams stood in a line. A crowd, a gathering, silent unresponsive four corpse bearers, and a dead body tied up in a blank plastic wrapper, of a thin aged man near whose head wrapped in a dirty cloth were a broken piece of black optical glass, a black optical frame whose handles are tied with threads like those given from the free-of-cost cataract-operation-camps, some pieces of chalks, actually the residues of them with which no one can write, some pieces of torn paper where a plus sign, a dot and a number '5' were written as is claimed, however it was the result of an investigation into some indistinct, unskilled pencil scribbling, and there was an unevenly eaten, half-wet half thin arrowroot biscuit which nobody knows who has eaten, at least the dead did not since it was not reported in the post-mortem. When several trams stand in a row some naked ulcerous beggar children come flying like a swarm of flies and start a game of ascending and descending the tram. Anyway, that young IPS cool headedly ordered to arrest the four men along with the dead body. Simultaneously he also arranged through green or blue channels so that the dead body is taken to a morgue where it can be kept in ice unputrefied. And there would be sandbags surrounding the dead body and ice. The dead body could be a booby trap. The four corpse bearers were taken away for interrogation. Handcuffed. According to the police report, the force with which they tightly held the feet of the cot with their hands, that desperation was not found when they were handcuffed. All four of them looked throughout to the front with open eyes. Their eyes did not even wink. Not even during the interrogation.

The IPS Officer did not make any mistake. Bombay blast, Calcutta blast, blast in south India, terrorism supported by Pakistan—during these dreadful times, neither the centre nor the state can take any risk. By reading Lenin he knows that extreme Leftists and extreme Rightists join hands together. It is in fact necessary to know what these four wretched, rough and scalded figured men are in actuality. 'Carlos' is caught nonetheless. So what? Where is Tiger Memon? The mystery of the film star who flew from the window of the multi-storeyed building! Son of Nargis! RDX. AK-56. Drug. Smuggling of uranium and plutonium. Does India have nuclear weapon or not? Whether it is yes or no, in this condition no anomaly can be ignored. Not ignored. The real life is not 'Roja' or '1942-A Love Story.'

Two

Before the interrogation process the investigation into the body revealed that it belonged to a thin, aged man in whose dead body, there was nothing except whatever remains in a dead body, and that remained in 'insulted' condition. When any part of the body is wounded or weakened by disease, efficient doctors call it an 'insult.' Such as, when one has had jaundice twice, if the doctors are efficient, they say that his liver suffered insults twice. The dead body which was tied up with black plastic on the bed, the various organs of the body like liver, kidney, urinary bladder, stomach, penis, eyes, scrotum—all were found to have suffered more than one insult. Recently in America results came of experiments in this matter that religion, poetry, love, violence, justice, theft, hunger, sex, wife-feeling, offspring-consciousness, urge

to rape, silence, love for music—all these are proportion of the individual parts of the grey matter in the brain or the compartment of the skull. Albeit the brain of the dead body is not vexed yet according to that knowledge, but it is a matter of hope that it is still conserved in that too cool cold-storage. At the cost of the government. That is to say, the dead body is waiting for experiments.

The interrogation of the four corpse bearers started in a very gentle manner. To open their mouth in a lovey-dovey way. One who is interrogated in this tricky twist or turn of words by and large gets into a tight corner. However, in their case it did not prove fruitful since these four men did not utter a single word. All of them who interrogate are not equally expert in word-games. Instead they beat up, threaten and sometimes go to far extreme to either good or bad consequences. Some opined that it is intentional. Some opine that it happens under stubborn resolve. Whatever it is, the second type of interrogation started with those two who did not have the wound of the collision with the tram. That is to say, the two men who were holding the hind feet of the cot. Randomly slapping them did not work. Not even kicking them while they were hung with ropes. At this moment if that young IPS would not have intervened something severe would have surely happened. He stopped the second process of interrogation. On a little treatment they got up again in a few days. Then all four of them were sent together to the doctors.

Three

There is no meaning in going into the details of the petty matters like throwing bright light on the eyes or striking the feet or the knees with a ting-ting sound. More than one electrode was entered through their skulls. Here it is to be mentioned so that the readers do not take it as a third process of interrogation. Science is not torture though science is used in torture. After observing various photo-lines on the monitoring machine the distinguished doctors have had a meeting. After that, in the detailed report written in English that they gave to the Police Chief who kept a photocopy of that and submitted the original to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and there too a photocopy was kept and the original is sent to higher authority, there were written—‘No evoked potential in auditory/visual cortex on peripheral sensory simulation’ . . . or ‘sensory aphasia’ . . . or ‘sensorineural deficit’ etc. many complicated words, the easy and simple meaning of which is that all these four corpse bearers are blind, deaf and mute. If someone is blind and deaf, he must be mute. And if there is someone like this it is impossible to establish any communication with him. Communication was not established anyway. However, if food is given, that is, if a bowl or dish is handed to them, they eat. Not sure whether they get the smell. There is no change in their mood at any time. Their eyes do not wink. They do not hear. They do not see. They do not say anything. They will never hear or see. No question of speaking. There is no possibility to know anything about them. They are confined at one place. On the contrary, the photocopies are kept and the original report was ascending higher and higher. But that too would stop at a time after reaching the President. Still there would be no possibility to know about the four deaf, mute and blind corpse bearers.

Four

The dead body is kept in an ultramodern cold-storage. In a handful of better cold-storages a few of American billionaires kept their dead bodies undamaged. They did it in the hope that in near future science would cross such limit when it would be possible to resuscitate their lives. Getting back to life after a few centuries leaping over a few generations they would again start their business, and their amusements. This type of thought and their expectations are not likely to be found in the conserved dead man here. Nevertheless, if he is taken back to life then perhaps mysteries would be solved. The young IPS Officer however did not think in this line.

On the other hand, it is already mentioned that the four were confined. The doors have strong and thick iron bars. Locked. Day and night vigilance in instalments. A small square hole on the upper part of the wall covered with a net. Through that sometimes sunlight and sometimes moonbeams obliquely enter the room. Then, no sooner than the sun or the moon moves away, the light runs away like a magical cat. They sit in silence, the four of them. Sometimes a solitary sparrow separated from its flock comes and pecks at the net of the square hole. Sometimes a little breeze enters and looking at them stops there. Their eyes do not wink. On the floor they sit in silence. The watchmen do not like their duties here. Especially at night. They talk among themselves that at that time some of them have heard whispering or sound of laughing. The young IPS Officer still visits often. But it would not be right to call him young any more as time is passing. Only in the room of the four corpse bearers time seems to have stopped always.

Whose dead body is that? What's his name? Does he have any relative? How did he die? What's the identity of the four corpse bearers? Which crematorium were they going to? How would have they reached? How did such an incident take place?

If anyone knows anything about this then he is requested to kindly inform the authorities. The authorities are still waiting.

*** Taken from the collection, *Nabarun Bhattacharyer Chotogalpo* (Calcutta: Pratikshon Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1995; pp. 107-111).**