

THE CHAI-BAGAAN EXPRESS

By
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After the monsoons, the tea gardens had suddenly come alive with fresh green leaves. Daffodils in the tea gardens? During the last period, Mrs Benton got carried away by her Wordsworth. Nandini wondered why Mrs Benton was teaching a poem about a flower which nobody had ever seen. It must be a pretty flower to have fascinated Mrs Benton. It was a long English period. The last bell had rung but Nandini knew Mrs Benton would only let them out after she had finished her lecture on the joy and beauty of flowers. Nandini was thinking about Dallu, Billu and Tinku who she knew would not wait for her. She hated to travel all the way home alone.

There was only one high school in

this region, where the tea gardens of Banarhat and Dalsingpara spread for 20 miles around. Transportation was the main problem in coming to the school. Papa considered it foolishness to waste a gallon of petrol on just one person. Nandini remembered Papa's coaxing, "Not everybody goes to school in the car. You have to know one day how to use the bus service."

She could see Dallu, Billu and Tinku making faces at her through the window. She heard Tinku whining, "I hate Mrs Benton!" Nandini wished that they would tone down their voices. She did not want Mrs Benton to overhear them. Dallu was saying aloud, "If we miss the bus, we won't be home till night." Nandini sternly looked through the

window, wishing they would disappear. She did not want to be embarrassed in front of the whole class. Brats! She made up her mind that next year she would only make friends with someone her age, from her own class.

She would have nothing more to do with the eighth class kids. Especially with Dallu, who didn't know when to shut her mouth.

Nandini remembered the first day she had come to the school wearing a *sari*. Dallu was so taken aback that she had gone around telling every one that Nandini was getting married.

"*Dhutt. Stop it!*" She had run snapping at Dallu. She wondered why Dallu was doing that to her. She was not the only eleventh class girl in *sari*. All

the tall girls wore one. She was glad to be wrapped in a *sari*, instead of that babyish frock Dallu wore. All the same, she enjoyed being the oldest and the tallest of all three of them. She was flattered at the way they addressed her as *Didi*, and then at the same time chided her for bossing over them as the older sister. Teasing, Dallu would often say to her, "Aye *Didi*, you are not only our *Didi*, but our *Dadi* also." A faint smile flickered on Nandini's face. Without them, it would have been surely boring to travel back and forth on her own.

Nandini could guess what all three of them were plotting against her. It could only be one of their diabolical schemes to penalise her for delay. She made up her mind, she was not going to give in so easily today.

On seeing her rushing out of the classroom, all three clamoured together, "Didi, first of all you must get us some tea and *mishti*, we have waited so long for you."

Nandini pretended to be angry, "I don't know why you have to stand in front of the classroom and make all those nasty remarks about Mrs Benton. We have no time for any tea or *mishti*. Sweets are bad for your teeth."

"Didi, you are *kanjoos*," Tinku said.

It did no good. "Okay, I am a miser. You will only get the tea and *mishti* if we don't miss the bus."

The four rushed to the bus stand.

The state buses that run in this part of the country are usually the oldest. From a mile away, you can hear them rattle and hum. Their engines sound as bad as their tattered chassis. Along those sedate narrow roadways of *chaibagaans*, when pushed, the engine of the battered state bus has the power of a harnessed dragon to reach a dazzling pace.

It was only at the tea stall Nandini found out that instead of the regular service from Dalsingpara, the last bus was coming from the weekly Dalgaon Haat market.

"The *chai-bagaan* special!" Billu and

Tinku jumped with excitement. "That's Shuchi Da's bus!"

She taunted them. "So what miracle do you think your Shuchi Da would perform?"

"Didi, you do not know anything at all about Shuchi Da," Tinku said. "Do you know who his driver is? Mama. Mama drives his bus like an aeroplane. Any speed you ask him he can go for that."

Dallu added, "On the morning trip, wherever you wave your hand, Shuchi Da will stop the bus for you."

Billu moaned, "Have you seen the *ganju* bus conductor in the morning? A real thug. If you reach the bus stand a second late, he just buzzes off. He charged me exactly eight *annas* today. I told him, 'Sir, look I am a *khokha* only a few years above 12,' but he would not listen."

Nandini smiled, "Yes, only two years above 12 and still a kid! He asked you for the bus fare; therefore, he is a thug. And your Shuchi Da, because he does not ask you for any fare, he is a good man."

Nandini resented the way Dallu, Tinku, and Billu made friends with characters such as bus conductors, hawkers, and rickshaw drivers.

"Shuchi Da is a good man," Billu insisted. "Didi, have you noticed his hairstyle. It is great—exactly like Dev Anand. And he dresses like Biswajeet!"

Before she could say that to her he did not look anything else but a bus conductor, Dallu interrupted, "Didi, Shuchi Da is so handsome! Did you see *Saptapadi*! There is a definite resemblance between Uttam Kumar and Shuchi Da. Uttam Kumar's round face and nose are just like Shuchi Da's."

Knowing that she was losing ground, Nandini tried to change the topic. "You children should not see so many pictures."

Tinku, as if anticipating such a reaction, butted in, "Look at our *Dadi*, telling us not to see *pitchers*."

Nandini wanted to box his ears, but

Tinku had slipped off at a safe distance. While Nandini blushed at her inability to do anything, the trio laughed uproariously.

When the bus from Dalgaon Haat arrived, Shuchi was the first person to step down. Dallu, Tinku and Billu swarmed around him, greeting him like a maharaja, "Ki *khabor*, *Dada*?"

"*Bhalloc*" He responded to them in the same jovial fashion, reciprocating their exaggerated royal courtesies. It was like a family reunion. Nandini preferred to be reserved with strangers, but the children were familiar with her pretentiousness. Seeing all of them jolly, despite her usual reticence she too had smiled. But when, above the heads of the children, she saw Shuchi Da closely observing her, she quickly tightened her lips and hurried inside the bus. There was something about Shuchi's look, though pleasing, which made her uneasy.

The bus was nearly empty. Most of the passengers returning from the weekly bazaar had got down at Dalsingpara. Nandini moved to the front of the bus. She occupied one of the empty seats where, through the driver's mirror, she could see Dallu, Billu and Tinku sitting close to Shuchi Da. They were recounting to Shuchi the stories of the day from the school, about their friends and teachers. There was a free wheeling dispensation of nicknames for everyone, friend or foe. Mrs Benton became the *paan*-eating witch with a long red tongue, Shastriji for his funny nose was named as "singhara sir", the bespectacled maths teacher Mr Mukopadhyaya was being called the four-eyed "charakha".

To amuse the children, Shuchi scolded the *bhaajiwalla* passenger who was still struggling to get all his goods down from the bus roof, "Sethji, the kids have to reach home also. The bus cannot stay here for two hours."

"Arey *moshai*," the clumsy passenger throwing down his baskets of poultry and potatoes was becoming

nervous. "Please don't lose your temper Mister. I am hurrying up."

The children were impressed with Shuchi's authority.

Shuchi Da gave a long blow on the whistle, signalling the driver Mama to move on.

The children were in a playful mood. Dallu caught Shuchi Da by the sleeves. Tinku was at his back. Suddenly, Billu jumped and snatched the whistle from Shuchi's hand and ran to the front of the bus. Shuchi was startled. As he ran after Billu for the whistle, Dallu shouted from the rear, "I have your goggles!"

Exasperated Shuchi stood in the middle of the bus. He knew the trio was up to something. "Okay, so what is on your mind?"

Billu was serious, "You must tell Mama to race the bus—drive faster."

Shuchi teased them, "No, the bus can go no faster. A fast driver is heavily penalised."

Tinku leapt from behind, and took the silver metal whistle away from Billu's hands. He shouted, "Well, if you won't tell Mama to drive faster, we will throw the whistle outside the bus."

Nandini was annoyed. She was ready to twist the arms of the two devils she knew were capable of anything.

Shuchi Da conceded defeat. "Okay, Mama. Only for once, drive faster for these *khokhas*."

The children were thrilled.

Whether a rickshaw, a bullock-cart, or an automobile, the trio would hoot, wave and make faces at every passing vehicle. This went on for some time until, to their complete surprise, they were stealthily overtaken by a familiar convertible Morris. The car which suddenly had come from behind was filled to its brim with kids from tea estates. It was the car of one of their classmates,

Joten, the son of the tea estate manager who got picked up everyday from the school by his driver. Joten took all his friends from the neighbouring *bagaans* in his car, but never invited the four of them despite the repeated pleas of Dallu, who simply couldn't resist car rides.

Dallu was about to burst into tears, "Look at that car. That's Joten. He is again showing off."

Tinku shouted. "Mama, that's the one which we must defeat. It is a '46 *khattara* model." Pointing to Dallu he

backward, and once again pushed forward to be well positioned in the tracks for the heat. Mama was ready for the kill. The trio, and the others who had boarded the bus at the last stop, stuck out their necks so as not to miss this thrill. Even Nandini could not help looking outside.

One, two, and three... and the bus, without any effort, glided past Joten's car. There was great dismay on the faces of Joten and his friends. They still seemed unable to comprehend the way

the noisy state bus had overtaken their convertible Morris. Another moment. Their faces were lost in a thick haze behind the bus. Inside the bus itself, instead of the suspense of a moment ago, there was now a thunderous victorious roar. The trio was dancing with delight, pouncing all over Shuchi, patting Mama on the back "weldun Mama weldun", exchanging congratulatory handshakes with the passengers.

Tinku was telling Nandini, "I told you so, *Didi*. I told you so. When Mama wants to be number one, no one can beat him."

When calm returned to the bus, Shuchi asked them to keep their side of the bargain. "Acha Baba, give me my whistle and goggles now." But the children were in no mood to return anything. Tinku and Billu wanted to continue the horseplay. Dallu again tried to catch him by the sleeves.

Nandini was getting tired of their practical jokes. She muttered angrily to Tinku, "Why don't you be quiet, and return his goggles and whistle to him?"

Tinku shouted from the front, "Hey Shuchi Da, *arrey* listen to our *Dadi*, she wants us to shut up. Do you know what *Dadi* means—Granny!"

"Yes my *gurus*, I know what it



was saying, "At least for the sake of this *becharee* we will have to run that *khattara* off the road. This will be our revenge!"

Our revenge! On this royal proclamation, Billu's hand dramatically rose in the air like the swashbuckling hero Premnath of Hindustani stunt films, brandishing his sword for the ultimate battle.

Mama must have been moved by the big entreating eyes of Dallu. He was waiting for a real situation to hurl himself into a gallant action. With his right hand stuck to the steering wheel, Mama's left hand grabbed the round black knob of the gear stick. He turned it left-right, up-down, and the engine was in its top gear. As Mama's right foot hit the accelerator, the passengers lurched forward, then

means," Shuchi said smilingly.

Granny! Nandini was indignant. *Didi or Dadi*. She could not let them make fun of her in front of everyone. They had no right to talk to a stranger about her like that. Shuchi Da might be something to them, but he was nothing to her.

She overheard Dallu murmuring to Shuchi, "No. No. It's not that our *Didi* is proud. She just does not like making friends with bus conductors..."

Nandini felt her face reddening. Oh! my God, why wouldn't Dallu shut up? It was not what Dallu had said but the way she had said it. Was she so vain and superior? Shuchi Da must think that she was some wicked rich girl. She loathed the thought of being understood that way. Wishing to hide herself, she could only turn her face away... gazing at those rapidly passing telephone poles at the boundary of the tea gardens. While the poles passed by swiftly, the lush green scenery on the horizon seemed to move like a slow merry-go-round. She tried to conjure up Shuchi Da's face but couldn't, for unlike the others, she had never paid much attention to him. Except for his khakhi uniform and dark goggles covering his smiling face, she couldn't remember much of him.

Through the rear view mirror, Nandini, this time, tried to look at him a bit more carefully. She noticed that he was very much like the way the others

had described him—Uttam Kumar with a round kind face, and a cute nose. But she felt that his cheerful outlook had suddenly faded away. Sitting amidst the children in his conductor seat by the door, for the first time, Shuchi Da looked very solitary, all alone, staring, like her, at the passing by *bagaans*. Daffodils in the tea gardens. She did not know why the lush greenery of the plantations reminded her of Mrs Benton's poem from the last period:

"A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees;
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

Suddenly, it had gone very quiet. It seemed that after the excitement of the victory, everyone in the bus, under some magical spell, had fallen asleep. Even her three friends seemed to be reposing. The lush greenery of tea gardens arched by a rainbow...the tea bushes, the blossoms, the two leaves on a stem...she felt she needed to run out among those *bagaans* and feel the tiny leaves with rain drops still glistening on them. Like the golden daffodils in the poem, she wanted to flutter and dance like a breeze. It was something absolutely new, which she had never felt before. There must be some meaning to what Mrs Benton was teaching this afternoon. In the envelope of silence surrounding her, she could only hear the sound of Shuchi Da's whistle, two sounds for stopping, a long

one to move on.

It was Dallu who roused her from her reverie. The Hamilton tea estate had arrived. Nandini collected her books.

Outside, Billu and Tinku were asking Shuchi, "So *Dada*, when do we see you again?"

"Same time. Next week."

"On the *chai-bagaan* express!" the pair yelled.

Shuchi nodded with a smile.

As usual, the trio got down without paying any fare. But Nandini, before getting off the bus, wanted to pay her fare. Shuchi withdrew himself.

"I don't take money from my friends."

She, Shuchi Da's friend? It was so unexpected that she did not know what to make of it. There was a gentle smile on Shuchi's face. She hurriedly stepped down leaving behind the eight *annas* fare on the conductors seat.

Shuchi took the coin and gave it to Dallu, "Return it to your *Didi*"

This time despite Nandini's caution, a shy smile appeared on her face.

"*Bhallo!*" She heard Shuchi softly say. "That's better!"

The red bus sputtered, and slowly pulled away. She could see Shuchi Da's face once again covered by goggles, waving at them. With the eight *anna* coin in her fist, Nandini kept on watching the rattling *chai-bagaan* express until it disappeared from the lush tea plantation. □