Eternal feelings are being lost somewhere. Nobody now writes stories about pure love, smooth affection, and unending fantasy. Only bombs and guns, wealth, greed and deception figure in them. This is really a bad sign.

Satyajit Bora took a decision. He will try to ignite the heavenly feelings in the minds of the people. He will crusade against the existing system. How strange! People have forgotten about love, affection, attachment. Has their hearts tuned to stones? No. This won’t do. Satyajit Bora will write such stories that will restore the dying emotions once again.

Now the prime requirement is—a suitable plot. But this is not a joke. Looking for tortoise eggs on a mountain. Just like imagining a modern girl wearing a thuriya in her ears.

Then what is the solution? Look back to the past? Let’s do that. Otherwise guns and mortars will again commit murders in his stories.

Any reference to the past reminds Satyajit Borah of his birthplace in the village. Specially the courtyard. Wide and spacious. Lit with moonlight in summer, sunlight in winter. Nowhere the trace of a single grass. Only the jig-jag marks left by the straw broom on the plain surface.

Satyajit Borah is thrilled at the thought of the broom. The girl who was sweeping the courtyard with surreptitious sounds! In a flash her name also came to his mind. Koli. Once her brother had shoved her in and left her there. Whether he had pushed her throughout the way Satyajit Borah has no idea. He was too young then.
Used to play marble games. Suddenly a grunting was heard. "Will you listen to me?" a lanky man was grinding his teeth, and thrusting her forward violently. She almost darted as a result of that violent push and holds on to a post in the front veranda to keep her balance. How she cried!

Only that day Satyajit Borah saw Koli crying.

Oh! Something more to remember! One young fellow always used to tease her! What was the idiom? Ahh! That will be superb. A love story can be created. First of all worldly love. Then the feeling of heavenly love. No bombs, no guns, no rape, no abduction. No dispute at all. It will be fine. It will work as a smoothing balm for everyone. There is a real necessity. Otherwise everyone will go mad or turn into stones.

Satyajit Borah closed his eyes to think. Koli reminds him of two scenes. Koli spraying cow dung mixed water in the courtyard ad Koli slipping in that slimy cow dung. Is there any more remembrance! No. Those are the only scenes. But the scenes carry shocking connotations. Koli is been captured in the cosmos reflected in a single cow-hoof mark.

Satyajit Borah picked up his pen without a moments delay.

Two

Dried Birina grass broom. Koli sweeping the courtyard slosh slosh. After sweeping, she picked up the inverted tub kept in the other end of the veranda. A distorted enamel tub. In a moment she reached the cowshed. Two cakes of cow dung have slipped under the nongola- the bamboo bars. Now she reached the well. She
filled the tub with two mugs of water and shook the water with a hand. Fine. Cow dung mixed water was ready.

Like the rural mothers carrying their babies over their waist, she picked the tub and started spraying the water. One handful of water spread at every step. One more step, one more handful. Her whole attention concentrated in the water mixed with cow dung, as if she is welcoming the morning to this world by spraying the water. As if otherwise the sun won't rise, birds won't fly, the night jasmines won't fall from their branches in abundance. A concentration similar to Yoga practice.

Just then the idiom was heard.

"Koli, the dirty black leaf,
She won't have plain rice
Let's go to the market together
And trade you for sweets."

Koli looked with widely opened eyes in a shock. Some of the cow dung water spilled over her mekhela. What a song? A song of having sweets in the market! Who is the singer?

There he is! Naughtly Mahesh. What this fool is singing! There are so many nice songs!

"Come out Sashiprabha
King's beloved queen,
We'll Fetch water
In a golden Um."

One more song is there. That is also a nice song.

"Standing under the Kadamba tree
Who is playing the flute so temptingly?"

Only if he knew any good songs! What a song eating sweets! Sing – whatever you want to. I have nothing to lose. Only you will become a laughing stock. She thought like this and resumed spreading the handfuls of cow dung water.

He again tested his vocal cords.

“Koli, the dirty dark leaf
Who won’t have rice plain..”

She again lifted her head to look. Oh, he is looking at her direction, smiling. That means? Oh--! He is teasing!

You brute.

No, she has not pronounced the words. She is mumbling the words to herself. And she spreads the cow dung mixed water making --- sounds.

“Do you hear me? Borah’s wife came in. “People has started flowing in to Sarma’s place.

“Who are these people?”

“The neighbours, who else! May be there is some trouble!”

“Why don’t you go there?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I could go. I have just put the curry on stove. Can you keep on stirring it?”

What a problem! Satyajit Borah put down his pen. There is no peace even to write a story. Life contains its pains. Sankardeva had written the purest truth.

Putting on the shirt he went out. He met Ahmed on the way. He informed- “They have arrested Ankur while he was jogging in the field.”

“Ankur?”
"Yes. Sarma’s son—."

"I understood. But who have arrested him?"

"Somebody in the army uniform."

"Is it? Why the army to arrest him?"

Ahmed lowered his voice and said—"How can you say that it was the army? Nowadays the secret killings are happening in army uniforms."

Similar talks were going on at Sarma’s place. No definite news was there. It might be this, arrest may have happened due to this reason, it would be better to inform someone etc. etc....

Sarma has already reached the police station. Mrs Sarma is surrounded by all the people. Satyajit Borah could not even see her face amongst that crowd. He could see the faces of the people surrounding her. They had a look of someone after a shock--fixed stare, pale lips and upright neck. His lips were also getting dry. Suddenly he remembered his own son. He rushed back home and asked—"Haven’t seen Sonmoni for sometime?"

"He had gone to his aunt’s place yesterday. Have you forgotten it?"

"Ring him up. He must have reached safely."

After discussing Sarma’s plight Borah had a cup of tea. Then he entered his room to change his clothes. While putting down his wrist he noticed---the story is lying open just like that.

..."Spreading cowdung mixed water."

Cheh! It has stopped at the beginning. Should progress it some more. There is no time. The publicity of his story is given in the previous edition itself. No way out. He tried to bring back his attention from Sarma’s house to that big, spacious
courtyard. He has to. Even during the great earthquake his Grandmother had cooked some food for the children. the heavily shaking tree had put off the earthen lamp. Yet she had continued cooking.

That’s like making an effort. Satyajit Borah picked up the pen.

Three

She is making an angry face. As if dirty coal mixed water. Even after finishing the work of cow dung her face retained a cow dung stained appearance.

She entered the kitchen garden carrying a basket. She picked some leafy vegetables, a greenish pumpkin and a few brinjals. Now she stood under the shed of ___. the shed is high. She could pluck them only if she jumps. On the other had all the black ants. But she doesn’t care the ants. But the ants also don’t mind her. They crept over her shoulder and have found their way through the gaps in her garment. They were not satisfied by all this and bit her back. She exclaimed in pain and stretched the hand to reach her back. Just then the adage sounded again.

"Koli, the dirty dark leaf…"

With it the sound of big laughter.

She shook her head in disgust.

"Your mothers’ head."

Grumbling she stomped on the ground. --- To ward of the ants crawling on her feet. On the other side the idiom and the resounding laughter continued over and over.

"Let’s go to the market together

And trade you for sweets…”
Four

Bora prepared to go to the market. Everything will be closed the next day for twenty-four hours. People are there like small ants. If a bomb blasts amongst this packed crowd. A shiver ran down the body the moment the thought came to mind. No. One should not let these thoughts in. He made himself mentally strong and entered the fare of fish, ginger, chillies pushing others.

On his way back he paid a visit to Sarma’s place. There was no trace. The parents have become lifeless. Had it been possible, they would have stood on the road and screamed their heart out with all the force. But the couple has lost the courage to cry. What if becomes a bad omen! A look at them and it feels as if the air has become static. It has become heavy. Like iron. Drawing it through the nose to refresh the lungs has become a great effort.

Helpless! Totally helpless!!

In the evening he reached back the story. His gaze stopped at the last sentence— “And trade Koli for sweets...” what to write next! Okay. Let a dishwashing scene be added here.

Five

Oily-greasy bell metal utensils. If these slips out of the hand the sound of the mouth will be louder than the clank of the utensils. Koli is progressing carefully. So that the utensils don’t fall off and the dirty morsels touch her clothes. How the dogs are creating trouble! As if they will ensure her fall by criss-crossing the way. So she is progressing very very carefully. She has to listen to all the scolding if the dogs touch the dishes. Had somebody accompanied her with a bamboo stick, she would
have been saved from this couple of dogs. Who will accompany her? She will beat up these dogs once she becomes able to immerse the utensils in water.

She’s moving forward carefully. Just then she heard the voice of that useless fellow.

“Koli won’t have plain rice…”

There he is. Giving water to the cows. Her anger was surfacing again. Just then a bird came and rested on a small tree. Such a beautiful yellow colour! Like the colour of the freshly ground turmeric paste used in the bridal bath of her sister. Her eyes brightened slightly. Again his voice sounded—

“… Lets go to the market together”

She gave him a gloomy look. A side glance. She opened her mouth to scold him. She could utter only a few words. She mumbled in a low voice—

“Shameless!”

“Listen, isn’t a crying sound coming from Sarma’s place?” Satyajit Bora jumped and stood up from his seat. While he was putting on his shirt his wife said—

“I will also come with you.”

Both of them proceeded hurriedly. The whole neighbourhood had gathered there. Mrs Sarma has stopped crying loudly and are sobbing now.

People are talking in a whisper. ---“They don’t want to talk openly. Maybe a ransom is demanded.

On their way back Ahmed said—“I can also smell something like that. They must have been instructed to keep it a secret.”

Mrs Bora is unable to take the hint. She tried to know everything clearly—

“is there a demand for money?”
Sleep won’t come to him. He sat upright. Its better to try writing than to spend the time twitchily. He looked at the pile of the papers on the table. The last two words—“Shameless!” He uncapped the pen and got ready to write.

**Six**

Mahesh is twisting a rope for the cattle along with Aghona. They are talking amongst themselves. A couple of sentences has reached Koli’s ears too.

“I entered the abandoned jungle in search of Kajoli.”

“After dusk?”

“Yes. Even then how this damned thing runs! If you run after her itchy nettle will touch your body.”

Aghona started to laugh in hiccups--- “What a taste?”

“Just don’t ask me! What type of itch! Today I will tie her up with this rope and bind her in the stubble field firmly....”

Koli is spraying Cow dung mixed water. But he is not looking at her. He is only talking and twisting the rope. Cow dung is a very sticky thing. The smell stays even after washing the hands. She daily rubs her hand with carambola and washes them. Still the smell doesn’t’ leave her hand. But mother says, to purify the courtyard one has to spray cow dung mixed water. Men shouldn’t step in an unclean courtyard. It reduces his age. Koli thought--- she’ll wake up even earlier from next morning. She’ll clean and purify the dirty courtyard before the idler wakes up.

He is not at all teasing her today. She has become over attentive. She was taking a chance to look towards her. But what was the use? Only the tub full of
water slanted to a side and a big amount of cow dung mixed water fell at one place making it muddy.

Even then he did not tease her. She finished washing a pile of dishes. She looked at him frequently while coating the kettle with mud paste.

The idler is still talking.

Suddenly her lips flickered brightly with a smile. She silently proceeded towards the place where the two men were sitting.

They are immersed in their talk and the work has not paid any attention to her.

Koli is moving forward with calculated steps. The last two steps resembled a jump. Just like a sparrow. And then, suddenly she moved her right hand over his face. She smiled a colourful smile like a maiden playing holi.

He was startled. Aghona started to laugh at the same moment.

"Just have a look. This girl Koli has coated his face with mud paste."

Mahesh threw away the rope and started chasing her. Koli ran away rapidly. She carried the mud coated kettle in one hand. Suddenly she stepped on the muddy cow dung mixed place. Immediately the kettle flew off and she fell to the ground face down, her hair spreading over her.

Seven

The night watch is on. People are not questioning the concerned people. Instead they are peeping from a distance and raising the same questions.

"Who’s duty is this? The government is paying you to guard us. Our duty is different. Can anyone work in the morning after keeping guard the whole night?"
Ahmed chewed a paan and jokingly said—“Didn’t Ramsing said like this? A single Assamese rows the boat, fires the mortar and directs a battle. You are also an Assamese. Descendants of Lachit Borphukan. Why can’t you?”

Satyajit Bora is also doing his duty as a guard. Every third day one has the duty. With burning red eyes he has to teach the class on Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Sometimes the sentences become disorderly. He sleeps as senselessly as a patient under anaesthesia the night after keeping watch. In the following two nights, feels the uneasiness of the ghost like approach of the night of duty. No comfortable feelings. No inspiration. Once in a while the unfinished story increases the uneasiness. One evening Satyajit Bora dragged himself towards the table. The last sentence in front of his eyes very distinctly.

“...she fell to the ground face down, her hair spreading over her.”

Bora suddenly felt that, not the girl named Koli but the story has fallen flat, facedown. He breathed out slowly and started thinking. Now he has to create an atmosphere of love. How will love develop if one keeps twirling on murky cow dung? She has to at least stand up. How to make her stand up. Can’t make Mahesh pull her up. It will be distasteful like a whimpering movie. If her owner is made to pull her up, the credibility is lost. Let her sit up on her own! But to do that she has fallen on her back so badly. On the other hand she had committed an offence. She has flung away the mud layered kettle. Even if she can stand up, the landlady’s scolding will make her go red in her ears.

Satyajit Bora mentally gives her strength—she should get up. Once she gets up, the story will proceed. He’s unable to find a way out. He started yawning
rapidly. Gradually he became irritated. Huh! Its useless to write stories about these people. You filthy thing. Knows how to fall but doesn’t know how to get up. Stupid!

The next day while strapping the wrist watch at the time of going out for night duty the last lines of the story came to his notice...“...she fell to the ground face down.” He became very angry. The world has gone topsy-turvy. She is still lying there, her hair spread over her. Let her lie there. Stay layered in cow dung.

Eight

Suddenly everyone was shaken with fear. A bomb was found on the nearby railway track. The men folk went out in an instant to inform the police station, military-CRPF camp, wherever they can. The women swept away their children like the eagle and stood at a distance from the railway track and looked on with fear. Satyajit Bora did not have duty that day. Still he did not feel sleepy. He had forgotten about the short story. So Koli is still lying on the ground.

Nine

A dead body was found. The police have summoned Mr and Mrs Sarmah for identification. Satyajit Bora looked at them while they were going out. Mrs Sarma’s face showed no signs of life. Lifeless, powerless. As if a dead body is walking. Sarma looked like the one whose flesh is measured and cut out by Shylock.

Bora does not have night duty today. Still he did not feel like going to bed—he is pacing down the room from one end to the other. Once in while he comes to the table. Not to read or write something. Unknowingly, without any cause. Again
goes away. He has forgotten about Koli. She is lying layered in cow dung. He does not remember anymore.

Bora’s wife is also unable to sleep. She is just lying on the bed. Once she said—“Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow you have night duty.”

He did not reply. He did not even hear the words. He sat down on the chair, put his elbows on the table and left the pressure of his face on his hands. Sometime later his eye became drowsy with sleep. In his tension he slept in the sitting position.

Ten

It was 7 o’clock in the morning. Satyajit Bora was in deep sleep as he had slept very late. Ahmed hurried into the room. And started without any context—“Something terrible has happened.”

Mrs Bora’s heart palpitated quickly. She rushed inside and woke up her husband. Ahmed is going on narrating.

“__ terrible happenings in Palpara. Haven’t you heard?”

“Of course not.”

“Ten persons were shot dead last night.”

“Really?”

“Yes. At around nine o’clock.”

“My! We did not hear any sound at all.”

“Only if there was any sound. They are not the double-barrelled guns of the past.”

Bora and his wife were perplexed. Just then at a distance hue and cry was heard. They were not slogans. Violent outcry. The Bora’s came out to the entrance. They saw all their neighbours standing outside their respective homes listening to
the sounds. The sound came from the highway. Not to be seen from their place. The voice without an amplifier is also not heard. But this not a voice. A violent uproar of a turbulent river gushing out all of a sudden.

Forthwith the sound of a gunshot was heard. Running into his room Bora picked up the receiver. His brother in law stays near the police station. Bora asked him—what has happened. He kept the phone and said in an excited tone... “they went to gherao the police station. A huge crowd. Police threw tear gas shells at them.”

Eleven

Curfew was imposed on both the sides of the town. Not in Bora’s locality. Still the atmosphere remained gloomy. No vehicle was plying on the road. Normal life of the people came to a standstill.

But people will have to go on living till the last breath. Bora eagerly sipped at his morning cup of tea. Trying to hide displeasure he asked as calmly as possible—

“No sugar?”

“Finished.”

This is the state of things in only two days of curfew. You should have informed me earlier.

Mrs Chaliha asked for a cup of sugar yesterday. I could not refuse because she came into the kitchen straightway as I was making tea.

There’ll be problem if you don’t use things frugally.

Bora’s wife retorted--- now you have said it. Last evening you insisted on serving tea when Ahmed and others came on a visit----- six people, not one or two.
Bora was flabbergasted/confounded. He stood—“Excuse me for a moment.”

“Where to?”

“To Ahmed’s place.”

His wife intentionally teased him…”To take tea with sugar?”

“Whatever!”

Twelve

Bhattacharyya was at Ahmed’s place. He regretted—“‘let all things stop. But it’s quite bad that we don’t get the newspaper. Bora said—“According to TV News only seven persons were killed. On being asked Dutta confirmed the number as ten. Again somebody escaping from that site of trouble through yards and allies said that fourteen people had to die. Very difficult to understand.”

“Ahmed tried to argue—“Dutta’s report must be reliable. He is a reporter in some paper.”

Bhattacharyya snapped—“Did you know the shopkeeper Mantu? He is also dead.”

“Shopkeeper Mantu?”

“That small Pan shop near the evening fair, in front of the blacksmith’s.”

“Yes, yes, now I understand. Did not know the man by name.”

“I also did not know him. One day I was in a _______ situation at the Green grocer’s shop in the bazaar. I did not have four rupees of lose cash. I rummaged through my pockets in vain and was about to lift the bag for returning the vegetables, then that Mantu came to my rescue. He said—“Sir. Here are four rupees.” I was at a loss and said to him—‘I’ll be able to return it only tomorrow”
morning.” He replied smiling— “It’s alright, sir. I’m here. You are also here. None of us will go missing.”

Bhattacharyya’s voice failed him

Bora and Ahmed heaved out sighs— the meaning— “what a pity!”

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Thirteen

Satyajit Bora was relaxing in bed. He was shattered by the sound of several gunshots. As he started for the door his wife prevented him saying— ‘wait.’ Turning the door knob Boa said – “Are there Chowdhuris on guard?”

His wife followed him in a helpless manner. They saw others coming out too. Choudhuri and others were on duty. They too approached.

No. Not a sound. Pin drop silence. Sound of some vehicle was heard after sometime. Maybe the Police or the Army.

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Fourteen

News spread in air. The shoot out was at Milanpur. Eight people died. They were shot by asking them sit in a queue on the bank of the rivulet.

Ahmed said— “There was another incident last night.” People died at Bongaon also. Parents, son, grandchild --- a total of seven.”

Satyajit Bora said as if talking to himself— “who knows what else happens?”

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Fifteen

People rushed out all of a sudden. One thing in every hand – a bag. Curfew has been relaxed for the day.

Satyajit Bora also came back from market. Coming back he saw that the hawker threw a large number of newspapers of the previous week. In the front page
of every newspaper the name of their place is written in bold letters. Not in gold but in blood stains. Palpara, Milanpur, Bongaon. The names and age of the deceased are recorded – Subhas Paul (56), Dhiren Kundu (25), Jaya (2 years 2 months).

Satyajit Bora stopped to ponder. When Sonmani was two years old he disavelled the clothes in the lower berth of the cloth rack. He threw out the shaving set of his father out of the window. One day even an earring of his mother. Very naughty. But quite endearing.

In reading the names of the dead people, Sonmani’s face came floating before his eyes though there was no similarity in age. Fear of death or of losing his son. As if it is not atmosphere. Fear sphere. Every moment he inhales it to his lungs. He becomes sleepless. He fails to sleep. Not to talk of his assigned duty as night guard. He keeps himself awake even otherwise. Like a person stung by a serpent. When Bora was an adolescent, his aunt was bitten by a snake. The lady felt like going to sleep but at the instruction of the quack doctor people tried to keep her awake. He knew about it at that tie, men bitten by snake should not be allowed to sleep. If allowed to sleep one would go to sleep forever. Not to be awakened again.

He looked at the newspaper of the date two days back. It contains the news from Bonaon. The name and age is mentioned here also. Mahesh Das (60) Arun Das (28) Koli Das (47).

He stumbled. Koli Das. Koli of his story. Maybe the same one. The name Mahesh is also recorded. He does not know what was Mahesh’s surname. But how can both the names belong to the same family? How? Does it mean then that Koli did rise from the cow dung mixed water?
He desired to see the woman for once. Unknowingly he put on his shirt. He wants to find out— whether this is the same Koli. He has enough time to spare. If he takes the scooter he will manage to return within one day.

Only after reaching the scooter he remembered that three days have passed. Koli must have turned into ashes.

He returned disappointed. Slowly he entered the room and stood near the table. Dust has gathered on top of the pages. Still his gaze stopped at the last sentence...

....“she fell to the ground face down, her hair spreading over her.”

The scene became alive in his mind. Then two questions arose in his mind. Did she get spread over? Did she fell face down or up? But those are not cow dung stains on her cloth— blood stains.

Satyajit Bora slowly ran his hand over the last sentence of his unfinished story. A few words resounded in his heart—““You did get up from the slimy cow dung water. You did shared love. But you could not get up from the pool of blood. Koli—! Koli of that idiom!”