

The Edges of Questions

Shamsher Ali

We keep walking in life. And in this duration, many passed by moments leave us with their memory. Many questions out of these stay hovering in our mind. Which cause us delight, or pain. Sometimes we feel, "That was a good thing that happened". Sometimes, "That was bad, but that is how it had to be". How do we gauge what is good, what is bad, when it is this assessment of ours that causes us sadness, or happiness? Why are we so keen to have every story have a 'turn'? Seated on a boat of thought, why do we start waiting for a new 'question fish'? Sometimes thought becomes heavy, and questions slip out of our hands. Then you don't get to sleep at night.

How quickly we start rummaging through, turning around and examining the days gone by, our today, and the days to come. When this happens to me, it's not like it doesn't feel good. And when I have no more of this to do, I turn to looking closely at my house. And start looking at the cracks in the walls, making all kinds of shapes with them. I laugh. And I also get frightened. A joker's face, then a dog. But when I make out of them an anguished face, I feel a strange fear. Why are his eyes on me alone? What does he want from me? I become him and ask myself these questions and am full of fear. And then, when this thought breaks, I laugh at him, and at myself. What was I doing? Why should I get frightened by this creature of my own looking? After all I created him, with my thinking.

Right now, I am sitting on the roof of my house. It's a very sunny morning. I am enjoying writing as well. Now I understand why *Ammi*, my brothers and sisters sit here. Right now, many eagles fly over my head because a man is feeding them. He throws up a piece of meat, towards them. His eyes are on the eagles. How must the eagles feel? Is that a common look, a regular gaze for them? Men on every roof are giving them pieces of meat. And the eagles sit on the roof of the hospital,

enjoying the pieces. What must this man be feeling? What must he make of this, of being one amongst many, of what he is doing? If we were to stand in a crowd, and look at one another, what will the eyes of the crowd say to us? Move! Get out of the way!

How many looks there must be in each of our looks. How many can we make out? Why do we ask questions, seek answers about these ways of looking? Jump into the ocean of thinking, and tire ourselves out, swimming. And when we don't find the shore, why do we kill our thought? By saying we don't know, or what do we care?

Once, my mother asked me to get milk. I refused. Don't know how *Ammi* felt about my refusal. She didn't say anything to me and kept looking at me, silently.

And I left. My mother's face and look kept appearing before me and my thoughts. Thinking these thoughts, singing a song, I went to the [video] Game [parlour]. That look chased me even there. This kept going through my head and finally, I found the edge of these questions, and went straight home. And said to *Ammi*, "Hurry, I'll get the milk". Handing me the money, *Ammi* said, "Just now you'd refused and left?" I could have lied in reply. But I had no truth as response to give her. I put the question in a boat and set it to sail to lose itself in the ocean. Quickly, I packed my things and came back to my world.

It's not always like this. Sometimes, time stands still. How much ever we want, time doesn't move ahead, and we remain troubled. About what will happen. Our one thought stays with us for not one, but even three to four days. During which we can neither do anything properly, nor can we reach any conclusion. Some thoughts travel a long distance in a brief time. But with these, we usually laugh; nothing else happens. (There is always one difficulty – do we know what it is that we think?) In our everyday life we knit and make many dreams. But making these in a crowd is enjoyable in a completely different sense. Like this, we make them not only by thinking, but also by seeing.

Sometimes these imagined dreams save us from many wrongs. (Sometimes some questions betray us.) What do my friends think about me, of me? If I sit down with this question, it will seem very random, confused. Every friend has an expectation of a friend. Which is what probably keeps the friendship. I want my friends to stay away from bad company, or from doing things because of which their parents or people will say hurtful things. Life goes on. And with that, so does thought. Everyday, there is a new thought, the tale of which is related to every other thought.

We can do anything in life, but if we make one mistake, we become bad. In this world, on the way to finding our destination, we share or exchange our thoughts with co-travellers. And a new story starts in our head. A story that changes, or turns right over with the next traveller we chance by. What else can we need? What can we not do with thought, and thinking. Where all can we not go. But to go into the depths of thinking, we need a pass, and the name of that permit is QUESTION...

Questions to Babli on her Impending Marriage

By her friends at the LNJP Lab

[Naseem Bano]

Will Babli like Bihar? Or still prefer Delhi?

Is Babli happy with a marriage decided by her family?

Is Babli going to miss Compughar?

Will Babli still teach children after she is married?

Will Babli want to touch the computer after she is married?

Once she is married, will Babli miss the Compughar and the time she spent here?

Will Babli still write after marriage?

Will Babli find a friend like Lakshmi in Bihar after her wedding?

Babli studied at school. She must have had some dreams about doing many things after finishing her formal education. But her studies have been discontinued because of her impending marriage. Will she have some regrets about this?

Will Babli take some texts of Jeebesh *bhaiya* to remember the Compughar, and even her school?

[Sultana]

Babli, why is your voice so sweet?

Are you happy or not about your marriage?

Is this marriage as per your wishes?

Babli, who do you like most at home?

Babli, why don't you use make-up when you go somewhere?

Do girls usually wear sarees after getting married?

Which is the one place you like to go the most?

[Neelofar]

Babli, how did you see the Compughar before? And now?

Does she imagine her married life, or not? Why?

Now that she is going to get married, does she perceive a change in her family members' behaviour? If yes, then what is it?

If there is a Compughar at her in-laws', will she join it?

Will Babli miss the [computer] games?

If Babli's marriage were to be postponed, or stop for some reason, how would she feel?

If, instead of joining the Compughar, Babli had joined a computer course, and had to leave that in-between, how would she have felt?

Will Babli take along her diaries, leave them at home, or leave them at the Compughar? Why?

[Masooma Ansari]

After marriage, what will Babli's being/existence's recognition be?

Did Babli's parents or elder sister ever understand Babli's feelings?

Then, will her to-be husband understand her feelings?
Did Babli's parents consult her on the marriage? If not, then why?
Doesn't she have a right to have a say in decisions about her own life?
Why didn't Babli's parents let her study further?
Will her husband let her continue her studies?
Will Babli be able to feel at home in the family she is now going to?
Will her in-laws let her do things, move ahead?
Babli must have dreams and desires. Will she be able to fulfil them?
Will she have the right to fulfil her dreams? If not, then why?

[Shahana Qureshi]

Will you meet with us even after you're married?
Is the way you think changing right now?
Your father decided about your marriage by himself. Do you have any objections?
Will you come to the Compughar when you come to Delhi?
When you talk about your marriage, your eyes start to well up.
With joy or sorrow?
Do you have any wish you would like to share with us?
Would you like to tell us about the milieu here, and there?
Will you teach children there as well? Or will you stay as housewives do, after marriage?
After marriage, will you change your way of thinking, or theirs?

[Yashoda]

Is Babli happy about her impending marriage?
Will Babli be able to fulfil the dreams she had for herself before her marriage?
Once she is married, will Babli be known through her husband, or will she create a name for herself?
Is Babli's parents' decision about her right?
Will Babli be able to come to terms with her parents' decision?
If Babli's husband or in-laws have any failings that she finds out about after her wedding, will Babli still be able to love and respect her parents just the same?

Had Babli ever thought about being married? If so, then what? Babli won't forget her companions at the Compughar after marriage, will she?

Will Babli take her own decisions, or will her in-laws take decisions for her?

Do you want to imagine Babli's life through these questions? If yes, then why?

[Bobby Khan]

Why is Babli's hair so long?

Babli, where did you learn to read out so well?

Babli, how do you think so well?

Babli, why are you going to a village?

Babli, when will you come back?

Why does the colour red look so good on Babli?

Why does Babli give tuitions to children?

How does Babli talk so beautifully?

Babli, why do you make handicrafts?

Babli, how do you get into agreement with others' thoughts?

[Mehrunnisa]

Is Babli happy with this marriage?

Will she stop her thinking after marriage?

Why did she not tell her father she didn't want to marry?

Was she unable to, because of the condition of her home? Or was there another reason?

Why does she not tell us about her home?

Does she want to stifle her thoughts? Will she let her thoughts go?

Did Babli think she would get married this early?

"*Sanjha*" (Sharing) peeps through Babli's thinking. Will this spark remain after she is married?

Will she accept and adapt to the customs of her new family?

[Azra Tabassum]

What was it about the relations in Babli's family that didn't let

her say anything when the marriage was decided?

Is change in Babli inevitable once she is married, or will she make herself change?

If she gets angry with someone when she thinks of her marriage, then why?

At her in-laws', who will she listen to more – her husband or her parents-in-law?

Just like you are getting married, if there was a friend of yours in your position, what would you have done for her?

How will you spend your free time in Bihar? With books, memories or planning?

Will you be able to dare to act according to your own will at all there?

Reading and hearing everyone's questions, what came to your mind? What emerged in front of your eyes?

Questions to Yashoda's Photo

What is that white line across the background in the photograph?

Is the curtain torn, or has your nail scratched the surface?

Is the reflection on your forehead because of the light, or from the oil in your hair?

Are your earrings of gold, or are they fake?

Are you wearing black incidentally, or because it is your favourite colour?

Why did you get a passport size photograph clicked? Was it peer pressure, or did you need the photo?

What was your attention focussed on while getting the photograph taken?

Was your hair oiled when you got the photo taken? I ask because not a single strand is out of place!

When you get a photo clicked, do you always look straight ahead, or do you also have photographs of yourself in profile?
What is that black thread you are wearing around your neck?
Why are you wearing an embroidered outfit? Were you going for a party, or did you just feel like wearing it?
Don't you like the embroidery? Why have you covered it with your *dupatta*?

And then, later, more questions (including Yashoda's questions) on Yashoda's text on her own photo –

Why have you written about this photograph?
Would you write about any photo given to you?
When you were writing, incorporating in your text the questions we asked you, how did you feel?
Is your text from your imagination, or does it contain past moments?
When you were writing, did you have questions in your mind, or the attempt to string different thoughts together in the text?
Have you written about a photograph before?
While writing, were you under pressure from your friends who asked you to write, or were you thinking about interesting incidents in your life?
While writing, did you remember any incident that made you really angry?
What was going through your mind while writing this text?
Is there someone you associate with this photograph, and whom you don't like?
How long did it take you to shape these questions in the mould of your mind?
Why do you feel that even if you dress really well, you won't look good in a photo?
Did you ever ask your mother why she makes you wear the black thread? Do you have faith in your mother's belief?
How did you feel on listening to, and then reading these questions?
When you were answering these questions, the way you looked –

have you ever looked like that before?
Were you thinking about us while answering these questions? If yes, then what?
Did you read out your text to your family members?
Can Yashoda ask questions of someone else's photo?
If Yashoda's mother had made her wear a silver chain instead of the black thread, would Yashoda have had faith in that as well?
If a shadow of the photographer had fallen on Yashoda, then whose image would we have called it?
Which question did you find the most compelling?
Listening to your text gives the distinct impression that you are close to your mother. Are you close to your father as well?
Did you shape your thoughts like a potter moulds his clay pots? Or did you pick and arrange them, like fruits in a basket? Did you pick as many as you wanted? Or as many as you needed? Or did you pick only as many as you could?

A Brief Biography of a Cable Operator

Workshop at the labs with Lokesh Sharma

Researcher, Publics and Practices in the History of the Present, Sarai

The following is excerpted from her article, "A brief biography of a cable operator", published in "The Media Fabric of the Contemporary City", a broadsheet from the project in January 2003.

"Srikant *kabariwala* (scrap-man) was a scrap dealer and a grocery shop owner when entered the cable industry as a cable operator in 1994 in a lower middle-class colony by buying off a failing business in the face of stiff competition from organized cable giants. Learning everything about the business from scratch, Srikant *Lala* (big boss, as he now came to be called) mastered the art of wooing customers and fending

off below-the-belt attacks from competitors with more clout and more capital – they would put a pin in his wire so that the reception was unclear, or superimpose an amplifier over his and amplify their signals to make reception unclear in his territory. At the same time, *ententes* between the major players in the cable industry proved to be a threat as well. A small player, Srikant's plans for territorial expansion, enumeration of subscribers and maximising of profits were whittled down. Finally, he had to give up his business to a media 'giant' in exchange for a fixed sum every month, rather than a share in the burgeoning trade.

This is a story of how the mediatised city is experienced in the locality. Figures such as Srikant move between trades, and corporate big players ally with local operators to restrict flexibility and autonomy – both of the trade at large, and of the consumer”.

QUESTIONS FROM THE LABS

- > When Srikant first came to Delhi, what was it that he felt?
- > What did he do in his village in Bihar?
- > Srikant, why did you work on a grocery shop? Why did you let go of the idea of a grocery shop?
- > Did Srikant come to Delhi with the thought of becoming a scrap dealer?
- > When you opened the *kabari* shop, what was your income?
- > What were the reasons for Srikant to work as a scrap dealer?
- > Did Srikant profit from both the grocery and *kabari* business?
- > When he started his earlier business – the grocery & *kabari* shop – how did he get the start-up finances?
- > Srikant, when you were in the *kabari* business, what all things came to your shop?
- > When did Srikant first think of starting a business?
- > When Srikant already had a *kabari* shop, why did he start work as a cable operator? Why did Srikant think of becoming a cable operator?
- > Could he have taken a decision other than cable as a business option? Was this a matter of choice?
- > Did Srikant start the cable business out of a long-standing desire,

or did he act on someone's advice?

- > Why did you choose to start a cable shop, when you already had a *kabari* shop?
- > Was it because his *kabari* business was not doing well that he started on the cable business?
- > In which business did you earn more – *kabari* or cable?
- > What is, in Srikant's experience, the difference between the *kabari* and the cable business?
- > Srikant, how did you feel when you were a scrap dealer, and then when people started calling you a cable operator, how did you feel?
- > What all problems did Srikant have to face after becoming a cable operator?
- > What was the effect of other cable operators on you?
- > Did they oppose your getting into the cable business?
- > Did you face them? How?
- > When you had to reduce your rates (because of the competition), how did it affect you?
- > Did Srikant get into fisticuffs with any of the other cable operators?
- > When Lilu and you were "at war", did you complain to the police?
- > Did Srikant initiate fights with other cable operators?
- > Did a relationship other than one of competition exist between the cable operators and Srikant? What social relationships are there between different cable operators?
- > Have you ever shown any illegal film on your cable?
- > Did you show pirated films on your cable, or old ones?
- > What was the nature of his relationship with his customers?
- > Did Srikant take money from his own home for a cable connection?
- > What relationship developed between Srikant and the families he got to know in his cable business?
- > Srikant, did you show Cartoon Network on your cable? Did you ever have a chat with a child about it?
- > When you went to houses to fix a cable connection, what did you talk about with the people there?
- > As a cable operator, what were Srikant's experiences of speaking with people who lived in the bigger houses?

- > As a scrap dealer, people came to Srikant. How was it different when Srikant had to go to people's houses to give connections and collect money?
- > When you had to sell you cable business because of Lilu, what all questions did you have to deal with, what thoughts came to your mind? And what price did you set for the sale?
- > How did he feel when his cable shop closed?
- > Srikant has been in the *kabari* business from before. He became a cable operator much later. If he were to get an opportunity to get into the role of a cable operator again, would he? Would he do anything in the 'cable line' again now or later?
- > Now that he isn't in the cable business, does he miss the people he interacted with, and the nature of his relationship with them, the fights he got into, the place he worked in?
- > Does Srikant have a family? What changes happened in his relations with them over his work?
- > Did Srikant ever feel troubled by his family?
- > Did Srikant live his life between these several co-ordinates, or had he thought of things outside of these?
- > What does he think about his future?

Questions Around an Object

(a closed notebook on the floor)

Asked by all at the LNJP Lab

- >Who made it? Did many people participate in making the notebook?
- >There is usually a net-like blue binding on every notebook. Does one person bind them all? Does the cloth come ready for binding? How was the cover designed? Who designed it? Was it designed

- keeping in mind who might buy it?
- >Are the cover/inside pages printed? Where? How?
 - >Who sold it?
 - >Was it in a shop?
 - >Where was the shop?
 - >Did the shopkeeper have notebooks of different sizes? Or was s/he out of stock of other sizes, and so the buyer bought this one?
 - >What is the price of the notebook?
 - >Who bought it?
 - >Why did s/he buy this size?
 - >What was the notebook bought for?
 - >Does more than one person use it?
 - >Who writes in it? What do they write?
 - >With what do they write? With what all colours would it have been written in?
 - >Is the notebook empty?
 - >Are the pages of this notebook very white, or are they a little yellow?
 - >Why is it not covered?
 - >Why is it looking unkempt? Is it old? Or not taken care of?
 - >Who kept it on the floor?
 - >Why is it kept as it is? Why is it straight? It could also have been kept upside down.
 - >Seen from a distance, could it be thought of as something other than a notebook? A greeting card?

Questions to a Window

[Masooma Ansari]

What is the colour of the curtain?

What type of curtain is it?

Whose house is it?

How many people live in this house?
How old is this window?
Who has put these long iron rods here? Why?
What metal is the antenna made of?
Why is this empty box lying here?
What are these brownish stains on the window?
Is it ever cleaned?

[Shahana Qureshi]

About three to four months back, I could see some people in the house. Where are they now?
Is the curtain black in colour or is it covered by a layer of muck?
Why can the crowing of the rooster always be heard here?
Who is the owner of this place?
Is this a white box, right in front, or soap foam?
What is the route to this house?
Why is it usually dark in here?
What is the meaning of the small wall here?
When no one lives here, why is there a curtain?
Do people have no relation to this place, is that why no one can be seen here?

[Bobby Khan]

Why is the light on in the closed room?
Why are the stairs orange in colour?
Whose shirt is this?
Are these boxes filled with water or kerosene?
Why is a pair of red and yellow pants hanging on the door?
Why is the curtain on the door torn?
Who is spilling this water that can be seen flowing?
What is this smoke because of?
Is it seeds the bird is pecking at?
Why is the gaze with which the house is being looked at changing?

[Nasreen]

Who has put the stairs outside the house?
Why is this curtain dirty and torn?
Why is it so dark inside the house?
Is the electricity out?
What colour are the walls inside the room?
What is the boy going up to the roof in this cold for?
Why is there so much noise inside the window at this time?
Why is the rooster crowing at the window?

[Manoj Kumar]

Is the window always hidden like this?
Is there a history hidden inside this window?

[Yashoda]

Why has so much dust settled on the window?
The space in front of the window looks like a house, but why does no one live there?
Why is this window right in front of our window?
Is this window older than, or was it built after, the Compughar window?
What could be the reason for the window to be made to open here?
Is there an end to the questions around this window?
Why do the limits of each of our questions about the window seem to be closing in on one another?
Does the window have a persona of its own?
Why are we asking so many questions of this window?
Are our thoughts and gaze limited to the window? If not, then why?

[Neelofar]

Where has this curtain been bought? I mean, from a shop, or from a hawker?
Have these people got the window made to compete with us? Or co-incidentally?
Who got the square stone placed above our window? Why? Is it

to appropriate some space?

Why is there no door-leaf in the window? Nor a net. Did they run out of money while building the house? Or did they just forget?

Do the people who live opposite us use the window? I mean, for the sun in winters and the breeze in summers?

Do they get the wall outside white-washed ever?

Are these windows friends?

Why did the people who live opposite us get the window made?

If, instead of boys, there was a family, or there were girls living in this house, then would a relationship of friendship have developed between us through these windows?

Why do the boys start fixing their curtains as soon as they see us?

[Sultana]

What all gets put into you when you are readied?

Why are you put in houses and offices?

How do you benefit us?

When you are purchased from the market, what is it that people like/look for in you that they get you for their house?

Why is glass fixed into you?

What all do you like and dislike seeing outside?

Why are you always accompanied by a curtain?

Do you like the curtain?

What would it be like if you were not there?

[Naseem Bano]

Do people passing by on the street ever look at this window?

Is this window made of iron? Why not of wood?

Whose house are the wires and ropes from this window going to?

Do these people need the window?

What is inside the bag that hangs in front?

Why is there so much garbage near the stairs?

That boy locked the window, but why did he not draw the curtains?

Why isn't there any noise coming through the window today?