



LANGCHAS

BY SAMIT BASU



When he learns about his father's heart attack, Potol is out in the paddy-fields, doing his favourite three things in the world: eating langchas, talking to his dog, and streaming his remarkable ability to chomp on one after another of his village's famous sweets to his small YumFlow audience.

The sky is its usual monsoon grey-black, the trees around him shine bright green as they sway in defiance to the growing wind, and one dark brown syrupy cylinder straight from heaven disappears into his mouth as likes float across his screen.

And then everything is ruined. He hears his sister Moni running up behind him, and gestures to her to keep out of his camera view. She doesn't stop, and yells his name instead. He groans and turns to her, and when he sees her in tears, her feet splattered with mud, he knows that something terrible has happened.

He races back home with her to see large huddle of people outside, muddying up everything. He can hear his mother yelling at relatives and neighbours to give his father space as he pushes his way in. She doesn't look at him, addressing Moni as she runs in behind him.

'Was he in school?' Ma asks.

Potol shoots a guilty glance at his phone, realises with a start that he'd forgotten to switch off his YumFlow, and swipes it away. Hopefully Moni had been too worried to notice he'd been eating langchas and streaming - again - instead of attending his classes, especially since he'd been given the best phone in the family.

'Yes,' Moni says. 'How is Baba?'

It wasn't a big heart attack, the neighbours say, but now Baba looks grey, can't really speak, and needs to be taken to hospital at once. One of Ma's cousins has already gone to see if he can borrow one of the cars in the market because everyone knows the nearest government hospital, in Nirole, would take hours to send an ambulance. There are hoardings up near their village about how the

Bad Days, when there were no hospitals to be found, would never come again--India now looks after all its people. Except no one seems to have told the hospitals about this. Poto's mother has called many times already, but it'll take many calls over several hours, if not days, before anything even starts moving. Even if they manage to get him to hospital - an aunt is already loudly praying that it doesn't start raining immediately - no one knows if there will be doctors there, or if the doctors there will be trained and capable.

It starts to rain. Some of the crowd assembled outside Poto's house scatters. Others stay, ignoring the raindrops as they grow heavier. Many relatives have already started crying.

A neighbour calls a nurse he knows at the nearest private hospital as well, to see if they can take him in, though everyone knows Poto's family can't afford it. Even if they could somehow borrow the money, it's widely known the hospital is more interested in making money disappear than illnesses. There are cheaper, less famous hospitals around as well, but those are known for making organs disappear, and sometimes people as well.

Poto's phone vibrates and, as he looks at it, ads pop up, no doubt triggered by all the conversation in the room about hospitals.

The ads show him all the amazing technology available at the global hospital chains in Calcutta, just four hours away. They cure anything, make you immortal, replace all your limbs, make you whole and complete and happy. The ads all have the faces of Poto and his friends in them from his photo gallery. Poto wants to break his phone.

As he's about to stuff it away, or start calling hospitals frantically just in case a miracle happens, he notices something strange.

There's a few thousand notifications on his YumFlow.

Ignoring Moni's enraged whispers about getting off his phone and being with his parents, he retreats to a corner of the room and tries to decipher what happened.

One of the biggest food-celebs in the world, the incredibly famous Korean snack-streamer known only as Lobster Almond King, has shared Poto's stream, which he'd forgotten to turn off, following his desperate run from his failed langcha-eating to his father's bedside. This has bounced around the world. He's finally gone viral - why did it have to be like this? - and now people want to send him money.

He looks at the donations already promised in his name and blinks. No one he knows has ever seen that kind of money, let alone possessed it. It could pay for anything in the fanciest private hospitals, if he can just get his father to one.

He yells, and the room falls to a hush. But, even after he explains what's just happen, the few people who understand what he's babbling about shake their heads. Money from outside the country could put you on lists you didn't want to be on, and it would take at least five days before these donations could be allowed to reach his father's bank account. And then were so many people he'd have to bribe before they let him move it to the hospital...

'We don't want charity anyway,' his mother snaps. 'Better he dies.'

'But so many strangers from all over the world want to save him!' Potol shouts. 'It's like a gift from the gods!'

'I don't want gifts from the gods,' Ma says. 'I want help from the people who come by and tell us every five years that things are going to change if we vote for them.'

Everyone's eyes turn to Mithun-da, who's a junior thug for a few political parties and heir to the biggest langcha store. He shrugs. 'I can make a few calls if you want,' he says. 'But they're going to take most of the money.'

'No need,' says Ma. 'You should all go home. If the ambulance comes, it'll come.'

No one leaves, and, as they gather around Ma again, Potol drags a protesting Moni towards the corner. 'Your English is way better than mine,' he says.

'True.' Moni actually logs in diligently to their e-school and pays attention to classes when she manages to get the phone out of Potol's hands.

'Here's what we have to do.'

Over a compilation video of his best langcha-eating moments, Potol gets Moni to write out an apology for not being able to accept money. He thanks everyone for their attempts to help, but says there's nothing to be done.

It's impossible to explain to people outside his world, especially in advanced countries, that he knows perfectly well that his father can be saved, that the technology to do it exists not far away, but that he's just not someone who has access to it, and there's nothing they can do to change that. This is a problem their family has faced for generations, and is likely to face forever unless a miracle happens.

Shortly after he posts his compilation, it goes viral too, and messages swarm in. Potol just hands the phone to Moni, unable to read so quickly, and twitches in irritation as she starts answering without checking with him.

'It's my YumFlow, you can't chat with people without asking me!'

'It's okay, dada, they know it's me. The stream's on again. We're leaving it on.'

A slow trickle of people filter in and out of their home: a friend brings aspirin,



someone else has a stash of nitroglycerin. Their village community doesn't always do whatever it can, but Poto's father was - is, he reminds himself - popular, and had no running feuds. But a good reputation won't conjure up an ambulance or even speed up its arrival: it won't stop the rain, or fix the potholes on the road that branches off from the highway, or clear the mud on the lane that leads to their house.

A notification pops up on Poto's phone after about an hour. 'Keep the cam on your face, or Moni's!' the text says. He does.

'Open the door.' He does.



When the first drone flies into the room, everyone screams. They've all seen the things flying by, carrying packages from city to city - once, they'd even seen a police drone tagging insurgents as they drove a stolen car through the village - but never this close. This drone is carrying a large carton of medicine.

The second buzzes in a minute later, carrying strange machines - Poto has no idea what they are, but Moni snatches the phone from him, and is soon deep in conversation with a doctor that Poto's YumFlow followers have chosen to run the whole thing.

It turns out that people all over the world are watching their stream, and, anxious to help, even if they've been told they can't and that the problems Poto's family faces are unsolvable. Through a range of messages that have flown from Seoul to Beirut to Cairo to Rio, they've managed to find some businessman in Shantiniketan, the nearest city, a YumFlow fan who's agreed to help, and now all kinds of supplies, bought by strangers in Calcutta, are on their way. Moni and Poto image-identify the first set of machines: there's a defibrillator, a smart portable generator, a mobile stent-printer, and so many other machines, flying in through their door, one by one. They stop counting after nine. The room was full before, now it's as crowded as a local bus.

They shoo everyone away. Their parents watch, as if in a dream, as Moni and Poto, following instructions from the doctor, assemble complicated combinations of equipment they have never seen before. They gasp and clutch each other in panic as some of the machines their children have assembled come to life as well: smart robots take over the assembly of medical equipment, setting up a state-of-the-art medical chamber around Poto's father. One looks like a spider, another like an old postbox, still another like a tubewell on wheels. They scan and prod their patient, cleaning him

and the room, vials and needles and masks moving around as they build a hospital around him. PotoI has seen scenes like this only in superhero movies, but somehow seeing these wonders in his own house is more difficult to believe than anything he's ever seen on screen. Before long, his father looks like a hero in a hospital scene: there's his heartbeat on a screen, there's the tube helping him breathe. It's all magic.

A robot turns a screen towards them. On it, a woman who looks like a movie star too. She speaks in halting Hindi first, realises they don't understand, and then switches to English, which they can follow even though her accent is strange.

'Hello, children,' she says. 'My name is Dr. Tunu Singh, and I'm talking to you from Vancouver, which is a big city in Canada. I'm just going to use a lot of big science words now because I need to do this fast, okay?'

'Okay,' says Moni, suppressing the nervous giggle that comes up every time she has to talk to big city people.

Dr. Singh nods and smiles. 'On the other rigs are colleagues from all over the world, but, from the results our automated helpers have just shown me, I think we should get to work right away, so I'll introduce them later. There are a few things I need to tell you before we proceed. We found that one of your father's coronary arteries is 92 percent obstructed, so we're going to give your father a coronary artery bypass surgery. We're diverting his left internal thoracic artery to the

left anterior descending branch of his left coronary artery. '

'Is it very dangerous? Will he die?' Moni asks.

'It's a very standard procedure, and we've used similar equipment to perform remote surgeries in far more challenging locations, but the process does require several experts at the same time because it's all being done remotely. Usually we'd need a few doctors standing by on site, where you are, to help the principal surgeon with the procedure, but that's difficult right now, so we're going to try our best with the robots.'

As long as the 7G signal doesn't drop, and your father cooperates, we should be fine.

Because you two are brave, and smart, and assembled a system called a Multiple Vitruvius, and a whole other rig called an integrated haptic remote microadjustment manager, with the kind of speed only trained adults are normally able to, we think we have a really good chance of saving him.'

'Can we do anything to help?' PotoI asks.

'Not really, because you probably won't have the patient data we need. The best thing you could do for us is to be on standby outside the room, and we'll call you in if there's anything you can do for us. There's going to be a lot of us moving different arms around, and it's going to get a little scary, so we'd like you and your mother to wait outside. Do you understand?'

'Yes, madam,' Moni says.

'Good. Do we have your permission to do this?'

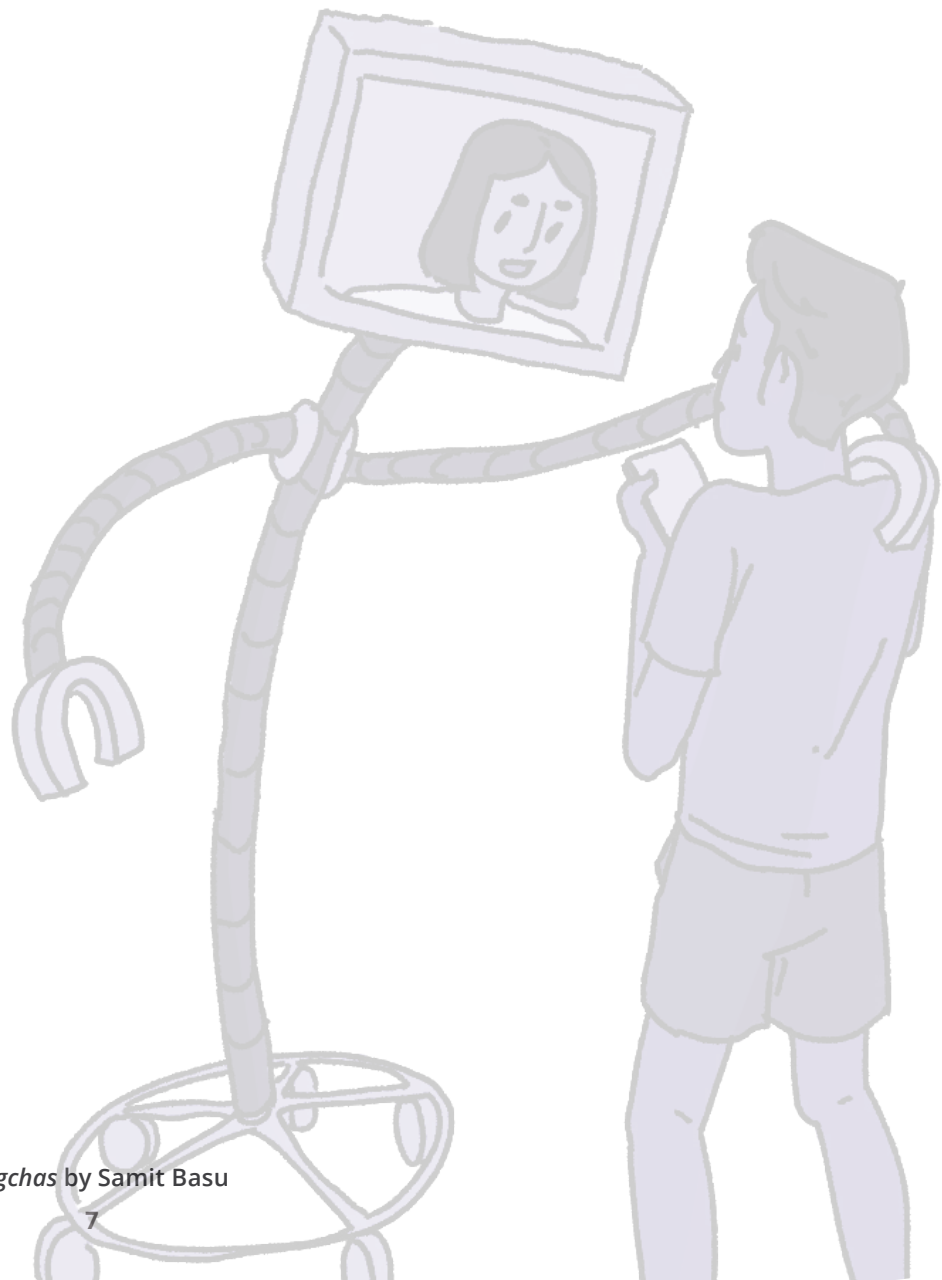
Moni looks at her mother. Ma nods.

'Yes, madam.'

'Good! No time to lose, then.'

They wait outside the house for what seems like forever: the neighbours offer them shelter, but they can't bear to be far away. PotoI and Moni are consoled, though, by thousands upon thousands of people around the world sending them loving messages, funny videos, and offers to meet should they ever travel the world. They even manage to get their mother to laugh a few times, showing her the day's YumFlow highlights, presented by the great Lobster Almond King himself. She's never understood why anyone does this, or why anyone would want to see it - but she does calm down a bit.

And then it's done. Dr. Singh calls PotoI, and tells him the surgery has been a success. His father is fine, but needs to not be disturbed for a while.



As their friends and neighbours gather around them and PotoI's phone almost explodes with the sound of joyous notifications, their mother cries her heart out, but they can tell her tears are of relief. She can't help grumbling at them. This was a miracle, but everything is terrible, systems don't work, this isn't a solution. She does join the stream for a moment, though, shyly thanks the assembled audience - now over seven million, worldwide - and scurries away. PotoI's father is going to be unconscious for a while now, of course, but that's finally something PotoI and Moni are able to giggle about. The last thing they need is people all over the world hearing their father's ideas for improving society.

'The best thing is, I have so many new followers!' PotoI says to Moni afterwards, as they walk through their lane, sidestepping puddles, avoiding drips from roofs and occasionally staring at the clear sky, just to see if more drones are on the way.

'Well,' Moni says, 'the best thing is that Baba's going to be okay.'

'You know what I mean,' he says.

'I do.'

'And thanks for not telling them I was skipping school. I'll go more regularly.'

'And you'll give me the phone more as well. I could start my own stream too.'

'What will you do on it?'

Moni slips her hand into his.

'Eat langchas with my brother,' she says.