

# BENGAL PARTITION STORIES

## An Unclosed Chapter



Edited by Bashabi Fraser

# Bengal Partition Stories

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Edited by

Bashabi Fraser

Translated by

Sheila Sen Gupta, Sarika Chaudhuri, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, Jayati Gupta,  
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## DEDICATION

To my father Bimalendu Bhattacharya, Pulin Das and in memory of my mother, Anima Bhattacharya and Samir Roy, and a whole generation to whose struggle we are indebted today.



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Bashabi Fraser  
Edinburgh

## FOREWORD

Literature has emerged as an alternate archive of the times. In the study of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, in particular, literature has articulated the 'little' narratives against the grand; the unofficial histories against the official. What is peripheral to recorded history—the actual impact of official decisions on the everyday life of the people—is central to literary representation. Literary works, particularly those of a realist dispensation, mirror *and* mould the perception of an age: its contradictions, travails, anxieties and cares.

In the literature on Partition, the short story holds a position of pre-eminence. It is not that in the many decades after 1947 no novels were written on the partition of the subcontinent. The short story, by encapsulating individual fates, held its own against the unfolding of multiple histories in the novel. The short durative of the story carried as much punch as the epic sweep of novelistic time. Writing on communal riots during Partition, Ismat Chughtai says: 'Most of the progressive writers in Hindustan and Pakistan turned their attention to this issue and, helped by other progressive elements, began their work in earnest. The force of the pen thwarted the attacks of the knife and dagger. Although the reactionaries sided with the dagger and the knife, it was the progressive elements that finally won. This was a time when the value of life was equivalent to a fistful of sand. The helpless victims had been unleashed in the field; every demand was met by adding fuel to the blaze of communal violence. The organizers were standing with their back turned; the reformers of the nation were dozing somewhere out of sight. This was the moment when writers provided the ammunition in the form of plays, sketches, stories and poems, scattering them everywhere'.\*

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\* 'Communal Violence and Literature', Ismat Chughtai, in *No Woman's Land*, Ritu Menon (ed.), Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2004, p. 44.

This collection of stories, backed by a thoughtful introduction, is a welcome addition to recent anthologies of fiction on Partition translated into English; more so, because it is on the eastern partition of the subcontinent. Its stories cover a wide time span, from pre-Partition days to the present, written by eminent Bengali authors of the older generation as well as younger writers from both sides of the border. I am sure they will reach out to a wide audience.

The carving-out of territory as a state, with religion as one of the main identity markers, and the ensuing displacement, migration, uprooting of minorities, the riots and the violence, the trauma women and children in particular had to bear, all find representation in these stories. The creation of the nation-state and the drawing of borders did not completely sever the emotional links with the home and homeland, or weaken the pull of a common language and culture. The two-nation theory and communal politics made religion the dominant marker of state identity. Ironically, language as marker of national identity became one of the main contentions between East and West Pakistan soon after they were constituted. *Looking Back* by Selina Hossain reveals the ruthlessness with which the Bengali Language Movement was dealt with in Dhaka in 1952.

The stories in this important book bring into sharp focus the ambiguity of the notions of the border/boundary and nation/homeland. The narratives poignantly portray the dilemmas of people, who see only fuzzy frontiers and emotional homelands where coldly and irrevocably drawn borders and nations have come into existence. For the traders, involved in selling and buying on the border, legally or illegally, the border is a porous entity. In Amar Mitra's *Wild-Goose Country*, if there is a shortage of Vicks on one side, it will be procured from the other. If Vicks cannot be managed, may be Jhandu Balm will do.

The border that is the 'just across' for the traders is the distance of the 'near abroad' for Mazarul in the same story who cannot understand why his uncles and aunts, who had migrated to East Pakistan, no longer reply to his letters. Although on the threshold, he is unable to take the short step to crossing over to look for his near and dear ones. Those who see undefined frontiers take the white things flying in the skies to be wild geese; those who see borders, assume they are warplanes. While the border on land can be fenced off with barbed wire, how is the borderline that runs through water to be enforced?

In Annada Shankar Ray's *Alien Land*, the navy launch Pomfret gets parked in the middle of the river on sandy land and causes the protagonist to fret: What if it floats off, when there is water into the 'other' territory, or

gets lost in the Bay of Bengal? Luckily, Muslims who take advantage of the floods upstream, board it, and ready to start the engine as soon as it moved, bring the launch back. 'What you preserve today, comes to your rescue later on,' says the protagonist, a magistrate in the border district in the post-Partition years who had built up a relationship of trust with the Muslims of the area.

The Radcliffe Award led to people finding themselves on a side of the border they had least expected to be on. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Acharya Kripalani Colony* is a humorous take on the politics of the dividing line. Land colonizers who promise ideal location on the banks of the river exploit the fear of relocation and displacement. The real location has nothing in common with the alluring advertisements for a plot of land.

The construction of identity that followed the constituting of nation-states after Partition is represented, almost with black humour, in Debesh Roy's *Refugee*. The identities of the protagonists Anima and Satyabrata are constructed in several differing histories, each of which is plausible, in legal parlance. They are there to prove their identities at the local police station, but how are they going to do it, and what really is the 'truth' of their identity? Prafulla Roy's *Infiltration* also deals with the fluid identities marked as refugee/migrant/infiltrator, all of which serve as fodder for vote-bank politics.

The mental divide wrought by Partition that lingers on is also emphasized in several stories. Sunil Gangopadhyay's *If* sensitively portrays the crossing of that invisible barrier of religious prejudice within a middle-class family where a Muslim son has married a Hindu girl. While the couple is free from religious beliefs, the mother is still rooted in her rituals and wants the grandchild to imbibe the values of her religion. A visit to her daughter-in-law's house on a festive occasion brings back memories of a syncretic culture in her childhood when the divide between communities was not as deeply felt.

In Dibyendu Palit's *Alam's Own House* the historical divide cannot be bridged. 'Certain lands are meant for certain roots only' says Raka, with a cynicism born of an assessment of the past and a reiteration of difference. Alam believed that homes and not houses had been exchanged between their fathers. Since he and Raka had shared a home—his, which was now hers—Alam assumed that there were no barriers between them. They shared the same interchangeable milieu, it seemed. What he did not realize was that the very act of 'exchange' had taken its toll. The uprootment, however genteel and gentlemanly it had been, was still an uprootment. The divide in this story was among individuals. Hence, with the strength that modernity accords, Alam was able to pick up his suitcase and leave the house he had assumed was his home with dignity. Love in *Alam's Own House* was

within the domain of the private. Not so in Imdadul Haq Milan's *The Girl Was Innocent*, where love is inscribed in the ethics of the feudal village community and does not enjoy the sanctity of privacy. It is the girl, Kusum, who bears the double burden of her being a woman and a poor Muslim. The boy, a Hindu, is better off and can buy his release from the Imam when caught meeting the girl. Kusum, the daughter of a poor artisan, is unable to pay the fine and has to suffer a hundred lashes in front of her community. Hers is a situation of no exit and she commits suicide, even as the Hindu boy waits for her by the river.

The rioting and violence that accompanied Partition also finds a nuanced representation in the stories in this anthology. Ordinary people find the strength to move beyond the diktats of the time and the groups they belong to, to help each other and people of the 'other' community. These are the small enclaves of humanism and sanity in the surrounding mayhem and bloodshed. Whether it is a boatman, Yasin, who responds to a woman passenger's cry for help and gives up his own chance of happiness to take her safely across (*Boatman*, Prafulla Roy), or a woman who finds refuge with a Muslim shopkeeper during a riot, both equally nervous about the other's presence (*Loss*, Gour Kishore Ghosh), or a Muslim, redefining the meaning of 'infidel' (*Infidel*, Atin Bandyopadhyay)—these are stories that conjure up sparks of humaneness in dark times. There are other tales that are more sombre in tone, however. In Dibyendu Palit's *Hindu*, Mathuranath can find within himself the compassion to get medical attention for a man he finds dying on the road, even though he is not sure which caste he belongs to. His humanitarian impulse withers up as soon as he realizes that the dying man is a Muslim. In the vitiated communal atmosphere of the town, everyone is eager to wash their hands off this corpse.

Other stories with sharper political intent show that the protagonists who suffer are the ordinary people, not those who are protected by wealth and power. After having hidden in a Hindu's house during the riots, a Muslim worker in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Ledger* returns home. On the way he passes through the localities of the rich that stand undisturbed. 'We belong to the poor community', he says to his friend, discerningly. Poverty is a greater identity marker than any religion. Achintya Kumar Sengupta's *Treaty* and Nabendu Ghosh's *Insignificance* also reiterate a class consciousness that binds the poor together, making them disregard religious differences.

Of interest in some of the stories is the internal stratification of communities that is underlined during turbulent times. In Nabendu Ghosh's *The Saviour*, the Bengali Hindu elite use the low-caste *doms*, under the leadership of Jhogru, to protect them when the Muslims attacked. The narrator ironically

states at the end of the story that 'Jhogru was dead because people like Jhogru were always born to save the likes of Mr Bose. The Pandavas would not have lived if the nishads had not died in their place'.

In the aftermath of Partition, members of the same family who have resettled across the border may not have fared equally well. This unequal destiny is the subject of Dipankar Das' *The Debt of a Generation*. There are others who negotiate the border profitably. In Imdadul Haq Milan's *The Story of Sonadas Baul*, Gaganbabu stays back in East Pakistan and continues to trade in grain, while he sends his money to West Bengal and even builds a three-storeyed house there for his wife and children. When the trader migrates to Kolkata in his old age, so that his son may light his pyre, the old, homeless baul Sonadas, loses his place of shelter, for he had slept in Gaganbabu's warehouse for years. The rich cross over; the poor become homeless within their own nations.

Women bore the brunt of Partition violence, uprootment and relocation in more ways than one. Many of the stories in this volume bring out the trauma of gendered suffering. Two stories, however, are remarkable for the representation of their triumph. Mahashweta Devi's *Of Ram and Rahim* has two mothers, who have lost their sons to the communal violence. They realize that they are together in grief and find a way of looking ahead, bridging the communal gap. In Sayyed Mustafa Siraj's *India* an old, irreverent woman, who is quick to reply to the fun the men in a tea-stall make of her, walks up to a banyan tree and settles comfortably into a hole in its roots. When discovered later, she seems to be dead. Men of both communities fight over her last rites, claiming that she belonged to 'them'. She is suddenly 'resurrected' and walks away, asking them if they do not recognize her for what she is. She could be a ghost, she could be the Indian subcontinent. Whatever she is, the image of the old, withered woman is a haunting one, for she transgresses all the spaces, boundaries and identities that could be imposed on her. She rises again, not to destroy, or wreck revenge, but to be on her way. She is an indomitable spirit beyond all violation and can, on the contrary, instill fear in the hearts of men who have not learnt their lessons from violence and hatred.

I think you have something really interesting here which could greatly extend our interest in Partition Literature.

Mushirul Hasan



## INTRODUCTION

### THE BENGAL PARTITION RELIVED IN LITERATURE

The Partition of India became an inevitable reality in the wake of successive events in Bengal. However, the Partition experience on India's eastern front was very different from that on its western border. The effect of these events on the communities concerned is evident in the shorter fiction that has since emerged in Bengali, which is the subject of this volume. This particular perspective will throw a distinct slant on a post-colonial evaluation of the Partition, and its effect on eastern India. The near 'silence' that has existed till very recently round the violence faced by people fleeing across the Bengal border, is striking, and the 'gaps' and 'absences' that exist, can be answered and filled in by the retelling of such experiences in the tales of an exodus that has changed the cultural, social and economic character of a divided Bengal, having an effect on modern India and the new nation of Bangladesh, thus raising questions about what *is* post-colonial. The stories depict the nature of this difference in their focus and what they have to tell.

Much has been written on the history, politics and social background which led to Bengal's Partition, but the actual experience of the people who were affected by the Partition has not been explored and can be recovered from oral histories and interviews or gleaned from the fiction, retelling the violence, the trauma, the small acts of humanity which the people—riot-torn and/or dislocated or of those who found themselves in the 'wrong' country, experienced.

There has been a notable surge of interest in the Partition of India since the fiftieth year of Indian Independence in 1997. It has been a time to reflect, look back and weigh what India gained or lost as a result of decolonization. Like the Punjab, Bengal was partitioned at the time of the formation of Pakistan and the re-emergence of India as a nation.



A lot has been documented about the violence during Punjab's vivisection and the upheaval faced by people from Gujarat, Sindh and Uttar Pradesh, in the spate of literature culminating around 1997, which remains irrevocably tied to India's Partition. The short fiction has been translated and brought out in anthologies like Mushirul Hasan's anthology of stories and poems about the western line of demarcation, called *India Partitioned: The Other Side of Freedom, 1947-97* (1997), and Alok Bhalla has edited *Stories about the Partition of India* (vols. I-III), in translation. Recently Settar and Gupta have edited a two-volume anthology entitled *Pangs of Partition* (2002), of which volume two is a compilation of stories on Partition. Though Bhalla's and Settar and Gupta's volumes include some stories about the Bengal Partition, a gap remains, as the Bengal story is still untold in its entirety in a major collection of stories about the Bengal Partition, in English. The translations of stories on the eastern border, included in the above-mentioned books, have not been included here.

The stories included in this volume are all English translations of published stories in Bengali. There are still many unpublished stories on the Partition experience which are waiting to be gathered in a new book (e.g. the story mentioned in footnote 119 later), which throw fresh light on the plight of the east Bengali refugee. The selection process of this book took into account several factors; first of all, stories that indicate the historical reality of an interaction that existed in Bengal, in spite of social taboos, have been included. Secondly, the stories illustrate a syncretic society of interdependence before factional politics disturbed this socio-economic fabric. Through the stories, an effort has been made to cover various experiences of common people who were affected by sectarian violence, suspicion, fear, or intimidation. Stories which document acts of humanism, when people helped those of the 'other' community to escape or survive, (these were incidents which kept alive people's faith in humanity through those traumatic times), are part of this selection. The horrific reality of the Partition experienced in riots, arson, looting, murder, rape, abduction and hairbreadth escape, is evident in many of the stories. The stories encapsulate universal themes of love, matrimony, birth, the meaning of land and property which acquire a new poignancy in times like these. The tales also explore the sense of loss, separation, migration, rehabilitation, rootlessness, identity, belonging, dislocation, relocation, nostalgia and longing felt by communities facing the upheaval of a divided nation. The stories begin in nineteenth century Bengal and come up to recent events like the Babri Masjid issue, reflecting political developments through time to today and stress the reality of the barbed wire fence on the Bangladesh border and continuous traffic of

people and goods across it, in spite of the political divide. The stories cover multiple experiences of Muslims and Hindus, women, men and children, landowners and the landless, businessmen, professionals, the rich and poor in urban and rural contexts. The stories in this volume are by women and men writers, both Muslim and Hindu, from both sides of the border. To avoid a repetition of themes, some stories had to be excluded, once one theme was covered by a story. All stories in this volume are there because they are powerful literary pieces and well written.

The School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, have taken up a comprehensive project to document women's experiences of the Partition in Bengal. Their first book, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, does bridge the gap and answer many of the questions in its focus on gender issues in, what is, a seminal tribute to the struggle and achievement of the women who suffered from Bengal's Partition. The volume is a collection of critical essays, interviews and reminiscences and includes an overview on films and creative writing on Bengal's Partition experience, in a gendered study. A forthcoming volume edited by Bagchi and Dasgupta will have a few translated short stories, and we have striven to avoid any major overlapping of repeated tales.

Any work on the Bengal Partition seems incomplete without a reference to Ritwik Ghatak's work. Given Ghatak's socialist ideals and pan-India outlook, his short stories on the Partition are largely about the experiences of the refugee on the western border. There is one story on the Bengal Partition which has been translated by Rani Ray in her anthology, *Ritwik Ghatak: Stories*, which has not been included in this volume. Also, Rabindranath Tagore's 'A Mussalman's Story', published in a volume edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, (OUP, 2000), is not in this anthology. The length of time involved in compiling any long book, inevitably sees new work published before the project is complete. So, a few stories in this volume, which have appeared in recent editions,<sup>1</sup> have been retained, as they serve the purpose of the collection. Moreover, each new translation is like a new creation, making it sometimes refreshingly different from another version of the same story, which is the reason why multiple translations of stories remain valid and read through time.

This volume of short stories is aimed at an international English speaking audience (not forgetting a non-Bengali audience in India), looking at a wide range of experiences of ordinary people who lived through or died during the riots and crossings of the border on both sides, of both Hindus and Muslims, before, during and after the Partition, right up to recent times, as Partition remains an everyday reality on the eastern border.

## 2

Looking at the socio-economic fabric of undivided Bengal in the East and the West in its urban complexes and rural holdings, one finds a continuous link through language, bound by a folk culture in a syncretic, interdependent society.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the Hindu-Muslim relations were no different here from those on the western border, especially in the Punjab, which, like Bengal, was also divided. But as history has shown, such commonalities are not enough to withstand organized violence and state sponsored pogroms against minority groups. Developments in Bengal triggered off events all over India, which made Partition an unavoidable reality. The Bengal story finally affected the whole course of Indian history in the last crucial months leading up to Indian Independence and the formation of Pakistan, born of fission. These events force one to reconsider questions of religious allegiance, personal beliefs, community consciousness and the divisive politics round the term 'communal' in Bengal and in the greater context, in India.

The Radcliffe Award allocated the two borders that created Pakistan and Partitioned India. While whole provinces like Sindh went to Pakistan and Gujrat to India, it divided the two provinces of the Punjab and Bengal. The effect of this on the economies of the two provinces was profound. Shri Prakash points out the 'economic irrationality of this unnatural geographical partition'<sup>3</sup> as the agro-rich lands producing wheat and cotton went to West Pakistan and those producing the bulk of jute and paddy to East Pakistan, leaving the industrial mills<sup>4</sup> relying on the raw materials for their processing, in India. The result of this 'irrational division'<sup>5</sup> was that Pakistan had to buy raw materials and agro-based goods against foreign exchange from other countries after domestic supplies from undivided India were abruptly stopped and India was compelled to find new foreign markets for her products, following Partition.

So the Radcliffe Award declared a jagged border cutting Bengal into unequal sections of a larger east Bengal, which became East Pakistan, surrounded on the north, west and east by India, and a smaller West Bengal, whose northern section is united to its southern by a narrow isthmus of land. The Partition separated families, cut through households as it tore a nation apart, driving people across a whimsical line, people who have never stopped coming, with or without their often meagre belongings, but mostly they have made it with their lives and in fear, or as in more recent times, seeking economic survival.

What is unique about the Bengal Partition is that unlike the massive exchange of populations in 1947–48 and till 1950 on the western border, the influx of refugees across the Bengal border has never stopped, to date. It has sometimes swollen to a deluge and sometimes been reduced to a trickle, but it has never dried up. Apart from a two-way movement of populations in 1950 from West Bengal, Bihar and East Pakistan, the refugee influx has been mostly a one-way traffic since 1950, from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, to West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Bihar in India. Whether one calls them refugees or economic migrants (asylum seekers or 'infiltrators' as some have been described in recent times),<sup>6</sup> this unending flow of people remains an everyday reality on West Bengal's 'porous' border, and has made the stories of Partition on the eastern front unending and different. The 'violence' is of a different kind in a protracted struggle to survive, of a denuded population from one section of the sub-continent—that keeps coming in a relentless stream—to the other.

In a post-colonial context, where does Partition leave the one-time native intellectual of Fanon's theory, who, after conscious appropriation, has galvanized the masses to regain their identity through a process of decolonization? The Hindu Bengali of east Bengal, the secular-minded Muslim on both sides of the border and the Bihari Muslim of East Pakistan who participated in the freedom struggle, found himself not the free citizen of the country he desired, but the disillusioned or displaced, landless, jobless refugee, driven out from the place of his birth by a border he 'had neither drawn nor desired'.<sup>7</sup> It is a story of displacement and dislocation which continues, and the voices of the people who have been affected by the politics of Partition have been recorded as it were, in Bengali stories of partition riots and the Partition itself, which have been selected, translated and compiled in this volume. The stories in the anthology bring out the relevance of the border even today, as the Bengal Partition remains an everyday reality with the continuous flow of refugees/migrants/'infiltrators', keeping the question of the border alive, unlike the story of the closed border on India's western front.

The human tragedy of communities which have lived together through the centuries in reasonable harmony, being riven apart through the partitions imposed by foreign imperial powers and/or divisive nationalistic politics, has not been an uncommon phenomenon through the twentieth century. The Bengal story, in this sense, becomes part of international experiences as whole populations become the victims of ethnic cleansing and/or religious violence, which, sadly, has not stopped and continues in the third millennium in various parts of the world. The Bengal story can then be viewed as part of a graver, greater global continuum of genocides, pogroms, rape and

abduction, mutilation of human beings and the destruction of property, as communities perceive fresh fault lines of demarcation and resort to violence to create unreal monolithic communities which are not realizable as has been proved in spite of Hitler's planned holocaust to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe. Communal violence has claimed lives, destroyed social harmony, disrupted livelihoods and even forced people to flee across international borders, creating whole populations of the dispossessed seeking refuge away from home. Thus we find the Bengal story resonating not only with India's western border experience, but with Northern Ireland, Israel, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Germany, Rwanda, Burundi, Chechnya, East Timor, Afghanistan,<sup>8</sup> Yugoslavia, Iraq and Sudan, in an unending list of afflicted communities which have fallen apart.

### 3

Whenever a Bengali from erstwhile east Bengal (later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh), meets another Bengali, she/he always asks in the course of the introductory preliminaries, 'Where are you from?'<sup>9</sup> The palimpsest reading of such a question could be deciphered as 'Are you from east Bengal? Which district?' The sense of dislocation and displacement which accompanied the declared (i.e., the refugee who registered herself/himself as a refugee in government records) or undeclared refugee from east Bengal, has remained evident in this leading question, which sets the stage for establishing a sense of identity along regional lines in the land of the Padma, which triggers a whole familiar process of longing, nostalgia and loss for those 'good old days', against these ones of endless struggle. Since Partition, on many occasions of nostalgic inter-changes, the east Bengali Hindu has aligned herself/himself on the basis of memory and shared regional affinities, to the east Bengali Muslim. A similar sense of loss of regional familiarities accompanied the displaced Bihari and U.P. Muslim in East Pakistan, who missed the climate and food habits they were familiar with. In the first two decades after Partition, the national language of both Pakistans being Urdu, benefited the Bihari and U.P. Muslim in East Pakistan, who enjoyed a privileged position in accessing the available education and employment opportunities. The Muslim Bengali in East Pakistan did not enjoy the same opportunities as for many people, Urdu was not their language of expression. In the case of Hindu and Muslim Bengalis, a common language did imply a certain shared culture of songs, oral history and tradition, folklore, performance arts and literature, till 1947. In fact, the language movement of 1952 was the precursor

to the 1971 struggle for an independent Bengali identity in East Pakistan, which questioned the anomaly of a forced marriage on the basis of religion only, as the Bengali speaking East Pakistani questioned what appeared to be a double colonization, moving from the dominance of the British colonizer to that of the West Pakistan Urdu speaking elite. In the 1940s, during the last few years leading up to Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan, the consideration of religion dismissed the reality of regional, climatic, linguistic and cultural continuity and the inevitable affinity that comes from contiguity.

In post-1947, East Pakistan could not feel the same sense of continuity with West Pakistan, separated as it was from it by approximately 2,000 miles of Indian territory. The bloody civil war of 1971 was nothing less than the re-questioning of the identity of the Bengali Muslim<sup>10</sup> in a demand for a country ('desh') for Bangla, the aftermath of which set off a chain reaction in another exodus—this time of the Urdu speaking Muslims from Bangladesh to West Pakistan and India. At the time of the Bangladesh Liberation War, West Bengal was aroused to a deep empathy, stirred to rallies for the freedom of East Pakistan, singing moving Bengali patriotic songs,<sup>11</sup> re-establishing a feeling of a continuity of language and culture between the two 'Bengals'. At that time in history, West Bengal witnessed a flood of refugees as never seen before, which was fleeing the onslaught of the Pakistan army. But after 1971, in a political reversal of events, 300,000 Bihari Muslims found that they 'were refugees in their "own" land',<sup>12</sup> and while 110,000<sup>13</sup> were allowed to enter Pakistan, the rest remained as unwanted citizens, forced to come as refugees or 'infiltrators'<sup>14</sup> every now and then, across the border into West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Bihar.

In any consideration of the Bengali Muslim or Hindu, one has to bear in mind the sense of continuity or fractures along lines of class, region and the rural-urban divide.

Religious allegiance is concerned with one's personal belief in a superhuman power and the adherence to a set of doctrines which is the acceptable expression of a particular belief. In the community, the practice of such doctrines finds expression in deliberate 'good deeds' or acts of self-denial and even in those,

... little nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love<sup>15</sup>

to appease or please the superhuman power and secure rewards beyond this life.

Communal loyalties are generated by more mundane considerations of one group gaining ascendancy over another in availing of limited resources. While community consciousness entails social bonding, 'communal' connotes the tension of clashing social, political and economic interests, which in the sub-continent, in the wake of the twentieth century, was defined along religious lines in a divisive politics demanding territorial segmentation.

In a consideration of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations and tensions in undivided Bengal, the first recorded riots of 1891, 1896 and 1897 in Kolkata show how labour protests could develop into 'communal' tensions in working class areas. The 'class' and 'communal' convergence continued in the 1906-07 riots in Mymensingh, following Lord Curzon's first Partition of Bengal in 1905. Wolpert shows how the 1905 Partition ensured a Muslim majority in the Eastern section across the Hoogly and inclusive of Assam, while the Western part with Kolkata, had a Bihari and Oriya population, ensuring a non-Bengali speaking community outnumbering the 'outspoken'<sup>16</sup> Bengali *bhadralok* who, in nationalistic outrage, led the *swadeshi* movement in the boycott of foreign goods.<sup>17</sup> The first Bengal partition came as political encouragement to Muslims<sup>18</sup> as Dhaka became the capital of Muslim east Bengal with its majority of 6 million Muslims, thus moving from being the one-time periphery of Kolkata—the British capital—to becoming the metropolitan centre for the Bengal Muslim, their new hub of political activity. The transformation catapulted the unification of the Bengal Muslims at Dhaka with those of the Deccan and the Muslim leaders at Aligarh College and at Amritsar, who organized themselves to lobby for a 'fair share' for their 'community'<sup>19</sup> on a national scale. Minto assured 'the Mohammedan community', 'I am entirely with you' and assured them that their 'political rights and interests as a community will be safeguarded by any administrative re-organization with which I am concerned'.<sup>20</sup> As recorded in the Harcourt Butler Papers, Minto's 'work of statesmanship' was 'nothing less than the pulling back of 62 million people from joining the ranks of the seditious opposition.'<sup>21</sup> The Muslim leaders under Aga Khan brought their representation to Lord Minto on 1 October 1906 at Shimla, the summer capital of the Empire in India. The All-India Muslim League met and was founded two months later in Dhaka on 30 December 1906, after the Muslim Education Conference. It owed its inception to the efforts of Nawab Musthfaq Husain. A pledge to stay loyal to the Raj was the mainstay of the League to secure and safeguard services under the crown for Muslims, against the claims of Hindus and other communities. As a result, the League would not be sympathetic to nationalistic calls for independence raised by the Congress with a unified front in years to come.<sup>22</sup> However, the

first partition of Bengal led to an all-Bengal unified movement for unity in which the Bengali Muslims lent support to the Hindu-led Swadeshi movement for the reunification of Bengal.<sup>23</sup>

The pattern of class combining with communal interests continued in the Kolkata, Pabna and Dhaka riots from 1918 to 1926, culminating in the Muslim peasant masses attacking their Hindu landlords and money-lenders as the uprisings spread to the Bengal countryside. The 1918 Kolkata riots, however, were triggered off by what was considered an insulting passage against Muslims in an Anglo-Indian newspaper. The 1926 riots were generated around issues like the question of music before mosques and an organized religious procession—issues which had not mattered earlier amongst the two ‘communities’ in the post-war period of the Khilafat movement (1920–24). Later on, these issues, together with the symbolic implications and rituals round ‘idolatry’ and the ‘cow’, became central to the widening ripples of communal violence in Bengal and in the larger context, of India as a whole. The 1926 Dhaka riots were a precursor to the violence in both Dhaka and Kishoreganj in 1930. While Kishoreganj witnessed the previous trend of class-based conflict in rural areas,<sup>24</sup> Dhaka saw the participation of Muslim political leaders in bringing together the masses in a cohesive communal front against the ‘other’ community.<sup>25</sup> The 1930 Kishoreganj–Dhaka events, as Sugata Bose analyses them, did polarize a pluralistic society along religious lines in a bid to dissolve the prevalent rural credit system, thus disempowering the Hindu money-lending talukdar/trader from his position of ‘economic control and power’<sup>26</sup> and thereby exorcising an old fear of the ‘mahajan’. The situation had followed on from the mounting problem of realising rents by Hindu landlords who then turned to lending as the alternative source of income. Their economic status was to be slowly eroded as their lending power was further curtailed with the successive Money-lenders Acts in Bengal of 1935 and 1940.

The 1930 Kishoreganj–Dhaka developments mark the watershed in Bengal politics, the point at which the Muslim elite and Muslim masses united with the mullahs, popularising the ‘Muslim’ cause, paving the way for the Muslim League a decade later to gain greater allegiance from the Bengal Muslims in a declared bid for ‘Pakistan’ finding fruition on the midnight of 14 August 1947.

There were, however, attempts made to bring the two communities together as in the Bengal Pact drafted by Chittaranjan Das in 1923,<sup>27</sup> which was ‘endorsed’ at the Bengal Provincial Conference by Hindu Congressmen in Bengal in 1924, (though it had been rejected earlier in 1923 by the Congress at Kakinad). The understanding between the Muslim League and the



Bengal Congress was short-lived, and C. R. Das's death in June 1925 left Bengal without a powerful figure who tried to effect Hindu-Muslim unity in the state.

But looking back, after Kishoreganj-Dhaka, it is interesting to note the entirely different impetus attached to the Chittagong violence in 1931 following the Armoury Raid led by Surya Sen and Ananta Lal Singh, where local government officials instigated the Muslims to rise against their Hindu neighbours as Hindu homes of revolutionaries were singled out for police raids, acts of arson and torture, killing and arrest of relatives of political suspects. One can see echoes of the official bureaucracy creating safeguards to retain political power by engendering a divide along communal lines, to divert the violence directed at Government machinery.

The Ramsay Macdonald Communal Award was announced in 1932, by which the separate Muslim electorate formula was extended to include other groups. In Bengal this meant that of the 80 Hindu seats in the Legislative Assembly, 10 were reserved for the depressed classes, bringing the Hindu representation down to 32 per cent of the total, which did not reflect their ratio as 44 per cent of the total population of Bengal. For the Muslims who formed 54 per cent of Bengal population, the Communal Award gave them 119 seats, i.e., 47.8 per cent of Assembly seats. Interestingly, the Europeans who totalled 1 per cent of the population in Bengal, were given 25 seats (10 per cent) by the same Award.<sup>28</sup> The 1932 Communal Award paved the way for the implementation of the Government of India Act of 1935 in the inauguration of Provincial autonomy on 1 April 1937, by which 'Muslims in Punjab and Bengal were not only allowed to retain their separate electorates, but granted more seats than any other community in the provincial assemblies'.<sup>29</sup> It is significant that these are the two provinces which would be partitioned later on in 1947. (By the implementation of this Award, there were to be two legislative assemblies, a council and an assembly in the six governor's provinces of Bengal, Bombay, Madras, U.P., Bihar and Assam.) To prevent a Muslim representative majority in the Assembly, a pamphlet called 'The Bengal Hindu Manifesto' of 23 April 1932 was brought out and prominently circulated. It was signed by some of the richest zamindars of Bengal and many lawyers and professionals.<sup>30</sup> The arrogant assertion of Hindu Bengali hegemony is evident in the words of the Manifesto, 'The claims of the Bengali Muslims [to statutory majority] are anti-national and selfish and [are] not based on any principles of equity and justice ... if conceded, it will keep Hindus in a perpetual state of inferiority and impotence... The achievements of Hindu Bengalis stand foremost in the whole of India in the fields of art, Literature and Science, whereas the Muslim community in

Bengal has not so far produced a single name of All-India fame in these fields.<sup>31</sup> Four years later, at the passing of the Government of India Act of 1935, 120 well-known Hindu leaders and intellectuals signed the Hindu Memorial on 27 June 1936, condemning the Communal Award for its divisive politics and asserting the Hindu cultural and intellectual contribution to Bengal's history and its economic progress, claiming their 'superiority' to the Muslims, for which they demanded the increase of Hindu seats in the forthcoming elections, to represent and lead the Province. The Memorial was submitted to Lord Zetland, the then Secretary of State for India. It was followed by a mammoth meeting in the Calcutta Town Hall on 15 July, presided over by Rabindranath Tagore, who expressed the fear that Muslim political leadership would endanger the future of Bengali literature, with the Bengali Muslim's affiliation to Urdu. Ironically, it would be the Bengali Muslim, who, from 1952 would launch the movement for a nation for Bengal speakers which would be the precursor to the formation of Bangladesh in 1972.

The Memorial and the meeting raised alarm bells for the Muslim leaders who read the Hindu response as a repeat of the anti-Partition movement after the first Partition of Bengal in 1905. Tagore's role and presidential address hurt the sentiment of the Bengali Muslims, coming as it did from Bengal's leading humanist voice, from the same man who had protested against the *swadeshi* movement as impoverishing and endangering the poor Muslim peasant and dealer/peddler in his novel, *Ghare Baire* in 1915 (translated as *Home and the World* in English, Macmillan, 1919).

In a counter move of Muslims in the same Calcutta Town Hall on 21 August, a 'Committee of Three' was recommended to be formed by Nooruddin and Ispahani. The three recommended members were Fazlul Huq, Jinnah and the Nawab of Dhaka. At this time there were multiple Muslim parties with different interests in Bengal. For the purpose of unifying the Muslim vote, the All-India Muslim League authorized Jinnah to form the Central Parliamentary Board (CPB). Watching the growing popularity of Fazlul Huq with his agrarian base and hold, amongst the young Bengali Muslims, Jinnah sought to placate the charismatic Bengali leader by declaring him a member of the working committee of the CPB, in a meeting held on 6 June 1936 in Lahore. Fazlul Huq started off as one of the leaders of the Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti, a multi-party group that was not just Muslim, but attracted radicals, nationalists, loyalists and both Congress and anti-Congress members. In a bid for its presidency against Akram Khan, Fazlul Huq broke away, and in a shrewd move, formed the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) in 1936. The same year on 24 May, the land-owning section and business magnates of Bengal formed the United Muslim Party (UMP) with

the Nawab of Dhaka<sup>32</sup> as its President, the Nawab of Jalpaiguri its vice-president and Suhrawardy<sup>33</sup> and Ispahani<sup>34</sup> its secretary and treasurer, respectively—all of whom were upcountry businessmen. The progressive KPP stayed aloof from the UMP as the campaigning gained ground in the countryside. On the other hand, Jinnah's overtures of collaboration to the UMP made no impression, as Suhrawardy decided to let 'local conditions' determine the course of 'local arrangements'.<sup>35</sup> In his blanket policy for all India, Jinnah wanted an all-encompassing Muslim unity, which was not commensurate with Fazlul Huq's estimate of the Bengal situation, as such solidarity across the board was not viable with the Muslim *krishaks* and *prajas* on the one hand, and the wealthy Muslim landowners and businessmen on the other.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, it was the same policy of having a uniform project for all India that made the High Command of the Congress stand aside and withdraw support to any provincial arrangement proposed by the Pradesh<sup>37</sup> Congress for special arrangements vis-à-vis the Bengal situation. On 25 August, Jinnah issued a press release stating the dissolution of the UMP and the New Muslim Majlis and their amalgamation with the Muslim League under the banner of CPB, challenging Huq with the possible blame of affecting the disunity of the Muslims of Bengal. The socio-economic class divide amongst the Bengal Muslims, illustrates the lack of unity on the eve of the 1937 elections. Though the CPB in its Muslim League affiliation campaigned for Muslim unity and welfare on the grounds of Islam, it did not monopolize the Muslim votes of rural Bengal in the January–February 1937 election.<sup>38</sup> It was the KPP with its proclamation to 'abolish zamindari without compensation'<sup>39</sup> and its manifesto to ask for remittance of rent and writing off of debts,<sup>40</sup> that had the popular appeal to Bengal's large peasantry, its petty landowners, small traders and others of this middling group of Muslims with their 'Dal-Bhat' campaign,<sup>41</sup> which swept one-third of the votes in the Muslim constituencies, emerging particularly successful in rural areas. The other two-thirds were evenly mopped up by the Muslim League and independent Muslim candidates. The Bengal Congress emerged as the largest single minority party in the Province. The Congress declined to collaborate with the KPP in the post-election negotiations to form a coalition. So a Krishak Praja Party–Muslim League coalition assumed the first autonomous Government in Bengal on 1 April 1937, with Fazlul Huq heading as its Premier.

So from 1937 to 1947, Bengal was ruled by Muslim Governments. The communal disturbances of the 1940s saw a challenge to the composite socio-economic structure of Bengali society. In 1941 the Dhaka disturbances took the cohesive form of organized communal violence against the 'other' community as the class divide was no longer a factor and nationalistic aspirations were not an issue, 'Pakistan' becoming the rallying point for the confluence of divergent interests and loyalties of the majority community in Bengal.

Joya Chatterjee notes how the Hindu *bhadralok* faced the eroding of their political representational power in provincial institutions in the 1930s and 1940s after the Communal Award. The Award was not applicable to district and local bodies, so the Hindus directed their energies into holding on to their privileged positions in the new political scenario. Their situation became desperate as the vote was given to men who could pay Re 1 in Cess<sup>42</sup> (or 'chaukidari'<sup>43</sup> as it was called) or to those who held degrees, making the right to vote the privilege of the educated and the rich. On the one hand, there was a thriving Muslim section amongst the peasantry and a growing middle-class with wealth. On the other, the Fazlul Huq ministry, acting on the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act of 1935, made the devolution of power in local and district bodies worthwhile even to Muslim creditors, through a good share of political power and subsequent settlements in their favour. Landowners, both zamindars and jotedars, however, found that they were powerless to realize payment in the face of a widespread 'non-payment mentality',<sup>44</sup> even if they controlled the Boards. The scramble for power made the Congress an active party lobbying for seats in local bodies, which they were slowly going to lose to Muslim representation on a growing proportional basis. The Huq Ministry asserted its hold over local bodies through a legislation which gave it control over nominated seats, which amounted to one-third of the total. The Bengali Hindu's sense of nationalism and religious identity had been built on the value set to 'culture' through education. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*, who had assumed the educational institution as their particular stronghold to retain and safeguard, were to see their power rapidly challenged and decreased with an emerging educated Muslim electorate voting in their candidates to positions of power on School Boards. Even in Hindu majority districts, the Hindu *bhadralok* found their attempts to assert or protect symbolic institutions such as Durga Puja, countered with, what they saw as the interference of the Huq and Nazimuddin governments, who stepped in from time to time with ameliorating measures, interpreted by Hindu *bhadralok* as concessions to the Muslim majority. The road was being built towards a growing *bhadralok* sentiment that they would not get a fair deal under 'Muslim rule'.

To mobilize the Hindu front across the board, a new caste consolidation campaign was started to enlist the lower castes like the Namasudras of north Bengal and Rajbangshis and Santals of East Bengal to the Hindu fold, effected by the *shuddhi* (purification) and *sangathan* (mobilization) programmes. This process was facilitated by the upward mobility measures taken by the lower castes to purify themselves, which made them willing partners in this highly politicized number game.

In the historic meeting of the Muslim League in Lahore in 1940, the two-nation theory was endorsed, based on the notion of Islam being in danger, which came to be known as the Lahore Pact. Between this Pact and the 'Great Calcutta Killing'<sup>45</sup> of 1946, came two events which would affect political developments in Bengal. The first was the nearly forgotten vast exodus of Indians from Burma in 1941 after Rangoon fell under Japanese occupation and the second, the devastating experience of the Bengal famine of 1943, which followed the fall of Burma and was closely allied to the War effort.

As a province of the British Empire, Burma had witnessed the migration of Indian labourers, workers, businessmen, professionals and forces to it and a sizeable population came from Bengal because of the province's proximity to Burma. Many middle-class Bengalis had sought work where it was available, and had migrated to Burma. 'In the 1920s' Rangoon 'seemed more like an Indian city than the capital of Burma.'<sup>46</sup> When the Montagu-Chelmsworth proposal for a process of devolution was put forward for Burma, the Indians were seen as a hindrance to this step towards self-government. The 1930s violence against Indians indicated the mood of the Burmese population to Indian settlers and workers.<sup>47</sup> The situation worsened for Burma Indians after the 1937 separation of the country from India. Matters came to a head for Indian immigrants when Rangoon was bombed between 23 and 25 December 1941 as part of the Japanese expansionist policy during the Second World War. Indian labourers left Rangoon toward Arakan and India, up the Prome Road.<sup>48</sup> The Indians in Burma had either to remain and face the Japanese, who would see them as the enemy's subjects, or leave for India. Many of them had bought assets and invested in the country and married Burmese women and settled in Burma.

Japanese victories in Burma precipitated the Indian exodus in what was to prove the hazardous, unaided march.<sup>49</sup> The real number of evacuees or of those that died in this forgotten march was never recorded. The probable estimate is of 450,000 to 500,000 Indians who left Burma; of which anywhere between 10,000 and 50,000 never made it. Many were robbed on the way, being open to raiding robbers in the lonely mountainous regions. The Burmese experience taught the Indians a lesson that they would never forget, that they were not the priority of the imperial powers to protect in times of crisis, however well they might have served the Empire. The result of this strenuous, unaided traumatic walk to a safe haven in Bengal and Assam, was that a large number of destitute refugees who arrived were left to start life afresh with very little means, creating a strain on the provinces' economy.

The Japanese victory and losses of the Allies had a knock-on-effect on eastern India, affecting the supply and prices 'of food items (especially rice,

oils and salt), cooking and lighting fuels (coal and kerosene), cloth and medicines. The loss of cheap Burma rice, which had fed the poorer sections of society immediately pushed up the price of the commodity.<sup>50</sup>

The fear of a Japanese attack was palpable in Bengal<sup>51</sup> and to ensure the 'denial policy' (which involved the 'scorched earth policy') in anticipation of an advancing army of Japanese occupation, 'surplus stocks' of paddy and items like boats and bicycles were destroyed, creating an underclass with denuded livelihoods, and the means of sustenance of alluvial farmers, fishermen, boatmen and other dependent occupations, were taken away from them overnight. The 'denial' policy, once put into effect in Bengal, further impoverished the economy, destroying arable land and crops, a factor that contributed to the man-made famine of 1943 in Bengal.

The Bengal famine was an ordeal that followed the 1942 cyclone which affected some coastal crops and encouraged a speculative price hike in Bengal.

Several factors accounted for this man-made calamity that starved a huge section of the most vulnerable members of society out of existence. Since 1906 jute had taken over some of the valuable rice lands of east Bengal and tied the Bengal economy irrevocably to the capitalist world market. In actuality, 'jute, the chief cash crop of Bengal, never enjoyed a sustained period of boom as did, for instance, cotton and wheat in western and northern India... The euphoria that jute cultivation had roused in the east Bengal countryside in the 1907-12 period never returned.'<sup>52</sup> So when jute prices fell as a result of the War and markets for Indian jute were cut off, it reduced the buying power of the jute peasant with smallholdings and led to the grain-deficit in these districts. The 1930s Depression had shifted the class power balance as the Moneylenders Act aggravated the crisis for moneylenders, who, pleading the fear of prosecution, took to stocking rather than lending grain supplies. The grain-deficit was felt most acutely in densely populated east Bengal once the returns from jute failed, causing the famine to be more pronounced there, as the money from jute was not forthcoming. Jute growers became insolvent, and while the grain dealers made money, the peasants became grain buyers rather than sellers. Starvation hit them when their buying power was crushed by rocketing prices of rice and other foodstuff. The legislative measures had broken the landlord-peasant bond, reducing the lending power of the landlord and his rent-collection role on the one hand, and leaving the peasant without the credit system he had fallen back on in earlier years, on the other. As noted earlier, the outbreak of the Second World War and the Japanese invasion of Burma, stopped the cheaper rice grains from coming in for the poorer population of Bengal. Moreover, Bengal was the ground base for War production from 1939 to 1945, as a bulk of

the Rs. 3,500 million spent in India on defence, was concentrated here.<sup>53</sup> So when inflation affected the country, it shook the economic base of the state in no uncertain terms.

The 1943 Bengal Famine thus hit a vulnerable population. In spite of a bumper rice crop in December 1943, the death rate from starvation and starvation related epidemics, were not reduced. Amartya Sen puts the death toll at 2.7 to 3 million while Paul Greenough makes it out to be between 3.5 and 3.8 million.<sup>54</sup> The acute starvation lasted from March to November 1943. The Parliament, however, did not officially acknowledge the famine till October 1943, which meant that the Governor's earlier warnings about the prospect of famine in Bengal and frantic calls for food supplies went unheeded, stopping effective relief measures to ward off or counter the famine.

In the meantime, the Quit India movement led by Gandhi in 1942 had resulted in mass arrests of Congress leaders, leaving the whole country rudderless in its nationalistic aspirations. As the Muslim League and the Communists openly supported the War effort, they were left free to strengthen their hold on the masses. Under the socialistic leadership of Fazlul Huq from 1937, there was, noticeably, a steady power devolvement as a new trend set in, uniting the Muslim masses in an overtly 'anti-landlord and anti-grain merchant stand'.<sup>55</sup> The memory of the famine was to play a crucial part in the mobilization of the Bengal peasantry, with the Muslim League promising economic stability in a 'Pakistan' free of the Hindu landlord and moneylender trader.

The general Election in Bengal was scheduled to be held from 19 till 22 March in 1946. The Congress secured 86 seats against the 114 won by the Muslim League, who, together with the two independent Muslim candidates, claimed a majority with 116 seats. As noted earlier, the League's attempts at forming a coalition with the Congress in 1937 had broken down under the Congress High Command directive to stand aloof from any kind of local autonomy in Pradesh Congresses. The next round of coalition talks in 1946 once again failed, as the League did not want to raise the question of the release of political prisoners as demanded by Congress or agree to an equal number of ministers from each party or allow the Congress to hold the Home portfolio.<sup>56</sup> So on 23 April 1946, the Muslim League, on being invited to form a ministry by the Governor, Frederick Burrows, assumed power in Bengal with H.S. Suhrawardy as its Prime Minister.

When 16 August 1946 was declared by Jinnah as Direct Action Day,<sup>57</sup> the Bengal Muslim League ministry, in a nervous response to the possibility of Congress protests, declared it and the two successive days (i.e., 17 and 18 August) as holidays. Abul Hashim, the Secretary for the Bengal Provincial Muslim League stated that the Muslim League was not prepared for the

violence that ensued, 'I brought from Burdwan my two sons ... a boy of 15 ... and ... a boy of 8 to show them the gathering that was expected on the occasion at Calcutta. I took them to the Maidan.<sup>58</sup> Lal Miah of Faridpur took his grandson aged six or seven. If we apprehended any danger we would not have taken our sons and grandsons to the Maidan.'<sup>59</sup>

The declared holiday meant that newspaper offices were closed, party offices could not function and public transport was off the street. As a result, Direct Action day was observed in Kolkata with the onset of mob fury undeterred, without the constraints of government machinery to curb the violence. After the fiery speeches on the Maidan on the morning of Direct Action Day, the crowds dispersed on the streets. Maulana Azad recounts the beginnings of the violence in his memoirs: 'Processions were taken out by the League which began to loot and commit acts of arson. Soon the whole city was in the grip of goondas of both communities...'<sup>60</sup> He says that 'Throughout Calcutta, the military and the police were standing by but remained inactive while innocent men and women were being killed.'<sup>61</sup> *The Statesman* called the carnage beginning on 16 August, 'The Great Calcutta Killing',<sup>62</sup> by which apt description it is still referred to now. The mayhem lasted from 16 till 26 August, though attempts were made from 21 August to keep the main streets free from mob violence, with armed patrols on vigilance.

The 1946 Kolkata riots did not bear the character of earlier communal violence in the city, committed with the mob consisting mainly of up-country underprivileged classes with a marked absence of the middle-class Hindu or Muslim Bengali. Suranjan Das notes how 'The crowd no longer overwhelmingly consisted of subordinate social groups but became a mixture of upper and lower strata. Whereas in previous Calcutta riots the crowd was largely of upcountry origin, August 1946 saw the first large-scale participation of Bengali Hindus and Muslims in communal violence.'<sup>63</sup> Institutional leaders now also directly mobilized the crowd and incited acts of arson...<sup>64</sup> Das finds the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* presence a distinct feature of the 1946 riots with 'students and other professional or middle-class elements'<sup>65</sup> active, and many 'Wealthy businessmen, influential merchants, artists, shopkeepers ... were arrested on rioting charges'.<sup>66</sup> The absence of arrests on a similar scale of Muslim miscreants is significant. During the 1946 Kolkata riots, the violence perpetrated by the rival communities was unmitigated, sadistic and revengeful. The Great Calcutta Killings started a chain reaction of events in east Bengal and then through India.

Direct Action Day and its aftermath resulted in the polarization of the city of Kolkata's population along communal lines, as a community which considered itself a 'minority' in one area, subsequently moved to another



where it felt more secure. The brutality of the violence was astounding, encouraged by the initial absence of police protection, which, when it did arrive, fell far short of the desired effectiveness, as the killings continued. Before the 1946 riots, no area had been clearly demarcated as either 'Hindu' or 'Muslim', as the metropolis had grown up without such conscious divisive considerations, leading to calculated settlement patterns. It was only during the riots that a 'Hindu' shop, a 'Muslim' restaurant, a 'Hindu' men's mess or a 'Muslim' girls' hostel became defined as such when targets were sought at the time of the mindless violence by mobs on the rampage. For the first time in 1946, small groups or lone killers emerged, seeking easy targets in unwary individuals and vulnerable victims and these sporadic acts of violence continued in the city till 15 August 1947. In his diary, under 18 August of 1946, Lord Wavell records, 'Calcutta is as bad as ever and the death-toll mounts steadily. Sarat Chandra Bose rang up in the afternoon with a message of protest to me that the police were favouring the Muslims against the Hindus, whereas the Governor tells me the casualties are higher amongst the Muslims. Anyway it is a thoroughly bad business.'<sup>67</sup> S. Sarkar too notes, 'More Muslims seemed to have died than Hindus, a point made not only by Wavell ... but also by Patel ('In Calcutta the Hindus had the best of it. But that is no comfort', letter to Cripps, 19 October...)',<sup>68</sup> Sarkar also emphasizes the nature of the violence, 'Murder was the primary objective in the Calcutta riots, not—as often in earlier communal outbreaks—desecration of temples or mosques, rape, or attacks on the property of relatively privileged groups belonging to the opposite community.'<sup>69</sup> Joya Chatterjee calls it a 'civil war' after an eye witness<sup>70</sup> who speaks of the brutality and notes how 'Hindus, as much as Muslims, were prepared for battle on 16 August; both sides were armed...'<sup>71</sup> illustrating that 'Direct Action day was not a flash in the pan...'<sup>72</sup> Since the strength of numbers amongst the inhabitants of Kolkata did not lie with either community, there was no question of a 'minority' community emerging as the main victim with the 'majority' as the perpetrators of violence. The damage to life and property was staggering, and both communities were equally guilty of unabated violence. The sense of power of a Muslim Ministry after its success in the provincial elections and the growing assurance of securing for Bengal a Pakistan identity by Bengali Muslims on the one hand, and the Bengali Hindus' determination to resist 'muslim tyranny' and be prepared for self defence on the other, led to the organized communal violence and the continuing retaliatory brutality that marred peaceful life in the city for a whole year till 15 August, 1947.

As said earlier, Suranjan Das has noted the preparedness of the Hindus at the time of Direct Action Day and the presence of the Hindu *bhadralok* in the

riots. Joya Chatterjee traces the Hindu preparedness in literature and some noteworthy practices and groups. She comments how for Bankimchandra, the high priest of Bengali literature, '*anushilan* was a cultural synthesis of the best of past and present worlds that would be achieved only through the future intellectual endeavour of a vanguard intelligentsia'. *Anushilan* symbolized the keystone of *bhadralok* culture. To counter the myth of 'martial races', the Bengali Hindus mobilized themselves into volunteer groups intent on body-building techniques and 'pseudo-military training'<sup>73</sup> under two revolutionary wings, the Jugantar and Anushilian groups. According to Chatterjee, one can trace the martial, *sangathan* (organizational) activities of the Hindu *bhadralok* to these two bodies<sup>74</sup> in the communal violence that rocked Bengal in 1946. These two groups, however, were revolutionary groups fired with a nationalistic ideology. They prepared themselves physically to combat the idea of the Bengali as non-martial and did not directly align themselves with Hindu nationalism. P. Chakrabarti, in *The Marginal Men*, shows how these two groups were to play a crucial role in the agitational politics of refugee Bengal in the history of post-Partition West Bengal communism, which will be discussed later.<sup>75</sup>

In 1946, when communal violence reached its peak, the British were determined not to be 'disturbed into action'.<sup>76</sup> Later on, Jawaharlal Nehru ascribed the acceleration of communal violence on the eve of Indian Independence to the British official policy of 'masterly inactivity'.<sup>77</sup> Yet neither Gandhi nor Nehru thought it necessary to visit the riot-affected city of Kolkata in August–September 1946.

The Great Calcutta Killings were followed by violence in Mumbai (then Bombay) in September. And seven weeks after the Kolkata riots there was the occurrence of the organized violence directed at the minority Hindu community in Noakhali and later on, in Tippera. These repurcussionary counter-measures in Noakhali were taken after post and telegraph, railway and road connections had been deliberately sabotaged before the intimidation process began in a rural uprising.<sup>78</sup> Added to the usual acts of looting, arson and murder, there was a calculated moral dimension to the Noakhali violence in forced conversions, abduction and forced marriages.<sup>79</sup> The news of the communal terror did not filter through to Kolkata and the rest of Bengal till four weeks after it began, due to the systematic severing of all communications and the blocking off of escape routes. When the news of the violence reached the rest of the country, the backlash was terrifying in neighbouring Bihar—in the torching of whole villages, brutal murders and the violence against women of the minority Muslims in the rural areas. After Kolkata-Mumbai-Noakhali-Tipperā, there was no stopping this tide of

communal violence as it was repeated in retaliatory and counter-retaliatory measures which spread like a prairie fire from Bihar to Punjab and across the sub-continent, leaving it singed and scorched till and after Partition.

The 1946 Kolkata, Noakhali and Tippera communal riots and organized violence in Bengal, saw the divide along class and economic lines disappear totally, giving way to religious and political alignment, which was overtly communal. We have already seen the repercussions of this violence in Bihar. In Bengal, it was organized with the Muslim elite and masses forming a common front with leadership from mullahs and a sympathetic League Government, against the weak opposition of a divided Pradesh Congress without the necessary support from the Congress High Command.

So the 1946 Kolkata riots did not lead to a major exodus, but they did trigger off the chain reaction in the organized violence of the majority community on the minority community seven weeks later in Noakhali and in Tippera,<sup>80</sup> which then led to a one-way exodus from these places to west Bengal, and the repercussions in Bihar led to another one-way traffic of terrified victims to east Bengal. Since India was then one country, the victims of communal violence were not recognized as refugees per se, and without such a label, they were not entitled to rehabilitation.

The Kolkata-Noakhali-Tippera violence in its unmitigated brutality in Bengal was allowed to happen as the curbing power of Government machinery in its police or para-military force was not effectively used. The Muslim League was then in power in Bengal. Shankar Ghosh, the journalist records in his book, *Hastantar* that he saw Suhrawardy, the then Prime Minister of Bengal, in the Control Room at Lal Bazar, the Police Headquarters of Kolkata and Bengal.<sup>81</sup> It was this presence in the Control Room and later tours of the riot-affected city made by Suhrawardy that became the basis of alleged partisanship of the Muslim League Government leader, made by the Bengal Congress and Hindu Mahasabha leaders, which was to colour the final decision of Hindus in the bid for Partition.

The failure of the police to act firmly to prevent the escalating violence, is corroborated by Francis Tucker, the G.O.C. of the Eastern Command who says that at two p.m. on the first day of the riots 'the Governor, Sir Francis Burrows, made a tour of the city ... and decided that the time had not yet come for military aid... A second drive through the city was made during the evening ... after which it was decided that the situation still did not warrant the use of troops.'<sup>82</sup> The Police Commissioner Hardwick's defence was that the police did not open fire since they had been heavily criticized earlier because of the stern measures taken by them against demonstrators demanding the freeing of prisoners of the Indian National Army in the previous year,

which had seen joint Hindu-Muslim protests.<sup>83</sup> Maulana Azad records how, during the 1946 Kolkata violence, when he was on his way to the airport to catch a plane for a meeting in Delhi, he asked the military why they were not doing anything to restore peace and order and was told that they had been asked to stand by till they had orders to act.<sup>84</sup> How far Suhrawardy could be held responsible for the Great Calcutta Killings or for his alleged communal bias in his decisions to provide or withhold assistance and succour to the victims of communal fury, remains open to debate even today. The fact remains that in Bengal, where a Muslim League Government was in power, three days had been declared holidays, beginning on Direct Action Day, which meant the non-availability of government machinery to stop or contain any outbreak of disturbance. The scale of relentless violence in Kolkata was not something any government in power could have desired or anticipated. The savagery unleashed led to a frantic Suhrawardy calling for military help, which, when it did come, was inadequate to restrain the small, determined groups which roamed the alleys and lanes of Kolkata looking for individual victims and easy targets. The events of Kolkata 1946 were to shake Suhrawardy and Fazlul Huq deeply as they recognized the dangers of the all-consuming fire of the demon of communalism. In post-Partition Pakistan, theirs became the combined voice of liberal humanist protest against the 1956 Islamic Constitution of Pakistan. They were the champions of the non-Muslim religious minorities, echoing Jinnah's proposition for a secular, untheocratic state after Pakistan's inception, but they were unheeded by the dominating West Pakistan elite.<sup>85</sup>

Earlier, during the Noakhali violence when Gandhi wanted to visit the district to bring about a communal understanding and some semblance of harmony between the two communities, to create an atmosphere of trust and security so that Muslim neighbours could encourage Hindus to return to their villages, the Governor told Gandhi that everything was under control. However, when Amiya Gupta accompanied Gandhi to Noakhali, they were told how dangerous it was for them to travel there by the people, and were advised to set up their camp in the adjacent district of Khulna. The League Ministry had, however, issued an order saying it would give Rs. 250 per holding to families affected by the violence, to rebuild houses and would grant Rs. 200 to weavers, fishermen and peasants, whose tools/machinery had been destroyed. This did not seem adequate for joint families who lived together in single holdings. So Amiya Gupta decided to go and see the Additional Magistrate of Noakhali to seek his clarification of the Government order. She speaks about the efficiency and willingness to help of the then Additional Magistrate, Mr Akhtaruzzaman, 'I haven't seen many officers

like him in my long life. It was because they were there that our relief work could progress properly and in many cases, not only did the afflicted get justice, but quick decisions made the work effective.<sup>86</sup> But the lack of an effective government programme to identify the miscreants and arrest and carry out trials of the perpetrators of the communal violence, did not help to create a climate of trust or bring back a sense of lasting security to the victims of the Noakhali violence. The Hindu community blamed the League Government in Bengal for its communal bias, which, they claimed, had led to the eruption and continuation of communal violence in Kolkata<sup>87</sup> and then in Noakhali and Tippera, and the blame was laid squarely on Suhrawardy, the then Prime Minister. Yet the number of Muslims killed in the Kolkata riots was greater than that of the Hindus. The allegation of communal partiality of the League Government, together with the inaction of the British Government, accounted for a deep sense of insecurity in the largest minority community in Bengal. Events in Bengal unleashed horrific retaliatory violence in Bihar, which, as has been said earlier, led to an exodus of the beleaguered Bihari Muslims from west to east. Again, as in Bengal, the Government in Bihar proved inept at containing the terror that was unleashed.<sup>88</sup> And in counter measures, as has been said earlier, violence had erupted in Mumbai in September and later in the Punjab, which had been quiet so far. Then there was no stopping the tide of communal unrest as suspicion and fear grew and led to a tired Congress accepting the Muslim League's demand for India's Partition, as the experience of a joint Government had proved how difficult it was for the two parties to work together in mutual agreement,<sup>89</sup> leading to a stalemate when situations demanded unanimity for prompt solutions. The Congress felt that in view of achieving a strong central government in the interests of a strong India, a parting of ways with the Muslim League was inevitable, which meant accepting the Partition of India and meeting with the demand for Pakistan by the Muslim League.

Successive attempts had been made earlier by Lord Wavell to bring about talks between the Muslim League and Congress. He had tried to set up a Joint Executive Council in June 1945 at the Shimla Conference. If the Conference had succeeded in implementing the proposal of having two Hindu, one Muslim (Maulana Azad), one Parsi and one Indian Christian member from the Congress, together with Lord Wavell's nominations of one Muslim (Khizir Hayat Khan), one Sikh and two scheduled caste and five Muslim League members, then the Council would have had seven Muslim members out of fourteen, i.e., 50 per cent representation in a country where Muslims formed 25 per cent of the population at the time of Partition.<sup>90</sup> Later, in his last attempt to promote a rapprochement between the two key players on

the question of India's move towards self governance, Lord Wavell had resisted and waived aside the idea of India's Partition with his three-tier Cabinet Mission Plan. This time it was not Jinnah's veto denying Muslim representation from any party other than the Muslim League that closed this last chapter of possible political negotiation. Jinnah accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan and so did the Congress on 25 June 1946. But Nehru, the then Congress President, made a statement at a Press Conference in Mumbai on 10 July 1946, that the Congress was not bound by any agreement to the Plan and had only agreed to participate in the Constituent Assembly, and felt free to modify the Plan at will.<sup>91</sup> This comment caused an alarmed Jinnah to call for a review of the situation following the Congress President's declaration.

The protracted negotiation process between the British, Congress and the Muslim League over the arrangements for the transfer of power and future constitutional developments in the country, generated an atmosphere of uncertainty and indecision. It is interesting to note that while the Muslim League demanded Partition at the provincial level, it pushed forward the idea of the unity of the provinces at an all-India level. At the regional level, however, the political leaders of the Muslim League supported the idea of partition, particularly in Bengal and the Punjab. Conversely, in the Congress camp, there was a staunch opposition to partition at the all-India level and an active move towards partition of the provinces on religio-demographic lines.

With the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan, the ground was laid for the Mountbatten Plan to be put forward, which went ahead with amazing speed. Mr Attlee's statement of 20 February 1947 that transfer of power to responsible Indian hands would have to be completed by June 1948, was unaccountably brought forward from fifteen months to less than six months. In fact, 'Lord Mountbatten set himself a period of three months during which to carry out the task of partitioning India.'<sup>92</sup> The hurry with which a nation was divided, led to the mayhem that followed with millions who paid for being on the 'wrong' side of new boundary lines, and were subsequently dislocated, uprooted and turned destitute overnight, while many never reached their destination.<sup>93</sup> The violence that accompanied the first pangs of Partition is too well known today. Mushirul Hasan notes how hastily the Partition was effected as Mountbatten gave an 'ultimatum that if he did not hear from Jinnah by midnight the Partition Plan would come into effect *in any case*. Fourteen hours to decide the destiny of a nation!<sup>94</sup> Fourteen hours seems an incredibly short time given for such a momentous decision, coming after a hundred and fifty years of colonial rule, as it was to affect millions of people in two nations and create demarcating borders that would 'destroy the socio-cultural fabric built over centuries of close relationships.'<sup>95</sup>

To encapsulate what has so far been discussed, the Communal Award sanctioned Muslim majority representation in the Provincial Assembly in Bengal. The Moneylenders Act of 1935 weakened the power and position of the zamindars, who were largely Hindus, especially in east Bengal. The government nominations of Muslims to local bodies together with a rising educated Muslim middle-class challenged and replaced the privileged position of the Hindu *bhadralok* in local and district bodies. In an atmosphere of growing suspicion, age-old religious customs caused communal conflict and even in Hindu-majority areas, the *bhadralok* felt that concessional measures that were granted to the Muslim community nurtured a growing Muslim sentiment of community strength at a 'Muslim' government's intervention. The physical fitness local bodies and revolutionary groups mastering the martial arts made a section of the Hindu youth ready for the awful communal confrontation of 1946 in Kolkata (according to Chatterjee, 1996). The violence showed a complete breakdown in what had been, in the past, a syncretic, inter-dependent society of Hindus and Muslims.

A political culture of generating a climate of fear and intimidation at the grass root level had, in many instances, led to political leaders losing control as goondas, musclemen, the 'rabble' and the masses indulged in acts of violence and intimidation against the immediate minority community. The Bengali morale had been further denuded by other complications such as the 1930s Depression, the Agricultural Debtors' Act, the shortages in food, cooking oil and fuel created by war and the fall of Burma, the refugee influx from Burma in 1941, the 1942 cyclone, the Bengal famine of 1943 and the economic strain of the war effort as Bengal was a major base for War production, events and developments which have already been discussed at length. The impact in the western districts of a rudderless Congress as leaders languished in jails following their arrest with the Quit India Movement and Bengal experienced the growing strength of an opposition free Muslim League in power, supported by the imperial administration, created a sense of powerlessness amongst nationalistic Bengalis.

However, in January 1947, Sarat Bose proposed a new Cabinet in Bengal with a view to settling communal differences and advocating a united sovereign Bengal to form a new Constitution of Bengal, in what came to be known as the 'Sarat Bose Formula'.<sup>96</sup> Both Sarat Bose and the Muslim League in Bengal wanted a united Bengal for different reasons. Sarat Bose envisioned a socialist Bengal in a federal union, while the Bengal Muslim League ministry wanted an independent united Bengal, to have a separate identity from the Pakistan proposal, and to avoid partition of the province. There was a counter movement led by Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and the

Hindu Mahasabha for the partition of Bengal, to create a home in the Indian Union for the Hindu Bengalis and to prevent a united Bengal under the Muslim League leadership, an idea which found support in the Mountbatten Plan for the Partition of the province.

During the 1946 violence, the unreliability of the Suhrawardy Government was confirmed in the Hindu Bengali mind, which led it to believe that the Hindus would not feel protected and could not look for a fair representation under the Muslim League. It paved the way for the Hindus of Bengal opting for partition, to stay within the Indian union, when it became evident that Bengal would otherwise go as a whole to Pakistan. The example had been set by events in the Punjab which had led to the decision to partition that state along religious lines, earlier in March. Soon after, the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, at its Tarakeshwar Conference between 4 and 6 April, proposed partition, to retain Hindu majority districts in the Indian union. This proposal gathered growing support of the Hindu section. Interestingly, when the United Bengal Plan for a Sovereign Bengal was put forward, it not only met with strong opposition from the Congress High Command but also from Jinnah's followers, Akram Khan and Khwaja Nazimuddin, who wanted Bengal as a whole entity to be part of Pakistan or its close constitutional ally.<sup>97</sup> There was no enthusiasm for a united Bengal amongst the Hindu Bengalis. On 20 June 1947, the two Houses of the Legislature of Bengal met with Nurul Amin as president to vote on the issue of joining India or Pakistan. The Muslim League members were in majority, so the vote went in favour of them joining Pakistan. On the question of keeping Bengal united there were 126 votes against and 90 for a united province in a vote of the two Houses of the Muslim League Ministry.<sup>98</sup> The East Bengal Legislature with many scheduled caste members, met and came up with 106 for to 35 votes against partition. Subsequently, the West Bengal Group of Legislators meeting under the Maharaja Udaychand Mahtab of Burdwan as President, counted 58 in favour of partition against 21 opposing it, indicating a clear divide in the voting pattern of the Muslim and Hindu members.<sup>99</sup> So when it became evident that Bengal could go as a whole to Pakistan (and Jinnah would not allow an independent Bengal in spite of Suhrawardy's claim, nor would the Congress, as stated earlier),<sup>100</sup> the Bengali Hindus voted for the partition of Bengal.<sup>101</sup>

The Bengal story was different from the rest of India's. Bengal had put forward the United Socialist Republic Plan with a proposal for a Union of Socialist Republics (albeit, this Plan was proposed by a handful of leaders, behind which the rest of Bengal did not stand), while all Indian nationalists, both Hindus and Muslims and other religious minorities, had urged for a united India.



To reiterate, the Congress finally agreed to Partition, with the view to creating a strong central government unimpeded by the impasse experienced as a result of the Muslim League's opposition to various issues as Liaquat Ali had used his vetoing power at various crucial moments as Finance Minister of the Interim Government, to prevent a unified front from emerging by opposing proposals put forth by Congress.<sup>102</sup> Partition was the price paid for Independence. The violence of August–October 1946 in Bengal, prompted the Hindu Bengali Legislators to opt for the Partition of the Bengal Province as it would otherwise go as a whole to Pakistan, leaving the Bengali Hindus under a Muslim League Government which, they felt, had failed to protect them.

The bloodbath that ensued as a result of Partition on the western border, led Nehru, with Mountbatten's help, to treat it with the emergency of a war to efficiently effect the exchange of populations and property, leading to the rehabilitation of the Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Pakistan, thus solving the problem of refugees once and for all. It was a two-way exodus, tragic, brutal and sudden, but the official handling accounted for a neat swap of populations that sealed the matter for all time. The scale of brutality of communal conflict on the western border was not enacted on the same scale on the eastern border at the time of Partition. Nevertheless, the Partition of Bengal brought about a huge migration of the Hindu middle-class population of east Bengal to West Bengal, prompted by fear and anxiety and the consciousness of being aliens in a 'foreign' land. The migration in the east did not have the character of an exodus compelled by a civil war as on the western front. The process of dislocation and displacement was a protracted one, which did not attract the same attention from the central Indian Government in Delhi. Delhi was not only closer to the western border, it felt overwhelmed by the flood of humanity that spilled over that border, arriving in unprecedented numbers at its doorstep and was horrified by the nature and scale of the violence on both sides of the new boundary. Though the migration across the Bengal border into West Bengal, Assam and Tripura was of staggering proportions,<sup>103</sup> it was spread over years in a steady and continuing stream, across what remains, a 'porous' border, which an impoverished state Government could not tackle or address effectively without the economic and administrative support and positive intervention of the central Government.

Even after Noakhali and Tippera were calm, sporadic violence continued in the Bengal capital till 15 August 1947, when suddenly without warning, the violence in Kolkata stopped. The next spate of violence was not to happen till 1950, which led to the first two-way exodus in divided Bengal, as frightened Muslims left Kolkata, while terrified Hindus fled from East Pakistan. There were Hindu–Muslim riots in Kolkata in December 1964, which,

as Ghosh's central character in *Shadow Lines* states, have been generally omitted in definitive records of communal violence. Meghna Guhathakurta, in her study of one particular Muslim family in 24 Parganas, documents the migration to East Pakistan of the father of her main protagonist as a result of the communal violence in 1965 in West Bengal.<sup>104</sup> On the whole, there have not been major outbreaks of communal violence in West Bengal as in many parts of India, leading up to the Babri Masjid issue in December 1992 and its aftermath in the new surge of Hindutva, which has shaken the very foundations of the claims made for a secular Indian nation in 1947. The events of 1964 and 1992 are discussed at length below.

Yet refugees never stopped flowing in from across the eastern border, and do so even today. But the western and eastern refugees were not given the same identity or status in free India, and with time, the eastern refugee has been transformed to the 'alien', the 'foreign', the 'economic migrant' and the 'infiltrator' in a relentless 'othering' process,<sup>105</sup> facilitated by several factors. So what were the reasons behind the difference in the handling of refugees on the western and eastern borders by the central Government?

The policy of recruitment in the armed forces during the Raj made for a sizeable section being recruited from the Punjab, which perhaps, explains the commendable humanitarian nature of the rehabilitation deal that was made out to the refugees from across the western border, as Nehru thought it prudent and expedient to meet the demand of the armed forces for swift rehabilitation of the Punjab refugees. The same policy of the Raj, built on the myth of the 'martial races', did not allow for recruitment from Bengal to the army. So when Bengal was partitioned like the Punjab, there was no formidable military force to demand similar treatment and enforce a rehabilitation policy with the same efficiency. In January 1950, the violence in Khulna district affected the Namasudras, with panic-stricken refugees arriving in a deluge to West Bengal. The Khulna incident sparked off violence in other areas of East Pakistan in Rajshahi, Dhaka and Faridpur, which in turn, led to reprisals in West Bengal, leading to a two-way exodus for the first time, on the eastern border.

Nehru's priorities had, in the meantime, changed. The problem of Kashmir was close to Nehru's heart and he wanted to prove to the international community that India was a secular safe haven for minorities, hence the exchange of populations and property that had solved the refugee problem on the western border, was totally ruled out in the case of West Bengal refugee.<sup>106</sup> Nehru acted swiftly and signed the Nehru-Liaquat Pact later in the year. The Muslim outflow was soon contained with what became known as the Delhi Pact of 1950. The Pact was to ensure the safe return of fleeing

Muslims back to West Bengal with the assurance of the return of their property and jobs, reciprocated by a similar promise from Liaquat Ali for the Hindus of East Pakistan who had fled to West Bengal in the wake of the fresh violence, if they decided to return to their East Pakistan 'homeland'. Many Muslims, who were assured of their land and property being restored to them, did return. Many did get a fair deal in West Bengal once they came back, and migrating Hindus had to move out of properties they had occupied in the interim period. The same kind of security was not effectively guaranteed to the East Pakistani Hindu<sup>107</sup> who returned to East Pakistan and there was no welcome for the re-returned refugee to West Bengal. So the Hindu refugee from east Bengal did not meet with the same treatment in the land of her/his birth, as not only were there no jobs vacated for her/him to take up on her/his return, there was no property or land for her/him to be rehabilitated in.

The east Bengal migrant women that Monmayee Basu interviewed from a range of economic backgrounds were all of the opinion that the exchange of property which had been effected in the case of refugees on the western border could have solved the agonisingly protracted process of migration of the refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It would not only have given a sense of security to the fleeing populace, but provided the economic stability that the majority of the West Bengal refugee population never witnessed, commensurate with that of the rehabilitation of the West Pakistan refugee.<sup>108</sup>

The minorities who would face insecurity and displacement in a divided India had been promised a safe haven by the Congress when it felt Partition was unavoidable and agreed to freedom with vivisection.<sup>109</sup> All such promises were forgotten in the case of West Bengal after Independence. Not only was an efficient and humanitarian programme for the rehabilitation of the east Bengal refugee sadly lacking in Central Government policies, the displaced person was treated as an interim problem, which could be addressed by providing meagre relief, followed by, what in today's terms would be called, 'deportation'. Ranajit Roy notes that the problem only gained the Union Government's direct attention in 1955<sup>110</sup> and all official and non-official sources agree that 'compensation' given to the West Pakistan refugee, 'was the key to its solution' while in relation to the East Pakistan refugee, 'the Government took an unshakeable stand that they were not entitled to compensation'.<sup>111</sup> Roy goes on to say that the Centre has given inflated and even fictitious figures for the East Pakistan refugee, and most of the figures it claims as compensation were, in fact, loans, while the West Pakistani refugee was granted with a solid foundation to restart life in India<sup>112</sup> (which was the ideal solution for what might otherwise have amounted to an insurmountable

problem). He points out how Bengali refugees were reputed as preferring living in Government camps and receiving dole to rehabilitation.<sup>113</sup> The question is, was this dole so attractive to the east Bengal Hindu as to make her/him leave the land of her/his birth and livelihood to face the insecurity of life across a border? One has to remember that the majority of the east Bengali Hindus, who did migrate soon after Partition, belonged to a fairly comfortable and even prosperous community.

In a letter to Nehru on 1 December 1949, Dr B.C. Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal writes 'You are under the impression that your Government gave us a large grant for the purpose of 'relief and rehabilitation'. Dr Roy gives the figure of 5 crores as what had been spent in 1948-49 and 1949-50 on the West Bengal refugee, which he points out, amounts to 'Rs 20 per capita spread over two years' 'for 26 lakhs displaced people' and asks 'Will you call that magnificent?'<sup>114</sup> In his reply of 2 December 1949, Nehru concedes 'I do not know what the expenditure incurred on relief and rehabilitation has been for those coming from East Pakistan. Probably you are right in saying that it has been far less than refugees from West Pakistan'.<sup>115</sup> Yet only 25 per cent of the refugees who came from East Pakistan, sought shelter in Government camps, the rest of the 75 per cent either crowded in with relatives in West Bengal (and Assam and Tripura<sup>116</sup>) or struggled on their own. The 75 per cent were left to fend for themselves, which makes the numbers who might have benefited from Government aid even smaller than the numbers from across the Western border.

Chakrabarty describes the scenes at Sealdah Station which was an entry point for hundreds of refugee, as 'The Gateway to Hell.' He gives an excerpt from *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 8 August 1948 which describes the plight of the East Pakistan refugees seeking the haven of India on their arrival at Sealdah Station, 'where they ... spent several days before moving elsewhere... An area of 39×36 sq.ft (sic) has been carved out by the rope fencing which the refugees are entitled to use till they are transferred to camps ... [where] five to six thousand men, women and children huddled together ... and [spend] their days and nights. There are only three taps which supply drinking water ... and only two latrines for women and about twelve latrines for men... in the station they are given free 'chire' (puffed rice) and 'gur' (molasses) as ration by the Government which is distributed by non-official relief organizations working there. There ends the responsibility of the Government and relief associations'.<sup>117</sup> The report goes on to say how there was not only no medical aid, but even women giving birth and a man suffering from dysentery or diarrhoea were not isolated or given medical aid, emphasising the utter lack of privacy which did not allow for human dignity for people. These vulnerable

people were not protected from unscrupulous men, who cheated them of their meagre dole and money with empty promises.<sup>118</sup> The men were not allowed to leave this cordoned off area to go and search for work.<sup>119</sup> When, after days of hopeless waiting, they were finally transferred to Government camps, conditions for them did not improve and there was no prospect of any betterment of their situation. Chakrabarty describes life and conditions at a Government camp called Cooper Camp, where 20 families were crowded into 100'x25' Nissen huts, which were windowless and had huge doors. The doors were closed at night against hyenas, causing intense suffocation. After a morning cup of tea at nine a.m. the inmates waited till two p.m. for a midday meal of a plate of rice, lentil paste and a potato. As at Sealdah Station, here too, they were not allowed to look for work, as the Government had not decided whether they needed rehabilitation or not.<sup>120</sup> Most of the twenty tube-wells here did not work, so the water scarcity was acute.

At another camp at Dhubulia, conditions were much the same. People died of disease, hunger, putrid wholemeal flour and contaminated water. Corpses were piled up and unremoved for days.<sup>121</sup> One does not hear of such sub-human conditions in relief camps set up for the West Pakistan refugee. In Dr Roy's letter, which has been quoted earlier, Dr Roy goes on to say 'The upper and middle-class Hindu families came here hungry and starved, having lost all including their hope of finding subsistence in this new place. For months the Government of India would not recognize the existence of the refugee problems in East Pakistan.'<sup>122</sup> He investigated the issue and 'discovered that there was harsh discrimination against the Bengali refugees. Serious difficulties were created for West Bengal already beset with grave problems.'<sup>123</sup> In his reply to Dr Roy's letter, Nehru says that both the Centre and West Bengal had policies not to encourage migration on the same scale as in the west, in West Bengal. Ranajit Roy's research into the policies regarding the East Pakistan refugees and their resultant plight, led to an article published in the *Delhi Statesman* of 29 January 1962. Meher Chand Khanna (a refugee from West Pakistan himself), the then Union Rehabilitation Minister's response in wondering where Roy had got all his 'facts', is significant.<sup>124</sup> So rehabilitation of the refugees from East Pakistan was not a major consideration at the Centre, unlike its policy for their West Pakistan counterpart. In fact, Nehru's deliberate non-recognition of the East Bengali refugee's presence, took away from them their identity as displaced Indians, evident in his marginalizing them as 'aliens'—foreign and unwanted—and hence without the status of bonafide citizens.<sup>125</sup>

Nehru's central policy contributed to the continuing struggle of the East Bengal refugee. Chakrabarty (1999) records how Nehru and his government

felt that the refugees should return when the situation was more congenial in East Pakistan,<sup>126</sup> thus discouraging settlement in and future migration to India and even blaming the Hindu leaders of doing wrong in setting an example by leaving East Pakistan and running away from the problem.<sup>127</sup> Chakrabarty says that Nehru failed to recognize the fact that the minorities in East Pakistan were not running away but were being driven away from their homesteads and land of birth and work<sup>128</sup> by fear and economic and social ostracism and isolation.

When Saxena, the Central Rehabilitation Minister said they would only give relief and not provide measures to rehabilitate the West Bengal refugees, he was confirming the Centre's policy of non-recognition of the refugee problem in West Bengal and hedging an unswervable reality, as relief and not rehabilitation was for a temporary population and problem. Even P.C. Ghosh, the then Chief Minister, in his tour of East Pakistan, towed the Congress line in exhorting Hindus to stay there 'as everything would settle down'. However, as a guest of Satin Sen's, when he asked his host after dinner 'What do you propose to do? Are you leaving East Pakistan, or remaining here?'<sup>129</sup> he voiced his own anxiety regarding the future of the East Pakistan minority population. Nehru succeeded in creating a safe haven in West Bengal for the returning Muslim, which the West Bengal Government has honoured after a fashion, and communal riots have not torn the state apart as has happened in some other parts of India. But Nehru's exhortation to the Hindu Bengali to go back, promising things would quieten down for them in time in East Pakistan, was unpractical and unrealizable as he was in no position to guarantee the safety, security, the return of land and property and jobs, the continuity of livelihoods, professions and amicable living from day-to-day, in another country. The consequence for the West Bengal returned refugee was a life-in-death existence in government relief camps with little or no hope of viable rehabilitation and the promise of a dignified life.

In many cases, the Hindu Bengali refugee, who fanned out across West Bengal, Tripura or Assam from East Pakistan, was not considered as needing Government relief or aid (see note in footnote 86), and such arguments were justified by Government reports which showed that the migrants from East Pakistan had not sought aid, and in many cases, it was assumed that they were well off. The Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation Papers, however, show how many applications were made for Government aid, for money for tractors, for housing, second-hand tools and building material, which were often not met with, pleading bureaucratic delays and/or non-availability of goods/items requested.<sup>130</sup>

To sum up, the communal violence in Kolkata did stop unaccountably on 15 August 1947. After the Radcliffe Boundary was announced on 16 August, there was no two-way migration on the eastern border, unlike the near-complete swap of populations on the western border, and this has been the general pattern of migration in the east, except for a brief period in 1950–51 and individual cases in 1964–65. The human stream has continued flowing, mostly from east to west from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and has never stopped, till today.<sup>131</sup> It has been a story of a long-drawn out migration and a seemingly unending struggle for survival for the east Bengali/East Pakistani refugee crossing to West Bengal, Assam and Bihar over a 'porous' border.

In a post-colonial perspective, one can assume that this continuous struggle, is, perhaps, the reason why stories about the Bengal Partition did not emerge on the same scale as they did about the western border. People have to feel settled before they can write about their experiences of violence and displacement. For the east Bengali/East Pakistani refugee, a long life of uncertainty and need, gave rise to a different kind of story—that of the endless effort to combat hunger, disease, homelessness and unemployment, with a resilient desire to survive and live, as Nita voices in that memorable anguished cry in Ritwik Ghatak's film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 'I want to live!' In East Pakistan, the Muslim Bengali or Muslim Bihari migrant could not hope to have had a sympathetic audience who would relate to stories of displacement and dislocation, of loss or nostalgia, following the realized dream of a homeland for Muslims.

What was the experience of the refugees who did end up in Government rehabilitation camps? Chakrabarty (1999) records the unmitigated struggle of the east Bengali/East Pakistani refugee to survive in the notorious Government relief and rehabilitation camps. He toured the colonies and camps and settlements in Dandakaranya, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar and Orissa—witnessed 'the painful toil of beginning life from scratch ... the trauma and agony'<sup>132</sup> of people who were trying to survive and integrate in a country where they were regarded as 'aliens'. There has been the myth created of the promised land of untold opportunities, which, in actuality, comprised of virgin forests or unirrigated land in Dandakaranya, in the Koraput (Orissa) and Bastar districts (Madhya Pradesh). Dandakaranya (ironically, the place is associated with the reality of harsh exile in the *Ramayana*), is a prime example of a hostile terrain which had not been made ready for settlement before the refugees were forcibly transferred there. It was one of the many 'hastily improvised schemes for the dispersal of the refugees'<sup>133</sup> from Government relief camps. The hostility of the local people and indifference of

the provincial Government in Bihar, led the refugees at Bettiah camp to start a peaceful *satyagraha*<sup>134</sup> in 1957, which was heavily dealt with by the state police, leading to five deaths of already starving, desperate men. So when they were ordered to go to Dandakarnya, where no irrigational projects, shelter or roads had been made for the refugees, they refused to be transported against their will. Their dole was stopped and the relief camps perfunctorily closed to starve them out to these 'reclaimed' lands. In police state fashion, the refugees were forcibly transported to what they considered, was exile, where many perished. But some trickled back, to the happier hell of West Bengal.

Ranajit Roy (1972), in analysing West Bengal's economic history in the post-Independence/post-Partition scenario, apporitions West Bengal's present economic decline to the Centre's special non-recognition policy of the Bengal's Partition refugee, and thus turning a blind eye to the reality and the related problems. The Centre's determination to give relief only and not rehabilitation to the East Pakistani refugee, its non-sanctioning of rehabilitation funds, the absence of a viable policy for the resettlement of families, or employment for the employable and well-thought-through rehabilitation programmes at the Centre, together with an unsympathetic state Congress Government under P.C. Ghosh or a helpless Dr B.C. Roy under a non-federal system, did not help to alleviate the lot of the East Pakistan refugee. Also, the unconcern or apathy, alarm or scorn of the settled community of West Bengalis, felt by many east Bengal/East Pakistan refugees, did not create a climate of hope or the land of sustenance for the displaced Bengali refugee in the east.

Many of the 75 per cent of unregistered refugees who were left to fend for themselves were middle-class Hindu Bengalis, displaced at the time of Partition and in the years of exodus to follow. On their migration to West Bengal, they found themselves, with their families, made destitute overnight. It was their sense of hurt-dignity which prevented them from looking for a haven in Government relief camps.

Interestingly, the Hindu middle-class of newly Partitioned Bengal was not exactly pro-Congress. They did initially look to the Congress Government for succour relying on their pre-Partition promises. However, many of them were sympathetic to the two secret revolutionary parties mentioned earlier, the Anushilan and Jugantar and were staunch followers of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's ideology. At first, the refugees held communists in suspect, not wishing to alienate the Government on whom they counted for help for rehabilitation. They were also suspicious of Communists as the latter had supported the War effort of the British Government in India, in a stand



against fascism and were open detractors of Netaji Subhas Bose. The communists, on their part, were wary of the Hindu Bengali refugee from East Pakistan suspecting them of harbouring a Hindu communal bias. But the ongoing struggle of the refugees and their sheer numbers made them a force to reckon with and count upon (and utilize) in the changing dynamics of West Bengal's political-economic scene. Once the refugees realized that the state Government could or would not do anything for them and that the Central Government would not do anything to rehabilitate them, they organized themselves under the leadership of communist leaders in their midst and forcibly seized fallow and waste land in a desperate bid towards self-rehabilitation, as the last survival option left open to them.

So they illegally occupied such land around Kolkata and moved into abandoned barracks and land with tacit government support. However, these colonies had no legitimization as they sprang up without legal documentation. The first of such Squatter's Colonies appeared at Sodepur, the next at Naihati and then at Kanchrapara, and soon they stretched from Dum Dum to Kanchrapara. In South Kolkata, the Dakshin Kalikata Sahartali Bastuhara Samhati, an organization of refugee colonies, was established with a Congress member as President and an RSP member as Secretary, confirming a build up towards political support. Then began a bitter struggle against the Establishment, which followed eviction procedures and orders and protracted legal battles fought by the squatters, which shaped West Bengal politics, merging in the wider Left politics of the state.

The reason why the ruling state party was not initially interested in the refugees was probably because they were not considered politically useful as they did not have the right to vote, which is, perhaps, why they were left without Government political interference at the beginning. The Governmental indifference left the ground clear for communist leaders to mobilize the refugees. The refugees united under the organization were called the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) which was to change the character of West Bengal politics radically. To obtain Governmental recognition of their entity, to voice their rights as citizens and to make the establishment conscious of their presence, the refugees organized protest demonstrations, welcomed arrests and thus began the agitational politics which were to alter the nature of Bengal politics and bring in United (left) Front governments<sup>135</sup> for short spells to Bengal in 1967 and 1969. Subsequently, West Bengal saw a consolidated Marxist Government coming to power in 1977 in a sweeping electoral victory, which has since then been returned in successive elections of the State assembly. Even today, the opposition in Bengal still resorts to the same agitational tactics to obtain attention and lodge protests. The only

difference is that instead of the emaciated, ragged demonstrators of the 1950s, the protesters are more confident of their place now in West Bengal society, having integrated well in West Bengal's society as they have gradually been accepted, aided and assisted by the host population.

But those who are more recent arrivals (refugees? economic migrants? infiltrator's? illegal immigrants?<sup>136</sup>) across the border, have the same precarious existence, working as domestic help, peddlers, day labourers, recycling ragpickers, etc., and in running small unsanctioned businesses, subject to intermittent police checks and evacuation, waiting for the final sanction of citizenship in the acquisition of the Indian ration card, which gives them the right to stay, vote and work.

On the positive side, the Partition has had a reverberating impact on women in India. Of women who suffered from Partition, Bagchi and Dasgupta write, '... they refused to succumb to the dictates of fate. Both in Punjab and Bengal they displayed exemplary resilience, fortitude, patience and strength to emerge victors against the combined nightmare of assault, exodus, displacement, grinding poverty and broken psyche. They kept their new shelter in camps and refugee settlements intact and also ventured out to acquire new skills and earn.'<sup>137</sup> One researcher, writing on the upper caste Hindu women's role in and contribution to West Bengal's present state, says, 'In the struggle for existence and thrown into the job of breadwinners, the Bengali refugee women helped to alter the whole socio-economic scenario of West Bengal... For as earning member, she changed the woman's role in the family, albeit not without inherent tensions. For another, the higher education status of the Hindu women from East Bengal had a salubrious effect on the exciting educational standard.'<sup>138</sup> Bagchi and Dasgupta too corroborate the 'historic assertion' of the West Bengali refugee bhadramahila as the 'tireless breadwinner' which 'changed the digits of feminine aspiration ... and altered the social landscape irrevocably.'<sup>139</sup>

In general, the West Bengal Government has remained on the wrong side of the Government in power in New Delhi, and a policy of blame is constantly laid at the door of the central Government for Bengal's economic decline. On the question of the formation of the present state of West Bengal, it is the reality of the accessible border with the continuous influx of economic migrants/refugees across it<sup>140</sup> that makes Partition relevant to the socio-economic fabric and politics of Bengal today. Ritu Menon, in utilising Oscar Martinez's classification list of areas alongside national boundaries, the 'borderlands', describes India and Pakistan as 'alienated' and India and Bangladesh as 'coexistent',<sup>141</sup> as some cross-border exchange is granted and tolerated, evident in the literary and cultural exchanges, the journeys made

by people going back to their 'desh', to trace their roots or to visit relatives and friends. Yet, there is the unsanctioned inter-dependence in the cross-border trade that thrives across the eastern border, as revealed in stories like 'Wild-Goose Country' in this volume.

We have seen how events in Bengal triggered off a process in India which made Partition unavoidable, as Hindu Bengalis opted for Partition. The unbelievable violence that ensued on either side of the western border, led to the massive human columns crossing over on both sides, necessitating a rehabilitation programme to cope with the colossal refugee problem. Unlike the sweeping exchange of populations that happened on the western border, making Partition final on a sealed boundary, an exchange of populations never materialized in the absence of concentrated violence on a similar scale in the east, following the announcement of the Radcliffe Award on 16 August 1947. The Central Government did not have a well formulated and thought-through policy of Rehabilitation for the Hindu Bengali from East Pakistan and West Bengal did not have the resources to cope with the numbers arriving everyday at its doorstep. While the West Pakistani refugee was recognized as such and dealt with in a humanitarian way, the East Pakistan refugee was treated as a foreigner and given relief, as she/he was expected to go back to the land of her/his birth. The rehabilitation programmes which were ultimately drawn up for the East Pakistani refugee by the Centre, embodied in the infamous Dandakaranya project, illustrate the choice of uninhabitable land and the inefficient implementation of such programmes, together with their insensitive enforcement on a population that had faced hostility since its arrival in a free India, all of which illustrates a difference in approach that prevailed for the east Indian refugee, as priorities changed at the Centre. And when assistance was given to the East Pakistan refugee, it was either inadequate or came in the form of loans. West Bengal (Kolkata in particular) was enmeshed in a protracted refugee struggle following Partition and the 1950-51 two-way exodus and the return of some of the victims of violence.

After 1950-51, there were Hindu-Muslim riots in Kolkata in December 1964, which, as Ghosh's central character in *Shadow Lines*, states, have been generally omitted in definitive records of communal violence. Meghna Guhathakurta, in her study of one particular Muslim family in 24 Parganas, documents the migration to East Pakistan of the father of her main protagonist as a result of the communal violence in 1965 in West Bengal.<sup>142</sup>

So, in a strange reversal of 46 to 64, Hindu-Muslim relations in Kolkata received a jolt in January 1964 when an angry procession of students marched to the East Pakistan High Commission to lodge their protest against the alleged atrocities on Hindu minorities in the Khulna and Jessore

districts of East Pakistan. The events took a communal turn when some shops owned by Muslims in the Sealdah area were destroyed on 8 January. But the actual trouble started when a procession consisting largely of Hindu students was suddenly attacked with lathis and rained upon with soda bottles and brickbats on the evening of 9 January at the Central Kolkata crossing. The crowd assumed that the attack was communally incited. However, the disturbances that rocked certain areas of Kolkata between 11 and 12 January were not characterized by communal clashes between opposing groups as in 1946. There were acts of 'arson, looting and secret stabbings',<sup>143</sup> but of the 82 casualties, 44 were bullet victims of the police and army.<sup>144</sup> The West Bengal Government was blamed for its ineptitude in dealing with the situation, but unlike the Muslim League Government in 1946, it was not accused of overt communalism in the handling of the rioters.

Events across the border in East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh, have closely affected the socio-political scene and economy of West Bengal, with its changing demographic composition. West Bengal saw an overwhelming mass migration of both Bengali Hindu and Muslim East Pakistani nationals during the resistance to Pakistan's military domination and its alleged atrocities. The guerrilla war was led by the Awami League freedom fighters, the Mukti Joddha, who were trained by the Indian army and later backed up in an openly declared India-Pakistan military conflict. In 1970-71, many West Bengal homes opened up to house a fleeing multitude and the atmosphere of backing a 'freedom fight' of a people sharing a common language and a continuous regional culture, was electric, especially in the city of Kolkata. The refugee influx at this time is estimated at about 9 million, i.e., 13 per cent of the population of East Pakistan,<sup>145</sup> the majority being Hindu. This was a staggering figure that West Bengal could not cope with. It was, perhaps, this realization that probably lay behind Indira Gandhi's desire to kill two birds with one stone, i.e., help create a breakaway nation from Pakistan and ensure a safe haven for the return of the East Pakistan refugees, to relieve India of this fresh demographic deluge. The demand for and achievement of a land for Bangla, the language, once again questioned the validity of the argument of unity based on religious fault lines as the East Pakistani Bengali Muslim felt no linguistic, regional or cultural bond with her/his West Pakistani counterpart. The two physically divided nations fell apart and were divided, this time, on the basis of language, and Bangladesh was born in 1971. After the formation of Bangladesh, the Bihari and U.P. Muslim became an unwelcome citizen of a country created for Bengali speakers, as were tribes like the Chakmas, whose language was not Bengali.

The newly emergent nation of Bangladesh was founded on secular-socialistic principles with the Awami League in power. But a coup d'état, ousting the regime in 1975, ushered in a military government. Successive military regimes in 1980 and 1985, right upto 1990, sought and encouraged the support of religious Islamic groups and parties, which affected the treatment and position of religious minorities in Bangladesh. So, through these successive stages of Islamic consolidation, the Hindus became the target victims of a 'deliberate strategy (with) ... attacks carried out in a dramatic way to attract publicity and create an atmosphere of alarm among the Hindus...' <sup>146</sup> Riaz records that in 1990 and 1992, the violence against them has been 'perpetrated in connivance with the state machinery.' <sup>147</sup> Interestingly, the 'systematic violence' <sup>148</sup> against Hindus preceded the declaration of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh in 1988, as Hindus were defined as the 'enemy' within and their property and assets confiscated. This law was hurriedly repealed in 2001 causing 'more damage to the Hindus' <sup>149</sup> and Riaz goes on to record that over fifty years, 3.5 million Hindus have fled Bangladesh, with an average of 500 disappearing everyday 'from a country no larger than Wisconsin' and a marked absence of any reference to these 'missing millions' in public political debates and media coverage, especially since 2001, remains significant. <sup>150</sup> These 'missing millions' continue coming across the border, keeping the question of Partition and a political border alive in the everyday reality of life in West Bengal and Assam. When East Pakistan was formed on the basis of Muslim majority districts the Chittagong Hill Tracts were incorporated into it, in spite of having a population of only 3 per cent Muslim. Recent years have seen the inflow of the Buddhist Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, fleeing persecution and conglomering in dismal refugee camps in West Bengal and Tripura. There has even been a tacit state assisted strategy to slowly starve them out of these camps by cutting down on rations to enforce them to return to 'their land' where they had already faced annihilation threats.

Who is a refugee <sup>151</sup> and who is an 'economic migrant' or 'infiltrator'—remains a burning issue in Bengal today, though, on the whole, there have not been major outbreaks of communal violence in West Bengal as in many parts of India, leading up to the Babri Masjid and its aftermath in the new surge of Hindutva, which has shaken the very foundations of the claims made for a secular Indian nation in 1947.

However, before 1992, the 1983 events in Assam led to the forced migration of thousands of immigrants to West Bengal as the violence claimed 5,000 lives, reigniting the whole question of citizenship status for the once displaced who were again compelled to relocate themselves.

The incidents following the Babri Masjid demolition on 6 December 1992, took on a distinctive colour in Kolkata in relation to the question of political and popular attitudes to the West Bengal Muslims. The BBC, through the Star TV network, broadcast provoking images of 'burning Calcutta', on the night of 9 December, creating tension and speculation.<sup>152</sup> An alleged 'whisper campaign' of the Inter Service Intelligence, affected communal relations in Kolkata during this time. However, the areas earmarked in earlier outbreaks as the riot zone,<sup>153</sup> remained markedly quiet.<sup>154</sup> It is interesting to note that the arson and looting occurred in Bengali Muslim dominated slums (of which the Hindus formed 20 per cent of the population) in Metiabruz, to enable the evacuation of land, carried out by 'their Bengali and Bihari Muslim neighbours',<sup>155</sup> starting, in all instances, between 10 and 10.30 p.m. Police intervention was impeded in organized attacks. Das draws attention to the Bihari Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh who are considered 'infiltrators' and denied employment opportunities and integration. They are then drawn into sectarian politics, finding dignity offered by mullas in a religious brotherhood, succumbing to the 'rowdiness' of the disaffected, marginalized jobless. Das deplores the communalization of the police and para-military forces in the deployment of anti-Muslim upcountrymen within the Calcutta Police, which was noticeable in their treatment of arrested Muslim youths.<sup>156</sup> While non-Bengali developers were interested in the flourishing Metiabruz area which had seen the boom in the garments industry and hoped forcible evacuation of the slum dwellers would facilitate the construction of multi-storeyed buildings and air-conditioned shopping centres, families of the Hindu non-Bengali community who did not join the attackers had their houses torched as well.<sup>157</sup> As Das notes, the Kolkata disturbance in December 1992 'was not necessarily a communal riot per se ... What actually took place in 1992 was a land-grabbing riot under a communal garb' hitting the informal sector.<sup>158</sup>

The border on the east, as stated earlier, remains a 'porous' border and the flow of refugees/migrants is continuous and has never stopped, as Ranabir Samaddar's essay title says, 'Still They Come—Migrants in the Post-Partition Bengal'.<sup>159</sup> The non-recognition of the East Pakistani refugee (of whom only 25 per cent were registered), led to their mobilization into a protest group which began the squatters' colonies in and around Kolkata, in a desperate move to survive and live. To avoid eviction orders issued by the state Government, they organized demonstrations and courted arrest, thus generating the agitational politics which became the hallmark of West Bengal's oppositional politics. The initial indifference of the ruling Congress party allowed the communists to carve an influence amongst this beleaguered population. Once the right to vote was granted to the refugees,

their importance was recognized and their influence has had far-reaching effects on West Bengal politics and decision-making in subsequent democratic elections. The middle-class women refugees in their educated, bread-winning role have changed the character of employment and representation on West Bengal's economic and political scene. The return of the Bihari Muslim across Bengal's border, following the Liberation War in 1971, has led to another pattern of reclamation in the Bihar countryside. There is the reality of the continuous flow of 'economic migrants'/'refugees'/'infiltrators'/'illegal immigrants' who cross over the border and pan out across the sub-continent, looking for work and a new home, settling in metropolitan centres as far off as Delhi and Mumbai, keeping the question of Partition alive today.<sup>160</sup> And the accessible border allows a traffic of goods and people, irrespective of diplomatic relations in the two neighbouring countries that help people on both sides to survive, in what remains, an unclosed chapter in the history of the Bengal Partition, as the following translations of stories in Bengali illustrate.

#### Notes

1. E.g. see Debjani Sengupta, *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from 2 Bengals*, India: Srishti Publishers and Distributors, 2003. It has ten short stories.
2. Sugata Bose, in a study of the economic history of the relationship between the Muslim peasantry and a predominantly Hindu landed gentry leading up to the Kishoreganj riots, shows how a 'symbiotic economic relationship' collapsed 'dramatically' as 'the old ties snapped' and 'the vast mass of smallholding Muslim peasants' in a bid to cancel interest bonds from the Hindu talukdar moneylender, turned a class struggle to a communal one, finding 'a sense of community' along religious lines which would become the favourable basis for 'political organization', making the 'Hindu talukdars and traders of east Bengal ... utterly redundant.' 'The Roots of "Communal" Violence in Rural Bengal: A Study of the Kishoreganj Riots, 1930', *Modern South Asian Studies*, 16, 3 (1982), pp. 463, 489, 491.
3. Shri Prakash, 'Economic Irrationality of the Partition of India' in Settar and Gupta, 2002, p. 308.
4. E.g. almost 98% of the jute mills of undivided India were located in what is now, West Bengal, while most of the jute growing area was in east Bengal, *ibid*.
5. *Ibid*.
6. See Ranabir Samaddar, *Reflections on Partition in the East* (Kolkata: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.), 1997, p. 23.
7. Mushirul Hasan, Introduction to *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (1995, Delhi: Roli Books, Lotus Collection), 1997, p. 28.
8. After the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in Kabul in 1996, their strict religious order not only oppressed women but 'the conflict gradually became organised along political, ethnic and religious lines, leading to a resurgence of identity-related violence.' From Francois Calais & Pierre Salignon, 'From 'Militant Monks' to Crusaders' in Fabrice Weisman, ed., *In the Shadow of 'Just Wars': Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action* (London: Hurst & Company in association with Medecins, Sans Frontieres), 2004, p. 66.

9. The question in Bengali is 'Apar desh kothae?' which implies, 'Where is your homeland?'
10. Ferhana Hashem explores and establishes the changing sense of identity of the Bengal Muslim in *Identity of the Bengal Muslims: Mapping Changing Perspectives* (1905–71), Ph.D. thesis Department of History, University of Sunderland, 2004, unpublished.
11. The popular slogan was 'Joi Bangla', which literally means, 'victory to Bangla'.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 106–07.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Many recent studies of immigration to India have echoed Hindu majoritarian nationalist perspectives, calling the Muslim migrants from Bangladesh 'infiltrators', the 'problem people' (Sharma, 1992) seeing them as 'unwanted people' (Shuckla, 1995) guilty of 'cross-border infiltration' (Chaudhuri, 1992). All the references are from, Sujata Ramchandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi 'Infiltrators' and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism' in Ritu Menon, ed., *Interventions*, Vol. 1(2), Routledge, 1999, p. 237.
15. William Wordsworth, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'.
16. See next footnote.
17. 'Hence at one fell stroke of the bureaucratic machine's mighty pen, the outspoken Calcutta-based Bengali-babu was to be thrown out of power in his mortally divided motherland. It sounded like *divide et impera* with a vengeance to Bengali ears, and that was precisely how Congress as a whole came to view the partition.' Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (1977, New York, Oxford: OUP), 2000, p. 273.
18. Sumit Sarkar refers to 'Lord Curzon's much-quoted speech in Dacca in February 1904 offering east Bengal Muslims the prospect of "unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman viceroys and kings".' Sarkar goes on to say that the real reason behind the first partition of Bengal was clearly stated by Risley, 'Home Secretary H.H. Risley summed it all up with clarity and frankness in two notes dated 7 February and 6 December 1904 while analysing the arguments of the critics of Partition: 'Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. That is perfectly true and is one of the merits of the scheme....' Quoted in *Modern India 1885–1947* (1983 Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd), 1989, p. 107.  
Hashem notes that Risley was aware that the partition scheme would encourage division 'along religious lines....' 'He (Risley) also suggested that this development would be an advantage to the British, because it would weaken the growing dominance of middle-class Hindus.' Hashem, 2004, pp. 149–50.
19. Wolpert, 2000, p. 278.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Quoted by Wolpert. *Ibid.*
22. 'I was present at the session and remember the two reasons advanced for the establishment of the League. It was said that one of the objects of the League would be to strengthen and develop a feeling of loyalty to the British Government among the Muslims of India. The second object was to advance the claims of the Muslims against Hindus and other communities in respect of service under the crown and thus safeguard Muslim interests and rights. The leaders of the League were therefore naturally opposed to the demand for political independence raised by the Congress. They felt that if the Muslims joined in any such demand the British would not support their claims for special treatment in education and service.' Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. *India Wins Freedom*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, complete version), 1988, p. 117.



23. 'Abdul Rasul and a large number of other Bengali Muslim intellectuals gave active support to the Swadeshi agitation against the partition of Bengal. In fact, the nationalist trend remained dominant among Muslims in Bengal till the late 1920s.' Chandra et al in *India's Struggle for Independence* (1988 New Delhi: Penguin Books India), 2000, p. 416
24. Sugata Bose records that with the authorities taking firm measures against participants of Congress Civil Disobedience Movement, the Muslim rioters were 'under the impression that the government would be on their side.... In Mymensingh, maulvis from Dacca and Bhowal had appeared and told the cultivators that the government supported the Muslims and would not interfere if they demanded back their bonds and other documents from moneylenders and extorted them forcibly if necessary.' Bose goes on to pose the question 'Had Kishoreganj witnessed a 'class war' or a 'communal outbreak?' In Dhaka 'The police ... took the opportunity of the communal clashes to raid Hindu houses and generally create terror among the nationalist ranks.' Burrows who replaced G.S. Dutt as District Magistrate in June 1930 in Dhaka, let it out that the 'issue ... was not between Muslims and Hindus but those against and in favour of the civil disobedience' and in his policy stated 'So far the mohammedans have kept themselves aloof mainly in their own interests and my policy will be to maintain this attitude without giving any encouragement to communal aggression.' Bose, 1982, pp. 478, 482-83.
25. Suranjan Das has analysed the changing pattern of communal conflict in Bengal in his book *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905 to 1947*, 1993.
26. Bose, 1982, p. 490.
27. The Pact was to ensure the representation of the two communities according to their population ratio in local self-government institutions (60% Muslim and 40% Hindu), and government appointments, (55-80% Muslims); music before mosques was to be banned and cow slaughter during Islamic festivals allowed to avoid violent eruptions; a committee of equal members from both communities were to be appointed to facilitate the implementation of these measures. See Nitish Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-Speaking People* (New Delhi, Bangalore etc.: UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd.) 2001, p. 367.
28. See Chatterjee, 1995, pp. 18-21.
29. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia* (1998 London and New York: Routledge), 2001, p. 170.
30. See Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-47*, (1995 New Delhi: Foundation Books), 1996, pp. 188-89.
31. Quoted by Chatterjee, 1996, Ibid.
32. The Nawabs of Dhaka were originally hide merchants from Kashmir, who had first migrated to Delhi and then moved to Kolkata. Chatterjee, 1996, p. 79.
33. Suhrawardy belonged to a leading ashraf family of Kolkata, who traced his ancestry to the first Caliph. See Chatterjee, *ibid*, p. 81.
34. Hasan Ispahani was one of the richest businessmen in Kolkata. He belonged to a trading family from Persia, who had first come to Bombay and Madras and then to Bengal, for the indigo trade. *Ibid*, p. 80.
35. Enayetur Rahim, 'Bengal Election, 1937: Fazlul Huq and M.A. Jinnah: A Study in Leadership Stress in Bengal Politics' in *Provincial Autonomy in Bengal, 1937-43*, eds . Rahim et al, Dhaka University Press, for Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi University, 1981. p. 73.
36. 'On the question of the interests of the Projas and Krishaks, the tillers of the soil who sweat so that others might enjoy the fruits of their labour, there is no difference

- whatever between the Hindus and Muslims for their interests are welded into one another, together ...' Ibid, p. 76.
37. Pradesh means Province.
  38. Chatterjee, 1996, p. 84
  39. Ibid, p. 75.
  40. Ibid.
  41. Ibid, p. 83. Literally, 'Dal-Bhat' means lentils and rice, the staple diet of the poor in Bengal, the equivalent of 'daily bread' in English.
  42. A tax.
  43. A revenue bailiff's contribution.
  44. Chatterjee, 1996, p. 205.
  45. A description by the English daily, *The Statesman*, of the communal atrocities committed by both communities beginning on Direct Action Day, 16 August 1946.
  46. See Tinker, Hugh, *Separate and Unequal: India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth 1920-1950*, London: Hurst & Company, 1976, Ibid, p. 122.
  47. Ibid, pp. 121-23.
  48. However, four-fifths of the evacuees were persuaded by the I.C.S. Agent, for the Government of India, R.H. Hutchings, to come back and serve the port to handle the War cargo. In fact, Rangoon port was sustained by Indian labourers and businessmen, till they were ordered to leave. Ibid. pp. 197-98.
  49. The exodus of Indians from Burma happened in three stages. Some left by sea before Rangoon was bombed, reaching the port of Chittagong. Others were compelled to evacuate immediately after Rangoon fell. Then began the long trek to India without any evacuation aid from the Burmese leaders or the British administration. One concourse walked through the Taungup Pass through Arakan. Another group travelled through central or northern Burma, braving the harsh terrain of rugged mountainous country to arrive in Assam and Bengal exhausted, in much depleted numbers. Ibid, pp. 202-03
  50. Bhattacharya, Sanjoy, *Propaganda and Information in Eastern India 193-45: A Necessary Weapon of War* (London: Centre of South Asian Studies and Curzon, Press, SOAS, University of London), 2001, p. 28.
  51. Kolkata suffered as it was targeted by Japanese bombers.
  52. Bose, 1982, pp. 468, 470
  53. See Sugata Bose 'Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan and Tonkin, 1942-45' in *Modern Asian Studies* 24, 4 (1990), printed in Great Britain, p. 715.
  54. Ibid, p. 702.
  55. Ibid, p. 725.
  56. For the last decade of Bengal politics, see Jahanara Begum, *The Last Decade of Undivided Bengal: Parties, Politics and Personalities* (Calcutta: Minerva Associations), 1994.
  57. "We all have to prepare for the toughest fight in our history in India. We have to fight for our existence as a nation. We have to fight for the preservation of our religion, ethics, culture and civilization, so manifestly distinct from those of others. You must equip yourself with unflinching discipline and return to the camp life and teachings of Islam. Follow the injunctions of the Holy Q'uran and the mandate of Islam and there lies the emancipation of Muslim India." Thus declared Albaj Khwaja Nazimuddin, former Premier of Bengal, explaining the circumstances which led the All-India Muslim League Council to pass the resolution on Direct Action at the Muslim National Guard Rally held yesterday... ' From a report in *Star of India*, Kolkata, Tuesday 5 August 1946, p. 3. In the next column, in the same issue, Maulana

Akram Khan, President of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League is quoted as commenting on the Bombay League Council meeting, 'We mean what we say. Our resolution of direct action will soon be translated into action'. The directive on what 'direct action' entailed, was not clear, as further down the column, he is quoted as saying, "Our Committee of Action have not yet drafted the programme for the struggle but it is soon expected to draw it up after watching the reactions to the resolutions. Leaguers are prepared for sufferings and sacrifice for winning their goal of Pakistan". Ibid. The news report is from Wardhaganj, dated 2 August.

In an earlier issue, the following was listed as the 'DIRECT ACTION DAY PROGRAMME' of the 'Bengal League Executive Decisions ... (1) To observe complete hartal and general strike everywhere. (2) To explain and reiterate the resolution of the League Council about the 'Direct Action' before the congregation in all mosques before the Jumma prayer. (3) To offer 'Munajat' for the freedom of Muslim India, Muslims of the world and for the people of the east in general. (4) To hold peaceful processions and demonstrations. (5) To hold open-air meetings and to reiterate the full support for the League Council resolution. (6) To request all other parties to observe complete hartal on that date and to take part in the demonstrations but the request must be made in a peaceful manner.' Kolkata, *Star of India*, Tuesday, 6 August 1946, p. 3.

The pledge to prepare to 'sacrifice' all to achieve Pakistan continues in the report by the Chief Reporter of *Dawn* in its Sunday, 18 August edition, 'The Delhi Muslims observed the "Direct Action Day" on Friday with great fervour and enthusiasm and pledged themselves to make every sacrifice for the achievement of Pakistan.' In the same paper, the main headlines read 'MUSLIM INDIA OBSERVES DIRECT ACTION DAY/ 90 DEAD, 900 INJURED IN CALCUTTA CLASHES/ MILITARY CALLED OUT IN BENGAL CAPITAL AND BOMBAY/ TRAFFIC IN BOTH CITIES PARALYSED'. In the next few days, the news from Kolkata captures the headlines of the major newspapers. See footnote 62.

58. The green heart of the city, which is a popular place for holding mass meetings and rallies.
59. Quoted by Begum, 1994, pp. 170-71.
60. Azad, 1988, p. 169.
61. Ibid.
62. 'After the Killing: The Government of Bengal has failed lamentably in judgement and executive ability. By forcing a general holiday on the public on the Muslim League's day of direct action it has brought about the consequences that many feared. Their fears were vigorously set out by the Opposition, in the Legislative Council, and would have been vigorously set out and supported by a large vote in the Assembly had their Chair not rejected an adjournment motion. From early on Friday there was violence in the streets, which increased rapidly in the early afternoon as processions made their way to the big demonstrations on the Maidan. Ruffians in the crowd armed with lathis knocked pedestrians and by-standers about, bands of ruffians ran about the city in lorries to assault people and smash up property. The full story of what happened cannot be told yet. The sum of tragedy known at the time of writing is over 270 killed, more than 1,600 injured, about 900 buildings on fire, much looting in many parts of the city. Direct Action Day has given the city two days of horror. Violence was feared, though not on so unrestrained a scale, when the Government decided on action that was certain to produce inflammatory language and communal clashes in the streets. There was however some assurance from those arranging the demonstration that it would be peaceful

and orderly, though when a holiday was announced and explained as a precaution against clashes in the streets that might lead to larger disturbances it was obvious that Ministers themselves were dubious. That being so, it was incumbent on them to take precautions against a breakdown of civic order. This, it was expected, would be done. The degree of their failure to think and act rightly is visible all over Calcutta today.' (August 18, 1946)

'Disgrace Abounding: On Calcutta's horrible ordeal we gave verdict two days ago. Owing however to the difficulties of producing and distributing a newspaper in the stricken city, that verdict could not reach all our readers. We condemned unsparingly the Bengal Government for lamentable failure in judgement and executive ability.

'That verdict we repeat. The origin of the appalling carnage and loss in the capital of a great Province, we believe the worst communal rioting in India's history, was a political demonstration by the Muslim League. Bengal's is a Muslim League Ministry. No other major Indian Province possesses one—for Sind hardly counts, being small and politically peculiar. Of all India's provincial Ministries, the Bengal Ministry, therefore, as the outstanding League Ministry, should have been the most scrupulous in ensuring that such a political demonstration caused no disturbance. Maintenance of law and order is any Ministry's prime obligation, and the obligation on the Bengal Ministry, in fulfilment of the League's declared policy of keeping "Direct Action Day" peaceful, was unique.

'But instead of fulfilling this, it undeniably, by confused acts of omission and provocation, contributed rather than otherwise to the horrible events which have occurred. No balanced person would charge it with having deliberately planned a catastrophe of such magnitude. Nevertheless in retrospect, its conduct before the riots stands open to inference—not only by its political opponents—that it was divided in mind whether rioting of some sort would be good or bad. Whatever truth such ugly inference may contain, the Ministry's utter, hideous failure to prevent what, for its own honour's sake and that of its party, it should have been at particular pains to avoid, is in any case blatant. It has fallen down shamefully in what should be the main task of any Administration worth the name. The bloody shambles to which this country's largest city has been reduced is an abounding disgrace.' (20 August 1946). Niranjan Majumder, compiler. *The Statesman: An Anthology 1875–1975*. Calcutta and New Delhi: The Statesman Ltd. 1975, pp. 499–501.

In the Muslim newspaper *Star of India*, there is a call from Jinnah on 15 August 1946. The front headlines read: 'OBSERVE DIRECT ACTION DAY PEACEFULLY/ Mr Jinnah's Call To Muslims/ "Do Not Play Into Hands Of Enemies"' Kolkata, p. 1.

The Delhi Muslim newspaper *Dawn* reports on 18 August 1946, 'MUSLIM INDIA OBSERVES DIRECT ACTION DAY/ 90 DEAD, 900 INJURED IN CALCUTTA CLASHES/MILITARY CALLED OUT IN BENGAL CAPITAL & BOMBAY/TRAFFIC IN BOTH CITIES PARALYSED, p. 1; 'OVER 270 DEAD & 1,600 INJURED IN CALCUTTA/ SITUATION IN CITY STILL VERY SERIOUS/ BRITISH TROOPS ON PICKET DUTY IN AFFECTED AREAS/ MORE FIRING BY POLICE ON SATURDAY' Ibid, Monday, 19 August 1946, p. 1; '600 KILLED AND 2,500 INJURED IN CALCUTTA/TENSE SITUATION CONTINUES/MILITARY OPENS FIRE SEVERAL TIMES' and the last headline is 'PEACE PROCESSION TOURS AFFECTED AREAS', Ibid, Tuesday, 20 August 1946, p. 1. It is not till Wednesday, 21 August that *Dawn* carries the headlines, 'MARKED IMPROVEMENT IN CALCUTTA

SITUATION/Normal Life Gradually Resuming', (Delhi). Headlines in *Star of India* on Wednesday, 21 August 1946 are similar 'FURTHER IMPROVEMENT IN SITUATION/Trams, Buses And Taxis Plying/Railways To Run Through Services', p.1. And the following day's headlines continue in the same vein, 'CITY CLEANING DRIVE IN FULL SWING/More Traffic On Streets/ Markets To RE-OPEN TO-MORROW' (the last two words significantly using full capitals), p. 1.

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika's* front headlines on 22 August carry a similar story, 'SITUATION CONTINUES TO IMPROVE/ Military Pickets Inadequate In Certain Areas/ RATION QUOTA IS HALVED AS TEMPORARY MEASURE/ Congress & League Tour City Appealing For Peace', *Ibid*, Calcutta, Thursday 22, 1946, p.1. And on 24 August, *Dawn's* headlines concede, 'CALCUTTA SITUATION RETURNING TO NORMAL' and goes on to report 'The curfew was being strictly enforced.' *Ibid*.

The tone of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, a pro-Hindu paper, by 20 and 21 August, is stricken and concerned, not seeking to apportion blame to the Muslims. In its editorial of 21 August, the editor, Mrinal Kanti Bose writes a carefully worded article under 'FOUR DAYS OF TERROR': 'For four days Calcutta has been a city completely abandoned to mob rule. Life, yes, precious human life, has been rendered nasty and brutish, poor and short. Hindus were killing Muslims and Muslims were killing Hindus. There was no compassion, no respect and no regard for what has been so often called the sanctity of human life. The whole machinery of the state was paralysed and the mechanism of civilised life thrown out of gear. Houses were set fire to and burnt. Temples and mosques were desecrated and destroyed... The streets are littered with maimed and mauled and disfigured bodies. It is a shocking sight. *Today we shall not sit back and apportion blame* [italics mine]. Things will be seen in their true perspective and the guilty ones found and discovered when there will be an end to this tension, this heat and dust of a bitter and acrimonious controversy carried to a fight to the knife.' The editor is careful of not to ruffle the League Ministry by implicating it with any studied partisanship, but cautiously raises questions of enforcing security in sensitive areas: 'Our attention... has been called to the fact that around the canal and its adjoining areas the armed forces have been few and far between. We cannot simply understand why sufficient precautions have not been taken in his dangerously explosive zone... It is not our intention to suggest that there should be any discrimination between Hindu majority and Muslim majority areas. We ask the Governor and his ministers to suppress mob rule ruthlessly but with due regard for the lives of law-abiding citizens irrespective of caste, creed or colour.', Kolkata, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 August, p. 2.

The *Dawn* and *Star of India*, however, were openly accusing in their reports. On 23 August 1946, the *Dawn* reports 'A WEEK LONG KNIVES IN CALCUTTA/ TRUTH BEHIND CITY'S HOLOCAUST/ NEITHER MUSLIMS NOR MINORITY RESPONSIBLE/ TELL-TALE CASUALTY FIGURES'. In this news column, the *Dawn* Special Representative goes on to say '... And I say that the outside world has been completely misled by the most diabolically planned one-sided propaganda. In this the British-edited 'Statesman'—now openly ranged among the enemies of the Mussalmans—has joined with the gusto of a proselytised convert... But it is not true that Muslims started it. It is not true that Muslims had in any manner prepared for it. It is not true that Muslims were even prepared for self-defence—because they did not apprehend that on the other side preparations had been made. MUSLIMS PAID A HEAVY TOLL.', p.1. In the adjacent column there is a column with the headline: 'Hindus Pulled Trigger First' which goes say

that this was Jinnah's opinion, in what it puts forth as a quote from Jinnah in bold, 'No one knows better than the Hindus of Bengal, generally of Calcutta, that it was they, who resorted to acts of violence which culminated in bloodshed. The motive of the Hindus is clear enough—to discredit the League Ministry...' Ibid.

In its editorial of 21 August, the *Star of India*, a daily published in Kolkata, is more cautious than the Delhi published *Dawn* and writes under the title: 'IN TRUE COLOURS' '... Public interest and interests of peace for which ravaged Calcutta yearns as it never yearned before forbids us into going into a comparison of losses suffered by Muslims and Hindus or the barbarities that have been perpetrated by the one on the other...' It goes on to say 'Muslims will have their own score to settle with the Ministry, if they are convinced that it was the Ministry that failed to afford them the initial protection in the absence of which they were dragged willy nilly into this mad conflict'. In this editorial it accuses the British daily, *Statesman* as being 'knocked completely off its "balance"' which it attributed to 'a deep-laid conspiracy ... to discredit the Muslim League Ministry and to discredit the entire Indian community as incapable of maintaining law and order. It enables us to see the imperialist agents in their true colour.' In the next day's editorial, it continues the indictment of *The Statesman* under the title "Statesmania" and says that it had an ulterior motive in its manner of reporting: 'For a long time there has been talk about the impending purchase of 'the Statesman' by Hindu capitalists. ... The service rendered through slandering and blackguarding the Muslims and the Muslim League will certainly put up 'the Statesman's' stock in the eyes of the Hindu capitalists to at least ten times the previous figure whatever that may have been.' Kolkata, *Star of India*, Thursday, 22 August 1946, p. 2. On 23 August, the *Star of India* is conscious of the crisis in the state and admits: 'CITY'S FOOD PROBLEM ACUTE' and goes on to concede, 'Situation Not Fully Normal', p.1. (And the food crisis has been referred to in *Amrita Bazar Patrika's* headline of the previous day's paper: 'RATION QUOTA IS HALVED AS TEMPORARY MEASURE', see above).

63. 'For the first time, Bengali Hindus and Muslims joined their coreligionists of up-country origin on a large scale in the Great Calcutta Killings.' Das, 1993, p. 209.
64. Ibid, pp. 6-7.
65. Ibid, p. 183.
66. Ibid.
67. Penderel Moon, *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (Karachi: OUP), 1973, p. 335.
68. Sarkar, 1983/89, p. 432.
69. Ibid.
70. Nikhil Chakrabarty quoted in Chatterjee, 1996, p. 232.
71. Ibid, 238.
72. Ibid, 232.
73. Chatterjee, 1996, p. 233
74. Ibid, pp. 238-39. For a full description of the birth and evolution of these bodies, see *ibid*, pp. 233-40.
75. See Prafulla K. Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men* (Kolkata: Naya Udyog), 1999, pp. 44-50.
76. Das, 1993, p. 3.
77. Ibid.
78. Once the news of the Noakhali violence became known, headlines in *The Statesman* read: 'Governor to Visit Noakhali /Mob Violence in East Bengal, 150,000 Reported Affected,' Kolkata, Saturday, 19 October 1946' p. 1: 'Mob Rule in Noakhali/Governor Flies Over Riot Areas/ "Exaggerated" Press Reports'. Sunday, 20

October 1946, p.1; 'Organised Violence in East Bengal/Panic Continues in Noakhali', p.1, "Nothing But Lawlessness/Organised Violence in East Bengal, p.5, Monday, 21 October 1946, p. 5. It is only in the issue of 24 October 1946 that The Statesman reports: 'Noakhali and Tipperah Quiet, says Press Report', p. 9, *The Statesman*, Kolkata, the National Library, Kolkata.

79. 'Noakhali: The British House of Commons has shown its concern over the violence in East Bengal but has not, we think, been so served as to understand how Bengal and many other parts of India are thinking and feeling. A report from the Governor of the Province was read, and Mr Henderson, India's Under-Secretary of State, made an amplifying statement. Both fell far below what was needed. What was said could not have conveyed to the House any sense of the horror felt about what has happened for the last 12 days. Only in Mr Nicholson's pertinacious and praiseworthy questionings was this emotion to some extent reflected.

'In present conditions no one can hope to estimate with any accuracy, the casualties inside a large area seething with violence. Perhaps no one ever will. The statistics with which to begin an investigation are primitive. But not many in East Bengal or in Calcutta, where a thousand or more refugees come every day bringing their own stories, will credit officialdom's reckoning of the dead as certainly below four figures, and probably low down in three. More acceptable is the figure of 30,000 refugees in Government relief centres that is only part of the whole. Over a large area ordinary life has been disrupted. Arson, looting, murder, abduction of women, forced conversions and forced marriages are everywhere and by every investigator spoken of as the characteristics of the lawlessness. There is in common much more evidence of these crimes against women than the Commons were permitted to learn. (24 October 1946), Majumder, 1975, p. 501-02.

'It was the end of Ashwin in the year 1946. We were then in Chittagong. Slowly the heart-rending stories from Noakhali were reaching our ears through people and newspapers. I was feeling an unbearable sense of restlessness for the abducted and homeless girls. Yet I could not think what I could do. On 20 October, at a meeting under the leadership of Mrs Nellie Sengupta, the women of Chittagong formed a committee for the relief and rescue of abducted girls. From 26 October every seven days, in rota, we roamed the villages of Noakhali to look for abducted girls and started basic relief work at stations and from descriptions given by persecuted villagers, drew up a list of affected villages.' Translated from Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhali's Duryogee Dine: An Account of the Aftermath of Riot in Noakhali in 1946*, (Kolkata: Naya Udyog), 1999, p. 11. She goes on to say how the work continues after the arrival of Gandhi on 7 November to Chaumuni, with leadership and help given by Sucheta Kripalani from Dattapara and Renuka Roy from Kolkata. Ibid.

'In the October disturbances in north-west Noakhali and the adjoining south-west corner of Tippera, attacks on property and incidents of rape figured more prominently than murder in sharp contrast to the Calcutta riots.' Sarkar, 1983, p. 433.

80. 'There has been murder, arson, loot, forcible conversion, abduction etc. Thousands have become homeless, many fairly well-to-do are in different refugee camps in miserable condition. A very large number of refugees from the neighbouring district of Noakhali also have come to the district.' Tippera District Relief, Rescue and Rehabilitation Committee: Appeal for Funds, in *Syama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi.
81. 'Most probably on the third day of the riots, I accompanied a senior colleague of mine to the main office of the Lal Bazar Police Station. At that time reporters did not have the authority to enter the Lal Bazar Control Room, especially reporters of

native newspapers. I don't know why I entered Lal Bazar, probably out of curiosity. After I had walked a few yards I saw one person coming out of a room and starting a discussion about something with one of the officers. Afterwards I learnt that that was the Control Room. The person who had come out of the room was someone I knew, he was the Prime Minister of undivided Bengal, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Seeing him, we went forward and introduced ourselves. He said he was very busy and had no time to talk. Then he went back to the Control Room.' Translated from Shankar Ghosh, *Hastantar* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited), 1999, pp. 98–99.

82. Quoted from the historian Gautam Chattopadhyay's account, Begum, 1994, pp. 17–72.

83. Ghosh, 1999, p. 99.

84. '16 August was a black day in the history of India. Mob violence unprecedented in the history of India plunged the great city into an orgy of bloodshed, murder and terror. Hundreds of lives were lost... I got to Dum Dum (airport) with great difficulty... I found there a large contingent of the military waiting in trucks. When I asked why they were not helping in restoring order, they replied that their orders were to stand ready but not to take any action. Throughout Calcutta, the military and the police were standing by but remained inactive while innocent men and women were being killed.' Azad, 1998, p. 169.

Wavell notes in his diary on 19 August (1946), 'I had an hour in the afternoon with Azad about the Calcutta riots and the Interim Government. He criticised the Bengal Ministry severely, and said that although they had apprehended trouble they had not taken sufficient precautions; also they had been too late enforcing a total curfew, and the troops had not been called out soon enough.' Moon, 1973, p. 335.

85. Hashem describes the political developments in Pakistan in an analytical study of leaders like Suhrawardy and Huq. Hashem, 2004.

86. Translated from Gupta, 1999, p. 29.

87. See footnotes 68 and 69, Sengupta, 2001, p. 501 and Moon, 1973, p. 335.

88. In a report in *Dawn* of 31 Oct. 1946, the following report about Bihar appeared under the headline 'Bihar Leader Incited Hindus' which goes on to say that a Hindu Congress worker 'deputed' by Rajendra Prasad 'exhorted the Hindus to destroy and annihilate the Muslims' which is denied in a report from the Kolkata daily, *The Morning News* of 21 October 1946, in which Rajendra Prasad expresses 'surprise and shock', saying that he 'categorically denied having deputed anyone'. The *Dawn* goes on to say, 'Quite obviously communal bigots have been taking his name without authority. Dr Rajendra Prasad can now see for himself the terrible consequences of anti-Muslim preachings by people, whether deputed by him or not.' From *Dr Rajendra Prasad Papers*, National Archives, New Delhi. Local leaders, obviously abused their power in some instances, to create confusion and ignite violence.

Filed with a letter to the Prime Minister of Bihar, there is a letter to Gandhi. The claimant signs 'sufferer' and writes: 'houses of Muslims are being searched for illicit arms and in doing so the police are dishonouring the women and desecrating the mosques, Dargahs and so forth.' dated 28.10.47, *Ibid*. It shows how insecure the Bihari Muslim felt, following independence.

There is a telegram corroborating the continuing violence, issued on 28.11.47 saying 'Report of serious occurrences at Shibnagar in Sitamarhi Subdivision on Muharram day received by Mahatmaji. Please wire details.' *Ibid*.

89. On 25 October 1946, the Muslim members of the Interim Government were announced. Azad notes how difficult it was for the Government to function with the



Finance portfolio having gone to the Muslim League, making any unanimous decision, difficult. He writes, 'Sardar Patel had been very anxious about retaining the Home Membership. Now he realised that he had played into the hands of the League by offering it Finance. Whatever proposal he made was either rejected or modified beyond recognition by Liaqat Ali. His persistent interference made it difficult for any Congress Member to function effectively. Internal dissensions broke out within the Government and went on increasing.

The fact is that the Interim Government was born in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between Congress and League.' Azad, 1988, p. 179.

90. Ibid, p. 121.
91. Ibid, p. 164–65.
92. Ibid, p. 217.
93. The real figure is debated, but the generally accepted figure of those who perished en route, in this colossal enforced exodus, is a million.
94. See Hasan, 1999, p. 28.
95. Ibid, p. 26.
96. The Sarat Bose Formula for a Sovereign Bengal proposed '(1) Bengal to be a Socialist Republic. (2) The Bengal legislature to be elected after the Constitution of the Republic is framed, and it should be elected on the basis of adult franchise and joint electorate. (3) The Bengal legislature to be elected should decide the relations of Bengal with the rest of India. (4) The present Muslim League Ministry should be dissolved and a representative interim Cabinet formed without delay. (5) The public services in Bengal should be manned by Bengalees, and Hindus and Muslims should have equal share in them. (6) An ad hoc constitution-making body consisting of 30 or 31 members should be set up by the Congress and the Muslim League in Bengal. It should frame the Constitution of the Republic of Bengal expeditiously.' In fact, in a press statement on 20 May 1947, Sarat Bose said 'On the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1944, when I was in prison, I recorded my ideas in the following words: "I conceive my country as Union of Socialist Republics -"... I have always held the view that India must be a Union of autonomous Socialist Republics ...' From S.C. Bose, *Whither Two Bengals?* (Kolkata: Netaji Research Bureau, 1970), pp. 1–3.
97. See Chatterjee, 1996, pp. 261–62.
98. See J. Begum, 1994, pp. 176–77.
99. Ibid, p. 177.
100. In a secret report Lord Mountbatten wrote 'Mr Suhrawardy told me that in the case of Bengal, this was far from being the case, and that since my plan included a vote on whether a Province should be partitioned or not, and if partitioned whether it was to join Paksitan, Hindustan, or remain independent, he could tell me now that given enough time, he was confident that he could get Bengal to remain as a complete entity. He told me that he could get Mr Jinnah to agree that it need not join Pakistan if it was prepared to remain united.'" Quoted from *LAR*, 1947 by J. Begum, *ibid*, p. 175.
101. 'The last nail in the coffin of United Bengal was struck on 20 June 1947. The Bengal Legislative Assembly voted for Pakistan. Thereafter, in a separate session, the MLAs from notional Hindu majority districts voted in favour of partitioning the province and staying in India. The Muslim League MLAs of both East and West Bengal voted against partition.' Sengupta, 2001, p. 520.  
Newspaper headlines of 20 June read: 'WEST BENGAL VOTES FOR PARTITION/JOINT SESSION AGAINST JOINING EXISTING CONSTT. ASSEMBLY ...' followed by the report 'THE JOINT SESSION OF WEST BENGAL

AND EAST BENGAL M.L.A.S WHICH MET 3 P.M. IN THE ASSEMBLY CHAMBERS BY A LARGE MAJORITY DECIDED AGAINST THE INCLUSION OF THE PROVINCE IN THE EXISTING CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, 126 MEMBERS VOTING AGAINST, AND 90 VOTING FOR IT. THE THREE COMMUNIST MEMBERS REMAINED NEUTRAL.' Kolkata: *The Star of India*, Friday, 20 June 1947, p.1.

102. Azad details this impasse in his memoirs. See, Azad, 1988, pp. 179, 188–89.
103. The government census of 1951 shows that there were 'at least 3.5 million refugees in West Bengal.' Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 3.
104. Cited by Menon, 1999, p. 161.
105. Shelley Feldman has identified the exclusion of the Bengal experience from ongoing debates on Partition and described it as 'the other' in 'Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition'. *Ibid*, p. 176.
106. Dr Triguna Sen, Education Minister of India, says that after Partition, 'Only in 1950, in the wake of brutal massacres in different districts of East Bengal, did the Hindus retaliate and immediately a two-way exodus began which might have brought about an unofficial transfer of population and a natural solution to the communal problem in West Bengal. But Nehru had reasons of his own to stop this natural solution of the problem and he bestirred himself immediately to stop this two-way movement by the Delhi Pact of 1950. The Pact stopped this two-way movement effectively and the Muslims who had left West Bengal returned and Nehru saw to it that their property was restored to them, but the exodus of the Hindus lingers to this day... Yet in the Western zone of India Nehru effected an exchange of property and then proceeded immediately to solve the problem of the West Pakistan refugees with such thoroughness that within two years they were resettled and integrated into the body politic of India.' Foreword, Chakrabarty, 1999, p.xv.  
 'Nehru told a deputation of Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad ... that they were aliens and that they should contact the AICC Bureau dealing with foreigners'. *Ibid*, p. 18. For more information, see endnote 125.  
 In a letter to B.C. Roy Nehru said "The fact that a man is a Muslim, does not make him a non-national... To say of a group of Indian nationals that we shall push them out because some people elsewhere are not behaving as they should is something which has no justification in law or equity. It strikes at the root of the secular state that we claim to be. We can't just do that whatever the consequences". *Ibid*, p. 20. Yet Nehru was in no position to guarantee security to the Bengali Hindu refugee (whom he was exhorting to go back), once they did return to East Pakistan.  
 Chakrabarty goes on to comment 'Nehru's secular state remained intact even after the exchange of population and property in Punjab. But a similar exchange in Bengal would strike at the root of the secularist image of India because he had to save Kashmir 'whatever the consequences...', the consequences being a life-in-death existence for the Bengali refugees from East Pakistan. 'If in the process several million East Bengal Hindus perished, then *vae victis*.' *Ibid*.
107. Ranajit Roy notes how the Indian Government officially recognised this, 'In a note prepared for official use in November 1968, the External Affairs Ministry passed this verdict on the Nehru-Liaquat Agreement: "Pakistan has of course all along violated the Agreement."' See Ranajit Roy, *The Agony of West Bengal* (Kolkata: New Age Publishers Pvt. Ltd.), second edition, 1972, endnote, p. 64.
108. 'Exchange of population, according to most of the women I interviewed, would therefore, have been the only solution... In fact, the Pakistan government issued an order on 7 July for large scale requisitioning of minority property, and in the three

weeks that followed, 811 houses were requisitioned in East Bengal... Even Nehru, who refused to accept the failure of the agreement, had to acknowledge that 'many of the Hindus, who returned from West Bengal to East Bengal subsequently came back to West Bengal ...' [1 Aug. 1950 Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 1950, Vol. IV, Part 1, Cols 7-14] 'Many of the ... educated middle-class ... hold the Nehru-Liaquat Pact to be squarely responsible for the lack of quick and proper rehabilitation schemes of the Govt. of India. It led to the continuance of the ill-treatment and persecution of the minorities in East Bengal.' Monmayee Basu, 'Unknown Victims of a major Holocaust', in *Pangs of Partition*, ed. S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta (New Delhi: Manohar) 2002, Vol. II, pp. 145, 146.

109. Mahatma Gandhi, whose voice was respected by the Congress leadership, said at a prayer meeting in New Delhi on 16 July 1947, "There is the problem of those Hindus who for fear, imaginary or real, will have to leave their own homes in Pakistan. If hindrances are created in their daily work or movement or if they are treated as foreigners in their own land, then they will not be able to stay there. In that case the duty of the adjoining province on this side of the border will be to accept them with both arms and extend to them all legitimate opportunities, they should be made to feel that they have not come to an alien land." In Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 19.

Nehru too, said something along the same lines, "Our duty to those who will be in peril in East Bengal, will be to protect them in their own country and to give them shelter in our own country if there is no other way and the situation so demands." Quoted by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in his speech in Parliament on 17 August 1948. *Ibid.*

On the national level, there was the constitutional plan, "The federation of India must be a willing Union of its various parts. In order to give the maximum freedom to the constituent units there may be a minimum list of common and federal subjects which will apply to all units, and a further optional list of common subjects which may be accepted by such units as desire to do so." From *Young Indian*, Delhi, Editor Chandra Shekhar, Congress MP Annual Number, 1971, quoted by Roy, 1972, p.144.

"...it may be desirable to fix a period, say ten days later after the establishment of the free Indian State, at the end of which the right to secede may be exercised through proper constitutional process and in accordance with the clearly expressed will of the inhabitants of the area concerned." quoted by Roy, 1972, from Central Parliamentary Board, Indian National Congress, *Handbook for Congressmen*, New Delhi, undated, p. 68, p.144.

110. Ranajit Roy, 1971, p. 63.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

112. Roy shows, with figures, how 'all of them (the West Pakistani refugees) have been rehabilitated on land and in houses of evacuee Muslims and shops and houses built by the Government of India at its expense and given as compensation to them.' *Ibid.*, p. 65. He writes that of the 47.40 lakh of West Pakistani refugees, 37.40 were Punjabis, of whom 27.37 were rehabilitated in Punjab-Hararyana and 5 lakhs in Delhi and all the land and houses left by evacuee Muslims in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Mysore, Bihar, Orissa and Himachal Pradesh went to the West Pakistani refugee. (*Ibid.*), The figures he gives are: 60 lakh acres of farmland and 7 lakh village houses in Punjab, 305,000 shops and houses in urban areas, while the Government built 221,110 houses and 19 townships for them; and that while loans figured largely in Government aid in the East, it was aid in the West (*Ibid.*, p. 66). He goes on to point out that in Delhi, while 73 residential areas and many modern

- market centres were built in refugee rehabilitation projects incurring a cost of Rs. 60 crores, the Bengali refugee was not given a house or a shop from this budget. If one compares figures from his Postscript, one can see that a total of 20.02 lakhs had found employment through employment exchanges amongst the West Pakistani refugee, while the Rehabilitation Ministry Report of 1964–65 records that in January 1965, 204 Bengali refugees found employment in the public sector (in spite of the registered number of 10, 571 migrants). *Ibid.* p. 67.
113. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
  114. Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 21.
  115. *Ibid.*
  116. On the Subject of ‘Refugees in Cooch Behar State’, the following correspondence to Dy. Adviser to Governor of Assam was made, ‘The official reports show how refugees in Tripura were written off as undeserving of Government aid “...Most of the refugees ... are well to do or at any rate not badly off. No one has asked for temporary relief but two days ago I received a few applications for loans for starting business, and four or five applications from students for monetary help ... There has been no need to open a regular or irregular refugee camp. Such people as have come are living with their relations and friends. Some have bought lands and built their own mat-wall buildings. No one is living in the open.” “... the refugees as a class are well-off...,”’ *Proceedings of the Ministry of States*, Government of India, National Archives, New Delhi.
  117. Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 11
  118. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
  119. In an unpublished story entitled ‘Shamikshan’ or ‘Search,’ by Sujanbilash Biswas, a writer, who had come from east Bengal to Kolkata, we encounter the harrowing tale of squatters in Sealdah station, who, without work, food or shelter, either die like Sudhanya or commit suicide like Sulata, to escape a life of shame, or are orphaned as their son is, without the sustenance and future that east Bengali refugees required at the time of Partition.
  120. Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 156–57.
  121. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
  122. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
  123. Roy, 1972, p. 3.
  124. *Ibid.*
  125. When Nehru told the deputation from Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad in 1948 that they were aliens (Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 18), he based it on the fact that he had a memorandum from P.C. Ghosh of West Bengal Congress. The consensus was that ‘the refugees were all foreigners’. Chakrabarty concludes that this shows that the Congress had decided to view the East Pakistan refugees as foreigners. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
  126. Though Nehru admits to a large-scale migration of Hindus from East Pakistan to West Bengal he says, ‘But migrations were not desirable and should not be encouraged, as they would bring a great deal of suffering in their train. He thought that conditions would improve so as to enable minorities in East Bengal to resume their normal lives and vocations... He agreed to grant the loan of Rs.8 crores to W. Bengal Government for relief and rehabilitation. *Ibid.*, p. 16. The quotation shows that Nehru acknowledged a deterioration in the lives and conditions of the fleeing populace and that life was not normal enough for them to pursue their livelihoods.
  127. On 16 Aug. 1948 (a year after Direct Action day) Nehru writes in a letter to Dr BC Roy ‘I have your letter of Aug 4th about the influx from East Bengal. I realise your

difficulties and naturally we should do what we can to help you. But as I told you long ago there is no reasonable solution to the problem if there is a large influx from East Bengal. This is why I have been terribly anxious throughout to prevent this. I still think every effort should be made to prevent it. I think that it was a wrong thing for some of the Hindu leaders of East Bengal to come to West Bengal' Ibid, p. 19. It is interesting to note that Nehru refers to 'East Bengal' and not East Pakistan and it is obvious that he is determined to discourage the east Bengali minority community of East Pakistan from entering India.

128. Ibid, p. p. 20.

129. Ibid, p. 38.

130. One example is a correspondence regarding the request for tractors to reclaim land (which the refugees are willing to reclaim at the own cost). The land, which has been granted by the Dewan of Tripura State will accommodate 1,000 refugees. The request is not met with as a result of delayed government transaction, and finally, rejected on the basis of non-availability, even though the request comes with the poignant point that the refugees will lose the next harvest, if the land is not reclaimed in time. See Petition from Mssrs. Swasti Samity, dated 5 January 1949, National Archives, New Delhi.

There are records of petitions from refugees in Assam (e.g. two lakhs in Silchar 'in perilous condition' and 50, 000 in Agartala who find it 'strange that the Government of Tripura have done nothing for rehabilitation during this long period of three and a half years. (as) Their suffering beggars description), who implore him to visit them and be a witness to their plight.' Syama Prasad Mookherjee Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi.

131. The Ministry of Rehabilitation figures record the approximate number of refugees across the eastern border from 1947 to 1958 as four million and another one million before the formation of Bangladesh between 1964 and 1971. See Menon, 1999, p. 161.

132. Triguna Sen, Foreword in Chakrabarty, 1999, p. xvi.

133. Ibid, p. 163

134. Gandhian passive resistance.

135. 'The working class and peasant struggles launched during this period culminated in a massive outburst in 1966 over the demand for food which forced the government to release the CPI (M) leaders from prison. The State Assembly elections in February 1967 led to the first United Front government in West Bengal.' Partha Chatterjee, 'The Naxalbari Legacy' in *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi, Kolkata, etc.: OUP), 1998, Chapter 6, p. 87.

'The year 1967 saw a change in government, the first since independence. It was a tenuous coalition of Left parties with breakaway Congress groups. Relations within the Left were not particularly amicable either, for the two Communist parties born out of the split five years ago had gone into the elections as bitter antagonists; several constituencies in the city saw rival communist candidates waging acrimonious campaigns against each other. The government was toppled in late 1968 —unjustly, the people thought, for they returned the United Front to power once again in 1969, but this time too the internal differences proved too strong for the government to last.' 'The Political Culture in Calcutta', Ibid, Chapter 11, p. 190.

136. Samaddar has found the neat distinction of refugee and economic migrant problematic in his study of the people coming across the eastern border: 'The Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) has maintained a strict distinction between 'refugees' and 'infiltrators', i.e., illegal migrants. The Hindus are refugees, for they are persecuted. Muslims

- want to enter illegally for economic and other reasons. This stereotype ... had been so strong, that we were overwhelmed by the equivalent: "voluntary + economic = migrants" and "involuntary + political = refugees"... in our study, we found this equivalence problematic.' He goes on to say that with post-coloniality, the developments in South Asia have made 'the traditional distinctions' made by Western social scientists 'between migrant and refugee, economic and political reason, volition and compulsion, largely "irrelevant"'. Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd), 1999, pp. 67–69.
137. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Stree), 2003, p. 6.
  138. Quoted by Sudeshna Chakrabarty in 'The Impact of the Flow of Refugees from East Bengal on West Bengal: Political, Economic and Social Aspect', Calcutta University (unpublished), 2001.
  139. Bagchi and Dasgupta, 2003, *Ibid*. This book includes transcriptions of interviews with Bengali refugee women, which testify to their struggle and will to succeed.
  140. See endnote 120.  
Samaddar sums up the reality of the 'porous' border in politically constructed attitudes, 'To deceive ourselves of the pangs of proximity, we have changed categories into opposites: migration is infiltration, border trade is smuggling, empathy is interference, policy prescription is area studies, neighbourhood is "near abroad".' Samaddar, 1997, p. 23.
  141. The other two classifications are 'inter-dependent' (which Menon applies to the borderlands of India and Nepal) and 'integrated' (which, for the sub-continent, remains yet to be achieved in a climate of free trade and a sanctioned flow of human traffic). Menon, 1999, p. 160.
  142. Cited by Menon, 1999, p. 161.
  143. Suranjan Das, 'The 1992 Calcutta Riot in Historical Continuum: A Relapse into Communal Fury?' in *Modern Asian Studies* 34, 2 (2000), Cambridge University Press Printed in the United Kingdom, p. 288.
  144. *Ibid*. Das goes on to note that incidents of desecration of places of worship and the molestation of women were markedly absent during the 1964 Kolkata riots.
  145. Samaddar, 1997, p. 106.
  146. Ali Riaz, *God Willing: the Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 2004, pp. 7–8. The Star investigation records "from Bhola to Pirojpur, from Laxmipur to Jessore to Bagerhat, ... all the Hindus had to say was how they had been subjected to looting, harassment, assault and, in some cases, rape. It was quite clear that the attackers were after the valuables and lands of the Hindus. And in the process, the Hindu women were easy prey." From "Harrowing Tales of Depravity: Fear and Insecurity Still Haunt Them", *Star Roving Team*, 11 November 2001, *Ibid*, p. 7.
  147. *Ibid*, p. 8.
  148. *Ibid*.
  149. *Ibid*.
  150. *Ibid*.
  151. '...Said distinguishes between "exiles", "refugees", expatriates" and "émigrés". The origin of exile, he observes, is in the ancient practice of banishment, which stigmatizes the exile as rejected. Refugees, he finds, are a by-product of the modern state, political innocents united in bewilderment. Expatriates share the condition of the exile in all respects but one: having chosen to leave their homeland they are therefore

- free to return. The status of the emigre is ambiguous”: the émigré may once have been an exile but may have constructed a new national identity away from national origins.’ Quoted in Samaddar, 1997, p. 81.
152. Das, 2000, p. 300.
153. Das lists this as consisting of Rajabazar, Kidderpore, Kalabagan, Zacharia Street, Keshab Sen Street, Chitpur and Moulali. *Ibid*, 292.
154. The affected areas were Metiabruz, Garden Reach, Park Circus, Tangra, Tapsia, Tiljala and Beniapukur slums. *Ibid*, p. 293.
155. *Ibid*, p. 294
156. ‘For instance, 150 Muslim youths arrested from Metiabruz were subjected to inhuman torture and forced to chant “Jai Sri Ram”.’ *Ibid*, p. 299.
157. *Ibid*, p. 296.
158. *Ibid*, pp. 300–01.
159. *Ibid*, p. 87.
- It is interesting to note that in her ‘Foreword’, Lal Jayawardena lists the top eleven nations of the developing world which bear the ‘brunt of the economic burden of refugees’ in which she includes Pakistan and Bangladesh and leaves out India altogether, an omission that does not take into account the migration across India’s ‘porous’ eastern border, which is largely one-way, into India. See E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen, eds., *Mistrusting Refugees*, Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995, p. viii.
160. ‘Pother Shesh’ (which literally means end of the road) is a colony of Hindu refugees from Bangladesh near Kolkata and the East Pakistan Displaced Person’s Colony in Delhi is self-descriptive in its very name. See Menon, 1999, p. 163.

***Bashabi Fraser***

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

We have had a difficult task of trying to retain the flavour of a language, steeped in a culture that is difficult to convey in its entirety, in English. We have taken some decisions to maintain a certain parity to maintain cohesion. For the purposes of this book, we have accepted the new names of the old Presidencies of Calcutta and Bombay as Kolkata and Mumbai, respectively, and Dhaka for Dacca, but retained the older names if they occur in quotations. West Bengal was born after Partition, so all references to the eastern part of Bengal before it became East Pakistan is to 'east Bengal', since it was not an officially recognized division before 1947, apart from the brief history of Bengal's first partition in 1905, which was repealed in 1911. Names of well-known people like that of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee appear with variations in the spelling in different references. We have used the present, most accepted form of such names, though we have retained the recorded spelling in archival lists when citing relevant references.

In the translation of the actual stories, what is utterly lost is the flavour of the nuances of the various east Bengali/East Pakistani dialects which are evocative of recognizable language rhythms and which immediately 'place' a person, indicating her/his roots in her/his land of birth. It is also difficult to convey the various forms of 'you' in so far as they convey intimacy, familiarity, respect or social position. There has been an effort, however unsatisfactory, to convey the difference in the dialect through the choice of language. The tone of persons addressing each other is difficult to translate. Inevitably, the rich connotation and meaning of proverbs, songs and idioms cannot be fully retrieved in a translation. The translators have worked to give, not just a word for word translation (which could be literary but meaningless), but striven to convey the full meaning of the stories, keeping both a western and a non-Bengali readership in mind.

We decided to keep the Bengali words which are part of the culture and would seem tedious in literary translations. Also, as in the case of *chire* and *muri*, which conjure familiar items so inter-woven with Bengali life and which are not exactly flaked rice or rice crispies, we decided to retain the



traditional Bengali words. They have all been explained in a glossary at the end of the book. Certain terms, which have a particular relevance to the story being told, have been explained in footnotes.

Honorifics like 'Didi' and references like 'Boropishi' have been included and explained in the glossary. An older sister or brother and an older friend or acquaintance are addressed with a 'di' or 'da' (short for *didi* or *dada*, in the case of a woman and man, respectively) added to the end of their name, as in 'Phooldi'. Similarly, an aunt or uncle, a mother's or a father's friend, can have 'mashima' or 'chachi,' 'kaku' or 'chacha' etc., attached as a suffix to their names, e.g. in Sneha+mashima = 'Snehamashima'. In fact, depending on the age of a person in relation to the person addressing her/him, a woman or man on the street will be referred to with respect as in 'Didi', 'Dada', 'Mashima', 'Chacha', 'Didima' (grandmother) or 'Dadu' (grandfather). A Bengali gentleman is addressed as 'Babu' which has been added as a suffix to a name, as in 'Mrigankababu', to reflect the way it is written in Bengali, as a continuous name and not as a separate word.

Where possible, we have given the full meaning of terms, as in the names of trees like *sal* and fish like *pabda*, in the glossary. But in some cases, some local names have proved untranslatable, especially when they have no relevance outside the region where they occur. In certain instances, we have explained them as 'small local fish' as in the case a long list of fish given in the story, *The Girl Was Innocent*, or left it in a context from which it is possible for the reader to gauge the meaning.

In the Bengali original, dialogues sometimes appear with dashes or without inverted commas. To standardize the whole text, we have used single inverted commas for all dialogues and double inverted commas to denote a quotation. Songs, as in the folk songs that Pishima sings in *Another Tune in Another Room*, have been italicized to distinguish them from the dialogue.

The names of the Bengali calendar months (e.g. Baishakh), the complex family relationships unexplained by 'aunt' (e.g. Pishima), 'uncle', grandmother or 'grandfather' (e.g. Dadu), the names of Hindu Gods and Goddesses (e.g. Shiva and Durga), have been retained to furnish their Bengali connotations and flavour and explained in the glossary.

It is not easy to capture the pronunciation of vowels in Bengali, when translated to English, for example, in Bengali 'a' can be pronounced as 'o' which is difficult to convey as in 'Basab', where the first 'a' is pronounced like 'u' in umbrella' and the second 'a' is pronounced as 'o'. In recent times, Bengalis have resorted to writing their names with altered vowels, as in 'Joya' to indicate the difference in sound from the widely accepted Indian pronunciation, 'Jaya'. Sometimes, the exact translation of a vowel conjures

something so different from the original, that, one is compelled to resort to an alternative spelling, so 'teen' which means 'three' and could have been written as 'tin' for accuracy, has been spelt with a double 'ee', although in Bengali the short vowel for 'i' is used. In this volume, the translators have, in certain cases, altered the spelling of words and names to convey the Bengali pronunciation, which we have retained. But in some cases, where the Hindi word is accepted in Indian English (as in *kotah* or *sal*), though it differs from the Bengali pronunciation ('kattha' and 'shal'), we have kept the pronunciation known India-wide. However, in some instances, where the Bengali term has a distinct connotation, adding to the local flavour of the story, as in 'sahab' or 'dactarbabu' (for sahib and doctorbabu), we have reverted to the Bengali pronunciation. Again, Bengali (like all Indian languages which are derived from Sanskrit), has three 's's, of which the dental 's' has been translated as 's' (with some exceptions, as in *sal*), and the other two have been written as 'sh', to indicate the sound in Bengali.

The stories which relate to Bihar like 'Hindu' and 'Infiltration' or depict countrymen as in 'Treaty', use modes of speech that indicate the characters' use of Hindi/Hindustani/Urdu or dialects of these languages, which is not possible to convey in a translation. The flavour, which marks the stories as depicting a different experience of people who form part of a study of the Bengal Partition, is difficult to capture in English, except in modes used by the author himself, when he uses a Urdu/Hindustani word in Bengali and then says 'meaning', giving the Bengali equivalent as in 'Phuphu, meaning Pishi,' in 'Infiltration'.

In Bengali stories, the narrator can use the past tense in the general narration and switch to the present when focussing on character dialogue, which, in an English translation, appears confusing in its seemingly ungrammatical tense change. We have tried to convey this narrative pattern where possible, without compromising the grammar in the English translation.

Many Indians, being bilingual, will intersperse their conversation with English words, phrases and even utter full sentences in English while speaking in the vernacular. In such cases, we have indicated the English words in italics. However, some English words which have become part of the Bengali language have not been highlighted.

On the whole, the translators have tried to avoid being pedantic and have done their best to convey the full meaning and flavour of the stories in Bengali for an English speaking audience.

**Bashabi Fraser**



## ABOUT THE STORIES

The stories in this anthology show how the socio-economic fabric of an inter-dependent society on either side of the eastern border slowly changed and was finally ripped apart by Partition, how friendships were tested, loyalties changed and how the humanity of some people surfaced in spite of the divisive politics. They illustrate the endless struggle of the east Bengal/East Pakistan refugee and illustrate the continuing relevance of the border as people continue to cross the Radcliffe Boundary. The stories also show the sense of uncertainty that still grips the minority community on either side of the demarcating line.

### ***The Solution (Samasya Puran)***

Rabindranath Tagore

The socio-economic fabric of Indian society with the Hindu landlord and his Muslim tenant and its inter-dependent reality is evident in Tagore's story, *The Solution*. In pre-Partitioned India, Krishnagopal Sarkar is the Hindu landlord of tenants of a mixed community, consisting of upper and lower caste Hindus and Muslims. He is the prototype of the benevolent zamindar, who takes care of his dependants and in altruistic fashion, writes off debts and even returns the land of his tenant farmers who are in difficulties and appeal to him. When in Hindu fashion, he decides to retire to Varanasi (Kashi) and leave his lands and their supervision in the hands of his modern, efficient, graduate son, Bipin Behari, the latter starts retrieving the diminished wealth and assets of the family by realizing the rent from defaulters and taking back their land. What surprises Bipin is that his father has returned the land to the tiller in the case of a Muslim, one Achimaddi Biswas, son of the motherly, Mirjabibi. Achimaddi's stiff legal resistance in the face of sure ruin astounds Bipin Behari and angers him more. The mystery is solved when Krishnagopal returns unaccountably on the day of the trial of Achimaddi who has been arrested for attempted assault, and advises Bipin to drop the charges as Achamaddi is his half brother by Mirjabibi.

The irony of romantic liaisons being a reality in spite of the caste, class and religious divide, comes as a shock to Bipin Behari, who withdraws the case to avoid a social scandal. Amongst all the recipients of Krishnagopal's magnanimity, is Ramtaran, the lawyer, whose education the former has paid for, and who can now absolve himself of a nagging sense of gratitude at the whiff of this scandal, as he assumes that all Krishnagopal's good deeds are acts of penance for self-atonement.

### ***The Protector (Je Banchae)***

Annada Shankar Ray

Mutual admiration for integrity and humanism account for the inter-communal friendship between an eccentric Assistant Magistrate Hafiz Mehdi and a Bengali Hindu judge (the narrator of the story) in *The Protector*. A Khaksar, Hafiz is ascetic in his habits and altruistic in his dealings with others and a staunch believer in the two-nation theory. As a Khaksar, Hafiz has pledged his life to the protection of others in works of charity, practising abstinence and never accepting anything without giving something in return. He believes that Hindus and Muslims are two nations and yet, he reveres Gandhi as a man of faith, but not Jinnah, for according to him, the Khaksars think he is not interested in religion or social welfare. The story is set during the Bengal Famine. Hafiz resigns from his civil service post when he is accused of protecting his subdivision from famine by the Food Minister. It is obvious that he protects all his people, not waiting to ponder their religion. He holds everyone responsible for allowing the Bengal famine to happen. After the exchange with the Minister, he loses his faith in the Ministry of the Muslim League. He has no idea how he will survive, and gives his life up to the will of Allah, but is still rigid in the policy of mutual give and take, practising the making of khadi on the charkkha even after Partition.

### ***Insignificance (Ulukhar)***

Nabendu Ghosh

'The poor have only one community—they are neither Hindus nor Muslim' is a reality that is reiterated in many stories on Partition as in *Insignificance*, a fact that is realized by the conductor, Aziz, of the Kolkata tram workers' union, who is on strike. The story shows how the tram workers' union remained united in spite of divisive politics, and Aziz did not trust either the League or the Cabinet as 'he knew them in and out.' But riots are instigated, and though Aziz's slum remains peaceful through his and the efforts of a wise elder, he is stabbed amidst this mindless violence, when he leaves his

locality, in a desperate effort to buy and bring home the doll, his ailing daughter, Rabiya, hankers after and he has promised.

***The Saviour (Traankarta)***

Nabendu Ghosh

The story of the bhadraloks' utilization of the poor to protect themselves at the cost of the lives of untouchables like Jhogru, is told in *The Saviour*. The Saviour is Jhogru Sardar, a Dom, the untouchable caste that conducts cremations and lives on the margins of society. He is the leader of the upcountry men who were identified in police records as having played a major role during the time of the Kolkata riots. The story shows how men like Jhogru are drawn into the rioting, claimed in times of crisis as part of the community and bribed with alcohol and food by the *bhadralok*, to fight in the front lines of the communal battle. The meeting in which the scheme is hatched to rouse and recruit Jhogru and his clan, is attended by businessmen, professionals and youths who are members of the Tarun Athletic Club, reminiscent of the groups who trained to explode the appellation of the non-martial Bengali. When the Jhogrus of their locality die, the influential middle-class quietly escape after the fatal clashes with police escort.

***The Ledger (Khatian)***

Manik Bandopadhyay

Set in riot times, *The Ledger* shows how the communal violence affected the very poor and once again, how the violence was enacted by the dispossessed classes, who were, by and large, at the receiving end. It also enumerates the Hindu-Muslim camaraderie that existed, enumerated here in the two workers in a factory and it shows how friends helped each other once the communal frenzy was unleashed. The Muslim worker hides his Hindu friend in his suffocating, congested slum house in spite of his wife's anger at endangering the family and sharing their meagre rations with him. The rioting crowds set fire to both their slums, and the blood-curdling shouts of killing and agonized screams fill the air. At the end both have had their houses burnt down and lost their jobs, and while they are whisked away in a police van for 'disobeying section 144', one friend asks the other to confess that 'neither you nor I have any caste. You are poor and so am I. We belong to the same community.' His friend readily agrees.

***Treaty (Swakkhar)***

Achintya Kumar Sengupta

*Treaty* shows how communal violence sent comrades fighting each other along battle lines. Dinonath, a Hindu and Johurali, a Muslim, try to eke out a meagre living in the big city of Kolkata by vending. Their families are in far away east Bengal, in Jessore and Barishal, respectively. The two friends share their food and exchange goods without a desire to profit from each other, till the burning, looting and stabbings of communal violence drives them apart and they hurl bricks and bottles at each other from opposing gangs. Circumstances force them to seek shelter in an abandoned building where they recognize each other, reunited against a common enemy, the security guard whose detection they evade in a silent bond. They share a light and a *bidi*, putting their signature as it were, to a 'treaty' of peace born of friendship.

***Loss (Jaha Jae)***

Gour Kishore Ghosh

*Loss* depicts how riots bring together people into a forced intimacy which would not have happened in normal times. The shifting perspective shows the different response of people to each other during such situations. The middle-aged Ranu from the Hindu middle-class, is unsure of the intentions of the elderly Muslim shopkeeper in whose shop she has sought refuge. Her host's initial irritation at being landed with the 'nuisance' of Ranu's unwanted presence, slowly turns to sympathy for Ranu's disturbed state and physical weakness. Nevertheless, he is anxious about the social response to being locked in with a woman from the 'other' community. The irony of Ranu's fears of dishonour is driven home by repeated references to her flabby, heavy, unattractive person of thirty-six years. In fact, this unsympathetic, even disparaging depiction of women of middle-age seen from the male gaze, occurs in more than one story. 'Loss' shows how proximity turns suspicion and anxiety to mutual trust and respect as both Ranu and the shopkeeper stay in this cramped safe zone while they wait for the city to be calm again for them to return to their diverse destinations.

***Infidel (Kafir)***

Atin Bandyopadhyay

Communal discord caused mindless violence like the death of a simple soul like Paran and led to the disappearance of women like Kirni. It was a test of humanity in people like Hashim and Zabida who continue in communal

amity with their Hindu neighbours at the risk of their own lives, or in the people who carry out searches to rescue women of the minority community, who disappeared amidst the mayhem, like the volunteer workers who rescue Kirni. The 'kafir' in the story is what Paran's killers brand Hashem with for helping a Hindu, till fate enacts a reversal of roles as Hashem's pursuers fall in a ditch and are buried under the collapsing earth. When a gathering crowd asks Hashem what he is doing, as he frenziedly piles earth over the new grave, Hashim says he is burying 'kafirs'.

### ***Boatman (Majhi)***

Prafulla Roy

Some people tried to make an easy buck at the time of Partition. Also, the worst and best in people surfaced in times of crisis in murder and abduction on the one hand and the enormous sacrifice of certain individuals in a bid to save the life and honour of women on the other. Fazal, the eponymous hero of the story called 'Boatman', dreams of marrying his love, Salima, for which he is saving up, to pay her grasping father. 'The Hindus were leaving the lands and property of their ancestors and fleeing in desperation' and amidst this surging sea of terrified humanity, Fazal looks forward to making a tidy sum in Yasin Shikdar's urgency to cross over with a woman in a burkha, who is not his bibi as Fazal at first assumes, but an abducted Hindu woman. Yasin has killed her husband, but has promised to send her on to Kolkata to safety. However, he tries to rape her on the boat instead. In a strange equalization of his Salima's face with that of the pleading Hindu widow who calls out to him to save her, Fazal acts, piercing Yasin with his harpoon and watches him drown in the Dhaleswari. The boatman ends up paying for the abducted woman's ferry ticket to Kolkata, and parting with the rest of his savings for her to survive in her new life as a refugee, thus pushing back his own hopes of nuptial happiness.

### ***Honour (Ijjat)***

Narayan Gangopadhyay

*Honour* is set soon after the events following the Great Calcutta Killing and Noakhali at the end of 1946. In an old syncretic society where Namasudras and Muslims have prayed on both sides of a shrine to a fakir and Kali, a Maulvi's speech is used by the Muslim landlord, Habib Mia, to instigate communal violence so that he can take over the land of the Namasudra Brahmin leader, Jagannath Sarkar. Mantai, the 'branded criminal', is incited by Habib Mia to threaten Jagannath of dire consequences if he continues to



conduct the Kali Puja that year. The reality of people assuming that they could wield power and authority under a Muslim League Government is evident in Mantai's warning 'It is our rule now. You'll have to do exactly what we say'. The story portrays the heightened Hindu consciousness of the Namasudras who have attained acceptance through *suddh* rituals, and are poised to protect their caste identity, with their leader breathing the self-importance of a high priest, as their Brahmin. The war cries of both groups accompany the sharpening of weapons in the preparations for a confrontation. In reality, both Mantai and Jagannath Sarkar are desperately poor, driven to Habib Mia to beg for saris to protect the respectability of their wives, but are refused. When Habib Mia's fourth and favourite wife, Lal-bibi, dies after a feast and is buried, the two leaders are spotted digging her grave for cloth from the coffin. An astounded and angry Habib Mia tries to goad onlookers to kill the two 'kafirs'. But the crowd remains immobile, wondering how 'painlessly' a 'compromise' had been struck between Kali and the fakir. For the time-being, a syncretic society is tenuously held together by the bonding born of shared needs of two communities who know and understand poverty.

***In a Place and in a Land (Sthane O Stane)***

Manik Bandyopadhyay

*In a Place and in a Land* is set just before Partition. The continuing violence, sporadic but seething under the calm surface, has made Kolkata a hateful city for Narahari, who has decided to continue living in Dhaka. Echoing Gandhi's plea of building bridges of trust between the communities after the Noakhali and similar violence in other areas in east Bengal, Narahari wants to show his solidarity with his place of birth by asserting his faith in his Muslim neighbours. His intention is to live in spite of fear, creating an atmosphere of trust in the community around him, and to this effect, he is bent on taking his family back with him in these troubled times. He comes to Kolkata with this purpose and is met with the strong opposition of his in-laws and the consternation of his wife, who all fail to understand the purpose of his decision to go back with his family, where their lives will be endangered.

***Here and There (Epar Opar)***

Manoj Basu

Noakhali led to the Bihar violence, which then had repercussion in other districts in east Bengal. The minority community of the well-to-do Hindus like Himangshu's family of his village, were at the receiving end of the violence in

*Here and There.* The passing of land and property to former tenants and servants and the attempts at selling them at a later date to their new proprietors, are central to Himangshu's experience and return. The story moves back and forth in time as Himangshu dreams of past events. It shows how secular friends like Sirajul and tenants like Taj Mohammad, changed beyond recognition during those times. A way of life is disrupted as households break up and are swept away by the violence. Yet when Himangshu returns, Taj Mohammad is willing to pay for the property he enjoys and gives him a hundred rupee note as a first instalment, while Taj Mohammad's women-folk bring provisions and Sirajul invites him to his house. One old man, a lyricist, Golam Ali, makes a hazardous and strenuous journey just to see him again. He tells him that if he had not been ill in bed during those fateful days, he would have contained the violence. Golam Ali's tears for Himangshu's desolation moves the latter to give the old man the hundred rupees to rebuild the dargah as a note of recognition of the latter's sense of justice and innate humanity. Like Fazal, in 'The Boatman', Himangshu, though faced with utter ruin and the non-realization of his dreams, gives away his all to someone of the other community from a sense of fellow feeling. In India, Himangshu knows that he will face unemployment and homelessness in the continuing struggle of the east Bengal refugee.

### ***Hindu***

Dibyendu Palit

The setting is Bihar after the 1946 violence with many Muslims having left Rampur, making it a predominantly Hindu area, showing the breaking of the norm of a mixed community in an Indian town. It also illustrates how the fear of communal uprisings prevented people from caring for the ill and destitute, if they were suspected to be of the 'other' community. The *Hindu* of the title is Mathuranath, the patriarch of a joint family, a pious man, continuing his regular ablutions in the Ganga at dawn, in spite of his fragile health. An unknown man, infested with body sores, ragged and emaciated and lying beside the open drain, arouses Mathuranath's humanism when the stranger proves to be still alive. In the face of the apathy and ineptitude of the local police and hospital, Mathuranath takes the man into his own house and nurses him personally. As a staunch Hindu, he remains convinced that this is his duty, according to his *shastras*. His lawyer son and a friend, who is a town elder, decide to remove the man, who is suspected of being a Muslim, to more neutral premises in order to avoid the mounting tension resulting from the incident of a Hindu household sheltering a Muslim man. Humanity is obviously not an issue with society here, which still seems volatile and easily explosive.

***Acharya Kripalani Colony***

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

*Acharya Kripalani Colony* encapsulates the fear of displacement, the worry about relocation and the exploitation of such anxieties of would-be refugees by profiteers, around the time of Partition. It shows how east Bengali Hindus were sold marshy land, given rosy promises of its developed state in unashamed fictitious advertisements of lucrative, and easily accessible 'land'. The cautious narrator decides to inspect the land before committing himself to investing in advertised plots. The landowner turns out to be a doctor with an unenviable practice, who appears distant and disinterested in a client who has come all the way from Jessore to see his plot. He waves a wad of receipts in the narrator's face to show the popularity of 'Acharya Kripalani Colony'. The 'Colony' turns out to be miles away from the station and the Ganga, and like much of the land given to east Bengal refugees, is waterlogged, mosquito infested and a veritable jungle of swampy undergrowth. By a twist of fate, according to the Radcliffe Report, the narrator's village is allocated to West Bengal, showing how the border defeated many expectations of where it would 'place' them.

***The Crossing (Epar Ganga Opar Ganga)***

Jyotirmoyee Devi

*The Crossing*, as the title suggest, is about the crossing of the border after Partition, of people in whole families, who leave fields of flourishing paddy and homesteads behind, carrying very little in their search for a safe haven. The self-styled guardians of the border on either side are out to make a profit. No one is allowed to cross over without lining the pockets of both groups. But while the very poor get away when they plead their poverty and promise not to come back with the *miyans* on the East Pakistan border, the ones on the West Bengal side prove implacable. Those with a little money take the train, while others are allowed to walk across. This story is about Sudam and his pretty, young wife, Durga. Men with money and beautiful women are easily spotted and noted by those guarding the border. While Durga is given shelter by the Muslim station master and his wife, Sudam crosses to Kolkata to find 25 rupees as the price to take his pretty wife across the border. Sudam returns after many days, by which time Durga, has taken the only option left to a defenceless, apparently abandoned woman, of drowning herself. Like Paran in *Kafir*, Sudam becomes the crazed husband, looking for his lost wife.

***A Thorn in the Path (Pathar Kanta)***

Ramesh Chandra Sen

Though the refugee columns in the east were not as concentrated as on the western border, as they were not perpetuated by immediate mob fury, the miserable train of people uprooted by fear, apprehension and despair from across the eastern border, walking in both directions, to the land of safety, was a common sight at the time of Partition. One such group trudging from east to west, carrying meagre belongings, confronts another group like itself, consisting of mainly women, children, the elderly and a few men, just as hapless like itself. There is a moment of silent empathy between them as they size each other up and recognize their similar plight, before going their opposite ways. The 'thorn' is the young boy, Jadav, burning with temperance and slowing the family down as his father, Parashar, curses him and his mother, Mohini, protects his frailness. The sharing of burdens and food by fellow travellers is typical of such times as the Ghataks share their rations with Parashar's family. Like the Ghatak's family, many have left, not because of communal violence, but because others were leaving, and they felt vulnerable in being left behind and needed to relocate amongst their own kind. The Ghataks come with money and seeds to begin life anew. Many refugees die of diseases on the way and this group encounters cholera beside, what appears to be, an inviting oasis of a lake with shady trees. Here they meet a Vaishnavi, who, like Sonadas Baul, in the story bearing his name, is a renouncer of material bonds and is beyond social, religious differences, given to singing songs depicting her own particular faith. It is at the lakeside that Parashar finds a little child crying of hunger when he cannot suckle at his dead mother's breast, whom Parashar cradles and saves from destruction, embodying the many acts of humanity that the destitute were driven to in such troubled times.

***Alien Land (Angina Bidesh)***

Annada Shankar Ray

The absurdity of drawing boundaries on water and the amusing story of asserting rights and privileges as confusion prevails when Indian Muslims and Hindu Pakistanis are left on the 'wrong' side, while their means of livelihood has been transferred to the other, making one-time citizens 'foreigners' overnight and creating suspicion amongst erstwhile neighbours, is told in *Alien Land*. Partition has not been a neat solution as it has not succeeded in distributing people in alignment with their religion, to their allocated countries. By a stroke of fate, the Muslim farmers and fishermen find themselves in

Fateyabad, which falls to India, while the Hindu farmers of Phulna are 're-located' as it were, in Pakistan. On the administrative side, the two countries bristle with shows of power and control and counter-control, preening for battle. What appears to be the fretting of a man, delirious with fever, turns out to be a story about the dispute round the waters of the Ganga where it merges with the Padma. The problem is, how does one draw a line of demarcation across water? A navy launch, the *Pomfret*, sent to salvage the problem of defending the right of Indian Muslims to harvest the crops they have always grown on the river strands, gets stuck and causes the officer to fret about its rescue against the danger of it drifting into the enemy's hands or be lost forever in the Bay of Bengal. The officer, who has defended his Muslim workmen and people all along as loyal citizens of India, is now justified in his faith, saved as he is, by a miraculous incident. A flash flood upstream in far off Uttar Pradesh prompts the Muslim boatmen, in a pre-emptive move, to board *Pomfret* and at high tide, propel it to the 'Indian' side. In despairing situations the officer can reassuringly recall *Pomfret* and say 'don't fret'.

### ***The Border (Shimanta)***

Salam Azad

The border between India and Pakistan not only created two countries, but segmented families, causing the immense pain of separation by a defining line which has been almost uncrossable for years, except as the final crossing for people who have left one country for another, for good. This is the dilemma faced by Neelima in *The Border*, when she receives a telegram in Bhagyakul in East Pakistan, saying that her aged father, who migrated to Karimgunge in India in 1947, now wants to see her, perhaps, for the last time. Yet how is she to fulfil his wish? It was not possible to cross the line, for one could be shot without documents. For many, like her father, it was a journey of no return. So Neelima arranges to wear a red sari and hopes her father will get her message to come and see her from the other side of the river at a certain point, at an appointed time. She sees a vague figure in the distance but is not sure whether her father with his failing eyes, is able to see her as well. Two helpless human beings, Neelima and her husband, Pobitra Saha, break down weeping uncontrollably, powerless beside this political barrier that they have neither created nor wanted.

***India (Bharatbarsha)***

Sayyed Mustafa Siraj

During times of communal violence and around Partition, the question of identity was raised time and again as to whether a person was a Hindu or a Muslim. It was about establishing alignment along communal lines, of identifying targets and of claiming the living or dead in times of rivalry. Like the unknown, emaciated, ragged man in Rampur in Bihar, in the story *Hindu*, an ancient looking, withered, old woman, braves the cold rain-ridden winter wind of the western plains of Bengal, arousing the curiosity of the street crowd who wonder where she is from and what her religion is. Like the other stranger in *Hindu*, she has come to her impoverished, nationless, communityless plight, without a sense of belonging and without any one community claiming to care for her. Yet when she is apparently dead, the Hindus and Muslims both claim her, swearing on having heard her establish her identity. She amazes them all by the miracle of her comeback and refuses to answer their question about her actual identity, throwing a spirited, defiant answer 'Can't you see ...?' Mustafa Siraj gives the woman her identity as 'India,' in the title of the story.

***Illegitimate (Jaiba)***

Narendranth Mitra

*Illegitimate* shows the sense of intense revulsion that overtakes a rape victim, Sudatta Majumdar, who passionately wants to abort the child she has conceived as a result of communal violence, having been in Lahore at the time of Partition. Her husband, Mriganka, who appears enlightened on the surface, has found her and taken her back. He is relieved when their doctor friend refuses to go ahead with the abortion proposal because of Sudatta's advanced stage of pregnancy. Contrary to Sudatta's wishes, Mriganka brings the child home, instead of sticking to the previously made arrangements of giving it away after birth. In a free India, the boy, who is a child of Partition, becomes the centre of interest for the scientist Mriganka's research on cross breeding, oblivious of the pain he causes his wife, who wants her child to be loved and valued as a human being and not treated as a guinea pig. Sudatta then takes the decision to abort her second 'legitimate' child in time, to prevent her scientist husband from having another sample to carry on a comparative study of heredity versus environment, a riveting topic for people who were concerned with the identity and traits of the children of Partition

***Home, Sweet Home! (Janmabhumi)***

Samaresh Dasgupta

Written like a diary, *Home, Sweet Home* has all the nostalgia of a refugee remembering his motherland and is about the social response to rape. The narrator is an artist who paints the landscape of what he has left behind with its romantic connotations and the reality of Sealdah Station which became proverbial as the crowded arrival point and indefinite refuge for the destitute from east Bengal and later, East Pakistan. The refugee narrator continues to miss the land of his birth and encounters the sarcasm of those who have not been uprooted from a fairly prosperous agricultural base and cannot comprehend the whole truth of what the dispossessed have lost. The new border has separated families as the narrator's parents, uncles and aunts stayed back and died there, while his generation was sent to India. Mothers are recalled with yearning in this story by their offspring. One of two sisters is 'saved' and given shelter by the narrator, her male cousin. Yet the international press misses the brother-sister bonding of cousins in Indian society, seeing the narrator's act as one of magnanimity to a rape victim and even suggesting she might be his mistress. Anju, the cousin in question then resorts to the last option left to many women in her situation, committing suicide on a railway track to save her cousin from shame on her behalf.

***The Stricken Daughter (Karun Kanya)***

Ramapada Chaudhury

In the wake of the national hue and cry raised by both nations to reclaim their abducted women who had forcibly been taken to the 'other' side, there was no question of asking or heeding the woman's choice. She had to be brought back with the help of a police force, as Arundhuti is, in *The Stricken Daughter*. Yet, society was not prepared for the rehabilitation of returned daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, who were considered polluted. Their children remained unwanted and unaccepted by the very societies who were responsible for their birth. Women like Arundhuti want to forget those past chapters of their life, but are not allowed to do so. Arundhuti pays the price for nurturing and cherishing the child born of a violent encounter. Her widowed mother's sense of shame and despair and suggestion that Arundhuti put the boy in an orphanage to protect her sibling's future and their family reputation, do not allow Arundhuti to wash her away the memory of a past, in which she was the hapless victim. She sees her situation mirrored in the attitude of another family to their daughter, Madhuri, who has been Arundhuti's friend. Now Madhuri is considered a 'fallen woman' by them and voiced

as such by her brother, Subimal, whom Arundhuti loved before they were all separated and scattered by the violence around Partition. At the end, Arundhuti, like Madhuri, faced by a nation's rejection, leaves of her own accord, going back with her child to the man she despises, her one-time abductor.

### ***Embrace (Angapali)***

Ramapada Chaudhury

Sabita, like Anju and Arundhuti, is a victim of rape and abduction. Lifted by riotous crowds a year and a half ago, she is brought back against all her entreaties by the police to her family, by which time, her mother has become a widow and her elder brother is no more, and one can only conjecture the reason for his disappearance. Sabita is relieved when her ritual-ridden mother takes and fondles her child, whom her delighted younger sister re-names 'Khushi'—the happy one—as Sabita is afraid to mention his Muslim name. Her joy, however, is short-lived. When Kabita admonishes her mother for having a wash in the evening in spite of her fragile health, her mother's response echoes that of a nation divided by religious prejudice. The mother decrees that even if Sabita has raised the child, it doesn't make him part of their family. Hers is a ritualistic cleansing after having touched the child born of the 'other' community. The children of Partition became the helpless and innocent victims of prejudice, never welcomed as citizens of the 'new' nations, which were responsible for their very birth.

### ***Kings Come and Kings Go (Raja Ashe Raja Jae)***

Prafulla Roy

Even if the poor did gain from Partition, their happiness often proved short-lived, as in the case of Razek, the simple village orphan of Chhiptipur. When Baikuntha Saha migrates to India, leaving his land and property in Razek's care, the latter experiences the rare lull from his subsistence living from fishing, as he flourishes with prosperity. New wealth brings the proposal of marriage from the respectable landowner, Torab Ali. But Partition also saw some exchange of property on a personal level as seen in this story (and in *Alam's Own House*). Baikuntha Saha comes back with a Muslim gentleman, one Amin saheb from Murshidbad and tells Razek that they are exchanging property so that Amin saheb can move in here and Baikuntha take over Amin saheb's lands in India. The arrangement sends the Razeks of a post-Partition world back to their former miserable existence of bare survival and broken dreams of marriage. They remain where they were—when the Baikuntha Sahas go and Amin sahebs arrive—on the margins of society, as Pakistan has no



meaning of a promised land providing sustainable incomes to or allowing inter-class marriages for the abject poor.

***The Story of Sonadas Baul (Sonadas Bauler Kathakata)***

Imdadul Haq Milan

The bauls of Bengal are itinerant minstrels who believe in universal love and like the Vaishnavi in *The Thorn in the Path*, remain outside the usual social and family norms. Like them, they live on charity and resist material bonds. Sonadas Baul is one such character, a loner in post-Partition east Bengal, without the remnants of a community around him. He is, perhaps, called a baul because of his peripheral, pecuniary existence. In the story, we see him as an old man who has a place of sorts to shelter in Gaganbabu's warehouse, for whom he does odd jobs. Gaganbabu is one of the few Hindu businessmen who, having sent his family away to Kolkata earlier, efficiently makes the last profits and sells his business quietly, thus making ready for the final departure from the land of his birth. When Gaganbabu decides to leave for Kolkata after his last dangerous, underhand deal, Sonadas Baul is devastated. He leaves without saying where he is going. 'In this whole wide world' on the eastern side of the Bengal border, 'there was no place for Sonadas'.

***Of Ram and Rahim (Ram Rahimer Katha)***

Mahasweta Devi

Ram and Rahim are commemorative of Hindu-Muslim friendship, two names that in this story signify the fate of young men who are the hapless victims of the mindless communal violence that claims their lives. While Panchu Bibi has seen the severed head of her son, Rahim, Sajumoni still awaits the full account of her son's disappearance from a Government which is reluctant to declare him dead. Both Sajumoni and Panchu Bibi empathize with one another's loss, but a fear of the times, keeps them apart. They belong to the hapless community of the under-privileged, suffering under grinding poverty and the political violence that uses and abuses young men, robbing whole families of their only bread-earners. Interestingly, the Hindu Sajumoni is doubtful of the power of the Siddha Kali shrine after Rahim's death and goes to the Muslim Fakir's shrine to pray for news of her son. Sajumoni's daughter-in-law still wears vermilion as a mark of her marriage in her uncertain wait for her husband's return, while Panchu Bibi's daughter-in-law is in the last days of her pregnancy, carrying the murdered Rahim's son. In this powerful story, soon after Sajumoni is assured of her son, Ram's murder, she hears Panchu Bibi's daughter-in-law's agonizing

yells of labour pain and the midwife in her rushes in the cover of darkness, ignoring the festering communal divide that hangs like a fearful pall over them, to bring the dead Rahim's son into this uncertain world.

### ***Looking Back (Phire Dekha)***

Selina Hossain

Set on the eve of the Bengali Language Movement in 1952 in Dhaka, *Looking Back* features the Dhaka University student movement which agitated against the imposition of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan in the Bengali speaking wing of a newly formed Pakistan. Its chief protagonist Bithi is the eldest daughter of an important police personnel, Toyabsaheb and his wife Jahanara, who has dreams for her daughters, in spite of her husband's patriarchal authority. Bithi is a leader of the Language movement and wants to see her future children valuing and learning Bengali, in full knowledge of their culture and identity. The values of the state and the individual, clash in the confrontation between Bithi's police father and Bithi. Bithi's fiance, Ashfaq, is both sad and proud in his consciousness of Bithi's extraordinary qualities and undaunted idealism. The story moves between Bithi's presciently visualized scenes of Parliamentary debates and her defiant political participation. On the eve of Bithi and Ashfaq's marriage, which coincides with the memorable Language Day of 21 February, in a sequence that reads like film shots being taken, Bithi leads the student procession unhaltingly, in spite of Section 144. She faces the raised guns of police who follow the orders of her astonished father and hears the Assembly debates of the future, while the past mingles in the present as her saliva turns to blood in her mouth.

### ***Refugee (Udbastu)***

Debesh Roy

*Refugee* questions the very identity of a family of a husband, his wife and daughter. They are doubted by the proposition that they have faked their true identities. The happy world of Satyabrata Lahiri, his wife Anima and daughter Anjana, in their miserable refugee holding where they have found some solace of being together and alive after being uprooted from east Bengal following Partition, is filled with dark forboding with the absurd police investigations providing three different unproven possibilities, negating Satyabrata and Anima's claims to being what they say or know they are. The story shows the bizarre legal investigations carried out in the Indian Union when it is faced with the question of approving property bought by refugees, demanding certificates from people who have fled without their belongings,

doubting the 'purity' of women who finally made it across the border, jeopardizing the very identity of their offspring. It also looks at the whole issue of giving back the property of Muslim evacuees after they returned to India to reclaim it, following the agreement of the Nehru-Liaqat Pact in 1952, which was put into practice effectively in some instances in West Bengal.

### ***The Debt of a Generation (Ek Janmer Hrin)***

Dipankar Das

The Debt of a Generation is paid by the narrator's family for his uncle's family. Both his and his uncle's families have been forced to flee their homeland at the time of Partition, and though the narrator's father somehow manages to eke out a living for his family, the brother is never able to recover the 'social dignity' he knew, in what was, east Bengal. Deep in debt and desperation, he disappears across the border, perhaps looking for his homeland after losing his mental balance. The shame of not being able to marry off daughters, who are well past the 'marriageable' age, was an ignominy many parents did face and could not bear. There is a sense of a heavy pall of despondency shrouding people who seem to be caught up in an unending, downhill post-Partition struggle. The apparently stoical elder daughter of the uncle, 'Renudi', the narrator's cousin, finds the only exit open to her from this inescapable situation, through suicide, also resorted to by Anju in *Home, Sweet Home!*

### ***If (Jadi)***

Sunil Gangopadhyay

*If* is about the small differences that can arise as a result of inter-communal marriages, as evident in that of the secular, atheist Siraj and Deepa, a non-practising Hindu. Yet, the marriage also allows visits between the two families and a festive sharing and participation. Partition did not necessarily see people aligned in the 'right' country according to their respective religions as Jahanara Begum, a dignified widow belonging to a prosperous and well-known Muslim family, is based in her late husband's mansion in Kolkata around 1966, while Deepa's family remains across the border in East Pakistan. Jahanara Begum is observing Shabe Barat with her grandchildren. In the context of post-Partition India, some of Jahanara Begum's family is scattered in Pakistan and the west, though the rest are with her. The tensions of a Hindu-Muslim marriage, about what (if any), religion the offspring should be taught, the principled neutrality that is enforced by an angry Siraj against his mother's shocked protests, illustrates the generation gap in the approach

to the question of individual freedom. Yet, Jahanara has not forced Deepa to convert to Islam. She, in universal motherly fashion, invites Deepa's brother and wife to their religious meal and, in turn, accepts their invitation to Lakshmi Puja in Deepa's father's home. The years of communal violence jar, but the memory of an earlier society of sharing is revived in a fainting Jahahnara Begum. She relents and asks for the *shinni* she so much enjoyed as a little girl, the *prasad* she used to have in a more syncretic, tolerant society of Hindu-Muslim association before communal politics shattered such relationships and exchange.

### ***Another Tune in Another Room* (Anya Ghare Anya Swar)**

Akhtaruzzaman Elias

The themes of families being separated, of tentative returns to one's roots, the call of the ancestral land and one's home, are recurrent themes in post-Partition literature as in *Home, Sweet Home!*, *Alam's Own House* and in *Another Tune in Another Room*. Prodip has returned to his father's old home where his widowed paternal aunt, Pishima and cousins still live. It is not exactly a sense of home-coming that Prodip feels, but perhaps, an unexpressed attempt to feel and hear of his late father once again, to discover familial traits in Pishima, to be assured by a sense of continuity as Prodip feels restless in his own fractured existence. The fact that he has never settled down, but moves across India and travels to Dhaka, Narayanganj and Agartala, where his family has been scattered, shows the fragmentation and scattering of people, that Partition caused. For those who have stayed on in the land of the Padma river, like Nanida and his family, business is threatened by continuous extortions in the name of donations (which Prodip is familiar with on the other side of the border, enacted with more subtlety), and Nanida's daughter cannot access higher education because of eve teasing. The future here is uncertain. Yet Pishima carries on singing the popular songs she has always sung, fragments, rather than whole songs, under her breath, like a half expressed reality of a fragile and vulnerable harmony that has existed between the two Bengals.

### ***Alam's Own House* (Alamer Nijer Bari)**

Dibyendu Palit

The umbilical pull of one's familial home and the attachment to the place of one's birth, are what bring Alam back to his own house. This story, like *The Story of Sonadas Baul* and *Kings Come, Kings Go*, is about the private exchange of property that happened across the eastern border. Anantashekhar of Dhaka

has exchanged his house with that of Alam's father many years after Partition, not because they had faced any animosity where they were but from a sense of change and an accompanying discomfort. In Alam's father's case, in spite of his belief in Gandhi, whose memorial service he arranged on his terrace after Gandhi's assassination, he gave up his medical practice as the 'Rams, Jadus and Kanais' went to Dr Gupta's surgery while the 'Rahims, Jamals and Karims' reverted to his, and with time, they too migrated across the border. Alam is an idealist, and to him, the journey back to Kolkata to participate in a conference on amity between the divided nations, entails one to his house and to Raka, the love of his life. The journey brings back memories, and is imbued with nostalgia. Alam had not seen the point of migrating with his family and lived on to finish his M.A. and commence his lecturership on the invitation of Raka's family, in 'his' house, like a son. Alam is not met by Raka when he does arrive, as Raka writes instead to say that there is 'a resistance' in her, a wall which prevents her from following her heart, which has made her run away to Delhi during Alam's visit. The non-meeting of Alam and Raka seems to symbolize the inability of two nations to meet, in spite of sharing a language and culture. It seemed as if the same sky prevents it from happening, as it does at the end of *A Passage to India*, implying the time is not yet ripe for such a meeting, 'not yet'.

### ***Three Generations (Teen Purush)***

Salam Azad

Generations of Bengali Hindus stayed on in the land of their birth in east Bengal after Partition as did three generations of the Biswas family, but with each fresh outbreak of communal disturbance, the grandfather and the father are killed by the violent conflagrations ignited by mindless mobs. At the end, Madhusudan's son, Mohit, is caught unawares in the infamous Dhaka University massacre of intellectuals enacted by the Pakistan army in March 1971. While the blood of the men mingles with the land of their birth, they all leave behind their widows and in Mohit's case, significantly, there is no orphaned son left to die in his homeland.

### ***Rehabilitation (Punarbashan)***

Abhra Roy

Set soon after the Liberation War, *Rehabilitation* shows the meeting of a group of excited people with a Mukti Joddha on the other side of the border from a newly formed Bangladesh. The group, impressed by the rumours of the heroics of a people's hero in a 'soldier' of the Mukti Bahini, want to

know of the exploits of the charming, youthful hero, Anowar. The story is about abduction, mass rape and rehabilitation, as at the heart of Anowar's shyly told narrative, is his deep sense of wrongdoing towards the violated Naseem, dominated by his desire to give her a place of respect as his wife. The shock in the response of his audience is not new. How can he do this though he knows that she has been raped? 'Will your society and you family accept it?' This is the typical irony by which the victim becomes the sufferer and the blamed, as the criminal assault on her body makes her the polluted one. Anowar's answer is that of an idealist; if one can accept the raped and burnt motherland as one's own and rebuild one's house on it, why couldn't one rehabilitate the raped woman? 'Is it because she has life?' he asks. He will consider himself fortunate if a woman like Naseem, whom he holds in high regard, accepts his hand in marriage.

***The Girl Was Innocent (Meyetir Kono Dosh Chhilo Na)***

Imdadul Haq Milan

The communal divide along cultural and religious lines is evident in a story like this. The broadminded Khalek, however, reasons 'Faith is not such a cheap thing that one can go astray by sharing a meal cooked in a Hindu home!' But it is a different matter when it comes to the reality of his daughter falling in love with a Hindu boy as a whole society interprets an embrace as a sinful act, and an irate Imam, whom Kusum has unwittingly offended earlier, concludes that she is guilty as she has had a liaison with a 'kafir'. Khalek is angry and ashamed in having his family brought to shame by his daughter, Kusum. He and the community have no option but to acquiesce to a public trial and watch the Imam whipping Kusum a hundred times with a broom, aided by the gleeful one-eyed Hashim, who is the Imam's willing assistant in this public trial. The Hindu boy, Paban, is let off on the payment of one thousand and five hundred rupees, which will help to construct a *pucca* mosque. Significantly, Kusum's simpleton of a little sister, Pari, is the only one who protests volubly against the social violence meted out to Kusum and like a mother, cares for her physically and mentally tortured person, while her agonized brother is petrified into inaction by the fear of an angry Imam's judgement in a village where the latter rules without opposition. Kusum opts for the only way out of her hopeless situation, by committing suicide, as does Anju in *Home, Sweet Home!*

***Infiltration (Anuprabesh)***

Prafulla Roy

This is the story of the Urdu speaking Biharis who have been forced to come back clandestinely seven years after Bangladesh was formed, to look for their ancestral homes in rural Bihar. Years ago, their grandfathers' families had been forced to leave Bihar to migrate to east Bengal at the time of the 1946 violence, which came as a repercussion to the violence in Noakhali. The Urdu speaking Biharis initially benefited from the language policy of Pakistan where Urdu was made the state language. But with the formation of Bangladesh, they confronted hostility and suspicion and a shattering of future prospects. Fear forces them back to India. They come in groups of eight and ten, to avoid drawing attention and after walking for miles, travelling by train and bullock cart, they struggle, under cover of night, to an open field, to set up their makeshift huts. The touts on both sides of the border have been appeased. The group that arrives in this story is guided by Shaukat, who is the self-appointed social worker, whom the young protagonist Farid calls 'Chacha'. Here we encounter the magnetic pull of the ancestral land in Farid and his fiance, Rasheda, and the storm of emotion that buffets them once they confront the field of crops which now covers the place where their ancestor's house once stood. What did a land for the Muslims mean for Farid's grandfather Mudasser Ali, who was not able to embrace his adopted country with jubilation and for his son, Rahmat, who became the victim of violence in a country subsequently divided on the question of language?

The vulnerable, rootless community of refugees now cowers in cautious anticipation of discovery, yet their presence does not escape the notice of the politicians. A tension concerning the future identity of the returned Bihari Muslims, colours this story. The situation is resolved as Shaukat and Farid's visit to one of the electoral candidates, Ramgopal Chaubey, looking for help, pays off. Interestingly, Ramgopal is called Ramvanbas, whose very name has an ironic significance in conjuring the Hindu God, Ram's exile. The uncertain existence of the refugees ends with Chaubey issuing ration cards and voters' cards to the whole refugee community, knowing that their numbers will swing the votes against his rival candidate, Ajeבלal Singh. For the time-being, the presence of the Indian-Pakistani-Bangladeshi Bihari Muslims is protected against the slogan raising musclemen of Singh, as the former become useful tools in the wily game of electoral numbers in modern Indian democracy.

***Deliverance (Traan Paritraan)***

Tridib Sengupta

Set in Kolkata in the year before the build up towards Ayodhya, *Deliverance* shows a young Muslim couple, Sirajul and Raushan, seeking shelter with friends, a Hindu couple, Tridib and Keya, in Kolkata. Both Tridib and Sirajul are secular minded writers which brings them together, yet Tridib finds Advani's politics redefining him as a Hindu. Central to this story is 'Bankada', a nickname which implies crookedness. Banka's constant friendly smile changes as he realizes Sirajul's religious identity, driving a cold stream of fear in the latter's heart, even while he continues to believe and march for communal harmony. Tridib is an angry young man, and erupts when his affectionate grandmother reacts to a Muslim friend being present at the time of the traditional Rajlakshmi Puja. 'And a horribly ugly spirit descended into the room. It spiralled like a whirlwind, went round and round, and sucked Tridib's father into the vortex. And Tridib too.' Tridib becomes a rebel against a society where, in a city of 11 million, his Muslim friends are unable to find a house outside the three Muslim-dominated localities. The story remains unfinished, to signify the uncertainty of Hindu-Muslim relations in India which affect Kolkata Muslims, who consider West Bengal their home.

***Tagore (Rabindranath)***

Swapnamoy Chakraborty

At the time of the Ayodhya dispute, there have been efforts to promote Hindu-Muslim amity. Yet there are people who voice the belief that Muslims are 'pampered' by the Indian government, and some are engaged in an inculcation of Hindutva. Yet, there are some individuals who are engaged in self-exploration to answer what is right and wrong, trying to maintain a precarious balance in explosive times. Amit plays the role of a Muslim in Bhajan Sarkar's play on communal harmony, staged by the Bank employees' union. Amit struggles with the reality of what is right and wrong in secular India. He is disturbed by numerous things, the Hindu cultural customs dominating public ceremonies and his own son, Bubun, using messages proudly asserting his Hindu identity while he is a boarder at Ramkrishna Mission School; the ignorance about Bengalis being Muslims as well as Hindus; the grudge against reservation of jobs for minorities and prayer rooms for Muslims in government offices. There is Amit's Marwari neighbour, Bhajanlal, who loves Bengali culture but is disillusioned as he fails to find employment. He turns to religion as his sole solace and is willing to die at Ayodhya as a karsevak. In this turmoil of soul-searching



self-questioning, Amit finds the apt lines for his editorial which he copies to Babun, lines from Tagore which say that when religious passion grips one, it kills the killer then God blesses the atheist who serves humanity.

### ***Wild-Goose Country (Bana Hangshir Deshe)***

Amar Mitra

*Wild-Goose Country* is set on the Hili border of West Dinajpur in 1996 after Babri Masjid. On the other side of the border, lies east Dinajpur. India has decided to demarcate the border with Bangladesh with a barbed wire fence. The barbed wire would proclaim all trespassers as 'infiltrators', i.e., illegal immigrants who had no right to cross over, rather than refugees or migrants, negating the assurance once given to people facing displacement when Partition was accepted by India and Pakistan, who were told that they would find refuge in the country of their choice or the one they were forced to inhabit. The border has segmented homesteads, lands, lives and identity. The barbed wire will trap them as never before. Aloka wants to see the border and comes accompanied by her husband, Subir. Their friend, Mazarul, who helps refugees across, has seen it many times, and is their guide. The barbed wire has been commissioned to be erected by Jiban Dutta, another friend of theirs. Aloka first approaches the border with curiosity, which then turns to awe and finally to anguish. The geese of the title are what Mazarul insists he has seen the previous night, corroborated by a lone goose, separated from its flock, like so many people affected by Partition, who flew across the border in flocks from which some got separated (as happened in the case of Parashar's family in *A Thorn in the Path* and Durga in *The Crossing*). Subir and Jiban, however, assume the flying objects could be warplanes as 'it's a border area after all'. The irrationality of the border is driven home by the fact that it has divided families and subverted the reality of ancestral homes and the sense of generational belonging. Mazarul's family has lived in West Bengal for seven generations and Aloka's family came from Barishal across the border before she was born, while Subir crossed with his family as a boy during the Indo-Pak war in 1965. Mazarul's two uncles have gone to the other side, forcing his aunts to go along with them in 1953, and Amal Bhattacharya, whom they meet at the border, has stayed on in Bangladesh while his sister has gone over to India.

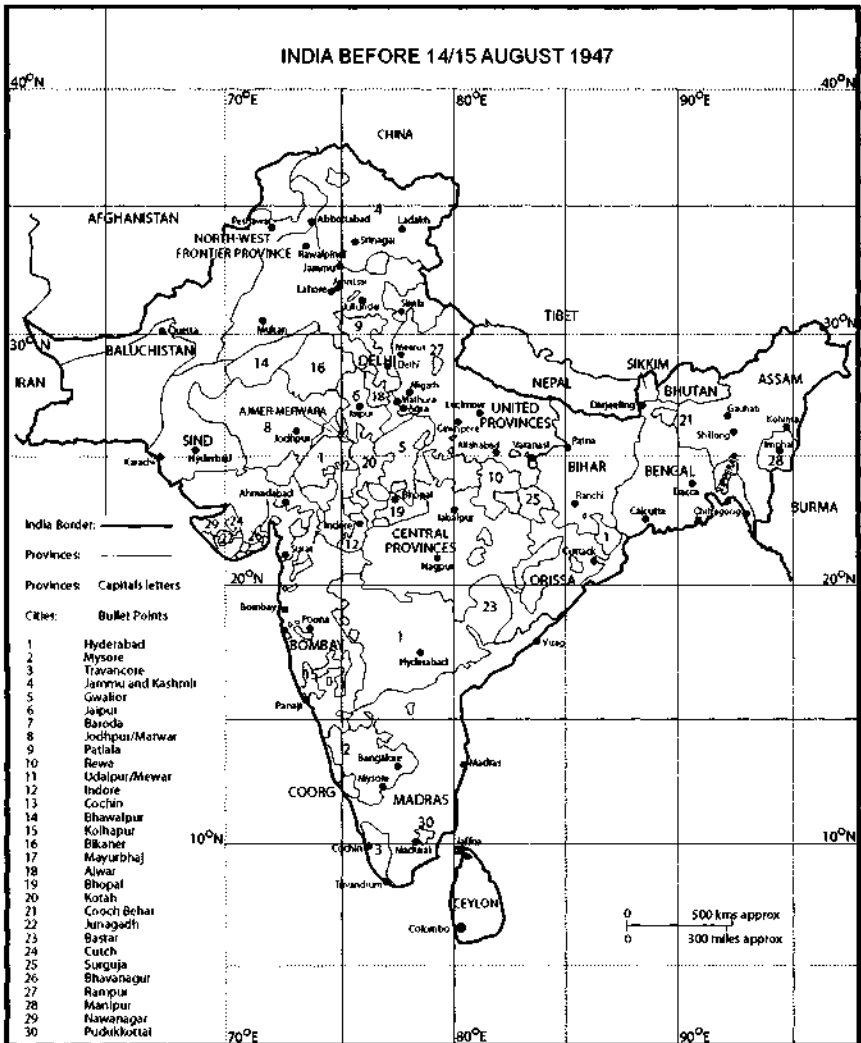
Through Mazarul's desperate enquiries about the whereabouts of his much loved, beautiful aunt and cousin, he learns of the affectionate relationship between his aunt and Amal. The border makes the existence of people living along it anomalous, for as Mazarul says, they 'have no homeland.' The railway-line in east Hili stops abruptly near the border. Once there was

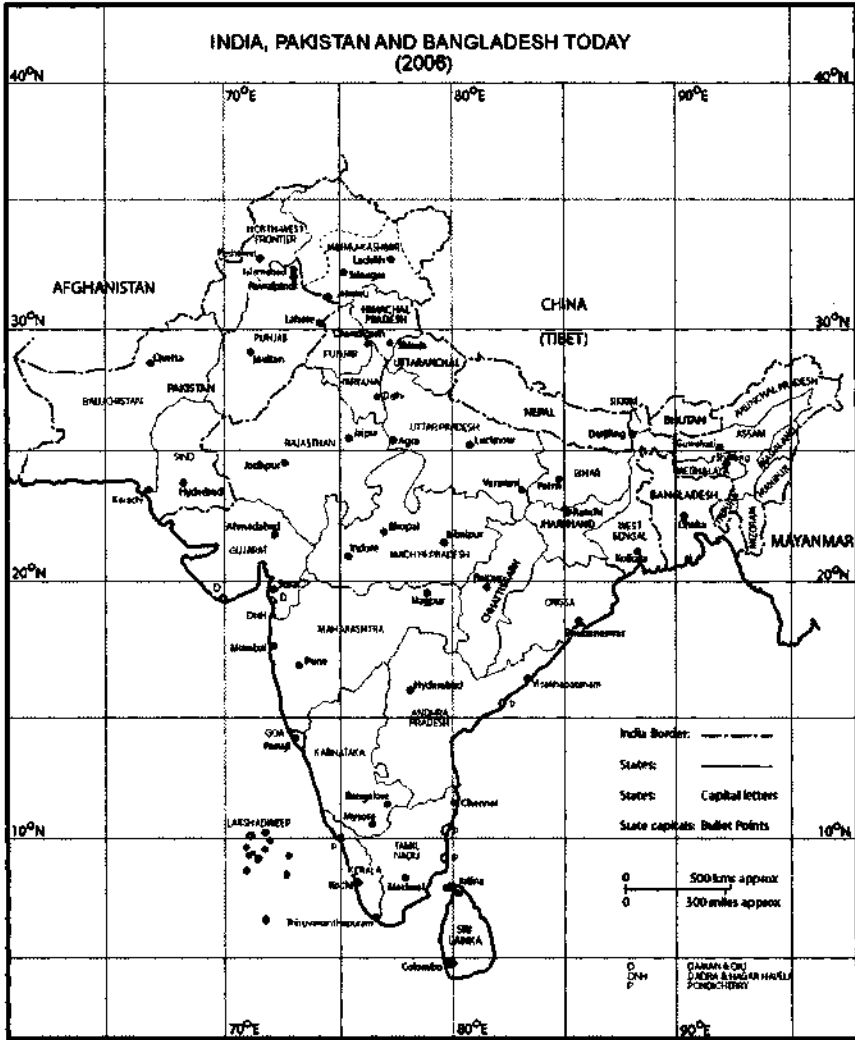
a rail accident and because the Indian villagers lived far away from the site, the rescue work was done by people from west Hili. Confrontation with the border demystifies Aloka as she finds that 'everything is just the same, yet, everything is different', even the sweets, a wily vendor sells for a higher rate, recognising, with a wry sense of humour, that one pays more for 'foreign' goods. In fact, the trans-border transactions are done with friendly handshakes under the nose of uncomfortable border security guards. At the end, Mazarul is seen clutching the barbed wire till it cuts through his skin leaving it bloody, distressing Aloka and Amal, who help to release his grip. Till the end, Mazarul refuses to cross the border.

***Bashabi Fraser***



# THE MAPS:







UNDIVIDED BENGAL



## THE AUTHORS AND THEIR STORIES

1. Samasya Puran: *The Solution*, Rabindranath Tagore
2. Je Bachae: *The Protector*, Annada Shankar Ray
3. Ulukhar: *Insignificance*, Nabendu Ghosh
4. Traankarta: *The Saviour*, Nabendu Ghosh
5. Khatian: *The Ledger*, Manik Bandyopadhyay
6. Swakkhar: *Treaty*, Achintya Kumar Sengupta
7. Jaha Jae: *Loss*, Gour Kishore Ghosh
8. Kafir: *Infidel*, Atin Bandyopadhyay
9. Majhi: *Boatman*, Prafulla Roy
10. Ijjar: *Honour*, Narayan Gangopadhyay
11. Sthane O Stane: *In a Place and in a Land*, Manik Bandyopadhyay
12. Epar Opar: *Here and There*, Manoj Basu
13. Hindu, Dibyendu Palit
14. Acharya Kripalani Colony, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay
15. Epar Ganga Opar Ganga: *The Crossing*, Jyotirmoyee Devi
16. Pather Kanta: *A Thorn in the Path*, Ramesh Chandra Sen
17. Angina Bidesh: *Alien Land*, Annada Shankar Ray
18. Shimanta: *The Border*, Salam Azad
19. Bharatbarsha: *India*, Sayyed Mustafa Siraj
20. Jaiba: *Illegitimate*, Narendranath Mitra
21. Janmabhumi: *Home, Sweet Home!* Samaresh Dasgupta
22. Karun Kanya: *The Stricken Daughter*, Ramapada Chaudhury
23. Angapali: *Embrace*, Ramapada Chaudhury
24. Raja Ashe, Raja Jae: *Kings Come and Kings Go*, Prafulla Roy
25. Sonadas Bauler Kathakata: *The Story of Sonadas Baul*, Imdadul Haq Milan
26. Ram Rahimer Katha: *Of Ram and Rahim*, Mahasweta Devi
27. Phire Dekha: *Looking Back*, Selina Hossain
28. Udbastu: *Refugee*, Debesh Roy
29. Ek Janmer Hrin: *The Debt of a Generation*, Dipankar Das
30. Jadi: *If*, Sunil Gangopadhyay
31. Anya Ghare Anya Swar: *Another Tune in Another Room*, Akhtaruzzaman Elias
32. Alamer Nijer Bari: *Alam's Own House*, Dibyendu Palit
33. Teen Purush: *Three Generations*, Salam Azad
34. Punarbashan: *Rehabilitation*, Abhra Roy
35. Meyetir Kono Dosh Chhilo Na: *The Girl Was Innocent*, Imdadul Haq Milan
36. Anuprabesh: *Infiltration*, Prafulla Roy
37. Traan Paritraan: *Deliverance*, Tridib Sengupta
38. Rabindranath: *Tagore*, Swapnamoy Chakrabarty
39. Bana Hangshir Deshe: *Wild-Goose Country*, Arnar Mitra





## MOB FURY

This isn't thunder's deep-set growl  
I see the shadows on the prowl  
I feel the fog of hatred rise  
Enveloping earth and skies  
I hear the fury of the mob  
My palms are moist, my temples throb  
I switch the lamps off one by one  
My own light set with today's sun.  
But then the sky is set aglow  
As streets ignite in one great show  
As if some magician of might  
Waved his wand to set them light  
And one by one they come alive  
Each honeycomb of bustling lives  
Sparkling, crackling, frenzied swirls  
Of swooning dervishes in whirls  
With strange beliefs that trample on  
Custom, habit and reason  
Till the whole arsenal bursts  
And mindless violence does its worst;  
The swarming maggots crawl in to claim  
Bodies, loot—in God's own name  
The madness subsides, the tides turn  
When there is nothing left to burn.

*Bashabi Fraser*



# THE SOLUTION (SAMASYA PURAN)

Rabindranath Tagore

## 1 Chapter

Krishnagopal Sarkar of Jhinkrakota finally handed over the responsibility of his estate and household to his eldest son and left for Kashi. Unable to bear this loss, those who were poor and homeless cried out in despair. Everybody agreed that such a charitable and virtuous man was not easily seen in this era of the *kaliyuga*.

Krishnagopal Sarkar's son Bipin Behari was a modern young man, well educated and armed with a B. A. degree. He was of good character, in fact, excessively so. He never smoked tobacco, nor played cards. He looked like a perfect and good gentleman, but he was also a strict disciplinarian at heart.

It didn't take his subjects very long to find out this trait of his. They realized that even though they could have expected some leniency from the older man, as far as an exemption of their land rate was concerned, they had no hope of being excused even of a single *paisa* from this son of his. There was no way they could default even by a day or two from their scheduled date of payment.

Soon after he took over charge of the estate, Bipin Behari discovered that his father had given away free land to innumerable Brahmin peasants, without charging them any land-tax, and had also decreased the land rent for countless others. Actually, his nature was such that he couldn't stay without fulfilling the requests made by others, and this was indeed one of his main weaknesses.

Bipin Behari did not like what he saw. He thought 'This just cannot be allowed. I cannot let go half of my estate for free'. Actually two arguments

were working in his mind. First, there were those who were enjoying profits from the free piece of land and were now bloated in idleness and were mostly useless and unfit for receiving any kind of charity. This kind of favour encouraged only idleness in the country.

Second, compared to his father and grandfather's time, modern day livelihood had become very difficult and competitive. Scarcity had also increased. For a man to live with self respect, it took four times the money required earlier. Therefore, it would no longer be possible to make free distributions as thoughtlessly and randomly as his father had, rather it was necessary to retrieve and regain all that lost property.

So Bipin Behari started acting according to his own sense of duty, and framed his own principle of action. Very soon, whatever had gone out of the estate some time earlier started coming back, little by little. He only left untouched a small amount of his father's donation, but even with those beneficiaries, he made sure that no one considered that donation, however small, as a permanent gift received.

Soon, Krishnagopal came to know of these woeful tales of his subjects from the letters that they sent him, and in fact, some of them even travelled to Kashi,<sup>1</sup> and fell at his feet, asking for his help and intervention in this matter. Krishnagopal wrote a letter to Bipin Behari, saying that whatever action he had taken was utterly condemnable.

In his reply, Bipin Behari wrote, 'In the earlier times, just as one could donate freely, so too there were various other ways of making income. There was also a mutual give and take relationship between the *zamindar* and his subjects. But with the recent advent of a new law, all other incomes, apart from the lawful receipt of land rent had ceased, and other than this routine task of collecting tax, a *zamindar* enjoys no other prestigious rights, so if I don't keep a strict eye on getting my lawful income today, then what would I be left with? Nowadays, my subjects will not be giving me anything more than what they have to, and neither will I give them anything more than what they deserve, it will be a purely give and take relationship between us. If we keep making donations now, then we will become paupers in no time, and it will be very difficult to hold on to not only our own property, but also to our family reputation'.

Krishnagopal felt extremely worried over this change in social attitude that had emerged over time, and he thought, 'today's young men are behaving in a manner fitting to the times, our previous style of working will no

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<sup>1</sup> The popular name for Benares or Varanasi

longer be appropriate today, and if I try to interfere from this distance, then they might say, "why don't you take back your property, we will not be able to look after it any more". So, what's the point, I would rather spend the remaining days of my life chanting only the name of God.'

## 2 Chapter

Things continued to move in this way. By fighting a number of legal cases in the court, and by working his way through many conflicts and difficulties, Bipin Behari somehow managed to put things in order.

Many of his subjects accepted his leadership out of sheer fear alone. Only Mirjabibi's son, Achimaddi Biswas, refused to come under his domination.

Bipin Behari too nourished the maximum grudge and malice against him. One could understand the reasons for the Brahmins enjoying a free piece of land, but it was difficult to understand on what account a Muslim peasant could enjoy such privilege of paying the minimal land tax.

Achimaddi, who was the son of an insignificant Muslim woman, had attended a village school and somehow learnt to read just a few lines, but he was so proud of his good fortune that he didn't pay any heed to others.

By talking to the old employees of the estate, Bipin soon found out that this Muslim family had been receiving a lot of charity right from his father's time, though no one seemed to know why this special favour had been granted. It was possible that the helpless widow had, at some time, expressed her own woeful tale and earned the *zamindar's* sympathy.

But this act of kindness on the part of his father towards this Muslim family, seemed most undeserving to Bipin. This was more so because he had not seen their earlier distressful condition, and seeing their excessive luxury and their limitless arrogance today, he felt that they had exploited his kind and simple hearted father and cheated him of his rightful share.

Achimaddi himself was an arrogant and headstrong youth. He said—'Even if it means my having to die, I will not give up an iota of my right'. So, a terrible war of animosity soon broke out between the two.

Achimaddi's widowed mother made repeated efforts to bring him around. She told her son that it would be wrong to fight the *zamindar* on whose kindness and charity their lives had depended for so many years now, rather it would be correct to continue to depend on his favours, and so they should agree to let go of some of the property, as desired by him.

But her son sent her back saying 'Ma, you don't really understand any of these things!'

Soon after that, Achimaddi began to lose the impending legal cases, one after another. But the more he got defeated, the more adamant he grew. In order to protect whatever he had, he staked his all.

One afternoon, Mirjabibi went to see the *zamindar* secretly, taking with her some vegetables that she had grown in her own garden, as gifts. Her kind, motherly heart seemed to stretch out a comforting hand towards Bipin as she pleaded, 'You are my son, may the Allah bless you. Son, please don't harm Achim. That will not be a virtuous act on your part. I am putting him in your hands. Please accept him as a worthless younger brother in need of your support. Please don't be angry with him for having received only a fraction of your endless wealth'.

Realising that this old woman was trying to establish a kind of domestic amicability by talking to him with the natural intrepidity of elderly women, Bipin felt very irritated. 'You are only a woman, incapable of understanding such matters. If you have anything to say, then ask your son to come and talk to me.'

Mirjabibi had been told by her own son and by someone else's son that she was incapable of understanding such things. She realized the futility of her efforts, and turned back with the name of the Allah in her lips, wiping her tears from her eyes.

### 3 Chapter

The case against Achimaddi moved from the criminal court to the civil court, from the civil to the *zilla* court and finally went up to the High Court. In this way, a year and a half passed by. By the time Achimddi was totally immersed in debt, he was declared a partial victor in the court of appeal. But whatever could be saved from the tiger's mouth on the shores received a jolt from the crocodile in the waters. His creditors passed a decree, and fixed a day for auctioning everything that he possessed.

That was a Monday, the day when the local market was usually held. It was a small market by the side of the river, which was overflowing with the monsoon rains. The selling and buying that was being carried out partially on the boats and partially on land had aroused a lot of noise and commotion. One of the major items among the goods that were being sold in this monsoon month was the jackfruit, and another was the *hilsa* fish which was also abundant. The sky was overcast with monsoon clouds and in order to protect themselves from the rains, many of the sellers had built a shelter by planting a few poles on the reground, and then tying a piece of cloth as a roof.

Achimaddi had also come to buy at the local market but he did not own a single *paisa*, and nowadays nobody agreed to sell him anything on loan either. He had brought along with him a chopper and a brass plate with the hope of pawning them for money.

At this time, Bipin Behari too was out on his evening walk, accompanied by two or three bodyguards, armed with sticks. Attracted by the noise coming from the market nearby, he expressed a wish to visit it.

On entering the market he met his guard Kalu, and began to enquire from him about his monthly income and expenditure. Achimaddi who was standing close by, saw Bipin Babu, and charged at him like a roaring tiger, wielding the chopper in his hand. But the other people in the market got hold of him midway, and disarmed him immediately. Then they handed him over to the police, and resumed their buying and selling just as before.

One cannot say that Bipin Babu did not feel very happy at this incident. The insolence and wickedness of the hunted trying to claw the hunter instead, is intolerable.

On hearing this story, the ladies belonging to Bipin's family felt extremely infuriated, 'How terrible, where did that wicked rascal come from!' they exclaimed. However, they felt somewhat consoled at the thought of Achimaddi being duly punished.

Somewhere else, the evening clouds fell over a widow's misfortune-laden house. With no food to eat, and with her son now gone, the twilight shadows drowned the place in a darkness that was even more frightening than death. Everybody forgot the incident and ate their meal, went to bed and slept, but to one old woman, it remained as the sole thought in the entire universe, and yet there was no one in the world who was willing to help her in her fight. Only a few withered bones and a desperate frightened heart remained waiting by the door of this dark, desolate home.

#### 4 Chapter

In the meantime, three days had already passed by. It had been decided that the deputy magistrate would sit on the bench tomorrow. Bipin would also have to come to the court and give his verdict. Incidentally, a *zamindar* had never had to stand at a witness box earlier, but Bipin had no objection to doing so.

Next day, he dressed in the usual ostentatious style of a *zamindar*, with a turban on his head, and a watch hanging from his pocket, and finally arrived at the magistrate's court amidst great pomp and show. The courtroom was



bursting with people that morning, in fact, such an occasion of popular curiosity had not occurred in this court for a very long time.

When it was almost time for the case to start, a certain footman came hurrying towards Bipin and whispered something in his ears. Immediately Bipin seemed to grow very alert and rushed out of the room saying 'Yes, it is indeed necessary'.

Coming outside the courtroom, he saw his father standing under a tree nearby. His bare body was covered only with a *namaboli* and with a rosary in his hand the lean figure seemed to exude a very soothing aura. It was as if a ray of compassion shone from his forehead, showering its light all around.

Being dressed in those tight zamindari clothes, Bipin found it very uncomfortable to bend down and touch his father's feet. His turban slipped over to the tip of his nose, and his watch fell out from his pocket. Pushing them back to their appropriate places, he requested his father to come and sit in the lawyer's house nearby. But Krishnagopal refused. 'No' he said, 'I'll say whatever I have to, here itself.'

By this time a curious crowd had gathered around the father and the son. Bipin's followers tried to keep them off.

Krishna Gopal continued. 'You must now try and get Achhim freed, and return him everything that you have confiscated.'

Surprised at such a suggestion, Bipin said, 'Is this why you have come all the way from Kashi? Why do you have such sympathy for that family?'

Krishnagopal seemed undisturbed. 'What will it gain you son, if I told you the whole story?'

Bipin wouldn't give up; he said, 'On finding a number of people undeserving of receiving any charity, I had taken back what you had once gifted them. In fact there were also a number of Brahmins among them, but you hadn't interfered then, yet now you seem so concerned about this Muslim-born man. If I have to free Achim today and return him everything, then what explanation would I offer to the people?'

Krishnagopal remained silent for a while. Then, continuing to turn the rosary beads in his hand he said, 'If you really think it is necessary to explain everything to the public, then you may tell them that Achim is your brother and my son'.

'What!' Bipin exclaimed. 'You mean ... in a Muslim's womb?'

'Yes, son' said Krishnagopal.

There was a long drawn out silence, before Bipin could shake off his dazed state. 'All that can be discussed later. Let us go home now' he said, suppressing his excitement.

'No, I will never enter my house again. I am returning right now.' Saying this, Krishnagopal blessed his son, and turned around, his aged frame trembling from trying to control his suppressed tears.

Bipin was at a loss for words and felt completely dazed. He stood silently for a long while. But even in that state of stupor, he realized that this was what a sense of duty was like in the earlier days. He felt he was far more noble than his father, at least, in terms of his education and character.

When he returned to the court, he saw the lean and frail Achim standing there with a pale face and fiery eyes, his body clad in dirty clothes and his hands chained and held by two armed guards. This man was Bipin's brother!

The Deputy magistrate was quite well known to him. The case against Achim got a little complicated and finally fizzled out. And Achim returned home and resumed his earlier life. But he never got to know the reason behind this sudden turn of events in the court of law. The other people of the estate were also equally amazed.

It didn't take very long for people to get to know that Krishnagopal had himself come here while the case was pending at the court, and soon everybody started talking about it.

Those lawyers, who had a keen mind, guessed the truth behind the episode. One of them, named Ramtaran, had been brought up and educated with Krishnagopal's money. He had been nourishing a suspicion for very long, but after all these years, it was for the first time today that he realized that, 'if judged well, behind the cover of nobility of every individual, there is something impure. No matter how sincerely and respectfully a man turned the rosary in his hand everybody in this world is just as ordinary as I am. The only difference between a monk and an ordinary man is that monks are all hypocrites, while ordinary men were not so'. Anyway, having realized that the noble qualities of sympathy, kindness and charity that Krishnagopal was so well known for, were actually all fake, Ramtaran seemed to have at last solved an age-old, complicated problem, and for some strange, unknown reason, his burden of gratitude towards Krishnagopal was lessened. He felt a great sense of relief.

Translated by Sheila Sen Gupta



## THE PROTECTOR (JE BANCHAE)

Annada Shankar Ray

I was out in the verandah reading the papers. My main worry though, was Hitler—he could trigger off a war any moment. Suddenly I heard the sound of hooves. I looked up and saw a horse inside the compound of my house, galloping up the path and towards me.

I had expected it to halt in front of the verandah. But, my goodness! To my utter surprise, it trotted right up the steps and on to the verandah. Thank God, the verandah was as generously broad as it was long! Or else, in the face of this attack, I would have had to find shelter inside the room.

The rider jumped off the horse and greeted me with a military salute and a clicking of heels. ‘Good morning, Judge!’ he said, ‘I was out on my morning walk. I could see you concentrating hard on the paper. Is something up? After Czekoslovakia, who’s next? Russia?’

I smiled, ‘Good morning, Hafiz! Why do I see only one of the 17 riders? Where have you left the other 16 behind? In those days you came and conquered Bangla.<sup>1</sup> Are you planning to conquer the bungalow now?’

The newly appointed Assistant Magistrate, Hafiz Mehdi Khan didn’t realize that I was referring to the Pathan<sup>2</sup> invasion of Bengal seven hundred years ago. On being told that, he burst into loud laughter. He was a very tall man. And thin. He loved wearing khaki shirt and trousers. He was a simple, straightforward man—humility personified. He was a guardian of the poor and lived a very simple life.

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<sup>1</sup> Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> Pathans are a proud tribe in the North West Frontier and Afganistan. In popular usage, the term refers to people from Afganistan

I continued to humour him, 'So, morning walk you said. But who does the walking? The man or the horse?'

'Horses need exercise too, judge. So it serves both our purposes,' replied Hafiz, standing there holding the reins in his hands. He never accepted a seat. The horse was a huge bay and I was tempted to have a ride on it. Hafiz had tried to persuade me on a number of occasions, but I had refused persistently, fearing the embarrassment of a fall. Hafiz, of course, had no fears. With him it was the other way round—it was the horse that feared him. Hafiz was a Pathan.

'Then let's go in and sit down for a while. Some tea or coffee? Any drinks?' I offered.

'Excuse me, Judge, but I don't have any of these. Also, the horse will become impatient,' he explained and pointing to the newspaper asked, 'so there's no possibility of a war just now?'

'No, no indications so far,' I replied. In the meantime my wife joined us. Hafiz clicked another military salute in her honour, 'Good morning, Mrs Biswas!'

'Good morning, Mr Khan! Do have a seat' she requested.

'The horse is not willing to have a seat. Do accept my apologies.' He clicked another salute and jumped on to the horse's back. The horse climbed down the stairs carefully, one step at a time. Soon it galloped away and vanished out of sight.

'Strange man!' my wife commented. 'I've never ever seen such a weirdo in your Services.'

'Once you know him, you'll find that he is a wonderful man. But in the Services he is an absolute misfit; just like me. He should have gone into the army. Instead, he lost his way and joined the Civil Service. By the way, on my way to this posting here, I was told by a friend in Kolkata that one of our colleagues from the Services had joined the Khaksar.' I feigned terror.

She was anxious. 'Khaksar? What does that mean? Secret Society?'

'No, a militant organization. Since they don't have guns, they parade with rolling pins, I'm told. They live by the principles of the old testament of Islam. Apart from violence their practices are similar to that of the Khuda-ikhidmadgars. Their belief in self-sacrifice, helping others, physical exercise, meagre needs, discipline—are similar to the qualities of the Gandhians.' That was as far as my knowledge went.

After joining this station I was also told that Hafiz had a few *charkas* in his house. He spun thread himself and made others do it too. If beggars knocked on his door, he would say, 'Come let's spin some thread. In order to get something, you should be willing to give. Give your labour, you'll get

a fee. There should be no begging, only barter.' Those who agreed, got much more than they expected; those who didn't, went back empty handed.

Yes, he was a strange man. But a great one! Hafiz somehow came to know that we spun the *charka* too, though unlike him, we never involved others in the process. That created in him an unexplained bias for me. And in turn, a bias within me for him too. Whenever, in his absence, the members in the club ridiculed him, I argued in his favour. Social work was Hafiz's religion. If someone preferred not to drink or smoke, it was nobody else's business. If someone could recite the *Quran* top to bottom from memory, how did it matter to other people? Yes, Mehedi was a Hafiz. That was his title, not his name. He knew the *Quran* by heart.

I had noticed, even the Muslims regarded him with sympathy. The young man's inability to socialize would one day cost him his promotions, though he would manage to retain his job, I thought. He was flawless in his duties. But duty wasn't all. Whoever enjoyed promotions solely on the basis of flawless duty? In addition to duty one needs to apply some polish too. Maybe some massage<sup>3</sup> as well.

Hafiz played tennis at the club regularly, to keep himself fit. When there was nobody else around, we played singles—Hafiz and I. Or else, we played doubles as partners. This was how we got to know each other. One day, we gave up the court to those waiting to play after us, and went for a walk along the river. Our discussions became very lively and interesting. Hafiz often spoke about religion.

'When you read the *Gita*, do you read it at one go? Or do you focus on one *stoka* at a time, analyse it to its minutest detail till you have had a thorough and complete understanding of it and then move on to the next one?' Hafiz had asked me one day, as if I was a great man of religion.

'I read it at one go, trying to understand the meaning of what is being said. So much and no more. If I try to read one at a time, it'll take me years,' I replied hesitantly.

'No, but that's not how you read religious texts. That might give you knowledge, not understanding and realization. And it is all about realization.' Hafiz did not believe in only memorising his texts.

'Do you read religious texts of the Hindus as well?' I asked him with surprise.

'Of course, I do. And from time to time I also draw inspiration from them. But with due apologies, I must say that as far as I am concerned, the *Quran* is the best.' He replied.

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<sup>3</sup> A massage for the ego.

'Why do you have to apologize? For you that's the most natural thing to say,' I assured him.

'But I have a complaint against the Hindus, judge. When you coin slogans like "Let the Hindus and the Muslims be one", doesn't that mean that we are not one? Hinduism and Islam are not the same. The *Gita* and the *Quran* are not the same. How can we then call for these to be one? Is that ever possible? The Hindus and the Muslims have always been two different entities, and they will always remain so. Their union is a dream. Their duality is a reality. And this duality has to be preserved at all costs. Otherwise, we'll lose our identity. How does it matter to you? You are in the majority.' Hafiz spoke passionately, as if Islam was in danger.

I tried to reason with him that just as the Hindus and the Muslims were two different entities in terms of religion, in terms of politics and economics, they were a unified whole. When the slogans are shouted they are not meant to be in religious terms. They aim at political and economic unity and oneness.

'Ah! That is exactly what I object to. If our religions are different, how can we not be different in politics and economics as well? Islam is not just a religion. In the beginning Islam also included politics, economics, and sociology. Islam is a complete way of life. Muslims don't believe in the concept of interests in banking, so how can they participate with the Hindus in the same economy? Similarly, if they believe in the Islamic Shariat, how can they be citizens of the same country as the Hindus?' Hafiz argued strongly.

I couldn't find words to counter the Pathan. I suggested, 'It is an undeniable fact that we have lived in harmony for 700 years. Both sides have to make compromises—we gave up a few things and we absorbed a few. Not in terms of religion, but in terms of politics, economics and sociology. After all, as Indians we have a certain identity too'.

'Again I would like to differ. This nationalism is a new religion. You may be able to embrace that religion, but how can we? If we too become Indian nationalists, do we not alienate our Arab, Iranian, Turkish and Afghan brothers? Don't we alienate our prophet as well? Hafiz, Saadi and Rumi are to us what Valmiki, Vyas and Kalidas are to you. Won't we also alienate them? No, Judge, we can't give up our Arab brothers and our Iranian brothers in favour of our Hindu brothers.' This young man was honest.

'So would you prefer to give up your Hindu brothers in favour of your Arab brothers? Will differences in religion stop the country from being united? Can race not be one? I've never heard people say such things before. What are the Muslims saying suddenly? We may belong to two groups but we are children of the same land. Our Motherland is the same'—I try to remind him.

Later, on another day, this same man told me, 'Do you still believe that we'll build a single nation with you? No, Judge that will never happen. Hindus and Muslims are not one, but two. This duality has to be acknowledged right in the beginning. This is the last word. Whether it is the Hindus or the Muslims, religion is the life force of the masses. They are able to endure everything—sadness, hard work, poverty—because of the strength that religion gives them. Religion brings them peace and it brings a smile to their lips. Yet the religions are not the same, they are not one, but two. If there are two religions, there should be two nations too. You cannot argue against this, Judge. That is, if we have to accept the phenomenon of nationalism'.

We had begun to gain a mild idea of the current trend in Muslims thoughts. But it had never hit us so clearly. A chill ran down my spine. Would post-British India be a battleground for the Hindus and the Muslims? Or, to avoid that war, would the country be split into two? Jinnah hadn't called for partition yet, but Iqbal had already spoken of Pakistan.

Anyhow, there was time. The British weren't leaving yet. I said, 'If our duality is a hard reality, so is our oneness. Our underlying unity will teach us to rise above our duality. Our united fight for freedom will create between us a bond, a oneness, arising from a common struggle. We can consolidate this bond of struggle into a bond of peace and harmony. Moreover, if Europe begins a war and our soldiers are compelled to participate in it, the Hindu soldiers and the Muslim soldiers will develop camaraderie among them. A nation takes shape from moments of shared struggles. It has happened in other countries, and so it will in our country'.

Hafiz was firm in his reasoning. 'It's not all that simple. What we need is a countrywide arrangement where neither the Hindus are ruled by Muslims nor the Muslims by Hindus. If the Congress and the League had agreed on a coalition government, they could have run the administration together. They could have also continued after the British had left. But would that have been a permanent solution? Other parties would have displaced them. So what would a permanent arrangement mean? Two independent nations. You're smiling! But why not?'

I said, 'If Bengal falls under Muslim India, the Hindus of Bihar and Central Provinces would become aliens to me, and I would become aliens to them. Can I ever regard Ram, Krishna and Buddha as aliens? Can I consider Gandhi an alien?'

'Why do you say Gandhi? Say Mahatma Gandhi,' Hafiz corrects me. 'Mahatma Gandhi's leadership has always been inspirational. Not so Jinnah's. He is neither a soldier nor interested in religion. He is not even concerned about social welfare. We, the Khaksars, can't tolerate him. But he is becoming



more and more the centre of growing Muslim opinion. The country now has two centres—Mahatma Gandhi and Qaed-e-Azam Jinnah.’

Hafiz and I often had arguments on violence and non-violence. Hafiz never agreed that the country could gain independence through non-violence and then be able to defend that independence afterwards. OK, then let violence give us independence. But why is that not happening? To this question he replied, ‘For that we need weapons. Where shall we get weapons?’

‘Even with weapons can we match the might of the British? Were Bahadur Shah and Nana Saheb successful? These are wild dreams,’ I laughed it off. ‘Even rolling pins won’t do as substitutes for guns, Hafiz.’

‘I know. But the training is the same. We are keeping ourselves trained. Someday somehow we’ll even have guns. Just let the war start.’ Hafiz was banking on the war.

One other day, during our walks Hafiz said, ‘We love you.’

I was a little surprised to hear this. What did he mean by ‘we’? But I never asked him. I just listened to him. He believed I was a Gandhian, I supported non-violence and I was concerned about social welfare. I was a *darbesh-ki-fakir*.<sup>4</sup>

‘Oh, no! I was none of these,’ I assured him. ‘I just want to live and let live. I believe he alone can survive who lets others survive. He who kills has to die too. This life is not to kill and be killed. It is to live and let live.’

‘Even the Mahatma has quoted Jesus Christ as saying, he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. But the practice in my family is entirely different. My ancestors were Rohillas. They had conquered Rohilkhand.<sup>5</sup> And traces of that victory can still be found in the villages. There are mountains of bones. Countless numbers were killed. The give-and-take of life is for us, a game. We like to kill as much as we like to die. We treat death with the spirit of a sportsman. And war is like a game of polo. How I wish I could ride away at full speed, sword in hand. Without all this, life becomes rusty. What is life without war? Now tell me, when is the war going to begin?’ Hafiz thought I was Mr Know-all.

One day the war did start finally. Hitler began it. Hafiz ran up to me and asked, ‘What is the Mahatma going to do now?’

‘Gandhi’s philosophy doesn’t believe in co-operating in a war. The Congress Ministers are going to resign,’ I replied.

<sup>4</sup> A Muslim ascetic.

<sup>5</sup> A former province in central India.

Hafiz didn't believe me. So the day when the congress Ministers actually resigned, he was amused, 'Why did you run away like that? You could have joined hands with Jinnah and riding on the Muslim League, you could have fought the war'.

'Then, who would have fought the British for independence?' I asked.

'Why, Bosebabu? Who else?' Hafiz's hero was Subhash Chandra Bose.

One day Hafiz came to say good-bye. He had to go to a settlement camp somewhere. From there, on to a routine posting of a Sub Divisional Magistrate. Probably, we would never meet again in this station. We wished him all the best.

That day he told us a little about his life. As a student in Cambridge, he once had to be taken to the operation theatre at 15 minutes' notice. It was a very serious case of appendicitis.

On the operation table, before he lost consciousness, he surrendered himself totally to *Allahtala*. He wished nothing at all for himself. His only prayer was that Allah's wish be fulfilled. Next day he woke up to find he was alive. The doctor congratulated him and asked—'How did you survive? This was not a case for survival.' He replied, 'Due to Allah's kindness'.

'My prayer was absolutely genuine, Judge. If not, I would have died on that table. That survival to me was a fresh lease of life. And from that moment I dedicated myself to the service of mankind. Service to man is service to Allah. My own life was over. This was an add-on. So it was not for my own self. Yes, the doctor had said that he had never come across such a relaxed body. Faith. Faith. Faith brings about miracles.'

We talked about Gandhiji's appendicitis operation. Hafiz said, 'Yes, he is a man of faith. People think he is a calculating politician. But that is not so. He goes by what his conscience says'.

Probably this was my last meeting with Hafiz. For quite sometime I had been thinking of giving up the job. In that case, we would never meet each other in another station again. So I said good-bye with a heavy heart. I said, '*Khuda Hafiz*'. He smiled and said the same.

About four years later we met each other again at the crossroads of Harrison Road and College Street in Kolkata. He was in his trademark khaki shirt and khaki trousers. There was someone else with him in similar clothes. They got off from a tram, possibly having noticed me.

'Hello, Judge! How are you? And Mrs Biswas? And the children?' Hafiz enquired in the same breath.

'Fine, fine, we're all fine. And you? I'm told you got married. How's your wife?' I asked holding on to his hands.

'Fine. Let me give you some news. I've just put in my papers. Now I'm free.' Hafiz was sad at heart but there was a smile on his face.

'Oh dear! But why? Why did you do such a thing?' I was dumbfounded. The times were good for them. Meaning, there were possibilities for ministerships.

'I had been summoned by the Chief Secretary. I went to the Secretariat. We got into an argument. And I wrote out my resignation letter. So! Now I'm free. By the way, where were you headed for? I must have detained you.' Hafiz said.

'I was going to get on to a tram too. I am on my way to a friend's place at Park Circus. Why don't you join us too? That is, if you have some time to spare,' I proposed.

The three of us got onto a tram. It was late afternoon but not the rush hour. The tram was empty, so we sat next to each other and chatted.

'I didn't ask for a single *paisa* from the big bosses. They have no commitments. The entire responsibility is mine. I have kept the people in my subdivision alive all this while by making arrangements for their food. I had a scheme of my own. If that scheme had been followed we could have avoided this widespread famine. There's hunger and desperation all around, but not within my jurisprudence. But is anyone thankful for that? The Food Minister is furious—why had I not allowed the famine to engulf my people? Why had I not allowed his black marketeers and middlemen to become rich overnight? Why had I stopped the export of the grains? But had I done all this for my own self? Or had I done it for the sake of my people?' Hafiz demanded to know from me. As if I was the head of the government.

What could I say to all this? I said apologetically, 'Why did you not ask for leave? The famine wouldn't last forever, nor would the whims of the ministers. None of them are permanent, but you are'.

'Asking for leave is to run away from reality. I am not an escapist. When millions of lives are at stake, is it right of me to think of saving my own skin? Shouldn't I try and save them?' Hafiz again wanted an answer from me. My silence made him angry. He said, 'This devil of a government will not save anyone, and if someone else wants to save the people they will intimidate him. To be associated with them is in itself a sin. Judge, you too are responsible for this mass murder'.

I was startled. I clarified, 'What's my responsibility in all this? I am a judge. Have I ever given an unfair judgement?'

'No, no, you too are responsible. Each and every servant of this government is responsible. No one has a clear conscience. Everyone should resign.' Hafiz pointed at me, 'You cannot ignore your conscience in this manner. In the court of Allah there will be complaints against you too, brought about by those dying hordes of young and old, men and women.'

I was pained. I said, 'How are you going to manage without the job? How will you survive?'

'If I have faith in Allah, and if I surrender myself totally to Him, He will keep me alive just as He did on that operation table at Cambridge. This life of mine is a borrowed one. So why should I worry so much about it?' he laughed it off.

At my friend's place that day, the two of them were offered two cups of tea. They refused to have anything else. When it was time for them to leave I noticed a coin each on the two plates. I was stunned. I said, 'This is not a tea stall, Hafiz.'

'Please don't mind, Judge. We are Khaksars. We don't accept anything without giving a return. If we do, it would break our code of conduct. Thank you for the tea. OK, see you then! Do convey my salaam to your wife. Salaam to you too.' So saying, Hafiz clicked his military salute. I extended my right hand and he shook it. Good-bye!

We never met again. But one day a student from the other side of the border, the 'other' Bengal, brought from him a token of his affection—a piece of *khadi* shawl. He had spun it with his own hands. How would I give a return for such an invaluable treasure? I haven't been able to, yet.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri



## INSIGNIFICANCE (ULUKHAR)

Nabendu Ghosh

Aziz remained seated quietly. He knew Zohra well. And he knew it was best to keep quiet when she was angry. Even if she said things that were not quite justified, it was best to remain quiet for the moment. He realized that people who grew up building castles in the air, found it difficult to cope with the harsh realities of life—poverty, deprivation and the shattering of dreams. It was the same with Zohra. She had grown up on stories from fairy tales and historical romances—Laila and Majnu, Shirin and Farhad, the Arabian Nights and Hatim Tai. And from these she had created her own wonderful castles and dreamt that those impossibilities would one day come true. But poor Zohra! Ever since she married this poor tram conductor, Aziz, the castles remained in the air and the beautiful dreams vanished like thin smoke.

Yet life continued. And however harsh and unbearable it was, Aziz felt there was a kind of fulfilment in the very fact of being alive. After a hard day's work, in a small untidy room of a slum, in the faint light of a kerosene lamp, Aziz could sometimes visualize the dreams that Zohra had once dreamt. Aziz would be surprised—what was he seeing? Was Zohra a heroine from one of those romantic tales? And their daughter Rabeya—she was like a beautiful fairy from paradise in disguise. Amazing! And Zohra! She had no more dreams, because she was aware of the minutest detail of their poverty-stricken household. Only she knew how difficult it was these days to provide food for three people. Yet they lived. They trudged on in life—stopping and moving, moving and stopping—in the belief that to be alive and to be filled with love for each other was an achievement in itself.

But suddenly there was a suspicion about that—about just being able to survive. And in such a situation, love became a painful burden. It seemed a crime to love someone if one did not have the means to provide them with

two square meals a day. And why was Aziz not able to do that? Because of the strike! The workers of the tram company had called for a strike. They could no longer tolerate the indifference and oppression of the white masters of the company. They could no longer bear to live their useless lives with such indignity.

The strike was on. Days had passed and it was now going to be two months. Gradually their savings had been exhausted and after about a fortnight or so they began to feel the pangs of hunger. And then, left with absolutely no choice, Aziz started some work. He put together his last penny and bought some assorted items of everyday use and laid them out on the pavement at the crossroads of Sealdah. If he could make a profit of one rupee every day, he would be able to manage well. They had no choice. They were beginning to realize that they would have to continue the strike for quite some time. Besides, the others were busy trying to look for some source of earning too. They had to survive—at least to seal this strike with the stamp of their victory.

But sometimes he had doubts. How long was this going to continue? The management had decided that this time round they were going to teach the employees a lesson by crushing them through hunger, however long it took. So the question nagged—how long was it going to take? And the same question reverberated in everything that Zohra had said to Aziz in her fit of rage today. How long? How much longer would they have to put up with it?

Zohra stopped suddenly and with her eyebrows knit together, she asked, 'It's the twentieth tomorrow, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'The company has issued a notice directing all its workers to join work tomorrow, hasn't it?'

'Yes.' Aziz was feeling uncomfortable at the shift of direction in Zohra's conversation.

'So you are going to join work, aren't you?'

Aziz shook his head, and to change the topic he called out to Rabeya, 'Dear, come here, come...'

Five-year-old Rabeya was busy playing with a rag doll. It was a very old doll—tattered—yet she was happy with it. She spent all her time with the doll. Sometimes she even forgot the presence of her father. She was Aziz's treasure—the apple of his eye. But at this moment she was oblivious to everything around her and it made Aziz smile.

'Come here, dear. Come here,' Aziz called again.

But Zohra didn't quite understand what Aziz had meant by the nod. It could have meant both 'yes' and 'no.' Contracting her eyebrows further she asked again, 'Aren't you going to go?'

Now Aziz looked straight at his wife and said mildly, 'No.'

'But why?'

Pulling his daughter to his lap he said, 'You know why.'

'You don't want to be defeated, right?'

'Yes.'

'But how long is this going to continue? How long?'

'As long as it takes—as long as they are not defeated.'

'Then what are you going to eat?' Zohra screamed, as if she wanted to defeat her husband with the force of her voice. It made Zohra very angry that he didn't want to be defeated by her, just as he didn't want to be defeated by the management of the tram company. Of course she understood what he was trying to say. But what was the harm in just pretending to accept her words?

But Zohra wasn't thinking aloud, so Aziz had no need for any pretension. He said, 'Why? Have I kept you unfed?'

Zohra pretended to be surprised, 'Are you going to walk around the streets like this? Will that give us enough to eat?'

Aziz smiled, 'We'll make do with not having enough to eat.'

Zohra didn't know what to say. Angry, she kept quiet for a while. Her eyes seemed to be burning like fire. After a while she said, 'Do whatever you wish—beg, die of hunger—whatever you want to...' and she stormed out of the room. But she didn't go out. She went in to a tiny cramped room that was the kitchen. That was also her 'anger-room'—her refuge when she was angry.

Aziz smiled quietly at the manner of his wife's departure. He couldn't be angry. And he didn't have the audacity to stoke her anger by making a light comment. So he just smiled. Looking at his daughter he said, 'So, dear! How's your doll?'

Nodding her head, Rabeya replied seriously, 'Fine.'

Aziz looked at his daughter with the eyes of an observer: like her doll, her shirt and trousers were tattered too! A look at her rough unkempt hair tied up with a ribbon, made his heart sink. In a small untidy face with a nose ring, her eyes shone like a pair of bright stars. And her lips had a reddish tinge. She was the only treasure he had in his poverty-ridden family life. He no longer had the bright and colourful days of his first youth. Those days Zohra had been his only treasure. These days it was Rabeya. Yet...

'Rabeya dear...'

'Yes, Abbajan?'

'Won't it be nice to get a new doll for you?'

'Yes,' Rabeya replied softly.



'I'll get one for you—soon. The day our strike is called off, my first job will be to buy you a new doll, right?'

Rabeya's eyes sparkled with joy. She embraced her father and said, 'Really?'

'Yes, absolutely! But then, what will you do with the old one? Throw it away?'

Rabeya didn't answer immediately. She looked at the tattered doll, stroked it once, and then shook her head and said, 'No. I'll keep this along with the new one.'

It was an old doll—her companion through good times and bad times! A new doll today could never reduce its value. No, Rabeya was not ungrateful. She would keep both the old and the new.

'Okay dear, you continue with your play, I'll have to leave now.'

'Where, Abbajan?'

'In search of some earnings...'

Then he looked towards the 'anger-room' of his harem, the tiny kitchen, and said with a smile, 'Do you hear me?'

The reply came, 'No.'

'Don't be angry, my dear—I'm going out...'

There was no reply.

'Do you hear? Rabeya's father is going out...'

The reply came, 'I don't hear anything...'

Now Aziz laughed out loud and said, 'Fine! Fine! I've been told off enough and now I'll have to leave.'

He picked up two bundles from the corner of the room, stroked his daughter's chin affectionately and left the house.

Today Zohra didn't follow him to the door. Instead, the five-year-old Rabeya did. She followed Aziz to the door, clutching her torn doll to her chest with her left hand. Leaning against the door she stood exactly like her mother and watched her father depart. Her tiny face had a serious look—as if she was not really young anymore and she had already learned the entire history of man's sufferings.

As he walked away, Aziz looked back once—just out of habit. And there was his little daughter—standing at the door to see him off! The sight made his heart sway with happiness and his eyes swell with tears. He had no reason to be sad anymore. He had suffered a lot and he had struggled a lot. And he would have to continue to suffer a lot and struggle a lot. But in the midst of all his sufferings a beautiful flower had blossomed in his life—his daughter. She was a part of his body. And in spite of all his sufferings she made his life worth living, just as the beauty of a red rose made life worth living in spite of the sufferings inflicted by its thorns. So along with Zohra, now there was also someone else who loved him from the depths of her heart.

Aziz found a place for himself on the left pavement at the crossroads of Sealdah and Bowbazar. He opened his bundles and arranged the wares on the footpath—pencils, blades, naphthalene balls, needles, buttons, toys, balls, little books of songs and stories in Urdu, combs, shoe polish, tongue-cleaners and so on. He didn't have a licence, but a couple of coins to the policemen took care of everything.

Around him there were people selling various other things. There were two men waiting to polish shoes, a *lungi* seller, two or three people selling oranges, one person with a basket of green coconuts, and so many other people. They spent their whole lives selling wares on the pavement and depended on it for survival. They neither had a room to live in nor a roof to cover their heads. The fire from the summer sun and the flood from the monsoon rains didn't stop them from their struggle for a living. They ignored all dangers and overcame all hurdles to keep themselves alive.

Aziz had had his food before leaving home so that he could return finally in the evening. It was the rush hour. The incessant wave of humanity continued its brisk movement. What an amazing sight this river of life was! People were almost hanging out from the buses. There was not an inch of space inside. But only if people could manage at least to hang on! Even that was not always possible. They had to walk—run almost. But why? It wasn't like this before. Almost ninety per cent of the people had something to travel by. So? Aziz looked at the main road—at the tramline. Two months ago, at this time of the day they used to shine brightly in the light. Today they were dull and dusty and clogged with dirt. They had lost their brightness. Aziz put his hand on his chest. He had fastened a piece of red paper with a safety pin. On it was written 'Striking Tram Worker'. The trams were not running today. They hadn't been running for the last two months. They were not running because the employees didn't have enough even after providing services to millions of people. There was no flash of current in the electric wires, the metal road wasn't vibrating, there was no clanking noise of metal on metal on the tracks and there was no tinkling of the bell. Everything was quiet today, silent. The buses, in their desperate effort to cope with the numbers, were dashing around crazily from point to point. The rickshaw-wallas were over-worked, the horse-drawn carriages and other forms of transport charged the earth. Today everything was silent—there were no trams. And there wouldn't be any unless the workers were treated with respect and dignity—not a single one!

Aziz sat quietly with his wares. He felt very strange in this new trade. He looked around absent-mindedly. The Sealdah station wasn't too far away. The sky above it was filled with black smoke. There was a sharp noise from one of the engines. On the walls of the Sealdah tram depot there was a huge

advertisement—displaying the face of a beautiful woman. On the footpath on the other side, a fruit seller was wiping the apples clean. The day progressed and with it the April sun struck down on them like a burning dagger.

‘Hey, how much do these pencils cost?’

Aziz was jolted back to reality. He had a buyer.

He had many such people.

‘How much do the blades cost? These ones?’

‘One Rupee.’

‘One Rupee? That’s too much.’

Many such people came—some bought, some didn’t.

Somehow time passed. He sold one or two things and then again looked around absent-mindedly. The day continued to move on. The rush hour was over but there weren’t any less people on the streets. As the day progressed the sun became stronger. Sweat oozed out from the body like oil, the whole body felt as if it was being burnt and the ears became hot. It was a struggle. In order to make one struggle meaningful and successful, Aziz and his colleagues were carrying on another struggle. On the twentieth they had said, the company had issued a notice that those who did not join work on that day would be sacked. Aziz had a silent laugh. He turned around and looked at the writing on the wall behind him. It said that touts engaged by the management would contribute not to the running of trams, but to their burning. The workers were not afraid of guns and bullets. If need arose, they would create a barrage of blood on the tracks. In the end, truth would triumph. And so would justice.

‘Buy each for two *annas*, these sweet oranges, come and buy...’

Aziz looked in that direction. An orange seller was repeating these lines in a sing-song manner—to attract buyers. The oranges were bright and smooth. Aziz wanted to buy one for his Rabeya. It would make her very happy. Aziz smiled at the thought.

‘Even *rasgollas* are less sweet, so take them for your in-laws, come and buy them...’ the man continued in the same sing-song voice and it made the passers-by smile.

Suddenly Aziz had a brainwave. The money that he earned from selling his wares wasn’t enough. Yet there was no certainty on how long the strike would last. He had to earn more. But how could he do it? Well, he could sell oranges like that man on the other footpath. That wouldn’t be a bad idea. He probably wouldn’t be able to shout in that appealing sing-song manner, yet he would surely be able to sell some. Right, so that was what he was going to do. Aziz had made up his mind.

The *lungi* seller had been sitting quietly for quite some time. He wasn't having much sale today. He looked at Aziz and said, 'It's very hot today, *miyan*,<sup>1</sup> isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Hmm...' he was not a man of many words.

Suddenly there were footsteps and a policeman came and stood there. Since no one had seen him approach, everyone felt a little uncomfortable by his presence. The sudden appearance of a policeman was a matter of great suspicion for them. And the most anxious of them was Aziz. The policeman must have read Aziz's expression. He walked straight up to Aziz and asked, 'Hey, *miyan*! Do you have a licence?'

Aziz didn't reply. He slowly pointed to the card on his chest on which was printed 'Striking Tram Worker.' Then he gave a very dejected smile, as if he wanted to win the policeman over with the little red card and the smile.

But the policeman was not moved. In a rough voice he said, 'I'm not interested in all that. Show me your licence or else...'

Aziz looked around helplessly and his eyes met that of the *lungi* seller briefly. Suddenly the *lungi* seller came forward.

'Hey, *sipahiji*<sup>2</sup>...'

'What is it?'

'Here's the licence...'

'But that's yours...'

'Yes, because these things are mine. He's working for me...'

The policeman glared at the *lungi* seller, then at Aziz, and muttering under his breath he moved on.

Aziz looked up at the *lungi* seller silently—his eyes were bright with gratitude—and then caught hold of the man's hands. The *lungi* seller didn't say a word. He just smiled gently and nodded.

The world seemed to be such a beautiful place, Aziz thought. And he was not alone any more. They would win. He looked around. A bus had stopped in front. One of the striking tram workers was collecting money in a tin box. And people were coming forward to help. Aziz smiled. They were going to win, they certainly were. Their British masters were against them, their own Indian ministers were against them, but they would still win. For how long were they going to let themselves be exploited and oppressed? The poor and the labourers comprised the largest group in this world. And how long

<sup>1</sup> A form of address—like 'sir' or 'mister.'

<sup>2</sup> A 'sipahi' is a policeman—'sepoy.'

would they remain suppressed? Gradually everyone would wake up from their slumber and take heart from this struggle. The spirit of this struggle would then spread to the whole country, and finally there would come a time when they would be able to shape their own destiny. Of course they would win, they had to!

Aziz returned home in the evening. His tiny home was inside a slum in the *baiithakkhana*<sup>3</sup> area of the city. The room was lit up with a small kerosene lamp. The light was dim and the air smelt of kerosene. And through that Aziz seemed to see a magic being performed. There was a string cot with unclean tattered bedding; a couple of Urdu books, and two old calendars; some clothes hanging from a string on the wall—pyjama, *lungi*, shirt and a uniform; two tin boxes and a few utensils; in the corner a pot for drinking water, a couple of bathing jugs and a small pot with a spout. Aziz hallucinated—he was an emperor from some long forgotten land; this was his mirror-embedded grand parlour; and that little kerosene lamp seemed even brighter than a chandelier lit up with a thousand candles.

Aziz called out, 'Rabeya...'

He heard the sound of tiny footsteps and the little girl came running, her rough unkempt hair swaying from side to side.

She replied, 'Abbajan...'

'Look what I've brought for you, my child...'

'What?'

'OK, now stand still, right?'

'OK.'

Aziz took out the orange from his pocket, looked at his daughter and smiled at the immediate sparkle in her eye. Then he pulled her close to him.

'Take, my dear, take it.'

But Aziz was alarmed the moment he touched her. Rabeya's body seemed to be burning like hot sand.

'My dear?'

'Yes, Abbajan.'

'What's happened to you?'

Zohra entered the room and answered on behalf of her daughter, 'Fever... afternoon onwards...'

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<sup>3</sup> Literally, drawing room, salon or lounge. Here it means the well-to-do residential area.

All of a sudden Aziz was at a loss. He became utterly distressed whenever his daughter had a problem. The world suddenly seemed to go dark.

'Fever! So what shall we do Zohra?'

Zohra understood how her husband felt. She came close, and touching him reassuringly, she said, 'Why are you getting so upset? Don't children have fever? She'll be fine...'

'Shall I go to the doctor?'

'Now? You've just returned from a tiring day, besides... don't worry. If the fever doesn't subside by tomorrow morning, you could go and see the *hakim*.'

Aziz was reluctant but accepted Zohra's suggestion. He looked at his daughter. Rabeya was busy with the orange.

'My dear...'

'Hmm?'

'Are you feeling very unwell?'

'No...'

'So, dear, where's your doll? What is she doing now?'

'She is sleeping now. She is not feeling well. When I don't feel well, she doesn't feel well either...'

Aziz and Zohra smiled.

They sat with their daughter—Aziz on one side, Zohra on the other. They sat there and spoke with each other for quite some time—about the little details of their domestic life, their needs and necessities.

Suddenly Zohra asked, 'So you are not going to join your duty tomorrow?'

Aziz replied softly, 'No, Zohra...'

'But...'

Aziz caught hold of Zohra's hand and said, 'Zohra...'

Zohra stopped and then smiled faintly, 'I understand. Anyway... please don't mind ... greedy...that's what I am—very greedy.'

He pressed her hand gently and smiled.

'Let me go now... I'll have to make some *roti*,' Zohra seemed to be suddenly reminded of her chores.

'Zohra!'

'Yes?'

'Are you still annoyed with me?'

'No.'

Zohra left. Aziz sat there with his daughter on his lap. Zohra had a point. It was the point of view of an average person. But how could he explain to her that it had become intolerable—that they couldn't take it any more. A handful of people with vested interests had unleashed oppression and deprivation on millions of others. How could he explain to Zohra that they were determined to crush those kings and masters and landlords?

Rabeya's fever did not subside the next day. Instead, it rose further. Aziz rushed to the *hakim*, Nizamuddin. The *hakim* assured him that it was nothing serious and she would be fine. Aziz returned home with a bottle of medicine and gave his daughter one dose. Then he sat with her and said things that made her laugh. Then at one point he went and stood at the door of the kitchen.

'Do you want to eat now?' asked Zohra.

'Hmm.'

'Sit.'

Aziz sat down to eat.

'Where are you going to go now?' Zohra looked at him obliquely. She knew his intentions very well. She knew what he was going to say. Yet, for a moment, she hoped that he would say he had finally decided to join work and that he had also decided to follow her advice. And when he made such a gesture of faithfulness and loyalty to his wife, Zohra would ooze with a feeling of self-satisfaction and glitter with the flash of triumph.

But what Aziz said was, 'Where else would I go? I'll be selling some more oranges at the crossroads of Sealdah today. It's quite profitable. In this heat, people invariably buy one or two to quench their thirst. I spoke with Karim *miyan* yesterday. He said he would let me sell a hundred oranges. I wouldn't need to make any advance deposit.'

Aziz became excited as he spoke.

Zohra looked at her husband. Was she disheartened? Was she going to sulk again because her husband hadn't taken her advice? But, no! She felt no pain. In fact, she was suddenly quite happy that her husband had, like a soldier, overcome all hurdles and remained determined in his struggle. He had not submitted to her. Instead of wishing to be filled with pride at her own triumph, she was filled with pride at her husband's triumph. And this feeling made her happy and relieved. But she couldn't resist her tendency to argue. She said, 'But is there no truth in what the ministers of the League<sup>4</sup> are saying?'

Aziz looked up and replied excitedly, 'It's all a big lie, Zohra, a big lie. They are thinking of Pakistan and Hindustan. They are thinking of becoming powerful, fattening their bellies and filling up their coffers. The word 'Pakistan' sounds good to the ears. And it will serve their purpose. But we will remain exactly as we are. If we get swept away in their rhetoric, our miseries will never be addressed, Zohra...'

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<sup>4</sup> The Muslim League

'So, what are you going to do?'

'Precisely what we are doing now—resisting. The poor have only one community—they are neither Hindus nor Muslims...'

Zohra remained silent.

Aziz finished his food and got up.

He was about to leave with his bundles when Rabeya called out, 'Abba.'

'Yes, dear?'

'Listen...'

'Yes, yes, tell me dear...' Aziz kneeled down beside Rabeya, 'What is it, dear?'

'Shall I say something?'

'Of course,' Aziz said, as he stroked his daughter's burning forehead, his voice brimming with love and affection.

Rabeya looked at him. She gave a faint smile and said, 'Are you going to bring the new doll today?'

'Today, dear, today!'

'If not today, then tomorrow?'

'Yes, yes, sure...'

Aziz covered her forehead with little kisses, and then getting up he said, 'I'll surely get it for you, dear. Now you go to sleep, OK?'

'OK,' nodded Rabeya. She had been promised a new doll. What more could she ask for? There was a trace of smile on her face and the indication of suppressed excitement.

Zohra watched this picture of father and daughter. Her eyes burnt with an unknown sensation. The fairy tales of her childhood had been realized in her life too—maybe a little differently, but they were there nevertheless. There was her man, and there was her daughter—as soft as cream and as beautiful as the moon. Were they not an invaluable treasure? No, Zohra had no reason to be sad.

Aziz left home.

As he walked, he looked around himself. It was the same scene. People were rushing to office. The buses were packed. The footsteps were brisk. And on the other side the iron tracks had lost their brightness and their pores were clogged. There were no sparks in the electric wires. There was no clanging sound of metal on the metal tracks. There was no tinkling of bells. The trams were not running. They had stopped in protest to injustice. They would start running the moment justice was restored. The League? The Cabinet? Aziz smiled to himself. He knew them in and out. They were teaching people to hate each other. They were handing over shining knives to young Muslim men, in order to safeguard their own narrow interests. It



was only people like Aziz who had refused to accept the knives from those people because they knew what the real intentions of those people were, and were not going to be duped by their bluff. It was the twentieth—the date in the company's notice. But who would dare join work today? Aziz had been specially assigned to the tram depot at Sealdah today. He would sell his wares and keep an eye. If anyone tried to join work, he would stand in the way. He had received instructions from the union last night. If necessary he was ready to shed his blood. It was more honourable to shed one's blood than to be subjected to a life of indignity day after day.

Aziz returned home in a very happy mood. He had returned home on the evening of the twentieth. They had won. The war hadn't ended, but today they had flown their flag in one battle at least. Not a single tram had rolled today. Not a single one. The noble Indian ministers had tried to neutralize their strike by trying to instigate the average Muslim youth into communal violence. But that failed too. Today they had taken another step forward in the direction of an inevitable victory.

But the light in his eyes went out the moment he reached home.

Zohra was sitting next to Rabeya. She was very concerned and seemed relieved to see Aziz.

'What's the matter, dear?' Aziz asked anxiously.

Zohra moved her lips and said, 'Rabeya...'

Aziz looked at his daughter. She lay there silently, her eyes closed. Maybe she was asleep.

'What's happened to Rabeya? How's the fever now?'

In a dry voice Zohra replied, 'The fever has risen further. I've washed her head, but the fever is continuing to rise...'

'She seemed to be all right in the morning...'

'Hmm...'

'So what do we do?'

'Go to the *hakim*.'

'Right... that's right... in the meantime you should put a cold compress on her forehead, ok?'

'OK...'

Aziz went out in a very disturbed state. He went to *hakim* Nizamuddin. The *hakim* reassured him again. It's nothing major, dear. Don't worry. Everything will be fine. He gave two more bottles. They cost one rupee. After making all the payments Aziz had only six *annas* left. Today he had earned about one rupee and a quarter. And he had two *annas* left from yesterday. It would not be possible to buy a doll for Rabeya now. Poor child! She never asked for anything. He would have to buy one for her somehow—later, after she recovered.

But the fever did not subside even after four or five days. The fever remained low in the mornings and they hoped it would subside. But as the day progressed, the fever rose too.

Aziz was at a loss. His daughter was gravely ill, and he had no money. Zohra felt nervous to be alone at home with her daughter, but there was no alternative. He had to go and sit on the pavements of Sealdah with his bundles of assorted wares and his basket of oranges. He had to run his family with earnings from these. He had to provide for Rabeya's treatment and keep their strike alive till they finally won.

Like the orange seller, he too began to shout in a practised voice, 'Two annas each, come and take... come and take sweet oranges...'

The other man laughed. He called out, 'Hey, my friend from the tram company!'

'Yes, friend?'

'These are my lines...'

'Of course! And the words are very sweet...'

The man didn't object further. Instead, he laughed and said, 'Okay, fine! Come let's shout together...'

The *lungi* seller approved of it as he puffed on his *biri*. 'That's better,' he said. 'Don't fight.'

Both of them shouted, 'Yes, come and take for two annas each... take oranges sweeter than *ravgolla*...'

At dusk Aziz returned home hurriedly in nervous anticipation—maybe Rabeya's fever had come down today. Maybe.

But that 'maybe' didn't materialize. Rabeya's condition continued to deteriorate steadily. The medicine that Aziz had bought from Nizamuddin had had no effect at all. And he was extremely disappointed. Finally, the next day, he visited Ahasan Ali, a slum elder.

'What shall I do, *Chacha*?' he explained his daughter's condition and asked for advice.

Old Ahasan thought for some time, and then said, 'Go and see Dr Ray at the crossroads of Pataldanga, dear. He is a learned man.'

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

'Okay.'

Aziz had received about three rupees from the union fund. With that as his only resource, he wrapped his daughter in a sheet and carried her in his arms to Dr Ray.

The doctor spent a long time checking Rabeya thoroughly. Then he said, 'It's a rather nasty kind of fever, *miyan saheb*. It's paratyphoid...'

'Sorry?'

'Don't worry! With good treatment she'll be fine.'

'Help her to recover, doctor... please...' with folded hands Aziz pleaded like a child.

The doctor laughed, 'Don't be crazy! There's no reason to be so anxious... she needs good treatment... and she'll recover...'

Before returning home, Aziz spent all the money he had on medicines.

On the way he had heard Rabeya's weak voice, 'Abbajan...'

'Yes, dear!'

'My new doll?'

A new doll. Aziz was embarrassed. But what was he to do? He had been spending all his money on the *hakim* and the doctor. How could he buy a doll?

Yet he had to assure his daughter. She wouldn't be happy to hear the truth. And she would be understandably hurt at not being granted such a small wish.

'I'll buy it for you, my dear! I'll surely buy it!'

Aziz had been walking along Harrison Road. Suddenly he had a feeling that the people around were walking faster than usual. It was midday, but there were no vehicles on the street. The buses had stopped running, taxis were rushing at a high speed and the people were walking in an unusually hurried manner.

'What was the matter?'

He turned to the man nearest to him and asked, 'What's the matter brother?'

The man was probably a Hindu. Without stopping, he glared at Aziz, and then clenching his teeth in disgust he said, 'What else could it be? Riots!'

'Riots!' So finally it had happened—something their masters couldn't pull off on the twentieth had now happened. And then Aziz remembered that this riot destroyed any possibility of the general strike that had been called on the twenty-eighth.

With a pale face he said, 'Riots again!'

The man replied tauntingly, 'Yes, what else can we do? You are the ones who have kept the matter alive, *miyan*...'

Aziz shook his head. Silently he raised his finger and pointed towards his chest—at the red card which said 'Striking Tram Worker.' He gave a dull smile. He wanted to say, '*Bhaisaab*<sup>5</sup>, we are different. We belong neither to Hindustan nor to Pakistan. We are hungry workers. We are landless

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<sup>5</sup> A form of address, meaning respected brother.

labourers. We are poor insignificant pieces of straw. Those that stab people and those that are stabbed by others are the same too. But they don't realize that in this bloodshed neither the killer nor the killed win. The only people that benefit are a handful of powerful men who sit in high places, look at maps of battlefields through their binoculars, and like an evil planetary effect, lead foolish people to their own destruction.'

He looked around him cautiously and increased his speed. He could not afford to confront a naked, greedy knife.

Zohra stood before him, 'No, I'm not going to let you go out today.'

'But why?' Aziz pretended not to understand.

Zohra had fear written all over her face. Irritated, she replied bitterly, 'Why don't you understand?'

'Why don't you understand either?'

'Do you want to go out in the midst of the riots?'

'How shall we manage if I don't?' he looked at Rabeya and said, 'You know the little girl is sick. And you also know that my pockets are empty.'

'Doesn't matter...'

'You must be mad, Zohra...'

'And you must be completely crazy...'

'I agree. But I still have to go. I don't mind staying hungry but I can't let the light of our life die of hunger and illness, dear. Please don't stop me. Allah is my protector... and I have been a worker for ten years. No one is going to harm me, because everyone knows that we don't ask for one-sided gains. We fight for the comfort and happiness of all...'

Zohra was fascinated. She was not bound to follow the *purdah* strictly, but she believed in it. She saw the outside world within her house—in a shrunken form. She had heard the names of the great leaders, but not their speeches. Today Aziz's flurry of words overwhelmed her. She couldn't argue further. Speechlessly she turned around to look at her daughter. Aziz too threw a concerned look at his daughter. Then he collected his bundles and left.

Aziz left home.

The people in the slum were having excited discussions. They were huddling together in groups. A couple of people could also be seen with long bamboo sticks.

Old Ahasan Ali called out from behind, 'Where are you going, my son—in the midst of this riot?'

Aziz smiled mildly and said, 'I am not a rioter, *Chacha*, how will I get food if I don't work. Besides, my daughter is sick. I will have to earn some money today.'

Aziz walked on. Some people passed some harsh comments, but he didn't care.

He reached Harrison Road. The streets were almost deserted. Every now and then a taxi or two whizzed past. Curious people stood in groups at the entrance of lanes and by-lanes. There were some armed police, camping at the crossroads of Sealdah. A handful of people walked down the footpaths on either side of the street. The right footpath was for Hindustan, and the left for Pakistan. The streets were deserted, and there was an eerie silence all around. In the scorching heat, the sky was like a parched desert, the road like a baking dish and the wind like fire. The blazing wind seemed to reflect the wild ferocity of men and the strange emptiness around seemed to reflect the blood from an unsheathed knife. Through it all, an ugly current of chilling fear flowed incessantly like an unseen glacier. Its presence made one's consciousness wail like a siren and one's feet grow heavy.

Yet Aziz forced himself moving towards the crossroads of Sealdah, and sat down at a place on the left side. A fearful din floated across from the direction of Raja bazaar and Maniktala. A few lorries of armed police passed by. Ringing its bell frantically, a fire brigade vehicle shot through like an arrow towards the right. And in an alley on the right there were three or four children still playing. These days the children were so fearless! And he was reminded of Rabeya. Rabeya was unwell. She had asked for a new doll. But where would he get one from? From where?

The roads were becoming quieter gradually. There was some noise somewhere. It was a motor van announcing that curfew had been declared from six in the evening to eight in the morning.

Aziz got up. Now he would have to go home. He had had a total sale of two rupees. His profit was about six *annas*. He felt dizzy. If the riot continued at this rate, he would soon be in trouble! Battles were fought between kings but it was their insignificant subjects that died. This riot was a design—of people blinded by selfishness. It was a war being waged by religious fanatics who were against peace and harmony. They were killing innocent people to strengthen the foundation of their thrones. But how long would this continue? How long?

Aziz turned towards home. As he walked back he checked all around himself—in front and behind. Hopefully, there were no suspicious elements around. As he walked, he placed his hand on the chest where the red card said 'Striking Tram Worker.' It was like a talisman for survival. As if it could scare away evil spirits, and also men who were as abnormal as those spirits.

Two days had passed, and Rabeya's fever had not subsided. Two days had passed, but there was no sign of the riots stopping either. It seemed as if

the situation was going to get from bad to worse until it acquired the proportions of the sixteenth of August. Two days had passed, and in these two days Aziz had had no earnings. He had only been pacing up and down hopelessly in his room, he sat beside his daughter, and he shouted out excitedly at the slum dwellers, warning them not to make a mistake, not to lose their senses. The people in his slum were relatively calm. His words and the wise advice of Ahasan Ali had had an effect—they had not joined the trouble-makers.

But what would Aziz do about his daughter? He needed to take her to the doctor. But how would he go? Aziz thought for long. Rabeya had become quite feeble. Rabeya—she was the five-year-old light of his life, she was the red rose of his bleeding life. She had asked for a doll, yet... he had to take her to the doctor somehow. Aziz put on a *dhoti*. And went out.

After about ten minutes, very cautiously, he entered the outer room in Dr Ray's house.

Dr Ray was startled. He said, 'You!'

'Yes.'

'What do you want?'

'My daughter is even more ill, doctor...'

'Even more?'

'Yes... please save her doctor... I plead with you...'

'Hmm... wait...'

After hearing everything, Dr Ray gave Aziz a prescription. Then he looked at him and said, 'Now go quickly... were you not scared to come into this locality?'

'For my daughter... and... besides, I am a worker, doctor...'

with a dull smile he put his hand on his chest.

Dr Ray smiled, 'Forget all that. People have lost their senses...'

Aziz smiled his dull smile. Then he looked around cautiously, said *salaam* to Dr Ray and went out.

Aziz could hear the discussions from inside the room. The people were on the road outside.

Zohra's face was white. She said, 'So many people are dying or are being injured, right? Are they burning down slums as well?'

Aziz replied dryly, 'It's the scoundrels. They have become addicted to blood—like alcohol. Unless they get over this devastating drunkenness, they won't realize what they have done. But leave them alone, dear, look at the girl...'

Zohra had no words. She looked at the pained face of her husband and then turned to look at her daughter. True, the girl had lost a lot of weight.

Aziz's eyes filled with tears as he stroked the rough hair of his daughter. Her body was burning with temperature. She was lying there very tired with her eyes closed—like a little injured bird. There were dark circles around her eyes. He cheeks had become hollow and her limbs had become thin. As he sat there stroking her rough hair, Aziz started crying.

He put his mouth close to her ears and called, 'Rabeya, my dear, my darling...'

Rabeya opened her eyes and gave a very weak smile. Seeing tears in her father's eyes she said, 'Why are you crying, Abbajan?'

Zohra turned away. She couldn't bear the sight any more. Her heart was breaking too.

Aziz nodded his head and replied, 'I've got some dust in the eye probably... so dear, how are you now?'

Rabeya tilted her head, and then running her hand over her forehead she said, 'I'm well...'

Then she remembered something, and with a smile said, 'Abbajan...'

'Yes, dear?'

'My new doll?'

Aziz became pale with embarrassment. He nodded his head violently and said, 'I'll buy it. Your new doll will come, dear...'

'Okay ....' assured, Rabeya closed her eyes.

Aziz looked at his daughter. Couldn't he fulfil her one small desire? Rabeya was the light of his life, the only flower in the painful tree of his life. What if Rabeya suddenly died? No! What kind of thoughts were these? But if Rabeya really deceived him and went away, her wish of a new doll would remain unfulfilled forever. That could not be. That should not be.

He stood up.

'Where are you going?' Zohra asked.

'I'll be back soon.'

He went to Ahasan Ali and borrowed some money.

At the crossroads of Sealdah, a few shops had kept their doors slightly ajar. Those desperately in need came and bought their necessities. Aziz went in to one of those shops and asked for a doll. As he took out the doll, the shopkeeper looked at him suspiciously. There were different kinds of dolls, at different prices. Aziz chose a female doll and bought it for a rupee and a half. He liked the doll. Hopefully Rabeya would like it too. The old doll had cost just six *annas*. This was a rupee and a half, that is, twenty-four *annas*. That was a big difference. But Rabeya's weak face would become bright with happiness at the sight of this doll. And that thought filled Aziz with happiness. Rabeya had to recover. *Khuda*, your mercy is endless. So, please help her.

He had been walking carefully. But suddenly he felt someone approaching him from the footpath on the other side—very fast. And it happened even before he could react and move aside.

It all happened in a moment. Absolutely unexpectedly.

A knife had gone straight into Aziz's back. And with the knife in that position, the attacker fled.

Aziz let out a weak cry. At a distance people who had witnessed the incident, yelled out. There were rushing footsteps.

Aziz looked out with a clouded vision. He felt a burning sensation in his back and chest. Then pain. As he was trying to reach his back, the doll flew from his hands. Trembling in agony, he fell onto the road. Lying there he looked at the doll. He tried to reach out and pick it up but couldn't. The doll had fallen quite far. With a hopeless and dull look he glanced at the doll and then at his chest. He put his hand where the card, attached with a safety pin, read 'Striking Tram Worker.'

He tried to say something, but couldn't. Before being totally blinded with excruciating pain, he tried to turn sideways with a stifled groan. And as he did so, the red card on his chest turned even redder—from the colour of his own blood.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri





## THE SAVIOUR (TRAANKARTA)

Nabendu Ghosh

The terrible news had reached this neighbourhood too, news of the riots. Tension was palpable on the street. It was deserted. Even the stray dogs had disappeared. Only a few daring young men were puffing at their cigarettes while clustering around the entrance of the lanes.

The other neighbourhood was up in flames—severed heads soaked in blood landed here and there, breasts of 16-year-old virgins had been cut off, angelic infants were bashed against the hard concrete, in pitch-dark hell the devil was being ceremonially installed tonight over there. The news had reached this locality—details of such horrific incidents drifted through the breeze and flourished before halting here.

People didn't know the way out. They were mesmerized by a torrent of fear. Fear that was unspeakable. Fear which made their hearts pound and made them want to huddle together. Fear that was ugly. That made life lose all flavour.

The women went about doing their work quietly. Not much cooking to-day, just some rice. It was the children who did not understand very much. They broke into laughter now and then, went up the stairs noisily, talked loudly amongst themselves. All of a sudden the vigilant adults would bark at them, 'Shut up, or else you'll be slapped hard enough to make your head reel.'

They could find no way of saving themselves. Behind closed doors they were discussing a possible course of action. It wasn't just bad news they had heard the terrible news that tonight those others from that neighbourhood would attack these people here. Shivers ran down their spines when they heard this—what could they do? How could they save themselves?

The house of the barrister Mr Bose, a leading member of the locality, was in turmoil. Arun was trying to sneak out at one point. How long could one stay indoors?

But Mr Bose was keeping an eye on everything today. It wasn't possible for anyone to sneak in or out of his home, which was like the Lanka palace.<sup>1</sup>

'Where are you off to?' he asked gravely.

'Just going out for a while.'

'Strange! There's no need for you to go out now. Don't you know what's going on in the city? Go on, get back to your room.' Arun went in.

His daughter, Ruby, came and stood before him. There were dark circles under her big, black eyes, reflecting the strain she was under and her long, curly tresses were in disarray. Her fair skin looked pale. She was sad, fear had gripped her mind. She had to suddenly stop going out to movies, parties and picnics. The desire to flit around like a social butterfly had vanished totally.

'Baba.'

'Yes?'

'Drop us at Meshomoshai's house.'

That was in Bhabanipur. Hindus were a majority there and it was a possibility that she could still flit around in her crepe silk sari and hair done up in plaits.

Mr Bose shook his head helplessly. 'Meshomoshai's house? Now? Impossible. There's not a single soul out on the streets. No car either. We have to pass through congested areas, drive through corpses and blood-splattered roads. Besides, what if we are suddenly attacked? On your way to Bhabanipur to save your lives, you'll lose it midway. Impossible. Stop talking nonsense and go back to your room Ruby.'

But how could Ruby sit in her room? She was scared. She could hear a din in the distance from time to time. A scary sort of din. Last night she had seen flames light up the eastern sky. Inhuman horror stories had reached her ears. And all these had left their imprint on her brain cells. Her head throbbed with the weight of all that she had heard. The delicate blue veins pulsating below her light skin gave away her terrified state of mind.

Arun and Ruby could be shut up. But Mrs Bose? Mr Bose had no doubt that the news of the riots would have an explosive effect on her mind, which was already in a state of perpetual bitterness for having to put up with her dangerously heavy body. So when Mrs Bose came and stood in front of him,

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<sup>1</sup> Lanka palace: Referring to the *Ramayana* where Ravana's palace in Lanka (Sri Lanka) was very closely guarded.

Mr Bose withdrew a bit. He knew that if he tried to be high-handed with Mrs Bose, he would be rebuffed.

'Listen, I can't bear this any more. This *suspense*, this *danger*, this is unbearable.'

'What can I do? *Tell me what am I to do, dear?*' Mr Bose tried to make his point feebly.

'Do something *for heaven's sake*. Don't just keep sitting.'

'I am not doing that. I am thinking. Besides, we have two rifles, 500 cartridges, a gatekeeper, bearers, servants and a driver. What are you so scared of?'

Mrs Bose reclined on the sofa, for a minute there was a glint in her blue eyes and she said sharply, 'Don't give me that list, *please*. Where will you be with all your smart tactics when thousands of people storm this place? What can you do with 500 cartridges? Do you possess an *akshaytun*?<sup>2</sup> No, I don't think I can take this any more—I might *faint* any minute.'

Knock, knock, knock. Someone was at the door.

'Hujoor.'<sup>3</sup> It was the gateman's voice.

'Who is it Tewari?'

'The gentlemen from our neighbourhood want to see you.'

'I'll be there. Listen, don't get excited. Let's see what happens. We are going to have a meeting of the defence committee here. It's a big neighbourhood after all, there are so many residents, and everyone is going to put up a fight. *Don't be nervous my dear*. If things really turn out that bad we'll obviously take a risk—the car will be ready at hand.'

A group of people lived in between this respectable, aristocrat enclave and that other neighbourhood and thought themselves as part of this one. They were *doms*. Their tenements were like pigeonholes and survival was what they barely managed. They swept and sprayed water on the streets, cleaned the drains and the sewage lines, cleared the clogged manholes, collected garbage riding on municipal trucks. They ate coarse rice full of stones out of cheap enamelled plates and sat around the dim light of a lantern at night for a drunken orgy. Though they thought of themselves as part of this neighbourhood, their aristocratic and respectable neighbours would rather disown them.

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is to the weapon the third Pandava, Arjun of the *Mahabharata*, is said to have possessed—an *akshaytun*, which is, literally, an inexhaustible quiver of arrows.

<sup>3</sup> Sir—respectful form of address from a social inferior.

Those who formed a barrier between the neighbourhood on the other side and this one would be around two hundred. And these two hundred people let their lives be ruled by the all-powerful Jhogru. If Jhogru asked his people to say the sun rises in the west, they would, no doubt, say it without batting an eyelid. Jhogru was their uncontested supremo, their Sardar.

Jhogru's followers were sitting around him. They had heard everything that had happened last night over there; they had also caught glimpses of some of that. Some of them had even helped a couple of those who had fled from the trap like scared rabbits to a safe destination. But they wondered, what would happen today? If the rumours turned out to be real, what would they do?

Jhogru was relaxing with some *tari*<sup>4</sup> and *penyajis*.<sup>5</sup> Aided by the soft breeze he was just beginning to feel light enough to fly like a balloon and the very fine veins of his exceptional eyes could be seen clearly. He was tempted to crack a salacious joke with an eye on his wife Suratiya's huge thighs, but these people crowded in at the wrong time with the bad news and got him into a bad mood.

Irritated, he said 'Come on, get lost. So what if those people come and attack us?'

Ranglal said, 'But we must do something . . .'

Jhogru stopped him short. With a wave of his hand he said, 'You've ruined my mood. What is there to think about? If they come we'll fight. What else? The fact is all of us have to be ready with our weapons—when the time comes we'll have to take the plunge—that's all.'

'But Sardar . . .'

'Now get lost all of you . . . let me have some fun . . . go home.'

They left.

Jhogru munched the *penyajis* while sipping *tari*. Slowly he could feel a strange sensation spread to his ears and his breath grew hot; his eyelids seemed heavy and his vision blurred. Jhogru felt high. He looked at Suratiya and was amazed to find how gorgeous she was. She looked like a beautiful princess.

'Suratiya.'

'What is it?'

'Come here sweetheart.'

'No . . . no.'

<sup>4</sup> A country liquor made from toddy.

<sup>5</sup> Fried onions in batter, popularly known as 'onion bhaji' in Britain.

'Want a little of this?'

'No, don't want to drink.'

Suddenly he felt angry in his state of drunkenness. He grew obstinate at Suratiya's refusal.

'Are you coming, you bitch?'

'No, I'm not coming. I've work.'

'Well then, we'll see.'

He got up. Walking like a toddler with unbalanced steps he went up to Suratiya and clasped her with both hands before lifting her off the ground.

Suratiya cried, 'I'll die. You'll break all my bones.'

Jhogru started laughing while drawing her closer, 'Feeling scared . . . don't be scared dear . . . come on, sit on my lap.'

But Jhogru was quite high by then—for how long could he manage a strong woman like Suratiya?

She wriggled out of his grip and ran away laughing.

It was mid-morning. If it had been a normal day Jhogru would have been busy with work at this time of the day. Since there was no work, thanks to the riots, Jhogru couldn't help having some fun.

He laughed and thought to himself, 'She ran way—the girl ran away.' But he had to do something. There was no more *tari* left Suratiya had also run away while he was still high. What could he do? What?

Suddenly he took out the old *dhol* from a corner of his room and started beating it in all earnest. He would sing. If people were not enthusiastic about his singing, it didn't matter to him. He felt like singing and he would. He started beating the *dhol* loudly and began the song. There was one line that he kept repeating in that mostly unintelligible song:

'The crows and the cranes are in a concert,  
Yes, on the roof they dance.'

What a song! How beautifully he played around with the tune! What a rich, passionate voice he had! The entire colony of doms became aware of Jhogru's singing, of the fact that he was drunk.

They told each other in awe, 'Sardar's singing—he's burst into song.'

The Defence Committee was holding a meeting in Mr Bose's house. He was the president.

Almost all the heavyweights had joined the meeting. There was the elderly professor Nibaran Mukherjee, the lawyer Haridas Mitra, Dr Santosh

Dutta (MB, FRCS) and the iron merchant Sukumar Roy. Besides, the young members of the Saraswati Orchestra Party, Tarun Athletic Club and Evergreen Dramatic Club had also come. There was a big rug spread on the floor of the verandah inside Mr Bose's house. Everyone was sitting there in a close-knit group, engaged in an earnest discussion. Ruby pulled the curtains of a room in the corner of the house and watched everyone from there. She was just curious. Since she was unable to step out of the house, she greatly missed the parties, picnics and movies. The meeting was convened at such a time. If nothing else, she could, at least, watch different kinds of people. And Ruby also judged people from what she saw. It gave her great pleasure.

Mr Bose started in a sombre tone that befitted the committee president. 'All of you have seen and heard what's going on in the heart of the city since yesterday. This is not the time for giving long lectures. Besides, I'm not qualified to do that. I just want to tell you one thing, that this is a difficult time for us, especially Bengalis. We have to come together to fight this medieval menace. *We have to fight it and stop it.* In other words, we have to stop this aberration. Today we must put aside all differences between caste and community, between a high caste and a low caste, between the untouchable and the others—we just have to remember one thing—we are Hindus, nothing else.

Mr Bose stopped, took out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat generated by excitement, brought out Black & White cigarettes from his cigarette case, offered them to the elderly in the gathering and lit one himself. In the meantime, the meeting was abuzz with praise for his significant words and Ruby's eyes sparkled like twinkling stars.

The iron merchant said, 'True, your words are priceless. Those days are over when we could bicker about community, caste, and rank, etcetera. Today we are all equals, all Hindus.'

Mr Bose said, 'So let's decide on our course of action.'

'Yes, yes,' everyone agreed and put their heads together.

The elderly academic said, 'Let the neighbourhood be divided into four units. Each group will keep vigil in one direction.' The lawyer said, 'Let conch shells or sirens be used to signal danger.'

The doctor said, 'A group of young men can take turns in staying awake at night and guarding the locality. If they smell danger they'll blow the conch shells three times and immediately the siren will sound. The four houses at the four extreme ends of the neighbourhood will have red lights. As soon as danger is sensed, the lights in one of the houses will be turned on, depending upon the direction from which danger seems to be approaching.'

The businessman said, 'The women, children and the elderly can stay on the terrace armed with bricks and stones. The men can stay downstairs with sticks and other weapons.'

All the proposals were accepted. The defence committee meeting proceeded rather well.

But suddenly a young man called Jatin began the trouble. He usually wore *khadi* clothes, was not exactly soft-spoken and had close cropped hair.

He asked, 'You've taken care of almost everything. But if they come and attack us right here, who's going to put up a fight?'

That was a bombshell. It shook the whole place. Absolutely right. It had never occurred to anyone even in a flash! One had to think about it.

The businessman said, 'But all of us will fight, we'll take the plunge.'

The elderly academic shook his head, 'This doesn't seem satisfactory. A group of people always has to be on guard on the street ready to fight, should the enemy attack. Therefore, they have to be prepared to lay down their lives all the time. Will all able-bodied men do that or will they be willing to do that?'

That caused another explosion. True, who would actually fight them? If their worst fears turned real, if thousands of people came and stormed this place all on a sudden, would they be able to save themselves from their island-like abodes by stocking up on bricks, stones and sticks?

Jatin said, 'In spite of such a flawless meeting and all the measures that we have thought of here, we will not be able to save ourselves. So think about it.'

Mr Bose was extremely intelligent; after having crossed the salty seas and returned a barrister, he had become even sharper. He realized that since Jatin had raised the point, he must have thought about a solution to the problem. Besides, the importance of his argument couldn't be denied.

Mr Bose said, 'I can't find a flaw in Jatin's argument. So I request Jatin to show us the way.'

Jatin smiled and nodded. 'Fine, I'll suggest a way out. Are you aware of the group of poor people who reside between our neighbourhood and theirs?'

'The doms?'

'Yes. They are not part of the other neighbourhood. In fact, they consider themselves belonging to our area and though they are denied entry into the Shiva temple at the entrance of our lane, they offer prayers to the idol. In other word they are Hindus.'

Mr Bose smiled at him appreciatively. 'The idea!'

Jatin continued, 'They eat less, hardly have anything to wear; yet they are strong. So many of us have come together today but we are helpless because we've lost something in which they have practised ease. So if you really want to form an effective defence committee, call them. And raise funds—now'.



The businessman immediately became alert. 'Why funds?'

'You have to feed the cow you milk,' Jatin smiled.

'What exactly do you mean?' the businessman asked, irritated.

'It's very simple. We'll have to buy them arms, feed them well, supply them with cheap booze.'

Mr Bose supported Jatin and said, 'That's right. We have to fulfil the demands of those who are ready to die.'

Jatin asserted, 'Don't waste any more time debating. Such atrocities have to be encountered through might. So we must be prepared. And there's no doubt that they'll strike tonight.'

One could hear coins and notes pouring in. Fifty rupees were raised immediately, if necessary, more funds would be forthcoming. After all, what could be more valuable than life? Let them have a feast. Good food and country liquor. It wasn't much. Maybe those people are going to strike tonight. The ferocious animals were going to emerge from hell in the dead of night. Was it not worth doing at least this bit for the people who would lay down their precious lives for the sake of saving their neighbours? It definitely was. It was a noble cause. Not only would they rejoice in having escaped death, there would be the satisfaction of having donated to a noble cause. So let them enjoy, let them get drunk.

Jhogru began to feel tired. He kicked the *dhol* away and said, 'The spell's broken.'

There was no work today. How long could one busy oneself at home? It wouldn't have been a bad idea to have fun with Suratiya. But she ran away—probably she had work to do. Besides, he was no longer really interested in such things—he just loved to drink. Jhogru didn't like coming out of the spell—his vision clearing up and his consciousness was gradually able to sense the real. He found this life an anomaly—for him it was normal to get drunk, get into drunken brawls, dance naked and sing obscene songs, then throw up and sit around like a zombie.

He felt awful. Needed some more drink. Had to feel high again, now that he was beginning to come back to his senses.

'Suratiya. Suratiya.'

'Calling me?'

'Need some cash, dear.'

'I don't have any.'

Jhogru sprang up and roared, 'Are you going to give me the dough or not? Enough of your tactics.'

Suratiya too retorted, 'I'm not creating a row. Simply saying there's no money.'

'You devil woman,' suddenly Jhogru pulled her plait and began pounding her back.

Suratiya wailed, 'He'll kill me! Help!' She needn't have screamed so loud, but Suratiya always made a mountain out of a molehill.

'Are you giving me the dough or not? You witch!'

The doms became aware once again and told each other with awe in their voices, 'Sardar is beating his wife now, he's beating her.'

At that moment some voices could be heard outside, 'Jhogru. Jhogru, are you there?'

Suratiya's howl nearly drowned their voices. They could be heard once again, this time a little louder. 'Jhogru, are you there, Jhogru Sardar?'

Suratiya stopped wailing. She looked out and said, 'Some people are calling you.'

'Calling me?'

'Yes. Gentlemen.'

'Gentlemen!'

He tried to muster control over himself and came out and stood in front of three strangers. Jatin was one of them.

'Are you Jhogru?'

'Yes, I am.'

'We've come to call you.'

'Who's calling me?' he asked, confused.

'The barrister, Mr Bose. Know him?'

Jhogru looked awestruck and nodded, 'Of course. How can I not know him? I do.'

'He's calling you. Right now.'

'Me? I'm Jhogru Dom, why is he calling me?'

'It's important. Won't you come?'

'Yes, of course, I'll come. Barrister Bose has called me after all.'

'*Salaam hujoor*,<sup>6</sup> *salaam babu*.' He came and stood before the defence committee members. He was still under the influence of alcohol and couldn't stand straight. Everyone looked at him. Drops of sweat glistened on his almost-bald head and his curious eyes kept roving. He was wearing a torn *dhoti* and a coarse *phatua*. There was the mark of a boil on his left cheek. That was how Jhogru looked.

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<sup>6</sup> Respectful address.

Ruby came and stood by the curtain again. She screwed up her nose and mumbled, '*How ugly and dirty.*'

Everyone in the room pierced him with their looks. He smiled and said, 'Excuse me *hujoor*, I'm sorry, I'm still a bit drunk.'

Mr Bose surged forward and asked, 'So you are Jhogru?'

'Yes sir, I'm Jhogru Dom.'

'You're drunk?'

'Yes sir.'

'You love drinking?'

Jhogru smiled and said shyly, 'Yes, I do *hujoor*.'

'Are you their leader?' Mr Bose asked with a stress on the words.

'Yes, I am.'

'Listen Jhogru, we'll give you and your people lots of cash for buying booze—as much as you want. We'll give you money not only for booze but for a feast as well.'

Was Jhogru dreaming? He was taken aback, he looked around. No, it seemed real. Had he drunk a bit too much? Of course not, he had hardly enough to quench his thirst. He wasn't in a dream, it was real.

'It's very kind of you *hujoor*, but . . .'

Mr Bose interrupted him and said, 'I'll tell you. You know there have been riots, don't you?'

Jhogru nodded.

'They may attack us tonight.'

'Yes.'

'We are Hindus, both you and us.'

'That's true.'

'If Hindus don't help each other, who will?'

'Sure.'

'If they come will you put up a fight? We...we are going to join in too and fight united.'

Suddenly Mr Bose noticed that amongst all others seated at the meeting, Jhogru was the only one standing. He said excitedly, 'What's this? Why are you standing Jhogru? Have a seat.'

Jhogru couldn't believe himself, he was absolutely stunned and managed to mutter, 'But . . .'

'Come on, feel free and sit down.'

'I'm a dom, *hujoor*.'

'Dom?' Mr Bose looked astonished; his voice was choked with emotion. 'What if you are a dom? You are a human being just like us and a Hindu—sit down my brother.'

He got up from his seat in a surge of emotion and held the bewildered Jhogru's hand to make him sit.

Jhogru tried to speak, but couldn't utter a single word. He was used to speaking non-stop even while he was dead-drunk. But today he was bereft of words in amazement, gratitude and a kind of happiness he had tasted for the first time.

The rustle of notes could be heard.

Jhogru left the place in a few minutes.

While returning home he stopped short in front of the Shiva temple near their slum and went nearer. He caressed the damp walls of the temple and smiled. Mumbling he said, 'Shivji, you are great, truly great.'

Suddenly it was celebration time for the entire slum. Ramprasad Singh's booze shop ran out of stock within an hour. Tewari's and Banowara Halwai's sweet shops too sold out all they had.

Sounds of a commotion reached their ears at times. A death-dance accompanied by the slogan 'Allaho-Akbar'. The sound waves crashed upon their consciousness like a raging tide.

A few dogs barked now and then. And the Sardar stayed awake in this desolate and still night. He looked ahead; his ears alert to all sorts of sounds and counter-sounds.

They declared war around one at night.

'Allah-ho-Akbar.'

'Long Live Pakistan.'

Jhogru sounded his *dhol*. Dum, dum, dum, dum.

The doms woke up at once. They came out in silence and got together.

The rivals came playing their bands. They were holding up blazing torches. It seemed as if a part of hell descended with them and bloodthirsty spirits from a primeval forest had found a shelter in their dark minds.

They first advanced towards the Shiva temple with the intention of destroying the temple before wiping out the locality.

The entire neighbourhood was on alert. Sirens were sounded, the red lights blazed menacing signals atop the buildings, children were heard crying, doors and windows were slammed shut, footsteps rushed past and conch shells were blown. They let out a cry of terror, 'Bandemataram'<sup>7</sup>—

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<sup>7</sup> Bandemataram: This was a song written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and its title, meaning 'Hail motherland', became a popular slogan during the Indian nationalist movement. As communal politics gained ground, it became associated by Muslims with Hindu revivalism.

the mantra for fighting for the freedom of their motherland became a war-cry today against their fellow countrymen.

Jhogru had stopped beating his *dhol*. They were waiting in silence.

'Don't raise a commotion—let them come nearer,' Jhogru told them.

Suddenly they came in a flood. Their sparkling swords and knives glistened in the light of the blazing torches that shone like the mid-day sun.

Jhogru was swaying to the beat of their drums. Now he said, 'Come on brothers, let's clear the garbage.'

Jhogru's team shouted their slogan.

The Shiva temple which they had never been allowed to enter, the damp walls of which they were only too happy to caress and seek blessings of the mute stone idol who had never protested against the blatant discrimination they faced—Jhogru raised his slogan to hail that God.

'Har Har Mahadeo—Glory to our Lord Shiva.'

And then it was like two mountains clashing. Not mountains made of soft earth but rock-hard mountains of primitive times.

There were rivers of blood. Limbs and heads flew here and there. Grey matter oozed out of crushed skulls; sharp knives kissed the soft tissues of the heart and came out victorious.

Quite a few stars were twinkling in the vast sky at that hour. Wisps of cloud kept floating. Somewhere surely a flower bloomed, a child slept, lovers lay in each other's arms, and some people still dreamt and loved each other. But ...

The riots had ceased. The rioters from the other side had receded. Jhogru's men had managed to teach them a lesson. The Shiva temple was untouched.

But there were many casualties. Both, on this side and the other side. Those who died on this side were the doms. The respectable babus were holding fort behind the frontline—the fight didn't stretch that far. If it had, they would surely have fought they said, laid down their lives.

Corpses lay strewn on the battlefield. The air was heavy with the stench of fresh blood.

A visit to Mr Bose's house would show that his motorcar was waiting for daybreak in the soft light of dawn. And a military truck with four soldiers was waiting next to it.

Mr Bose hurriedly said, 'Are you ready, Ruby? Come fast—the *military escort* won't wait much longer.'

Ruby nodded, 'Yes, *we are ready*. Come on Ma. Baba, Ma is in a *terrible shock*.'

They came out. Mr Bose said, 'Natural, *quite natural*. Do you think I am fine? With God's grace, we have somehow managed to survive. Come now, *hurry up*.'

Mr Bose got into the car. The car sped. They were on their way to Bhabanipur.

Arun said, 'Jhogru saved us Baba—oh, how he fought!'

Mr Bose lit a cigarette, until now he was not in a state of mind to think of smoking. He took a drag and said, 'Hmm . . . it was their job after all. Could you ever have done it? *Certainly not.* Anyway, we gave him good money. *He was well-paid.*'

Ruby heaved a sigh of relief. Thank God, this was not an end to picnics and movies in her life. The social butterfly hadn't died an untimely death.

Their car disappeared in the distance.

The Nariparba<sup>8</sup> of the *Mahabharata* was then being played in the tenements of the doms. Many a woman had lost her father, brother, husband and son. Like quivering flames, their lament rose skywards.

Suratiya was crying too. Jhogru had died.

Yes, Jhogru was dead because people like Jhogru were always born to save the likes of Mr Bose. The Pandavas would never have lived if the five Nishads<sup>9</sup> had not died in their place.

Translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta

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<sup>8</sup> Nariparba: Literally means 'Woman's Episode,' referring to the episode in the *Mahabharata* after the battle of Kurukshetra, in which innumerable women on both sides of the Pandavas and Kauravas, had lost their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons.

<sup>9</sup> Five Nishads: This too alludes to the *Mahabharata* where the five Pandavas saved themselves and their mother Kunti from the fire in a house built of lacquer in the forests. This was a plot hatched by their rivals, the Kauravas. The Pandavas, having prior knowledge of the conspiracy, deliberately let five men of a hunting tribe and their mother die in the fire, so that no one would suspect that they had fled.



## THE LEDGER (KHATIAN)

Manik Bandyopadhyay

He got detained in his friend's house which was located somewhere in the slum area this side. Having got to know of this from someone, a group of twenty or twenty five people came rushing this side, in search of his blood. On hearing this, his friend quickly hid him under the broken cot in his room.

'He has escaped. He has already escaped!'

'Escaped?' Those men who were in a state of murderous frenzy felt disheartened and angry, 'Why did you let him off? You are the one who deserves a beating then.'

The cot was so low, that there was nothing that he could do other than just keep lying underneath. His friend laid a torn mat and a coarse cloth of jute on the floor and gave him an oil-stained pillow. The pillow, though hard as stone, was not torn. There was another pillow, patched up but somewhat softer than this one, but with the slightest movement, the cotton flakes from inside flowed out. So he spent most of the time hiding under the cot in his friend's house and remained like that till the time a fire struck the slum on the following night.

His own house was in the slum area that lay on the eastern side of the main road. Of course, both the slums were a little distance away from the main road. On both sides, a street passing through the brick-houses narrowed into a dirty, dingy lane and reached the slums. Actually, if a line was drawn through the slums, they would be somewhat at an angle to the main road. The area that lay between the main corners of the main road up to the southern bend, was the Englishmen's locality. For sometime, plans and preparations were being made to demolish these roadside slums and build modern-type houses of cement and concrete.



He realized that even through there had been an urgency he had made a mistake by coming this side. Of course, he had never imagined that the situation would have deteriorated so quickly, that this reckless game that was being played with human lives would become more and more dangerous with every passing second.

'You are a right idiot!' his friend cursed him angrily while trying to silence him.

'And you are even worse!' He had replied back, though neither of them experienced any joy at this friendly exchange. Both of them were fear-stricken now. The friendship that had developed from working together in the same factory, and the camaraderie they had shared even till the other day, while walking shoulder to shoulder at a protest march and then coming out victorious, seemed to have received a sudden jolt. Both of them suddenly realized with a certain bewilderment and helplessness that even though there was a common bond between them, and even though they were still friends, it was no longer the same, as if they had become part of two different groups, which were carrying out such vengeful atrocities of murder, plunder and arson against each other. The constant uproar from the outside made them constantly aware of the fact that even though they had belonged to two different groups all these years, they had, all along, participated in protests and processions together, picketing and fighting the police, but today the two groups were ruthlessly clutching at each others' throat.

Both of them felt unhappy.

'Here, have a *bidi* and finish it fast.' His friendly quickly passed a half-smoked *bidi* under the cot.

His friend's wife lowered her son from her lap and sat him on the floor with a thud that made the child wail out. Ignoring the baby's cries, she lowered her voice and said, 'What a nuisance we've got on our hands, who knows what will happen now?'

There was no way of expressing her anger aloud. With a hushed voice, and pouring as much rancour as possible into her words, his friend's wife continued to express her resentment against the wickedness of this man's sudden visit to her house. With the amount of ration that was still left in the house, they could have somehow managed to feed themselves for a couple more days, but now one more adult male mouth had been added. Besides, people had become crazy. They seemed to have lost all sense of kindness, mercy, consideration, or any kind of sympathy. Who knows what would happen if people got to know of this. Grumbling to herself she went out to cook some rice, and then keeping her husband on guard on the verandah outside, she bolted the door from the inside and fed his friend hurriedly,

making him almost swallow the food, before pushing him back under the cot, again. Then after clearing the used utensils, she unbolted the door and looked around cautiously before stepping out. A sense of guilt in keeping this man hidden from those vengeful men outside and the fear of an ensuing punishment, if caught, worried her far more than it worried her husband. But still, she didn't for once suggest the easy way out in simply driving away this menace from her house.

It seemed to be darker under the cot, even during the day. He was quite used to the filthy stench that such rooms generally had, but the smell here seemed to be unbearably strong. With cockroaches crawling all over him, mosquitoes and other insects biting him constantly, and with the largely exaggerated and horrifying descriptions and even more horrifying rumours of all that was happening outside reaching his ears from time to time, he often felt that he was a dead man himself. Sometimes he felt he was a sick man. And at other times he felt like a bullet stuffed with gunpowder. Initially, worries for his aged mother, wife and children had scraped his heart painfully like an ice-scraping knife, but slowly those worries and apprehensions had bloated and intensified a hundred times and turned into such a pain, that he couldn't make out clearly for whom or what he felt this terrible hurt. While still lost in such thoughts, he tried to sit up once, but his nose got grazed against the wooden cot, and the sheer pain of that physical hurt brought tears to his eyes. The shame, hurt and insult of hiding like this, aroused his suppressed anger once again, as if he could hear from somewhere outside a call to regain his right to walk freely and wilfully anywhere that he wanted to, and an intense urgency in his heart to walk out boldly, independent of the consequences. While trying to brush off a few cockroaches from his body, he discovered, first, that he was completely drenched in sweat, and then he realized that the hot and humid weather was almost suffocating him. He fumed silently in blind rage, and an intense feeling of animosity overwhelmed him. Let the world be doomed, let all traces of mankind perish. He would get up now and set this house on fire first, and then, taking a stick, knife, a wooden plank, or any other weapon, he would step outside and kill whoever he saw, and finally, he would kill himself. Oh God, he was so unbearably poor.

Poor? He realized once again that he was poor. Amazed, he wondered how he had forgotten this and had let his mind wander. After all, what was he other than just a poor man? He was poor and so were all the others in this slum.

The next day, this slum was set ablaze, and amidst the noise and uproar that followed, he left frantically for his home in the other slum. He had heard from his friend that his own slum had been set on fire too.

'What will you do now? This is a problem,' his friend said, feeling remorse.

'It's okay.'

Obviously, he wouldn't be able to take the straight path. His appearance and dress were far too indicative. Maybe he could go around this side and somehow reach the Sahebpara<sup>1</sup> alive. And if he was not able to reach it finally, if he lost his life before that, then be it so. He had never killed anybody, he did not want to kill anybody either, but still, if he had to die, he would fight till his death; he was not afraid of dying anymore. There were two roundabout roads from the Sahebpara that went towards his own slum. Possibly, there was a face to face confrontation going on in the main road, as a result of the two slums having been set on fire. He could decide on the safest way home, once he reached the Sahebpara.

He walked on, lost in his own thoughts. There was now a deep contempt in his heart for those who engaged in such meaningless and foolish fights. They were worthless, bad, not adults but just envious, wicked adolescents. Even if a thousand of them rushed to attack him, they would only break down into tears and run off if he just snubbed them and slapped them casually. The sky had now reddened from the fire in the slums, the blue stars were shining bright. Beyond the slum, the area surrounding the brick buildings was totally deserted and silent. A number of stones and empty broken bottles were strewn all around, and along with that lay a few human corpses. His head reeled from the unbearably pungent foul smell that filled the air, in comparison, even that place under the cot where he had lain in his friend's house, seemed to have had a floral fragrance around it. As if he had come down from that place into a factory manufacturing rotten gas. The stench of burning flesh had mixed with the smell of smoke billowing out from the rising flames in the slum, and was now moving upwards.

He halted for a moment, unable to pass by the two bodies that lay on the roadside. Maybe they hadn't killed each other. There was no way of knowing whether they had even wanted to kill somebody, maybe it was only because of the difference in their dresses that they had to die as enemies, but after their death they were now lying on the road, close to each other, like friends. Their heads lay so close that it seemed that they were touching each other, one of them had his hand lying over the other's, even as it lay loosely by the roadside dirt.

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<sup>1</sup> *Para* means neighbourhood, so, literally, the European neighbourhood.

He raised his face slowly towards the sky. His lips started moving, and as if addressing the one who stayed mysteriously behind the stars and heavenly bodies, he said, 'Can you make out which one is a Muslim, and which one a Hindu, from the stench of those corpses? Can you make out which one is a Hindu and which one a Muslim just from the smell of burnt flesh?'

'Who goes there?'

'It's me.'

'Where are you going to?'

'To the hospital.'

While walking up to the Sahebpara, he had come close to dying, almost four times. He was alone, maybe because he was walking all alone on this dangerous road under such frightening circumstances, those agitated and panic-stricken people did not hit him or arrest him. He had to hear several pieces of advice and orders about going back, and not to act foolishly. He even heard people remark a number of times, 'Is this man crazy?'

As soon as he reached the main road in the Sahebpara, he felt as if he had entered a completely new world. In the moonlight-soft electric and gas light, the roads seemed strewn with an abundance of peace and purity. On both sides of the road, there were picturesque houses with gardens and lawns that were brightly illuminated. The sound of exalted laughter and music floated across those lawns and reached his ears like a mild satire. He walked on, till the sweet sound of a piano from a nearby house distracted him and he halted for a moment.

'Who is there? What do you want?'

An armed guard dressed in a khaki uniform called out from somewhere near the gate.

He walked on without replying. Forgetting the roundabout path, he kept following the main road itself, even after hearing the sound of a scuffle come from somewhere not too far on this main road itself. The sweet sound of a piano played in his ears like the gong of a fire brigade-bell. His ears deafened momentarily.

On turning the road, he suddenly caught sight of a stray, disorderly fight. There was a reddish haze in the air. He lifted his eyes slowly and found his own house on this side in blaze. Who would know whether his old mother, wife and children were burning along with that also!

After a few days he met his friend in front of the factory gates. The gates had not opened yet, even though it was long past the official time.

'Give me a *bidi*. Tell me, what's the news?'

Keeping their eyes on the soldier sitting on the nearby bench and on the rifles piled haphazardly, they exchanged news.

'Did you see? It was only we poor people who died.'

'What else could happen? Who would die otherwise?'

'They are all quite well and living happily.'

'Shouldn't they be? After all, all this happened so that they could live well. My wife did not die in the fire. It's only because I hadn't been able to receive any news of her since that day the slum had caught fire, that I thought that she had possibly burnt to death. But I got the news yesterday.'

'Really?'

'Yes, she is in the hospital, and will possibly live.'

'My mother has, of course, died.'

'Really?'

'The rest of my family are all right. Of course they are almost starving to death, but I think they will be able to get over it. We will surely be getting our ration today. Won't we?'

The gates were opened now, but only a little. The iron chain on the gate was loosened to make a gap, just enough to let only one man pass through, and then it was locked again.

About three hundred people had collected in front of the gates by then. The names were called out, and people were let in one by one. About forty names were left out, which included both his own and his friend's. Then the gates were closed.

They had no jobs and no right or necessity either to go inside. They should now leave without making a noise. About forty people retrenched so irresponsibly in just one day's time! How did the people who, just a month back, were forced to take back the three people they had earlier thrown out in an act of false bravado, become so courageous now? Everybody looked surprised, the two of them exchanged glances.

Within five minutes armed guards arrived, and after arresting these people for disobeying Section 144, they lifted them into a police van and left. .

As soon as the lorry began to move, he suddenly seized his friend by his shirt collar, and spat out the half smoked *bidi* on the road.

'I am going to murder you today, rascal.' he warned

'Go on.' His friend nodded in compliance

'Just say, that neither you nor I have any caste. You are poor and so am I. We belong to the poor community.'

'That's right,' his friend said, nodding his head in agreement.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

## TREATY (SWAKKHAR)

Achintya Kumar Sengupta

Thick iced cream in earthen pots—that's what Dinonath sold. He came from Jessore.<sup>1</sup>

'Well made, this *rabri*. I have two left today. Come on, have one.' As he spoke in the dialect of a far-away land, and a jargon that only close friends shared, Dinonath stirred the cream vigorously. It was in a tin can that had to be stirred between the palms.

'What about the other one?'

'I'm going to have that myself.'

It was a summer night. The two of them were sitting in a concrete doorway of a largely *kancha* slum, licking their cream-lollies tenderly placed on *sal* leaves. Their tongues went round and round, savouring every touch. They sat there chatting—talking about the lives and villages they had to leave behind.

Eggs in a big thick-caned basket—that's what Johurali sold. He came from Barishal.<sup>2</sup>

'Did you get some fish today?'

'A teeny-weeny portion of shrimps was being sold for four *annas*. Think it's soon going to be the end of our fish-eating days.'

'Come on, have these two eggs.' Johurali offered two duck-eggs. 'Come on, cook these.'

'How much should I pay?' Dinonath hesitated.

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<sup>1</sup> Jessore is a district that went to East Pakistan after Partition.

<sup>2</sup> Barishal is a district that also went to East Pakistan after Partition.

'Oh, come on, don't talk too much! Did you ask to be paid for the cream-lolly the other day?' The two laughed out aloud, relishing the mock transactions of their simple and innocent lives.

They lived in slums next to each other. But they were not the only ones. There were others like them—the riffraff and dregs of society, the heckled and the hassled, the poor and the petty.

The petty people. Their actions were petty. Their attitudes were petty too. And they restricted themselves to the narrow confines of society. They allowed the grand people of society to take them for a ride. And they were taken round and round an ever-increasing circle of self-interest woven by these grand people, which provided the latter with a bountiful harvest.

The grand people. They talked of grand things. They sat on high pedestals and made grand speeches. They used their grandeur to stay away from the heat and dust of ordinary everyday life.

Johurali and Dinonath were neighbours. They didn't have time to ponder over either the meaning of life or its value. Their lives were ruled by little joys and little sorrows of mundane existence. Their main concern was to find two-square meals a day, one whole piece of cloth to cover themselves with, and a pillow under their heads for a comfortable night's sleep. Nothing else excited them or inspired them. Except of course, opportunities for saving a *paisa* or two, so that they could send some money to their families in the far-away villages, or even manage a trip back, themselves. And in the midst of that struggle, very often, their minds went back to the life they had left behind. And then they could see their beautifully manicured rice-fields, feel the cool waters of the village river, and hear, like the first flush of the tidal waves, the bubbling melody of the voices of their little ones. And they wondered if one day they might suddenly be taken away from all this.

They were fellow walkers in life—Johurali and Dinonath. Johurali walked in the mornings and Dinonath in the evenings. At times, they walked simultaneously, in the afternoons, carrying wares on their shoulders. Johurali carried a big basket of vegetables, and Dinonath carried a small basket of hairpins, ribbons and *alta*.<sup>3</sup> In the city they might not have walked the same streets but in life their streets were the same. They didn't know, though, where those streets were going to take them and what kind of a destination awaited them. Yet they continued to walk; and moved on; at their own very slow pace.

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<sup>3</sup> A red liquid traditionally used by Bengali women to decorate their feet.

'Since I need to buy a *gamchha*<sup>4</sup> anyway, I might as well buy it from you. Do you have one?' asked Johurali.

'Take this; very good weave. Not going to make a single paisa's profit on this one. Take it at cost price,' replied Dinonath.

'But why? Why won't you make a profit?'

'Oh, that's because I'm going to buy vegetables and eggs from you. Will you make a profit out of those, then?'

The two friends laughed out loud.

But one fine day, this laughter was ripped apart by heart-rending cries from shining knives. And there was blood all around. Blood flowed from innocent passers-by and the screams rang out from helpless victims.

As if in a moment, even before they realized what was happening, Dinonath and Johurali's worlds changed. Shops started burning. People started looting. In lanes and by-lanes, people were stabbing those they didn't even know. Peace-loving citizens had become mute spectators of the blood-bath in their own front-yards. Vultures were flapping their wings and swooping down on the streets of Kolkata.

Johurali and Dinonath. They now looked at each other differently; far removed from the quiet comfort of their affection and tender feeling for each other. Their looks were now clouded with suspicion and their expressions spoke only of distrust. There were no words anymore between them; only silence. And their laughter had been replaced with irritation.

They themselves didn't realize how steadily, but surely, their faces had changed. They realized it only when their slums started burning one evening. The harassed residents came out of their homes. They were in two groups. Dinonath was on one side, Johurali on the other. Dinonath was armed with a block of brick, and Johurali with a soda bottle.

If only there had been someone around to measure how much they had moved apart! It was an unimaginable sight. Dinonath kept hurling brick after brick, and Johurali kept hurling bottle after bottle; as if they were desperate to hurt each other. The two groups yelled and roared in turns, as more and more people got wounded. It seemed as if Dinonath would jump with joy if Johurali died and Johurali would dance with happiness if Dinonath died.

They were being swept about like bits of straw in a fierce flood—a flood of mindless violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Traditional bathing towel made of very fine soft woven cotton cloth.



The groups gradually increased in size. There were more and more men carrying more and more arms. In the midst of all that, there was no one to keep track of how many people were dying, how many were wounded and how many were fleeing.

It was past dusk, but the battle continued. Each group had suffered its share of triumphs and reverses. They had tripped over corpses and slipped on a slush of blood.

Then a police car arrived and fired a few blank rounds. Within moments the mob started fleeing desperately in all directions. Our Dinonath and Johurali ran too, but no one knew in which direction they were being swept away.

No one cared any more.

The army was out. They fired whenever they spotted a trouble-maker. There were arrests. The roar of violence had now been replaced by the silence of terror.

At an opportune moment, two men sneaked stealthily into a half-burnt abandoned house. They belonged to the same group of people—those trying to hide themselves. They huddled beneath a flight of stairs leading to the first floor. The main door was open but the place where they were hiding was dark and they were well hidden. Even if bullets were aimed from the main door, they wouldn't reach them.

They could hear the noise of heavy boots close by—the clanking noise of metal studs. The soldiers were on guard.

The two men were terrified. They cringed and huddled closer.

'Gone?'

'Gone,' replied the other, as he gradually relaxed and released the breath he had been holding back in panic all that while.

Both were speaking in hushed tones. They were safe for the moment. Yet neither of them was willing to let go of the reassuring warmth of the other's presence.

'Are we making any progress?' one of them asked, as if the battle was still on.

'Of course, we are,' replied the other, as if reading from a ledger.

It is possible to identify people not only by their faces but in the dark but also by their voices. And Johurali and Dinonath recognized each other.

Oh dear! They did not actually belong to the same group.

In a jargon that only close friends shared, Dinonath asked, 'Where have you hurt yourself?'

'On the head, the chest. You?' Johurali reciprocated in the same jargon.

'The same.'

'Do you have a light?'

'Yeh, and you have a *bidi*?' asked Johurali, his voice filled with joy.

Dinonath lit a *bidi*. He took a few puffs and passed it over to Johurali.

Two puffs later it came back to Dinonath. One puff. Again Johurali. They were very tired. A lot of blood had been lost.

'There, there they come!'

Johurali hid the *bidi* within the palms of his hands so that it couldn't be seen from the outside. He wiped out traces of even the faintest hint of life.

They huddled together, very close, flesh against flesh, both bodies suffering from spasms inflicted by the same pain.

The metal studs of heavy boots clanked on the metal roads. Clank! Clank! Clank!

The *bidi* had gone out. Johurali lit it again.

Dinonath put three fingers together, turned the *bidi* around and gave it a final puff.

The fire was their signature. It was a treaty—of peace and friendship.

The cluster of the sound of marching boots.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri



## LOSS (JAHAJAE)

Gour Kishore Ghosh

The straps of her sandals snapped, and Ranu was forced to stop in her tracks. This was annoying. She looked around for a cobbler but couldn't see one. Now she would have to drag her foot along, and she wasn't even sure how far she had to walk.

She already had a bad heel that became so painful at times that she found it difficult even to walk. On top of this, she was now carrying a bag-load of shopping. Should she discard the sandals? She didn't want to. These were not very old and had never snapped before.

She couldn't really blame the sandals. It was the crowd! As she was about to take a step, someone had stamped on it at the back and it had snapped. Now she was trying to work out what to do next. All the while people were brushing past her, and she felt an intermittent stab of elbows. All of a sudden she lost her temper and was furious with Achintya. These days, especially in situations like these, she often felt that for the past 16 years Achintya and her family had been taking advantage of her. And each time she had such thoughts, she felt an attack of intense pain in her spine and neck, a throbbing of the veins and a sense of suffocation within her chest.

Was something the matter today? It was past half-eight in the evening, but the buses were still crowded. She would have to give this bus a miss as well. There was no way she could get inside this one. For a moment she felt like spending more than she was supposed to and taking a cab back home. That would be a good way to get back at Achintya, she thought. But she gave up the idea for two reasons. One, she was still scared to travel alone in a cab. Achintya had once flamboyantly offered a psychological explanation for this fear. 'This means, your subconscious mind likes to believe that your physical assets are worthy of being ravished. It's a latent hope and this

springs from a deep-rooted desire. It's actually pride, not fear at all,' he had explained. The shameless rascal! Second, Achintya never kept any money for himself. He handed over his entire salary to her. It was up to her to run the house. And Ranu realized that taking a taxi wouldn't affect Achintya in any way. She was the one who would have to bear the brunt of the extra expense.

She had walked around endlessly for good bargains from discount offers, and bought a huge bedspread, some fabric and wool, a few glasses and some cups. Her heavy bag was also stuffed with medicines for the kids and packets of Bombay mix. And then she hadn't been able to resist picking up a pair of cauliflowers at a rather modest price, so both her hands were literally full. Now there was no point in getting on to a bus unless she had a seat. So she had to wait at the busstop, clinging on to her torn sandals and swallowing stabs from strange elbows. Waiting there, she followed the immersion<sup>1</sup> procession, and the crowd.

Soon, two processions came in from opposite directions, blocking the whole place. There were buses, taxis, rickshaws, lorries, hand-carts, tempos,<sup>2</sup> and men—men, men and men, like overflowing water from a clogged basin. Musical bands, honking cars and screaming people created such a cacophony that Ranu felt helpless and completely paralysed. She was feeling rather uneasy. Then all of a sudden there was a big bang—as if a bomb had exploded right in the depths of her heart. She was blinded. Then another. And another. Everything around reverberated from the impact. Some panic-stricken female voices moaned into Ranu's ears, 'Oh, my God! What's happening!' A deep voice complained, 'there they go again. This is impossible.' People ran in all directions. Ranu ran too—with her heavy body and her heavy bags.

The riot spread so fast and so far that Ranu couldn't be sure which place would be safe to shield and protect her 36-year-old body. She closed her eyes and ran. The loose and flabby flesh of her protruding belly, generous buttocks and dangling breasts seemed to grow heavier and heavier till they finally threatened to fall off. The glasses slid down her nose and hung precariously at its tip. The muscles in her tummy ached from the strain. Her heart seemed to explode into a thousand pieces. Suddenly, she noticed the falling shutters of a nearby shop. She made a dash for it, crawled underneath the shutters, pushed past the man in front and hurled herself into the shop. The shopkeeper pulled down the shutters quickly and locked them hurriedly

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<sup>1</sup> After a religious festival, the images the Gods and Goddesses are taken in a procession and immersed in the Ganga or any local river.

<sup>2</sup> Small lorries with three wheels.

The bag and the cauliflowers had flown from Ranu's hands. The shop shuddered from the sound of the bombs outside. The shopkeeper put the locks in place and turned around to find a female almost drooping on the floor. She was panting; breathing with her open mouth. Her clothes were drenched with sweat. She looked so miserable and helpless that he controlled an instant urge to open the shutters and get rid of the nuisance. He felt a little uncomfortable. First, there was trouble all around. Now, he found himself in a locked room all alone with a respectable woman. He didn't want this to become an issue and be unnecessarily harassed. Honestly speaking, he was genuinely worried. It was time for him to close the shop when the riots started. He had pulled down the shutters hoping the clashes outside would subside by the time he finished his *namaaz* inside. He would then leave for home. But now he was stranded with this problem.

They heard the thud of a brick somewhere. Maybe at the shop next door. Then there was a shattering of glass. Someone shouted, 'The rascals are on a rampage.'

Ranu felt a pain in her chest. There was no air around and she was breathless. Her head was beginning to roll towards her chest. She was feeling very hot. With her eyes closed, she was trying to get back her breath. She could see innumerable bright stars popping up in the dark. Suddenly she thought of her children.

The shopkeeper realized that the female was going to slump on to the floor. She was gasping like a fish out of water. She was probably feeling faint and giddy. Quickly, he switched on the fan at full speed.

'The scoundrels have set the vehicle on fire. Call the fire brigade, the fire brigade,' shouted some people as they ran past.

A draught of air reached Ranu. It blew off a newspaper page that was lying somewhere. Her hair and the loose end of her sari swayed with the impact. The sweat on her forehead, neck and face now made her feel cool and comfortable. The cramps in the muscles, the pain in the chest, the throbbing of the neck and forehead and the profuse sweating were gradually subsiding. She now had the strength to lift up her drooping head and open her closing eyes. She heaved a huge sigh. She was feeling much better. But her heart was still thumping and her whole body felt numb. Outside they could hear the bells of the fire brigade.

'The fire-brigade is here,' the man blurted out softly, relieved.

Ranu turned towards the voice. For the first time she realized there was someone else in that room. The man stared at her. She also realized that sometime back when she was desperately looking for shelter, it was this man that she had pushed aside to enter into the shop. Quickly she began to pull

her clothes about her. The part of the sari covering her breasts had fallen off. In the mad scamper for shelter, the taut muscles of her tense body had snapped off one of the straps of her much-worn bra. There were large gaps in the front of her blouse where some of the buttons had got unfastened. As she was busy organising herself, her ears burnt with embarrassment.

The fire brigade had stopped mid-way. They could hear a couple of blasts nearby, and the incessant ringing of the stranded fire brigade.

The man was taken aback by Ranu's frantic efforts to regain some of her dignity. He was ashamed at the thought of having done something inappropriate. He must have embarrassed the female with his staring. He turned around in the other direction.

Ranu drew some strength from the timid expression of the man. Maybe he was not a bad man after all. She now looked around the room. There were some old almirahs. There were stacks of woollen clothes—scarves, sweaters and shawls—all with tags. There were numerous brackets hanging from the ceiling. These brackets contained all kinds of suits and stoles. There was hardly any empty space in the room. On the floor on one side there was a heap of woollen clothes. There was a small tube light; lots of Diwali insects flying about,<sup>3</sup> and a strong iron shutter. He had locked the shutters. Her eyes stopped on the lock. There was absolutely no way to escape. A chill ran down her spine. Couldn't she get him to open the lock? What was the harm if she left now?

Hesitantly, the man explained that he would be happy to open the locks for her if she wanted to leave. Otherwise it was best to keep them on. It was difficult to know what intentions the rampaging mob had.

Ranu was taken aback. The man knew exactly what her thoughts were. It meant he was watching her very closely.

The man explained, 'Bombs, stones, rods and knives were being used. You can hear the sound. The fire brigade has been stopped. And someone was looking for an opportunity to loot. They would jump at us at the slightest opportunity. I won't be left with anything then. The customers have trusted us with their things. We have no choice but to be careful.'

Ranu was sure that this was a clever man. She warded off the insects from her neck and looked at the man again, sharply. He was a thin, grey, dry-looking man and under the harsh light he looked a determined kind of a

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<sup>3</sup> Small green midges that appear in large numbers around October-November just before the Diwali celebrations and disappear soon after. They hover around lights and have a sharp sting.

person. She had a clear feeling that the man was not at all pleased with her. The green insects were all over his head, shoulders, face and back. He was sitting directly under the bulb from which the insects were falling off. It was a tiny room and the man had hardly any space to get away from her. Should Ranu get out of here? Should she ask him to open the locks for her?

In the distance, from the direction of the commotion, suddenly they heard some explosions. The excitement rose. And they heard heavy footsteps running past in a hurry.

‘The police are firing tear gas shells,’ the man informed her quietly.

Immediately there was an explosion. Very near to where they were. Ranu was alarmed. The room shuddered. They could smell the gunpowder. The man moved quickly and fastened a couple of more locks.

Ranu had been thirsty for quite some time. Her throat and mouth were parched. There was no way she could go out now. She wondered if she could get some water somewhere. The man was back in his seat now. He was busy brushing off the insects from his head, face and shoulders.

Ranu asked, ‘Could I have a glass of water please?’ Her voice seemed to choke. The man hurried towards an almirah and took out a glass. He cleaned it well, poured water from the pitcher and offered the shining glass to Ranu.

‘Have it,’ he said, ‘the water is clean.’

Ranu didn’t feel comfortable with the man. And it was as if he had read her thoughts. She hadn’t spoken to him at all till then, but he seemed to feel the apprehension, suspicion, discomfort and fear that she harboured against him. And that she might not be willing to have anything offered by him. So almost in anticipation, he clarified that the water was fine and she needn’t worry. Ranu tilted her head backwards, held the glass above her open mouth, and tried to pour the water instead of sipping straight from the glass. But when she looked up and saw so many insects flying around, she brought the glass down to her mouth and drank directly from it. She drank it all in one breath almost. The water tasted really good. She felt soothed.

‘Some more?’ The man asked.

In her choked voice Ranu replied, ‘Yes please.’

He handed her another glass and explained, ‘This water is from the deep tube well. Nothing tastes as good.’

Ranu felt much better now. She wanted to thank the man. But she wasn’t sure how to do so. He had given her shelter; when she was fainting he had switched on the fan for her, he had given her water. But how could she convey her heartfelt gratitude to this strange man, and maintain a safe distance? She couldn’t make up her mind. She felt a little embarrassed but finally decided to



say something before she left, and turned her attention towards her plastic bag. It had flown from her hands and some of the things had spilled onto the floor. Slowly she began to gather them together. The Diwali insects were pecking away at her, stinging. For the moment that was her main discomfort. She had turned her back to the man. It was as if she was ashamed to face him—she had been unable to thank him for his kindness.

Outside there was pandemonium—an incessant stream of bomb explosions and tear gas bursts, the fire brigade bells ringing away frantically and the sharp honking of cars.

But now that Ranu was more confident of the shelter she had, her tension was subsiding, her body was relaxing, and her tired eyes were becoming heavy with sleep. Was it extreme tiredness? Quite possible. This kind of stress and strain was not usual for her and it was very demanding at her age. She started dosing. The cacophony of bombs, tear gas shells, horns—everything seemed to melt into the melody of a sweet harmony. She seemed to be drugged. Her hands and feet were heavy. Was it only tiredness? Suddenly something flashed in her mind. That man. He must have drugged the water. So, that was his sweet water from the deep tube well. He was smiling. He had revealed his true colours finally. Help! Help! She screamed. But she realized her voice was completely choked. She saw him hanging up more locks. She could see the door covered with locks now—rom top to bottom. He was putting in the last lock; his back turned towards her. This was her chance. She took out a glass from her bag, and aiming at his head, she threw it at him. As soon as he was hit, the man burst into a huge explosion and there were fumes all over the room.

Startled, Ranu regained her senses. There was no one in front of her. She turned around and found him offering his *namaaz*. Dreams! What an ugly dream it was! She felt a whip lash on herself.

The man couldn't concentrate on his *namaaz* today. On a normal day he would have switched off the lights to keep the insects away, and pray peacefully in the darkness. Today he wasn't able to do that and the insects were taking the life out of him. Also, his thoughts wandered towards the female. How pale she had turned when she saw the locks on the shutter! How could he drive her out in such a condition?

But sometimes dreams did come true, Ranu justified to herself. Binadi had foreseen her father's death to the minutest detail. Bad dreams did come true. She brushed off an insect from the tip of her nose.

The female was absolutely quiet. She was petrified. This thought nagged him. And his heart stung like the insect bites. Moreover, it was not safe for his reputation to keep her locked in this room with him. The local guys

might make this an issue. Although they knew him and his shop for 23 years now, a hot head and a suspicious mind could obstruct reason anytime. Moreover, the police could make life difficult for him too. He was becoming more and more confused.

If all of a sudden he tries to do something, I should be prepared to defend myself. Sitting as I am now with my back towards him is creating a good opportunity for him. She turned to face him. He was still at his *namaaz*. She needn't be too worried, she told herself. But there was no harm in being careful.

Immediately after his *namaaz*, the man thought, he would unlock the shutter and throw the female out. She was extremely panicky and if, by chance, she started screaming for some reason, it would spell disaster.

There were two explosions right outside the shutters. In a few seconds, the room was filled with a sharp, foul smell. Ranu started coughing. So did the man. Eyes burnt and tears flowed.

'Pass me your hanky, pass me your hanky,' the man spoke out. 'They are using gas.'

With her eyes closed, Ranu took out her hanky. The man grabbed it from her, dipped it in water and thrust it back into her hands.

'Wipe your eyes, and keep doing it. That's the only protection against the gas.'

Ranu wiped her eyes continuously. But they continued to burn slightly. She tried to look through her fluttering lids and tears tumbled out in a steady stream. 'Keep your eyes padded with the wet hanky,' the man suggested. 'That's the only remedy.'

Then the man got up. Ranu heard him open one lock after another. He raised the shutter a bit and immediately pulled it down.

'They are still at it,' he informed her. 'But it is possible to pick one's way through now.' Then as if for Ranu's benefit he said aloud, 'Let's leave it unlocked now.'

The man must be thinking very lowly of her, thought Ranu. The effect of the gas was now wearing off but she didn't take the hanky off.

She didn't want anyone to know that she was crying.

But I haven't done anything suspicious, Ranu heard the man speaking from the depths of her heart. No, none at all, Ranu wanted to assure him. But how was she going to say it? She had no words. So she remained silent.

The man noticed that the female had been sitting there, with her head lowered and the hanky pressed to her eyes, for quite sometime. The gas must have been too strong for her. Her neck, head and cheeks were covered with insects. She was so terrified, he had thought that she would leave the moment he unlocked the doors. But no, she remained there, sitting.

Slowly Ranu raised her head. She had finally pulled herself together. She looked straight into the man's eyes. He seemed to be a little surprised, a little unsure.

Ranu asked clearly, 'Are the buses running again?'

'No,' he replied, 'not yet.'

'Could I then, 'she asked', wait here till the buses start running again? My sandals have snapped and my feet are hurting. Can't stand on them for long.'

'Of course, please do.'

Ranu felt relieved. Finally she had found a way. A faint smile touched her lips.

'Can I say something?' The man was eager to listen to Ranu. 'Please do,' he said.

'Do you mind switching off the light? The insects are a nuisance.' She spoke spontaneously, as if speaking to a near and dear one. 'That is, if it's not inconvenient for you.'

'Oh no, not at all', he replied in a flurry. 'With these insects around, I can hardly keep the light on anyway.'

'Then, could you switch it off, please?' Ranu asked. 'Why unnecessarily suffer these insects here?'

Ranu would have felt relieved if she would have been able to say these words. But she could say nothing. And for as long as they were there, they just kept looking at each other, now and then. Destiny had brought them together under the same roof, and a specific geographical boundary had forced them to be neighbours as were bound to each other by an indispensable chord of inter-dependence. Yet, it was clear that they had no confidence in each other. Although they spent time sitting next to each other, they were not able to switch off the light in the room. So, they continued to suffer the insects. And these insects kept nibbling at them. Nibbling away, nibbling away...

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

# INFIDEL (KAFIR)

Atin Bandyopadhyay

Not a drop of water could be given to the donkeys that evening. The cows, too, could be heard pleading from their sheds. And the intermittent shrieking of the horses meant that absolutely no one could escape the consequences of this horrible bloodbath.

It was the middle of the night. Fierce flames leapt from the villages all around; wails of human beings reverberated through the empty fields; and every now and then, the air brought with it the stench of burnt flesh. A pall of heart-rending distress descended over the villages as far as one could see, haunting the open fields like a phantom possessed. Almost everyone was fleeing. They were scrambling for escape routes either in the darkness of the fields, or in the thickness of the long grass, or in the depths of the woods. Young women were disappearing, never to be found again. In the field, Paran yelled out his wife's name—twice. And at that very moment he saw a group of men running towards his direction. They were carrying fire with them—flames dancing wildly from their torches. They seemed to be shouting—there he is, running away! Pin him down with our wooden spear! Paran swiftly hid himself in the cover of the long grass. And there he began to whisper, 'Kirni! Are you there? Kirni?'

There was no reply. Everything seemed to stand still with fear. The only option was to use the depths of the night—to flee. But it was going to be very risky till one was able to reach the town—somehow. Kirni could not be found. And Paran was alone. Maybe that was why he suddenly remembered Hashim. And Zabida. Perhaps they could save him. Hashim was a close friend. He had stood by Paran and had been his saviour time and again. Now if Hashim decided to abandon him, Paran would be completely helpless. Suddenly Paran realized that there was no escape route from those men

with fire. He was being cornered—for sure death. So he took refuge in the water. He began to swim—sometimes on the surface, sometimes under it; and finally arrived at Hashim's house. 'Give me a *tufan* Hashim,' he pleaded, 'I'll wear a cap—as Muslims do—and leave.' Or, probably he wanted to say—'I've been looking for Kirni all over, but haven't been able to find her. So I've come to check with you'.

'Who's there?'

'It's me, Parainna,' replied Paran, repeating his name in a form that was used by close friends as a mark of endearment. 'Save me, Hashim. And if you wish to kill me, do so. I can't take it any more.'

In the midst of these fierce riots, people like Hashim found themselves totally isolated. They were unable to come out in groups to save lives—either of men or of animals. So they shut themselves away from this gruesome bloodbath by locking themselves within their homes. Their eyes burned and their foreheads filled with sweat. They suffered the agony of every brutal act and the pitiful wail that followed.

Paran could not stand on his feet any longer. He leaned against the bamboo pillar and slumped into a sitting position in slow motion. A lamp burnt within the house. And Paran could hear a cock crowing in the distance. It was extremely cold. So Zabida lit a fire for them. They sat round it and spoke in whispers. They were worried that someone might overhear them. There were spies everywhere. They could hear a man in the dark fields—declaring the details of the killings over a loudspeaker. Paran was still cold. He was terrified and couldn't make sense of what he was hearing—he seemed to hear Kirni's cautious voice calling him from behind some shrubs. He didn't know what was happening. He somehow managed to raise his eyes towards Zabida. And shivering, asked, 'What were you saying, sister?'

Zabida gave him courage. She said, 'Warm yourself at the fire; I'll be back soon.' And she walked across the courtyard to visit some of her neighbours to find out about the situation outside. The news she collected was alarming. Ismatali had been pierced with a bamboo spear. He had given shelter to some people in their school building. And his men had been fighting hard to protect these people. But in the end they lost. The school building was now engulfed in flames, and Ismatali lay supine on the field, as if counting the stars in the sky.

Hashim said, 'Ismatali is gone too'.

The significance of the events seemed to be dawning on Paran. He gradually began to realize that the people who were being sheltered by Ismatali had all been burnt to death. And many more had either been injured or killed. This was the information that was being announced by the man

wielding the cone-shaped loudspeaker, as he made his way towards the mosque. The mosque was built by the side of a well that captured the beauty of nature around in the reflections on its crystal clear water.

Paran was now scared that he might endanger the lives of Hashim and his family. So, standing up he said, 'Sister, I'll have to leave now. I'll walk across the fields'. But, as he was about to move away, Hashim stood in his way and said, 'Where are you going to go? Into the fields? Not while I'm alive'. Saying this, he looked expectantly towards his wife for suggestions on how they could help Paran. He could walk through the fields wearing a tavan and a cap. If he were able to keep up his disguise till he reached the town, he would be safe. But Paran was a local, and it would be difficult for him to hide under a disguise. Zabida was not able to provide an immediate solution. It was a long distance to the town—a long walk first across the fields, and then along the river. But suddenly Zabida's face lit up. It wouldn't be possible for them to keep Paran in the house for very long. There were spies everywhere. But now she had some hope. They would have to be able to walk up to the river somehow. And then Paran would be in the river, with a cooking pot. The pot would float on the water and underneath it would be Paran, breathing through a small hole in the pot. On the bank of the river, Hashim would be walking, carrying a bamboo pole on his shoulders, with a bundle of parched rice tied at one of its ends. From time to time, when Paran was hungry, Hashim would hide with him amidst the shrubs and woods and give some of that rice in a little bowl to Paran, soaked in river water. Zabida had lived her whole life along river banks. She knew the waters, the hyacinths and the banks like the back of her hand.

Hashim went and milked the cow quickly and got a little milk. And in that cold night, Zabida heated it up. She checked all around her and decided this was the best time. Or else, the men with flaming torches would get wind of their movements. Zabida offered the milk to Paran. Then she tied some parched rice into a little bundle. Hashim would escort him like a bodyguard all the way till the end of the river. And Paran, swimming under water, would pop to the surface from time to time for air, on hearing the coded sounds of Hashim's bamboo stick. Alternatively, he could also breathe through the hole in the cooking pot over his head. Anyone watching would see just a cooking pot floating on the water. Underneath it would be Paran, swimming under the surface. But no one would know. Thus, Paran would swim his way to town—skilfully negotiating the waters like a fish in full splendour.

The horses had stopped screaming. They belonged to the babus and were now dead. From time to time, the air resounded with gory screams of sadistic

exultation. Innocent men and women were burning inside the flames. The fields were filled with a musty smell of burning skin. In the darkness of the night, a cluster of white pigeons flew over a dome. They were flying away to the huge fields on the other side of the river. In the meantime, Zabida had come out, with a lantern in her hand, into the front yard. Paran followed at the rear. Hashim prayed—we count on you, O, Khuda! As they approached the field, they gradually began to disappear from Zabida's sight. As they walked deeper and deeper into the darkness, Zabida thought—how lush the grass was, how numerous the birds, and how fragrant the greenery of the fields! But Paran was leaving all these behind—his Kirni, and his home. As a farmer he cherished nothing more than the land he ploughed. Memories came crowding in—of good times and bad times; of Paran and his mother—Madhu *pishi*. Paran had once found Zabida, then ten-months pregnant, unconscious among this long lush grass. She had gone out looking for the goats. Paran had lifted her up in his strong arms and had carried her back all the way across this huge field. Once home, he had told Hashim off. The same Paran was now leaving behind his much-loved fields and crops—never to come back again. Zabida's eyes filled with tears.

They were rushing ahead—sometimes through fire, sometimes through the still darkness of the night. Paran was wearing a *tafan* and a cap, and using the darkness around to keep his face covered. Hashim had slung the bundle of parched rice on the bamboo stick. In the bundle, there was also the small bowl. When Paran would become exhausted and start freezing in the cold water, he would use the bowl to give Paran a bit of the parched rice soaked in river water with some jaggery. The meagre food and the warmth of the sun would then keep him going underwater for some more time. As they moved ahead and away from the village, Paran broke into fits of sobs. 'Where is my Kirni?' he cried. 'Hashim, there's no point in my being alive,' he lamented, and collapsing on the grass, he started wailing in the darkness. And in that state Paran looked like a madman. But behind him stood Hashim whispering words of assurance, encouraging him to live, preparing him to cross the river, to float under its surface and swim untiringly for long distances and long hours. All around, people were fleeing—in every direction and in every manner. Maybe, in the town, in some government tent, Kirni was waiting for Paran. Hashim was constantly weaving words, whispering them into Paran's ears, inspiring him to overcome this ordeal.

Hashim was egging Paran on and had managed to persuade him to reach the bridge. Now they had to cross it. But he could see a few people standing in the dark shadow of the mosque, and wasn't sure who they were. So he walked down the slope into the tobacco and onion fields all around, and

avoided walking by the mosque. Then he began to crawl his way through the tobacco field. Their bodies became wet from the dew on the ground. In the midst of all this, Paran Mandal moved like a robot. Hashim was drilling into Paran a new identity—Paran was now Mohammed Idris, son of Mohammed Imanulla. Or else, he should act dumb; Hashim would do the talking—that Paran was sick and mentally disabled, and they were going to the town to see a doctor. But why in the middle of the night? This was not going to be a convincing story, Hashim thought. The only thing Paran had to do was roll up his eyes and keep repeating a meaningless ‘baa, baa’. And not speak at all. Hashim would pull him through the danger points like a little calf—as if they were on their way to the town for the weekly market where Paran Mandal was going to be sold.

They walked through fields, plots of land, and various kinds of shrubbery, and reached a field with *hijal* trees. They were not taking the usual route. Instead they followed a circuitous route, choosing their path through areas where the violence was less intense. Suddenly they heard the raucous laughter of a group of people returning to the village. Hashim realized they had been busy somewhere—killing and injuring people—and were now celebrating their success. He pulled Paran close to him and hid themselves behind the shrubs. Once the men were inside the village, and a good distance away from them, Hashim and Paran began to make a dash through the fields. They continued to run. Now even if the men noticed them and followed, they would not be able to catch up with them from that distance.

Village after village endured indescribable suffering. The ecstatic jubilation of destruction ran through the village of Sonar Ga in a north-south direction and through the numerous villages on the banks of the rivers Maheshwari and Sheetalkha, stretching from the east to the west. Humanity was experiencing the most horrifying of times. People had forgotten the essence of religion. They were possessed only by an intense hatred and a mad drive to kill, and this seemed to engulf the whole region like an evil shadow. As they pushed ahead, Hashim continued to murmur into Paran’s ears. At the same time, he also had to remain alert on all fronts—for Paran. He had to save the dazed Paran—somehow; it was a matter of self-respect—his own, and that of the entire human race. As Hashim continued to run for Paran’s life, he also continued to encourage Paran to want to live.

The first time they stopped was at the ashram of Garipardi. From a wood of peepul trees, across a rugged field, they could hear the call of birds. It was going to be dawn soon. Some of the birds cast their shadows on the waters of the river, while some others flew away towards the eastern and western horizon and disappeared. The crows and the mynahs had spread their wings



in the sky. The whole scene was as clear as crystal; and there were no traces of filth—from the bloodbath of the night. But Hashim was not to be fooled. He was conscious of the huge monster that lay beneath the calm surface, waiting to strike at any moment. Now they had only the river in front of them. If Paran tried to make it to town openly during the day, he would be caught. So he would have to wade through neck-deep water with the cooking-pot over his head. And he would have to do that for about six miles now. If he somehow managed to overcome six more miles, Hashim would be able to salvage his self-respect. He handed over the little bowl, with some parched rice and jaggery, to Paran. Paran would have to remain under water for the rest of the day. He would have to float under the water with the cooking-pot over his head, and carry out the breathing process through the hole in the pot. But, alas! Paran showed no interest in life or living. His face was white with fear. Hashim tried to divert his mind by talking about the fair last year and their profits and losses from it. But Paran sat there listlessly. He wasn't really eating; he was just pushing the food into his mouth mechanically. And all the while Hashim kept a sharp vigil. As soon as Paran finished eating, Hashim started moving again—he didn't want to waste a moment. He sent Paran into the water while he kept walking along the bank. Hashim now felt like a true pilgrim—on his way to Mecca and Medina. To a place where there was love for humanity, where there were no differences amongst mankind, where everything was accepted as God's gift, where all creatures could demand sympathy, and where not wanting to live was a sin. So Hashim walked. Towards Mecca. And Medina. A little below him was a wintry river. And in that water floated a single cooking-pot. The pot moved smoothly towards the south. There was no way anyone would know that one of their men had embarked on an unknown voyage—with a cooking-pot over his head. The river was not very deep where they were—shallow water, no plants and reeds, and at the bottom a sandy bed. Under the water, Paran was moving like a lithe water-snake, but to an ordinary eye, a cooking-pot among the hyacinths would appear to be just another of so many other objects that floated around—insects large and small, and dead bodies of monkeys and cats. And from the bank, Hashim's long shadow fell on the water. Along with that came the rhythmic sound from his stick striking the ground like a horse's hooves—one, two; one, two. Paran heard it as fear, fear; and he stayed submerged. And then he heard—one, two, three; one, two three—and all was safe. Then he pushed his face out of the water and waded through the hyacinths.

The bank of the river gradually began to rise uphill. Hashim was now walking along a very high edge. His figure grew smaller and smaller. But

even from that distance Paran heard the sound—one, two; one, two. It floated across like a strange sound—travelling as if from an underwater kingdom. Maybe, it was a prince riding by on his horse—one, two; one, two. Or maybe now the prince was trotting on his horse—one, two, three—and as the horse galloped away, Paran knew he had nothing to fear. Under the water, Paran dreamt of Kirni. She had a small face with large eyes. She had lost all her birds and cattle—cows, goats and pigeons. Where was she now? The uproar had started very suddenly—he woke up to find their cowshed burning. When he came out of his house there were people wailing. He left everything behind and began to run.

Along the bank on both sides of the river were villages, fields and crops. The shrubs and woods along the banks were dotted with pretty little flowers. Ahead he could see a crematorium. And again he heard the sound—one, two; one, two. Paran was back in the water, under the cooking-pot. He could have been looking for pearls. But, no! He was looking for Kirni—groping around—under the water, along the water, in the villages, in the fields and among the crops. 'Kirni, my Kirni! You who clung to my heart, both on land and in water,' Paran cried, 'where are you now? Where am I going without you?'

From beneath the surface, he heard the sound again—one, two, three. There was nothing to fear. So Paran popped his head up. With both hands, he cleared the hyacinths and moved ahead. He was gradually getting tired. It was winter and the water was ice cold. From within, Paran was dying—inch by inch—of fear, of his sense of loss for Kirni, of the winter, and of the ice-cold water; he was steadily losing his breath and his strength. Hashim continued to cheer him, having to shout across a long distance now—'You are almost there, Parainna. The chimneys of the factory of Dhamgarh are in sight! That is where you are going to find your Kirni too.' His situation was similar to that of a shipwrecked man. As if the man was telling his son, 'look, there's the lighthouse in the distance. With a little more effort we'll be able to reach it soon; and get light, food and warmth'. Or maybe saying, 'Look dear! Look at the stars in the sky. Your mum's waiting for us at home. Just a few more strokes and we'll be able to overcome this frightening sea of water'. The shipwrecked man would, in this way, inspire his little son to go on. Here, Hashim tried to inspire Paran—it is only a short distance to the lighthouse. And we will have to make it there.

Hashim was now hopping his way through. The river continued to flow in a downward direction, and the bank continued to rise higher and higher. The further Hashim continued to climb, the deeper and broader were the cracks in the stone. He had to cross these cracks very cautiously. He could

have followed a different route and taken a proper path, but that would have taken him slightly inland and he could not have seen Paran from there. Moreover, it wouldn't be possible for Paran to hear the sound of the stick on stone either. These cracks were masses of land that had been left behind standing precariously, after the fierce current of the swollen river had washed the banks during the rainy season. The moment the rains came again, there would be 'plop! plop!' sound on the water and the land would vanish in moments, dissolved, finding its way towards the mouth of the river. And one day, just like Paran, the river too would break its shores and move far away from them.

From within the water, Paran probably hadn't heard Hashim. Hashim was standing at quite a height. The high bank of the river was quite steep with some sand at the bottom. Now that everything was quiet all around and there was no one in sight, Paran had nothing to fear. He sat among the reeds and enjoyed the golden grains of spring in the crops on the other side of the river. He could see fields of maize and wheat and the big village of Nangalband. The potters and the blacksmiths had all left the village. And the temples were deserted. A clay idol of Lord Shiva and those of other Gods and Goddesses lay neglected and forgotten like insignificant stacks of hay. There were signs of the traditional practice of animal sacrifice in temples, but everything had now stopped. The poor farmers of the village had come here looking for the gold ornaments worn by the Goddess. Suddenly, Paran heard the sound from Hashim's stick—one, two. Immediately, like a frog, he plunged into the water and lay there quietly.

As Hashim was walking by, he noticed a wooden spear stuck into a banana tree. A couple of boys were practicing throwing their spear. Suddenly they noticed a man walking along the steep banks of the river. The man was not following the regular path. They raised their spears and shouted, 'who's that? What is he up to?' And they began to run through the maize field to catch up with Hashim. Hashim didn't know what to do. He was at a loss for words and suddenly seemed to have become dumb in a way that he had been training Paran to be. He stared blankly like a fool for a while and then rolled his eyes. But the men persisted. They nudged him—

'*Miyan*, where are you headed to?'

'To Narayanganj.' His eyes continued rolling. Trying to act like a moron, and trying to avoid further conversation, he began muttering to himself.

'What's your name, *miyan*?'

'Mohammed Hashimali; from Nayapara; nephew of Ismatali Sheikh.'

They said, 'You are a brave man, *miyan*—there are people dying everywhere.'

'I belong to the Sheikh family; who would dare kill me?' his eyes were back to normal, but he continued to walk with a vengeance. He walked straight, hit the stick hard on the ground—one, two, one two—and kept walking. But alas! Almost next to him, among the reeds, was a floating cooking-pot. On it was perched a crow. And underneath it was a man floating by. The man was hardly breathing he was looking forward to reaching Narayanganj in the hope of finding his Kirmi. Hashim continued to walk, his stick making a loud noise—one, two. The sound he created was non-stop—either with the metal bowl or with the stones in his hand. One, two—fear, fear—it said. Parainna, you'll die in the waters if you surface now. Fear, fear! At that moment, Hashim heard the men behind him scream—'Hey, *miyan*, look, there's a cooking-pot moving on the water there!'

Hashim's whole body was going numb. But he continued to walk as usual. If he stopped now, the men would immediately know there was something wrong. Hashim was an ordinary middle-class family man. And he pretended to be sick and helpless. But he was also taking Paran to town. So he wanted to divert the attention of those men, and began to sing a ballad of a Muslim warrior, all the while managing to act like a sick man. There was a warrior, he sang, but he was an unfortunate man. Hashim turned round and round beating his stick furiously on the ground—one, two—Paran, fear! Fear! And he sang, the face was beautiful like the moon... Paran, fear! Fear! He turned round and round and tried his best to divert their attention. But they didn't care. They were already on their way down—running down the slope, spear in hand—towards the cooking pot.

In desperation, Hashim shouted out—'Hey, *miyan*, that cooking pot is moving in the wind.'

'But there is no wind!'

Hashim now gave them his farewell greetings, as if the warrior's song had truly come to an end. He would have to take their leave. So in a leave-taking style at the end of a song, he called out to them a riddle—'Hey, *miyan*! Can you tell me what is the difference between the sun and the moon? The difference between wheat and maize? For whom do the crops grow? Who is the person who provides the fruits of harvest to the three worlds? And gives life to our hearts—hey, *miyan*! Why are you running? Where's the wind gone? Has Allah, disgusted with you and your deeds, swallowed up all the wind around?'

They paid no attention to what Hashim was saying. They reached near the cooking-pot and threw the spear fiercely at it. The spear pierced the pot, and the crown of Paran's head, and stuck there—upright—like a feather on a dartboard. Paran sprang out from the water, a fountain of blood gushing

out on to his face and body. His eyes opened up into a wide circle. He lifted his arms into the air and screamed out—'I've found my Kirni'. And then, hugging the pot to his chest, he began to drown. There were some bubbles. The men laughed out triumphantly, and then they turned their attention towards Hashim. He was now making a mad dash to escape. They followed him. 'There goes the *kafir*!' they shouted. They ran, hopping through the fields and the steep banks, to catch up with him. 'Look, there goes the *kafir*! Look at that *kafir*—running through the fields of maize and wheat! That man is a *kafir*! It's dusk and there's a man running through the fields and he is a *kafir*!' The birds were returning home, but inside the fields of wheat and maize was a *kafir* that had kept himself hidden. The men were striking the plants with their spears and frantically looking for the *kafir*. Their spears were ready to pierce his belly the moment they found him. And then the *kafir* would lie on the ground, fallen, like a grand bird spread out helplessly.

Bending himself very low, Hashim ran through the fields. There were huge cracks in the ground, and he jumped across these as he raced ahead. The fear of death made him restless. He turned round once and found them closing in on him. In the meantime, it was becoming dark all around. And the dull slice of the new moon hung like a dead crow from the chimney of the factory at Ramgarh. As he tried to negotiate the next crack, he realized that he could not jump across that one. If he fell into the crack, it would be a depthless bottom for him. And in the darkness, the depth looked frighteningly sinister. But the moment he peeped out, he realized that the men had reached him. Now they only had to aim and throw the spear at him. But he said a little prayer again, and took a leap. As he landed on the other side, he realized that he had broken a bone on his left leg. He couldn't move. The men stood there in the dark, and roared with laughter. Now they only had to ram the spear into him and that would be the end. He lay on the ground with his hands folded. And began to groan. But since they were now able to strike him from such a close range, they thought it was going to be more satisfying for them to jump across to the other side and thrust the spear in through his back. Hashim lay there in fear, curled up like a dog. He wasn't saying anything, but he seemed to be watching something. And he held on firmly to the stick in his right hand. As they jumped across the crack, he blocked their way by holding out the stick in the middle of the crack. They lost their balance and began to slide down the side of the crack. Hashim was in no hurry. He stuck his face out, looked down into the gorge and said, 'Now my friends, enjoy the sky above and the river below! How does it feel? How far are you on your way down right now? Can you see the path to Hell?' Now it was his turn to roar with laughter. 'Parainna, there is nothing

to worry now! Dive into the river and you'll find oysters there. But not all oysters would contain pearls, Parainna.' He began to lament. Then, keeping his stick aside, he peered into the gorge and screamed, 'Hey, *miyan*? Has Allah swallowed all the wind around you? So what does Allah have to say to you?'

Pitiful cries swelled up from within the gorge and spread around the field. The men inside the crack were being buried under soil breaking loose from the edges on top. It was quite dark now. And streams of lanterns descended on the fields. They had come rushing in, in response to the shouts of 'There goes a *kafir*!' And Hashim roared with laughter. He wanted to say, look how these two *kafirs* are being buried alive. He took out his little metal bowl, threw the remaining parched rice and jaggery into the crack and began to scrape down mounds of sandy land with it. The pitiful voices down below could not be heard anymore. As more and more people gathered around him, Hashim told them—there were two *kafirs* passing by, *miyan*, and I gave it to them—gave them a burial right here.

In the darkness Hashim couldn't stop piling the earth over the crack. He also couldn't stop Paran's face from appearing before him over and over again. The spear was stuck on his head like a piece of feather. And his dead pair of eyes searched frantically for his beloved treasure—his beloved land and his beloved Kirni. Hashim couldn't forget that terrible sight. And he kept piling earth in a frenzy. In the meantime, the waters of the tide had entered the gorge. The earth falling into the crack was now forming a thick slush in the waters. He was drenched in sweat. And as he wiped his face with the edge of his clothing, he noticed two men with lanterns standing over him.

'Hey, *miyan*, why are you throwing earth like a man possessed?'

Hashim did not reply. He continued to scrape the earth like a mad man.

They asked again, 'What are you looking for under the ground?'

This time Hashim broke down, 'I'm digging the ground for gold, *miyan*; I've lost my treasure,' he wailed hysterically.

Suddenly they seemed to recognize Hashim, 'Aren't you Hashim?'

It seemed ages since he had known his true identity. He had forgotten everything. He had a wife at home—Zabida. Holding the bowl close to his chest, he tried to stand on his feet. But couldn't. So he sat down again and exclaimed, 'You!'

'We're on our way back from town—having pulled Paran's wife through to safety.'

'Now pull me through. I need to go too.'

The pigeons in the field were flying around and cooing happily. They were Paran's pigeons. Paran had immersed himself in the waters. He was

lying there with his arms around the cooking-pot. He no longer had any sorrow. He was lying in his own village, in his own land, and dreaming—there were pretty flowers in the *kalmi* creepers again, there were birds in the sky, and in the lush green fields of maize and wheat he was playing hide-and-peek with his beloved Kirni.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## BOATMAN (MAJHI)

Prafulla Roy

The Boynabibi canal flowed through lush green reeds and met the river Dhaleshwari further down. Her course was as straight as the fine parting of the thick dark cascading hair of a beautiful princess. It was just after dawn in October and Fazal had tied his single-oared rental ferryboat exactly where the coconut and the beetle nut trees sparkled brightly in the soft rays of the morning sun. His restless eyes swiftly scanned the *karamcha* shrubs, the forest of beetle nut trees and the four-roofed green-bamboo hut in front, in a full circle. But there was no sign of Salima. Probably she had forgotten about her promise last evening.

Fazal had waited a long time. He now picked up his oar made from the wood of jackfruit tress. If he didn't reach the market place of Sira-jdigha soon enough, the other boatmen would distribute the passengers among themselves.

He was almost ready to untie the boat when he heard the melody of a gushing wave on the Boynabibi canal. Peals of laughter floated in like sweet music from a water instrument. It was Salima standing next to a thick coconut tree.

Fazal refused to look in her direction. He sat with his back towards her. His face had become clouded as he sulked.

In the meantime, Salima had almost reached the prow of the boat. Her bluish eyes brimmed with the light from the morning sun. Salima's body was as soft, fresh and full as the beautiful *champa* flower. But her tongue cut through with mock sharpness as she exclaimed in a high pitch, 'Well! Well! So someone's going to be angry now, is it? Oh, dear me! Give me a break!'

Fazal did not respond.

Salima said again, 'What's up? Look at me...'



Fazal didn't look. He continued to sit still.

Now Salima spoke in a deep and serious voice, 'I don't like you sitting like that not looking at me. There's no point in being unnecessarily angry. I need to slip through Bajaan's vigil to come and meet you on the sly. And you know how difficult it is. He keeps an eye on me day and night. Since waking up in the morning, he has been sitting in the courtyard having his tobacco. Only a little while ago he went towards the farm. And I took the opportunity to come and see you.'

Now Fazal turned around. Since he had received a valid clarification from Salima for being late, his fresh young face was bright and clear again. He replied, 'You don't need to play hide-and-seek with Bajaan for very long now. All arrangements will be ready in a day or two. I have already collected six score and ten rupees. Another ten rupees and I'll have seven score rupees. If I have enough passengers, I should be able to make it today. The Hindus are leaving their lands and fleeing for their life. So I will surely have passengers. And then I'll hand over seven score Rupees to your bajaan<sup>1</sup> and bring you over to my house. OK then, see you!'

Salima had replied, 'Oh, no! I'm not going to let you go so soon. I took such pains to come here, and if we can't spend a little time together...' her face had become dark.

Fazal said, 'Your Bajaan is such a heartless miser, he's going to extract every drop of that seven score rupees. And only then will he give his daughter. Let me go now. We'll meet again at dusk.'

'OK, see you then. I'll be here exactly at dusk. So don't be late.'

'No! No! I won't be late.'

Then, as an after thought, Salima had said, 'Just one more word...'

'What is it?' Fazal had asked curiously.

'Last night, Kashimali of Nabipur had come to Bajaan with money. The rascal wanted to marry me. I chased him away. Earlier, there was a visit from Aibuddi of Basail, and before that from Habib Miyan of Giriganj. I chased all of them away. But I won't be able to do it for very long. You know Bajaan. With money in his hands, he could pin me to anybody any-day. Moreover...'

'What?'

'I don't like being alone anymore. I feel very strange sometimes.'

Fazal had joked, 'How do you feel? To be free like a bird in the sky and fly off?'

<sup>1</sup> A respectful form of 'father' used by Muslims.

Salima was embarrassed, 'I don't know,' she said coyly.

Fazal hadn't responded immediately. He thought for a while and then moved on to something completely different, 'Don't worry. No Kashimali or the likes of him will be able to take you away from me. I'll pay off your Bajaan tomorrow. Let me go now.' He didn't wait further. He pushed the boat with his oar right into the middle of the Boynabibi canal. And then as he rowed back he broke into a boatman's song:

The young girl of sixteen  
Has stepped onto seventeen  
The morning star lies  
Captured in her eyes.

The girl who had captivated the morning star in her eyes listened to this ode to her youth and was deeply moved. And in the fine bluish line of the canal, Fazal's boat and his overwhelming song floated away like a little dot for a very long time and finally disappeared from sight.

It was getting darker in the evening. And at the jetty of Sirajdigha the ferry-boats were lighting up their lamps. The marketplace was full of people from unknown villages who had come there to sell their wares. And numerous red flames from their kerosene lamps now lit up the entire place. The calm deep voice of a boatman offering his *namaaz* drifted in from some merchant boat far away.

Fazal's single-oar ferryboat had finished its last hire for the day and had just arrived at the jetty. He had been transporting passengers back and forth the whole day and in the end had been able to earn seven rupees in all. He dug the boat-hook deeply and firmly into the mud along the bank and tied it well with a piece of thick rope. Then lighting a kerosene lamp, he took out the secret purse from his waist and settled down to count the coins carefully one by one. In all, he had six score and seventeen rupees. He still needed three rupees more to make it seven score. He had hoped to make it today. But that was not to be. Now he would have to wait for one more day.

The Hindus were leaving the lands and the property of their ancestors and fleeing in desperation. So it was not unusual now to be able to make five or ten rupees from a single hire. And he was sure to be able to get that the next day. This morning he had told Salima that tomorrow he was finally going to quench her father's thirst for seven score rupees. But that would not be possible now. He would have to do it the next day. He would fling the one hundred and forty rupees with all his force at the ugly wild catlike face of her Bajaan, and finalize all arrangements to bring her over to his place.

A few days back Salima's Bajaan had screamed in a shrill voice like that of a vulture, 'You wish to marry Salima? Give me seven score rupees with your right hand, and take her away with your left hand. And remember one other thing. All expenses for the wedding will be yours.'

Quietly Fazal had said, 'Now I have only four score rupees. Let me give you that. I'll pay the rest after the wedding. I promise.'

Salima's Bajaan was over sensitive about dues. He thought of them as heavenly stars. They were always out of reach. So, he had replied in a dispassionate tone, 'I don't deal in dues, *miyan*. I deal only in cash.'

'Fine, then give me a month's time. I'll arrange the money.'

'In the meantime, if there's someone else who's willing to pay the money, I'll arrange to have my daughter wedded to him.'

Fazal hadn't pursued the matter any further that day. Instead, he had walked quietly away from that ugly face towards his ferryboat. He had vowed that he would find the money somehow and as soon as possible.

Since that day he had been accumulating the money rupee by rupee. In order to be able to buy the desires and dreams of his entire youth, he rowed incessantly, ferrying passengers with single-minded dedication and back-breaking labour. Delbhog, Savar, Basail, Sonarong—his boat sped far and wide, non-stop across the waterways of Bengal. The days stormed past in a daze and he had not only lost all sense of tiredness and fatigue but also the track of days and nights, minutes and seconds. He drove himself harder and harder by the moment, in order to build a home with Salima. His tireless efforts in the outside world were inspired by the hope that in the inside world of his home, he would have Salima and her dreams intimately to himself... Anyway, he counted the notes and replaced them inside the purse one by one. Then he tied it around his waist, very close to his skin so that not a single rupee was lost. If even one of those notes had, somehow, gone either to Heaven or to Hell, he would have chased it all the way there to retrieve it.

Only three more rupees. And then he would be able to marry Salima. He was trying to imagine that beautiful day of his dreams, and started singing softly:

I have drunk the wine from those dark eyes  
 And restlessly I pine.  
 And from my friend's first flush of youth  
 I have also drunk more wine.  
 My beloved feigns resentment  
 Now how do I make things fine?  
 I'll place a *paan* on those soft lips  
 And a kiss on her eyes divine.

He was completely submerged in his song when he suddenly remembered his promise that morning. He was supposed to meet Salima in the evening, amidst the whispering coconut groves.

So he quickly got up and got ready to leave. Immediately he heard the shout of a passenger, 'Hey, boatman! Are you ready for hire? And who's that? Isn't that our Fazal?'

The voice was familiar. Fazal looked behind him. It was Yasin Shikdar from Malkhangar, standing almost at the edge of the jetty. And right behind him was a female figure clad in a burkha. She was probably his wife.

The jetty for the launch was adjacent to the jetty for the ferryboats. It had been deserted all this while. But now a launch had just arrived from Narayanganj and was waiting there. The bright searchlight from that launch had lit up the whole area. Fazal asked, 'Where do you want to go, *miyan saab*?' 'Char Ismail,' replied Yasin.

'Can't take you that far now. It's already dark. Come back tomorrow morning.'

Yasin became anxious. Holding on to the prow he pleaded, 'No one wants to travel at night by choice. I'm helpless. Take me there, and you'll be happy with the payment.'

Now Fazal tried to pay attention, 'How much will you pay?'

'Five rupees.'

'Five rupees? Pooh! I'll give you a sheet, take your wife and sleep comfortably through the night under that tin shed of the marketplace, and in the morning, just swim across.'

He had wasted a lot of time. Salima was waiting amidst the whispering coconut groves. And by now, because of his delay, the collective darkness of an entire night must have descended on her face.

But Yasin grasped the prow even more desperately, 'Okay, I'll give you seven rupees. I will have to reach Char Ismail tonight.'

Fazal replied, 'Why do you want to give seven rupees to me? Use the money to buy a quarter ton of oil,<sup>2</sup> stuff it up your nose, and go off to sleep. You will forget that you ever had to go to Char Ismail. Now leave the prow and let me go...'

'So, how much do you want?'

'You'll have to pay ten rupees, *miyan saab*. That's final.'

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<sup>2</sup> There's a saying in Bengali that a few drops of mustard oil in the nose ensures very sound sleep.

'Ten rupees!' his terrified scream seemed to bring the life out of him, 'Well, you people are the ones that are exploiting to the full the benefits from the creation of Pakistan...'

Very indifferently Fazal said, 'If you can pay that amount get on to the boat. Otherwise leave the prow. I've got work to do.'

Yasin muttered under his breath, 'You've found me in a spot and you are bullying me into paying more. Anyway, I'm helpless. So I will have to pay ten rupees.'

Fazal didn't seem to hear the first few words. But he heard each of the last few words clearly. Fazal said, 'Now *miyan saab*, you are talking like a man. Get onto the deck with your wife.'

No sooner than Fazal had spoken, Yasin Shikdar turned to the burkha-clad figure and pulled her roughly by the hand. Immediately there was a muffled, yet sharp cry from the woman, 'No! no! I don't want to go. Please leave me. I beg of you.'

Yasin replied in a muffled roar, 'You lowly wretch! You never appreciate good things. With me you're going to stay like a princess. Otherwise, you'd have been taken away by that betel-nut trader, Keramat Dakui, and been kicked around by him. Wouldn't it be a better life to live as my chief Begum?'

The low cry now became heart-rending. Fazal was startled. Then two rough hands pressed the woman's mouth tight, 'Quiet! Quiet! Or I'll kill you.'

The man's voice left no doubt in anyone's mind that such a deed was not beyond him.

The searchlight from the ferry launch had now turned to the other side. And on that lighted side the dark waters of the Dhaleshwari shone like sparkling black glass. Everything was totally dark on this side of the river now. And in the darkness Yasin's eyes burnt like the fiery jewel of a King Cobra's crown.<sup>3</sup>

Focussing all his concentration on his eyes and his ears, Fazal was listening to and watching what was going on. Suddenly he called out, 'What's wrong, *miyan saab*? Doesn't the lady want to go to Char Ismail?'

Fazal's voice sounded worried. Yasin leapt up and ran back to the boat. His voice was somewhat incoherent, 'She's just a child. Doesn't want to leave her father's place and go to her husband's. It's nothing serious really.'

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed that the King Cobra carries a jewel on its forehead, and there are many stories of people trying to obtain it. In reality, however, it is thought that its forehead is so highly polished that sometimes at night when the moonlight falls at a certain angle, it glitters even brighter than the brightest of diamonds, and is mistaken for a sparkling jewel.

'Oh! I was wondering if it was something else.'

Yasin didn't respond. Instead he caught hold of the woman and almost carried her onto the deck of the boat. Immediately there was an earth-shattering scream from inside the burkha.

With a frightened tremor in his voice Fazal said, '*Miyan saab*, I don't feel comfortable about this. Please come back in the morning.'

'You've found me in a spot. OK, I'll pay you fifteen rupees. Come on! Don't delay! Release the boat. I will have to reach Char Ismail by tonight.'

Fifteen rupees! What was the man saying! If he hoisted the sail of the boat, the force of the north wind would take them to Char Ismail long before the break of dawn. And apart from sitting at the helm gripping the oar tight, and looking for Salima's face in the midst of the innumerable chains of sparkling stars in the sky, he would have nothing else to do really. In exchange he would get fifteen rupees in cash! Even after paying Salima's price of seven score Rupees he would have twelve rupees left neatly lying against one another in his purse and ringing away joyously together. The thoughts filled Fazal's mind with happiness.

In the meantime, Salima must have left the Coconut grove after waiting for him in vain. Doesn't matter. Tomorrow, even before the sun rose in the east, he would surprise Salima's Bajaan by flinging the promised money on his mean face. And then at the end of this month he would wed Salima and bring her over to his home. Fazal was a simple man. Thoughts of little joys, little pleasures and little pieces of happiness, made him joyful and bubbly for the next few moments.

A little later, Fazal checked with Yasin once again, 'How much are you going to pay me?'

From inside a covered space of the boat came the reply, 'Fifteen.'

Fazal was sure if he wrung Yasin further he would drip more honey. But Fazal didn't want to add to his sins. He was somewhat God-fearing.

Anyway, without further delay, he punted the boat right into the middle of the river. From then on it would be the brisk endless flow of the Dhaleshwari. The dark scheming night had spread its wings far and wide. The dull and subdued light of the moon had given the Dhaleshwari a haunted look. And the waves were lapping around in a regular monotone around the boat, which was made from the wood of blackberry trees.

Gripping the oar tightly at the helm, Fazal looked up at the dimly lit sky. There were innumerable stars up there, twinkling like fireflies. He gazed at them and thought of Salima. And he seemed to be filled with a wonderful sense of intoxication. Without Salima, his life would be meaningless. These days the bed in his little two-roofed hut felt like the terrible embrace of a dead

ice-cold serpent. His life seemed very lonely. And in that joyless and uncelebrated loneliness of his life, Fazal spent the nights just dreaming of Salima.

Tonight, after reaching his passengers to Char Ismail, he would direct his sail immediately towards Salima's house. The joy and excitement of it tugged at his veins. The blood gushed all over him and his heart swayed with romance.

The boat cut through the water smoothly and progressed swiftly. He held on to the oar with a tight grip and started to sing:

Youth has come into the girl  
 Like waters from a tide  
 The dancing lotus in my tears  
 Sways from side to side.  
 O girl! Do become a beautiful face  
 A veil on that I'll be,  
 Become the pupil of an eye  
 Where its dark black kohl I'll be., O girl...

All on a sudden the music seemed to be ripped apart. All the senses seemed to receive a violent jolt. Picking up his ears with great concentration, Fazal sat listening anxiously. There was a frenzied movement inside the covered portion of the boat. A frantic tussle seemed to be going on inside. Fazal was gripped by a horrible feeling of discomfort.

Yasin Shikdar was hissing like a ferocious snake, 'Shut up! Shut up! Or I'll strangle you.'

'Yes, do that. Please do that. Either kill me or let me go. Or else I'll jump into the river.' The woman's voice was choked and muffled.

Yasin's laughter was like the eerie sound of a jackal in a graveyard, 'Dying is not that easy. I'm not going to let you die so easily. I'll murder you bit by bit.'

The exchange between Yasin and the woman hit the pit of Fazal's heart with the force of a raving tornado.

The boat was speeding like a meteor through the rapid current of the endless Dhaleshwari. And on the banks the coconut and the *hijal* trees were being struck aimlessly by a strong breeze that blew in all directions.

In the meantime, the tussle had subsided. And Fazal gradually relaxed his tense mind that had, all this while, been anxiously concentrating solely on Yasin and the woman. He tried to think of something else. The sky was covered with innumerable stars. He turned his gaze towards them and tried to think of Salima again.

Before the first cock crowed next morning, he would wake up Salima's Bajaan from sleep and throw the seven score Rupees right onto his face. Fazal was amused to imagine how the man would be staring at him like a stupid fool, out of sheer surprise.

But he couldn't think of Salima's Bajaan for long.

Gradually, very gradually, he was overcome by dreams of Salima sipping in through his entire consciousness. Her dark doe-eyed look, her well-formed young body full as a wild creeper, her multicoloured striped sari—all in all, Salima was an amazing mystery, a wonder!

His dreams were broken again.

He could hear a helpless and tearful female voice, 'Take me to Kolkata. You are my Godfather. I plead with you.'

Yasin laughed out in an ugly muffled voice, 'I'm not your father, girl. I'd like to be your child's father. Now shut up! I had to bear three injuries from your husband in order to be able to grab you.'

Yasin's laughter, the black wavy Dhaleshwari, the fading darkness, the sounds of the waves and the sail, the sound of the breeze—everything combined to create the feeling of being gradually engulfed in a terrible omen. Millions of fishes seemed to be emerging from the deep seas and laughing an earth-shattering laughter. Fazal started feeling scared.

He heard Yasin's terrible voice and laughter again, 'Don't nag me, you bitch! I'll definitely kill you now.'

The female voice sounded desperate, 'Do that please. I'll be relieved. You've killed my husband.'

'I've killed your husband, have I? How long will the taste of a former husband last? You'll now live life with a new husband. You'll feel better.' And he continued his roaring laughter.

This time around the woman let out an inhuman scream. Fazal couldn't imagine such an earth-shattering, heart-rending wail could have been contained within that burkha.

And following the wail Fazal heard the tense and alarmed female voice, 'Don't touch me! Don't! Is this your justice? Is this why you snatched me away from them? You had said you'd take me to Kolkata. Don't touch me! Ah...!'

'Mmmm, Virgin Behula<sup>4</sup> indeed! Don't touch me!' Yasin dragged his words in sarcasm.

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<sup>4</sup> A woman in a legend, who with concentrated determination, pursued Death and brought her husband back to life.



Immediately the frantic tussle of bodies was resumed. The boat was swaying violently on the waves now. It was swaying so violently that it could subside any moment.

Fazal was going to say something. But the woman cried out to him in a loud and shrill voice, 'Save me, O boatman! Save me! I am being ruined!'

The plea seemed to slice through Fazal's veins, nerves, fat and marrow, and pierced his very consciousness.

There was the wide-open sky above him, the swift wind howling all around and the turbulent river underneath. Apart from the two passengers, there was no one else around. Dreams of Salima had been wiped out from his mind long back. Fazal felt a kind of explosion in the very channels of his veins. His eyes flared up like those of an angry tiger. A lightning seemed to have passed through his entire consciousness. In a terrifying voice Fazal roared, '*Miyan saab...*'

Even before he finished his roar, he gripped the oar firmly with his left hand and moved his right hand towards the sharp pointed teeth of the harpoon under the perch. He had hoped to spend the night under the soft open sky gazing at the millions of twinkling stars and having sweet dreams of Salima. Little did he know that an ugly storm lay lurking behind those simple hopes of his.

On hearing Fazal's call, Yasin Shikdar opened the door of the covering and came out and sat on the deck. Immediately the girl leapt out from inside too. The boat tilted for a moment and some water gushed in. The girl wailed in that unearthly heart-rending cry, 'save me, O batman! Save me! I am the weaver's wife. My husband has been killed in the riots. And this...'

The girl's voice seemed to be possessed by a supernatural spirit. It seemed to rush through Fazal's nerves all over his body and created a strange, unexpected effect on his heart. Not conscious of what he was doing, the harpoon whizzed out of his right hand. The accuracy was deadly. Even before Yasin could resist, it had pierced his ribs. Yasin Shikdar let out a terrible groan, '*Ya...a...a...*'

Soon Yasin's body was sucked into the swift current of the Dhaleshwari and lost into oblivion. The boat was much lighter now. In the meantime, Fazal had cleaned up the sharp points of the harpoon and placed it back to where it had been.

The girl must have been choking with terror. It seemed her flesh was going to burst into a spray of blood, and her eyes would pop out of her face.

Calmly, as if nothing had happened at all, Fazal enquired, 'Where would you like to go?'

In a faintly relieved voice the girl answered, 'I don't have anyone here. Everyone fled during the riots. My husband lost his life. I have a brother-in-law in Kolkata. That's where I'd like to go.'

Fazal asked no more questions. He just turned the prow of his boat towards the jetty of Tarpasha.

Once again the current was swift, the lapping of the waves and the whooshing sound of the wind. Just as the eastern sky was beginning to glow with faint patches of light, Fazal anchored his boat at the jetty of Tarpasha from where the steamers left.

On the deck of the boat, the girl was sitting absolutely still. Her face was spotted with little drops from the morning light. One look at her and Fazal was startled. For a moment he seemed to see Salima's face in her's.

The steamer jetty was full of people. They were leaving their lands and homes and moving away like wandering gypsies.

Fazal brought the girl along with him to the ticket counter and said, 'Give me the money. I'll buy the ticket for you.'

The girl lowered her head and informed him that she didn't have any money at all.

Fazal stood there quietly for a moment. Then suddenly he remembered. In the secret purse at his waist he had the money that could buy the beautiful dreams of youth.

Fazal hesitated for a moment. His heart trembled a little. And then forcing himself to turn his back on his own life, he dived into the sea of humanity to buy a ticket for Kolkata.

In the meantime, with a deep horn, the steamer announced its arrival. As he placed the ticket and the rest of the money into the girl's hand, he said, 'Keep this small sum of money. There are so many people travelling. You'll reach Kolkata along with them. Will you manage?'

'I will, but this money...' her head was bent low in deep and utter embarrassment. When she raised her head a little later, she couldn't see anyone. Like an incredible piece of magic, the boatman had disappeared completely.

What had Fazal been reminded of on the way to his single-oared boat at the ferry jetty? Salima? No. The weaver's wife who had lost everything in life? No. Was his mind paralysed at the thought that Salima's bajaan would get her married off to someone else if he was unable to pay the promised sum of seven score rupees in a day or two? Not really.

He was reminded of the bloody head of the harpoon last night. It was popping up and down, swaying incessantly on the wave of his consciousness. How many times, in the scheming darkness of the nights, would people like

Yasin appear on his boat, before he was able to build a home with Salima in a quiet corner under the shade of a tree on the banks of the Dhaleshwari? How many times?

Fazal remembered, the harpoon hadn't been sharpened for a very long time. He would have to do it today and make it sparkle like silver.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## HONOUR (IJAT)

Narayan Gangopadhyay

The sea is far removed. There are storms, there are cyclones there. And here, this bit of a village is like a coral island. It is surrounded by the peace that comes from simple ill-breeding and ignorance—like a calm lagoon it is protected, encircled by coral reefs.

This was a comparison made by Mainuddin, the son of Jainuddin Mia, the village physician, in fact the only L.M.F. qualified physician in the four or five adjoining villages taken together. He was an undergraduate student in a Kolkata college then. Six to seven years have gone by after that. He is now an up-coming advocate in a far away mufassil town, a member of the District Board, a well-known leader. He finds the thundering of the drunken sea more enticing than the peaceful and calm lagoon.

There is a storm in the distant seas. Kolkata, Noakhali, Bihar, Mumbai, Punjab. The blue waters of the sea have turned red with the blood of suicidal and accidental deaths. The coral reef encircling the lagoon has crumbled; the placid waters of the lagoon are agitated by the violence.

In the pride of his being a Brahmin, Jagannath Sarkar has grown an unusually long tuft of hair at the back of his head. Swinging that with vigour, he says, 'No! I have to find some redress. Do you realize that if this is allowed to continue, in no time all of you'll have to become Muslims.'

Tarani Mondal retorts, 'Then we'll have to be up in arms.'

'Maybe that's what we'll do. If we don't respect our own dignity, may I know who else will be bothered about it? It's a pledge I'll take that I'll not let this come about till the very last drop of blood in my veins.'

The tuft of hair on Jagannath Sarkar's head keeps wriggling like the dock-tail of a puppy.

Jagannath Sarkar is a trifle too self-conscious about the rights of a Brahmin. His not being recognized by caste Brahmin's makes him more eager to prove himself, to establish himself. Across the sea, on an entire sub-continent where the flag of Brahmanism flies high, there is no difference between Jagannath Sarkar, puffed up in his high-caste status, and the untouchable Namasudra. That is the precise reason why, within the area of his limited influence, he seeks to invest himself with the glory of a Vasistha or a Yagnavalka. He grabs the reddish earth-coloured, ostentatious looking sacred thread, cleansed with alkali, and says, 'Yes, sirs, I'm blue-blooded, direct descendant of Kashyap and disciple of Guru Ramakesto. If I had only kept up the practice of religious austerities, I'd have reduced whosoever I desired into ashes.'

Just because he has given up asceticism, it is no longer possible for this disciple of Ramakesto to turn people to ashes; and however much he claims to be a descendant of Manuparashar, in reality he is now a low-caste Hindu, he is a Brahmin of the Namasudras.

Some seven or ten generations ago, a geriatric great-grandson of the well-known, pedigreed kulin-born, Ramakesto Thakur, had conducted a religious ceremony for a Namasudra, either because he was in dire straits or out of greed. Since then, they became outcastes. In the true tradition of Hindutva, this transgression had not been forgiven, or judged. Little by little, in the reckoning of time, they had slid down a slippery hierarchy and they are now considered the Brahmins of the casteless.

They still retain the sacred thread, they perform the thread-ceremony, bits and pieces of ritualistic and meaningless Brahmanical practices are entwined with their life-style. Nominally literate, Jagannath Sarkar just about manages to scrawl his signature like a half-literate novice. His countenance has nothing of the dignified radiance of a caste-Brahmin. Sun-burnt and dark-skinned, his broad spatula palms are hard and calloused with the toil of pushing plough-shares, the skin on his back is crusted, his rough hair is copper-coloured, his eyes are opaque and reddish, exactly like someone's who has bathed for long. His teeth are big and uneven, and two of these are, in typical Hindustani style, encased in silver. Only like a dog's dock-tail, the tuft of hair on his head, proclaims the pride of his Brahmanism.

In marriage ceremonies of Namasudras, at Kshetrapal's pujas, he is the person who recites the mantras. The mantras are quite strange. He invests purely provincial Bengali words with sanskritized suffixes, thereby imposing on them, a peculiar spiritual glamour. To whatever little he has already inherited from his ancestors, Jagannath Sarkar has, at his own convenience, liberally added his own mantras. On the whole, he has a good practice and is, therefore, extremely conscious of his self-esteem.

His sense of self-respect has taken a beating today.

There is a storm in the sea outside. Kolkata, Noakhali, Bihar. A gigantic dagger flashes all across the country and like a stroke of lightning, it dazzles the sky here as well.

Many moons ago, a fakir had appeared here. The fakir was believed to have had miraculous powers; all sorts of fairies and demons were supposed to be his slaves. He would take a handful of dust in his palms and lightly blow it away—at once the dust was transformed into delicious raisins and currants, sometimes into excellent Mughlai pilau. The fakir would gather together some leaves and grass and chant some mantras and within moments these were transformed into precious gems—rubies, emeralds and diamonds. History does not record what eventually happened to all those diamonds and gems, but the glory of the fakir is immortalized and lives on in local human memory. What is most remarkable is that, such a smart superman should choose to die in this godforsaken corner.

The villagers celebrated the last rites quite ostentatiously. They erected a small dome over the grave. Now the dome no longer exists, only a few bricks covered with moss lie scattered around. But that has in no way diminished an iota of the fakir's aura. Like old wine, as time marches on, that supernatural aura is magnified.

The fakir's grave is on a little hillock in the middle of a desolate field. If one were to move away a little from it, there stands a snarled banyan tree—the hanging roots have all come down or is, perhaps, even older than him. From the thick branches, roots hang down and claw their way into the earth, creating pillar-like supports. All told, the environment is grave and eerie—the thick bluish, overhanging shadows, the dampish earth, the owls perched inside every hollow. This is the holy abode of the Goddess Kali that dacoits worship.

The history of the fakir and the history of this Kali Goddess venerated by dacoits are strung together by primitive folk tradition. Some infamous dacoit, on moonless nights, after the ritual human sacrifice, would go out on his spree of dacoity. A formidable tantric, with blood-shot eyes, had sat in meditation on five human skulls, at this very spot. The earth here has sucked in the blood of innumerable human sacrifices; heaps of skulls are buried under this earth. Naturally therefore, Goddess Kali exercises a certain horrific power over the Hindus here. This village is under her protection and if it ever comes under her angry gaze, it may well be disastrous.

It is most surprising that in this huge open expanse, these two, the fakir and the goddess Kali are so closely juxtaposed. For ages without dispute or conflict, the two had peacefully existed, side by side. The discourse is entitled 'a

single blanket suffices for ten fakirs'—and perhaps all because of this, the fakir had never expressed his dissent. Kali was equally unconcerned about a non-Hindu sharing the abode and feared nothing for any defilement of caste. No hassles whatsoever.

But there is a storm at sea. Dashing against the encircling coral, it shakes the sleepy coral island.

About a mile and a half in the interior there is a modest madrasa. One day a Maulavi came there and delivered a religious sermon. Only he knows what he said, but the very next day, the entire atmosphere there changed completely. Two days later, fair-skinned Mantai from the Muslim locality came out and threatened Jagannath Sarkar, 'This year you cannot conduct a puja at the abode of Goddess Kali.'

'Reason?'

'The reason is the hullabaloo around the place. Spirits are worshipped there. That disturbs the fakir sahib's blissful sleep.' Jagannath Thakur tries to explain. 'The puja has traditionally been held there. If fakir sahib never felt disturbed earlier, why is it that he should feel so on this particular occasion?'

Fair-skinned Mantai smiled, 'That may well have been, but I don't know. But this I'm quite certain about, that this year the puja will not be allowed to be held there. That is an affront to our religion.'

'But it's also our religion that is being defamed.'

'Is worshipping spirits any religion?' Fair-skinned Mantai glazed with malice. Let me warn you Thakur. It is our rule now. You'll have to do exactly what we say. Now don't try to be smart, you may land yourself in trouble.'

There are two Mantai's in the village. One is lean and dark-skinned, a timid listless chap, he is just Mantai. Fair-skinned Mantai is a shade fairer, tall and of sturdy physique, broad-chested. In the Muslim locality, he is by far the most powerful man, a branded criminal. So, fair-skinned Mantai's threat is not an empty one.

'Don't forget what I told you Thakur. There may be trouble later.' He is warned again and then fair-skinned Mantai withdraws with his followers.

For the timebeing Jagannath Thakur keeps quiet. But keeping silent is not passive acceptance. It is a blow to the Brahmin's self-respect and the tuft of hair, like a dock-tailed dog's, bristles with excitement like porcupine quills.

This is a Namasudra village. The community is ordinarily somewhat militant; it's not the sort that would become reticent out of fear. As they are the down-trodden in society, their attachment to religion is more punctilious. Once customs have been condoned by the stark and simple superstitions of the sudra community, it is impossible to discard these even in the face of utmost insults. From time immemorial, there flows in their veins the sluggish

devoutness of snails and the determination of Ekalabya.<sup>1</sup> Religion to them is not just an ornament as it is to the upper classes in society; despite being the down-trodden, they cling to religion with a sense of pride.

No wonder, the Brahmin of the Namasudra's, Jagannath Sarkar is up in arms.

'We will perform the Puja! Then we'll handle the matter.'

One of them says, 'Then we need to get the battle-axe and lances ready'.

Jagannath Sarkar slaps his knees and says, 'Of course! Maybe there'll be a murder or two, but we can't back out. If they go beyond limits we'll wipe them all out, fakirs and everyone'.

One of the more enthusiastic in the audience, stood up. His blood is besotted with a craze. The craze to kill. His savage animal consciousness responds to the call of a primitive wilderness.

He stands up erect and in a distorted voice screams, 'Hail, Hail Goddess Kali!'

A lusty chorus joins in, 'Hail Goddess Kali!'

Almost immediately the reply drifts in from the far-away Muslim quarters, 'Allah-ho-Akbar!'

The assembly under the leadership of Jagannath Sarkar comes to an end; in the Muslim locality, the discussion under the leadership of fair-skinned Mantai also ends. The entire Muslim community has pledged in the name of Allah that even at the cost of sacrificing their lives they would not allow the puja to be performed. If the honour of Islam is to be protected, the spirit pujas have to be stopped.

The sky brews with the signs of an approaching storm.

Habib Miyan is, in reality the chief instigator in the Muslim quarters.

Plump and roundish, he has a pink complexion. His temper is one that enjoys luxury. Every week, supplies of surma arrive from Delhi for himself and for his beloved Laibibi. His ears are stuffed with perfumed cotton wool and his mouth exudes the aroma of scented betel-leaf. Habib Miyan is 50, but his youthfulness of spirit hasn't diminished at all. Until the present time he has handled 12 bibis, and of the four that he retains now, the first is the original one, and the most sincere, the other three are absolutely new. Habib Miyan is impatient with old things, but he cannot even think

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<sup>1</sup> Ekalabya, the disciple of Drono, is a character in the *Mahabharata*, known for his devotion to his Guru. When Drono asked him if he could give him anything he asked for, Ekalabya said 'yes'. Drono asked for his right thumb, which Ekalabya at once cut off and gifted to Drono. This was the thumb crucial for an archer.



of divorcing his first wife. Having spent 32 years with her, he is too attached to her, besides she manages the household—the food and drinks, the cows and dairy with such efficiency, that it's difficult to find any substitute.

The first *bibi* is busy with her work, the second and third are as irrelevant as shadows. The one who enjoys the rights and privileges of a queen with great élan is the youngest *bibi* or *Lalbibi*. She is about 17 or 18, slim, and a wheatish complexion. Her desires, her tantrums and moods overpower his mind and heart and constitute the primary preoccupation of Habib Miyan. He can hardly allow *Lalbibi* out of his sight for the fraction of a moment. So the pinkish attar he uses behind his ears is even more potent, and the expense of fetching supplies of *jarda* is spiralling, and the *surma* lining his eyes is applied with a more liberal hand. Habib Miyan laughs more often than he did before, and his belly quakes more vigorously, and his fair complexion glows with a new-found youthfulness.

Habib Miyan has every legal right to be happy. He has massive expanses of agricultural land—in the cultivation season he employs 12 plough-shares. He is a member of the Union Board, the Chairman of the Food Committee. Whatever he needs, he has it.

Everything seems fine; in the evenings, however, he has a dose of opium. To start with, it began as an antidote for indigestion, now it has become an addiction. It is relaxing to close one's eyes and enjoy opium dreams, quite undisturbed, for a couple of hours. In this delirious state, he fantasizes about his desirable *Lalbibi* and creates for himself a thoroughly sweet ambience.

It goes without saying that if some humourless, spoilt-sport disturbs him at such times, he won't take it kindly. Habib Miyan may have generally been an even-tempered man, but an intruder who deliberately dislocates his dreams, would surely receive a few unceremonious blows as he took off his sandals in rage. Like a true scion of the Syeds, he feels like roaring out: 'Shut up, you son of a slave!'

At this precise moment, he is in a frame of mind of his Syed ancestors. Habib Miyan doesn't use expletives, but without bothering to open his eyes, in chaste Amiri language asks: 'Who's that screaming there?'

'I'm fair-skinned Mantai, Jenab!'

This is a person one cannot hound out with a shout, nor can one display here the pride of his sophisticated Amiri ancestry. He is an ill-tempered and obstinate person—if enraged, he will be reckless with either a Syed or a Maulavi. Therefore, with extreme reluctance and deep irritation, he has to open his eyes, and for the moment, the many-hued dreams of *Lalbibi* are dissipated into thin air.

With a forced grin on his lips, Habib Myan says, 'Well, what's the news?' Mantai squats down on the mat on the verandah, 'Sir, I've banned it.'

'Then?'

'They'll create trouble. This evening I saw them organizing their groups.'

'What are your plans? Are you all going to back out like the offspring of goats?'

'On the name of Allah!' Fair-skinned Mantai speaks with the subdued roar of an untamed, caged tiger, 'Jenab, I am a pure Pathan. I'll kill each of them one by one, if that happens.'

Habib Miyan's voice sounds relieved: 'It's all because of that Thakur. He is the brain behind them.'

'It won't take me a moment's time to execute the head of their leader, Jenab. Then the dead body will be secretly disposed of in the waters of the Madhumati. Even the crows will have no clue.'

'Bravo!'

Habib Miyan keeps silent. A smile played around his lips again, but this is not a forced one, but one expressing simple satisfaction. It seems that the matter will at last be sorted out. The bull's enemy will be killed by a tiger. If he had tried to do things himself, there would have been unnecessary complications—riots, police investigations—but this method will not only be safe but also final. Habib Miyan knows Jagannath Thakur well enough to realize that it will be impossible to snatch away the one and a half bighas of agricultural land adjoining the dam that Thakur legally claims as his. But this plan is ideal because it is likely that without a hitch, Jagannath Thakur's head will be chopped off from his body and then....

This is exactly what that proverb means, the snake is scorched and the stick remains unbroken. Luckily, Maulavi sahib had come that other day and had bandied around those inciting words, otherwise we may never have found such an opportunity! Habib Miyan found a reason to commend himself and give himself a pat on his shoulder. There is nothing cleverer than using others for finding a salvation for one's earthly pursuits.

Fair-skinned Mantai clarifies, 'If any legal hassle arises we can hopefully count on your support?'

'Certainly.' Habib Miyan assents eagerly, that obviously goes without saying.

He doesn't have anything more to ask, has little else to say. Fair-skinned Mantai hesitates uncomfortably and fidgets with his tie. He has something else to say, but can't gather up courage enough to say it in simple and clear words. He is restrained, he is cowering.

'Jenab!'

'What are you saying?'

'I was saying', Mantai shuts up again.

At last Habib Miyan starts to feel uncomfortable. Something is amiss. Habitually after this kind of pause comes the demand for payment—asking for two measures of grain or two times twenty takas as loan. When a strapping young man shrivels up like this, one gets suspicious.

'Come out with what you want to say, Miyan.'

'Sir.' The expression on the face of this unmannerly, rough man becomes shy as he pleads in a pitiful tone: 'Sir, it's so difficult to maintain the honour of womenfolk at home.'

'Maintain their honour! How's that? Who would have the guts to defile the honour of your family?'

'Well, it's not that. It's not a matter of any violation; it's just about a couple of clothes ...'

'Clothes!' Habib Miyan almost screams, 'Clothes!'

'Sir, If you can arrange ...'

'Are you crazy, Mantai?' Habib Miyan expresses his utter surprise: 'The consignment imported by the government had arrived, but that was sold out six months ago, I didn't even get a rag. You may ask for the heavens and I'll pull that down, but not cloth.'

'Is there no way, Jenab?'

'There's no way.' Habib Miyan decides with his face contorted, 'This control of goods had just spelt havoc. All these sins and all this corruption. This country will be going to the dogs, understand?'

Mantai doesn't seem particularly perturbed about the national crisis—whether its going to the dogs or not. He lets out a deep sigh and stands up, pays obeisance and goes down into the darkness.

Habib Miyan closes his eyes to get back to his slumber. He cannot slip back into that mood; his trance had been shattered by that man. Never mind, never mind. The biggest gain has been that the bull's enemy will be killed by a tiger. The only fault is his whining for the cloth. Cloth? Habib Miyan smiles. There is some cloth. Two full lengths of those, costing thirty-two *takas*. Mantai can't afford that—it's even more difficult to afford that than asking for the moon.

Mantai moves through the darkness, crossing the ridges between the paddy fields. Using the main road would mean taking a detour. This is the short cut. On either side, stalks of full-ripened paddy lap at his feet. The air is heavy with the aroma of rice-grains. The aroma is so fulfilling, one trembles with expectation. This paddy, this aromatic rice, could, once upon a time give them everything—it gave them clothing, their daily food, silver ornaments for their wives and daughters. That paddy-fields still yield crops,

the rice still has that intoxicating scent. Strangely enough, there is nothing for them. The wives and daughters have no cloth to wear, there is not enough rice for one's hunger, one has to sniff out and dig up edible roots like boars. Allah!

He stumbles in the darkness. He slips off the ridge dividing the paddy fields into the paddy crops.

'Who's that? Can't you see—are you night-blind?'

The person coming from the other side also halts abruptly.

'Don't be irritated, brother, I couldn't quite see in the dark.'

'Oh, it's Jagannath Thakur!'

Jagannath Thakur starts. He falls back a few steps in fear. The signs of a storm brew over the sky, and in the eerie silence of desolate darkness, the two rivals come face to face. Jagannath Sarkar fortifies himself for Mantai's assault.

Mantai laughs out even in his moment of personal crisis.

'Why are you scared Thakur? I'll not have a scuffle with you here. Whatever fights we have will take place in that place, the abode of your Kali—that will be the ultimate test of our strength! Where are you off to in the thick of night?'

There was a hint of relief in Jagannath Thakur's voice, 'To meet Habib Miyan.'

'To meet HabibMiyan!' Puzzled, Mantai asks, 'What for? To settle matters?'

'Settlement? About what?' Jagannath's voice becomes rough, 'You are all men and we are all men, we'll settle it through arms. Not for that, I'm going to ask for two lengths of cloth.'

'Cloth?'

'Yes, cloth. Impossible to live honourably, Miyan. My wife can't come out of the house these last two days. She says she'll hang herself if I can't manage to get her a sari.'

Mantai sighs.

'You won't get any cloth, brother, instead tell your wife to hang herself. I'll have to do the same.'

Mantai does not wait, he walks away briskly. Jagannath stands stunned in the paddy field looking after him—he is trying to gauge something.

The morning reveals that both parties are getting ready with similar enthusiasm.

'Glory be to Goddess Kali!' 'Allah-ho-Akbar!' Bloodshed is almost inevitable. Never is the Kali puja at this time of the year, but this year, Jagannath Thakur has some vow to fulfill, so the puja has to take place on the coming moonless night. The image is being made in the locality where the potters live, and the metal heads of lances, spears are being given a sharpening. This time on this side or on that side, surely something is expected to happen.

These people stand near the temple of Kali, patron deity of the dacoits. The penetrating eyes of owls shine like burning embers from the deep hollows of the gnarled banyan tree, as it stands there silently in its calm, damp, mysterious shadows. Standing here in the queer, bluish shadow, in this uncanny, abnormal environment, their blood is stirred by primitive memories. They remember that this was the place where human sacrifices were made, masses of coagulated blood accumulated on this earth! One could dig up human skulls lying close under the surface, skeletons and ghosts would come alive. Today, this Kali, the patron deity of dacoits, is hankering anew for human sacrifice.

On the other side, fair-skinned Mantai's followers assemble in front of the fakir's dargah. They are sharpening their arms, cutting down the bamboo grove to make enough lathis, but now is the time only to keep a watch on them. One may sit at home and make the image, organize the resistance. Everything is poised to bring the image and put it up at the temple and beat the temple drums. Secretly everything is ready—a river of blood is about to flow.

Fair-skinned Mantai watches out of his sharp eyes and distractedly caresses the tuft of hair under his chin. The tuft of hair on the Namasudra's Jagannath Thakur's head, which looks like the dock-tail of a puppy, is perked up like a porcupine's bristles.

All of a sudden there is arousing cry, 'Goddess Kali be praised!'

From the other side comes an equally lusty echo, 'Allah-ho-Akbar!'

The situation is almost on the verge of a riot. But both sides are aware—the time has not yet come. This is only a mutual warning, tricks will not pay. We are also alert, we also wait in readiness. We are watching, we are sounding a warning. At the opportune moment there will be a test of strength.

Two forces facing each other—equally martial, equally motivated. A few crimes here and there are the order of the day—crimes for property, centering on their women—for religion they are prepared to risk something greater!

There is a concomitant heightening of tensions as the day of the new moon advances. During the day the plans are finalized, in the evenings Jagannath and Mantai return home. The two heroic leaders of the day-time become powerless at night-fall. This is one opponent that they are not equipped to stand face to face. They have to come to terms with their defeat—they have to accept the insult and sad decline of their manhood. Mantai's wife warns him that she will run away from home. One can hear Jagannath's wife whining within their home that she has now no option but to strangle herself.

Both sit powerless. In their sub-conscious minds, both have, like devouring snakes a secret desire: If Habib Miyan could be murdered?

They have not yet learnt to attack their enemy, what they have learnt is only inflicting wounds on themselves.

In the morning, Mantai, with his followers is just proceeding towards Habib Miyan's house when a chilling cry stops them in their tracks. The cry is certainly from Habib Miyan's. Everyone begins running.

Something disastrous must have happened. Last night there had been a special feast—pilau had been cooked. Perhaps, Lalbibi, an ordinary farmer's daughter, had not been able to quite digest the rich, Syedi amiri style of cooking. Last night, she threw up a few times and that was the end of her.

Habib Miyan half-crazed, is beating his breasts, the three bibi's are competing with each other to synchronize their nasal weeping. An opportunity. On the excellence of this weeping would depend who is fated to enjoy in future the perquisites of Lalbibi.

Hanging over the Muslim locality is a pall of mourning. Not expressing grief could have serious consequences in the future. Everyone keeps wiping their eyes frequently while letting escape deep sighs. Even the famine is no match for this great disaster.

With great fanfare the grave is dug in the Muslim burial ground. The three bibi's come to bathe the dead body, the *namaaz* is read for the last rites. The corpse is wrapped in an exquisite coloured sari, and covered with a white sheet, Habib Miyan's beloved Lalbibi is interred under the earth.

The Hindus watch from a distance. Sadness writ large on their faces, they watch the rites of grief. It seems, that they are equally moved by Habib Miyan's sorrow. Not once did they raise the slogan praising Kalimata. It isn't worthwhile to irritate Habib Miyan, the Secretary of the Food Committee.

The shameful incident took place that very night.

Someone had come out late at night to look for his goats. He came to inform Habib Miyan secretly. From a vantage point on the dam, in the copper light of the waxing moon, one could clearly see figures digging up the grave of Lalbibi in the burial ground.

Demons? No, not demons. Must be humans. Their shadows could be seen in the moonlight. If these were ghosts, they would cast no shadows.

Habib Miyan arms himself with a rifle in one hand and a torch in the other. He collects some men. They move cautiously through the mango orchard.

The news is correct. Two men. One is digging the other shovelling. The motive is clear, to rob the cloth in the coffin.

'Catch the thieves, catch them.'

The men try to flee, unable to do so. Both stumble on the uneven mounds and cavities and are caught. The copper hued moonlight of *dashami*<sup>2</sup> is under a cloud at that precise moment, so the coffin thieves are unrecognizable.

'Who are these shameless brutes who want to violate the purdah of womenfolk?'

Habib Miyan flashes the light from his powerful torch.

Not only those men, but the entire gang is turned to stone. The torch slips from Habib Mian's hands. One of them is a true Mussalman's son, fair-skinned Mantai, and the other, the Brahmin priest Jagannath—the person who has to bathe in the Ganges every time he touches a Muslim. Fair-skinned Mantai has a spade in his hands, and Jagannath's arms, upto his elbows, are covered in the earth of the burial ground.

Within a few moments Habib Miyan controlled himself. In a distorted, horrific voice he suddenly screams, 'Beat them, beat them to pulp. Rascals born of *kafirs*!'

But all the people have turned into stone. No one raises his hands to kill; they do not raise even a finger. In their bewildered and stupefied minds only one question comes back again and again: how was the compromise between Kali and the fakir made so painlessly?

Translated by Jayati Gupta

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<sup>2</sup> The tenth day after fullmoon.

## IN A PLACE AND IN A LAND (STHANE O STANE)

Manik Bandyopadhyay

Those who knew him said, 'So you are running away, aren't you!'

The one whose heart had shrunk in fear, the one who would have escaped with his family, if it were possible today, this question always seemed to have a hidden sting and his response even more pungent.

'Why should I run away?' said Narahari, 'I'm only going there to bring my wife'.

A few who knew him well believed this, 'What, are you really planning to bring her now? Why not wait till the 15 August? See what happens for a month or two, after all it's a different thing for you to stay alone, but to bring your children now.'

'But if I have to live here out of sheer necessity, then what is the use of delaying any further? It's best to hope that nothing untoward will happen, only such a belief can increase our confidence.' Narahari replied.

The steamer was bustling with passengers. Some of them were fugitives, but not all were so. There was usually a crowd in this steamer. Over time, people had been travelling to and fro, like packed animals, in search of the bare necessities of life, and also to remain connected with a widely spread out world. But even within that journey, there had always been a kind of peaceful disciplined harmony that matched the placid waters of the river. But today, there were indications of a suppressed excitement, expectation and fear, pride and defeat and a general restlessness in their movement and in their collective humming. And yet, in much of their behaviour, and inter-personal interaction, they were just the same people as they were earlier. It seemed as if an artificial awareness of some sort that had been imposed on them externally, which was creating a kind of unrest and impact on their minds.



A terrible mishap had occurred in the train. A sudden dacoity, though incomplete, had plundered the ladies' compartment, sometime around midnight. There were about ten to twelve dacoits, all armed, with two of them carrying fire arms. One couldn't make out whether there were any *sepoys* or police on the train, before the dacoits vanished in the distant darkness. Apparently, after the train had left the last station, it had slowed down once and it was then that these dacoits had boarded the compartment.

The engine driver had apparently forgotten that he would have to give an explanation some time later as to why he had suddenly slowed down the train exactly in that desolate area between the two stations. It could be that those dacoits had plans for stopping the train at a definite location and then absconding after looting the passengers of their ornaments and valuables. They might have even wanted to forcibly take away a young woman as their companion. But since the woman's mother had already pulled the emergency chain, defying those raised knives and rifles, the dacoits had only managed to injure her, before jumping off the train and running away, leaving their task unfinished. A group of passengers had raised an alarm and tried to chase the dacoits. The fear of bullets could not stop them, but it was the unknown dark fields and jungles in the distance that finally did.

But Narahari did not know this, he had heard a different story altogether. He had heard that such incidents were now a routine affair, and that passengers no longer reacted to such sudden attacks, they either feigned sleep or just sat dozing. So, the latter part of the rumor was apparently not true.

The train reached Sealdah much behind schedule; of course, this had also become routine. Holding a bag in one hand and with some bedding tucked under his arm, Narahari stood still for a moment to see that part of this very familiar city that lay outside the station. The alien anger that he had been feeling of late towards this city, seemed to be surging forth, as if preventing him from taking a step further. Those joyous memories of his student life and the memory of his wedding night amidst festival lights and strains of the *shnmai*, and the sorrow and joy of separating and re-uniting with Sumitra during her visits to her parents' home, had made this city so dear to his heart. In fact, it was so even till a few days back. Its glorious prosperity had seemed so satisfying and thrilling. Reading about its success stories while sitting in Dhaka, had made him so happy, he had felt joyous rush of his blood in his veins. The victory of student agitations, the joyous victory of the coming together of its one lakh citizens, the victory of its public-strikes, military torture, and the victory of burning people to death, it was one victory after another. Even the long spell of atrocities that the people of Calcutta had engaged in after that, could not make the city seem hateful or despicable to him. He had felt hurt and aggrieved and remained only depressed and disheartened.

But today he hated Calcutta with all his heart. All these days, he had thought that the Hindus and Muslims living in the city at least fought with each other over their own individual interests, but now he knew that it was not so. There were neither any Hindus nor any Muslims living in this city, now it was only an abode of wicked people.

He would possibly not be able to go as far as Sumitra's parents house, he might get killed on the way itself. That fear was of course there. But if he did die, then he would die from a poisonous snakebite. Calcutta was now an abode of snakes that fed on snakes. After all, there couldn't be any such thing as a Hindu snake, or a Muslim snake, it had to be just snakes.

It was Atul Babu who received his son-in-law. 'Come in son, come in. I have been living in fear and worry ever since your telegram reached us. How is your mother now? Did she feel any better after taking that *ayurvedic* medicine?'

'My Mother left for Puri last month'.

'Oh I see! Anyway she is all right, I hope! Of course, Puri is not a very safe place either. What I am reading in the papers everyday, is scary enough. I hear that the local young men in Orissa have got together and are collectively assaulting Bengali girls.'

'My mother is almost seventy years old now.'

'She has nothing to fear.' His eldest brother-in-law, Parimal said. 'But there are so many young Bengali girls living in Orissa. On the one hand it's the anti-socials who are trying to assault them, and on the other, the Oriyas are torturing them, just think how dangerous it is!'

His second brother-in-law Shyamal joined in, 'Oh, I've taught some Oriya boys such a lesson today that they will never forget in their lifetime. I am talking about those boys—Arjun who works in that grocery shop and also Satish babu's servant. Some boys had got hold of Sudhin babu's maid, and Arjun's wife. But we felt, that whatever it is, after all we are gentlemen, it will not be proper for us to lay our hands on women. So we decided to let them go. You know Narahari, we are suffering today only because of our own gentlemanly values and attitude. If we could torture their women, then they would surely cool down.'

Narahari felt a pang of hunger, but at the same time, he wanted to vomit.

It was a perfect welcome. His father-in-law was not a wealthy man, but even he served him some *sandesh* along with some *luchis* fried in vegetable ghee. It wasn't just sweetened milk curd prepared at home, but expensive sweets bought from a sweet shop. All the sweet shops were closed, but still.

A child was wailing somewhere nearby, it seemed very much like the voice of his own child. He heard his sister-in-law trying to quieten the baby, "Hush, hush, the Muslims will catch you, if you don't!"

Of course he had also heard a counter rhyme, 'Hush, hush, the Sikhs are coming!'

Obviously, a two-sided action would necessarily have a two-sided reaction.

Atul warned him, not to go out unless he had some urgent work. Shyamal exemplified the statement further. 'Going out now meant putting one's own life at risk. There is no trouble here, maybe there is no trouble in the place of his destination also, but you might have to go through a road where ...'

'That's precisely the trouble,' Parimal joined in support. 'If one could know from beforehand which localities were not really safe, then at least ...'

Seeing the expression on Narahari's face, his youngest brother-in-law Amal intervened, 'All right, you don't have to say all that; *Jamaibabu* is quite concerned about his own life. He'll go out if he needs to but he shouldn't roam around here and there, that's all!'

'Oh, for you it's only a matter of saying these words!' Parimal said rather angrily, 'How would *Jamaibabu* know?' These men have kept the trams running on all routes. Wouldn't it be natural for Narahari to assume that since trams are running in a particular locality, that area must be quite safe? And once someone enters their locality even by mistake, they will immediately pull him down from the tram and ...'

'But if someone enters your locality by mistake, then don't you offer him sweets?' Narahari asked. The hidden banter was enough to infuriate the elders in the room.

'Where else do I need to go other than to buy a few essentials! I will not have the time to meet anybody. I shall pack up and leave early with my family for the station.'

'Are you really serious about taking Sumi with you?' Parimal asked.

'Why, didn't you receive my letter?'

'Of course, I received it. But frankly speaking, I couldn't make any meaning out of it. Unless one is crazy why would he ...'

'Enough, enough.' Atul interrupted. 'We will discuss all that later. Why don't you first have a wash, eat something and relax for a while, and after that we can all sit and talk it over in the evening. You are not leaving today, anyway.'

Of course, Narahari was quite familiar with this sort of politics. 'Why don't you rest a while, then try and sort it out with my daughter, let your tempers cool down a bit, and then later we will all pounce on you.' He knew what these words exactly meant! With an even more polite and calm voice, Narahari said, 'No, I must leave today. When I had written that letter, I had thought that I would be able to stay back for a couple of days, but that's not possible now. You do understand the situation, don't you?'

Of course, Narahari had had no plans of going back today even while he had been waiting at the station. He had thought that he would stay back for the day and then leave the day after. But the panic-stricken look of the main road, and the sight he had momentarily witnessed from the window of a moving bus—of a few fearless and unconcerned people coming out from a nearby lane and killing a lone passenger on the road, and added to that, the suffocating atmosphere of this house, was taking away his breath. Even these genuinely well-wishing family members seemed like enemies now.

‘What is the matter’ Atul said, giving up all hope of postponing the discussion. ‘Those who can, are fleeing this side, and those who can’t, are at least sending over their wives, but you are saying that you will take Sumi with you.’

‘No, its not that all those who can escape are running away from that place. There are many who can easily move down here but have still decided to stay back there.’

‘How long can they stay there?’ Shyamal said with a smile. ‘What are you hurrying so much for? If they let you stay there, you can come and take Sumi then, but why are insisting on taking her now?’

‘Oh, I need them for keeping my job. There are a lot of changes going on, some people will stay, some new people will come, and some others will lose their jobs. In fact, I might even lose my job if I don’t take them with me now’.

‘Is that so?’

‘But that’s quite natural. Those who live with their families there, those who want to stay there, obviously they will get preference. And if I send my wife and son away to Calcutta, and wait to leave the city at the very first opportunity myself, then why should they favor me?’

‘Have they told you this? But yours is a Hindu office, isn’t it? Did your boss tell you this in spite of being a Hindu himself?’

Narahari looked on with tired eyes. ‘But my boss has to stay there as a citizen of that country, isn’t it? And if I am ready to run away at the first available opportunity, then why should he treat me kindly? Would he sack a person who is ready to live there with his family and employ me instead?’

‘In that case, such a job may as well go!’ Shyamal announced rather heroically, ‘One cannot afford to expose one’s wife to such a dangerous situation, just for the sake of keeping his job. They will not spare a single young woman, married or unmarried! Believe me!’

‘But Shyamal, at least one lakh young girls and married women will have to stay there. If your sister comes with me, then that number will only increase by one.’

‘Lets’ not talk about that’ Atul said rather judiciously, ‘Of course there is enough reason to be afraid. If you lose your job, then so be it, what is the way out, anyway? You can come back to Calcutta, and find yourself another job.’

'Shall I come away leaving my home and everything else? So many thousands of men are losing their jobs here, who would be giving me one?'

'Well, what will happen will happen. What can one do? But that doesn't mean that ...'

'Of course, your responsibility ends with saying these words, doesn't it?'

The fact that there were many other young women like Sumi who would have to stay back in East Bengal didn't seem to bother anybody, it just vanished as something trifle. Possibly, it didn't occur to them, even in their thoughts. Who cared what happened to other women, all that they were worried about was the safety of their daughter and sister. Of course, Sumitra was also his wife, and they just couldn't understand why he was worrying about what would happen to hundreds of other women, in the context of his own wife's safety!

'Your intentions don't seem very good, Narahari.' Shyamal said rather angrily. 'You want to use your wife as a bribe in order to keep your job.'

Atul was fortunately able to calm down the growing tension in the room with the help of his wife who having heard the angry voices, had rushed in from the kitchen, her hands still stained with turmeric and other spices. The other women of the household had been peeping curiously from around the door, but realizing the seriousness of the topic being discussed, they had not dared to enter the room. And even after stepping in now, they kept standing or sitting a little away from Narahari and the other men in the room. Sumitra flung the key ring that was tied to the end of her saree over her shoulder about three or four times with a loud bang.

Ignoring even that noise, Narahari boldly announced, 'If thousands of wives are facing danger today then my wife too will.' Saying this he fell silent.

In spite of knowing that it was better to stay silent now, Parimal said, 'Of course, it is well known that the Hindus of East Bengal are now doomed.'

'Well if we are doomed, then we will be so, only for people like you. You are our biggest enemies.' Narahari replied in spite of deciding to remain silent.

Amal had been silent all along. Whenever he spoke, the hidden sting in his words annoyed the other members of his family.

'A friend of mine, who used to live in Park Circus had once said ...' He began slowly, and surprisingly, even though everybody knew fully well that his words would finally annoy them, they listened to his words patiently, 'All these days we used to think that the Hindus were our enemies, but now I am realizing that our own people, in this independent nation, will really be the cause of our doom!'

'Shut up!' Atul snubbed him, after hearing his words.

Sumitra was as sweet-natured as she had been earlier. And a long separation from her husband had made this sweetness even more intense. It being a Sunday today, the usual urgency of going to work was not there, every routine item like cooking, eating, resting was being carried out at a leisurely pace. Of course there was a need to hurry if Narahari were to take Sumitra and leave by the night train tonight itself, but the people in this house knew that Narahari would finally give up this crazy plan, he would definitely leave his wife behind and spend a day or two here himself. No matter what they said, everybody knew that the problem was not at all easy, and that they had not been able to gauge the head or tail of the matter. Whatever it be, Narahari had taken a decision. He had tried to eliminate emotions as far as possible and had decided on something that was good for himself. It would not be easy to sway him from that decision now.

He had always been somewhat stubborn and obstinate—after all he was a Bangal<sup>1</sup>, from East Bengal. At the time when his elder son was ill, this family had appointed their own trusted ayurvedic physician to treat the child, but within just two hours of stepping into his in-law's house, Narahari had brushed away their opinion and brought a doctor who charged Rs. 4 as a fee.

His argument had been that, 'If my son dies, then let him die from a medical treatment that I have trust in!'

How sharp those words were! Of course, with God's grace the boy had survived, but God forbid if something bad had happened, then how would Narahari have faced the others? How would he have regretted for not listening to his elders, and for disregarding them!

That is why, even though there was no reason to hurry today, Narahari was served lunch by 12 o' clock and was given a room and bed to sleep on. By one o' clock, Sumitra came to his room. Her son and her baby daughter remained in the care of her elder sister and sister-in-laws.

Ideally that discussion on life and death shouldn't have started between them, at least not within the first hour of their reunion itself, but Sumitra felt that this long absence and estrangement had made this man extremely impatient and eager for her. His heart seemed completely empty, and she felt that it wouldn't be right to let go this opportunity of settling on that serious matter first. Let them first come to a mutual understanding, let Narahari first agree to let her continue to stay in her father's house for the present,

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<sup>1</sup> A Bangal is someone from East Bengal. The term is often used pejoratively to denote a country bumpkin. It has become synonymous with refugees/migrants from east Bengal/East Pakistan.

and then she would happily surrender herself to him. She would throw herself on his heart, in a desperate passion. Hadn't she been longing for him also? But to keep the eccentric behaviour of a hotheaded man in check, how could a woman do without maintaining control over herself.

'What kind of a person are you that you started quarrelling as soon as you came in?' she said smiling, her lips reddened from the *paan* that she had been chewing till a while back and bending a little to dry her damp hair with a towel.

'Was I quarreling?' Narahari asked, surprised. 'I have come to take you after informing your family about my plans through a letter, and I even sent them a telegram, but they are now saying that they will not let you go. I can take you wherever I wish, why should that bother them?'

Of course Sumitra felt a little angry at this. 'But they are my parents and my own brother and sisters, shouldn't they worry for me?'

'I see. And I am just a nobody.'

'What strange words this man speaks!' Sumitra remarked. 'Have they not given me away to you; how can you still be an outsider? Do you think that my father and brothers call every passer-by on the road to sleep in their house? Am I just an outsider?'

But the words didn't seem to have the desired effect, nor did they serve any purpose. An endless animosity, violence and the hard reality of many terrible deaths seemed to have turned everything upside down; even the sweet intimacy and privacy of a closed room seemed heavy with the grave and harsh burden of 10 million afflicted lives.

'I was thinking of leaving today itself.'

'Along with me?'

'What else? I have come here just to take you back?'

The words gradually gave way to an argument and then to silent tears. Such things had often happened in the past, but some kind of poison seemed to have vitiated these tears and quarrels today. Seeing this technique not yield any result also, Sumitra brought back her endearing self and sought shelter on her husband's chest. How intense their conjugal love had grown, how strong it had turned as parental love for their children. But still, something seemed to have split, which seemed to break under the pressure of this painful misunderstanding today.

'If you want,' Narahari said with the serious tone of a person swearing to protect his country. 'Instead of going back today, I can go back tomorrow. But you will have to come with me.'

'I can't go there to die.'

'But, I might die?'

Sumitra remained silent.

'This is not child's play,' Narahari continued. 'It is also not a matter of wronged sentiments between us. If you don't come with me now, then you will have to spend the rest of your life in your fathers' house—like a widow.'

'Why don't you kill me!' Sumitra screamed in desperation. 'Instead of some unknown man dragging me to some unknown place and torturing me, why don't you kill me with your own hands, instead!'

Narahari looked on with tired, weary eyes, in a sad and desperate way. From somewhere nearby, he could hear the sound of a child crying. It was possibly from within this house itself, and it sounded like his own son's. The child was probably not wanting to stay with someone else and was crying out for his mother now.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta





## HERE AND THERE (EPAR OPAR)

Manoj Basu

A big procession came out on Friday after the Jumma *namaaz*. It was mainly the endeavour of Sirajul and Taj Mohammad. Processions had come out earlier, but nothing like this had happened before. Meandering through ten villages for the whole day, it went on and on. The weekly *haat* did not assemble at the marketplace that day—the big meeting was to be held with all these shoppers. Sirajul was frenzied. The usually tranquil Taj Mohammad was also furious. They had wandered through many villages in Bihar—the far-off helpless cries of people there seemed to reverberate through Sirajul's voice.

Hundreds of protesting voices did not let his speech come to an end. Even the appearances of the men underwent a sudden change. People who would earlier never speak without a smile on their lips, changed too. Their behaviour and movements resembled those of flashing, sharpened swords.

Himangshu had just started his practice at the district court. He wasn't making money yet, neither did he have the inclination to do so. He always came to spend some time in the village during the winter season. After feasting on palm juice, jaggery, and fresh cat fish from the lakes, he would make arrangements for the distribution of the paddy and the rice, and then once again go back to his rented house in the district headquarters. He was just coming back from the barn along with Nakul Das. His feet seemed to become static when he arrived near the marketsquare. He had known vaguely that there had been some trouble, but could not imagine that it was such a dangerous affair. He went and stood behind the trunk of the banyan tree. He did not want to get noticed by the people going to attend the meeting, so he hid himself amid the aerial roots that had formed like a small room. Once he thought he would climb up the branches to the top. From there he

would be able to both hear clearly and also see everyone. But all his enthusiasm subsided once he listened to Sirajul's speech. He moved away from the vicinity of the marketplace even before the speech ended. Shivering all over with fright, he did not have the courage to walk through the empty roads. The village that he had known for all these years had suddenly changed its appearance. It seemed as if a jungle of wild grass had all of a sudden turned into a dangerous forest, with snakes and tigers lurking around everywhere. He could not decide which side was safe. He had to run away—but where and through which route?

It was a huge double-storeyed mansion. So many people frequented it—especially on such occasions when Himangshu came home. There was no end to the festivities till midnight. But today no one came. Without glancing anywhere, he hurriedly stepped on to the verandah in front of his bedroom. Upon hearing his footsteps, Hashi opened the door. Her face resembled that of a bloodless corpse. Quickly she locked the door, fixed the latch on. Then she went around the house inspecting whether all the windows were securely shut.

That night, no one in the Hindu neighbourhood opened their doors. Hardly anyone slept. They lit lamps and kept on sitting throughout the night. They did not even have the courage to talk. There was silence everywhere—a kind of eerie gloom had settled in. The call of either a fox or a dog from a far off place sent shivers down their spines. What was that? Were they beating tin sheets? At the western end of the village, tin sheets were being beaten instead of drums. They strained to listen to whether they could also hear "Allah-ho-Akbar" along with the noise.

In the morning it came to be known that a group of *moghajirs* had thrown Haran Chatterjee out of his house. Mr Chatterjee had gone to lodge his protest, so he was caught by the neck and driven out. Having fallen down on the staircase, his whole body was bruised. It was also heard that there wasn't a single house left unharmed in Bandar. Having gathered in groups, they had torched the barns of grain in broad daylight. The police simply remained silent spectators.

It seemed to be Sirajul's voice—he was standing on the road speaking to somebody. Himangshu had studied with this same Sirajul right from the nursery class to high school. Whatever he might have said in the public meeting, now that he was available close at hand, he should be questioned once. He would surely offer help.

Himangshu ran to the road and clasped Sirajul's hands.

'What am I hearing brother?'

'You've heard too much—a lot of it has been exaggerated.'

'Stop them brother. Probably you can do it. They are killing innocent people...'

'Killing the Hindus,' Sirajul corrected him.

Himangshu spoke in a perplexed tone, 'What are you saying? Aren't Hindus human beings?'

'Hindus are human beings, Muslims are also human beings. All those people who were killed in Bihar, were they not innocent too?'

'But, why are you penalizing us for their sins? Go to Bihar—go and kill those people who are killing others.'

In a firm, emphatic tone Sirajul replied, 'The killings are being done not according to human beings but according to community. Wherever the Hindus are powerful, they are killing the Muslims. Therefore, whenever the Muslims get an opportunity, they will kill the Hindus.'

How could one rely on anything else if such words came from a person like Sirajul? No one knew how such things happened. Right from the beginnings of civilization, men had been uttering such good words. But they were simply decorative costumes from outside—a small scratch revealed the shameful animal instincts from within.

While walking through the village paths once again after a period of four years, Himangshu kept recapitulating these past incidents. It had been like a devastating storm—so many houses had been destroyed, so many men got scattered here and there. This evening it was very peaceful and quiet. There was no similarity at all with that day. At the end of the village there was a huge banyan tree that had spread out its branches on both sides. This place was known as Haritala—Lord Hari spreading out his symbolic arms to protect the lonely village. Nowadays, during festivities no one heard the drums being played, nor did anyone place a sindoor-annointed pitcher at the foot of the tree for worshipping it. The whole place was now covered jungle, making it impossible for one to go near the God.

While walking past Taj Mohammad's house Himangshu noticed that verandahs had been added to it already. Bundles of jute were spread out in the entire courtyard for drying. The women of the house were busy husking *chire*. In the afternoon, date juice was being boiled—large bright flames of fire came out through the two openings of the clay oven. Himangshu had seen what hard days they had earlier. Now they had arranged for everything. The reason for their over-flowing prosperity was of course their illegal use of his own and ten other people's farmlands.

His eyes fill with tears. City-bred people try to use their intelligence in understanding all these accounts. But how could they enter the minds of such people? Can people from outside understand the suffering and pain of one who has had similar experience in the past?

The market-place. It was not the day for the weekly assembly here—even then people kept chatting in front of the shops. Covering his face with his hands, Himangshu sped past it. 'Babu, walk slowly. It's a dark place—you might trip and fall over some roots,' Nakul advised him.

By the time he came and stood in the courtyard of his house, it was quite late in the evening. Just because he had known it for 30 years he could identify it—otherwise any newcomer could not tell whose courtyard it actually was. Standing beneath the verandah he found that wild plants had grown neck-high and covered the entire place. A mild scent of wild flowers filled his nostrils. A droning sound came from the wind passing through the rows of tamarisk trees on both sides of the gate. Himangshu felt a tingling sensation in his heart.

What happened to Nakul? How long did it take to light a lamp? Nakul had come here earlier in the afternoon, swept the floors and had kept the lantern and the matchbox ready. Then why was he taking so long? Impatient, Himangshu entered the room in the darkness itself. He was a bit wary, as if some hidden assailant was lurking there. He wanted to shut the door but the panels were all missing. They had taken away all the doors and windows from the deserted house.

Laying a mat on the floor, Nakul said, 'You are tired—lie down Babu. I'm going to boil some rice for you'.

Nakul was incomparable. For the last four years he alone had been looking after this deserted gentlemanly neighbourhood. He would come here whenever he got an opportunity—stopping by for a while at someone's courtyard, someone's garden. The jackals and the pigs would scamper away at the presence of human beings. It seemed as if everyone had entrusted Nakul to look after their properties before they ran away. But actually none of them had told him anything before they left.

The rustling sound of a sari made him look up in surprise. Hashi entered the room.

The lantern was kept at a distance so that its light did not disturb Himangshu. Suddenly its light flared up for a while and then gradually grew dim. The room was dark. She was standing at the head of the bed. Himangshu turned his head to see her once again. Hashi moved towards the small shelf in the wall and stood there fidgeting with something. Was she looking at her face by holding a mirror in her hands? How could she see things in the dark? Did she bring the mirror along with her? The slightly wavy ends of black hair left open on her back made Himangshu certain that she was Hashi Rani. Hashi was not speaking, so why should Himangshu speak to her? Hashi did not care to find out how he had been running around here and there like a storm-tossed bird. She did not share his grief.

Hashi suddenly came and sat down next to him, very close to his body. This was her permanent place. She spoke too. Her voice trembled.

‘Did you remember your home after such a long time?’

‘But how are you living in this jungle?’ Himangshu asked.

‘Tell me, what can I do? If everyone runs away then there would be no one left to lighten the evening lamp in this family household—how could that be tolerated?’

‘Don’t you feel frightened?’

‘Can anyone feel afraid of one’s own things?’ Hashi replied. ‘Now that you have come—am I afraid of it?’

After being silent for a short while she added, ‘You all are not alive. But can we think differently?’

Himangshu screamed out in fear. At least he felt that he was shouting at the top of his voice.

‘Not alive?’

‘Yes, you are, you are.’

Trying to manage the situation, Hashi said, ‘Don’t be annoyed—yes, there is no doubt that you are living. I was just joking.’

Looking up at Hashi’s face, Himangshu emphatically added, ‘Yes, that is why I was saved. I had come here once again with the police after recovering at the hospital. You had died, Hashi. Right? I was forgetting everything. Now I remember....’

Hashi gave a small smile and added, ‘That is what I am also telling you. Both Nikhil and you are alive. All right, don’t get excited over petty things. There is a profusion of blooming *bel* flowers—can’t you smell them? Wait, I’ll fetch some and keep them on a platter near the head of our bed.’

‘Tonight we will sleep once again on a bed of flowers as newly married brides and bridegrooms do,’ she added. ‘This time it will be really quiet and peaceful without anybody disturbing us. Oh! I still remember how we could not speak anything on that auspicious night. As soon as you tried to say something, someone started to laugh aloud from behind those windows.’

Laughing, Hashi tiptoed out of the room to pluck the flowers. So, the flower garden still existed! She was forever crazy about flowers—her attraction did not fade even at this age. But this bit of information had really not reached Himangshu that Hashi was still looking after this jungle house.

‘The food is ready, Babu. Please get up,’ Nakul called.

Himangshu got up and said, ‘Brighten the light. I can’t see anything.’

Nakul looked at him with surprise.

‘How much more can I increase it? The glass will crack if I try any further.’

He had spread some boiled rice on a banana leaf. A bit of tamarind had also been arranged along with it. That was more than enough. Putting a few morsels in his mouth, Himangshu sat thinking.

‘What is that huge scar on your neck, Nakul?’ he asked.

‘They had hit me with a chopper. By God’s grace I was not cut into two pieces.’

‘They had hit me too...’

‘They hit you with a stick. Your skull had cracked and the soft matter inside had come out. No one could imagine that you would recover and come back from the hospital again. On the other hand see what happened to sister-in-law ...’

Oh, what a terrible day that had been! Everything was being looted. All the rooms were engulfed in flames. The oozing blood from Himangshu’s cracked skull kept flowing in streams in the courtyard. Hashi was begging like a lunatic at their feet, ‘Since you have taken all, when you have finished all, then why do you have pity on me? Please kill me too.’

‘You pointed a gun at us. We have the maximum grudge against you. That is why we will not kill you,’ they had replied.

Handing her an earthen bowl they said, ‘You will go begging from door to door—this is the state that we have turned you into.’

‘That bowl was lying in the ferry-boat jetty next to a jungle of berries, Babu,’ Nakul said. ‘The dead body was found amid the tall grass hedges. Such an immaculate figure like a banana tree had decayed and bloated up.’

Himangshu grew wild with anger.

‘Can’t you find any other place to narrate such cock-and-bull stories? Your neck was slit, the grey matter in my head came out, and we are still living. And that living person who did not have a single scar on her body—was she the one to die?’

After the meal was complete, Himangshu sat on the mat, leaned against the wall and closed his eyes once again. He would think over the whole matter again in a calm and composed mood. He had recovered and come back from the hospital—no maybe that was not true—he had probably thought that he had recovered. The denizens of the world after death probably lived with such pride. Probably they thought that they were the only ones alive—the rest were dead. The sound of footsteps interrupted his thoughts. It was Nakul.

‘Get up, Babu. Let me lay a sheet upon the mat. Otherwise you will suffer and get marks of the mat all over your body.’

Himangshu clasped Nakul’s hands firmly.

‘Tell me truly, don’t hide. Are we dead?’

‘By God, Why do you think so? Many have gone, but we are still here. It is our good luck.’

The night advanced. The huge clumps of trees and shrubs which all this time stood motionless, now seemed to peep and eavesdrop from here and there. Nakul was exceptional. Without any signs of fear, he lay peacefully sleeping on the floor in the room with shutterless doors.

‘Hey, Nakul!’

Without answering, Nakul just turned in his sleep. His snoring stopped, that’s all. Himangshu’s head was reeling. He started slapping the mosquitoes all over his body. What should he do now? Everyone thought that he was a brave man. Why then was he feeling such impatience even while sleeping in his own ancestral home? What was that? An animal suddenly disturbed the vegetation and rushed into the jungle. A chameleon was calling from the vicinity of the Durga temple. Sleep was eluding him. How could he sleep in such a situation?

The chameleon had stopped calling. Now it was the sound of crickets. The night seemed heavy. It seemed as if the women of the house were ululating softly as they did on festive occasions while roaming around the entire village. Innumerable fireflies had filled up the trees. That courtyard there had a maze of innumerable rooms surrounding it. *Jethamoshai* used to say that even a thief would not dare to enter the house because he feared that he would not be able to get out.

Aren’t the palanquin bearers calling? Which great nawab bahadur was approaching in a palanquin in the middle of the night? Who else but Ramratan uncle from the Chatterjee household? Golam Ali of Bhalukbhar village had even composed lyrics on him which emphasized how even without sickness Joggeswar Babu was weakened, whereas without any land or belongings, Ramratan remained a Babu. It was said that Ramratan even went to the market in a palanquin. No one could stop his spendthrift habits even after he lost all his ancestral wealth and property.

Strangely enough, Ramratan uncle’s palanquin just stopped in front of Himangshu’s room. Uprooting a few thick branches of the *heranchi* trees, the bearers sat upon them, wiping their perspiration with their *gamchhas*—occasionally fanning themselves with them too.

‘I heard that you had come, so I came to meet you. How are you? You look quite thin. It’s a pity that you have to stay in the city. I hear that one has to even buy soil with money there—what can you get to eat in such a place? What exams did you pass this time before coming?’

Himangshu had finished studying long ago, but the old man would forget that and ask the same questions over and over again.



Joggeswar arrived too. He was fair, very lean, his unshaven face filled with a beard. 'From the call of the bearers I knew that you had come,' he said. 'But why is the drawing room dark? He called for the daughter-in-law, "Bouma, send a light.' Then to Ramratan uncle he said, 'Come, let's not waste time. You had defeated me in two deals in the morning—let me repay one of them at least.' He pulled Ramratan's hands with such strength that the old man cried out 'ooh—ooh' in pain.

'Though you are old Joggeswar, you cannot do away with your childish habits. You nearly broke my wrist. Himu has come home, so please wait a little.'

Joggeswar looked up and gave a very casual glimpse towards Himangshu. 'Are you well? When did you come?'

By that time he had already dragged Ramratan into the courtyard. 'Himu is going to be here. I will come in the morning again and talk to him. Stop making excuses and come along right now.' Then he raised his voice for the daughter-in-law and added, 'Send some *paan* to the drawing room, Bouma.'

The disgusted tone in Hashi's voice could be heard from the darkness of the adjacent room.

'Now they turn crazy for having *paan* so late at night.'

Ma scolded Hashi in a subdued voice.

'What kind of behaviour is that? If people come to your house you will have to bear with some hassles. Guests are akin to Lakshmi. A middle-class household gets blessed only when people keep on coming to it.'

Nothing more could be said. Hashi was ashamed. All her display of power was towards Himangshu. Now in Ma's presence she was as timid as possible.

The sound of the nutcracker chopping betel-nuts was heard. Khiro lulled back the baby to sleep when he cried out. One could hear the sound of the hammock being swung too. This Khiro was a strange girl. She would not accept any salary. 'Where will I keep my money?' she would ask. It was really strange that she did not find any place to keep her money. She was like a sister to Himangshu—another daughter of his mother.

One could hear some shouts coming from the drawing room. Really, these two old men had become unmanageable. Himangshu ran there. A great tussle between the two was going on. Joggeswar had hugged Ramratan in a tight embrace. Though he was lean, he had tremendous strength in his body. Without saying anything, he would strike his opponent suddenly. Ramratan was sweating all over.

'What are you two up to? Everyone is laughing at you. Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?'

A lot of children had gathered both inside and outside the house. The waistcoat of Ramratan uncle was torn to strips and hanging from all over his body. Joggeswar held his neck tightly and the manner in which he hovered upon the huge body of Taran uncle resembled that of a tiny bird on the top of a mountain. But Taran uncle was uncomfortable even under the pressure of this frail man. The audience kept on offering different comments, even cheering them.

'Have you lost your mind?' Himangshu shouted at both of them. 'Can't you hear what they are saying?'

An undaunted Joggeswar replied, 'But how can one retrace a step on the verge of winning? I have to win the game ...'

'But my rook did not reach the winning point,' a nearly suffocating Ramratan replied in a squeaky voice. 'I promise by Goddess Kali. How can I retrace a step? Just because he has physical strength, can he win by force?'

Just at that moment Nakul appeared with a case full of *paan*. On seeing him Joggeswar said, 'What took you so long? My throat has dried up from not having *paan* for such a long time ...'

It worked like magic. Leaving Ramratan alone, Joggeswar put four *paans* in his mouth all at once and started chewing them fervently. Ramratan stood up and while he was brushing off the dust from his feet, Joggeswar held the box of *paan* towards him.

Chewing the *paan* Ramratan said in a very liberal tone, 'Okay. I'll go for it. I don't want a rook. At least I have the knight—I'll surely check-mate and end.'

'That's good,' replied Joggeswar. 'That's speaking like a man. Let's see ...'

Once again, the two of them got engrossed in their game of chess.

A full-fledged household had existed within this house that was now covered with jungle. Everyone was there—mother, wife, Khiro, the baby. As usual the elderly men of the village came to indulge themselves in idle talk in the drawing room. Himangshu could not remember how long he had not seen them. Could he even dream now that he would meet them again? Even if he died now then death would seem very pleasant. He did not wish to leave this blissful state and return to the drudgery of life once again.

Towards the end of the night his sleep became deeper. Then he knew nothing else. He kept on sleeping blissfully even though it was dawn. Gradually he could sense people coming and going. Then with a sudden jolt he sat up. Since the wild shrubs had covered the entire courtyard, the people who could not stand there came up to the verandah. The house had become auspicious even without people moving about it.

Who had come? In the dim hours of the morning, the dreams of the night still dizzied his brains. All the people from the bygone days with whom he

had spent the whole night did not leave him alone even in the morning. They just left the room and went to sit in the verandah, giving Himangshu some time to relax. Did the other people whom Joggeswar spoke about also come over here to gossip? The *adda* would be accompanied by tea and fried *muri*. If the tea arrived a little late, Joggeswar would shout at the top of his voice, 'What has happened to you all—oh Bouma?' That old man with the white beard who could be seen there—wasn't he Joggeswar? Surely if Joggeswar lived till the present, he would have turned like this.

He realized his mistake once he came outside. No, these were not the relatives who visited him at night—these people were on the enemy's side. There was Taj Mohammad—one who had danced wild with glee with a sharpened chopper in his hand—and many more like him. Why had they come here early in the morning? He was just lazing around in his playhouse and wanted to stay here for merely two days. Then he would go away forever. No one related to him would come here again. No one would even mention that for seven generations—beginning from their rice-eating ceremony in childhood to their journey to the funeral pyre—they had lived here. Whatever faint connections still existed in relation to their agricultural land would also be severed from now on. That was the reason for his coming here. They could go and ask Sirajul if they wanted to—he knew everything. After so many years, Himangshu had not come here with the intention of settling down once again.

'You were coming from the marketplace,' Taj Mohammad said. 'The shopkeepers had seen you. News had spread within the night. I am very busy with the farmwork now—cutting paddy, lentils, harvesting mustard seeds—that is why I have come so early in the morning.'

Why did they come here? What was their intention? Himangshu's face turned pale. He remembered the incidents of that particular day—he had been an eyewitness to all those incidents.

The old man whom he had mistaken for Joggeswar, pushed Taj Mohammad aside with his left hand. He had a long flowing white beard, his skin sagging with age. 'Don't you know me?' the old man asked.

What kind of tone was this? Himangshu realized that he had really made a mistake coming here. He should have written to Sirajul to take the money and come over to Kolkata. The arrangement for the transfer of the land could have been done there. And with the kind of eagerness that he had shown, Sirajul would surely have come over. At least he would not have to hear this derogatory tone of address towards him. Himangshu was the eldest son of the household—most of these people were his subjects—and even a five-year-old child of this house had been addressed by old people with reverence. After so

many years, being above 30 years now, it was humiliating to listen to such a tone. Had they all come over in a large group just to insult him?

The old man said, 'I am nearly five score years old now. Can't walk too much. I lie down most of the time. But I could not resist coming here when I heard that you had come. How the world has turned topsy-turvy, with all our old relationships washed away forever.'

He breathed a deep sigh and lowered his head.

'I have come here in advance,' Taj Mohammad said. 'Many others will come. How many days are you going to stay here? Since you've taken so much trouble to come, stay over for a few more days. And listen ...'

He waved his hands from a distance and whispered, 'Now you will listen to many stories about me. Of course, how can I say that they are all false? I have actually taken possession of your paddy fields. Tell me, what would be the use of leaving it fallow? But I will not forfeit your share. Just think that you have given it to me for sharecropping. I agree to whatever amount people calculate and ask me to give you. But I cannot give it to you all at once. You'll have to take it in installments. I have brought along a 100 rupees now. Since you have spent so much to come here, at least let some of it be realized.'

Taj Mohammad handed him the note and left. The surprised Himangshu just kept on staring at him while he left. Before coming here, his employer had told him, 'If you want to go, please do so. But you will not be able to bring a single paisa from Pakistan. You'll be only spending money.' With the money in his hands, Himangshu still could not believe himself. How could one believe that people still came over to your house voluntarily to hand over money to you? He had heard that Taj Mohammad still had a big court case pending against him and that he would be hanged to death. He didn't know anything after that. Maybe he had already been hanged to death—this was probably his reincarnation. Otherwise, how could that same person speak so politely and display such religious faith?

The old man introduced himself. 'My name is Golam Ali. How will you know me? After Ishwar's death I had stopped coming to this house. All of you were very small then.'

Himangshu became a little conscious on hearing his name. Faintly he remembered seeing him in childhood but he knew a lot about him. Golam Ali hailed from a pedigreed family. During those years he had built so many roads and schools, dug ponds along with Ishwar. Ishwar was Himangshu's uncle—the elder brother of his father. No one in this region had such expertise in English as he had.

'I have become old and invalid,' Golam Ali continued, 'And the distance from Bhalukghar is also not very little. While crossing the river, I fell down on the bricks and see what has happened to me.'

Himangshu was sad to see the big bruise on his knee. In a surprised tone he asked, 'Uncle, what are you saying? You had to wade through the water even in these winter months?'

'Yes. Even in the month of Chaitra there is knee-deep water. There was a bridge earlier, but now it has broken into pieces. That is why it's more difficult now—you have to stumble against the bricks in the water.'

'But even then, I could not rest in peace, son. I heard that you had come here—you might just fly away again. I woke up in the middle of the night and since then had been tossing and turning in my bed. I remember so many incidents from those days—where were you then?'

Suddenly Golam Ali stopped speaking. Sirajul came in.

'So you have arrived.'

In a respectful tone Himangshu replied, 'Why did you take the trouble of coming? I was going there. These people have come here, so I got a bit delayed.'

'I came to tell you that you will have tea and snacks at my house,' Sirajul said. With a brief smile he then added, 'Oh, how many days later I have come here again. What a mansion it was! During the master's regime no one could cross over to the inner courtyard on this side. We even had bets on whether we could sit here in front with our legs spread out.'

Sirajul was a busy village head now. He left in a hurry. He said that he would buy some solid slabs of date molasses on his way back home. Maybe they were meant for Himangshu.

'What is his motive in coming here?' asked Golam Ali.

Himangshu did not reply. A very excited Golam Ali then said, 'Tell me everything clearly. He wants the land? Whatever ten or twenty bighas of land that you have left, can't you sleep at night? Are you dying without selling your land? Is this why you remembered your ancestral home?'

Himangshu knew that in whatever manner he might have spoken, the words were absolutely true. He had lost all his money in a coal depot venture. Now he worked as an accountant in a small bookshop. That shop too was on the verge of closure. He would carry back some money after selling his land; otherwise there was total darkness everywhere.

Golam Ali closed his eyes and sat resting against the wall. Did he want to compensate for his sleepless night in this manner? Himangshu was in deep trouble. He had taken leave for only two days—a lot of bargaining, secret discussions and arrangements for distribution of the land had to be made yet. Would this old man sit here and spoil everything? But since he had already addressed him as uncle, he could not say anything to him.

Suddenly he saw a stream of tears rolling down from Golam Ali's closed eyes. In a worried tone he asked him, 'What's the matter?'

Wiping his eyes with the end of his garment, Golam Ali looked up calmly and replied, 'Nothing, son. We have nothing to say. With what authority can we ask you to stay back? I was lying sick at that time. Your influential friend had spread the rumour that there has been violence and killing in some state, that they had destroyed a mosque ...'

'Why are you calling it a rumour, uncle? It was not a false statement. And Sirajul had directly proven it.'

Golam Ali gave a loud laugh.

'You are talking like a child. I did not have the strength to get up, otherwise I would have given a big shout and told everyone ...'

'No one would listen to you, Uncle. No one was in the mood to listen ...'

'What a disaster it had been!' Golam Ali kept on speaking to himself. 'I can't sit in this verandah and look around on all sides. Only if Khuda had made me blind!'

Three veiled women stood huddling together in the distance near the broken backdoor of the courtyard. Nakul came running forward and whispered to Himangshu, 'They are women from Taj Mohammad's house. His mother, his wife, and somebody else. I cannot recognize her. They hardly come out of their house, but today they have come all the way.'

Himangshu hurried towards them. 'Why are you standing at the door? Come, come inside.'

The baskets that they were carrying contained rice, pulses and vegetables. A small cup of oil, a pitcher full of milk, tied with strings, hung from the edge of a basket. Moving forward, they put down the things on the floor of the verandah rather hesitantly.

'What's all this?'

The aged woman, who must be Taj Mohammad's mother, lifted her ghomta a little and looked up.

'You've come home but there are no provisions here. Cook all these things for today...'

Himangshu shook his head seriously.

'Won't you take it?' the woman pleaded.

But even before Himangshu could answer, Nakul dashed in and took all the things away to the kitchen. 'You partly fasted yesterday,' he said. 'Now where do we find the bazaar? I am already going to boil a pot of water. You can stand here, decide and judge for yourself.'

Himangshu replied with a smile. 'See, Nakul is worse than a beggar. I did not really want to accept these things. I was feeling very annoyed. Does a

man like to cook? Instead of carrying raw rice and vegetables, couldn't you send some cooked rice, mother?'

The same thing happened throughout the day. People just kept on coming—as if a fair was being held here. The jungle that had grown up on the unused pathway disappeared under the trampling of so many feet. The light from the soot-filled lantern that Nakul had lit the night before was insufficient for seeing everybody's face. Someone ran to Sirajul's house and brought a bigger light. Once upon a time, Himangshu had secretly covered his face and had run away late at night. Today he was comfortably meeting innumerable people in the bright light. It seemed like a home of festivities—the celebration of which was being undertaken by a new group of friends. The same people who had earlier stayed at a distance of a hundred yards had now come very close through darkness and devastation. It seemed like pleasant sunshine after a storm. Man had once again regained his eternal habits. Who could imagine that such fountains of love rested in men's hearts? It seemed to Himangshu that he had recovered from a very serious disease—everything around seemed wonderful. All the people were good too.

The next day was even more crowded. As the news spread, people from other villages came trooping in too. Himangshu felt amused—what made him turn so popular all of a sudden? But he could not take it anymore—he did not have even a minute to himself. The main reason for his arrival had still not been realized. In these two days, he did not find one free moment to speak to Sirajul. The village was about five miles from the railway station. He had come walking on the day of his arrival. On his return journey, no one listened to him. They brought a bullock-cart and made him sit upon it. The newly done up cart with a portable bamboo covering belonged to someone in the neighbourhood. It was dazzling in the early morning sunshine.

The bullock-cart screeched along slowly with a big group of people walking before and after it.

Golam Ali asked, 'When will you come again?'

'I'll come ...' Himangshu could not say anything else. If he spoke any more then he would not be able to control the tears in his eyes.

Popping his head out of the cart he suddenly called, 'Listen, uncle ...'

The cart stopped. Golam Ali came next to him. Himangshu shoved the hundred rupee note that he had received from Taj Mohammad into the hands of the old man and said, 'Uncle, see that the *dargah* at Bhalukghar is built. You must try like earlier times. This is my contribution.'

He knew that the bookshop job he held would not last long. He did not have even four annas to support himself, would probably end up penniless the streets soon. Such generosity on his part was not justified. He knew

everything. Suddenly he remembered the prediction of his employer, 'Go, if you want to. But you shall not be able to bring any money from Pakistan—they will snatch everything from you'. That was just what happened. There was no power in him to take money from here.

Translated by Somdatta Mandal





# HINDU

## Dibyendu Palit

For Mathuranath it was just another day. He was on his way back home, walking briskly after his daily dip in the Ganga at dawn. His feet were bare, his bare body wrapped loosely in a *namabali*, his forehead smeared with sandalwood paste and in his hand a copper vessel containing the holy water from the Ganga. The river water on his fair feet had dried but the mud was still there. His lips were moving with whispered chants from the *Gita*. This daily devotion guarded him from the lashes of the cold winds in winter and took away the tiredness in summer. Unless he was terribly sick, this daily practice had never been interrupted in the last 30 years.

About ten or twelve years back he used to have companions for this daily dip. But they had either passed away, or been paralysed, or had left Rampur. His last companion, Banowarilal, passed away sometime back and now he was alone. There had been no new companions. He realized that times had changed and that they were going to change even faster. Pious living was becoming outmoded. Now people used religion for business and politics, not for righteous living. What a wonderful experience his daily dips were, as he walked all by himself and touched the waters in those early hours of dawn! It seemed as if Ganga was his very own. At the same time he also had a feeling that somehow Ganga too waited for his arrival every morning. And probably then, she stopped her incessant flow for a brief moment to give him company. It was his belief that his absence would make the river restless.

The river was much nearer till about ten or twelve years back. In those days it was just a matter of walking about a couple of miles to go to the Khanjarpur Ghat. But gradually the flow changed direction at the curve, and Khanjarpur was left with a mass of sandbank. The river became a mere trickle, flowing through slush, weeds and mustard plants. So he had to walk

quite far these days and take his dip at the Pirpur Ghat. There, Ganga still flowed like a river—wide and deep and brimming with water.

Mathuranath was 62 and no one in the family liked this whim of his—not only his wife Kaushalya, daughter Bindya, son Bipin and daughter-in-law Neeta, but also his servant Dayaram and maid Lachhmi. These were bad times they said. There hadn't been any trouble recently, but after the riots sometime back, there had been a constant undercurrent of fear in Rampur and its neighbourhood. Everyone was worried about being alone.

Mathuranath's son Bipin had graduated as a lawyer from Patna. He practised both in Patna and in Rampur. Sometime back his mother, Kaushlya, had complained to him about his old father going for his early morning dip in the Ganga. So he tried to argue with his father, 'Babuji, will you lose your religion if you have your morning bath at home? You should become a little more careful at your age. You have a responsibility towards us too. Ma keeps worrying all the time.'

Mathuranath had smiled, as he always did—spontaneously.

'Look, son, don't worry about me. The idea of religion is an individual perception. For example, from your point of view I am a father, but from my point of view you are a son. I am a Hindu. And if my soul is pure and my belief is firm, my life and actions will be fine. For more than 30 years now I have been going for these dips, and I've been returning home fine every single day. No harm has come to me so far.'

'You are right,' Bipin had said. 'But what if something happens all of a sudden? Evil always appears out of the blue.'

'But it has nothing to do with evil either,' he assured his son and out of habit recited a line from the *Gita*, 'bhavaty-atyaginam pretya na tu sanyasi-nam kvachit'.<sup>1</sup> Don't worry at all.'

Bipin knew what it meant. When he had been studying Sanskrit, he had been compelled by Mathuranath to read the *Gita*. Mathuranath did not believe in *karma*. Although he lived the life of a family man, he was as pious as a *sanyasi*. He never strove for salvation. Right from his childhood Bipin had seen him as a man who was pious, who believed in the sense of right and wrong, and who had a deep respect for his Hinduism and his sacred thread. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew him and respected him—the Hindus, the Muslims and the marginalized. In better times when all the

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<sup>1</sup> The three-fold fruit of karma—good, evil, and a mixture of both good and evil—has to be borne by those who haven't renounced their desires; never by one who has renounced all desires.

communities lived harmoniously, lots of people came to visit him. Those close to him sat with him, shared a fresh lime drink or two and listened to what he had to say. These days, apart from Kanhaialalji, Dayacharan Mishra, Jankinath Chaudhuri and a couple of other such elderly people, no one else dropped in regularly. With the younger generation there was a gap—in age, preferences and once in a while, in language too. But the respect was there.

Bipin had only one worry about his father—old age. Physically he was not as strong and able as he had been. Although mild, he had already suffered for a while from a heart attack about three years back. He had complained of a dull nagging pain in his chest and left arm. And had been taken to Patna for treatment. The doctor had advised him to lead a normal life, but had warned against taking on unnecessary strain. Mathuranath paid attention to none of this. Though no one else agreed, he considered his long walks for the regular dips as part of his normal life. He walked the distance alone and didn't know how to swim. Not a soul would know if suddenly, by chance, he had a problem. Apart from other fears, the road itself was not safe. He left the house before dawn, in pitch darkness. It was quite possible for him at his age, to trip in the dark, or in a moment of carelessness, be run over by one of those long-distance trucks speeding between Patna, Mokama, Bhagalpur, Sahebganj and so on.

The family's worry was not without basis. Pirpur Ghat was quite a distance from their house, which was close to the main police station. It was about ten miles both ways. These days people no longer walked such a long distance. They didn't need to. Rampur was a town divided into two parts by a slightly underdeveloped stretch. On one side were the main police station, the railway station, a Hanuman temple and the market. On the other side were the post office, the hospital, a Ram temple and the court. So all amenities were available within a couple of miles. In terms of habitation too, most people lived in the centre of the town and the outskirts were rather lonely. A Bihar State Transport Bus ran through Rampur every hour or hour and a half. Within the town people used cycles, and there were quite a few cycle rickshaws. A handful of people had cars. Other vehicles included horse-drawn carriages and bullock carts. These plied between the two habitations on either side of Rampur—Nath Chowk on one side and Chhanderi on the other. The people of Rampur did not care about places beyond these. Since the riots a couple of years back, it had become a predominantly Hindu area. Unless absolutely necessary, most people maintained this segregation.

By the time Mathuranath reached home after a walk of almost five miles, the sun would be up, beginning to spread its soft rays all around. The long

walk would make him sweat, and he would feel it all over his *namabali* wrapped body. It was the beginning of summer and now and then there were brief spells of dust storms in the afternoons. He would walk up to his home and the door would open up as soon as he knocked on the little iron latch. Most days it would either be his daughter Bindya or his daughter-in-law, Neeta, who would rush to the door. And that depended on whoever was not menstruating. They would take the vessel of Ganga water from him and carry it to his prayer room. Trying to get his breath back, he would walk up to the tube well in the courtyard and wait for his faithful servant, Dayaram, to pump out some water. He would then wash his hands and feet, and do the customary cleansing of mouth before worship. Then putting aside his *namabali* and wiping himself with a soft towel he would go to the prayer room. He would spend about ten minutes there, sitting quietly in front of the white marble deity of Ram and Krishna. He would use *bel* leaves to sprinkle their feet with sandalwood paste and the holy water from the Ganga. Then he would sprinkle a couple of drops of water on to his own mouth too. Finally, it would be time for him to go out and sit on the cot in the verandah outside. Kaushalya would bring him some cold milk in a brass glass. He would drink it and imperceptibly disappear into the role of a family man.

But today his daily routine had been interrupted.

Near the big banyan tree very close to their house, Mathuranath noticed a group of people. There were seven or eight of them and one of them had a cycle. But before he could see more, his view was obstructed by the dust flying from the approaching bus on the Sultanganj-Chanderi route. He let the bus pass by and then reached the group. Immediately his forehead shrank. On that dusty, moderately wide metal road, lay a half-naked man. He looked middle-aged. He had a dirty twine tied around his waist, but the pair of pyjamas that belonged to it was so tattered that there was hardly anything to cover him. He wore something that had once been a shirt. Now it was a piece of cloth hanging loosely from his left arm with the rest of it crushed under his body. His naked, rag-clad body was covered with mud. It seemed as if he had been lying in the drain next to him and someone had pulled him up and placed him on the road. It was also possible that he had been going somewhere but couldn't carry on any more.

But that was not why the man drew attention. The reason was different. Apart from a part of the face and some parts of the body, his whole body was covered with sores. On the head, neck, chest, arms, waist, lower abdomen, knees and feet—there were sores everywhere. Some sores were small, some half-healed and some very raw where the top skin had peeled off and

puss had formed. The most badly affected were the testicles and the penis. It was a most repulsive sight.

The experienced Mathuranath, however, did not look away. He studied the man carefully and noticed that the right eye was shut, but the left eye was slightly open. And although he was in a very bad shape, he was alive. There was breathing movement in the hollow pit of his stomach, in the ribs that were sticking out from his chest, and in the throat. And once in a while, there was a mild tremor in the body when flies sucked at the sores on his face and neck.

The people who had gathered around the man stopped their chatter when they noticed Mathuranath. In the meantime, a couple of other passers-by had joined them too. Mathuranath pulled himself up from the slightly bent position from which he had been scrutinizing the man. He shook his head in hopelessness. He hadn't noticed this man on his way to the river in the early hours of the morning. And then it occurred to him that this was the dark fortnight.<sup>2</sup> So it was absolutely dark at that time of the morning. In fact, he himself had to find his way with care. It was quite possible that the body had been lying there even then.

He looked at the faces around him and asked, 'How long has this been here?'

'No idea, Panditji,' someone replied, 'We noticed it only a little while ago.'

'Poor chap! He's going to die soon,' someone else commented.

'Don't say such a thing, son' replied Mathuranath. And looking at another person said, 'His breathing is fine. He is alive. He should be taken to the hospital. He'll live.'

Everyone seemed to agree, and that created a mild buzz.

Mathuranath then looked at the young man with the cycle.

'What's your name?'

'Sir, Giridhari.'

'Giridhari, my dear, just run up to the police station and inform them that a patient is lying unconscious here. They should arrange to take him to the district hospital.'

'Sir, actually I'm headed towards the station. I have a train to catch.'

'This is going to be on your way. You've just got to reach the message. It'll be a matter of two minutes. Go on son, go cheerfully!'

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<sup>2</sup> Monthly cycle of the moon that alternates between a light or bright fortnight and a dark fortnight.

Giridhari rode away on his bicycle with Mathuranath staring absent-mindedly after him. He looked at the man again. As the sun grew stronger, the flies around the man grew in numbers too. Along with the ordinary flies there were some big blue ones as well. They were everywhere—on the lids of his right eye, around his lips, chest, hands, abdomen and testicles. The body shivered for a moment, and then it was still again, the lips struggled to part ever so slightly. Was the man thirsty? The stillness of his throat, however, gave no indications.

Mathuranath heaved a deep sigh. Then he looked up at the sky and muttered to himself. He seemed to be invoking his Gods Rama and Krishna and seemed to be asking why human beings were condemned to witness such pathetic sights as these. There were so many people all around, but wasn't there anyone to whom this unfortunate man belonged? Why did he have to suffer in such a manner? And then he told himself that once the police heard that the message had been sent by him, they would rush here without delay, haul the man up on to a bullock cart or a push-cart and somehow arrange to take him to a hospital. He hoped that the man would either recover or find peace in death. These were the only choices that life had to offer.

Mathuranath returned home, but remained depressed all day. He went through his daily routine in exactly the same manner, but he couldn't concentrate. He stood in front of the tube well and wiping his hands on a towel spoke to Dayaram. 'Listen, there's a man lying unconscious out there on the road, next to the big tree. The police have been informed. They should take him to the hospital. Just go and have a look. If he is thirsty, gently pour a few drops of water on his lips. Go and do it now.'

Dayaram was very loyal to Mathuranath. He never disobeyed orders. Yet he asked hesitatingly, 'Which caste does he belong to, master?'

Mathuranath had been walking away. He stopped and turned around. His soft face showed a hint of annoyance.

'Do sufferers have a caste? He is an unfortunate human being, and it is our duty to give him water.'

With heavy steps that came from the *kharams*, Mathuraath walked towards the prayer room. He was going to meditate.

The people of Rampur were curious about births and deaths, but never really excited by these. There had been some element of excitement and anxiety once during the riots when there were thirty three dead and eighteen injured from both sides in four days. But soon they were back to their usual selves. From time to time people died—either due to cholera or some unknown disease or just of old age. And this seemed to be a routine exercise as if to make sure that people did not forget the chant of 'Ram naam satya

hai'.<sup>3</sup> And then they chanted it effortlessly and without any excitement. Sometimes there were killings over issues like property and mistresses, but these were very rare. Everyone believed that Lord Rama was the only hope.

The police took no interest in their work. They took their share of the booty from those that stole, made them give a good body massage, got them to pull up water from the wells and, if they didn't create problems, let them off in a couple of days. During the riots there were 29 deaths in the very first day and the reserved police had been called in to control the situation. Since then the policemen here had felt relieved about not having to work.

It was the same with the hospital. When the superintending doctor's bicycle tyres got punctured, they abused the government till these were repaired. And in the meantime, of course, the superintendent and his assistant had no time to look after their patients. There were about 20 odd beds, but rather than being used for patients, these were used for guests. When the doctor's official residence overflowed with relatives, some of the hospital beds were made available for them. Minor ailments did receive attention here but at the slightest sign of any complication, the patients were given a receipt and referred to the main district hospital at Bhagalpur.

Mathuranath finished his prayers, sipped the milk and called for Dayaram. Dayaram informed him that he had given a few drops of water to the man, but most of it had fallen off the edges of his lips. Nothing had gone in. He also informed him that Giridhari had come back to say that the police would be late.

'Why?' Mathuranath was worried.

'No idea, master,' replied Dayaram. 'That's what he said. Havildaar sahib<sup>4</sup> has been having a runny tummy since last night. There aren't enough men at the police post.'

'Hm.' Mathuranath sat there for sometime with his head bent down and his hands spread out. Then asked again, 'What did you see? He is still alive, isn't he?'

'Yes, master, he seemed to be. I thought I saw him move his head. And...'

'And what?'

'Master, the vendor Raghunath told us that after you came away, the man had passed urine. Others confirmed that.'

<sup>3</sup> 'God's name is the truth' —this is chanted by the pall bearers in a funeral procession.

<sup>4</sup> A local pronunciation of 'sahib'.



Dayaram's words made Mathuranath even more worried. The man hadn't taken any water, yet they said he had passed urine. All this further substantiated the unconscious state of the man. And the sores were the most worrying. There were raw sores all over the body, and with the flies and dust from the road, these would aggravate even more. No one knew if these were symptoms of a deadlier disease deep within. Dayaram's words suggested there was quite a little crowd there. But what were they watching? They were watching the gradual decay of an unknown man and waiting for his slow death. Was it possible to let a person die in such a manner?

Bipin was not around. He had gone to Patna to fight a case. He was supposed to be back in a day or two. They could have found some solution to this if he had been around. Should he then inform Jankinath Choudhury? He was very close to the local councillor of Rampur and could make some arrangements if he wished to. But he lived near Nathchowk. And although he usually drove his car and dropped in here in the evenings, there was no one to carry the message to him so far away. Even if Dayaram was sent with the message, there was no guarantee that Jankinath would be available at home.

Mathuranath was becoming impatient. He began to sweat. He reached out towards the handmade fan lying on the cot but didn't use it. Suddenly he shouted out to his daughter, 'Bindiya! O Bindiya!'

Bindiya was in the shower. Neeta was in the backyard hanging out the washing. Lachhmi was busy grinding the pulses. Kaushalya stopped transferring the pulses from the sack into the big cane plate used for cleaning pulses and responded to her husband's urgent summons.

'What is it? Do you need something?'

As he stared at his wife who stood at the doorway, Mathurnath organized his thoughts.

'Could you get me some money, please? Dayaram has to be sent to the hospital—he has to take a rickshaw.'

'Hospital.'

'Yes. There's an unconscious man near the tree outside. After all, someone has to take care of him.'

They had already heard of this incident from Lachhmi. And knowing her husband, she didn't pursue the conversation further and went in to get the money.

Having sent Dayaram to the hospital to ask for help, Mathuranath put on a shirt, carried the customary *gamchha* on his shoulders and stepped on to the road.

Still there were about 20 people around the man. As he made his way through the crowd and looked down at that man lying under the blazing

sun, Mathuranath felt a shiver run through his body. The man had been lying in exactly the same position. Only now there were innumerable flies on him. The open sores on the chest and testicles seemed to have especially been transformed into hives. There were thick clusters of flies sitting on the sores, flying around and again sitting there. There were flies on his eyelids, in the recesses of his ribs and on his lips. In the midst of all this, however, there was a slight heaving of the chest. As he stood there watching all this, Mathuranath's eyes became moist. Standing where he was, he removed the towel from his shoulders and used it to ward off the flies from the man.

At the wave of the towel, the flies began flying around in all directions. The crowd around the unconscious man moved away in a hurry, to avoid being contaminated by the flies. The man, however, seemed to feel some relief. He shivered lightly and moved his head a little sideways.

Then a voice from amongst the crowd commented, 'Today you'll have to go to the Ganga again for your bath, Panditji.'

'Why?'

On seeing Mathuranath's annoyed expression, the speaker explained hesitantly, 'Now just look at these flies—they have been all over you. God alone knows the caste of this man.'

He was right. Mathuranath noticed many of the flies sitting on his shirt and *dhoti*. They were then going back to the man again. He gave no reply and walked towards his home in a sombre mood.

The message to the hospital had no effect. Dayaram returned to say, 'The doctor hadn't arrived. His deputy was inside but I couldn't get to meet him. The guard said that he'll pass on the message ...'

Mathuranath did not reply. He became even more serious. And heaved a deep sigh.

Then, in a moment, Mathuranath took a strange decision. He called the women of the house and asked them to make arrangements to clean up the vacant room next to Dayaram's. Lachhmi should sweep the floor and place a cot there. He was going to bring in the man lying unconscious on the road outside.

There was a mild protest from Kaushalya.

'But you are a Brahmin...'

Mathuranath had a very different look in his eyes.

'If it is against a Brahmin's duty to serve human beings, I shall become a *Sudra* from today.'

His words startled everyone in the house. No one had ever seen Mathuranath in a mood such as this—that resolute personality and those blazing eyes. But they were most surprised when all on a sudden they noticed

a tear roll down his cheeks. He wiped it off with the back of a hand that weighed heavy with sorrow and uttered, 'O! Rama! O! Krishna!'

Neeta went and stood beside Kaushalya. Bindiya said, 'You are right, papa. After all, he is suffering. Go Dayaram. Go with Babuji. I'll look after the arrangements here.'

Dayaram was a loyal servant. Even if he had his own reservations, he remained silent and followed Mathuranath.

The people of Rampur had never seen anything like this before. An unconscious man of unknown religion and caste from the roadside, with a body full of raw open sores, was being held close to the hearts of two men and being carried away into a house by them. And one of them was Mathuranath!

Some people found the sight scary while others wrinkled their nose in utter contempt and disapproval. Though very few in number, there were some who nodded their heads in approval. All in all, the news spread like wild fire.

They brought the man home and put him down on the cot. Mathuranath felt much better now. He was not a physician, but he knew the nuances of nursing. First he cleaned the sores carefully, and then tenderly covered them with a paste of sandalwood. To bring the fever down, he gave some homeopathy medicine and then with a spoon, gently fed the man some milk. He ran his hands affectionately over the man's forehead and covered the naked body with a fresh, clean sheet of cloth. Mathuranath placed his hands near the man's nostrils and felt that his breathing was becoming more and more normal. Relieved, Mathuranath walked towards the tube-well to have a bath.

In the afternoon, the man was given another dose of medicines and milk and it seemed that the body was gradually regaining some energy. A relieved Mathuranath went off to have his siesta.

Kanhaialaji, Jankinath and some others visited his house in the evening. Having heard everything, they nodded their heads in approval. Everything said and done, Mathuranath had done the right thing. Jankinath said that something needed to be done to pull up the police force and the hospital staff at Rampur. This state of affairs had to stop. Anyway, he would make arrangements to send the man to the hospital, he said, when he regained his consciousness.

Bipin returned after dusk. He had won the case and was happy. But he didn't seem to be happy with what Mathuranath had done. He spoke sarcastically, 'This almost equals the deeds of the great Mahatma. This news should reach the President of the country...'

Mathuranath had not expected this from his son. He was hurt but managed a faint smile, 'So you are not my son.'

'You don't understand me, Babuji. I am your son. But the general population of Rampur is not. If they would have been your son, we would not have had the riots last time.'

Mathuranath remained quiet for a while. Then in a voice that was firm in confidence and clear in self belief he said, 'Maybe... but I shall continue to perform my duties, my religion.'

Next morning he went out as usual to have his dip in the Ganga. And returned too.

But he stopped suddenly near his house. In front of the house was a crowd similar to that of the day before. Daylight was breaking through and in the bright rays of the morning sun, he also noticed a car parked outside. It seemed to be a familiar one. He wasn't sure what was happening. He walked in slowly, a little surprised and a little worried. The bystanders said nothing.

Walking in through the open doorway, Mathuranath was astonished. Jankinath was speaking with Bipin and Bindiya. The moment they saw him, they stopped.

'What's the matter? Jankinathji, you here? So early in the morning?'

Bindiya took the vessel of Ganga water from Mathuranath's hands and went in.

'Yes, I had to come over.' Jankinath looked at Bipin, 'You tell him, Bipin. Have a seat, Panditji.'

Mathuranath didn't take a seat. He looked at Bipin suspiciously.

'Babuji...', Bipin hesitated. 'We'll have to remove this man from the house immediately...'

'Why?'

'Because, he is a Muslim.'

Absolutely dumbfounded, Mathuranath stared at his son for a while. Then asked, 'Has he regained consciousness?'

'Not yet.' Jankinath explained, 'But all over people have been saying this. He was naked... there were marks on his body...'

Mathuranath was speechless.

'This is true, Babuji,' Bipin added, 'Last night Dayaram told me... the man had muttered "O! Allah!" in his delirium.'

Mathuranath stood there for some time and then regained his composure.

'Right, but he is also a patient who is unconscious, isn't he? Let him rest now. He'll go off when he feels better. This is what my duty and religion says.'

'Keep your duties and religion to yourself, Panditji.' Jankinath's voice was hard. 'The situation seems to be tense. Don't you know Rampur? Do you want an attack here, and start another riot?'

There was pin drop silence.

Then Jankinath spoke. 'I shall make all the necessary arrangements for the patient. You don't worry about it at all. You relax, and continue with your prayers. This is a minor issue.'

Maybe it was—a minor issue. Yet Mathuranath held back a deep sigh. He felt a strange kind of physical discomfort. His ears were hot and the corners of his eyes burning. Inside the *namabali* that was wrapped around his bare upper body, he reached for his sacred thread and silently, with unwavering lips he uttered the words, 'O! Rama! O! Krishna!'

The rest of the events followed in a normal and routine manner. Mathuranath washed his feet, wiped his sweating body, went to his prayer room, and also had his milk. He asked no questions. It was as if he had forgotten everything that had taken place a little while ago; as if this was just another day. The sun shone, the wind blew, and the world was in perfect poise. Apart from a solemnity of expression and a sense of absent-mindedness, there was no change in Mathuranath.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

# ACHARYA KRIPALANI COLONY

## Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

My wife had been pestering me for quite some time now. After all, our house was in East Bengal. If we didn't try to acquire some land in West Bengal right away, would we be able to get anything later? We didn't have enough money to buy some land or build a house in proper Kolkata, but after the 15 August, would anything be available in the suburbs either? So we needed to act immediately.

I started looking around for a plot in places like Dum Dum, Ichhapur, Kashipur, Khardah, Dhakuria, etc. I made it a regular habit to read advertisements on real estate. It was clear that the land and house owners had not lost any time in taking full advantage of the agitated state of all those Hindus who had been fleeing East Bengal. The land that didn't sell for even 50 rupees a *bigha* till a year back, was now priced at 700 or 800 rupees a *kotah*.

I had been searching for land in various places and felt exasperated.

The price of land in the immediate vicinity of Kolkata had gone up abnormally, much beyond our financial reach. Besides, where could we find something of our choice?

At around this time one day, my wife came and handed me a piece of paper, and said, 'You don't seem to like any plot of land that you see. How does it matter if there is no pleasant scenery around? You always seem dissatisfied with either this or that. I wonder if you'll you be able to get anything now? Well, just go and see this plot. It seems to be rather nice, just like what you have been wanting all along. Just read this'.

Whatever opinion my wife might have had of me, I had not really been sitting all that idle. I had been searching in all earnestness. In fact, no one would be happier than me, if we could finally succeed in finding something truly nice.

'Where did you get this paper' I asked her.

'Well, I had gone to Bina's. They are also looking for a plot. It seems everybody from their village is immigrating to this part of Bengal, and settling down in various places around Kolkata. They have got this paper from somewhere.'

I looked at the page. It read—

"Acharya Kripalani Colony."

'Come right away! See for yourselves! And register immediately!!! A new colony is being built on the vast land adjoining a certain station, only a few miles away from Kolkata, amidst beautiful natural surroundings. The clear and holy waters of the Jahnvi river flow past its southernmost point. The promised colony will provide all comforts and conveniences of urban life, with roads 50 ft wide, electricity, tap water, schools, girls' schools, libraries, etc. One can register for the time being by sending just Rs. 50.'

The station that they had mentioned in the papers, was indeed close to Kolkata.

My wife looked at me with exasperation. 'Did you read it? Doesn't it sound nice?' she asked.

'Very nice. Has Bina's Uncle acquired land here?'

'No, he hasn't yet, but he will soon. He has registered his name. Why don't you meet him and send over the 50 rupees that they have asked for. You need to only send 50 rupees per *kotah* now, and you can see the land later. Bina's uncle too hasn't seen the land yet.'

'What, shouldn't I see the land first? All right, let me ask Bina's uncle.' I said.

Bina's uncle, Chintaharan Chakraborty, had always worked outside Calcutta. He hadn't built a house yet, but he was greatly enthusiastic about acquiring land and a house now. He had earlier thought that he would build a house in Kolkata, but had given up that hope only very recently.

Chintaharan Babu welcomed me. 'Come in,' he said. 'Have you read that piece of paper? Doesn't it sound like a good proposal?'

'Isn't it a little too far off?'

'But where will you get anything closer than that, Sir?'

'That's true. It's quite close to the station, and on the bank of the Ganga.'

'It's selling quite cheap still. But it might not remain so later. After all it has electricity, tap water, 50 feet wide roads ...'

'Have you sent them the money yet?'

'Of course. I have even received a receipt from them. If you decide to buy something there, then send them the money at once.'

'What? Without even seeing the land once?'

'Listen Sir, have your name registered for the present. You might not get anything later. The address is, The New National Land Trust, Rajibnagar.'

My wife was pleased to see a receipt arrive in my name. 'It's 50 rupees per kotah. How many kotahs did you pay for? Only two kotahs?'

'Let it be just this for the present. Let the 15 August be over and the results of the Border Commission declared, after that ...'

The 15 August passed by, but the results of the Border Commission weren't yet out. My wife said, 'Why don't you go and see the land once? You can take Bina's uncle with you. So many people are fleeing over from places like Mymensingh, Pabna and Noakhali. All the flats in the building next to ours are surging with people. About three to four families are taking shelter in a single household.'

'But why are they looking for shelter? There isn't any trouble anywhere?'

'Who knows why, who wants to know all that anyway? Even Bina's cousin brother and her grandfather's younger brother have taken refuge in her house, along with their children.'

The suggestion didn't seem too bad. Of course, I had registered my name, and the land wouldn't just vanish. But shouldn't I see it at least once, before deciding on whether I should buy a *kotah* or half more?

In the evening Bina's uncle stormed into my room. 'What is it?' I asked 'What's all this hurry for?'

'Take it, take it, at once.' He said. 'You'll not be able to find even an iota of land anywhere after this. Thousands of people are streaming in from East Bengal. Just look at my own house, it is fully crowded. So, go and grab whatever land you need, right away.'

'Really, is that so?'

'Believe me! Let's go and see the land for the proposed colony tomorrow itself. And after that you can purchase some more land in that colony itself. They haven't yet said how much they'll be pricing it at. Let us find out all that from their office tomorrow.'

'Where exactly is their office?'

'It is in Rajibnagar, near Konnagar.' However, I had to go alone next day.

Bina's uncle couldn't accompany me, since he was again busy with two other families who had sought shelter in his house.

As I stepped down from the train at the Konnagar station and started walking towards Rajibnagar, I felt rather dejected. The land wasn't anywhere near the station, it was a good two and a half miles away. The road



was unpaved and muddy. It was as much filled with shrubs as it was infested with mosquitoes.

After some search, I found a village doctor who happened to be the owner of the land. He was busy checking some patients in a tin-walled room. Of course, the number of patients waiting in his room couldn't in any way have been a point of envy for a doctor.

Seeing me near the door, he said, 'Who are you looking for?'

I tried to sound polite as I said, 'Are you Manindra Ghatak? I have come from Jessore. I think you had advertised in the papers -'

'Oh,' the doctor replied in a rather disinterested tone.

And the next instant, he turned his attention to his patients again.

I had set out with much hope. The land was next to a station only nine miles away from Kolkata. It would, indeed, be very useful in many ways, if I could acquire this land. But why was the landowner looking so disinterested. Could it be that he had decided not to sell the land?

About ten minutes passed by.

I kept standing. Nobody even asked me to sit down.

I tried to gather some courage. 'You see ... actually I will be returning by this train again ... I mean ...'

Lifting his face just a little, the doctor said 'What did you say?'

'You see, that plot of land ...'

'Which plot of land?'

'The one that you had advertised in the papers. That plot adjoining the station, the upcoming Kripalani colony...'

'Oh I see.'

He turned to his patients once more. I didn't feel bold enough to irritate the owner of land that promised such convenience.

Ten minutes again passed by.

This time it was the doctor who looked at me and said, 'Okay, sit down.'

I felt grateful to have been allowed to sit down after all the time I had been left standing. After sitting down for two minutes, I said, 'You see, about that land, I mean...'

The doctor raised his eyes again, 'What did you say?'

'I was talking about the land, I mean—it would be nice if I could just see it once. Actually, it's getting quite late.'

'Oh, you want to see the land, is it? Okay, Kartik, Kartik! Take him and show him the piece of land.'

Suddenly I saw something and felt surprised. What was that? The room next to the doctor's had the words "The New National Land Trust" written in bold letters on one of its walls.

This colony was going to be built on a large plot of land near the Ganga, but I found that Rajibnagar was about two and a half miles away from the river. Of course, it could be that the New National Land Trust had only its office here, and the advertised plot was adjacent to the Ganga.

The man called Kartik whom the doctor had called out to, had just come into the room. 'Which land are you talking about Babu?' he asked the doctor.

'Oh, the one on the western side of the burroughs.'

'Land?'

'Damn you, why are you standing and gaping like a clown? Yes, yes, I'm talking about that plot of land. Which planet are you from?'

This servant must indeed be quite ignorant. Why didn't he know anything about this much advertised land of his master's?

I stepped out on the road and said, 'Let us go...'

Seeing the man move westward, I said, 'Why are you going that side? I'm wanting to see that land next to the station—the Kripalani Colony...'

'There's no land near the station, sir.'

'Of course there is one. You don't seem to be aware of anything.'

'No sir, there is no land that side.'

'Listen. I'm talking about the land adjacent to the station. The one that has been advertised in the papers, for which people were asked to pay Rs. 50. as registration fee. I too have registered my name. In fact, I am carrying the receipt in my pocket now.'

'Why didn't you say this in the office, sir? I do not know of any other plot of land. Yesterday also a gentleman had come to the office and registered his name.'

'Didn't he see the land?'

'No Sir, Dactarbabu told him that he could see the plot next Sunday.'

'Okay, take me there now...'

'Sir...'

'Come on, what do you have to say this time?'

'Do you really want to see the land?'

'What rubbish are you talking! What else do you think I'll do if not see the land?'

'All right, then please wait here. I will just go and find out...'

Feeling irritated, I set out for the office myself. The doctor was still sitting there.

'Your servant doesn't seem to know where exactly to take me.' I said.

This time, I saw the doctor talking to another gentleman. It seemed as if he too had come for the same plot of land, because, I saw him take out some money from his pocket and register his name. The doctor gave him a receipt.

I was not sure what else he had told the man but I saw the man pay two rupees for a receipt before leaving.

The doctor turned towards me and said, 'You wish to see the land, isn't it? All right, come with me, I will take you there myself.' Then he took me past several drains filled with dirty and foul smelling water and undergrowth, past broken thatched roofs, towards some unknown mysterious destination, that he alone seemed to know.

I tried to make a faint protest once. Maybe he had forgotten that the plot of land was supposed to be somewhere close to the station, at least, that is how it had been advertised in the papers.

The doctor looked angrily at me, 'You seem to be having a great idea! Did you think that "adjoining the station" meant being just next to the Konnagar station ticket room?'

Of course, I could have easily asked whether 'adjoining' meant a distance of two miles from the station. But I changed my mind. I didn't think it was necessary to do so. After all, I was just a helpless Hindu from East Bengal, I couldn't afford to engage in a useless quarrel with a landowner here. I just needed to acquire some land. What if he got angry and refused to grant me that?

So I asked him politely, "How far is the colony?"

'About a mile from here.'

Surprised, I said, 'What! That means that the proposed land is about three and a half miles away from the station! Is this what you refer as "adjoining the station"? I have never heard of such a thing before ...'

The doctor halted abruptly. 'Well, I cannot really help it if you have never heard that before. But let me tell you that not even an inch of this land will remain unsold. Every plot is getting registered under a name. If you wish, you too can have some. In that case, would you like to go and see it, or would you rather not?'

'All right, let's go.' I said.

Taking out a bunch of letters from his pocket, the doctor waved them in front of my nose, 'See this.' he said. 'Do you know that money has been streaming in to my office through money orders, and letters have been pouring in everyday. You can see the land for yourself Sir. You may feel cheated later, if you don't. Of course, one will not force you to take it if you don't want to.'

The roads were damp and muddy. There were cowsheds and cattle-grazing grounds everywhere. A foul smell filled the air, and mosquitoes buzzed all around. After a while we passed by a slum inhabited mainly by non-Bengali Muslims, which was as dirty as it was crowded. After that it was

again a jungle of bamboo palms and muddy puddles. A mile away, by the side of a road next to a forest, I saw a metal hoarding which displayed in bold letters the words—"Acharya Kripalani Colony". The doctor halted there, and pointing ahead, said 'That's it.'

I looked around in silence. It was, as if, I had even lost my own sense of amazement. This then was the much prescribed 'Acharya Kripalani Colony!' Where was the Ganga flowing at its southern lip? Where was that much advertised scenic beauty? I tried to match the image of the proclaimed fifty feet wide road, electric lights, tap water etc., with the dark bamboo and undergrowth and the mosquito filled ditches. I tried to console myself by thinking of what Rashbehari Avenue had been like earlier. What had other places been like? But I just did not succeed. Besides, where was any coastal land over here anyway? Of course, it was useless to think of all that now.

The doctor looked at me and with a tone of satisfied pride said, 'Each *kotah* here is priced at Rs. 650 that is why it is not coming down. You know, every plot has been registered already.'

But a 'plot' meant a piece of land, and there was not an iota of land over here, it was all waterlogged. The holy, clear flowing Ganga didn't seem to be anywhere near it.

'How far is the Ganga from here?' I asked.

'Not too far. Maybe a mile or just a little more.'

How could that be possible either? How could the Ganga be less than four miles from here? I just could not understand.

Whatever it was, I didn't argue. I came back. Who knows whether I would be able to acquire even such a piece of water-logged land or such fields full of undergrowth afterwards! I felt extremely miserable.

As soon as I came home, my wife came rushing towards me, 'Tell me, how did you find it? Was it nice?'

'Wonderful' I said.

'Tell me, what kind of a place is it? Is it on the Ganga?'

'Well one can say it is "adjoining it."'

'Have they built a fairly wide road?'

'Well, it's not too bad.'

I did not speak to Bina's uncle that day. True, I had thrown my 50 rupees down the drain, but I felt a sense of relief. East Bengal was much better. I decided that I would not look around for land any more.

The next day, the results of Radcliffe Commission were declared.

Our native land had fallen within the jurisdiction of West Bengal.



## THE CROSSING (EPAR GANGA OPAR GANGA)

Jyotirmoyee Devi

A dark night. Off the beaten track and through the jungle path. They know the easier route but it is best not taken. They are terrified of danger lurking on the usual route.

They move on. In small, large and split-up groups—all moving together towards the same destination.

No, they are not pilgrims. Not heading for Kedarbadri or the Sagar Mela. They haven't set out to conquer a difficult terrain on a pilgrimage.

However, their destination is inaccessible. If they could get there somehow. What if that happened? Their women's honour and their men's lives and faith will not be lost. Not that they are carrying anything precious. They aren't rich. What they've left behind are rich fields of paddy.

The men are carrying sticks and battle-axes. Bundles of clothes or some eatables tied to their back. Bare torsos, just a *dhoti* between their legs. Men of all ages—the old, the young and the middle-aged.

The women are carrying infants. Holding the hands of children. Some of them are also carrying small bundles of provision. Ends of saris drawn over their heads as *ghomtas*.

All kinds of women, the younger ones right in the middle encircled by elders.

They walk in silence. Terrified.

Suddenly the shrill whistle of a train is heard from one end of the forests. Then black smoke billows up the sky. The wheels rumble at a distance.

The women ululate in joy. Some of the men chant, 'Haribol.'

'Why are you raising such a racket? Don't you know they'll hear us?' one of the elderly men warns them.

They fall silent again. But this time their joy knows no bounds. It seems like light at the end of the tunnel at last, after they have walked a few nights through the jungle, across the river. They can't wait to buy tickets and board the train. They know they've lost their homes, their dear ones, their homeland. They have no money, being left with nothing. But at least, they can be together with people of the same faith, the same religion. No one can drive them away like animals. Their honour and lives won't be on tenterhooks.

A group of 60 odd people arrives. They come to the railway station on the border. Many others are on their way.

Those this side of the border stand guard. 'Where are you from? What about your passports?'

These silly men have heard of passports. But some of their folks had crossed the borders without the papers. Last year on that fateful day.

They say, 'Haven't been able to get the papers, Miyan Saheb, please let us go. We'll never come back again you know.'

The Miyan Sahebs don't say much. 'Ask them on the other side.' They go towards that side.

'No, we don't have orders. Go back home,' they are told.

'How can that be?' The dumbfounded men fall at the feet of these guardians on both sides of the border.

No, tears or appeals won't help. They need something much more concrete. Yes, on both sides. The elders have their backs turned. The young explain to them in gestures. They don't disagree on this.

Those who can afford, cross the border. The rest remain in a corner at the station.

All of a sudden someone asks him, 'What's your name?'

They have been sitting quietly in a corner. They have nothing with which to make a deal. There is no way they can go back home. Nor can they go over to the other side. They would have walked across if no one had stopped them. Those two are man and wife.

He grows hopeful and answers, 'Babu, my name's Sudam Rishi.'

'Who's that with you?'

'My wife. It's just the two of us. Will you let us go please?'

A young, attractive woman in her early twenties. She has been sitting with her head bowed, covered with the ghomta.

Everyone has noticed. They've spotted the good-looking young girls and men with some cash on them. With one look, these experienced men on both sides of the border are able to figure out whom to approach and for what. The questioning continues.

'How much can you pay up for the two of you?'

Sudam pleads, 'Babu, I've just five *taka* on me. Nothing else.'

They break into laughter. 'Go home son, go back home.'

They look at Sudam's wife. 'What's her name?'

'She's Durga.'

She looks like the goddess no doubt, they think. 'If you can pay up 25 *taka* for the two of you, we'll let you go on foot.'

'Where would we get so much money, Babu?'

All at once Durga unveils her face and says something to her husband. What a lovely face. Nice complexion. Who could make out she was a cobbler's daughter?

Sudam says, 'Her brother's in Kolkata. I could get some money from him. But who would I send her with?'

Those who were looking at Durga can't take their eyes off her.

They say, 'Why don't you go? Get the money. Let her stay at the station master's house for a couple of days.'

The very thought scares them, fearing separation any moment.

Sudam says, 'No Babu, we'll go back.'

The day ends. Night. Durga lies all wrapped up tying the end of her sari to her husband's *dhoti*. She dozes off for a while. Then wakes up with a start after some time.

Gradually, all the others in their group somehow manage to cross the border. Those who are left behind don't belong to their village. Nevertheless, they are Hindus.

Night falls at the end of the day again. Those agents too come back. They say, 'Why don't you go, Sudam? Get the money, we'll look after your wife.'

Durga freezes in apprehension. They'll look after her? Who are these people?

Another day goes by. At last Durga tells her husband, 'You take me to Master Saheb's house. If he's willing to let me stay with them, it's all right. He has a Bibi.'

The station master's quarter is near by. He has a wife and two or three children.

Durga goes in covering her head and face well with the *ghomta*. And Sudam sits at the station master's feet with tears in his eyes, saying, 'You are like my father. Please do let her stay. I'll get the money from her brother and give it to you.'

Men could be as cold as stones; they could be humane too.

The station master had almost got used to seeing no end to these people's sufferings. In spite of that he was suddenly struck by Sudam and Durga's



helplessness. 'Okay, you leave her with my wife. But when will you be back? There are all kinds of ruffians in this place. Will I able to keep them at bay? And what will she eat? You won't have food cooked by us—you are Hindus.'

Sudam sounds cheerful. 'I'll be back in no time. You treat her as your daughter. She'll cook something for herself, now that she'll be with her 'Ma—your wife. She can have some *chire* or *muri* that she's got with her. It's only a matter of a couple of days. She'll be with Ma-jan in the meanwhile.'

The young and pretty Durga counts her days. Yes, it's the third day today. Sudam will definitely be back any moment. Her brothers are there in Kolkata. She has an aunt too. Sudam's father's sister stays there as well. Won't all of them pool in 25 rupees?

No, it is five days since he has left. Now it's ten. She is gripped by fear and anxiety. What has happened to Sudam? Won't he return? Has something happened to him? Have the people over there done something to him? The young loafers of the station gather around the station master's house and chat with his *Bibisaheb*. After a while they tell his wife, 'Bibisaheb, why have you kept her with you? Drive her out. Let her go where she pleases.' The porters laugh at her and says, 'Is he ever going to come back? That too with money! He's managed to get rid of her somehow. Now the girl is going to earn so much more. Sure, we'll find clients for her.' Durga gets to hear everything from a dark corner of the storeroom. Her heart pounds. Tears well up. Lips feel parched.

After they leave, she weeps at *Bibisaheb's* feet and pleads, 'You are my mother. I've called you Ma-jan. I beg of you, don't hand me over to them.'

The *Bibi* says, 'Of course not, don't worry. Stay where you are.'

But at night she asks her husband at the opportune moment, 'Why hasn't that man come back? Has he ditched her and run away?'

Miyan says, 'God knows. But he'll come. Got a young, pretty wife. He wept a lot at my feet before leaving. It's Kolkata after all. You never know what might have befallen him. Or maybe, he hasn't managed to get the money. I could have let them go. But you know how it is on both sides of the Ganga. They'll have to pay up here as well as there. Not much difference between the guardian angels on the two sides of the river.'

The *Bibi* says, 'Poor girl. And she's so young. How long do you think you'll be able to shelter her in these times of trouble?'

None of this escapes Durga's ears as she spends sleepless nights in the next room.

What is she going to do? Will they throw her out amongst the pack of wolves? She's seen the fate of some women in their neighbouring villages; on the way to the border too, groups were waylaid a number of times. The

women wept. Some of the men got killed, the others fled. What then? Durga freezes. She is petrified.

Should she escape? Where to? They are there everywhere. Hang herself? Drown? Is there a river close by? A pond? Maybe there's one. The next minute she's hopeful. He'll come. Sudam will definitely come.

A few more days pass.

The Master Saheb and his Bibi grow doubtful. Sudam seems to have fled. Durga doesn't cook any more. She hardly eats. If Bibi keeps nagging her, she munches some *chire* or *muri*.

Sudam returns after 21 days. His cheeks and eyes have shrunk in fear and anxiety. But he's back.

After many entreaties and with great effort, he's somehow managed to save the money from the clutches of all kinds of people on the way.

He comes and lies prostrate at the station master's feet. 'Saheb.'

Saheb gives a start as though he has just seen a ghost. 'Why so late? You promised to be back in three days. What happened?'

'It took time to arrange for the cash. But I should be able to take her with me today. She's fine, isn't she?'

He places the currency notes before the Saheb.

The saheb doesn't touch the money. Instead he says uneasily, 'Have something to eat. We'll talk later.'

Sudam feels scared. He imagines they are going to ask for more money. Where would he get it? More money?

He accompanies saheb to his quarter.

Touches the feet of *Bibisaheb*. She too asks uneasily, 'How have you been? Where were you all this time?'

'Where is she, Ma-jan?' Sudam asks, eagerly looking around.

The *Bibi* replies, 'Have something to eat first. Then we'll talk.'

'Hasn't she cooked? I'll have some of that. Ask her to bring me something.'

The *Bibi* can't control her tears any longer.

Sudam's face looks drained of all colour. 'Isn't she here? Have they taken her away?'

Miyan was standing right behind. He explains, 'No, they haven't. She's dead. Drowned herself.' Dumbfounded, Sudam slumps in the courtyard.

He keeps sitting like that for quite a while and then goes out.

He is suddenly struck by the thought that people are lying to him. They want more money, otherwise they won't let him go. She must be with someone out there.

He goes to the station. When the Miyan Saheb is slightly free, he falls at the Saheb's feet and bashes his head on the ground, on the Saheb's

shoe-clad feet. His forehead swells up in no time. People start gathering around him.

He keeps saying in between sobs, 'Saheb, please give her back to me. She's the only one I can call my own.'

The officers from the other side and the staff and the decision-makers this side of the border, all assemble in this commotion.

Everyone says, 'She tied a brick around her neck and drowned herself in a pond. We all know. She's no longer alive. She did this when you were not coming back.'

Sudam stares at them in disbelief. He says nothing. He finds it impossible.

The Hindu officer tells him, 'You come with me. What are you going to do here? I'll send you to the other side.'

The Muslim officer says, 'True, she's not alive. We've seen her body. The police know.'

He keeps sitting there like an animal. He doesn't speak to anyone. He doesn't seem to hear anything.

Many frequently use the jungle path. He stares in that direction and looks for Durga. Is that her? That fair one over there in a sari with a red border, *alta* on her feet? Looks so much like Durga! But no, he changes his mind. He comes back to the station master's house.

The Saheb is resting after lunch. 'Saheb, you know where she is. Do tell me. I'll take her to Kolkata, make her take a dip in the Ganga and arrange for the atonement. She won't be an outcast. The day I left she'd cried so much.'

The *Bibi* says sadly, 'She's no more, my son, she's dead.'

He comes again the next day. This time he says, 'Ma-jan, I want to be a Muslim. Then they'll surely return her to me. You tell them that. No Muslim is going to keep the wife of another Muslim. Ma-jan, I've called you mother. You talk to Saheb. She can't be dead. She had urged me to come back soon.'

*Bibisaheb* is speechless. She doesn't know what to say.

She just mumbles, 'You are not in your senses. She's no more.'

Sudam leaves. He keeps roaming all the time, here and there, everywhere. There's no end to his search. Durga might have gone the way he came. Those men might have taken her the other way. He runs helter skelter. People keep coming to the border everyday. There's quite a crowd now.

All kinds of women. Slim, young, healthy women. That one's fair, *alta* on her feet, *sindur* on the parting of her hair, chewing a *paan*. Looks just like Durga from a distance. He calls out, 'Durga, Durga.'

He moves closer. No, none of them are his Durga.

Late at night, tired, he falls asleep at the station. He wakes up again with a start before day-break.

He gets up while it is still dark. Maybe, Durga will be found today.

Translated by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta



## A THORN IN THE PATH (PATHER KANTA)

Ramesh Chandra Sen

‘How much further, Baba?’ Jadav asked his father, in a fit of desperation, his voice sounding as feeble and melancholic as a newborn bird’s.

He was a young boy of around ten or twelve years, dark complexioned, thin-limbed with a bulging tummy and brownish eyes. His legs felt heavy from continuous walking. No, he just couldn’t carry on any further. After every few steps, he had to stop and take a deep breath. And each time he paused, his father cursed him. ‘This rascal is really a thorn in my path. Come on, move, move.’

Jadav’s mother protested, ‘Why do you rebuke this weak, helpless son of mine? After all, he is the one who protected and looked after us, when you were not there.’

‘Protected you? Nonsense.’ Jadav’s father, Parashar, retorted angrily. Parashar was a strong man, dark complexioned and quite handsome—around 30 to 35 years of age, but in these recent times of misfortune, starvation and sleeplessness, his health and broken down considerably. It was difficult for him to walk with a load on his back, holding a tin suitcase with one hand, and Jadav with the other. From time to time, he muttered to himself ‘How I must have sinned, why else would I be finally forced to leave my own land and country?’

‘Nothing is a sin or virtue in life. Didn’t I feed a Brahmin like Ganguly Thakur the other day? But see, it only resulted in this misfortune!’ Parashar’s wife Mohini remarked.

She was a dark complexioned woman with a protruding forehead, bulging teeth and large eyes. It wasn’t easy to guess her age, but she looked older than her husband.

She held a small bundle in one hand while her other hand clutched on to a broken bucket containing a dirty, worn out lantern, a pot of salt, a bottle of oil, an utensil or two and other such essential items of a poor household.

Thousands of people were walking with them. Among them there were those who were handicapped, blind, deaf, healthy, strong, young, old, children and adults. As far as one could see there were large but interspersed processions of people, moving from the east to the west, carrying their own luggage, suitcases, boxes, utensils, pots, pans and other household items. Some of the groups had moved forward, others were still following. They had a strange nervous look on their faces, shrieking at the slight noise. At times they turned to look back and whenever they saw some vague, indistinct object in the distance, they cried out, 'There, there it is.'

It wasn't only the ailing Jadav, who wanted to know how much further they had to go. Everybody was eager to know how much further they had to walk and how far really was West Bengal?

When those who were old and weak would sit down on the road, from time to time, their companions would scare them. 'There, it is the Ansars<sup>1</sup> in the distance,' they would shout. Fear stricken, they would immediately get up and begin to walk again.

It had been this same scene being enacted for the last few days. Hordes of people were moving from the east to the west, and some others, from the west to the east.

After walking a little, Jadav sat down again.

Parashar turned to his son, angrily. 'Will I have to die because of you rascal?'

Mohini asked, 'What is this, have you really lost your head?'

'Yes I have. It's those Babus who have made me mad. At the time when they were revelling over the country's Partition, this boy had been running after them, with a flag in his hand. Hadn't I forbidden him then?'

'But had they really understood anything when they were shouting those slogans? Had those Babus understood anything either?' Mohini said.

'Well, why didn't they? Fools, they are all useless fools.' Parashar muttered angrily.

At this time, another group of people came from behind them and mingled with their group. Leading the new batch of people was a young boy of around 20 or 22 years, who was followed by two young women. The three of them resembled each other, they seemed to be siblings. Behind them were their parents, an elderly couple. A young boy of around five years, who was

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<sup>1</sup> A self-styled Muslim group which was on the rampage at the time of Partition.

walking with the father, looked at Parashar and said, 'Thame on you, you shouldn't get angry.'

Parashar started laughing.

Jadav was still trying to control his tears after being rebuked by his father. Mohini touched his forehead and exclaimed, 'My goodness, his body is burning, it seems it will soon turn to ashes!'

'Let it, let it turn to ashes,' Parshar said angrily

'Please Lord, don't listen to him.' Mohini prayed silently. 'I promise to offer you *shinni*<sup>2</sup> once I reach Calcutta. I promise I will.'

Jadav wanted a drink of water. His mother went and asked the elderly woman if she was carrying some water.

'No I don't have any water, I have milk. Would you like to have some?'

'Yes, that will be good. After all, it will give him some energy you know.'

After swallowing two or three gulps of milk, Jadav felt his thirst increase and he started crying out for some more.

'This son is truly a thorn in my path.' Parashar said fretfully. 'I know he will be the cause of my death, what with the Ansars threatening to arrive any moment now.'

On hearing the word 'Ansar', the two women who were walking with them turned pale with fright. They kept around nervously, but their young brother kept saying 'Anthal-Anthal' in his own baby voice, and laughed aloud.

Parashar told him, 'Don't laugh child. "Ansar" is not something to laugh about.'

The young man who was leading the group came forward. 'Come, let's move ahead. I am sure we will find some water on the way. Don't worry, we will carry your son in turns,' he assured Parashar.

So they started moving again. The young man, now carrying Jadav on his shoulders, led the group, followed by his two younger sisters and his elderly parents, with the old man holding on to his young son. Mohini and Parashar were right at the end.

One of the two young women carried a tin suitcase in one hand, and the other carried a bulging sack. Their mother, a rather plump lady, found it difficult to walk because of her excess body weight. She was not carrying anything, except a bundle of *kanthas*<sup>3</sup> and clothes.

A row of trees could now be seen at the far end of the sun-washed field. The scenery was as soothing to the eye as a green coloured border on a yellow

<sup>2</sup> A mixture made of milk and banana and rice flour or wheat flour as offering to God.

<sup>3</sup> Cotton wrapper or quilt made of patchwork, traditional of Bangladesh and Bengal.



coloured sari. It reminded Mohini of her own village, Saratali, where they had their own green garden around their tin-walled house, paddy stacks, cows and ploughs. Rows of mango, lemon and *tal* trees adorned her garden, and a small canal ran underneath. Just as the waters of the canal flowed on ceaselessly, holding the tiny waves to its heart, so too their lives had flowed amidst all trivial joys, sorrows and hope.

It was that dear village of theirs that they had to leave behind.

Before leaving, Mohini and Jadav had hidden themselves in the forest for three full days. Parashar was not at home then, and Mohini, holding her young son by his hand, had to run from one forest to another, searching for shelter like a wild animal.

At times they would hear desperate cries for help, 'We'll die! We're finished! Help, help!'

The most pathetic was the sound of Rupi, the barber's wife's helpless wailings. Mohini would never forget the painful moans of that woman being humiliated and tortured at the hands of a beastly man. It was not possible to forget that.

Those heart-rending sounds of helpless moaning on the one hand, and beastly exultation on the other.

The sky had turned a bright red from time to time. Huge balls of fire floated in the air and it seemed as if the devils were playing football with fire.

They had spent those three days in what had seemed like a torturous hell. It was in that forest that Yadav had developed a fever, which had eventually turned to malaria. After three days, the president of the Union Board, Shri Sirajul Haq had come forward to rescue them. He had been away for some work, but on returning to his village, he had sent word to the district judge, asking for an armed police force. A search was conducted in every Hindu household. He even accompanied the police to the forests and called out to all possible fugitives who might be hiding there. 'Is anybody there? You may come out now, there is nothing to fear,' he had assured them.

Hearing his reassuring words, those who had been hiding began to emerge from the woods, one by one. But their appearance was enough to frighten him. What is this—he thought to himself. How was it possible for these people to change so drastically in just three days? He arranged for them to be sent to the district. It was there that Parashar was able to reunite with his wife and son.

The steamers were not plying because of lack of coal. So they set out from the district on foot. There were about seven families from Saratali village alone, who were walking with this group.

There were several canals and lakes and two big rivers that they had to cross on their way. As they reached the shores, some volunteers, and Ansars caught hold of them.

‘Where are you going with all those jewels?’

‘Do you think you can steal jewels from Pakistan and escape? We will not allow you to carry more than Rs.10 each and you’ll have to hand over the excess money to us.’

Finally, those who were trying to flee had to let go of several possessions, one by one. Some of them were finally left with nothing except the clothes they were wearing. Parashar and his group fell a little behind, because of Jadav’s ill health. By the time they reached the railway station, they didn’t even have enough money to buy train tickets.

Some Ansars again caught them on the road. ‘Why are you carrying a saw?’ they demanded. ‘We cannot allow you to carry a chisel, a saw or any other such weapon.’

‘But I use this instrument only for earning my livelihood.’ Parashar tried to explain. ‘I use it to feed my son and wife. I beg of you, please do not snatch it from me.’ But his pleading yielded no result. The only thing that could somehow be saved was a very small fancy saw. It had a shining black handle, as if it was made out of mahogany wood.

Parashar was a good mechanic. He didn’t work only for the sake of earning a livelihood; he found joy in such creative work. There were many examples of his excellent handiwork available in the neighboring villages. His best work was the huge wooden statue in Sirajul Haq’s house. It looked like a real man squatting to remove a thorn from his foot. Haq Sahib had been extremely pleased with this work of art and it was then that he had presented him with this fancy saw and a certificate of praise, as a token of appreciation. It was possibly because they thought this thing would not come to any use that the Ansars decided to return it to him.

The day moved on. Earlier there were at least a tree or two by the roadside, but now there was not even that. It seemed as if they were walking through a barren desert now, the strong overhead sun pricking their skin like a needle, and sunburnt sheafs of grass hurting their toes. The road was covered with dust, and at times, their heels dug into the dust as they moved forward. A dusty haze followed the refugees, its billowing clouds eclipsing even the afternoon sun which now shone pale in the sky. Yadav felt the dust choke his throat and began to cough.

But the elderly man who had joined them sometime back, tried to lighten the burden of their arduous walk, by narrating stories from his own life.

'This is not really all that difficult! I have been in much more difficult times!' he announced.

'More difficult than this! What are you talking about?' Parashar questioned.

'Yes, sir' the old man replied and began to narrate several difficult situations that he had confronted in his own life. The stories seemed very thrilling no doubt, in fact, they brought shivers even in daylight. At times they seemed fabricated, but even then, his audience listened to him with total amazement.

After that he introduced himself. Even though his actual name was Patit Pavan, people had given him the nick name of 'Ghatak'.<sup>4</sup> And that was because he could butcher even very large buffaloes in just one blow.

The man then told them about his own native place, which was close by, about 20 to 25 miles from where they were. Apparently, no trouble had broken out there yet, the Hindus and Muslims were still living together quite amicably. Of course, people from the gentlemanly section of society had all left the place, and now the farmers and labourers were following suit. In fact, there were no people within a distance of a quarter mile radius from his own house; no one left from his own caste who could give him a drop of water if he lay on his death bed, or even to carry him to the cremation ground if he died. So how could he possibly dare to stay on? Who could he depend on? That is why he was leaving behind his village.

He was now carrying some money to buy some land, and also a pitcher full of seeds. He had plans of buying and cultivating a rice field once he reached Hindustan. As soon as he mentioned the money that he was carrying, his wife made a loud noise as if she was clearing her throat.

Ghatak turned to her and said, 'Why are you coughing? I can assess people quite well. I can safely trust this man. He is a thorough gentleman.' And then turning to Parashar, he said, 'This is my wife, Kumudini, commonly known as Kumud. My father and her paternal uncle were great friends. You know, people think that I married her on my own. And Kumud says that she had quite liked me when she saw me for the first time. Of course, it's quite possible. It is quite likely that a young girl at that tender age of 11 or 12 might have felt a stir in her heart.' Saying this, Patit Pavan laughed out—and what a sincere, heartfelt laugh that was!

He resumed talking, 'My younger son, Hambir, is really a very intelligent boy. People say he is truly his father's son. My two daughters are named Chhaya and Kaaya. The slimmer one is Kaaya and the well built-one is Chhaya. Chhaya is just like her mother.'

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<sup>4</sup> Literally, a butcher; it is also a title in Bengal for marriage negotiators

Chhaya was extremely embarrassed. Kumudini tried to draw her husband's attention once again, clearing her throat a little louder this time. But Ghatak continued unperturbed, 'It would have been better if my elder son Pratap too had taken after his mother. Fluffy cheeks, that makes the eyes seem even more sunk in.'

'Please stop all this, Baba' Pratap intervened.

At this time, suddenly a dark line appeared in the distance, and Ghatak immediately turned everybody's attention to that direction. Jadav too opened his eyes. But his glance was turned towards the east, and the dark line was to his west. So he could see nothing but a dust-covered sky.

After scrutinizing the distant object for a while, Parashar said, 'Is that a group of people?'

'What if they are Muslims?' Chhaya asked nervously.

'Muslims?' Kumudini repeated, feeling the dust choke her throat. Mohini shut her eyes instantly and started praying.

Parashar cursed aloud, 'Dividing the nation! Rascals!'

What had seemed like a thin black line from far, gradually became more conspicuous, and grew larger in shape. It was truly a group of people advancing in this direction.

Soon, a loud cry echoed in the air, 'Allah ho ...'

It was doubtful whether Parashar and his group of people would have felt a greater fear if they had heard the sound of thunder from a clear, cloudless sky. Apart from Pratap, a shadow fell over everybody's face. Frightened beyond words, Chhaya and Kaaya called simultaneously, 'Baba!'

'Allah ho Allah.' The all-piercing cry kept growing louder with time.

Pratap cried out in return, 'Bande...'

Hambir laughed in his baby voice, and said 'Anthal.'

'Is this a time to laugh, child?' Parashar said sternly.

'Why are you laughing Hambir?' Ghatak asked.

The agitation and revolt that had overtaken society, and the nervousness that it caused amongst the elders, only gave rise to laughter in the child. Hambir laughed once again and repeated, 'Anthal.'

The Muslim group that had come quite close now, seemed to consist mainly of young children and a few women in burkhas. Apart from that there were about 10 to 12 men in all.

Pratap turned to his daughters and said, 'People don't come to fight with children and womenfolk. So you have nothing to fear dears.'

Ghatak said, 'Maybe, they have had to leave behind their homes too and are going eastward now.'

'But they are more in number than us. What if they take revenge?' Parashar asked nervously.

'Oh, just my father and I can resist them at least for a while—can't we Baba?'

Ghatak puffed up his biceps and proudly announced, 'Of course, we can. I still have that much strength left in me.'

A group of people came and stopped in front of them. They were a bunch of unfortunate people, with a similar desperate look in their eyes, reflecting the same emptiness of having lost all. The men were carrying baggage consisting of bundles on their shoulders and had bedding under their arms, and the women were carrying children in their arms and pitchers on their hands. They too had lost their home and land and had become destitute. Someone's father had been killed; someone had lost a brother while some others had even lost their wives. Those rogues had apparently killed even a son in front of his mother.

On seeing Parashar and his group in the distance they too had cried out in fear 'Allah ho...'

Seeing a young boy with a piece of cloth tied over his head, Mohini was immediately reminded of her younger brother-in-law, Juvan. He too used to tie a band on his head. After reaching the district sub-division he had suffered a severe attack of epilepsy and had died instantly.

On coming closer, the two groups of people just stood, staring silently at each other. They had the same quiet unwavering look in their eyes, without the slightest trace of any mutual animosity or violence. That quiet look seemed to be harboring the same question, 'You too have landed in this condition, brothers? Who is responsible for this? Who are they?'

A note of sympathy and mutual compassion was evident in that silent question. Even the silent gaze of those women from behind the cover of their burkhas seemed to reflect the same sympathy for another.

Both the groups again resumed their walking, moving in different directions. But this time they did not raise any cries of "Allah Ho" or "Bande Mataram". Their sympathy for each other had, by now, crossed way beyond the world of sound.

After a while Mohini said, 'We should have found out whether they were carrying any water or not.'

Ghatak turned and said, 'Women alone can think of such things this at such an hour. No wonder it is said that one should avoid taking women as fellow travellers.'

After walking some distance, they arrived at a shaded area by the roadside. There was a massive lake filled with cool sparkling water, and surrounded by

huge trees like *sal*, *shimul*, *ashok* and *arjun*. On the eastern side stood a very old banyan tree, with its innumerable hanging branches spread out aerially, like the matted hair of an ascetic, engrossed in deep meditation.

People thronged from all around, with the crowd on the eastern side being relatively less. Many were bathing in the cool waters of the lake. Young boys were swimming in the current, with the waters surfing beneath their feet and blooming like bouquets of white flowers.

Women too had entered the waters for washing and cleaning themselves. A little distance away, one could see pots full of rice and *daal* being boiled over small stoves. Some people were sitting nearby, munching rice and *chire*. A few others stood staring at those who ate, licking only their saliva as it drooled from their mouth. Mohini looked around for a place in the shade to lay her son down. She prodded her way carefully, avoiding bumping into the cooking utensils and boxes and suitcases that lay spread all around. But she didn't dare to ask anyone. Finally she asked a good looking, young woman who was standing nearby, 'Do you think I could find a place for this weak child of mine? He has been running fever for the past few days.'

The young woman looked up and said, 'I have not bought this land for myself, have I? But would you like to sit here? You see my child is suffering from dysentery and is passing stool very frequently.'

'No, no, let it be then.' Mohini immediately retracted.

In the end, it was a Vaishnavi who offered her a place. A dark-complexioned woman, she was dressed like a typical Vaishnavi,<sup>5</sup> with a string of *tulsi* beads around her neck and a mud streak painted on her nose. She seemed about 50 years old, and was of a sturdy and firm build. She moved aside into the sun, and lay down Jadav in the cool shade of the tree. Then she poured some water from her own pitcher into the child's thirsty lips. But after taking only a gulp or two, Jadav turned away his face.

'I have boiled the water, that is why there might be a peculiar smell.' The Vaishnavi tried to expalin.

After a while, Jadav fell asleep.

'Is something terrible happening in your land?' the Vaishnavi asked. Mohini described some of the atrocities and killings that had occurred in her own village and then said, 'What about your village?'

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<sup>5</sup> Vaishnav's are followers of Chaitanya, who was a worshipper of Vishnu, the Preserver in the Hindu Trinity; a Vaishnavi is a female follower.

'I don't belong to any village. I am taking my Radha Ballabh<sup>6</sup> to Nabad-weep with me.'

'Is it true that a kind of a gastric epidemic has struck this place here?'

'It's not a simple gastric disease, its nothing less than cholera!'

'Cholera!'

'Nobody utters the word "cholera". They call it dysentery.'

'Has anybody died?'

'I came yesterday, since then, two people have died.'

'Tell me, what should I do now?' Mohini asked desperately. 'If I take this sick child into the sun, the blood might rush to his head, and he will definitely die. But how can we remain here either?'

'Don't worry. The Almighty Radha Ballabh will surely protect him.'

Keeping her son in Vaishnavi's custody, Mohini went to take a bath, and when she returned, she found that Kumud had already put some rice to boil on a make-shift oven on a couple of bricks. Turning to Mohini, she said, 'Shall I add some rice for both of you? Meanwhile you may rest with your son in the shade.'

'That's not necessary. I have some *chira* with me.'

'Oh, you don't really have to worry about using up my provisions. I have some extra rice. I would like you to eat with me for these two days.'

Mohini hesitated a little. She glanced towards her husband once and then said, 'You see, we are Bagha Kshatri by caste. Which caste do you belong to?'

'We are *Tentule Bicha*<sup>7</sup> Ghatak replied.

'What? We have never heard of "*Tentule Bicha*!'"

'Oh, we are your fellow caste people. You can safely have food made by us.'

'You are joking aren't you?' Parashar said.

'Stop it, father.' Pratap snubbed. 'It's still that same old concern about caste! When are we ever going to feel ashamed of ourselves!'

As an aroma of cooked rice began to fill the air, some little children from all around gathered together and came closer. Some of them were stark naked, some just wore torn underwear, their bodies were unclean and their eyes had sunk deep, but they kept looking unwaveringly at the white rice-water boiling in the pot. Theirs veins had swollen with hunger and their eyeballs were bulging, as if they would fall off any moment.

<sup>6</sup> Here, her images of the Goddess and God.

<sup>7</sup> Literally, a kind of scorpion.

As soon as Kumudini served a spoon of rice on a plate, the group of hungry children fell over her. But she moved them aside saying, 'Let me feed my husband and child first, and only after that you may get to eat something. Now, just move off, will you?'

One or two children moved back very reluctantly, but they kept pushing at each other, unable to decide who should retreat first.

Kumudini scolded them, 'I will not give you even a crumb to eat, if you behave like this.'

Hambir dipped a finger into the lump of hot rice, and immediately burnt it. Kumudini lost her patience now. Turning towards those hungry children she said, 'If you hadn't looked so greedily at the food, Hambir wouldn't have burnt his finger. Now get out from here, you skeletons! Scoot!'

One of the children's mothers was standing close by. Hearing Kumudini's nasty remark, she stepped forward and said, 'What do you think of yourself, you witch! All this arrogance—just for a handful of rice! Have we never seen rice in our lifetime? God knows how many such handfuls we have fed crows and ducks with!'

Kumudini couldn't finish her meal. She had just finished having a mouthful or two, when that hungry lot of children again surrounded her. She distributed her own share of food amongst them. Time passed by and the evening drew to a close. A little before twilight, a heart-rending cry was heard from the other side of the river. 'I had to finally leave you behind dear, in this dead man's lake?'

Parashar turned to Ghatak, 'That's one more gone, isn't it?'

Ghatak had already gone around the lake two to three times, and made friends with many. 'Yes,' he said, 'Apparently, someone had also died before we came here.'

'What! Is that true?' Parashar asked.

'Yes, I believe one or two have been dying everyday. They dispose of them on the eastern field, below the lake. I have even seen some bones and flesh scattered around. Would you like to go and see it?'

'Excuse me, please' Parashar said.

The evening darkness descended slowly and soon, nothing could be seen, not even the man standing next to one, it was as if there was a total black-out. Those who wanted to smoke cupped their hands to hide the light, as they lit their *bidis*. And when they needed a light for some special reason, they covered it with a piece of cloth.

In the midst of such a dark, somber night, Vaishnavi took out an *ektara* from her saffron-coloured bag and started singing:



Play your *ektara*,  
 The Lord, will soon enter your heart  
 riding a golden chariot.  
 So what if there are no conchshell or bells,  
 So what if there are no offerings—  
 Why do you worry over loss or gain,  
 For what your heartfelt grievings?

What an excellent voice she had. Soft and yet high pitched, as melodious as the strains of the *ektara* itself. The sweet tune lent life to the inert darkness around, and the wind filled with a sweet tremor.

As soon as she finished the song, a young woman came close and said, 'Please sing the song once more *Didi*. My son wants to hear it.'

It was the same woman whom Mohini had asked for shelter. She asked 'How is your son now?'

'Not well,' the young woman replied. 'He wants to hear her sing.'  
 So Vaishnavi started again,

My Gauri will become Radha,  
 This veena of mine will forever be  
 in harmony with Her divine tune.

Mohini had fallen asleep late in the night. When she woke up at dawn, she found the Vaishnavi sitting next to Jadav and humming a song.

The place where Kumudini had been sitting only a few hours earlier was now empty, with only a few flakes of moist *chira* scattered here and there. A sparrow and its mate were busy pecking at those. A little distance away, a row of ants were crawling home-bound, with flakes of *chira* in their mouth. Mohini felt sad for Kumudini and her family, especially for Hambir.

After her bath, the Vaishnavi returned, carrying some water with her. She washed her own idol of Radha Ballabh and then set about worshipping it. A little later, as she lay down the idol on the velvet cover inside a brass box she prayed silently, 'God please make him well.'

Parashar awoke a little later. The shores of the lake were even more deserted by then. He turned around and said, 'Where have they all gone—Pratap, Ghatakda the others?'

'They left even before I had woken up,' Mohini replied.

Parashar said, 'I can see that everybody has gone. We will be the only ones destined to stay behind.'

'It's all a game designed by the Almighty Lord Radha Ballabh.'

'Don't talk about His playful dalliance! I doubt how much power He has!' The Vaishnavi continued to softly chant the Radha Ballabh's name.

Only two groups arrived in the entire day.

Parashar said, 'I wonder if Pakistan has cooled down!'

Jadav's condition was the same. Kumudini had given him some barley the previous day. But there was no barley today; she couldn't get any barely, sago or even sugar from her fellow travellers. All they could get was grains of *muri*.

But it was difficult for Jadav to even have *muri* soaked in water: It seemed to get stuck in his throat. Parashar felt dejected. How could a boy who found it painful to swallow even soaked *muri*, be able to withstand the hardship of walking!

The next day, three more groups left the place. But no new group arrived in its place. The entire place looked deserted. Jadav wanted to hear the Vaishnavi sing. 'Why don't you sing that song on Gauri?'

So the Vaishnavi started singing:

My Gauri will be Radha ...

She repeated the song many times. Towards the evening, Parashar went out on a stroll, and decided to rest for a while on the eastern shore of the lake, which was the most beautiful of the four shores. It lay in the shadow of tall, green trees like the *deodar*, *ashok*, *palash* and there were small shrubs in between.

As he looked around, he suddenly saw some human skulls and a few human bones lying scattered on the ground on the eastern side. A vulture and a crow were sitting on a corpse and poking at its eyes and the rest of its mortal remains.

Parashar wondered whether these were bones of the dead refugees alone, or was there a crematorium here earlier, where people performed their last rites?

He didn't keep waiting there, but moved towards the south-western corner of the shore.

It was a lonely place. By the side of a *shaora* grove, a woman lay asleep with a child in her arms. The lower part of her body lay in the sunshine, while the upper part lay in the shade. Her face lay where it was most dark; it was as if someone had left a coating of black paint on it.

The sound of dry leaves cracking under Parashar's feet woke up the child from his sleep. He clutched on to his mother's breast and began to suck it. But not being able to taste any milk, he began to bang his head on her chest

and cry out aloud. The mother remained silent. The onslaught of her child's young hands, led to one of her hands to roll down from where it lay on her chest. Her entire body shook like a mechanical doll.

Parashar looked on with a fixed gaze. The scene moved his heart. He thought, could these hordes of people who were leaving their own land and house for an unknown place, only to escape death, finally escape it? Rather, it seemed that they kept creating new graveyards on the path, as they travelled on.

The child stretched out his arms towards Parashar, wanting to jump into his embrace. Unable to resist, Parashar picked him up in his arms, and immediately the child quietened down.

Holding him to his heart Parashar kept walking in the dark. He wondered about the child's mother. Poor thing, she was alone there. The eastern field was, after all, the most suitable place for her. It would have been so much better if she could be kept there along with other such corpses.

At least it would have certainly put his own heart to rest.

At this time, the Vaishnavi suddenly came and said, 'Please come quickly, we have to wind up here.'

'Why? Why at this dead of night?' Parashar asked and turned to look at the refugees, not too far off. He noticed a certain urgency and excitement amongst them. They seemed to be busy planning, whispering and discussing with each other, ready to pack up their belongings. As if they were about to move right now. The Vaishnavi said, 'Two of these men have heard that the Muslims will be attacking this place today, in the later hours of the night.'

'I see,' said Parashar, and followed the Vaishnavi to where his own wife and son were waiting. Mohini was collecting her things together, and Jadav was lying down near her. He looked at his father, blinking his eyes, as if questioning whom was he holding in his arms?

Mohini appeared as if she would burst in anger. After a while, she said, 'Just get rid of that child. His mother has died of cholera; he has poison all over his body.' Parashar kept standing silently.

Mohini continued, 'Here you are cursing your own son for being only a thorn in your path. And there you have picked up another poisonous thorn and brought him here!'

'Of course he's a thorn, a hundred times so.' Parashar tried to say the words forcefully, but his voice fell. He turned towards the Vaishnavi hoping that she would support him. But even the Vaishnavi didn't say a word.

Parashar felt angry, wondering how strange the human mind was! Till the day before yesterday, there were so many people here, some were cholera patients too. All of them had lived together, crammed and pressed against each other.

There were fewer people today, with not a single patient anywhere. The only thing that remained as a token of memory of the last female patient was this lump of her very own flesh. And they were feeling scared of even that little thing and wanted to get rid of it instantly!

Mohini had been staring at her husband all this while.

'All right then, why don't you just live with the child,' she said angrily.

Parashar didn't reply.

After a while Mohini said, 'Did you hear anything?'

'Yes I did, but at the dead of night in such darkness...' Interrupting him, Mohini said, 'But if everybody has decided to leave, how can we alone stay back?'

'That is also true.' Parashar said thoughtfully.

Apparently, two of the refugees who had gone for an early evening stroll in the southern field had returned with the news that the Mussalmans would be landing on the land by the side of the lake, sometime in the late hours of the night. Even though they seemed to be giving conflicting information whenever the elderly people questioned them, still the refugees had decided to leave this place immediately. Having heard all this news from his wife, Parashar asked one of the refugees, where he was actually going to.

'Wherever God leads us.' The man said. 'Why, won't you be going too?'

'Of course, I will. But with what faith can I leave in this dark hour for an unknown destination?'

'But on what faith will you stay back either? Rather, it is quite likely that we might come across a village, a Hindu village somewhere on our way.'

'But, what if it is a Muslim village?' Parashar asked.

'Well, if they are sympathetic Muslims, they will surely then protect us. After all, not everybody is a staunch Mussalman''

'But what is the surety that there will be some trouble here?'

'Our own men have heard it. They have even touched the feet of the Brahmins and sworn that it is true!'

'I see,' Parashar said.

Everybody was almost ready for leaving; only Parashar was left to pack up his belongings. Mohini hadn't been able to pack everything. So Parashar stood the child on the ground, and began to tie up the remaining goods. Immediately, the child broke into a loud wail.

'My goodness, what a menace you have brought.' Mohini said angrily. Parashar didn't reply. The man next to him said, 'Please hurry up, sir.'

Before another minute had passed, another man joined in, 'It seems we will all have to die here just because of you. Besides, what a living poisonous menace you have brought with you.'

Parashar was livid.

And just at that moment, Mohini said, 'Please know that I will not be able to add any further load to my already bulging baggage.'

The journey started

Parashar lifted the trunk onto his shoulders, and the bulging sack on his back. Then he picked up Jadav in one arm and the new child in his other. About ten or twelve small groups of refugees then started moving through the darkness. They didn't light a torch, lest someone saw them. They didn't even talk amongst themselves, as they moved on with light steps, Parashar was carrying a very heavy load and therefore, found it very difficult to walk. He was constantly falling behind. The ones who were leading the groups kept hurrying him. 'Walk faster sir.' They said.

The more he fell behind, the more this insistence lessened and finally, after some time, he couldn't even hear their voices. Even the Vaishnavi had left with the earlier batch of people. Now Parashar's group had only four people consisting of himself, his wife, Jadav, and the new child.

Parashar had been quiet all along. Only once he said 'Even such a sincere devotee of the Radhaballabh had to go! This is what is known as fate!'

At times, they could hear the sound of eagles and vultures flapping their wings and bats and wolves howling. Mohini felt these ill omens had fallen on their path because of that new thorn in their path, that orphan child. If only she had enough strength, she would have picked up the child and flung it far on the eastern shore of the lake.

A sound came floating from the distance, it sounded almost as if somebody was crying out, 'Allah Ho!'

'There, it goes again, just listen.' Mohini said with a scared voice.

Parashar snubbed her, 'What's there to fear? Whatever has to happen will happen!'

'Have you left anything undone? Having acquired that thorn in our path...'

Parashar burst out in anger, 'If you make too much noise, I will abandon the entire cauldron here and run off, leaving you, Jadav and this idiot too. I will not keep a single thorn on my path'.

Mohini was afraid and quietned down. She knew that it wasn't all that impossible for her husband to leave them behind on the road today, just as it wasn't strange for him to bring that ill fated boy here. Mohini was aware of this. Touching Jadav lightly, she walked on silently, next to her husband.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

## ALIEN LAND (ANGINA BIDESH)

Annada Shankar Ray

On hearing about his brother's illness, Adhirath came to meet him one day. 'Boudi, I hear Dada is ill. What has happened? How is he now?' he asked his sister-in-law.

'He has fever,' she said. 'Not a very high temperature, but he is getting into a delirium at times. You can hear him when you visit his room. But please don't stay for too long and don't let him talk much either. It's the doctor's orders you know.' Saying this, she got back to doing her domestic chores.

Adhirath entered the bedroom and found his brother lying with his eyes shut. As the sound of footsteps reached his ears, he opened his eyes wide and said, 'Who is it! Is it Adhirath! Don't fret! "Pomfret!"'

Adhirath assumed those words of his brother's to be a part of a feverish delirium. But on touching his forehead, he found that it was only slightly warm. Could anyone get into a delirium with such a slight temperature!

'How are you feeling now, Dada? You seem to have a very low temperature right now,' he said.

'It's a nagging kind of fever. It seems to come and go. But somehow, it is not leaving me completely. And that is what is worrying. But tell me, how would worries help? Don't fret. "Pomfret",' Dada said, holding Adhirath's hand.

'Don't worry. Everything will be all right,' Adhirath said trying to assure him.

'Of course it will. And that is why I say, don't fret. "Pomfret."'

'What does that mean?' Adhirath asked, feeling puzzled.

'Why, that's plain English. Everybody knows the meaning of the word 'fret', and if you have never tasted pomfret, then let me tell you, it is a kind of sea fish.'

'Of course, I have tasted it. I quite like it. But why should I have to eat pomfret without fretting. After all there are so many other kinds of fish.' Adhirath argued.

'Stupid boy! It's just a special kind of *mantra*!' Dada seemed to regain his strength.

'But even *mantras* have some kind of relevance, or are these also some kind of magic words!' Adhirath's voice had a note of curiosity.

Leaning back on his pillows Dada tried to explain.

'There was once an ocean launch named "Pomfret". Its name is ever-green in my memory. Whenever I land in dire trouble and am unable to find a way out, that name comes back to my mind. I keep assuring myself that, this time too, I shall be rescued just as miraculously as I was the last time. What is there to feel so helpless about? Don't fret! "Pomfret".'

'What is there to feel so helpless about?' Adhirath repeated his brother's words in an aggrieved tone. 'Is there a single Bengali remaining in the land that was once named Bangladesh! Either they are running away or they are being shot down. I hear that about one and a half crore people are going to die out of sheer starvation!'

Like a gentleman's promise, his brother repeated the same words again, 'Don't fret. "Pomfret". There is an end to disappointments also.'

'And there's not a single noble soul on this side either! Either they are all criminals or they are just cowards. So, how can I not feel despair, tell me!' Adhirath said in a sad voice.

'Even then, you must keep up hope. Don't fret. "Pomfret".' Dada assured him.

'Oh tell me Tara Mother, where shall I stand?' Adhirath quoted from a famous song rather pensively.

'I went to Delhi and found that it was only a story of bribery and flattery everywhere. That same city of Delhi, which was once under the Muslims towards the end of their rule.'

'Dont fret. "Pomfret".' Repeating these words again, Dada moved back into his reclining position. It was clear that he was feeling hurt again. Adhirath was afraid that his temperature might rise again.

He quickly added, 'Let it be, Dada, we can discuss all that later. Why don't you get well first. I'll come and see you again in about seven days' time. You can tell me the story about "Pomfret" then. I am feeling very curious to know all about it.' Adhirath did not want him to talk much.

'But if I try to tell you the entire story, then some official secrets might get leaked out. Of course, I have been noticing that the so called bigwigs of our country have been spreading government secrets, and yet remaining

unscathed. We are only small fry, but still we have been selected to bear certain serious responsibilities at a very important juncture in history.' Feeling weary, Dada lay back again.

It was on a later date, that he related the entire story of the "Pomfret".

## 2

'Those three years of our lives are really unparalleled. The years 1946, 1947 and 1948. I had thought that I was only a witness or a mute spectator of the times. And that I had no role to play on the stage. But suddenly one day, towards the end of the year 1947, I got an official order through telephone. "You are being sent as a magistrate to the Fateyabad *zilla*. Please don't refuse. We are unable to find any other suitable person."

'Fateyabad had always been a very peaceful place, and so were the neighbouring provinces of Nanadiya and Ranimahāl on the other side. A line had recently been drawn through these states and declared as the international border. That is why there was such unrest all along the border.'

'Apart from this, there was of course, the perennial problem of the Rams and the Rahims. All this while, we used to say that it was a trick played by some other third party, but now, Ram started accusing Rahim of having committed that mischief, while Rahim said it was actually an act of hostility on Ram's part. As if they were innocent themselves. As if one could clap only with one hand!'

'Your sister-in-law had never wanted to leave Kolkata; after all, it was after 18 long years that we had finally got a chance to live in Kolkata! In fact we had still not been able to settle down well! It was only four months since we had come here. And a transfer so soon! But my sense of history told me that if I really wanted to witness true action, then this was my opportunity. After all, you are an actor too. You are not just one more mute spectator or critic.'

'All these provinces—Fateyabad, Nanadiya and Ranimahāl were my old districts. Was there anybody from these places who didn't know me, or whom I didn't know? So, who could be a better ambassador of friendship than I? This was really the spirit with which I went there. I had not gone there to fight; I had gone to make peace. The present magistrate of Ranimahāl was my previous senior deputy, and we still maintained a very cordial relation. The magistrate in Nanadia was also my colleague, even though we were not all that close.'



'I soon realized that no one considered the other person as his co-patriot or as his fellow being any more. The people on that side of the border seemed alien to those living on this side. And vice versa. It was the same province, the same people, and still it was a strange magic which made one class of people seem alien to others.

"Sir you must be careful when you talk to people on the other side of the border," the police officer announced. After all they are foreigners. They had actually wanted to make this province a Muslim-hold, because after all there is a Muslim majority here. It had initially been included in their share. If only you had seen their attitude then! And also the joy of the local Muslims here! All of them belonged to the fifth battalion with not a soul to be trusted! Everybody feels that this land will once again become a part of Pakistan! In fact, a conspiracy is being secretly hatched. Do you know sir, every night a truck from the other side comes here and smuggles out goods to the other side of the border?"

'It seemed as if Fateyabad was our very own Alsace Lorraine, caught in a tug-of-war between Germany and France and causing endless bad feelings between the two countries. No one was ready to let it go, with each wanting to strike a war at the very first opportunity.'

'Just as the Partition gave rise to two alien groups, similarly, it also saw a group of night-smugglers emerge. The Hindus and Muslims got together and formed a new industry. The trick of their trade was such that the Muslims from the other side signalled the Hindus on this side, and the Hindus from this side signalled the Muslims on the other. Oblivious to their own national interests, both parties smuggled out their national treasures, working skilfully under the cover of darkness.'

'One day, I spent a night on the banks of the Padma river and witnessed with my own eyes their signalling lights. The boats started moving instantly. And then it was all a brotherhood between the Hindus and Muslims. No one dared arrest them, and who would benefit from arresting them anyway! After all, the evil lay right within the core. One senior man said, "How will they be able to clothe themselves, if we do not supply them any clothes? Please don't forget that many of them are Hindus! After all it's mostly sarees that are being sent".'

'It was the same logic being used in the case of rice. "What will they eat, if we do not provide them rice? Don't forget that many of them are Hindus." This argument was followed for all commodities.'

'Again, on this side, there was a loud protest against the non-availability of rice and sugar and the sky-high prices of clothes. It was accompanied by a constant threat of a strike if we were unable to supply them. Some ordinances

were still in effect then. But they were not meant for this kind of a situation. Being helpless, we tried to apply those rules in this case also, and thereby earned the wrath of the traders. Some people even threatened publicly to complain to Nidan Roy.'

'I seemed to be caught between a conspiracy on the one side, and a ring of bad men on the other. I just keep slogging day and night and made others slog also. My colleagues in the government were truly unparalleled. Many of them differed from my opinion on the ideal relation between India and Pakistan, but still they obeyed my orders. I wonder why they had such faith on me. However, I cannot say that I was as reliant on my own seniors.'

'What had actually happened was that a game of chess was being played in Delhi and in Karachi, and its effects were being realized in Kolkata and Dhaka. That in turn was affecting Fateyabad and Ranimahāl. We were mere agents. But at least we had our own personal freedom, which I guarded very carefully. I never became a total pawn in their hands.'

'One day I went to survey the borders, accompanied by a policeman. I looked through my binoculars at Ranimahāl on the other side, and suddenly glanced upon my earlier house. My eyes filled with tears.'

'Sir, have you noticed, how they have placed cannons on either side of the gate? If they ever fire a bullet, it will land on this side also. Even though the Padma is very wide, it is really nothing much for a bullet in flight. This needs a fitting reply. We should have a cannon on our side too.'

'We hadn't known then, that those cannons actually belonged to the Mughal era and that they had just been used as decorations. But I took the policeman's words seriously.'

'After that, we heard that they had a launch also, and that a Behari Muslim officer used it to go on a daily patrol over the Padma river. Apparently, he had been obstructing our commercial ships from moving over the river, stopping some, catching hold of another, and persecuting yet some other. According to him, that part of the water lay within the Pakistani border.'

'Earlier the two provinces were separated by a boundary line running through the centre of the river, which was now the dividing line between two nations. If one followed the map strictly, then the part of the river through which launches and steamers moved, the zone which was presently considered as the region of primary flow, was within our own purview. Detaining our ships in our own territory was a sheer attacking move on their part.'

'On enquiring through a letter, I was told that according to them, the rules that existed in the pre-Partition days, were no longer valid now. According to international laws, it did not matter through which area the river primarily flowed, half of it had to belong to Pakistan and the other half to

India. If a line could be drawn through the centre, then it would show that the launch had not gone beyond the line, it had remained within its own territory. After all, it was Sitadevi and not Ravana who had transgressed the boundary line. Of course, Ravana would definitely capture anyone who stepped into his jurisdiction!

'I felt amazed at this. One could draw a border on hard ground, but was it possible to draw a line through water? Maybe it was possible to float a buoy in the river to indicate a possible boundary line, but would that really be able to stop this menace? With the kind of attacking attitude that the two nations had, it was not possible for us to give any kind of protection to our own boatmen. The river belonged to the one who was powerful. A launch was stronger than a boat. So a launch could only be confronted with a launch, and a gunboat with a gunboat. Had it been an ocean, one could even say that a cruiser could be confronted only by a cruiser. And a battleship with another battleship.'

'To my superiors, I wrote that arguing with Dhaka would be of no use, and that Karachi would also sing the same tune. What we needed was a launch. This menace would stop only if they saw that we too had a launch. Of course we wouldn't obstruct their boats from plying, after all the rivers were meant for boats to move freely and we would comply with that. But if they refused to comply, then we wouldn't move back either.'

'Besides there was another reason also, and that was far more important. Like that saying that amidst the Ganga flowing on both sides there are sand deposits, so too in the case of the Padma. According to the geographical map and the official ledger, some of the sandy land fell within the boundary of Fateyabad. People from this side planted and grew rice paddy on those lands. They even grew other kinds of crops, and then cultivated them. If the argument that Pakistan was now putting forth was true, then these farmers would no longer be able to go there, and no one would be able to travel to those sandy lands by boats.'

'Till the time that my friend remained as the magistrate of Ranimahal, I was confident of his assurances in this regard. He had said that farmers would be allowed to bring their own crops unobstructed, and that a stability in their relationship would be maintained. That Bengali Muslim officer was transferred to Dhaka and his post was now taken over by a Punjabi Muslim. I was not willing to seek his favors. So I started making demands for a launch. Of course there was nothing else I could do. A farmer had complained to me in an aggrieved tone that he was not being allowed to bring his own crops, because apparently that part of the land was within the Pakistani territory. The farmer was a Muslim from this side of the border.'

'Earlier, Phulna had served as a port for majority of the launches. At the time of the Partition, Phulna had been given to us and that is why we had not removed the launches then. In fact, nobody had even thought of doing that. But later Phulna was given over to Pakistan, and the propriety of the launches also moved hands. Of course, they did not give us our share of the launches.'

'There was only one launch in Kolkata, and arrangements were made to have that sent to me. But it went back after having come almost mid-way. The Bhagirathi river was completely dry. And a launch could reach the Padma river only after crossing the Bhagirathi! I was almost beginning to give up hope, when suddenly one day, I heard that a launch had arrived at the shore close to my house. Feeling relieved, I ran to find that it was actually an ocean-launch, with the name "Pomfret" written in bold letters over the deck. It was not meant for civil use and had been temporarily lent to me by the navy. The one who had steered it was a naval officer, Captain Malik. After depositing it in my hands and before returning to Calcutta, he took me on the launch and saw me off a little distance. I noticed that the deck was coated with some kind of steel or zinc sheet or similar material, and that is why the launch moved over the waters at crocodile pace. Besides there were so many tools and appliances spread over the floor that there was no space to stretch out one's legs. I also saw that there was only one cabin and that too was not comfortable enough to stay in. So I left it in Sareng Tandel Sukhani's hands. And it was they who guided it to the Padma river.'

'A colleague tried to scare me. "What have you done sir? You have asked a cat to look after the fish. Don't you know they are all Muslim sailors from Kayakhali. They eat the salt of this nation, but their hearts reside in that nation. You will soon find out that they have taken the launch to Ranimahal."

"But they have never betrayed us till now, and I don't think they will ever do so." I said, without intimidation.'

'Soon after, we received the news that "Pomfret" had parked itself in due time at the Talgola Ghat and that the police had taken over its charge. I felt relieved, but forgot to forbid anyone from using the launch without my prior consent.

'Later, I was amazed to hear that while "Pomfret" had been chasing a foreign ship, it had got detained on high sandy land.'

'How dreadful, I thought, as I ran to see what had happened. On reaching the spot, I heard that even the district magistrate and his team had failed to move it. They had even tried to move it by pulling it with a rope, whose other end was tied to an elephant's feet. But even that had failed, because the elephant was not as strong as the launch. After all, it was a launch

coated in steel. Actually this excessive weight was the cause of its doom. Had it been lighter it wouldn't have got stuck on the land. The foreign ships were passing by freely, weren't they?

"It is not a piece of hidden land. It's a spy!" My colleague said.

"This is sabotage. We should have known that these were all Muslims from Keyakhali. What else does one expect from them? Please get some Hindu sailors to come here. They are available in the South."

'I couldn't see any fault on the part of sailors. After all they hadn't brought the launch. The one who had given the order was an officer and that too a Hindu.'

'I reported the matter to my senior, over the telephone. A group of experts were sent to help but while trying to examine the launch, they lost their way in the waters completely. Their boat drifted away into mid-stream where a group of foreigners captured them and took them away to Ranimahal. Hearing this news, I left immediately for Kolkata and arrived at the secretariat, feeling a little nervous.'

'The chief security officer seemed amused. He laughed and said, "Come on, it is said that Hitler never lost his nerves even after losing division after division of his army, and we have lost only a group of experts. Should we lose our nerve so easily?"'

'An exchange of various official letters finally saw the release of those officers but the launch continued to remain unmoved like Bhishma on his bed of thorns. A guard was kept on duty both on the launch and on the shore to see that it didn't get lost. It would be even worse if the launch drifted off on its own into the Padma, and from there to the Meghna, and finally landed in the Bay of Bengal, because, even an exchange of a hundred letters wouldn't help in getting it back. It would vanish in the ocean itself.'

'I kept seeing a nightmare at night, that "Pomfret" had been seized by the Pakistanis, and that they were using it against us. No, "Pomfret" had escaped to the Bay of Bengal and had got lost there. It would never return again.'

'This entire incident had become an issue of prestige. After what had happened, would I be able to talk face to face with the magistrate of Ranimahal? No, I would feel embarrassed in his presence. It was as if "Pomfret" was a symbol of my own self-respect. I would have to somehow regain it. But how would that be possible?'

'This problem had surpassed all other problems. They were now forcibly trying to enjoy what was really not theirs. On the other hand, we were unable to protect our own farmers and our own milkmen and all those who had been taking their cows to graze on the grass on this sandy land. How could I accept the fact that just because our nation had been partitioned, all these people

who had been enjoying these privileges would be deprived of their rights now? And just because they were foreigners now, their entry would be prohibited, what sense did that make either?’

‘I had not desired Partition. But I could clearly make out that if this domestic war finally turned into a religious war between the Hindus and the Muslims, then no Muslim would feel safe staying in a Hindu-dominated locality, he would obviously seek shelter in a Muslim-majority area. In this way, each area would be occupied by either only Muslims or Hindus. In that case it would automatically lead to the creation of a Hindustan and a Pakistan. Neither could the Congress have a monopolistic rule over the entire country nor could the Muslim League dominate over all the states. Once the English left the country, a spontaneous division was inevitable. So the first step was to prevent a religious war. But was anybody capable of doing that? After all, both the parties wanted revenge. Even the Hindus were not an exception to this. So one had to suffer Partition.’

‘Partition had to be withstood since an exchange of people would not benefit anyone. It had to be stopped. People had to remain wherever they were and that is where they would be safe. Fateyabad had a majority of Muslims whereas Phulna had more Hindus. Even then, they were equally safe. From now on the nation would no longer consider benefits for Muslims or Hindus separately; it would look after the benefits of each citizen.’

‘I had come as an emissary of peace and unity. But it turned out to be just the opposite now. I sought help from the government for carrying out an operation to settle the dispute over the sand deposits. But they said that this was an international matter. Who other than the military could confront it? So a number of military officers, both of senior and junior rank, came to survey the sandy deposits. There were brigadiers, lieutenant generals lieutenant colonels and army majors. I had never had to interact so intensely with military people earlier. It was indeed a very interesting experience. Anyway, that’s a different story altogether. All that I can say now is that those who have seen a war once are the ones who oppose it the most. It is completely wrong for anybody to think that since army men are all professional soldiers, they must be the most fanatic about wars. If there is anybody who is crazy about wars, then it must be someone who has never witnessed it from a close distance.’

‘The brigadier was our houseguest. He had told my wife “I have fought in various countries during both the world wars. That is why I am the greatest patron of non-violence. Please listen to me and try and convince your husband that non-violence is indeed the best practice”.’

'After that the Lientenant General told me that, "It's a child's play for India to capture three or four bits of high ground. But if during that operation, even one army *jawan* is killed, then it lowers the status and pride of the entire army. And an international war will immediately break out. Do you wish that we take such a risk? Please listen to my suggestion, and give up the idea of involving the army. Instead, request the armed police of the state government to take up that responsibility".'

'The era of the Mahabharata had seen the Kurukshetra war break out over five villages. Would another Kurushetra war break out in the modern era, over the issue of just three or four bits of high ground? And will I be its cause? No it was impossible. I requested the state government and had an armed police force sent here. From the various weapons that they brought along it seemed as if they were the para-military.'

'Seeing them, our own police chief said, "Sir have these policemen came here to die? Beware, if even one of them dies then the entire police force will go on strike".'

'I had never seen him speak earlier with such intense emotion. Where the entire nation's honour was at stake, how could the life of a single sepoy be of greater importance? It wasn't that I wanted anybody to die, not even those in the opposite camp. But if that happened then would the entire police force prove non-cooperative?'

"Sir, please don't misunderstand me" he continued. "It's the duty of the police to arrest thieves and dacoits. We have arrested them. After that, their job is to control the traffic. We have done that. Then it is their job to fight the communists. We have fought them. And, now we hear that we have to exchange bullets with the armed police force from a different nation. Is that also a policeman's job? Did the government tell us all this when they admitted us to this profession?"'

'In the meantime, about six or seven more launches arrived. All of them belonged to the navy and were commonly known as *tanac*. They were beautifully shaped but were not as heavy as "Pomfret". They didn't move as powerfully through the waters either. I parked them at a relatively safe place, a little to the west of the juncture from where the Ganga changed into the Padma. Yes, the sailors were all Muslims, belonging to the Bhatanga locality of Keyakhali.'

"Sir, I hope your entire naval force doesn't get lost some day." A colleague joked. "It might come back sometime later as a carrier of Pakistani gun-boats!"'

'But there really was no other way out, as each of the launches had a group of Sareng Tandels associated with it over ages. In fact those launches

usually became defunct if those men got detached from them. It is only because we needed these men, that we had adopted a secular state. They too had an equal right and interest in this nation. Every individual was a national treasure. Each one was valuable.'

'The farmers along the borders were primarily Muslim. They were the ones who cultivated on the sand deposits. It was their crops that were at stake. And it was in their interest that we were trying to conduct this operation. Otherwise how would it matter to us? But that didn't mean that I would lose my control over the launch. Almost each of these had a wireless fitted inside. We would receive news regularly, everything was all right.'

'I had written off "Pomfret" from my mind. But still there was no end to my worrying. If it ever went into the hands of the Pakistanis then it would surely add to their arrogance. They would certainly show it off as a prized trophy. And if the engine failed and it drifted off into the ocean, then one wouldn't be able to retrieve it even by fighting.'

'This calamity was put to an end by an untimely flood in the Ganges, somewhere in the state of Uttar Pradesh. It's strange what one isolated incident could lead to. One day, I suddenly received a radiogram which said "Pomfret had been rescued". I ran to see it, and found it had been parked at the Talgola Ghat. I heard that the Sareng Tandels, anticipating an imminent flood, had, in a pre-emptive move, boarded the launch. As soon as the Pomfret sailed into the waters they had started the engine. One should not distrust a man just for his religious beliefs. Whatever you preserve today, comes to your rescue later on.'

Translated by Sheila Sengupta





# THE BORDER (SHIMANTA)

Salam Azad

The evening seemed somewhat gloomy. It had been a sunny day. But quite suddenly the sky became overcast. It was sultry. Not a leaf moved. Even the plantains that were so easily swayed by the slightest draft, were now standing still.

Pobitra Saha was sitting on a straw mat beneath the neem tree to the south of his house. More towards the south of this tree the narrow path lays submerged beneath a welter of water. From Taltola, the path wended its way towards the far west via Srinagar, Jusurgaon, Kusharipara, Koykirtan, Damla, Barikhal, and Bhagyakul. Bhagyakul, now in Pakistan, was where Pobitrababu's in-laws once lived. Now there was no one in that house. Not a soul. After the Partition of 1947, Pobitrababu's father-in-law had migrated to Karimgunge in India, taking the entire family with him. He had already set up some business there.

Since that evening, Pobitra Saha's mind was tinged with a melancholy that matched the gloom of the skies. He wanted to dispel this feeling, but it proved impossible, however hard he tried. Impossible to be in a good mood.

His wife put down his lunch on the small low table in the dining room. Fried bitter gourd, a broth made with *tangra* fish and *chachhari* made with *mola* fish. Pulses cooked with *chalta* and green mango chutney to go with it. He stood near the table and was just about to sit upon the mat made with date palm leaves, when someone called out from the outer wing of his house, 'Telegram for Pobitrababu-u-u!'

He did not sit down to eat but quickly getting into a short sleeveless *kurta* he came out to learn that the telegram had been delivered at his office in Srinagar on the previous day. But the bearer of the telegram had lost his seven-year-old daughter the day before the telegram arrived. Within 24

hours the child had succumbed to acute stomach disorder and vomiting. It seemed that the girl had been extremely thirsty. But a cholera patient must not be given water to drink. Doctor's orders. Water was being poured on the girl's head. With outstretched hands she had wanted to drink that water. Her hands had been tied securely to the crude bed she was lying on so that she could not even touch the water. The poor man broke down sobbing as he spoke of his child. 'It's all right, no harm if the telegram comes late. Besides, you had genuine difficulties,' said Pobitrababu, consoling the man.

The telegram had come from Jakigunge in the Sylhet district. It was from a cousin of Pobitrababu's wife, her paternal uncle's son. 'Mama sick,' he wrote, 'Wants to see Neelima.'

This telegram was what made Pabitrababu feel sad. His sick father-in-law wanted to see his own daughter. But was it possible! It was not as if it were Damla and Bhagyakul, that one could easily go whenever one wanted to. Damla was a village in Bikrampur. And Bikrampur was a part of Pakistan. But Karimgunge... that was a district in India. One needed a passport and a visa to go there. Since the sixth of September when the war broke out between India and Pakistan, no visas were being issued for India. When they would start issuing visas again was anybody's guess. But father-in-law's request to see his daughter was urgent. Maybe this was the last time the old man would want to see her. With such thoughts on his mind, he could hardly take his lunch. He had not told his wife about the telegram. But of course his wife was bound to notice how disinterested her husband was in his meal.

'Are you unwell?'

'No.'

'Isn't the cooking good?'

'Good, yes.'

'Then why are you getting up without eating?'

'I have eaten.'

'You've eaten nothing. Everybody is getting fever these days,' and she placed her hand on her husband's forehead. Quietly he pushed her hand aside and left the place. Neelima remained silent. She realized that although he was not sick he was certainly sad. It would not be wise to disturb him. She felt sure he would tell her everything once he started feeling better. Whereas he would probably lose his temper if she asked him anything just then.

Replenishing her husband's plate with more rice Neelima ate from the same plate. Then she took up the dirty utensils on to the palm of her left hand and made for the pond. A sari and *gamchha* in her right hand. This *ghat*

was used by her family alone. All the other *ghats* were used by all and sundry. All around the pond there were houses that made up the locality known as Sahapara. Some people called it Saun Bari. This area comprised of 32 families. The people here were all dealers in bell metal and brass. They manufactured brass and bell metal utensils in their own homes. At the end of each week, from the port of Lauhajat, the middlemen moneylenders came in huge boats and collected and took away with them the product of the entire week... all the cooking pots, the plates, the glasses and the bowls. Pobitrababu was the only one who did not get himself involved in this business. He taught in Bhagyakul School. All the 32 families used this pond for their washing and bathing. About a hundred years ago the founder of this locality, one Radhagobinda Saha dug a pond more than 30 feet deep and with the mud that was dug up, he built the dwellings.

Neelima washed up the utensils and took a bath in the tank and putting a *paan* into her mouth she left the tankside and walked away towards Neemtala. She could not do without the plain *paan*. She thought it was *the* way to get fully and perfectly the satisfaction that the betel leaf could offer. All this time Pobitrababu had been sitting still in Neemtala, the telegram in his hand, his gaze fixed on the fields of the *aman* rice in the south. In Bikrampur a cluster of paddy fields was known as *chawk*. Had these fields been more extensive they could have been called *bil*. Now at the end of the rainy season the paddy was ripe and juicy. It would soon be sprouting. There was a solitary house in the middle of those fields where only one person lived. Everyone called her Buri, and her home was known as Buri's House. Neelima was curious about this old woman—what she ate, what she did—all this she would like to know. It was rumoured that Buri would be evicted from her house; more earth was to be dug up from the spot in order to create a graveyard at the site. Buri belonged to the village called Kolapara. The village had two sections. Kolapara North and Kolapara South. In Kolapara North, nearly everyone was weaver by caste. Neelima's maternal aunt's daughter was married into the family of Nandalal Saha. Sitting here in Neemtala, Pobitra could see the house at the other end of the square. No one else had a share in that two-storeyed house. The entire house belonged to Neelima's sister's father-in-law. There were two ponds on either side of the house. The pond on the west had two paved banks with stairs going down into the water. Yet the owner of the house had gone to Kolkata leaving behind all this property. That was nearly 20 years ago. The house has been deserted. Yet the people still called it Nandalal Saha's House. Such thoughts weighed upon Neelima's mind. Her sister was still alive. Yet she had not seen her for the last two decades. Neelima let out a sigh, the sound of which made Pobitra Saha turn towards her.

Sitting there below the neem tree after lunch, Pabitrababu had gone through the telegram once again. He had even pondered about the ways of taking his wife to Karimgunge. But he could not see how. Why this Partition, why this vigilance at the Border! What was the use of cutting one mother into two? He could find no answer. The thought of the claustrophobic unease amidst which he had been living since Partition, suddenly made Pobitra Saha's eyes moist with tears. He made an unsuccessful attempt to hide them from her by turning his face away.

But Neelima seemed not a bit perturbed after hearing of her father's illness. She had mastered her feelings with great effort for she knew her husband would be upset if he saw her suffer. But inwardly she felt extreme torment. Her father wanted to see her. Perhaps this would be for the last time.

Did her father only want to see her? It was a long time since Neelima last met him. Bhagyakul and the river Padma. The Bhagyakul bazar snuggling up to the bank of the river. She had met Gobinda sometime ago at Krishna's place in Majjpara. Gobinda was young then. He was almost her own age. He used to sit with his father in their own sweet shop. Neelima's father bought her *barfi* made of milk curd from Gobinda's shop when she happened to go with him to the bazar. The taste of those sweets still lingered on her tongue.

Her father never let her go to the riverside. Even now in mature middle age Neelima could not figure out why. One day after a lot of crying and cajoling she managed to accompany him to the river. She remembered a big boat, what Baba called a steamer, and seeing the black smoke coming out of its roof she had shouted in excitement. The sound of the whistle that could be heard from their house, was actually the whistle that was blown from the steamers, *baba* had told her. Not only Neelima's granny but lots of other people too called this whistle 'satee' Neelima could even hear the sound of that 'satee' from Damla. But not as frequently as in those days when people used to take the water way to Kolkata via Narayangunge and Goalund. The route was less frequently used. Nowadays the 'satee' could be heard only once, piercing the depths of the night. Whenever the sound woke her up in the middle of the night the first thought that would come to Neelima's mind was her father. He was the first to show her a steamer.

After getting married to Pobitra Saha she found herself losing intimate contact with her father. As a child she used to fall asleep with her face pressed upon his breast. That secure haven was long lost. In Damla, when one night she had dreamt of her father, when in the small hours of the night that dream had jolted her awake, she had requested her husband to take her to Bhagyakul. Pabitrababu did escort her to Bhagyakul the very next day.

Then she had flung herself on to her father's breast and wept till her burdened heart felt lighter. These thoughts made her eyes overflow and the tears drenched her cheeks.

Pobitrababu returned home from Neemtala to find his wife greatly overcome with sorrow. He went out after asking her to send a telegram to Jockey-gunge. From Srinagar Neelima sent the message to her cousin, her paternal aunt's son, telling him that they would start for Jockeygunge, a border post on the Pakistan side, the next day.

No sooner had she reached Jockeygunge than Neelima became impatient to go to Karimgunge, this time not to plunge into her father's embrace but to snuggle his head in her own lap. Now her father would be like her child. For only a child would so pine for his mother.

But Neelima's cousin said there was no way one could go to Karimgunge. Not only was there strict vigilance on the Border, but Indian visas were not being issued either.

What then? A deep sigh rent her soul. Neelima tried in vain to negotiate with the men at the checkpost, those who supervised the people who crossed the Border. Anyone trying to go over to the other side without permission was sure to have bullets shatter their ribs. An urgent message was sent from Jockeygunge in Pakistan to Neelima's father in Karimgunge, India. Neelima would stand on the banks of the river Kushiara on Sunday, at ten in the morning, wearing a red sari. Her ailing father should be brought to the opposite bank. In the present situation this was the only arrangement that could be made. All this was conveyed in the message.

Neelima did not have any red sari with her. So, one was bought for her the next day from the bazar at Jockeygunge. Wearing this sari, Neelima went and stood by the Kushiara next morning at ten o'clock. Did her old father see her? Neelima did not know. They were separated by a stretch of half a mile. But she saw her father vaguely on the opposite bank of the river and broke down completely.

Pobitrababu did not try to console his wife. He stood still. 'Alas Politics! Alas Religion! Alas Partition! Alas, this Border.' The words escaped from his lips suddenly and even while uttering them he started weeping uncontrollably.

The tears of two helpless human beings on one side of the river, the intensity of their unexpressed sorrow—everything was suppressed by the menace of the inexorable Border.

Translated by Tapati Gupta



# INDIA (BHARATBARSHA)

Sayyed Mustafa Siraj

A tiny bazaar had come up at the turning of the metal road. In the background was a village, thickly wooded with bamboo reeds. The village had no electricity. And the dullness of the life there was, sometimes reflected in the faces of the young boys and girls who walked up and down the shrub-lined narrow muddy village path. It was as if they were far removed from civilization. The clothes they wore came from mills in Ahmedabad at the opposite end of the country. The bazaar had electricity, though. It had three tea stalls, two sweet stalls, three stalls for clothes, one for fancy items and two for groceries. There was a godown as well and a husking machine. Behind all this was a brick factory. People came there from all the neighbouring villages and the place remained lively till nine in the evening. After that it became very quiet and deserted. All that was left behind then, were some stray dogs and their shadows in the dim light of a few bulbs still burning. Once in a while a truck or two sped past towards the city far away. Then there was the all-pervading silence once again. So much so, that even an occasional shriek of an owl from the ancient banyan tree didn't seem to unsettle the stillness around.

It was winter. The chilly north wind blew incessantly across the huge open field to the north of the bazaar. The sky became dull and cloudy. And then came the rain. Those Rarh plains in the western part of Bengal have always had intense winters. The rain now made it sharper. The educated people called it the '*poushey badla*' and the illiterates called it '*daaor*'. And when it rained along with a very strong wind they called it '*faanpi*'. That year they had '*faanpi*' conditions, and the rice had still not been harvested. The untimely storm meant it would destroy the crops. So the villagers became apprehensive and annoyed. Farmers, both Hindus and Muslims, cursed



their Gods whenever they got together at the teashops for an *adda* and waited anxiously for just one sunny day. Finally, some of the younger peasants lost patience and screamed out—there's no damn power up there to look after us—none at all.

Since they now knew there was no one to look after them, it became easy for them to do whatever they wished. Tempers rose and arguments almost led to fights. They no longer needed a reason to argue and trivial issues got blown out of proportion. The cold and the rain confined people to their homes but they really had nothing much to do. So they all gravitated to the little stove of the civilized world to keep themselves warm. That was all the happiness they could afford at that point of time. And it was out of this idle chatter that various conversations grew. They either discussed Bollywood, Indira Gandhi, Chief Ministers and their legislatures, or the local girl who was thought to have found a lover in the city, or just anything. The arguments got hotter and hotter and the tea-man, Chawla's sales soared higher and higher. This was the harvest season and he knew his dues would be cleared sooner or later. So, he raised his credit limit too.

One day, in the midst of all this arrived a very old beggar woman. She was hunched and looked shaky with age. There was an almost demonish look about her. She had a head full of white hair, wore a piece of dirty tattered cloth, and had a similar piece of cotton blanket draped around her. Thoroughly drenched, she walked along the metal road with a stunted walking stick in one hand, and remarkably steadily made her way towards the tea stall. Age had left severe marks on her shrunk and shrivelled face. She entered the stall in the midst of the passionate debates and asked for a cup of tea. The people there had one look at her and fell silent. They wondered how she had managed to trudge up there in the middle of such hostile weather.

She gulped down her cup of tea with ease and looked around silently. Someone called out, 'Hey, Buri!<sup>1</sup> Where have you come from?'

The old woman was rather temperamental. She muttered, 'It's none of your business, lads!'

They laughed out aloud. This was no ordinary old woman. She was fiery and was trotting around in the storm like a spirited pony, they said.

Now she was livid. 'Shut up! Your dads and his likes must be ponies! Don't you dare say such nasty things about me! Where I come from is nobody's business.'

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<sup>1</sup> An old woman. There is no mark of respect in an address like this.

A voice spoke politely, 'My dear Buri, these people just want to know where you live.'

'On your heads!' she said, and pulled out a small worn out piece of cloth from within the blanket. She counted the coins in it, paid and left the stall.

'This old woman is going to die; she'll surely die!' shouted the group anxiously.

The woman turned around and spat out, 'You guys are going to die, a hundred generations of your clans are going to die!'

The group watched as the old woman made her way shakily to the sheltered foot of the banyan tree at the turn of the road. The space was empty but the rain had made the ground slushy. To the amazement of those watching, she found a thick root and sat herself down on it. The trunk there had a big hole. Cradling her back in the hole she stretched out her legs in front of her. Obviously, she knew what to do. They realized she was a woman of the trees.

Some people from the group thought she should have gone to the community centre. Under the tree she was surely going to die. This led to more comments about the old woman. The *adda* was on again in full swing.

There are sayings in the village about the winter rains. It is said that if the rains start on a Saturday, it would continue for seven days; if on a Tuesday, it would rain for five days; if on a Wednesday, it would rain for three days. And if the rains started on other days, it would last only for a day. These rains had started on a Tuesday. No one had kept count, but the day the rains stopped, the sky cleared completely. The sun shone brightly. And people found that at the foot of that banyan tree the old woman lay very still—lifeless.

When it was well into the morning and she hadn't stirred at all, Chawla Jaga of the tea stall was quite certain she was dead.

Someone said, 'Gosh! The animals are going to tear her apart. She'll also start stinking soon.'

A crowd started gathering, gradually. Some touched her forehead to check the temperature. She was very cold. Someone checked her pulse—no beat. She had to be dead.

The *chowkidar* was called. He said, 'What's the point in informing the police? It's just an old beggar dying in the *faanpi*. It would be too complicated—travelling five kilometres to inform the police and then by the time they make their way here, it would be the middle of the night, and by then the place will start stinking. No one even knows how long she's been dead already. Don't you see, she's swollen all over?'

'So, what do we do, *chowkirdarda*?'

'Chuck her in the river! She'll be taken care of there—somehow.'

Everyone agreed with the experienced *chowkidar's* suggestion. The river was two miles away on the other side of the field. And it was quite dry at that moment. So they left her on the sand bank. They also left behind the bamboo poles they had used to sling her body from. They left the old woman's body behind, supine on the warm sand, under a bright and sunny sky.

When they had come back, they scanned the horizon for flocks of vultures to swoop down.

Suddenly they saw an amazing sight. A body, slung from bamboo poles, was being brought in from across the field. People realized what was happening only when it arrived at the bazaar. It was the old woman's body that was being brought in by the Muslims. They were chanting prayers in Arabic and some of them had also put on their holy caps.

It was the Hindus who had thrown her into the dry riverbed. They were now puzzled and demanded to know what was happening.

Buri was a Muslim.

Proof?

Many proofs. Several people had heard her murmur the name of Allah or Bismilla. Mulla Saheb, the head priest of the Muslims, swore, 'After the morning *namaaz*, while I was waiting for the bus, the woman must have been in her death throes. I distinctly heard her chanting the prayer of the converts. Now, how was I to know she was dying? I was headed for the city—for a busy day at the court. So I rushed off. On my return I was told she had been thrown into the river. *Tauba! Tauba!* How could we let such a thing happen to her? So we've decided to bury her.'

Bhattacharyamoshai of the village had just got off the bus. He stopped by to find out what was happening and having found out he said, 'Impossible! I took the same bus to the city as Mulla saheb and I'm not deaf. I clearly heard the old woman say, "Sri Hari, Sri Hari, Sri Hari!"'<sup>2</sup>

He got together some evidence as well. Nakari, the barber who was a Hindu, swore 'Yesterday I went to the foot of the banyan tree to check if I could sit there waiting for customers, but couldn't. It was then that I heard the old woman muttering to herself, "Haribol, Haribol!"'<sup>3</sup>

'You were mistaken,' said Fazul Sheikh. I heard her say, "La-ilaha-illal!"'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Name of a Hindu God

<sup>3</sup> Hindu chant

<sup>4</sup> The Kalma reads, 'La-allaha illalaho, Mohammadur Rasamullah' which means 'Allah is the true God and Mohammad is His Prophet'.

Nibaran Bagdi was a hot-headed man. He was a Hindu and used to be a dreaded dacoit once. He screamed, 'Lies!'

Karim Farazi, a Muslim, was a religious and God-fearing man now. But once upon a time he used to be a professional *lathial*. He was not one to tolerate Nibaran's high-handedness. So he screamed louder, 'Watch it!'

The exchanges became more and more heated. People were arguing and screaming excitedly. A tug-of-war started for the possession of the pole carrying the body. Both groups claimed it to be theirs. All of a sudden there was tension all around. The stalls pulled down their shutters. Large numbers of people began running in from the village, each of them carrying different kinds of dangerous weapons.

The body on the pole was still lying on the road. The people had formed two clear groups on either side of the body. Both groups were armed. They were hurling abuses at each other. Once in a while Mulla Saheb shouted, 'My Muslim brothers! Jihad! Jihad! Naraye Taqbir—Allah o Akbar!'

From the other group Bhattacharya thundered, 'Hail Mother Kali! Appear before us and lead us in our fight against these Barbarians. Hail Mother Kali! Victory to you!'

There was an earth-shattering noise of challenges and counter-challenges. In the midst of all this stood the precarious symbol of law-enforcement, the *chowkidar*, in his blue uniform, trying his best to pacify each group in turn. When the Muslims advanced, he banged his staff on the metal road and roared, 'Watch it!' And when the Hindus advanced he shouted banging his staff in the same manner, 'Don't you dare!'

No one knew how long he would have been able to keep this belligerent mob in control. He rushed across madly from one to group to the other, banging his stick as loud as he could. The air vibrated with the sound of clack-clack, clack-clack.

Suddenly something incredible happened. The corpse started moving. It was trying to move up towards a sitting position. The armed men from both the groups stood there paralysed in bewilderment. The guard stood there gaping.

The old woman pulled herself up. She stood there and looked from one side to the other—at the two groups of people. Then she distorted her face. And burst into an amused giggle.

The guard gathered his wits and said, 'Buri! You're not dead!'

'Die! You die! Let your entire clan die!'

People from both the groups shouted out, 'Buri! You're not dead!'

'You die! You black-faced monkeys!'

'Buri, are you Hindu or Muslim?'

The old woman was livid, 'Have you had your eyes plucked out, you rascals? Can't you see? You devils of hell, you vulture-eyes! Can't you see for yourself what I am? Run! Get out of my sight or I'll have your eyes plucked out!'

Having said this she began to hobble away unsteadily along the road. The mob made way for her. She moved further and further away and gradually faded into the soft glow of the golden sunset.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## AN ABDUCTED WOMAN

### The Loot

She stands mute, her hands listless at her side  
Her glance dead, her looks far away  
Remembering each slaughtered head  
Each torn breast, each splintered babe.  
She still sees the venomous crowds—  
Blood hungry wolf packs, carrying fire,  
Setting fire, soaking living souls in fire  
Till the flames encircle her and dance  
Around her and in her and burn the light  
Out of her eyes forever.

She is the booty the son has brought home  
The last bargain thrown in in the colossal loot.

Her red brown curls scorch the glance  
Of his mother, her brown-green eyes  
Quiver in their victim's domain;  
Her golden berry skin tightens like  
A taugt drum, over her keen-strung body—  
Waiting to beat into a frenzy of feeling  
Of fleeting feet and deer-like intensity.

'Look what I've brought home mother'  
He gloats, 'a slave who will relieve  
Your arduous tasks of fire and water.'  
Their eyes meet—of one beseeching,  
Of the other searching. The silence  
In the courtyard deepens in greater folds

Than the one that settles  
On mass graves of exterminated villages—  
Till the mother decrees 'marry her first'  
And the doe springs to life, crumpling at her feet  
In the agony of having found refuge in one extant heart.

*Bashabi Fraser*

## ILLEGITIMATE (JAIBA)

Narendranath Mitra

‘... Therefore we must analyse the basis of the modern concept of heredity or generational traits that is prevalent amongst ordinary people today. Actually, just as a part of the physical characteristics, mental qualities and faculties can get passed on through successive generations, from the parents and even the forefathers to a child, so too, one can see how the environment, educational training, customs and associations influence the lifestyle of a person...’

Karabi turned off the radio, and with some irritation said, ‘Oh no, it is one of those long lectures again! They should be broadcasting some good music at this hour—instead...’

My friend, Dr Bashab Mukherjee, who had been reclining in a chair, smoking a cigarette silently, sat up suddenly, ‘Oh dear, did you really switch off the radio?’ he said.

‘Why shouldn’t I?’ Karabi asked. ‘Were you planning to hear every Tom, Dick and Harry’s lecture that is broadcast over the radio?’

‘Of course, one cannot really vouch for the lecture’s quality. But the man who was talking is not all that negligible. After all, he is a scholar and a professor at one of the eminent colleges of this city.’

Karabi felt surprised but didn’t quite show it. ‘So what if he is a great scholar. Being a professor doesn’t necessarily mean...’

‘No, it is not only that. I happen to know Mrignaka Majumdar quite well,’ Bashab said.

‘Oh, now I know why you were listening to that lecture with such rapt attention. Actually, even I feel good to hear familiar voices of friends and relatives over the radio.’



Seeing that Karabi was about to switch on the radio again, Bashab stopped her. 'Are you going to hear that again? Why not let it be!'

It was now my turn to feel irritated. 'Why? Didn't you just tell us that it was one of your professor friends who was talking over the radio?'

'But that does not mean that I have to listen to the whole lecture. Besides, I don't really like to hear known voices over the radio, after all my ears are not as sharp as your wife's,' Bashab replied.

'Of course they aren't,' I said laughingly. 'After all, you can plug your ears at most with a leather-bound stethoscope, but you can never acquire such a bejewelled pair of ears like her's, can you?'

'That's right' Bashab said with the same jesting manner.

'Anyway, are you sure you don't want to hear your friend's talk any more?'

'No, let it be,' Bashab said. 'I find these talks by Mrigankababu very distasteful. He ought to understand how they hurt Sudatta and how disturbed she feels on hearing those words. The impact that it has on her mind is...'

Immediately, Karabi's face lit up with curiosity. 'Who is Sudatta?' she asked.

Looking at his face, it seemed that Bashab was now feeling embarrassed for having blurted out those words.

'She is Mrigankababu's wife,' Bashab replied, in a rather serious tone.

'Then why should she feel hurt at her husband's words? Really, Bashababu, your words aren't making much sense!'

Trying to ease the growing tension in the air, I said, 'That's true. No matter how much meaningless a husband's words may sound, and however unmusical a wife's singing might be, they somehow seem most pleasurable to each other. Isn't it?'

But this attempt to bring in some humour fell through. Bashab continued to remain serious. Even Karabi didn't pay any attention to what I said. She continued on her earlier track. 'What is it Bashababu? Of course, if it is very confidential, then ...'

'Yes it is indeed very confidential,' Bashab said, now smiling a little. 'I could have satisfied your curiosity somewhat, but it will be difficult for me to talk about it.'

'No, that shouldn't be so difficult,' Karabi said. 'My nerves aren't any less stronger than yours.'

'Oh, women always think and speak like that initially, but later on it is always seen that...' Bashab stopped abruptly, with a smile.

'Okay, why not let us see what happens when you reach the end of the story. But if you really want to tell us the story, then please start right from the beginning.'

Shaking the ash off from his cigarette butt, Bashab said 'All right, but I'll not be able to start from the beginning. I'll start from somewhere in the middle because I am also not quite aware of how it all started.'

'It was during those days of riots. There wasn't such a crowd waiting at my dispensary that day, mainly because most of my patients were all Muslims, and as the riots continued, it wasn't safe for them to visit Hindu localities and it wasn't safe for me to visit their homes either. But obviously, the need to buy basic food—rice, dal, oil, salt—couldn't wait for the riots to end, and it was also true that one needed to earn money for being able to purchase those essentials. I felt miserable. At other times, my dispensary would be surging with patients even till as late an hour as nine or half past nine in the evening. But that day the place bore a deserted look by eight o' clock itself. The very few patients who belonged to my locality were all on charity.'

'Having seen the last man off, I was about to leave the surgery, when a taxi suddenly drew up in front of the gate. Anticipating a patient, I sat up eagerly and cleaned up my table somewhat. By then the gentleman had walked in.'

'His face seemed very familiar and I fumbled a little as I asked him to sit down.'

'He was a handsome man, about 27 years old. Pulling a chair across the table he sat down and said. "It seems you have not been able to recognize me. We had studied together for about two years at the Scottish Church College!"'

"Oh yes, yes, I remember now," I said. "I think your name is..."

"Mriganka Majumdar."

"We must be meeting after a long time, isn't that right?"

"Yes indeed. Look, I have come on very urgent business."

'I looked at Mrigankababu's face for a while. He was well built and of good health. He had a fair complexion and a large forehead with his hair brushed backwards. I couldn't see any indication of bad health on his appearance. Of course, it wasn't always possible to tell a person's state of health by just looking at him. Even a doctor couldn't do that.'

"So tell me," I urged.'

'Looking around the room a little cautiously, Mrigankababu said, "The matter is particularly confidential."'

'There wasn't a soul around in the dispensary then. My compounder, Ramesh, was sitting on a stool behind the partition and dozing happily. My servant Haridas wasn't anywhere around. Maybe he was chatting at the *paan* shop in the street corner.'

'I said, "Well you can talk to me here, it is quite safe. But if you still feel hesitant, then we may go to the cabin next door."

'Mrigankababu glanced towards the cabin once and then at the taxi standing outside. "My wife is waiting in the car outside," he said.'

'I had already guessed that a lady was sitting in the car, but I pretended as if I had just got know of it. "Is she? Do ask her to come in," I said.'

"I'll bring her later, if it is necessary," Mrigankababu replied.'

"Then shall we move to the cabin?" I asked.'

"No that is not really necessary. I can talk to you here itself. *She is in the family way. But we don't want it. You do understand?*"

"Yes I do," I said. "But how advanced?"

"Well it's quite an *advanced stage*, she's in her fourth month of pregnancy now," Mrigankababu informed me.'

"That means it's quite well *advanced*. Well, it's not possible to do anything now. Besides, may I ask why you want to take this step? Do you have any other children?"

"No."

"Then? It's best to take *precaution* in such matters," I said.'

"We used to take precaution"

"And it failed, did it? But it's really strange that you don't even want to have a child or two! How old is your wife?" I asked.'

"About 23 to 24."

"Well, it's good to have one or two children at this age," I said.'

"I know, but I've not been able to make my wife realize that."

'Feeling somewhat surprised, I said "I wonder why women nowadays don't like to entertain motherhood. I can try and explain it to her if you bring her here. Besides, it is not possible to do anything now. No intelligent person will agree to do this, believe me."

"Other doctors have also expressed the same opinion," Mrigankababu confessed. "Anyway why don't you try and make Sudatta understand this. You know I am not at all in favour of taking this step. I can quite understand how dangerous it can be. But, I am having such problems with her!"

'Mrigankababu went out and came back a little later accompanied by his wife. She was quite a good looking lady with a tall and slim frame, well built, and of a fair complexion.'

'There was no sign of tiredness even in her present state of health. I couldn't understand why they had decided on such a strange idea.

"Come let us go to the next room," I said. The lady seemed somewhat pleased, as if she had just received some hopeful news.'

'All three of us entered the cabin and sat down on the leather bound seat. Before I could say anything, she turned to me hurriedly and said, "So you are agreeable to doing this. Will you be able to do it?"'

'I shook my head. "No, no one will be able to do it. Why are you contemplating the impossible?"'

'For a moment, the expression on her face paled, but at the very next, it turned red with excitement. "Listen, I have not come here to hear your noble advice. I have been hearing such sermons from doctors for the past one and a half month. Just tell me if there is a way out, I am ready to pay whatever it may require."'

'I felt hurt to hear such words from a decent and educated lady like her. "Listen," I tried to explain "It's not the money which matters. In fact we can even ignore the legality of the action involved. But where it is a matter of one's life being at risk."

"Life at risk!" Sudatta repeated, in a helpless tone. "You have no idea how I am burning inside, and dying every minute. I hate myself and loathe every moment of my present existence. I can feel this pain piercing my heart all the time, it's really unbearable now. Please, please save me from this unclean feeling. I shall remain obliged to you for ever, I promise."

'Amazed, I turned to look at Mrigankababu. He seemed completely shocked and silenced by this semi-hysterical outburst of his wife's.'

'It was Sudatta who broke the silence a few minutes later.'

'She turned to her husband and said, "Tell him. Tell him everything. There is no need to hold back anything."

"But my explaining everything to him cannot change medical science can it? After all I have explained this to other doctors even earlier, didn't I?" Mrigankababu asked.'

"Well, tell him as well. I am sure he will be able to suggest some way out."

'Mrigankababu signalled me to accompany him to the next room, while Sudatta remained sitting in the cabin. He walked silently to a corner of the room, and seemed a little hesitant, but shaking off that uneasiness, he tried to summarize the event in a few words, "You see, my wife was in Lahore when the riots broke out in north India."

"Was she with a relative?" I asked, innocently.'

"Yes and that is where the unfortunate incident occurred. He said. "And it is only very recently, that is, about three months after the incident, that we were able to rescue her from a small state. But she has not been able to regain her normal state of mind as yet. She is constantly making us run around to meet several doctors. Though I know quite well that there is nothing that

the doctors can do at this advanced stage, and also, that it will not be right to do anything either."

"I shook my head and said, "No, I think we should now only try and make her understand the present situation and keep her pacified."

"Of course that's right. Mrigankababu agreed with me. "I have tried enough to make her realize that it was really nothing more than just an accident! *We should now wait till the proper time.*"

"Why don't you send her to her parents' house for a while?" I suggested. "Maybe she can find some peace there."

"Her parents are not alive any more. She has only a distant uncle and aunt living somewhere. I had forced her to go there for a while. But she returned within just two days. Its possible that they too have heard the story and therefore been unwilling to take any kind of responsibility in such matters." Mrigankababu said. "Anyway, I am sorry for disturbing you unnecessarily." He stood up suddenly. "Could you please tell me your fees..."

"I am really sorry," I said. "I wish I could have helped you—but I'm sure you'll understand that in the present state... Maybe, if you ever need anything, some time later ..."

"Certainly". Mrigankababu said. "Of course, I ll need your help when the actual time comes, that is when I will have to make some arrangements at a hospital. Actually, I don't really know anyone else that well."

"Oh, that won't be very difficult! I have good connections with the Carmichael Hospital. All arrangements will be made when its time. Don't worry about that at all."

"Thank you so much," Mrigankababu sounded sincere. "Anyway, why don't you come over to our house sometime? You know, we live on Beadon Street, and we would love to have you visit us. You know, I really feel that our college days were so much better!"

"That's true," I nodded, in agreement.'

Bashab stopped for a moment and looked at Karabi. She seemed busy turning over the pages of a magazine silently, but the expression on her face belied her eagerness to hear the complete story. I was sure about that.

So I said—And what happened after that?

Bashab turned to light another cigarette and then continued with the story, 'After that, I met Mriganka Babu and his wife a number of times within the next six months. The more I got to know them, the more my respect for Mrigankababu grew. To tell you the truth, I had never cherished much respect for the good students in my college. I had felt that those who excelled in academics were usually third class human beings in their practical

lives. But the more I saw Mrigankababu, the more my opinion began to change. Though his own subject was Chemistry, his academic interest and passion did not remain confined to that subject only. He seemed to have enough interest in other branches of science as well. In fact, there wasn't any lack of interest for other diverse fields like literature, politics and social science. But what impressed me the most was not his profound knowledge, but his gentlemanly and polite behaviour. It was wonderful to see how easily he had accepted this unfortunate incident that his wife had met with. Whatever I say, I don't think I would have been able to do the same myself.'

'One day, while we were discussing something, Mrigankababu suddenly said, "You might have felt surprised at my behaviour that night. Of course, I know that such things cannot be done, and I didn't want to take the least risk myself. But tell me, what else could I do under the circumstances, I just couldn't make Sudatta realize the gravity of the situation, so it was only to show her that I ..."

"Of course I had understood that." I said reassuringly. "Otherwise why would someone like you make such a strange suggestion?"

'However, after some time, some kind of realization must have dawned on Sudatta also and she refrained from making such further requests. She must have understood that there was no other way other than to wait till the end, and that no one would or rather could really help her do otherwise.'

'But even though she had apparently stopped her efforts, the matter continued to prick her heart constantly. One day, in a voice charged with emotion, she said "I have no faith left in your medical science any more."

'I did not say a word. I did not feel like arguing on behalf of medical science, because Mrigankababu had already told me how this unfortunate incident had affected his wife. Sudatta seemed unable to rid herself of that impure and unclean feeling that kept nagging her perpetually. In fact, she continued to show such signs of uneasiness, even as she lay in her husband's intimate embrace. And encountering his wife's strange behaviour, Mrigankababu too would feel awkward. But of course, he had infinite patience, an incredible scientific understanding and also a sense of compromise. He spared no efforts to bring his wife to a normal state. Previously, he would never go to movies or theatres halls; in fact, he had a particular *dislike* for such public entertainment, mainly because they meant such a waste of time for him. But now Mrigankababu started accompanying his wife everywhere. Of course Sudatta didn't like going out much. She wanted to remain inside the house, all day and night. But it was I who suggested that it would not be correct to leave her by herself now. Rather, it was better for her to move around a bit at this stage, so that the sunlight and fresh air could play on

her. Most importantly, it was necessary to see that her mind was always in a happy state.'

'Of course, Sudatta didn't pay much heed to any of our advice. Rather, she would behave most irresponsibly even in that fragile state of health. She refused to perform all routine work like bathing or eating on time, and subjected herself to all kinds of physical torture. Of course, we understood the purpose of her wanting to engage in such deliberate irregular physical torture.'

'One day Sudatta said, "Bashabbabu, can't we do something by which this thing that is growing inside me gets destroyed on its own? I just can't bear this any more."

'I knew that it was because she wanted to discuss such things, that she often invited me to her house. Mrigankababu also wanted me to visit them. He wanted Sudatta to discuss the matter with me, hoping that it would thereby help her to be relieved of some of her hatred and repulsion, and find some kind of solace and satisfaction in her heart.'

'But one day something happened. I had got to know of it from Mrigankababu himself. It seemed that one of his distant aunts who used to live in Kashi,<sup>1</sup> had come to stay with them for a while, her main purpose being to get her eyes treated in a city hospital. It was I who made arrangements for her admission to the Medical College. Apparently, she had been diagnosed with cataract in both the eyes, for which she needed immediate operation. This lady not only had weak sight, but was hard of hearing also. She had not heard of the riots and the ensuing trouble that they had resulted in, neither was she aware of the sudden misfortune that had fallen over her nephew's family.'

'But however much impaired her eyesight might have been, Pishima didn't fail to notice Sudatta's advancing motherhood.'

"How many months has this been on now? Have you performed the *sadh* ceremony yet?" She asked her nephew.'

'Mrigankababu shook his head. "No, we don't believe in those customs Pishima." he said.'

"And why should you indeed?" Pishima remarked sarcastically. "After all, you are all outcaste and Christians. But do you know what happens if the *sadh* ceremony is not performed? The child you are expecting will be born greedy, so that he will always have saliva drooling from his mouth, so much so that you'll never be able to pick him up, without your clothes getting completely soiled. If you don't want this to happen then you had better

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<sup>1</sup> Popular name for Varanasi or Benares.

perform a *sadh* ceremony in honour of your wife. Remember, by doing this you would not only be feeding another's daughter, but your very own flesh and blood that is growing in her womb will also taste the delicacies that you will offer during the ceremony. Of course, I am not surprised that you have such a miserly attitude. After all, you are your father's son, so you have to be just like him. Just as water doesn't trickle through my brother's hands, the same is true of you—you are a born miser.”

‘Mrigankababu’s father had lived in Calcutta for some time. But after the post-riot scene had quietened down a bit, he had moved back to his village where he spent his time supervising his land and other property.’

‘So instead of his father, his Pishima made arrangements for celebrating Sudatta’s *sadh* ceremony and insisted that her nephew get the necessary provisions. Then she sat down to make the traditional sweets and other delicacies herself. In fact, she even bought a new sari, and after arranging all these token ceremonial items on a tray, she took it to Sudatta, as per custom.’

‘However, Sudatta threw the offerings from Pishima into the gutter. Then she called her husband and said, “I understand that Pishima might not have been aware of the truth, but why are you even after knowing everything, insulting me like this?”’

‘Unable to control her emotions, Sudatta pressed her face into the pillow, and burst into a flow of unceasing tears. She refused to get back into her normal routine of daily life and even stopped going out of her room.’

‘Pishima stayed back for a month even after her operation was over. On the day of her departure, she turned to Mrigankababu and said, “Now tell me if you need help. At this time it is good for your wife to have someone with her. If you want I can stay on.”’

‘Mrigankababu said, “No Pishima, we don't want to detain you any further. Don't worry. I'll keep a nurse”. Pishima was slightly hurt. “All right then, let me know when she has the child. Don't forget to send me a postcard, saying whether it was a boy or a girl. I sincerely hope that the merciful Bishwanath will bless you with a son. In that case I'll volunteer a tray full of offerings to Him, and also name the little one after Lord Bishwanath.’

“All right, all right,” Mrigankababu assured her hurriedly. “You'll miss the train if you don't start packing right away.”’

‘On the ground floor of Mrigankababu’s house, there lived another family consisting of a husband, wife and her mother. The wife was childless, even though they had been consulting several doctors and ayurvedic practitioners over time, and had made several offerings at the Kali temple in Tarakeshwar. The young wife’s arms were covered with a number of amulets and a holy talisman in the hope of getting a child.’



'She would often visit Sudatta, and on one such day she said, "What kind of westernization is this Didi! A precious little one is going to arrive in this household very soon, and yet there are no indications of that auspicious event! Can't you see that winter is about to set in. Why don't you knit a few baby socks and caps in advance, otherwise it might become difficult later!"'

'Sudatta wanted to avoid such discussions. "We don't need such things," she said, rather sternly.'

"How can that be?" the young woman continued, unrestrained. "I might not have borne a child myself, but that does not mean that I have not seen others do! You know, my three sisters have 13 children in all. I have seen that it becomes very difficult, especially if small quilts are not stitched beforehand. All right, if you don't feel like doing anything yourself, just get me some wool, and I'll do everything. See, there are so many women who want a child and yet don't have one, and there are women like you who..."

'Seeing that Sudatta remained totally unaffected by these words, the young woman got her husband to buy her some wool, and started knitting socks and caps for the baby herself.'

'Unable to withstand such excessive behaviour, Sudatta called her husband and said "Please tell them the truth. Tell the whole world what happened. How disgusting, how disgusting," she repeated. "I'll not be able to bear this any more..."'

'But Mrigankababu withstood it all. In fact, I have never seen him lose his temper while talking to her, or express any displeasure or irritation in his mannerisms.'

'Finally, Sudatta's due date arrived. You must know that I had served as a House surgeon at the Carmichael Hospital, for some time. Even now, whenever I visit the hospital, they receive me with such cordiality. So it was not difficult for me to make the right arrangements for Mrigankababu. A separate cabin was booked for Sudatta, and two nurses were appointed to look after her. I even asked Dr Bose, who was in charge of the particular ward to take special care of her. In spite of that, Mrigankababu requested me to stay also, "I shall be very grateful if you do..."'

"That will not be necessary," I smiled reassuringly. "Still I will keep in touch with the hospital as far as possible. I am even making arrangement for them to call me over the phone, as soon as the child is born."

'Sudatta had noticed her husband's increasing concern. "Why are you worrying so much, there's nothing to be afraid of," she assured him, with a smile.'

'It was wonderful to see that smile on Sudatta's face. Even the relaxed way in she reassured her husband seemed encouraging. It seemed as if she

herself felt reassured also. It was now time for her worries and that mental turmoil to end. The hospital authorities had already been informed and arrangements made accordingly. It had been decided that soon after the delivery, a nurse would carry the new-born to some other room, and hand it over either to a sweeper, or send it off to an ashram. The hospital authorities had already taken charge of all that and relieved Mrigankababu of all worries. Actually such cases were quite common and so the nurses knew quite well what was to be done. One could rest assured by just paying them the requisite money and know that it was really worth it as the money would not go to waste.'

'But Mrigankababu didn't quite like the plan. He said, "Whatever you may say Bashabbabu, I am not feeling happy about this. I have never done anything deceitful in my life. And yet I am now being forced to get involved in such degraded matters."

"But what else can we do?" I asked.'

'Sudatta intervened. "Don't listen to him." She told me in a firm tone. "We couldn't have made better arrangements than what has been done now."

'The next morning, I got a telephone call from the nurse at the hospital. Sudatta had given birth to a son, sometime late last night. And apparently, Mrs Majumdar hadn't experienced much pain during the delivery. The child was keeping quite well now, and seemed to be quite healthy.'

'I passed on the news to Mrigankababu. He suggested that we go and look up Sudatta at once. I felt slightly irritated. Why were they dragging me into this?'

"But I'll not be free before one o'clock," I said, trying to avoid him.'

"All right, we'll leave at one o'clock then," Mrigankababu said, undeterred.'

'So we turned up at the hospital in the afternoon. The nurse drew aside the curtains of the cabin, and we followed her into the room. I looked up and paused just for a while. A nurse was holding up the towel clad baby to Sudatta, and she, in turn, was looking at this tiny human form with an intense gaze, shorn of all anger and hate. There wasn't the slightest discomfort or turmoil in her expression. The peace and sense of fulfilment that she must have been feeling in her heart were reflected in her eyes. It looked so natural, beautiful and so comforting.'

'But as soon as she heard our footsteps, she became a little uneasy. Her pale, and weary face suddenly seemed to fill with blood. And the next minute she was rebuking the nurse, "Take that child away instantly." she commanded. "Who asked you to bring it here?"'

‘For a moment, the nurse seemed dumbfounded but immediately afterwards, she walked out of the room, with a sheepish smile on her face. I had been watching Sudatta all the while, so I hadn’t noticed any change in Mrigankababu’s expression. But when I finally turned to look at him I didn’t notice any distortion in his facial expression.’

‘After a while, Mrigankababu bent down and asked his wife “How are you feeling Sudatta?” There was a clear tone of affection in his words.’

‘It took Mrs Majumdar some time to regain her composure. Lowering her eyes she said “I am all right.”’

“I was feeling so nervous and worried,” Mrigankababu confessed.’

“What was there to feel scared of?” Sudatta asked.’

‘Mrigankababu looked a little awkward. “No, of course I am feeling quite reassured now.”’

‘A little later, as we walked out of the cabin-room, Mrigankababu suddenly stopped and said, “Bashabbabu, please cancel all our earlier arrangements with the hospital. I have decided to carry the baby home.”’

‘This sudden change surprised me. “How can that be?” I said. “And why would Mrs Majumdar agree to this either! No, no please don’t try to do that Mrigankababu, please don’t complicate matters further!”’

‘Mrigankababu stopped to light a cigarette. Then he smiled and said, “There is nothing complicated in this. Motherhood is the easiest and the most natural phenomenon of all.”’

“Come on, what are you talking about?” I protested. “The specific case of motherhood that we are referring to now, is not really all that natural and unadulterated. There are so many other factors like social customs, family dignity and personal convenience all involved in it. The maternal love that you just saw in Mrs Majumdar’s face may be only temporary, or only a physical reaction.”

‘There was a faint smile on Mrigankababu’s face, “But that is how it is in every other case also,” he said.’

‘He didn’t pay any heed to my protest. He went and talked to the nurses and cancelled all our previous arrangements.’

“But what about Mrs Majumdar?” I asked.’

“Don’t worry, I’ll manage all that,” Mrigankababu sounded rather irritated.’

‘Anyway, what was there for me to worry about, I said to myself as I turned to go back.’

‘About a week later Mriganakababu took his wife and new born son home. I had heard that Sudatta had protested vehemently against this, but Mriganakababu did not pay any heed.’

"You must have lost your head." he had told her. "So what if the child is not as good looking or even as fair complexioned as you are, but does that mean that one should abandon one's own child?"

'Mrigankababu called me over the phone from his house. "Everything is okay now. I'm really sorry that I caused you such trouble."'

"Oh, that's all right." I said, politely.'

'At this time, a young man, possibly a labourer, was waiting for his turn with the rest of the patients in my dispensary. He was accompanied by his wife and two children, with the son being the older of the two. Apparently, he had come to seek some treatment for his wife. I checked her and suggested some medicines. Seeing the younger son in his mother's lap, the older one demanded that he be picked up too.'

"Your son listens to you, doesn't he?" I said.'

"Yes doctor, he is very fond of me."

I laughed to myself. This boy was his wife's son by her former marriage. And this labourer was a long-time patient of mine. He had married this woman after his first wife had died. At that time she was a widow with this child. But now this boy seemed to have developed a great affection for my patient, that is, the man who was his step father. Everything is actually a result of one's beliefs, I said to myself. It was like the mental strength I had seen in Mrigankababu, that nothing seemed impossible to him.'

'After that, I had not been able to keep in touch with Mriganakababu for almost a year. They too had not maintained any contact with me. Of course, I had tried to avoid them, quite intentionally, thinking that they might no longer find it very desirable or comfortable to keep up an association with me.'

'But about a month ago, I received a sudden phone call from Mrs Majumdar. She said that she was ill and that she would be grateful if I could go and check her up.'

"All right" I told her. "But where is Mr Majumdar?"

"Oh, he has just gone out for some work."

'I had to look up another patient in Haripal lane before I could set out for Mrigankababu's house. It was about half past one in the afternoon, when I reached their doorstep.'

'It was the same old servant who opened the door and greeted me.'

"Come in Dactarbabu. It's been a long time since you came here, isn't it?"

'As I stepped inside, it didn't seem to me that there was a serious patient in this house.'

'I followed the servant, Amulya, up the stairs to the first floor. Mrigankababu had rented three rooms in this house. Out of these, one was used as his

personal library, the other one as his living room, and the largest one in the far interior housed Sudatta's domestic world. As I passed along the corridor, I noticed that the other two rooms were locked from the outside.'

'Amulya stopped in front of the largest room and said "Please go in. Ma is waiting for you."'

'Having heard our voices outside, Sudatta had come out and was waiting at the door. "Please come in" she said. "I was beginning to think that you wouldn't be coming after all."'

'Sudatta seemed to have grown even more beautiful. Her face no longer reflected the earlier tension or excitement. Instead it bore a calm and sober expression, and there was a deep melancholic look in her eyes.'

"All right tell me, what are you suffering from?" I asked in a professional tone.'

'Sudatta smiled. "My goodness, it's only a little while since you stepped in, and you are already enquiring about illness?"'

"Come on, does anybody call the doctor in his or her good times?" I asked, not to be defeated.'

'Sudatta kept silent.'

'I noticed that a year old baby was sleeping in a swing-bed nearby.'

"I hope your child is keeping well," I said.'

"Oh yes, Bishu is quite well now."

"Bishu?" I repeated, a little surprised.'

'I noticed a faint blush on her cheeks "Yes" she said, "Pishima had suggested this name, Bishweshwar."'

'Leaning back a little in the leather-bound chair, I said, "That's a nice name. Thank goodness, the boy is keeping well. Actually, I had begun to feel a little concerned. Anyway, it's good to see everything is fine. Tell me, why did Mrigankababu suddenly go away?"'

"Oh he has gone to Nagpur for a short visit. He had heard that a new class of guinea pigs have suddenly shown up there. So he has gone to collect a few of those."

"But what will he do with those guinea pigs?"

"He thinks they are going to be very helpful for his on-going research experiment on cross breeding." Sudatta explained.'

"Cross breeding?" I asked, surprised.'

'Looking straight into my eyes, Sudatta nodded her head. "Yes," she said.'

"His main subject is Biology. About heredity..."

'Then she suddenly said, "I can't bear this any more Dactarbabu!"'

'Forcing a smile I said, "Oh, a scientist's wife has to put up with some annoyances."'

“What do you mean?” Sudatta retorted. “Is a doctor’s wife not a human being? Is she a rat or a guinea pig?”

‘After a while, when she had regained her calm, she revealed, bit by bit, what had actually happened. Pointing towards the closed rooms, she said, “Do you know, these rooms are filled with all kinds of books on Biology, and so many varieties of insects—all preserved in bottles. Maybe he wanted to keep Bishu locked up in that room also, but he must have realized later, that in order to study the impact of the environment on the life of a human being, one didn’t need to use such safeguards.”’

“I don’t understand what you are saying!” I told her feeling completely dumbfounded.’

‘Sudatta tried to explain. Apparently, she had tried earnestly to send off Bishu to some other place. But Mrigankababu had not agreed. After all, Bishu was only a commodity for him. He was an essential material for his on going research. And this was what had infuriated her. It was true of course that Mrigankababu spared no pains to provide the costliest of clothes, food and toys for Bishu. He even enquired of his well being several times a day, held him in his arms, and caressed him. But in the midst of it all, he would suddenly look into his eyes, with the gaze of an investigator, and then scribble something in his notebook. How was it possible for Sudatta to witness and withstand such an abnormal behaviour?’

‘I felt totally at a loss for words. After a while I stood up and said, “Sudatta Debi, I am in a little hurry today. If you would kindly excuse me for the day, then...”’

‘Sudatta didn’t let me finish. “No please stay just a little longer. I have something more to tell you,” She said rather excitedly.’

“What else?” I asked surprised.’

‘After a few moments of hesitating silence, she said, “Dactarbabu, you know I have conceived again. But this time it has not yet reached such an advanced stage. I am sure you can help me at least this time.”’

‘Taken aback with surprise, I said, “What exactly do you mean?”’

‘All this while Sudatta had been talking with her face lowered. But now she raised her face and looked straight at me. I could see that the earlier excited look had crept back into her eyes, the kind that I had seen the very first day when she had come to my dispensary.’

‘As if she was suffering from that same state of intolerance, her body burning out of a similar kind of hate and repulsion.’

‘It was the same direct look in her eyes too. “I am sure you have understood what I want. Please doctor, I don’t want to supply your friend with any material for doing a comparative research.” She pleaded.’

Bashab paused to light a cigarette. I was about to make a small remark, but Karabi suddenly got up and switched on the radio. This time, there was no speech, nor even a story being broadcast. The words of a song came floating loud, "All those songs that I had once sung for you."

It was a musical programme being broadcast, based on listeners' choice.

Karabi let out a sigh. "What a relief" she said.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

# HOME, SWEET HOME! (JANMABHUMI)

Samaresh Dasgupta

Today, I hardly remember the river Gomati that sprung from the mountains. Yet one day, it was the source for my inspiration and gave me a lot of peace and contentment. It had a tumultuous force during the rainy season, and the colour turned yellow-ochre, like the robes of the sadhus. I spent hours observing the waves and the flow of the river, and it was like a spiritual retreat! I felt a quietness within and out, as though there was no strife in the world, no cause for sorrow or pain.

Our house was very close to the river. An antique old house. People thought that it was haunted. I had seen saplings of banyan trees peeping out of the cracks of the wall. I was very fond of nature right from my childhood days and loved watching birds, trees, flowers, river, and the countryside, and felt the presence of a universal spirit or God in them.

## 2

Yesterday, I displayed my Sealdah-platform, Cooper's Camp and Dandakaranya. What does it feel like to leave one's motherland? I tried to recall the face of my mother while concentrating on those sketches. Why was my feeling like that of a beggar? Was I begging for my mother? Or was I searching for my mother, like an orphan? Searching for my homeland? Home, sweet home!



## 3

I used to dream of my parents during the war. The dream has continued for the last 22 days. It is like a nightmare! One night I dreamt that I was running with both their dead bodies! The moment I got up I felt very depressed and frustrated. I worried helplessly at the bitter truth that I could not reach out to them.

If I wrote to my mother that letter would never reach her! Gomati was no more a friend. It had become an enemy, the spiritual water had turned poisonous. If I ever drank that water, I would surely die!

But still I had that urge to write to my mother. So I wrote to my student's cousin, staying in London. She would redirect that letter to the banks of the Gomati. The letter, that would have crossed just three hundred miles, had to take a round about trip across thousands of miles. I'm really surprised. I can't resist my tears! The world is really small. Yet a group of astronauts have conquered space and man has landed on the moon. Some have ventured to the bottom of the ocean while others have climbed mountains. Everyone is busy competing with each other in conquering the earth. But who is bothered about the world of humanity?

## 4

My Jethamoshai is still there in my favourite ancestral home. He is nearly a hundred. Jethamoshai used to say 'I would like to die where I was born. My homeland can never be my enemy'. My father is burdened with the woes of an 85-year-old. He wouldn't like to leave his elder brother and come to India. So he sent me to India. If I had stayed on in Pakistan,<sup>1</sup> my future would have been doomed! My mother was in a dilemma. On the one hand she had her sick husband and brother-in-law, and on the other, her son. I told her not to worry about me but to take care of my father and Jethamoshai. If she leaves, they might not survive.

Actually, each and every one of us has to live.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Pakistan'—this has reference to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

## 5

Today, one of the foreign tourists bought one of my pictures. It was a landscape of the hills. I etched it from my mind's album, my fond memories of Mynamati Hills. In my picture, the hills are out of focus behind a row of barbed wires creating a boundary. This boundary is in focus. I had named this landscape 'Refugee'.

The foreigner commented, 'Your landscape reminds me of my country. An ugly wall has been erected over there too!' He had an Air-India pamphlet with him. 'In the unlikely event of an Emergency landing on water and air, our aircrafts are thoroughly equipped to take care of you.' Only in case of an accident or air-crash, one can think of an emergency exit! Even today, when we are pained by all the turbulent wars around us, we search for an exit. But I am not able to escape from this pain, from this suffering! I'm suffering from mixed feelings. At this moment, I can recall another quotation. I don't remember the source, but it was written on a door, 'Do you have the key to foreign travel?'

'Key'? I'm shuddering at that word. If I eavesdrop, I can still hear the foreigners sing in our language, "*Kothai pabo tare, amar moner manush ji re*"<sup>2</sup> where shall I search for the person I can trust and love or "*Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomai bhato bashi*"<sup>3</sup>

## 6

During the Second World War, the 14 Army Head Quarters were situated around the Mynamati Hills. I remember how we were surrounded by military tents, vehicles and soldiers. We had this feeling that we were trapped in a battle-field. Today the War has stopped. But has it really stopped? War is becoming a commonplace experience now. But no, we don't want War.

## 7

My Mama's home was in Dhaka. We used to take a stroll on the banks of Buriganga. We would see a lot a colourful houseboats floating on the water.

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<sup>2</sup> The translation is 'where shall I search for the person I can trust and love'

<sup>3</sup> The translation is 'where shall I search for the person I can trust and love' my golden Bengal, I love you...

My Mama was a zaminda—with a lot of land property. He used to celebrate Durga Puja in grand style. The family used to stage a play. Baromama used to do the role of Aurangzeb quite well. Mejomama used to play the role of Curvello. But the youngest uncle tried the most difficult role, that of Chanakya. But now all the glory is destroyed by a storm. Baromama died of Cancer. Mejomama had shifted to a refugee's camp near Ranaghat<sup>4</sup> with Mejomamima. They faced financial crisis. He opened a grocery shop, but could not run it smoothly. He ran away when he could not settle his dues. My Aunt, Mejomamima, was in trouble. I went and met her seven years after the tragedy. She had turned into flesh and bones. She simply broke down when she saw me. I too could not resist my tears. I wanted to ask her whom she could blame for this turn of events. But I couldn't!

## 8

Today I received the news of Mejomamima's death.

At this moment, I recalled my mothers' face as well. They are all so far away. I don't know whether I'll ever see them alive. Ma will pass away one day like Mejomamima. Baba too. I won't be by their bedside at their last hour. Visa, passports are not worthwhile any more.

What are my parents' feelings in this matter? Do they feel that there should be an end to our relationship in this manner?

I feel like crying out like our Aminuddinchacha in our ancestral home, 'There is nothing impossible that they can't do!'

## 9

Baromama and Mejomama had no issue of their own. Only Chhotomama had one son and two daughters. Chhotomama had committed suicide in Pakistan. Chhotomamima was extraordinarily pretty. She used to sing. She frequently went on tours with a person. He had helped her in getting an audition on Dhaka Radio Station. Perhaps this affair led to Chotomama's depression. He sent his daughters away to Calcutta, and then committed suicide. The son stayed on with his mother. Their daughters, Anju and Manju, were as pretty as their mother.

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<sup>4</sup> Ranaghat is in West Bengal

**10**

Anju and Manju. In the meantime, I suddenly decided to visit them at their residence in Bagbazar. The elder one has taken up teaching in a school as her vocation. The younger one was in search for a job. She sounded quite desperate, 'Biluda, please keep in touch with us. Who else can we talk to? Why have you chosen the saffron-colour as your dresscode? Are artists fond of these earthen shades of the sages?'

'You know, we artists deal with colours! So you shouldn't have any prejudice against any colour. I strongly feel that colours speak all languages!'

Manju replied, 'Biluda, you must tune in to Dhaka Radio station next Tuesday, at 8.00 p.m. Ma will have her programme in Rabindra Sangeet. You must listen to her! For such a long time, I have not heard her voice for such a long time! Ma—our Ma!'

**11**

Manju has got an appointment as a telephone operator. She had got this job on one condition. She had to marry a Punjabi boy. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he was strong. He too was a refugee. They had written to their mother about this, sending the letter via New York, but had received no reply. Anju couldn't resist her tears as she tried to confide in me, 'I had no other way Biluda. I was worried about Manju. I wanted to save her.'

'You have saved her, no doubt! But what about yourself?' I showed my concern.

'I don't think about myself. Besides, I am suffering from a prolonged illness. Whatever image you might have had of my mother, she is very selfish!'

At this moment Anju appeared like a goddess to me, made of stone. What a coincidence! Last night, I had dreamt that the statue of Venus was breaking down into pieces.

**12**

I couldn't make it a point to listen to Chhotomamima's song.

Of course, I am fond of listening to Radio Station Dhaka, particularly their folksongs. Those songs are down to earth, and I fondly associate them with the fragrance of earth and water. But whenever political issues are discussed on Dhaka radio, I tune it to Kolkata. A hair's difference, yet what a lot of difference it makes! As though we have to go on voyages for miles together and

cover a number of oceans in between! Britain is so far away. Yet communication with her is so simple. Why is Dhaka so far away? I saw a warning in the Tourist Guide. 'Do not attempt to photograph Pakistani women without asking their permission.' Not only Pakistani women, the whole of East Pakistan is a forbidden territory for us. But can't I visualize it in my mind's album? I can simply close my eyes and travel to the shores of Buriganga, Ramana, to the Maynamati hills and visit those places which are famous for their banks and tanks. I thought of my mother. I recalled Baba's words, 'Keep your passport and visa safely.'

Ma used to say 'For how many days I have not made *patishapta* and *narkelar naru* for you ...'

If I open my eyes, I get a glare! Why is life so complicated in this glare? I feel like shutting off all the light and closing my eyes again! It is so painful! It is pricking my eyes continuously!

### 13

Someone asked me the other day, 'Were you all landlords in Pakistan? Whoever I meet seems to have regrets about leaving behind orchards of coconut, betel palm, ponds with fishes, mansions, etc.' He sounded sarcastic. But we all know what we actually had, and what we lost! How would you understand the pangs of leaving one's motherland?

I did not want to hurt anybody. I just wanted to share the void I felt within! And show the fortitude and courage that we have displayed in pitching our tents in this desert of desolation.

### 14

Chhotomama's son, Montu, has taken up a job for Karachi. No one has heard about Chhotomamima.

Anju was in tears. 'I just can't imagine that I won't be able to meet my mother any more! Even Montu is so selfish! I can't imagine how I am surviving Biluda! I don't feel like living any more!'

### 15

I am not interested in reading about Pakistan anymore. I switch off when there is a Bhataiyali song on the radio. Is this reaction due to hatred or indifference?

I do not know. How can I hate my father or my mother. I can be angry! But anger? Angry with my parents? Or someone else? Who is that someone else? I can't look at Anju or at myself! I feel like a vagabond, with no roots, nowhere to go to. If I ever feel like painting, the subject is bound to be centred round the pain of the refugees. I feel like burning my brushes and immersing the easel in water. But I can't!

## 16

It seems as though I have experienced a landslide. My home has been separated from the rest of the world. I was thinking of my homeland. The concepts of 'mother' and 'mother's land' are greater than Heaven! Have I lost Heaven; have I fallen from Paradise?

## 17

Dhaka Radio station has stopped broadcasting Tagore's songs. I can see an earthquake in the hills of Maynamati in my mind's album. It is a huge earthquake, it cannot be measured on the Richter scale. They are just driving refugees like us, far away!

I had some landscapes and river-scapes of the Buriganga on my wall. I felt like pulling them down, but couldn't. I had treasured a musical clock, bought from Mughaltuli, Comilla. Although it works no more, I still treasure it. My hands quiver even at the thought of discarding it.

## 18

Anju tried to commit suicide by lying on the rail-tracks. But she couldn't! She went through the trauma, lost one eye, and is still alive! 'Why did they save me, Biluda? Why?' She asked.

## 19

Anju-Manju have their mother's family in Bardhaman. Their mother's brothers are rich and well-settled. But they neglected their nieces. They never invited them to stay with them. Manju stays with her husband in Jabalpur. She had requested her sister to live with her. But she refused. So I

had no other way but to offer shelter to her. She is still very fond of embroidery. She has done a beautiful piece with red and black thread, the embroidery is in red, and in the middle she has written in black, "Janani Janmabhūmischa Swargadarpi Gariyasi"....<sup>5</sup>

## 20

I can't look at Anju's face which is lined with suffering. She represents my lost homeland, East Bengal. It is so painful, unbearable! Radcliffe's knife is so cruel and so sharp!

## 21

At this moment I really need my mother. Maybe, I'm very ill. Ma will nurse me. I want nourishing food made by my mother. I will write to her, 'Ma, let Baba stay over there. But you come via Burma<sup>6</sup> or Ceylon<sup>7</sup> and stay with me. Don't worry about money.'

Thinking over all this, I really wrote to her one day, 'I am missing you a lot...'

Anju was listening to Pakistan Radio, not to artist's songs but to a lecture on Kashmir.

'Please switch off the radio, Anju? Why do you like listen to such crap?'

'Just wait! Probably there will be songs after the lecture. You never know, probably Ma would be singing. I have not heard Ma's voice for so long.'

## 22

My paintings have been favourably reviewed in a foreign journal. They have also commented on my personal life: 'The artist has the courage of giving shelter to a raped girl!' I was shocked! I couldn't see Anju around. But I could guess that she had read the review as well. Many tourists were asking

<sup>5</sup> Mother and motherland are greater than Heaven!

<sup>6</sup> Mother and motherland are greater than Heaven!  
Now Mynamar

<sup>7</sup> Now Srilanka

her a lot of questions and then they turned to me and asked me whether she was my mistress!

I saw a huge fire in front of me. I looked at the globe, towards my easel, and could not say a word. I felt that all the water that covers this earth, three-fourth of the earth's capacity, is covered with sand. And some people are constantly scratching that sand and rewriting the words, 'Refugee', 'Refugee', 'Refugee.'

## 23

It breaks my heart to even think of it. Anju is no more! This time she made a second attempt in committing suicide, and saving me from disgrace. She has succeeded. Even if I sit down with paint and brushes, I cannot paint anymore. Even if I do paint, I paint only one picture—of passports and visas. Amidst that two blurred faces emerge, one is my mother's, and the other is the river's.

My mind restlessly writes on the picture: my mother and my homeland and my mother ... and ...

Translated by Julu Sen





## THE STRICKEN DAUGHTER (KARUN KANYA)

Ramapada Chaudhury

Not just the first page, even if Arundhuti were asked to return to any of the earlier chapters of her life, she wouldn't mind. But then, as soon as she turned over the pages in her memory and arrived at the shores of the overflowing Padma river, she would feel a shiver run through her. Her scared eyes refused to see the dark ocean ahead.

The waves of the huge and wide Padma river were breaking over the shores and all around was a blinding darkness of the midnight hour. Two indicator lights flickering near the distant bend of the waters and on a central pole in the river seemed as if they were communicating in a sign language with the steamer in the distance. There was only darkness around, and beyond that a row of dim lights wavered like a golden string of stars. They were probably the lights from the hanging lanterns in the row of boats waiting at the Ghat. A faint, monotonous sound came floating from the steamer moving in the distance, the searchlight on its deck rotating its rays and piercing the darkness around.

That memory was still very fresh in her mind. It would have been indeed better if she could forget it all.

They had been running silently, crouching behind the *hijal* shrubs. 'They' meaning her father, mother, brother, sister—everybody. An illusory light was flickering somewhere in the distance. The silence around being broken only by the sound of *hijal* fruits falling into the river—it seemed as if there were some people whispering nearby. In spite of knowing that they were not actual voices, but the sound of *hijal* fruits falling into the water, they paused from time to time with baited breath. Yes, they were forced to stop finally. Suddenly from nowhere, a frenzied and threatening mob pounced on them. And from that moment, a new chapter started in Arundhuti's life.

Not one, but several chapters.

Of course, Arundhuti did not want to recollect those times. Still, why would the world let her erase those terrible memories even if she wanted to? She had wanted to divert from the normal flow of life and live the remaining days with her head buried in unclean waters. She had thought that if there was no possibility of weighing the anchors, then what was the use of cherishing any dreams? Wouldn't it be better to weave all her fragile emotions around this home, however unwanted it might be? And was it not because of this decision that she had finally and unresistingly accepted her much-hated husband? Husband? Even the utterance of the word brought a taunting smile on her face. Yet, she had accepted, as her own, the child that was born out of that one monstrous act of love.

Arundhuti had been unaware of what was happening in the world outside, and no news would ever reach her. Like a princess locked up in an underground dungeon, she had given up all hope and faith, and had tried to only fortify her own mind by hiding herself and her thoughts in a dark, dingy corner of a small room that she never felt was her own.

Then one day a policeman arrived and it seemed as if an internee from one world had found her way through the open door of yet another world. Arundhuti returned home but it wasn't to the same happy abode of the earlier times. Even then, for just a few moments only, the rays of happiness shone like a few mica chips lying over a deserted shore. A question remained unanswered in the mind of her own siblings as they hugged her out of the sheer joy of having her back once again amidst themselves. True, her mother's face didn't quite reflect a glow of joy, but one could make out that the stone-like expression on her face that had withstood several storms in life, was actually disguised. It was clear that having got back her daughter after so many years, her mother's heart wanted to rejoice, but that little child in Arundhuti's lap had raised an insurmountable and silent wall between the mother and daughter.

And was it only her mother? It didn't take long for the news to reach her neighbours. Possibly to get some kind of cheap fun out of the episode, they pretended as if they knew nothing. They spoke to her in such a familiar tone as if this family had been here for a long time. As if they had known this family for ages.

'She has come to visit you from her in-laws place, hasn't she?' some tried to pose an innocent question.

How could Arundhuti's mother reply? She remained silent, bending her head to conceal the discomfort on her pale countenance. After a lot of effort, she suppressed her tears and said, 'She had got lost during the riots.'

'Is that so?' Immediately everybody poured out their sympathy, their eyes filling with tears. 'Oh, what a bloodthirsty riot it was, Didi!' They wiped their flowing tears with the end of their own sarees.

Someone else from within the crowd said, 'Anyway, it's enough that you got her back again.'

Arundhuti's mother didn't fail to recognize the underlying sarcasm in the words but she couldn't come out with an appropriate answer.

Arundhuti had overheard the conversation from behind the doors and had felt like dying out of shame. But she wasn't ashamed of herself, what else could she have done? Was there any other way out for her! Even then, she had never realized that it would disgrace her mother so much, for which reason she wouldn't ever be able to hold her head high before others again!

But had Arundhuti never really realized that! Had she never thought about it? Then why had she cried her heart out and begged those police officers who had come to rescue her? Why had she said, please don't take me back, I am quite all right and happy here.

Wasn't there one single message, one single fear behind those words! 'Even if I did go back, would I be able to get back everything again? Will my parents, my brothers, my sister welcome me back amidst them once again?'

The man whom she had been forced to accept as her husband, suppressing all her animosity and hate deep in her heart, surely she had not developed an attachment to him in these three years! The only one person she had held dearly to her bosom out of a pure love, was the child born out of her own flesh and blood.

Of course, Arundhuti had known that it would be like this. Ever since the day when she had refused to break all emotional ties with this unwanted child in her womb, ever since she had refused to erase the joyous rainbow that this small reward had brought into her empty life, Arundhuti had known that. But hearing her mother's hesitant voice now, she flared up in anger.

'Anyway it's enough that you have been able to get her back Didi!' These words from her elderly neighbour had struck fire in her heart. Clutching the child in her arms Arundhuti came out from behind the door, and with a firm anger resounding in her voice, said, 'I have even brought a proof to show that I have not really returned unhindered!'

'My goodness, why did this girl spit such fire!' everybody wondered. For someone who had returned after five years, having lost her chastity and honour, and with a child in her lap, wasn't she supposed to hide herself in shame and stay away from others' sight? Instead, here she was, talking back! Still, with feigned sympathy in their voice, some of them tried to sympathize with her, 'But it wasn't your fault dear, what could you have done!'

Of course, they pursed their lips and laughed behind her back. What they meant was 'Whatever the mother might be saying now about the girl, having got lost in the riots, who knows what the truth really was.'

What could Arundhuti do other than throw herself on her bed and cry her heart out!

And as she let her tears flow unceasingly, she didn't realize when exactly her mother had come and sat down quietly by her side, her trembling fingers moving over her hair, trying to soothe the pain from her heart.

'Sit up dear, don't cry any more.' Her own voice had filled with tears as she tried to console her daughter. 'How does it matter what others think?'

Arundhuti sat up suddenly and fixed her tearful gaze on her mother's eyes. 'Then why do you feel ashamed, why do you fear to tell the truth?' she asked.

'Love, do you know why I'm afraid?' her mother sobbed, as she wiped the tears rolling down her eyes, 'I had lost both you and your father in the riot. And I had never dreamt of getting you back! Only God knows the number of offerings that I had promised Him, to have you back in my arms again!'

There was a strong tone of hurt in Arundhuti's voice as she said, 'You shouldn't have done that. Maybe that is why I never found the courage to take poison and end my life. It would have ended all this agony!'

'If only your father had been alive now.' Arundhuti's mother heaved a deep sigh, 'Had he been here, I would I have not felt so scared. But being on my own now, I don't feel so safe among these neighbours now.'

'Then tell me what I should do now.' Arundhuti pleaded as she wept miserably.

'We can do something, Aru.' Her mother's voice sounded quite firm now. 'We can keep the child in an orphanage and continue to look after his well-being, can't we?'

Aruni raised her eyes in hurtful amazement. 'What are saying Ma! Why don't you ask me to crash this child dead instead, so that all of you may live in peace?'

Her mother didn't utter a word. How strange this was! Aru had not been like this earlier, how did she become so disobedient! She might have a different opinion, but didn't she realize that it was for her own good that her mother worried so much! How was she throwing such harsh words at her mother! Why was she forgetting that no matter what had happened, Arundhuti was still her own daughter!

But, how would Aruni understand all that!

After all, how could her mother realize how Arundhuti had had to plead and how many tears she had to shed to beg her child from his father? She

would be stunned to know that, maybe she would even think that her daughter must have lost her senses momentarily.

No, there was no use of telling her mother all that. She only shook her head sadly and said, 'No Ma, that's not possible.'

Then? Would they have to bear and withstand the concealed banter, and whispers of their neighbours all their life? Even if she tried to keep her eyes shut, what about Aru, wasn't she seeing those reactions behind the scenes? Would she be able to hold her head high, in spite of that? No, she would only begin to wither inside! And of course, most importantly, Biju and Kali were still at the growing age; wouldn't their minds be affected by this humiliating disgrace?

Trying to find some way out, her mother said—'Then lets move to some other locality'.

'But it's going to be the same everywhere, Ma!' Aru laughed sadly. 'Tell me, is there any neighbourhood where an open sore wouldn't attract a fly?'

'Your dreams and desires have all died Aru.' her mother said haltingly; it was clear that there was enough apprehension in her tone as she ended her words. 'Why not adopt a widow's dress Aru.'

Hearing these words Aruni burst into laughter. Of course, her mother didn't fail to understand the intense sufferings that could cause such an insane outburst. How strange! She was asking someone who had never got married to become a widow! After a few minutes of silence, she let out a long drawn sigh and said. 'Anyway child, do what you consider best'.

What was the 'best' anyway? Was there any noble path left anywhere? There was no other way out apart from walking through narrow, crooked alleyways!

That is why one day, finally, her mother had to say, 'Aru, whatever money I had till now and those few ornaments that I had kept with Didi, have all been spent. After all, it's because of those ornaments that I could bring up Biju and Koli. What do you think we should do now?'

'There's nothing much that you can do. Let me try for a job now.' Arundhuti said.

So it was in the pursuit of a job that Arundhuti started moving out once again. And that meant sending out applications against vacancies published in newspapers, or it meant meeting young executives and officers who were dressed in smart clothes, and armed with a false smile and false modesty.

It was on one such day as she was rushing down the steps of an office, her mind totally exasperated and irritated, at a moment when one didn't even feel like seeing the man who one had bumped into, that she suddenly saw him. Who would have ever thought that she would meet Subimal at such an unexpected place and time?

They met after such a long time.

Arundhuti could hear the music of petals flowering in her heart.

'Subimalda!'

She spotted Subimal as she was going down the stairs, which made her stop in her tracks. Subimal was climbing up the stairs. She was certain it was him as he drew closer. Her face and eyes lighted up like sparklers with joy, as she called out, 'Subimalda, its you, isn't it!'

Subimal turned his surprised gaze on Arundhuti, for a few moments he looked totally perplexed. Then the pale melancholic expression on his face changed to one of joy as he said, 'Aruni? Arundhuti?'

Arundhuti felt completely oblivious of her surroundings. Unaware of who was around, and what they might say, she clasped one of his hands and said, 'Oh, its been so long since I saw you. I had never thought that I would see you again. Where are you staying nowadays? Here, I hope! Where is Madhu, Madhuri? How is Mashima and the rest of the family? Have you married? You haven't, have you? Ma will be so happy to see you!'

The overflowing stream of words washed away everything, even Subimal's own reply. Pulling him by the hand, Arundhuti rushed downstairs.

'Well then, tell me everything. Why are you silent? Tell me, how and where is everybody else! What are you doing nowadays? Are you working?'

The words seemed to pour out endlessly. There were so many questions to be asked, so many things to be said. As if everything that she had to know and all that she had to say came crowding together. She was at a loss to know what she should say first, and which one last, which question should be asked first, and in what order the others should follow, as if she was forgetting all that. The joy that she had felt in reuniting with her mother, brother and sisters was really not as much as what she felt at this chance meeting with Subimal. It was as if the leaves in her heart lit up in sunshine and turned beautifully green. And she felt so overtaken by this ecstatic joy, that it was only after a long time that she realized that Subimal wasn't replying to her questions.

'What is this!' Aruni asked surprised. 'Why aren't you saying anything!'

A fraction of a melancholic smile paled Subimal's face. 'But, what is there to say?'

Looking at him, Arundhuti felt a shadow of panic come over her. 'Why, what is it Subimalda? Tell me, please!'

Subimal smiled. 'Nothing more could happen really! What else is left, Aruni?'

Arundhuti realized there was a kind of sadness in his expression, as if he was trying to hide something. Her earlier words and ceaseless queries stopped on their own.

Walking away from the afternoon sun, they came and stood in the shadow of the Cathedral, to avoid the noise of the cars rushing by. But was it only for that? No, they had met after almost a decade. The hindrance caused by the sudden curse that had befallen their path and disrupted their mutual world of love and intimate relationship, was gone after all these years. It was as if two parallel waves which had lost their way were silently rejoicing their coming together all anew. Like words, they couldn't find a way out.

All that they felt was they had found each other, after such a long time. True, there were so many words piled up in their heart, waiting to be expressed and crushed like snow. They were so eager to talk and listen to each other. They were wondering where they would go now, where they would sit and talk to each other as slowly and leisurely as one cracks peanuts, one at a time. Their words were about to ooze out like soda from a newly opened bottle. And yet they couldn't find any words to start with! They were desperate to go somewhere, somewhere where they could linger, sit, talk and pour out their hearts!

It was the music of just a few stray meaningless, irrelevant words, and then some flashes of sparkling laughter.

But how long could they keep standing near the church, in such a busy public space, on such a sweltering summer day?

Arundhuti had hoped for a lot. She had thought that Subimal would suggest a way out just as he had done in earlier days. That he would hand over the thread of words to Aruni. No, even Subimal seemed lost.

Finally, it was Arundhuti who had to say, 'Subimalda, come let us go to our house. My mother will be so happy to see you. It really hurts so much to think how all those we knew, got scattered. I don't get to see even a single known face.'

Subimal smiled sadly. He said, 'Maybe there are some, but everybody wants to remain hidden.'

Arundhuti raised her eyes and tried to understand what those words meant. 'Is there anything more for one to hide one's face?' But having uttered those words, her heart trembled in fear. Was Subimal actually referring to her? Did he too know of that scandalous episode of her life?

There was a time when his love was the only precious thing she had. Had the disgraceful event paled that love? Did all these different sentiments belong to the same person?

Arundhuti trembled in fear. Why was she feeling so restlessly apprehensive about that one regretful chapter of her life that she had so boldly announced to others, getting exposed to Subimal?



Nevertheless, she brought Subimal home. 'Come and see how big Kali has grown,' she said. 'And Biju will be so delighted to see you.'

Subimal accompanied Arundhuti to her house just like those earlier days when Aruni used to return from her college, with books piled in her arms, her face reddened by the heat of the sun, and beads of sweat shining on her forehead. She used to wait for him at the corner of a lonely lane, they would smile and talk first through a sign language and then in a clearer tone as they strolled together in the quiet afternoon sun. They walked together and boarded a tram, and alighted a few minutes later on the main road. Turning off into a small lane and wading through the garbage scattered around the dustbin placed near the sun-washed lamppost, they crossed a four storey building on one side and a five-storeyed on the other, and then crossing a narrower muddy lane, they came and stood in front of the most neglected, most unventilated house in the farthest corner. Arundhuti shook the metal ring on the door. Her mother opened the door and, for a moment her face seemed to light up in joy, but the very next instant it paled.

Subimal came and sat in a small dark, dingy room on the ground floor with one window. He knew that even when the yellow evening sun shone on the terrace of this house, it would be dusk in this room. When there would be a cyclone in the city, there would only be a noise in this room.

But after all, this was Arundhuti's room.

Her mother heaved a deep sigh which seemed to say, 'See, where we have landed today.' She said, 'Son, you have seen our earlier house and garden, you also know how at the very mention of my husband's name, people would show you our house. But see where we have ended up today!'

New stars were shining in Subimal's heart now while Aruni's eyes reflected a deep, sombre light. Those words—'see where we have ended up today!'—kept resounding in his hears! He felt they had crossed many oceans and landed at a new port.

On feeling Arundhuti's soft, cool hand on his shoulder, Subimal turned his wandering gaze to the small window of that dark suffocating room. Even though his vision was blocked by the neighbouring house, it seemed to cross miles and reach the distant horizon.

There was only one question that lurked in Arundhuti's mind, 'Have all our dreams been shattered Subimalda?'

Subimal too felt a certain doubt in his heart. 'Will we never get back what we have lost?'

After that, when they were able to snatch a few moments of intimate togetherness, Subimal looked up at Arundhuti with an amused look in his eyes. He drew her closer, till their eager hands intertwined. It was as if they

receded behind all those useless years that had blocked their lives for so long.

Subimal looked at Arundhuti and Aruni seemed to feel that intense gaze with her entire being. Both of them had the same unspoken words in their heart, 'Even if the world is not the same any longer, it doesn't really matter, since our minds have not changed at all.'

But how much could they rely on their own minds? Arundhuti shuddered in fear. Would Subimal still speak such loving words, even after hearing the truth? Would his face still reflect such a mellowed light of love, even after knowing everything?

At that moment, Arundhuti's mother came in with a glass of tea, which she prepared by using up the milk that she had kept for her younger son. She offered the tea to Subimal and started talking to him.

Arundhuti signalled to her mother from behind the door. Holding on to her hands, she whispered, 'Ma, please don't tell him.' She couldn't finish her words.

'Come on, silly girl.' Her mother smiled and went back to resume her talk with Subimal.

She didn't notice those tears streaming from Arundhuti's eyes.

No, this was making her feel small in her own eyes. Arundhuti felt that it was even more shameful to conceal everything from Subimal. She decided that since she couldn't reveal it to Subimal herself, she would request her mother to let Subimal know everything.

With such thoughts running in her head, Arundhuti spent an entire afternoon and many captivating moments in the melancholic evening light, sitting next to Subimal on the soft grass by the banks of Ganga and watching ships and rows of boats pass by. Finally, she returned home, drowned in her own loneliness.

She came back.

But as soon as she saw her mother, she forgot everything. Her mother stood there with her back against the door, with an expressionless face and an envelope in her hand.

'Who opened the letter? Did it come by the morning post?' She asked, not knowing who it was from, but she didn't wait for the reply either. She ran her eyes quickly over the slanted handwriting. Immediately, a painful look clouded her face, she came and sat on the bed clutching the letter in her fist, and then thrust her face into the pillows.

He had written to Arundhuti. No it was not a letter, it was actually a curse. It was from that dreaded enemy.

Amazing! He wanted to have Arundhuti back. He wanted her to come back to him, of own free will. No one would prevent her if she did, he promised, no policeman would come and snatch her away again, this time.

Strange! As if Arundhuti was eager to give herself up to her hated enemy. As if she had been snatched against her wishes.

Amazing! He had written a letter to Arubdhuti.

He had written that if Arundhuti did not want to return, if their love and attachment had really been deflated like a balloon, then at least, she should return his child to him. He would try and keep her out of his mind, by looking at the child's face alone. And if Arundhuti did not agree to send her son either, then she should let him see his beloved child for at least a day. He had appealed to her with a grieving heart.

Arundhuti raised herself slowly from the bed and tore the letter into pieces. A crooked, hard smile lit up her face.

A few days later, Subimal came again, to invite her. Arundhuti heard him, smiled happily and accepted his invitation. She dressed quickly and with a joyful blush radiating her face, she stepped out of her house with Subimal, just as she used to in the earlier days. Then after spending an entire afternoon together and walking past a long stretch by the tramway, they reached a dilapidated, worn, poverty stricken, lonely house.

Arundhuti felt a fresh breeze in her heart. There were rainbows in her eyes.

It was a tinned roof-house with a bamboo fencing all around. A motor mechanic's shop stood a little distance way. A few motor mechanics and labourers strolled nearby. A siren played from the jute mill in the far distance. It was a red coloured dusty road. A few lorries drove past, raising clouds of dust, and roaring sounds. But still, the earth and breeze seemed so familiar to Arundhuti. It seemed to be her own.

'Listen Arundhuti,' Subimal said, as he pushed open the bamboo gate. His eyes lit up, as if they were calling out to her more intimately.

'What is it?' Arundhuti asked, raising her eyes.

'There is something that I have not been able to tell you, Aruni.'

Arundhuti's eyebrows were raised in wonder.

Subimal spoke out the words slowly. His voice was calm. 'Aruni, Madhu, Madhuri is not here.'

'Not here?'

'No, she is alive. But it would have probably have been better if she was not.'

Madhu, Madhuri was not there? Madhu, that much loved friend of Arundhuti, the one whom she had known as her dearly cherished companion right from her young age, she wasn't there? Those games that they had played in their childhood, jumping across chalked lines drawn over the roads, those fights, and reconciliations, the shared secrets of adolescent love. And then those hours of joyous laughter and conversations on a moonlight washed terrace. How much time they had spent together, standing by the parapet on the rooftop. How they had let open their minds to each other! Was it the same Madhu who was not there any more, and for whom it would be better if she were not there? And why? What had happened to Madhuri, what had her life met with? Arundhuti just couldn't ask those questions.

She only saw and understood. Nobody mentioned Madhuri's name even once. It seemed as if her name had got erased from Subimal's family, forever. Maybe it was even erased from their memory. Arundhuti's heart filled with an indomitable eagerness and anxiety to know what had happened. But even then, her curious mind remained buried under all her other immediate formalities, like talking and exchanging news with others in the family. Then finally she took leave from the entire family, Subimal's mother, younger brothers and sister. As the two of them walked back past the wild shrubs and the red-gravel path, they fell silent, as if they, both Arundhuti and Subimal, had suddenly lost all speech.

Those words 'Madhuri is not here, it would be better if she were not there' seemed to ring in her ears again.

Madhuri was still alive. But where, and how, and why! Did those dimples still show up on her cheek when she smiled, like they did in earlier times? Was she married? What about her children! Suddenly she remembered how Madhuri used to be fond of little children. How she loved to caress them. How she would keep aside her work just to watch little children laugh and play. Did Madhuri too preserve the same kind of love and concern for her own son? But strangely enough, that one name was missing in everybody's talk. What was this careful avoidance and deliberate forgetfulness?

Arundhuti couldn't hold back her curiosity till the end of the journey back home. She turned to Subimal midway, and said, 'You didn't tell me where Madhu is Subimalda. I want to meet her so desperately. I haven't really seen her for a long time!'

Subimal lowered his head, and then looked up and around, as if he hadn't heard Arundhuti talk. Then, in a calm voice, he said, 'Aruni please don't ask me about Madhu, and please don't express a wish to see her either.'

Arundhuti felt surprised. Her eyes lit up with a question, 'Why what has happened to her Subimalda?'

Subimal seemed to shrink in shame and self-disgrace. In a voice that was barely a whisper he said, 'Madhu, Madhu has become a fallen woman, Aruni.'

Arundhuti raised her eyes in surprise; and then looked down again. Her body trembled out of sheer amazement and desperation, her eyes filled with tears, she couldn't believe this, Madhu, Madhuri was no more! It would have been better if Madhuri had not been there! Madhuri who occupied a very intimate part of her heart had become polluted and withered away.

'Madhu has become a fallen woman, Aruni.' They were only a few words, but Arundhuti never had to bear the sting of such a sharp, spear-like attack before. Subimal continued to speak slowly, 'We were in a train at that time. A fire had suddenly broken out. The train was forced to a halt. It was then that we lost Madhuri.'

Arundhuti felt a shudder run through her not because it reminded her of a particular chapter in her own life, but because it gave her a chance to understand Subimal's mind. He obviously misunderstood. He wanted to build a fort over flowing waters. How could this be considered as Madhuri's turning into a fallen woman? She felt like laughing aloud with wild anger. So she had done the right thing by not revealing the history of her own secret humiliation to Subimal.

But instead of bursting out in anger, Arundhuti burst out into a sarcastic laugh. This unsympathetic attitude on Subimal's part drowned her in silent pain. Still talking in a low voice, Subimal said, 'I don't want to hide anything from you Aruni. After they abducted her, she had no other option other than to take the fallen path.'

Arundhuti looked up hopefully.

Subimal looked dejected. 'We looked around for her. So many days, and so many months passed by, still we couldn't find her. And just at the time we were beginning to forget that she was even alive, we got this news and soon after Madhuri returned under police protection.'

Eager to hear what happened next, Madhuri said, 'And then?'

Subimal smiled wearily, suddenly he clasped her hand and said, 'Please don't misunderstand me Aruni, it wasn't really my fault.'

Pausing between words he said, 'After all I had three more younger sisters. My mother said, 'Will I not be able to even marry them off, just because of her? Can I allow this scandalous incident to mar so many lives unnecessarily and defame the entire family?'

'And that is why you drove her out, isn't it?' There was a definite tone of sarcasm in Arundhuti's voice as she spit out the words.

'No', said Subimal lowering his head in shame, 'We kept it a secret and arranged for her marriage. But Madhuri refused. She said that she wouldn't be able to hide this personal scandal all her life.'

'And is that why the marriage didn't take place?' This time Arundhuti's voice sounded ever more sarcastic.

Subimal failed to understand. 'No' he spoke in an easy tone. 'We had thought that if Ma and Dada agreed, and once she got married, Madhu would probably let go of her stubbornness and possibly her husband, even after knowing everything would forgive her. But we had miscalculated. Soon after she got married, Madhuri revealed that truth to her husband, and he left her immediately without informing anybody about his whereabouts.'

Arundhuti felt the sting of tears in her eyes. She felt like reacting harshly to what she had just heard, but remained silent instead. She kept listening to what Subimal was saying without saying a word herself. As she walked back with Subimal, over the red-dusty path, past those rows of wild bamboo clumps, her mind filled with sadness at the thought of Madhuri. The innocence of her beautiful young face kept haunting her. How could that face suffer such misfortune?

Continuing to speak in a whisper, Subimal said, 'She was rebuked by everybody. Mother said let Madhu do whatever she wants, but we must get my other daughters married. After all we have to live with self-respect and dignity. The entire family can't get destroyed just because of her. My elder brother even said, "It was better if Madhu had not been alive. I wish she hadn't returned."'

'But she didn't come back of her own will Subimalda. She might have lived better, accepting her own fate, but it was all of you who created such a national stir.'

Subimal kept silent. After walking some distance, he stopped by the busstand. 'Maybe it was because of that feeling of wronged hurt, that Madhuri too left home one day.'

'Did you not get any more news of her?' Arundhuti asked anxiously.

Subimal couldn't look up out of sheer embarrassment. 'Yes, I did' he whispered. 'I heard she has gone back to her life as a fallen woman again.'

Arundhuti laughed sarcastically, to herself. 'Wasn't it you Subimalda, who had once said that it is a person's mind that is most important, that that is what really matters. But then, why did all of you feel so scared?'

'Aruni, the mind is controlled by the body. Once the body is polluted...' Subimal couldn't complete what he wanted to say.

Arundhuti felt as if she was listening to some egoistic village scholar. However much people differed in their age, mode of dress and education, they seemed to have the same kind of mental frame.

No. It was better if she bore this unbearable, mental agony all her life. She would not go back to Subimal ever again. She just couldn't.

After that, Arundhuti spent so many restless and agonizing days and nights immersed in her own thoughts. And from time to time, a new pain would pierce her heart, and leave her burning in helpless anger.

It was his letter.

That letter of appeal was from him. The man against whom she had been nourishing only hate and futile anger, the man who had tainted her entire life with such shame, it was his letter. It was a request from him. The words had pierced her heart like a thorn.

Come back Arundhuti, give me back my child, at least let me see him once.

This was how he pleaded. But only fury and cynicism filled Arundhuti's heart.

Wasn't there far more sincerity in her own pleading, when she had requested that man to spare her from that inhuman act! How many tears had she shed to soften his cruel heart and how earnestly she had thrown herself at him and held his feet, begging for mercy, hoping that there might at least be human blood flowing in those veins. But those futile tears could not melt his unsympathetic stone-like heart!

The memory of those times froze her entire being in terror. It was a tale of daily torture, humiliation and hurt. Her entire life had been destroyed, her respect and dignity had been trampled on, and her right to speak out had been snatched away from her.

But even after that he had been sending her repeated requests and appeals.

This was a letter from that man!

Arundhuti smiled to herself. She took the letter in her hand, thought for a while, and then read it. It was not the same letter. It was not the same request either.

It wasn't really a letter. It was a message from him saying that he would come to her secretly in the dead of night. He would come to her with only one request. This secrecy wasn't for himself. It was only to protect Arundhuti's dignity.

He wasn't wanting her back. He knew that he would never get her back again. He didn't want to take back his own child from her. He also knew that he would not be able to take him away from her.

He would only come, for just a moment, and wait near the lamppost at the corner of the road. He would hold his child in his arms, only once.

No, he wasn't asking for anything else. Even then, a sarcastic and venomous smile appeared on her face.

No, she wouldn't be able to forgive him. Nor would she be able to forgive Subimal.

One of them had earned only her contempt, and the other himself had despised her.

She knew that Subimal would move away from her once he got to know the truth. She would never regain her place of honour, love and respect in his heart.

But still, she tried to search a way out, and lost herself in thought. Her mind became restless.

Then, finally, the day arrived. The sun rose in the sky at the right hour, and when the day came to an end, it set in the western sky again. Aruni's heart drowned in tears. How strange! Aruni spent the entire day and evening just thinking by herself.

At last, the time had come for her to settle her long nurtured futile anger. Now she had her greatest enemy in her own clasp.

Her blood seemed to be boiling impatiently, waiting to take revenge. As if at this ultimate moment, she was wanting to tear apart in beastly joy, both the one who had received only her despise and the one who had only despised her.

The golden hours of the day gradually gave way to a purple twilight. Darkness gathered around a window through which neither light nor air played and the road gradually became desolate. The electric light from the lamp posts at the corner of the street thickened the darkness, and a bluish smoky light floated all around. And then a man came carrying a ladder on his shoulder. He was to light the roadside lamps. The gas-lamps didn't emit light. They created a sense of suspense and terror.

The night grew darker and the roads lonelier.

The lights from the neighboring windows were turned off one by one. All noise died and sleep seemed to descend in every room of that four-storeyed building that hid the moon from sight.

The evening ten o'clock bell sounded from the tram depot in the distance. Arundhuti began to grow restless. She had reached the climax of her long wait. She looked around carefully as she tip toed to the main door. The house lay quiet in sleep. She wrapped herself in a jet black sari, and in the pale moonlight, shielded by the dark veil, Arundhuti's petty face looked even more beautiful, full of melancholy and pathos. And yet, in the corner of those arrow-sharp eyes, lay hidden the poisoned breath of bitterness.

Covering up her child with the end of her own saree, Arundhuti came out of the house, and walked through the muddy narrow lane towards the lamppost that stood at the bend of the road.



She could recognize him from even that distance. She saw him pacing up and down impatiently. In hope and despair.

Who knows what telltale signs were hidden under her black veil but it instantly brought a glow to his face as he came forward, towards her.

'Come,' Arundhuti said in a clear voice. Immediately the man looked up in unbelievable surprise. What was Arundhuti saying? He had only wanted to see his own child, for a moment only, not any longer. He hadn't desired anything else.

'Come on,' Arundhuti repeated again.

'Will you come back? Will you be coming back Arundhuti?'

The earlier hopeless expression now lit up in joyous disbelief. 'I had known it,' he said slowly. 'I had known that you would come back, Arundhuti.'

Come back! Arundhuti's eyes lit up with sarcasm. She hadn't wanted to come back, after all, it was the entire world that was receding. It was forcing her and everybody else to move back.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

## EMBRACE (ANGAPALI)

Ramapada Chaudhuri

Sabita came back carrying a baby of eight months in her arms. She had to come back after what seemed a decade. Actually, it was probably not that long a time, maybe a year and a half or even less. And yet so many changes had occurred within this short span.

A fire had seared through the darkness that night. And with it, the sound of helpless wailing. The noise made by those blood-suckers and the desperate cries of the innocent people had filled the air. Sabita had woken up from her sleep and it seemed as if a terrible fear had gripped her. There was also an expression of fearful amazement in her parents' eyes. Their faces seemed as white as washed sheets, as they shrieked in panic. It was only a few moments' wait. And then those demons, had lunged forward, with a savage look in their eyes. Those dark, shadowy men. It was totally dark outside, even as it continued to rain heavily. But the frantic cries of the intoxicated crowd outside, drowned the music of the falling raindrops. They came closer now. Some of them were armed with fire torches, while others wielded daggers. And then something had happened which Sabita couldn't quite recollect now. Maybe she had lost consciousness. She had only watched with mute and innocent eyes. There was blood everywhere.

It was her family, her father, mother, brother and sister. How many lazy, melancholic afternoons she must have spent later, worrying about them, how many sleepless nights! Who knew whether they were still alive? Of course, they no longer existed in her life, maybe their days had regained colour even without her. Maybe they had even forgotten the dark stain of dishonour that had fallen on the otherwise untainted reputation of their family lineage, and built their life anew! They might have even forgotten her! Of course, she too had tried her best to forget them. Anyway, what

would she really gain out of this useless lamentation! This futile regret! Suddenly, one day she had realized that a tender rapture of motherhood had filled her entire body. There was an exquisite tiredness in her eyes. It might have been an unwanted and unwelcome child, not born out of love and affection, a mere product of hate and animosity. But still, it was as if she forgave the crime. It was, after all, her own flesh and blood, and she nursed it at her own breast and began to raise him with dreams for his future.

At this time a call came from somewhere. Some unknown people, accompanied by a police force had arrived and rescued her.

And then!

Sabita returned carrying an eight month old baby in her arms. Torn from tiredness and grief, she alighted from the police van, and stood on the road, still and silent, like a statue made of stone. The police van drove away, leaving only a haze of dust behind.

Letting out a deep sigh, she looked up once to see her mother. The very next minute her head bent down and her gaze turned to her feet. As if she felt an uneasiness to even raise her face.

‘Come.’

It was a short welcoming call from her mother. Perhaps sincere or maybe even helpless. Sabita couldn’t make out which one it was. She turned to look at her mother again. Yes, there were tears of concealed grief in those eyes.

It was then that she noticed that her mother was dressed in white. Did that mean that her father had died? No it couldn’t be true! Her beloved father! With a deep sigh, Sabita followed her mother into the house, with slow steps.

Her younger sister Kabita was in the room, staring with anxiety at her, her forehead resting on her hand. She was a young girl of about eleven years, innocent and ignorant of the hard realities of life, and yet a there was a look of uneasiness in her eyes. Sabita looked at her and smiled sadly.

She was at a complete loss for words. What should she say or ask? It was better to remain silent. After all, there was only one thing that she would remember or could be reminded of—the memory of those humiliating days of her past.

‘Come and sit here.’ her mother said. ‘Or else go and have a wash and take a little rest. In the meantime, let me go and get you something to eat.’

Sabita laughed to herself, but didn’t reply. It seemed that this feeling of restlessness and awkwardness was not pressing down on her alone, her mother too wanted to avoid her, and stay away from her sight.

As soon as her mother left the room, Sabita asked her sister to come closer. Smiling a little, she put her arm around her shoulder lovingly, and asked softly, ‘How have you been Kabita?’

Kabita nodded, signalling that she was well.

‘And Dada?’

It was a short query. What did it actually mean? Kabita could interpret it any way she liked. She could take it to mean ‘Where is Dada?’ or ‘How is Dada?’ or even ‘Is Dada alive?’

Kabita raised her eyes, in surprise

Sabita smiled sadly and said, ‘I see.’

Letting out a deep sigh, she again asked, ‘And Boku? Is Boku not here either?’

‘No, Chhorda has gone to college.’

Thank goodness, he was there.

Suddenly she grew restless. She forced a smile, and tried to look happy. She knew that she had to, and must now try and mingle with the rest of the family, just like those earlier times. Maybe this deliberate artificiality on her part would look and seem a little unnatural. But she had to break the wall that stood between her and her family. Otherwise if she continued to maintain a silent distance, then she might remain alien to them, and that would be far more painful and unbearable.

Looking relaxed and somewhat happy now, Sabita fondled her baby and kissed her. Laughing joyously she said, ‘Naughty baby, what are you staring at? Do you know who she is—do you?’

Kabita laughed and stretched out her arms to the baby. Sabita put the baby in her sister’s arms and embraced her, and pretending she was fondling her boy, she continued to play with her child, her left arm resting on her sister’s shoulders, while she ran her fingers lovingly through the baby’s soft hair. Her chest pressed against her sister’s back, but Kabita didn’t seem to be aware of that. She was very fond of little children, and after all, this was her sister’s son! But Sabita was longing to embrace her sister and hold her close to her heart. After all, it was after such a long time since she had her little sister so close. She felt restless with joy.

But hearing her mother’s sudden footsteps, the smile disappeared from her face, and she quickly lifted her baby from Kabita’s arms. Maybe all this fun and happiness and frivolity would seem extremely distasteful to her mother.

After a while, her mother walked into the room.

Pointing towards the baby Kabita said, ‘See, Ma, what beautiful eyes he has! And that naughty smile, did you notice that also?’

Maybe the young girl’s joyous spirit had touched her mother’s heart too, as a faint smile lit up her face.

Kabita turned to her sister and asked, ‘Didi, how old is he?’

Sabita didn't reply immediately. She felt somewhat uneasy in her mother's presence.

But when Kabita repeated the question again, she hurriedly said, 'eight months.' There was a stiffness in her tone.

'Gosh, he's just eight months old and he already feels so heavy. I can't even hold him properly! How chubby he is, isn't he Ma? I thought he was at least a year old!'

Kabita didn't seem to notice that there was no response from either her mother or her sister. Caught up in her own enthusiasm, she continued to talk all by herself.

'What have you named him Didi?' she asked.

'He doesn't have a name.' Sabita replied in a dry tone.

In other words, it wasn't possible to tell them the name that he already had.

Kabita's eyes lit up in wonder. 'What, you haven't named him yet?' she said. 'See Ma, what a jolly fellow he is. Tell me, what will you name him? Okay, I have got an idea. You know Didi, the lady next door has named her child Hashi, so we will call this child Khushi, agreed?' Kabita laughed aloud with joy.

Then turning to the baby, she said, 'Khushi dear, I'll marry you off to Hashi, all right? She is a pretty little girl. Ill bring her over tomorrow, and you can see her then!'

All this while, Sabita had been trying to maintain a seriousness. But she couldn't any longer. A smile was gradually beginning to show in her eyes.

'Go Sobi, go and have a wash.' Her mother said again.

Kabita turned towards her mother and charged her, 'What kind of a grandmother are you? You haven't held your grandson even once till now?'

Hearing this, her mother stretched out her arms to the baby. Sabita had just started walking towards the bathroom then. She turned back once from behind the door, and saw her mother take her child in her lap. It was as if a load suddenly left her heart! Sabita sighed a long sigh of relief, and turned back, with the music of tinkling bells playing in her ears.

On returning, she found Khushi was still lying in her mother's lap. Kabita was trying to snatch him from her mother's embrace, but her mother wouldn't just let go.

Pursing her lips, Sabita smiled to herself. She couldn't take her eyes off from this beautiful scene. It overwhelmed her heart.

It was true that Sabita was afraid of her mother. She was aware of her mother's superstitious and fastidious nature, and that is why, the apprehension. When the police had come to rescue her, she had pleaded with them. 'Please don't take me back' she had begged them earnestly. 'I am quite all right here,

and believe me, I don't want to go back home. And even if I do, why should my parents agree to take me back? After all, I have lost my religion and caste now, I have become an untouchable to them.' But the police hadn't listened to her. They had quoted law, and assured her that even if her parents were reluctant to take her back, there were orphanages that she could go to.

But seeing her mother holding her son lovingly now, she felt that all these days, she had not really known her mother that well. It was as if she truly recognized her for the first time, today.

It was strange how people changed in their lifetime! Memories of her own childhood came back to her mind. She remembered how after returning from school, she was not allowed to touch her mother or any other thing in the house, without changing her school dress!

Sabita felt somewhat relaxed now. 'Kobi, will you make me some tea please?'

Her mother turned around, 'Wait a minute, I'll just get you something to eat.' And with that promise, she left the room.

The evening sun had just started to fade. The dark shadows of the night were gradually spreading all around. It was at this time that Boku returned home, holding his books under his arm.

'Is that really you Didi?' he said, surprised.

'Yes, it's me.' Sabita laughed and said. 'Why, did you really think I was a ghost?'

Boku joined in the laughter. 'We had thought that you were not alive.'

'That would have been better, wouldn't it?'

'Rubbish. There's no comfort in dying.'

'Tell me, are you studying seriously nowadays, or are you still fooling around, like earlier times?' Sabita asked, laughing.

'Come on Didi, this is not a school, after all, I am going to a college now. Can one do without studying anymore?'

'Is that so? Sabita laughed.

Kabita butted in, 'What rubbish, he doesn't study at all! He's constantly gossiping with Shantada and whiling away his time!'

'So, so what if I do,' Boku stuck his tongue out at Kabita and went inside to keep his books.

After taking some light refreshment, Sabita lay down in the deck chair in the verandah. Her entire body was aching from fatigue and the day's pressures. Besides, her eyes felt heavy with sleep. She thought she would take a short nap, but soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

The evening shadows grew longer and at one time the breeze stopped blowing. The moon came up slowly in the start-lit sky. Hiding somewhere

behind the *krishnachura* leaves, a crow fluttered its wings. A few titmice flew past, crying out in a shrill note.

Sabita didn't get to hear their call. She didn't see anything either. Her head drooped over her shoulder, deep in sleep.

Boku and Kabita came and went back several times. They were waiting so eagerly to talk to their sister, after all, they had so many stories to hear from her. And so many stories to tell also. It had been only a year and a half but it seemed as long as a decade. So many events had taken place, so many changes had occurred. Would they not exchange all that news now? But Sabita was extremely tired. She was fast asleep. No, they didn't have the heart to wake her up yet. She would surely get up some time on her own.

It was some noise that woke Sabita up finally. She slowly opened her eyes and sat up.

The night had thickened outside. It was a silent, deserted night. She looked at the road ahead, and then turned her gaze to the houses far and near. And then she looked up at the sky.

A thin film of fog veiled the star-lit sky. The road below, shining like steel, lay quiet and desolate. A few lights could be seen in the windows of the buildings around.

Sabita stood up. Her throat felt dry.

Should she fetch some water herself, or should she call her sister?

She took a few light steps and paced up and down for a while. Khushi had possibly fallen asleep in the verandah itself. She felt a strange tingling in her breasts and remembered that she hadn't nursed Khushi yet. Or had they fed him with some bottled milk already?

She turned round slowly to enter the house. The rooms were all dark. A ray of light fell over the inner courtyard. After walking just a few steps, she stopped abruptly and hid behind the open door.

Her mother was standing there with her clothes dripping wet. Boku stood by her side.

Sabita heard her brother admonishing her mother. 'As it is you are unwell, on top of that you have had a bath again in this late evening hour.'

Looking a little embarrassed, her mother said, 'What else could I do, tell me? After all, I have been holding and cuddling the baby the whole day.'

'So what if you did!' Boku said, in a stubborn tone.

'Well,' Sabita heard her mother say 'just because she has raised him in her lap, it does not make him a child of this family, does it?'

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

# KINGS COME AND KINGS GO

## (RAJA ASHE, RAJA JAE)

Prafulla Roy

It was just after dawn. Razel was sitting on the porch of the east-facing room and shaking his legs. He was wearing a green *lungi* with yellow streaks on it and a netted vest. He had already combed his hair and had given it a fashionable parting. Waves of happiness lapped about in his heart. And it was not just today. The tide of happiness had occupied his heart for the past few months.

On the north and the west side of the house, there were two huge rooms. These had roofs of tin designed in a wave, arched walls made of *sal* timber and a cemented floor in a very foreign style.

From the point where Razel sat, stretched out a huge courtyard. On one side of the courtyard were lines of big hollow baskets filled with grain, and on the other side a *shiuli* tree. The courtyard led on to a slightly low-lying marshy land filled with shrubs of *pitkhira* and *sonal*. And then there was the pond. On the other side of the pond was the rice field. In the monsoons, the pond and the rice fields became one. It was still the same. There was nothing to demarcate the two.

A number of huge tin-roofed rooms, a massive courtyard, a pond and beyond it a stretch of about 90 acres of land providing a double harvest every season—this was wealth fit only for kings! And all these now belonged to Razel. Yet, about eight months back, where had he been? He didn't want to think about that now.

It was almost the middle of September. In August, the monsoons had washed the sky clean into a beautiful clear blue. And it still remained. There were puffs of white clouds floating around. The *shiuli* tree in the courtyard had adorned itself with a bounty of flowers. It had begun to bloom even before the arrival of autumn and still continued.



Soon the sun was out. The rays poured out like a flow of molten gold. Two birds with charming tufts on their foreheads flew in from somewhere and sat on the roof of the north-facing room. They rubbed their beaks against each other and seemed to argue about something. All around, in the east and in the west and wherever one looked, autumn seemed to have laid out a feast of beauty with its magic wand.

Rocking his knees in a relaxed mood, Razek had been absent-mindedly looking out in the direction of the rice fields. He had been doing this for the past few months. Just sitting there in the porch of the east-facing room and looking out lazily. It was a wonderful luxury. Or maybe, it had become a favourite past-time. Far away he could see the dot of a boat slicing through the rice fields. It wasn't very clear. Across the paddy he could only see a round prow, a dark black boatman and the gentle bounce of a long pole.

Every morning a large number of boats crossed the rice fields to travel in different directions. So Razek was not concerned about where that particular boat was going to go. Actually, he could concentrate neither on the mellow sun of October, nor on the tapping birds on the tin roof, nor on the floating clouds in the sky. He was thinking of himself—his long life of 30 years.

What a miserable life he had had! Eight months ago he couldn't even dream of wearing a netted vest, having a fashionable parting in the hair and sitting there rocking his knees, allowing himself to glide along in a flow of comfort and tranquility. He wouldn't have stumbled upon this good fortune if the country had not been divided into two, and if Baikuntha Saha and his family had not left this village of Chhriptipur.

He was still in his thoughts when he found to his surprise, that the boat from the rice fields had in reality entered his pond and anchored at the ghat.

Razek wrinkled his eyebrows and sat up straight. He wondered who could come calling on him in the morning. But he didn't have to wait long. The man who got off the boat was none other than Torab Ali, the wealthiest man in Chhriptipur.

He had about 200 acres of land that could be harvested three times a year. He had innumerable ploughs, about 50 or 60 cattle, about 40 boats, about 25 to 30 temporary labourers working for him round the year—paddy, jute, pulses, it was a grand affair!

Till about eight months ago Razek had worked for him as a temporary hand. Torab Ali was the head of this Chhriptipur village, and its most respected person.

He was not only wealthy, but also had a taste for style. Even at such an early hour he was immaculately groomed. He was wearing a silk lungi, a

milk white Punjabi, untanned leather shoes and his hair and moustache were dyed. Razek knew if he went closer he would be able to see the black surma in his eyes and feel the fragrance of attar all around him.

Had Torab Ali come to visit him? Razek wasn't sure. There could be nothing more surprising than someone like Torab Ali coming over to visit him. Puzzled, Razek sat there like a fool for sometime and then jumped up and ran to the ghat as fast as he could. Wringing his hands with extreme modesty he said, 'You!'

Stroking his beard with both hands, Torab Ali smiled a little. He said, 'Yes, I've come to visit you...'

*Hai!* Allah! Razek couldn't believe his ears. He just echoed, 'Visit me!'

'Yes, yes. Visit you!'

Razek didn't know what to say.

In a very light voice Torab Ali then said, 'Are you going to make me stand here forever? Aren't you going to ask me to come in?'

The tone was intimate. Razek had seen Torab Ali since his childhood. He had never heard Torab Ali speak in this manner before.

Anyway, Razek was embarrassed. He said, 'Yes, yes, do come in...'

Razek couldn't decide where to give him a seat or how to provide Torab Ali with the best hospitality. First he ran out and got a mat which he placed on the floor of the porch. But he didn't feel satisfied. So he wrapped it up and went and got a stool instead.

But Torab Ali did not sit down. He was quite satisfied with Razek's efforts to provide a fitting welcome. In a pleased voice he said, 'Don't be anxious, Razek. I'll sit in a while. First show me around the house...'

Razek was taken aback and quickly cast a suspicious glance at Torab Ali. Had the man come all the way to his place so early in the morning to have a look at his house? God alone knew what Torab Ali had in mind!

Torab Ali felt the suspicion in Razek's eyes. He gave an amused smile and said, 'Don't worry! I'm not going to take your property away from you. Your property will remain yours.'

Since Torab Ali had asked to be shown around the house, there was no way Razek could say, 'no.' With a mountain of suspicion, Razek showed him around the place.

Having seen everything in minute detail, Torab Ali now made himself comfortable on the stool. He asked, 'Do you have some tobacco?'

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<sup>1</sup> 'Hai' is an exclamation like 'Oh!' indicating a lament.

Razek should have thought of it and offered some. He would have. But his mind had become so clouded with suspicion that he had forgotten everything else.

Razek ran off and came back with the tobacco. Puffing at the hookah leisurely, Torab Ali said, 'Baikuntha Sha<sup>2</sup> has left his property under your care, hasn't he?'

The man's intentions were not clear. Razek held his breath and replied, 'Yes.'

Torab Ali pointed straight ahead and said, 'That pond belongs to Baikuntha Sha too, doesn't it?'

'Yes.'

'The land on the other side of the pond?'

'That too belongs to master Sha.'

'How much land does he have?'

'90 acres.'

'Is everything under your care now?'

In a faint voice Razek said, 'Yes.'

There was silence. Torab Ali rapidly inhaled from the hookah a couple of times and bellowed out the smoke in a steady stream. Then he said, 'It's about eight months since Baikuntha Sha has left the village, isn't it?'

The man had kept himself well informed. Razek replied in his earlier tone, 'Yes.'

'Do you know where they have gone?'

'I'd heard they were headed for Kolkata.'

'Have you heard anything from them?'

'No.'

'Have they written to you in the meantime?'

'No.'

Torab Ali remained silent for a while and thought with his brows knit together. Then he asked, 'What do you think?'

Razek didn't quite understand the question. He asked, 'About what?'

'Will Baikuntha Sha and his family return?'

'How can I answer that?'

Torab Ali didn't seem to hear Razek's reply. He spoke out, almost to himself, 'I have a feeling they will never return.'

Razek did not reply.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Sha' is the transliteration of the dialectal pronunciation of the surname Saha.

Torab Ali spoke again, 'If Baikuntha Sha and his family don't return, his entire land, houses, pond—everything will become yours. In fact, it has become yours already.'

Razek remained silent.

Torab Ali continued to enquire about Baikuntha Saha's land and property in detail. Then suddenly he said, 'Let me get on with the main purpose of my visit.'

Razek had been holding his breath anyway. Now he asked faintly, 'what purpose?'

'I would like you to come over to my place tomorrow to have a simple lunch with me.'

Razek wouldn't have been more stunned if he was struck by lightning. Torab Ali was the wealthiest, the most respected and the most honoured man in the village of Chhiptipur. Just a few days back Razek had worked for him as a temporary hand. And that Torab Ali had come to Razek in person to extend an invitation! Razek tried to say something but his voice was choked.

In the meantime Torab Ali, leaning on his hand, stood up. He said, 'So that is final. You are coming over in the afternoon.'

Almost in a trance, not very conscious of what he was doing, Razek tilted his neck in agreement.

Torab Ali said, 'Now don't you forget. We'll be waiting for you,' and walked away. He walked across the stretch of courtyard, then crossed the shrubs of *Sonal* and *Pitkhira* and reached the ghat. Soon his boat disappeared among the rice fields far away.

Razek continued to sit there for a long time. It didn't occur to him at all that he should have accompanied Torab Ali to the ghat. Actually, he had never been more stunned, more dumbfounded and more overwhelmed. And he had never been so frightened.

It seemed incredible that Torab Ali had come to visit him and had also invited him to lunch the next day. It was totally unimaginable that a person like Torab Ali could visit him and treat him with such respect. It was just a few months since the Baikuntha Shaha family had deserted their lands, that Razek had had some comfort. Just eight months ago he had led such a miserable life!

Sitting like a helpless fool on the porch of that east-facing room, Razek suddenly went back in time.

What a miserable life he had had! Very early in life he had lost both his parents. Ever since, he had wandered at the doors of Chhiptipur like a little puppy looking for food—sometimes at the door of the Mridhas, sometimes at the Sardars' and sometimes at the Khans'. His most frequent visits used to

be to the Hindu locality. At times he was given something, at times nothing. The only feeling he experienced at that time was hunger. It seemed to pursue him everywhere.

When he was a little older, he realized that it was not possible to live an entire life on the mercy of others. And it was not respectable either. So he got hold of some twine and a fishing hook. Then he begged around for a couple of strong bamboo poles. He used these to make a fishing net. And thus began the second phase of his struggle for survival.

In this country there was water round the year. If canals dried, there were ponds; and if ponds dried there were the brimming rivers. He roamed the waters with his fishing net and hook—the canals, the ponds, and even the river two miles away. He worked from morning till night and with the fish that he was rewarded with after a hard day's work, he rushed to the market at Inamganj. Having sold the fish, he would make his way to the poor Muslim settlement at a corner of Chhriptipur. After the others had finished cooking he would boil himself a meager meal. And then he would rest his tired back and fall asleep at one of the doorsteps.

Razek spent the whole year in the water. And if he found an opportunity he worked as a temporary hand for some family. He harvested the paddy for someone, carried the jute for another and so on. Most of the time though, he used to work for Torab Ali. And after the crop was harvested in January and February, he would go to the fields and look for grains that had escaped the eyes of the farmers. He used to pick these one by one and also pull out grains from the holes of the rats. He spent a couple of months comfortably from the collection.

Whether it was on land or on water, life for him was a merciless struggle. He didn't have much of a chance to spend time on land. And almost 12 months in water had cracked his skin open. His skin was perpetually flaked. His hair and beard were in tangles and his eyes had become dull and lifeless. The bits of clay that stuck at the corners of his nails turned into an infection. His hands were almost rotten from the constant contact with water and the skin between his fingers turned into raw sores. For him life had only one shade—sadness—an endless and all encompassing sadness.

What a miserable life Razek had had!

Spinning round and round the unending cycle of summer, winter, autumn and spring, Razek hadn't realised how 30 years had passed by.

One day, when he was waist deep in water, busy fishing, he noticed hordes of people gathering at the huge grounds in front of the school building. A group of people in multi-coloured clothes played some foreign music. Some people shook their heads vehemently, screamed at the top of their voices and gave long speeches. A new silk flag rose up towards the sky.

Razek had stared at the field in front of the school building with his lacklustre eyes. But when fireworks were lighted with enthusiasm at the same place in the evening, he was curious. He walked up with hesitation and asked, 'What's all this celebration for? Why are they bursting crackers?'

From among the crowd someone chided him, 'You fool, where have you come from? Let me have a look at you.' Surveying Razek from head to toe the man said, 'Oh! So it's our Razeika! Who else would ask such a thing? The water has taken away your brains. You don't keep yourself up to date...'

'Instead of beating around the bush, tell me what's happening...'

The man had explained. That was a memorable day—a day when the country had become independent. They had achieved not only independence, but also what millions of people had dreamt of and fought for—the establishment of Pakistan. This was a special day, different from all the millions of other dull and drab ordinary days. Such a day could not be allowed to pass by indifferently. It had to be welcomed with deep affection and great splendour. That was why there were so many people, such a lot of fire-works and such enthusiasm.

He had remained amongst that crowd in front of the school building till very late. It was all very new to him and he had loved it all—the cacophony, the excitement, the lights and the colours. But his happiness was for just one night. Next day he had to go down to the waters again.

It was almost a year since that marvellously special day. Suddenly, while fishing in the stinking waters in November, Razek heard that cracks had developed in the village of Chhiptipur. The Goshai family was apparently selling off its property and going off to Kolkata. After the Goshais it was the Bhumallars. And then one by one the Baruis, the Kumors, the Jugis, and in no time Chhiptipur was almost deserted.

An entire life in the waters had dulled Razek's senses to a large extent. He was not at all worried about who stayed back in the village and who left. His only worry in life was to reap the lively silver harvest from under the water.

Partition, the gorgeous celebrations of the Independence Day or the crack in the village community—these things affected Razek only mildly. He did not have the time to ponder over these. The reason was that he had to struggle so hard for survival that he had no strength or enthusiasm left to get excited about anything at all.

But he could not ignore the world around for long. One cool afternoon in late January, Razek was busy collecting grains from the fields. Suddenly old Baikuntha Saha came up to him.

Razek had asked, 'Do you want to tell me something Sha-mashai?'

'Yes,' Baikuntha Saha had nodded his head.

'Tell me.'

'We've decided to leave the village...'

'Where are you going?'

'Kolkata.'

'When are you going to be back?'

'Not sure.'

Razek didn't ask further questions.

Baikuntha Saha had then said, 'I have something important to tell you.'

'What?'

'When we're gone to Kolkata, I'd like you to look after our land and property. It's not that I'm asking you to do it without returns. The crops will belong to you. If we ever come back, we'd expect you to return the property to us. And if we don't come back, it'll be yours.'

Baikuntha Saha and his family did leave the village. His vast property and his huge wealth came into the care of Rezak. For the last eight months he hadn't had the need to glean for food on land and water. That was one relief. Comfort and happiness had wiped out the sores from his hands and nails. His flaky skin had now become soft and smooth. And his hair had become fashionably wavy. His tastes had also become refined. These days he wore only silk *lungis*, netted vests, and pristine white *punjabis*. And he felt uncomfortable without perfumed oil.

Recently he had been feeling thankful that the country had been divided and that Baikuntha Saha and his family had left. Without all that, fortune wouldn't have turned around for him so dramatically. And he would never have experienced such comfort and happiness!

His days passed by happily. But today he couldn't stop wondering why, of all people in Chhriptipur, Torab Ali had chosen to visit him. And not only visit him but also invite him home! God alone knew what he had in mind!

Torab Ali had come in person to invite him. It would be very rude to refuse. Yet he didn't feel comfortable about going either. The next day he thought about it from morning till afternoon. And then at some point, almost unconsciously, he had a shower, wore a bright *lungi* and *punjabi*, put on the shoes made from untanned leather and stepped onto the boat.

Torab Ali's house was on a kind of an island at the far end of the village. It wasn't an ordinary house—it was a cemented one. It spread over a large piece of land and there were numerous rooms, and people too.

When Razek crossed the paddy fields and reached there, it was well past noon. The sun was beginning to take on a yellowish hue.

No sooner than the boat reached the ghat, Torab Ali came rushing out. In a respectful tone he said, 'So you've finally arrived, *miyan!* I was wondering if you had forgotten...'

Razek couldn't reply. He was spellbound. Even till the other day, Torab Ali had used 'tui,' the lower form of 'you,' with him, and addressed him casually as 'Razeika'. And that was not very long ago. Even yesterday he had spoken to him using the lower form of address. He wondered what had happened overnight to make him so respectable. 'Tui' became 'tumi,' and 'Razeika' became '*miyan.*' Razek couldn't contain his astonishment.

Torab Ali said, 'Come in, come in...'

Silently Razek stepped off the boat. Accompanying him to the house Torab Ali continued, 'Why are you so late?'

Razek tried to mumble something, but what he said was unclear.

Torab Ali said, 'I would have waited for a little while more. And if you still hadn't turned up, I would have sent someone to fetch you.'

With great effort Razek disentangled his voice from within his throat and said, 'Yesterday you had visited me in person to invite me. I surely don't have the audacity to defy you.'

Torab Ali didn't reply. He just smiled.

Razek was taken into the house and made to sit on a clean bright carpet with great care. Immediately sherbet was brought in. And then came beetel nut and tobacco. The adults of the family—both male and female came and sat around him. The children stood in a cluster near the doorway.

Razek had begun to sweat. He couldn't forget that eight months back he had worked in this house as a temporary hand. He had cut the paddy from the field, helped to process the jute and so on. Torab Ali and his family seemed to have forgotten all that. At least that was what was evident from the elaborate hospitality they had organized. Today he was their much respected guest.

Torab Ali said, 'Come on, *miyan,* have some sherbet. Lunch isn't ready yet—still a couple of items to be cooked.'

The other members of the family agreed, 'Yes, yes, drink ...'

With trembling hands Razek picked up the glass of sherbet.

After sherbet came tobacco. Torab Ali took a few puffs from the hookah and handed it over to Razek.

Razek had recoiled with embarrassment. Waving both his hands and shaking his head from side to side he repeated, 'No! no! no! no!...'

Torab Ali almost stuffed the hookah in his hands and said, 'Come on, *miyan!* Take it. Why are you behaving like a woman?'



Lowering his head, Razek replied in a faint voice, 'I can't smoke in front of you! No! No! No!...'

'So what? Go on ...'

After great insistence, Razek turned his back towards Torab Ali and took a couple of quick puffs. Then he handed over the hookah to the person nearest to him and turned round again.

After the sherbet and tobacco they began to chat. They talked about Partition, the crack in the communal harmony of the village, paddy, the Monsoons—almost everything. But most of the conversation revolved around Baikuntha Saha and his property.

In the meantime the day had moved on. The sun had dipped considerably along the incline of the western sky. And then came the news that food was finally ready.

Torab Ali was apologetic. 'It's quite late in the day. And it's been a long wait. We've given you a lot of trouble, *miyan*,' he said.

Razek said, 'Oh! It's no trouble at all.'

'Come, come. Let's go.'

Lunch had been arranged in the inner chambers of the house. And it was a grand affair. There were five or six different kinds of fish, meat, rice pudding, rice pudding, special big flute-like bananas, and condensed yellowish milk with a thick layer of cream on top.

Razek was being given company by Torab Ali and a few other elderly members of the family. As they ate they again spoke about Baikuntha Saha and the possibility of their return.

Razek, of course, didn't speak much. He was so stunned and puzzled by everything that apart from a polite 'yes' and 'no', he hardly said anything.

Razek was eating with his head bent down. Suddenly, when he looked up sideways in response to a comment by one of Torab Ali's elderly uncles, he noticed something at a window on the other side. It was Kamran. She was Torab Ali's daughter. Her skin was golden, and her eyes, nose and chin were wide and pointed at the tips. Her face was heart-shaped. Her small forehead was covered with a cascade of thick curly hair, and her lips were fine and dainty. She was like a princess from a fairy tale.

The girl had probably been staring at them all this while. The moment their eyes met she gave a sweet but embarrassed smile and went away.

Razek wasn't seeing Kamran for the first time. He had seen her a number of times when he had come here to work as a daily labourer. She was a very proud girl. She was proud of her looks and she was proud of her status. The whole world seemed to be at her feet. And those not up to her standard were not considered as humans.

So it was most miraculous that Kamran was capable of smiling the way she did.

By the time they finished their food and came back to their carpets in the living room, it was dusk. Razek said, 'I should take your leave now.'

Torab Ali didn't stop him. 'Fine, but do come over again,' he said and accompanied him to his boat at the ghat.

By now it was very dark. And there were millions of fire-flies all around. A mild October breeze blew aimlessly.

As he rowed his boat through the rice fields, the old thought came back to Razek. What was the actual reason behind Torab Ali's hospitality and respect for him? Was it some kind of a trap? Did he ultimately want to grab all the land and property that Baikuntha Saha had left behind?

The invitation that had begun so unexpectedly continued till early December. For some reason or the other he had to visit Torab Ali's house every now and then. And each time he received the same grand welcome, affection and respect as he had the first time.

Razek had noticed that these days Kamran didn't appear before him. He just caught glimpses of her through the window while having his food or having a chat. Yet, about eight or ten months back when he used to visit their house to work for them, the proud girl used to strut around with her glittering beauty and flashing pride. Razek was confused at the change that had come about her. He thought very hard, but found no answer.

Finally it was clear. One morning around the middle of November, Torab Ali visited him and said, 'There's something important that I need to discuss with you...'

All this while Torab Ali had only extended invitations and provided him with splendid hospitality. Apart from aimless chatter he hadn't brought up any serious topic. But Razek had a feeling that he was going to say something—something that was of very specific interest to Torab Ali. So Razek couldn't sleep well. It was like a sharp thorn stuck in his chest.

God alone knew what Torab Ali's important discussion was! Razek held his breath and looked at him. Torab Ali said, 'You've seen my daughter Kamran, haven't you?'

Totally puzzled, and having no clue about what the man meant, Razek nodded, 'Yes...'

'I'd like you to be married to her...'

Razek was severely jolted, 'What are you saying, big *miyan*...'

Torab Ali asked, 'Why? What have I said?'

'You are such a big man, and your family is such a respectable one! And till the other day I've been working for you! To be wedded to the daughter of such a person! No, no...'

'Forget about having worked for me, *miyan*. And if you speak of big men and respected families, I must say that you are no less in any way. You have all the land and property that Baikuntha Saha had. So what do you lack? You have risen in status, *miyan*...'

Very hesitantly Razek said, 'But...'

'What is it now?'

'What would people say about you if you have your daughter wedded to me?'

'No rascal will say anything. No one has the audacity to speak out. Besides...'

'What?'

'I want to make sure that my daughter has the best of comforts. Who else other than you has such huge property and such a lovely house? I don't care about what people say.'

This was unbelievable! Absolutely incredible! So that was why Torab Ali had been working so hard—such respect and such elaborate food! He wanted Rzek to be his son-in-law! Floating on cloud nine, Rzek said, 'Then what can I say? What ever you think fit...'

After some thought Torab Ali said, 'I would like the wedding to take place as soon as the crops are harvested...'

Rzek did not reply. He sat there with his head bowed.

Then Torab Ali said, 'So that's final. I'll leave now...'

Rzek continued to sit there even after Torab Ali left. He was so thankful that the country had been divided and that Baikuntha Saha and his family had left the village. Otherwise he wouldn't have stumbled upon such a good fortune.

The harvest season started around early December. By the time the crops were cut, threshed, bound and arranged in those big baskets, it was the middle of February. Then Torab Ali appeared again. The harvest is done, so now it's time to inform the priests...'

Picking at his nails, Rzek had said, 'As you wish...'

After some thought Torab Ali asked, 'What's the day today?'

'Wednesday...'

'I'll send you the boat on Saturday afternoon. Come over to our place. In the meantime I'll inform the priests and others and they'll be there too. And on that day we'll finalise plans about the wedding, dowry and so on.'

Razek said, 'Don't worry about sending the boat. I'll come over...'

Torab Ali did not agree. Shaking his head vehemently he said, 'You'll be coming for an auspicious occasion. How can I not send the boat? You deserve respect.'

After Torab Ali left on Wednesday, the days seemed to be never-ending. Razek spent restless days with uncontrollable excitement in every cell of his body.

However, days did pass—Thursday and then Friday. From Saturday morning, time seemed to stand still. The sun seemed to rise much later than usual, and when it did, it travelled extremely slowly. It seemed to take the sun ten hours to traverse one hour!

Razek paced up and down and every now and then looked out towards the rice fields far away. He had lost count of the number of times he had looked out in that direction.

This March there was no water on the fields. But there was a big canal by the field. And that canal flowed into the pond of Baikuntha Saha. Torab Ali's boat would arrive through that canal.

However slowly time moved, at some point noon did arrive. And then Razek noticed the round prow of a boat on the canal. Immediately he felt a storm in his heart and the random strumming of a musical instrument. This was not any ordinary two-oared boat. It was the legendary peacock-shaped barge of the princess from the fairytales.

In no time the boat was at the ghat. Razek had been following it with great enthusiasm. He was wondering if he should go down to the ghat.

But before he could complete his thoughts, the man who stepped off from the boat was someone whom he hadn't seen even in his dreams in the past three or four months. Razek shuddered. He wouldn't have been more horrified if he had been hit by lightning. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

Baikuntha Saha was not alone. There was someone else with him too. From his looks Razek had a feeling he was a Muslim. He seemed to be around 60 years old.

From the ghat, Baikuntha Saha, along with his companion, headed straight for the house. He was very happy to find Razek. He said, 'It's so nice to see you here, Razek! I hadn't thought I would find you as soon as I arrived. So, how are you? Are you keeping well?'

Razek stood there paralysed like a man struck by lightning. He somehow managed to say, 'You, Sha moshai!'

Baikuntha Saha said, 'Yes, it's me. I couldn't inform you know in advance. There was an unexpected opportunity and I came over.'

'Where were you all this while?'

'In various places. Kolkata, Bongan, Dutta Pukur—countless places. Finally I've settled down in Murshidabad.' As he spoke Baikuntha Saha became aware of his companion and said, 'Have a seat, Amin saheb. Razek, get him a stool or something, and if you can arrange for some tobacco as well...'

When the stool was brought, Amin saheb sat down. Baikuntha Saha sat down too on one side of the verandah. Then they started chatting. The situation of the country, the people in the village, the people who had left the village and so on—Baikuntha Saha had been asking a series of questions. Razek was feeling faint and he gave the answers in a lifeless voice.

After having spoken at random for sometime, he came to the main point. 'So, have you been looking after the house properly?'

Razek was not sure why Baikuntha Saha had returned after such a long time. And that too on a day when his wedding plans were going to be finalized. Absent-mindedly Razek replied, 'See for yourself how it has been maintained...'

Immediately Baikuntha Saha stood up. He called out to Amin saheb and said, 'Come on! On our way, from the boat, I had shown you my land. Now have a look at my house...'

Baikuntha Saha showed Amin saheb around the house. Razek did not accompany them. He continued to sit there with heart-stopping anxiety and breathless anticipation. His heart throbbed like the blows from a husking pedal.

After such a long time Baikuntha Saha hadn't brought his family along with him, but he had brought Amin saheb. Amin saheb did not seem to belong to this part of the country. Razek would have known. How was this Muslim man related to Baikuntha Saha? On the way he had shown Amin saheb his agricultural land, and now he was showing him around the house—everything seemed very mysterious to Razek. He didn't understand what was happening.

After a while they came back. Taking a seat on the porch, Baikuntha Saha asked, 'How did you find the house?'

Amin saheb said, 'Good.'

'Do you like it?'

'Yes.'

While speaking with Amin saheb, Baikuntha Saha suddenly remembered something. He looked around at Razek quickly and said, 'By-the-way, I haven't yet introduced Amin saheb to you. He is a friend of mine from Murshidabad.' Then he said to Amin saheb, 'and this is Razek *miyan*. He is a very reliable man. When we left the country, we had left behind all our land and property in his care. Look how well he has maintained these.'

Amin saheb didn't say anything. He just nodded his head.

After the introductions Baikuntha Saha said, 'You know Razek, we are not going to return to this country any more. That is why I've brought Amin saheb with me. Do you understand why he's come?'

Razek nodded, meaning he hadn't understood.

Checking carefully that there was nobody around to hear him, Baikuntha Saha said in a low voice, 'I'll donate all my land and property to Amin saheb. The fact of the matter is...'

'What?'

'Amin saheb doesn't want to stay in India. He is going to donate to us whatever land and property he has in Murshidabad. And I shall give him whatever I have in Pakistan. There's going to be an 'echchange'. And Baikuntha Saha explained to Razek in Bengali the meaning of 'exchange.'

Razek was going to say something in reply, but in the meantime two of Torab Ali's boatmen came and stood there. They said, 'Come on, *miyan* saheb, be quick. We've been slightly late in arriving...'

Baikuntha Saha was going to donate his entire property to Amin saheb. Razek wasn't sure if there was any reason for him to go to Torab Ali's house after having heard this piece of information. All in all, he wasn't in the frame of mind to think anything clearly.

In the meantime the boatmen kept on urging him to hurry. Suddenly Razek thought of Torab Ali's warm behaviour. He remembered his hospitality. Razek thought since Torab Ali had proceeded so far in the plans for wedding, he would probably not want to go back on his word.

Razek stood up almost in a trance. He told Baikuntha Saha, 'You relax for a while, Sha moshai, I'll be back soon...' and along with the two boatmen stepped on to the boat.

The moment they reached Torab Ali's house they saw that grand arrangements had been made for the occasion. The house was teeming with people. The priests had already arrived! There were people from the house of the Sardars, the Khans and the Mridhas. No respectable family in Chhipipur had gone unrepresented.

The moment Razek entered, there was great celebration. There was a sprinkling of rose water, then came the stimulants—betel leaves and tobacco. And then came the fragrant essence of flowers—attar. In the midst of all this, people joked, passed witty comments, and laughed out at comments on love and romance.

Razek didn't seem to hear anything. Or see anything either. Thoroughly overwhelmed by his strange situation he sat there, lifeless.

Torab Ali had been noticing Razek. He was very happy today. There was a touch of romance in his heart too. So he couldn't resist the temptation of poking some fun at his son-in-law to be. He sat very close to Razek and said, 'Why are you so quiet on a day such as this? What's the matter?'

Immediately, almost unconsciously, Razek blurted out, 'Baikuntha Sha has come back today.'

Torab Ali was jolted, 'Baikuntha Sha has comeback.'

'Yes, and he has brought with him someone called Amin saheb. Apparently he is going to write off all his land and property to him.'

In seconds, the room became completely silent. After a long silence Torab Ali said, 'Then what's the point in talking about the wedding? Whatever Khuda does, He does for the best. Thankfully, Baikuntha Sha came back today...' saying this, he stood up and with long strides walked off into the inner chambers of the building.

In a while, one by one, everyone was gone—the priests and the respected people of the village. Razek sat quietly in the empty room for some time and then came out.

Days came and days went.

Razek went back to the waters again with his fishing net, hook and twine. Once again he started looking for left-over grains from the fields in Autumn. In no time the skin of his feet cracked, the flesh between the fingers of his hands became full of raw sores and his skin began to flake.

These days when Razek is out looking for fish and grains of paddy, he speaks to himself and says, 'The country gets divided; the Sahas, the Bhui-malis and the Jugis leave the village; one king goes and another king comes; but how does that affect you? How does it affect you?'

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## THE STORY OF SONADAS BAUL (SONADAS BAULER KATHAKATA)

Imdadul Haq Milan

Sonadas lived at the back of the bazar, in the warehouse that belonged to Gaganbabu. A strip of cold floor behind gunny bags stuffed with paddy and rice. He had made a mattress out of two such bags cut open at the seam. Near his head were a couple of bricks brought from the school building. He had stolen these two bricks. That was last year.

During the monsoons the previous year, a big barge full of thousands of bricks had arrived from Fatulla. For quite a few days the labourers were seen moving with their burden of bricks and piling them up in neat rows on the grounds of the local school. As soon as the rainy season was over the construction began. A huge verandah had come up to the north of the compound. Little brats clutching their books under their armpits, now went to read in this school.

Sonadas had stolen the pair of bricks from the grounds of this school. One evening on his way back from the races and finding an opportune moment, Sonadas had returned to the godown with those carefully chosen bricks under either arm. Gaganbabu was then sitting on the *gadi* puffing at a *bidi*. Two or three merchants were sitting on the bench. The boat had come in with the ebb and these merchants had arrived in it. Gaganbabu sat bargaining with them. He would buy the grain if the price suited him. At present, the price of grain was rather high. The merchants sat with glum expressions, and would not look at Gaganbabu.

Though Gaganbabu was extremely sweet spoken, he was cunning to the core. Compared to the other three warehouse owners, Gaganbabu had always bought grain at the cheapest rate. He would offer the merchants now a cigarette, then a *bidi* and in a jiffy gain their confidence and respect. Camaraderie first, bargaining afterwards. He would treat them to the best fish



available in the market. Although this made him the butt of ridicule and object of discussion in the eyes of the other godown owners, Gaganbabu couldn't care less. What did it matter was what they said! People would talk! In fact, their chatter was their pastime.

Gaganbabu would go on with his own work. Businessman he was and business was his only pursuit. Therefore money and more money. The warehouse was always full. Sack upon sack. With bundles of notes stacked in the iron safe, Gaganbabu sat like a mother hen. And year after year he would transfer his wealth to Kolkata across the border where his family lived; his wife, his children. He even bought a three-storeyed house there. It was rumoured that one day he too would leave everything and go there.

Then what would happen to Sonadas?

One day Sonadas had even ventured to broach the topic. 'The folk say ye'll go off to Kolkaitta?'

'Who told yer, hah?' said Gaganbabu with a puff on his *bidi*.

'The folk in the bazar.'

'Folk may say so many things.'

Gaganbabu smiled. He had a lovely smile. Over three scores in age, he had not lost a single tooth. Everyday he used a *neem* twig to brush his teeth which flashed every time he smiled. On his shiny bald head he had just a few strands of hair which were as white and as fine as the *kash* flowers and gently fluttered in the breeze that came down from the river. He had a bright complexion and a flabby body. He always wore a white dhoti and a banian. The sacred thread, the mark of a brahmin, hung from his neck.

Gaganbabu's family belonged to the upper caste: the Chakrabartys. He hailed from Malkhanagar. Malkhanagar was quite a famous place where many of the high caste Hindus of Bikrampur lived. It was said of the Boses' house that it contained 52 narrow corridors. The Boses left for Hindustan after the Partition. The house where Gaganbabu's family lived was quite close to the Boses'. After the Partition, Gaganbabu sent his wife, children and everyone else in the family to Kolkata while he himself preferred to be left behind. The ancestral warehouse was situated in Lauhajang Bazar. He dealt in paddy and rice and did not want to leave his wealth and business behind. Now people were saying Gaganbabu too would leave one day, after making suitable arrangements. This had become the convention with well-to-do Hindu families who were left behind in East Bengal.

But Gaganbabu did not acknowledge this. In his East Bengal accent he said, 'I never shall leave this land. I was born here, I grew up here. This is my native land. Why should I leave it? No, I will not. I feel so attached to it.'

Sonadas knew Gaganbabu was a good talker. With his tongue he could conquer the world. A businessman who had once spoken to him found it impossible to sell his merchandise to any other wholesaler. Gaganbabu could do anything for money.

Yes he knew; Sonadas knew everything. But what was the use? He did not disclose all this to anyone. Gaganbabu would be furious if he came to know, and if the babu was displeased with him he would lose not only his place but also the advance payment he sometimes got and his provisions in the days of dire need. Then what would Sonadas do? If Gaganbabu drove him off he would not even have a shelter over his head. Where would he go when he grew old? He was not unaware of all that went on in this godown. Nothing escaped Sonadas's eyes; he also heard everything but puffed at his *bidi* in silence. He was helpless.

During the last monsoon a merchant arrived with his paddy. He looked quite like a bandit. He was an old acquaintance of Gaganbabu's. Sonadas had seen the man once or twice before. He had twisted whiskers and shaggy hair. He had small twinkling eyes like those of a cat. But they had a sharp look that made anyone he looked at shiver in fright.

One night, this man arrived. It had been raining heavily since that morning. The shopkeepers had closed their shutters early in the evening. In a few stationery and grocery shops lanterns burned dimly. Sonadas had finished with his evening meal quite early. He sat enjoying his *bidi*. Sitting on his *gaggi* Gaganbabu was deeply engrossed in writing down the accounts in the red-covered account book. The shawl he wore was nearly 50 years old. The rain had cooled down the earth. There were sudden gusts of wind. The wind was also whistling through crevices of the tin room. On such an evening the man appeared. He stood outside and bellowed hoarsely 'Hasn't the Babu come?'

'Whozzat?' said Gaganbabu, without lifting his head from the account book.

'Dealer!'

'Come in,' and Gaganbabu at last shut the account book.

The man pushed open the wooden door and stepped in. Lifting up his arms and placing together the palms dramatically like the hero in a *jabra*, he said, 'Namaskar Dada.'

Gaganbabu seemed to be elated sky high as he said excitedly, 'I am honoured. Come in, come in.' and he started dusting the white mattress on which he had been sitting. Oh, do sit down, do sit,' he said.

The man sat down a bit hesitantly. He took in the room with eyes that glowed like a cat's. Sonadas was crouched like a bush on his coarse bedding behind the sacks of paddy. The place was thick with darkness. Just a short distance away the lantern on Gagnbabu's *gaggi* glimmered with a faint glow which lighted up a small area but did not reach up to where Sonadas was.

Sonadas peered through the curtain of darkness and took a look at the fellow. His *bidi* was nearly burnt out. With a last puff on it Sonadas threw it away through the gap in the fencing. Just then Gaganbabu called, 'Sonaaa, come here. Get some tea for the merchant.'

Sonadas stretched himself. He had an old tattered wrapper that he used to cover himself with in winter. It was kept pretty much within his reach, and wrapping it round him, Sonadas slowly went up and stood before Gaganbabu. The man had by then made himself snug and cosy. He had lifted his legs up onto the mattress and seemed quite at home. They were discussing something in low tones and stopped on seeing Sonadas. 'Go tell Manik to bring two cups of fascelass<sup>1</sup> tea,' said Gaganbabu.

Behind the gap in the door Sonadas could see the rain pouring hard. Falling thick and black. Would Manik have his shop open at such an hour? And even if he had, where would he get customers?

'My master, I think Manik's shop is closed,' said Sonadas.

'O let be, I don't need tea,' said the trader.

Letting out a cry of protest, Gaganbabu said, 'Go and wake up Mainka and mention my name to him.'

Upon this Sonadas vanished into the rainy darkness without uttering a word of protest. Along with the rain there was also the wind coming from the direction of the river Padma. How cold it was! It seemed to penetrate his wrapper and dig into his skin.

In such foul weather Sonadas usually took a big gunny bag and like a small boat turned upside down, used it to cover his head. He had it on, but still the spray sprinkled his face.

Manik was not asleep. With one shutter of the shop loosened, he was sitting with his cash box. Making up his accounts, counting his dough. A pariah of the bazar had curled up under the tin cornice in an attempt to protect itself from the downpour. Sonadas's footfalls did not make him so much as raise his head.

Seeing Sonadas, Manik grinned broadly, "What news, Bauldada?"

'The boss, he wants two cups of tea,' said Sonadas.

'Who comes so late in the night in the boss's room?'

'Merchant comes.'

Manik promptly made the tea in a glass. He stirred it noisily with a dirt-black spoon and gave it to Sonadas in two cups. 'It's okay to return the cups tomorrow, Bauldada,' he told him.

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<sup>1</sup> A common mispronunciation of 'first class'.

'All right.' And with careful strides, holding the tea, Sonadas returned to the warehouse.

Over the tea, and in low tones, Gaganbabu immersed himself in some deep and absorbing discussion with the trader. About three times the man roared with laughter. Then he said, 'Send him quick, it's getting late. Such a foul night.'

Gaganbabu said, 'Aye, let's wait till the rain weakens a bit.'

'But it takes some time to go and come back?'

'True.'

Again Gaganbabu called Sonadas. 'Sona, There's another thing you have to do.'

Sonadas was always ready to his slightest bidding. No matter how late into the night, no matter how rainy and windy it was, Sonadas was never tired of working for the babu.

'Yes, say it.'

The master descended from his seat. The businessman had lit a cigarette.

'Can you fetch Alta?' The babu whispered huskily.

Sonadas nodded assent and responded unhesitatingly, 'If you say it, there's nothing I can't do.' And he sounded quite naïve.

'Then go.' The babu was visibly glad. "Tell her she'll have to stay the whole night.'

'Where?'

'In your bed.'

'How many people?'

'Only this man.'

Gaganbabu thrust into Sonadas's hand a ten rupee note. 'I give this as advance payment, for otherwise she will not come. The wench has increased her price these days.'

Sonadas went out with the money. The downpour had lessened a bit. The larger drops were no more. Just a soft drizzle. Just as the wives and daughters of the household with their soft and smooth hands sprinkle water on the accumulated dust of the courtyard before sweeping it, so it seemed that someone was sprinkling the raindrops. The breeze was still blowing chill and keen, boring holes in the skin and delving into the body.

He felt cold, too cold. Shivering and guessing his way in the dark, he walked on carefully. Although he had the boat-shaped gunny bag on his head and the wrapper round his body, he could neither ward off the unrelenting rain, nor the chill. In spite of it all, he had to go, since it was Gaganbabu's orders.

So Sonadas walked on, guessing his way in the dark.

There was no prospect of any sleep that night. There would be filthy, immoral activity in the warehouse, right there on his bed. True, Gaganbabu had no such inclination. He was advanced in years and desire was long dead. To get the goods from the merchant at a cheap rate, would be his only profit.

But what would Sonadas get?

O yes, he too would get something, some benefit. He owed his existence to Gaganbabu. It was he who provided him with a place to stay in and gave him this and that, money and provisions for the little errands he did for him. When the opportunity came Sonadas even indulged in small acts of dishonesty of which Gaganbabu never had the slightest clue. Thousands of tonnes of grain were stored in the warehouse. The little that Sonadas could pilfer from it stretched a long way for him. He was old, solitary and shorn of fleshly desire. There was a time when he would spend his days singing and busking in the bazar. The title 'baul'<sup>ii</sup> was appended to his name and thus his days went by. Now he was in his twilight years and his voice had lost its tunefulness. No one tossed him a coin when he sang. Instead they either laughed, or hurled abuse at him.

No sooner had he come near Alta's place than an idea crossed his mind. The babu had given him an oblong biscuit-like crispy ten rupee note as advance to Alta. Sonadas had it in his breast pocket.

What if he did not give her this money?

A subtle plan spread through his head like a spider's web. He would coax and cajole Alta to accompany him and would not tell her about the advance payment that the babu had sent her. In any case she would be given more money, at least ten rupees, when she returned in the morning and would surely be pleased with that and would not utter a word of complaint. She would never guess that she had been given ten more rupees as advance and that Sonadas had devoured it.

Highly pleased with himself, Sonadas lit a *bidi*. If he were caught he would think of something to say... that Alta had not asked for an advance. And he would say to Alta, 'I forgot I was sitting on your money.'

And if he was not caught!

Having planned this far, he passed his hand under his wrapper and quickly touched the note in his pocket. His palm got warm. The heat of money. Like fire.

Sonadas walked on happily.

Their house was just on the outskirts of the village near the marketplace. Not much of a house; just a thatched room, a few plantains and about four square feet of open space. The family comprised of only Alta and her old

mother. When she was very young Alta had been married to a *lathial* who used to go off to take possession of the new sandbanks that arose in the river Padma. This he did for the *mahajan*, and that is how one day he met his end. Alta was then a full-bloomed young woman. Her buxom body was like the Padma at full tide. Who would satisfy the hunger of this young woman? Who would provide her meals three times a day?

Such being the circumstances, what else was there for her to do but become a prostitute? There was this double need, that of hunger, the other of the flesh. Now she worked as a maid in various households during the day and at night she became the call girl. Her nights were spent in the bazar, now in this bedroom, now in some other. God was on her side for He had rendered her sterile. Or else she would have got pregnant every year and her body would by now hang loose. No customer would have paid an advance for lying with her.

Sonadas knew all there was to know about her. One day Alta had related to him the story of her woes. But what could Sonadas do? He too was a confirmed sufferer. He had never known anyone he could call his own. He only knew this bazar. Only this he could call his own.

With such thoughts on his mind and letting out a sigh, Sonadas walked on.

On reaching the steps of the house where Alta lived, Sonadas lighted another *bidi*. Getting ten rupees just like that was no joke. The very thought made Sonadas feel like puffing away throughout the night. There was no prospect of getting any sleep, so what else could he do but smoke?

Sonadas stood in the courtyard and puffed away at his *bidi*. He listened intently for any sound from inside the room. Sometimes Alta sent her old mother to spend the night in someone else's house and slept in the room with her client. This arrangement was meant for those customers who had no place for sleeping with wenches. In such circumstances Alta demanded more money.

No, there wasn't any one like that in Alta's room then. There was no sound of voices. Behind the hut he could hear the sound of raindrops falling on banana leaves. The crickets chirped continuously. From the direction where the ground sloped away, frogs could be heard croaking.

Much relieved, Sonadas cleared his throat. Alta was not sleeping, "Who's there?" she cried from inside the shack.

'This is Sonadas. Not sleeping, Alta?'

'No. What's up, now!'

'Get up! Got to go to the bazar.'

'To whom?'

'To Gaganbabu's place. Business come. Will give you good money.'

Sonadas concocted the money bit. Without such temptation Alta may not agree to venture out in such foul weather and at such an hour. Then the ten rupee note...

Much to his delight, however, Alta got up to go. She whispered a few words to her mother and came out. Sonadas could feel his heart leaping like a frog at the thought of getting that tenner.

'From where does the trader arrive?' asked Alta as she stepped out.

'Can't say.'

So saying Sonadas happily walked on with Alta, smoking his *bidi* all the time. They could not see each other's face, yet how joyfully they walked on together!

'Feeling cold, Bauldada,' said Alta with a sudden shiver.

'Want my wrapper?'

'You will give me your wrapper, Bauldada, ... but won't you feel cold?' and Alta giggled noisily.

'Never mind.'

'No, let it be. You are old. You should not be cold. Give me a *bidi*.'

At any other time Sonadas would not have complied with such a request. But now he was in a good mood. He had earned ten rupees; and that was due to Alta. So what if he spared her a *bidi*! He got out a *bidi* and gave it to her.

'Light it for me,' she said.

Sonadas lit it. Just then from somewhere was heard the cry of a night fowl and from the direction of the bazaar, the bark of a dog.

'Say something Bauldada, it's boring to walk so silently,' said Alta, smoking her *bidi*.

'What should I say? Tell me.'

'Something, anything.'

'I don't know anything, sister.'

'Tell me about yourself.'

'About myself... there's nothing to say.'

'People have so much to say... about good times and bad times.'

'For me there's no happiness, no sorrow.'

'Can there be anyone without joy or sorrow?'

'There can be.'

'Tell me who.'

'Here, myself,' Sonadas laughed.

'Pah! Don't play the fool, Bauldada,' said Alta, smoking her *bidi*, 'Tell me.'

'What should I say?'

'Why didn't you get married?' Alta laughed aloud.

The way the wench laughed! Although Sonadas felt a bit angry, he controlled his feelings for it would not do to fall out with Alta. Suppose she went and tattled to the babu about the money?

'What's the matter? Why don't you say something? Then I won't go.'

Sonadas got apprehensive and with a sigh said, 'How should I get married? Who would give away their daughter to such a one as me?'

'Why not? Why shouldn't they?'

'How would they? What have I got?'

'Didn't you have someone you loved?'

'Na. Who would have love for me? I don't have anyone in the world. No mother, no father. Didn't see no one since I was born. Almost a fakir, had to beg for food. No one spares anything for old people. But for babu, I would have lain dead in the bazar.'

After this, Alta did not speak at all.

Sonadas vividly remembered that night. The businessman spent the night on his bed with Alta and Sonadas sat with the pariah in front of Sultan's shop in the bazar, on the bench that was made with four poles and a plank of wood about nine inches wide. Sonadas sat smoking. Throughout the dark rainy night the boatswain carried bags of grain into Gaganbabu's *gaddi*. Never before had goods been delivered in the dead of night. Why was it being done then?

The next day Gaganbabu had told him not to tell anyone that goods had arrived in the warehouse at night and he had again pushed into Sonadas's hand a ten rupee note. It was a lucky day for Sonadas: 20 rupees in 24 hours.

No, he had not. He had not breathed Gaganbabu's secret to a soul. After a long time he had learned that those were stolen goods. The man with the feline eyes had killed the oarsmen and the *mahajan* and escaped with the big barge full of goods. But nothing had happened to Gaganbabu. Everything was sold within two days. God knows how much money he made.

Yes, Sonadas remembered it all. But he never told anyone, for if he did, he himself would be the loser. Gaganbabu would drive him off. Then where would Sonadas go at this age? Go to whom? There was no place for him anywhere in the world.

One evening there was a huge moon up there in the sky. Sonadas was then on the banks of the river. It must be the time of full moon and seeing the moon already big and round, Sonadas returned to the warehouse. The whole world was flooded with moonlight. Despite his age, he found it



pleasantly exciting. Merrily smoking his *bidi*, he returned to the *gaddi*. No sooner than he reached the place, he got the news.

Gaganbabu sat there dejectedly. He was wearing a dhoti and a new banian. In front of him was a dimly lit lantern.

'Come, Sonadas,' said Gaganbabu as soon as he saw him, 'I have something to tell you.'

Sonadas sat stiffly on the edge of the *gaddi*.

Gaganbabu cleared his throat and said, 'I go away tomorrow, Sona, dear.'

"Where?" asked Sonadas in astonishment.

'You don't know?'

'No, I don't know anything!'

'Going to Kolikata, dear.'

It was a bolt from the blue. 'Your warehouse?' he asked stupidly.

'Sold it.'

Sonadas was struck dumb for a few minutes. Quickly glancing at the storehouse he felt it had turned black like a new moon night, yet it was full moon, the night was intoxicatingly drenched in moonlight. Sonadas forgot everything.

Gaganbabu said, 'Feel sorry for you, Sonadas. 'Ave spent m' life 'ere, do I want to go? But what to do? Am old. Can die any moment. If I die here, who'll light my funeral pier? It's better to die near Golapan'<sup>2</sup>

After this neither Gaganbabu nor Sonadas uttered a word. The dimly lit lantern sat between the two.

Sonadas got up after some time.

'Where are you going?' said Sonadas.

'Coming,'<sup>3</sup> said Sonadas in a sad voice.

As he came out, Sonadas had a funny feeling deep within him. In this old age, should he weep? Shout and thump his forehead?

People would laugh to see him cry.

He lit a *bidi* and went towards the back of the bazar.

There was a huge field. Beyond the field were wetlands for paddy extending across many miles. In the far distance were more fields and villages. The moon blossomed atop the village. The place was heady with the moonlight.

<sup>2</sup> Golapan is probably Gaganbabu's son, who lives in or near Kolkata. According to Hindu custom, the eldest son is required to initiate the lighting of a parent's funeral pyre.

<sup>3</sup> In Bengali, it is inauspicious to say 'I'm going' or 'I'm leaving.' Instead, people say 'I'm coming,' which implies, 'I'm leaving now, but I will return.'

With weary steps, the miserable Sonadas walked on through the fields. Who knows where he went! In this whole wide world, there was no place for Sonadas.

Translated by Tapati Gupta



## OF RAM AND RAHIM (RAM RAHIMER KATHA)

Mahasweta Devi

The eternal faith in God quickly left Sajumoni Beora's mind in this late monsoon day. Of course Sajumoni and her likes did not understand this business about God. They chanted the words, 'Oh God, where are you?' but were unable to realize the existence of an unspeakable, formless, powerful spirit. Their god meant the local Shitala or Panchu Thakur. Or maybe if they moved a little further, God meant the Bishnupur Kali temple at Baharampur. At present of course, they were very scared to even mention the name of 'Kali.' It was rumoured that some of them had visited the Siddha Kali temple situated between Hetampur and Kajokhali. The temple was about 20 years old. But the priest of that temple kept on telling them that one evening, while he was about to urinate beneath the great banyan tree, he had received a very heavy slap from some invisible hand and heard someone say,

'Don't you know that I live beneath the ground here? I am lying here for 700 years, rescue me.'

Even Baidyanath Ghoshal who was all this while drinking country liquor and calling his mistress with all sorts of endearing terms—'O my dark god! O my sweetmeat! etc., etc.' (this was part of his daily routine—he began with the endearments in the evening and ended by kicking his wife's back each night with the accusation that the *chapatis* were not warm)—he too became inspired with a religious fervour. Though nothing was found even after digging up the place, there was a lot of show about it. As a result a temple dedicated to a Kali with four arms was built there. Because of public demand, some non-Hindu looking farmers were forced to give up their cultivable lands. Baidyanath was a rich man now. His able sons, Adyanath and Saktinath, had built up gambling dens, country liquor shops and many such public-welfare institutions.

Once upon a time, seeking Ramlal's recovery from sickness, Sajumoni had donated her son's hair and her own blood to this Siddha Kali shrine. But on that terrible evening Baidyanath and Adyanath had been calling the goddess Kali and chopping off the heads of refugees with the large sacrificial knife. A worried Sajumoni had also been wandering restlessly because Ramlal had not returned home. On the day of the Dashahara bathing festival, she had gone to sell puffed rice and sweets at the fair, but her cry of 'Oh Ram, where did you go' got stuck in her throat, once she saw the severed head of Panchu Bibi's son Rahim lying on the ground.

Since then, the very mention of the goddess 'Kali' made her afraid. Now for Sajumoni and her ilk, 'god' meant Panchu Thakur, Sitala, and other folk ones. By native land or India, they understood Hetampur. Neither did they know who the president, nor the prime minister nor chief minister of their country was. They only understood the village head, Amulya Sarbaggya to be their leader. All these years Sajumoni had immense faith in her beliefs, as long as they delivered something.

Both Panchu Thakur and Shitala were powerful gods.

The word 'country' meant Hetampur.

The all-powerful man was Amulya Sarbaggya.

But in this late monsoon season, when the banks of the River Bhagirathi were overflowing, ponds were filled to the brim, all the fields of grain destroyed, Sajumoni suddenly discovered that the foundations of her beliefs had been shattered.

Till yesterday her beliefs were intact. Even yesterday she had gone to meet Amulya. His surname 'Sarbaggya' literally meant 'all-knowing', and the man actually knew a lot. He could predict whether a snakebite was poisonous or not. He offered expert advice on any partition or title deed in court cases. Like an amin, he was adept at measuring land. He even understood veterinary treatment quite well. He frequented the police station, the court, the party office, the JLRO office with ease. He even had access to the functioning of the *panchayat*. In fact, he was adept at working less but keeping control over things.

'It's over two months now, tell me something at least. Don't you realize how I am spending my days?'

'Aren't you getting the midwife's job?'

'Once in a while. I haven't come here looking for a midwife's job, Babu. (At present the only woman expecting a child was Rahim's wife, Batashi Bibi. It was up to them whether they would call Sajumoni or carry her to the town.) I've come to tell you that it's over two months now that my son

has not come back. Whether he will return, or whether you have found his dead body—I need to know something. Can anyone live like this?’

Usually Sarbaggyababu spoke to Sajumoni in a dominating tone. Sajumoni did not vote for the ruling party, but the one next to it. But the murder incident of 24 June that was centered on the Katra Mosque was a very sensitive issue. So he had to be very careful before he spoke. He lowered his usual tone and said,

‘I haven’t stopped enquiring even for a day. Even day before yesterday, when I went to see my daughter at Baharampur, then...’

Then he said to himself, ‘And damn this government. He has been missing for all these days, why don’t they declare him “assumed to be dead”? Instead of that I have to undergo all this unnecessary trouble.’ To Sajumoni he said,

‘Ramlal is not a stupid boy. He sells puffed rice and sweets at every Dasha-hara fair. When such a boy does not return home, well, what could we do? There are four more cases like this, but those are of course elsewhere.’

‘You just give me news of my son.’

‘I’ll do whenever I receive it.’

Sajumoni asked, ‘Does “not found” mean dead?’

‘Whatever news I get ... but where are you going?’

‘Bimala, Subal Dhal’s wife told me, “Mashi, you’ve gone everywhere. Go to Siddha Kali’s temple. She’s very powerful”, but I don’t feel like going there. So I am going to the Fakir Baba’s place at Kajokhali.’

Amulya turned serious at the very mention of Siddha Kali’s name. During that time there was a rumour that Baidyanath and Adyanath had received the divine orders of Goddess Kali to build the temple. But even after the temple had been built, and even after Enamul, Makbul and Mansoor Mullick’s birthplace had been acquired for the temple project, Amulya believed that it actually was a religious mission. After he turned *pradhan*, the head of the village, had given each of them 20 decibels of land—which of course they could not retain. At present Siddha Kali’s market was in a slump. Soon Baidyanath’s cousin built another temple. Now, the sacrificial goat’s blood was something and the blood of the non-Hindus meant another thing. Under the present circumstances, it was very difficult for this non-Hindu blood-sucking Kali to retain her former glory. Probably someone else has to wait for divine admonitions again. Even the gambling and country liquor dens were quiet now.

‘Go. Walking round police stations is killing me.’

Bimala Dhal was a strong woman and naturally quite vocal too. ‘Go, visit different temples and spoil your health,’ she told Sajumoni. The she addressed

Amulya Sarbaggya, 'So, if Ram does not come back, Mashi will get the money. But she is not looking for her son in greed of that money, Babu. Ram's wife has a three-month old daughter. Her eldest son and the third one stay elsewhere permanently. The middle one is absent. The only male member in the house is Ram's seven-year-old son. If you cannot provide any information, won't people run to the temples?'

Sajumoni had visited the Fakir Baba's place even yesterday.

'I understand Panchu Bibi's sorrow, Baba,' she confessed. 'A bright son just dead like that. What is my sorrow compared to hers? My mind says he's no more. Let the Pradhan Babu tell us he is no more. Ram's wife sits eagerly waiting for his return; the grandchildren come running to me and ask, "Did you bring Baba back?"; a seven-year-old boy, a five-year-old daughter; a three-month old kid, a young wife—what can I tell each of them? Last night I made a mistake in my sleep and asked, "Ram will be coming, but where will he sleep?" I have been restless all night. It has never been like this earlier, Babu. Tell me whether he is living or not. Because it is inauspicious to cry, I cannot even shed tears.'

The worship and plea were in vain. Bimala sat observing Sajumoni with her sharp eyes. Once she raised her head, she said, 'Mashi, come let's go home. Some strange bird called from the tamarind tree. I saw a vulture three times. Let's go home.'

The vultures did not know that according to local superstitions, seeing them was very inauspicious. With their huge brown bodies, they were looking for insects to eat. Bimala threw a stone at them and said, 'Go away, go away!'

Ramlal's memories were strewn around all the paths through which they headed home. Ramlal had used this path to go to school for some time. Once upon a time he had even picked up a two-rupee note from this path. But the Siddha Kali's temple was nearby too. Sajumoni remembered the severed head of Rahim. What amazement there was in his still and open eyes!

Blood! There was a profusion of blood.

Now the rains had washed away the blood. The earth had also decorated herself with the blood it absorbed. What sin had the people of Hetampur and Kajokhali committed?

Panchu Bibi had got the news then and there. Sajumoni remembered how she had cried out in grief for several days at a stretch. 'Oh Allah, if you gave me a son, why did you take him back?'

'Who will shoulder responsibility now?'

'Oh my son, who will get me the ointment for my arthritis now?'

'Why did you go, son?'

'Why didn't you return?'

Tears, tears and only tears.

Even though Sajumoni was very much moved by her plight, she could not run across to her house and sympathize with her.

Will they take it naturally?

Then, like a cloudy afternoon during the monsoon, there was just silence on both sides of the pond.

'Ramlal's mother!' someone called her.

Sajumoni suddenly stopped.

'Panchu Bibi, my sister!'

Panchu Bibi had come forward with hesitant footsteps.

'Cry it out, sister. You will feel light.'

With tears flooding her eyes, Sajumoni cleared her choked voice and shook her head.

'I still have not received any news yet. Won't it be harmful for him if I cried?'

'I received my news from the birds.'

Both of them sat facing each other and quietly cried for a long time. Panchu Bibi was in deep trouble. The boat was floating in the river without any helmsman to control it.

Both Suku and Dukhu died, and now Rahim was also gone. Only a sister was left.

'You had seen everything with your own eyes. He would work as a daily labourer in the vegetable fields. Recently he was very keen to leave that job and go away to work in a bidi factory. The *panchayat* did not offer any work. If you work as a daily labourer, then you will have to join the union. The lean and sickly Rahim, who was already suffering from diarrhoea, was troubled very much with two daughters, and the wife was in the ninth month of her pregnancy once again. Why didn't Allah take Panchu Bibi instead?

'Both of us are unfortunate, sister...'

'Yes, but in two different ways.'

Panchu Bibi had nodded in agreement and left.

After coming home, Sajumoni called for her daughter-in-law, 'Bou!'

'What's the matter, Ma?'

Sajumoni's voice was choked.

'It's evening now. Where are you going with your hair all open in this advanced stage of your pregnancy?'

'I'm going to fetch kerosene.'

'Stop, don't go.'



Sajumoni fished out a bottle from behind the boxes kept in the loft.

She was a committed saver. Setting aside little amounts of kerosene and rice had been her long-time habit. The money she earned from making quilts, washing other people's mosquito nets, working as a midwife—she saved as much as she could. She felt a pain in her heart while parting with the bottle of kerosene. There had been a lot of festivities celebrating the rice-eating ceremony of Sarbaggya Babu's grandson. The entire school building in Kotasur village had been lit up with small bulbs. Sarbaggya's son was a contractor and was very proud of his cash income. In the beginning the guests were served with bottles and bottles of fruit syrup poured with ice. Ramlal had worked very hard there carrying buckets and buckets of water. He had earned ten rupees and a lot of food, and had also brought home an empty bottle.

'So, I should not go?'

'No, stay at home.'

'Wash your face and hands. Wan't some tea?'

'Where have Nani and Neeta gone?'

'They're playing.'

'Call them inside.'

After washing her hands and feet, Sajumoni changed her clothes and as a matter of habit went to light the lamp near the *Tulsi* shrine.

The Beoras originally hailed from a good and respectable family. In the earlier days, they too owned a lot of land here. This land later on went over to the Sarbaggyas and Paldhis. But even now, the saving habit that her mother-in-law had inculcated in Sajumoni remained—she saved a quarter of whatever she earned. Ramlal's father would taunt her,

'So you have made a bank at home? You want to buy land?'

Who could buy a land in this village anymore—especially the Beoras, the Dhals and the Muslims? Owning lands was like a dream—it faded out and never came back. Ramlal's father would say, 'All these saving habits are meant for the babus. If they save, they can save a lot. Here we have no clothes to wear, work as labourers, and do not even have our own tilling equipments. Why should I save?'

'Can you give me five hundred rupees?' he would ask in disgust.

No, Sajumoni was not able to give him the money. But she had reared goats along with other shareholders; financed Ramlal's puffed rice and sweet shop at the yearly Dashahara festival; bought ducks for herself. The house was in shambles. Before the elections, the *panchayat* had repaired it for them.

The grandchildren came in.

The four of them sat down to eat—stale wet rice, arum root curry and boiled lentils. The three-month old daughter Nirmala sucked her mother's milk.

The daughter-in-law stared absent-mindedly at the small kerosene lamp.

'Eat. Don't worry.'

'It's nearly two months now.'

'Eat.'

Sajumoni had not been sitting idle for the past two months. Bipul Dhal, Subal's nephew, did not let her do so. The only *Kshatriya* boy who had passed his school board exams in Hetampur, Bipul was jobless. At present, taking a bank loan (for which he signed for 200 rupees and actually got 1500) he had bought a rickshaw van and ferried passengers, rice, vegetables, chicken, dead bodies, patients and what not.

Bipul Dhal was an active worker for the second ruling party. About a week after that bloody evening, he had been running to the district headquarters with the list of missing people. According to the chief minister, all missing and dead people were entitled to a compensation of 25,000 rupees each. He had taken a crying Panchu Bibi and a stunned Sajumoni to the district headquarters several times. He had helped them put in their applications to the correct place, collected the recommendations of the village head and the acknowledgment from the police station. In the interim period, he had also joined the peace march processions. The people of Hetampur believed that he stood a fair chance of winning in the forthcoming elections.

Sajumoni knew that everyone in Hetampur thought that there was no chance of her son's return. It was not like the movies. Life was too tough. She also knew that her hopes would be in vain. The government red tape had actually killed her. Until and unless the government declared the missing Ramlal Beora, Naseeb Mollah and Rupendra Gope as "missing forever, hence dead," her hands and feet were tied.

Sajumoni counted her goats and ducks. She had received some wheat as donation from the *panchayat*, but had to sell her male goat. Ramlal did not come home but he did not take the family's hunger along with him. In the meantime she had got a job from the *panchayat* for a few days only. The wheels of her family had stopped totally. In fact, they would be fasting now had not Bipul given them some help.

The goats, ducks, Sajumoni, the daughter-in-law, the two grandchildren—all of them shared the same room. They had to fix the mosquito net to prevent snakes from coming in at this season. If everything was flooded, what else could they do?

On lying down, Sajumoni started looking for her beliefs in God once again. But she did not find it. The belief was very old—in fact it existed right from the time of her birth. Everything was predetermined by fate; whatever happened was by the will of God—this is how she had been taught to live her life. Her elder son lived in Debagram and owned a betel leaf shop. The third son tied *bidis* at Dhulian. Out of sight did not mean out of mind. After all, could a mother forget her sons? But all of them were struggling to survive. How many days could they leave work and stay here? Both Shyamlal and Bishnu had come. The elder son had given her 20 rupees, the other one five kilos of rice. Shyamlal had asked her to seek God's blessings.

So she was calling god, but He did not respond.

So was there no god?

But Sajumoni knew that He existed.

Lying down in this late monsoon night, Sajumoni felt an emptiness in her chest. It seemed as if a very heavy breeze was blowing through a room with broken doors and windows. Was she feeling such emptiness because she had lost her faith? How much space did faith occupy in her mind?

Both the court and the police station were heartless.

Why couldn't they say that he was no more?

Otherwise, say that he was still living.

Neither dead, nor living, where was Ramlal?

## 2

A strong sunshine had emerged from the clouds in the morning.

Sajumoni lay out all the bedding to dry in the courtyard and along the fence. She asked her daughter-in-law to make some hot soda water so that she could wash all the dirty and stinking clothes.

Washing them in the pond, she bathed and came home to hang out the clothes for drying. Releasing the ducks from the room, the daughter-in-law went to light the fire.

Both Nanilal and Neeta sat down to eat puffed rice.

'I have bought some *kalmi* leaves—fry them till brown. And the pumpkin that Bimli had given me put it in the rice to boil.'

'We need oil.'

'Yes, mustard oil, kerosene, one matchbox. Be a bit careful while plucking the dry leaves from the trees. One cannot trust the rainy season. There might be snakes hidden there...'

Just then, Amulya Sarbaggya entered along with Bipul and his uncle Subal.

Why did they bring along a policeman?

Why was Sarbaggya Babu's face so pale?

Why had Bipul stopped speaking?

'Ram's mother, come on and have a look.'

Sajumoni did not move on her own. It seemed that someone was pushing her along.

'This chain ...'

It was a zinc chain with a zinc locket. The locket had "Ramlal" inscribed on it. Inside was some holy earth from Panchu Thakur's shrine.

'It's his chain. Where is he?'

'Where else? They had dragged him and buried him next to the canal,' Amulya Sarbaggya said with a deep sigh. 'When the water increased the boys who went out fishing ... Oh, thank goodness that the diary had been done at that time. Otherwise the police station would have bungled everything by saying that he had died later.'

Was Sajumoni divided into two pieces? How could she hear her own voice?

'I want to see.'

'What else is there to see? Ramlal, and Nasib, Rupen—now we will have to go to their villages also.'

Saju regained herself.

'So Ramlal is no more?'

Bipul held her.

'Grandma, sit down.'

'How many days has it been?'

'That very same day.'

'It took so long to tell us?'

The daughter-in-law gave out a loud cry. Sajumoni could also now pound her breast and cry. 'I went to the canal side even yesterday, son. I did not know you were there ... which executioner killed you? I go and come near the canal everyday, I didn't know anything, son!'

The neighbours fill up the courtyard.

This news had been expected for sometime but now that the news gained acceptance, Sajumoni could lift the heavy weight that was preventing her tears to be released.

Amid her tears she asked, 'What about the last rites?'

'I'll arrange everything, grandma ...'

Ramlal Beora was identified by his locket; Nasib Mollah by his slightly shorter left leg; and the long hair stuck to the skeleton of the other melting body proved that it was Rupendra Gope. For two months they had been

tied together with bricks. After the legal proceedings were over, the funerals would be arranged.

Bipul said, 'All three of them had police diaries.'

Bimala took Ramlal's wife to the pond for the rituals.

'An unnatural death meant loss of brains,' added Subal's aunt.

'If he is burnt, then a *shradh* is necessary...'

'Why are you saying these things now?' said Bipul.

Sajumoni did not hear anything.

That she might receive the 25,000 rupees, made Subal's obviously envious aunt say,

'We have to think right now. For two months the wife had been living in a married state, don't you think it is harmful? Besides, an unnatural death needed penance.'

'What penance? Did Ram die for his own fault? Would such things happen if God was there? He's not there.'

Sajumoni's words were mourning laments, but very dangerous too.

Bipul took her to the room and lay her down.

Panchu Bibi's mourning laments drift in again. The news of her son's death freshly reiterated through Sajumoni's cries. It fills the skies of Hetampur.

Everything took place one after another.

The almost fleshless skeleton wrapped up in a polythene sheet was duly cremated. Lighting the funeral pyre in the probable place for the lips, Ram's wife fainted.

Sajumoni sat like a dead stone. She could not cry.

Both Shyamlal and Bishnu came, but without their family.

'Ma, what about the rituals?'

Sajumoni did not speak.

'At least something should be done. After all because it was unnatural ....'

'I have nothing to do,' Sajumoni said very slowly. 'A mother has nothing left if her son dies.'

Having no other choice, Shyamlal and others went to Amulya Sarbaggya. As expected, he was a specialist in this field as well.

'You do not have the strength of money. If so, tell me.'

'Where can we get money, Babu?'

'I am arranging for a priest. He will do things with the barest minimum requirements. He has done many such rituals before...'

'Who will get the money, Babu?' Bishnu asks in a scared tone.

'The wife and the mother will get it.'

'Won't the brothers get anything?'

'Did you stay together?'

The brothers were silent.

'Don't try and snatch the food from the hungry. The mother, the wife, the three children... Besides, it was Sajumoni who made the police diary.'

'Who will do the rituals?'

'According to tradition, the wife should do it. She had lit the pyre. If she authorizes, then Shyam can do it.'

Both Shyam and Bishnu felt guilty under such circumstances. The wife had the right.

'How did he die, Babu?'

'With a blow from the chopper, and then by dragging over bricks.'

The shradh ceremony of Ramlal Beora, son of Late Ishwarlal Beora, was completed as simply as possible. In the absence of proper clothes, Ram's wife carried on the rituals amid tears and by wearing her striped yellow sari.

'Grandma, we have to move right now,' said Bipul.

'I just can't Bipul. Do I have to go immediately?'

'Let me see what arrangements Amulya-da can make. At first he is going to write, then the police station will write, then we will have to go to the district headquarters and get hold of Prasad Babu. Everything will be arranged, Grandma. We have our minister....'

Sajumoni turned silent again.

Bipul told Ramlal's wife not to cry.

'Oh, what a terrible day it had been. Why is she like a stone?'

'She cannot cry.'

Sajumoni heard everything. Everyone noticed her transformation. Who had seen such lament in a poor man's house? They cried for three days. Then they returned to their families and started working again. Who ever lived like this silently and without shedding any tears?

'What are you straining your ears for?' the wife asks her.

'To listen.'

'Listen to his call?'

'No, not that.'

'Then whose call? If you remained like a stone, how could I regain my faith?' Sajumoni stretched out her frail hand.

'Have faith in me. I have not thrown you all away.'

'Then what are you waiting to listen?'

In a tired voice she replied, 'Rahim's mother, She had cried that day. She knows how I feel, I know how she feels. I could cry if I got her now. My sorrow would become lighter.'

'Can she ever come, Ma? How will she come now?'

'Why not? As she used to do earlier, she could stop by now. Rahim went to the meeting, Ram went to sell puffed rice and sweets. Both died through no fault of their own. Then why should Rahim's mother feel ashamed? What mistake had she done? What did I do?'

'Everyone is behaving like an enemy because they will get money.'

'But I did not want money instead of Ram. I did not kill anyone in sport. He would come running whenever there was trouble. And to kill him like that....'

'Mukul's mother cries everyday at the bathing ghat.'

'Is she Rahim's wife?'

'Yes. She says that the Allah was not just.'

Sajumoni gave a faint smile.

'Who was just? Gods, goddesses, sadhus, fakirs, all are the same. Now go to sleep. If she came I could have cried a little. With whom shall I cry?'

The daughter-in-law kept quiet.

'She could have come.'

'She might be thinking what people would say.'

'Maybe. I cannot go also for the same reason. But tell me, with whom could I go and cry?'

Sajumoni's voice sounded very depressed.

'Ma, go to sleep.'

'You sleep.'

Sajumoni still kept straining her ears.

One evening a few days later, Panchu Bibi came hurriedly with a lantern in her hands.

'Sister, are you at home, sister?'

'Where the hell can I go?'

'The woman has just begun her delivery pains. Water is coming out. What shall I do now? Who knows what fate has decreed?'

'Go to the hospital.'

'Who will take her there? Bipul has gone to Lalbagh with his van. She was feeling sick from the morning. She should have told me earlier. You have delivered her earlier ones. I would not have asked you this time, but now I am in great trouble, sister...'

Sajumoni was surprised, really surprised.

Why was she still unable to cry?

'Call Halim's mother. Boil some water. I am coming, you go. Do you have soap?'

'Yes, I do. The woman cannot suffer too much pain.' Panchu Bibi left.

'Give me the bag, Bou.'

Some Dettol in a homeopathic file, a thin bamboo strip, some gauze, bandage and cotton wool given by the nurse of the health centre became the contents of Sajumoni's maternity bag. Was there some taunt in her tone? So many things could be heard about the health centre. But in Sajumoni's hands, every delivery had been successful. Both the mother and the child were living.

'From where did you learn all this, Saju?'

'There was a matron at the maternity clinic then. Whenever there were delivery cases at night, she would take me along with her. Ram's father had just died, Ram was just four years old. I got two rupees for going along with her. The matron told me that the maternity clinic was moving away to Kotasur. They were not repairing the building here. There would be a new building there. She asked me to learn the trade. I learnt. Then I would get calls from different villages. Nowadays no one calls any more. They go to the clinic. But if there is danger and they are stuck ...'

The last delivery she had done was when Bimala's son was born. Her pains began at midnight, Then Sajumashi was the saviour. Her son was now six months old. Oh, yes, she even helped in the delivery of Ram's wife. 'If you wiped the bamboo blade with Dettol, then...'

Batashi Bibi was yelling.

'Now, endure a little more. Sister, give me the soap...'

Sajumoni was busy for about two hours to bring Rahim's child into this world. Batashi kept on crying endlessly. 'Why are you scared? Who delivered the two earlier ones? Come on, exert yourself. That's it.'

'Oah...oah.. oah...'

'What is it, sister?'

'A boy. A grandson for you.'

The cleaning up took some more time.

'Come, let me show you the way.'

'Give me a torch if you have one. I can go back.'

'No, let me go with you a little. Your dues, sister....'

'It's all right. You don't have to pay.'

Panchu Bibi breathed a sigh of relief.

'After I get the money...'

'It's OK.'

While walking together, a slightly annoyed Panchu Bibi told Sajumoni,

'Why have you covered your griefs with a stone? Can't you cry?'

'Why did you too stop after one cry?'

'They pressed my mouth shut.'

'You too have shut my mouth.'



Sajumoni's house could be seen.

'Now you can go. Batashi is alone.'

'No, Hashim's mother is there.'

'Go, the child will have black excreta at first. Don't breast-feed him before that. Give him honey and water. Boil the water.'

'Yes I will. You too cry a little. Can one live with a burden in one's heart? The sons have gone but what pains did they carry with them?'

'No, they have left everything behind. Birth of a child, the daily routine of life.' Panchu Bibi turned to go back. Sajumoni knocked her door.

'Ma, you've come?'

'Yes.'

'What was it?'

'A son.'

'Quite big?'

'No, her new borns are always small. They grow up later.'

'Fair or dark?'

'I think he'll be dark.'

'I have kept water in the bucket.'

Sajumoni changed her clothes, sprayed water over her hands and face. Then she opened the windows a little. There was a thin moon in the sky.

Looking at the moon, Sajumoni now cried to her heart's content.

The heavy weight upon her heart melted.

It was an endless cry.

Sajumoni choked and felt the pressure. She had been carrying the burden of this mourning for a long time. Let some of it be released. If the daughter-in-law, children, goats, chickens, salt, oil, kerosene, everything remained, then why did the unfortunate boys have to die? Where was the answer?

The beaming moon remained silent and tilted a little further.

Translated by Somdatta Mandal

## LOOKING BACK (PHIRE DEKHA)

Selina Hossain

Ashfaq's marriage with Bithi was fixed. Both their parents had arranged for this wedding. There were still a few months left. The date fixed was 21 February. At Ashfaq's wish, Bithi had met him once. Ashfaq had said over the telephone, 'we have to see whether we can live together, don't we? Will you come?'

Bithi was a University student, a smart girl. She had at once said, 'Yes, that's right. Before the marriage is broken, let us come to an understanding. I don't want the wedding football to enter the goal post. It is better that it rolls in the field.'

At that time they met in Baldha Gardens in mid afternoon. Around them was the burning sunshine of 1952. They were sitting on the steps of the pond in the garden. There were numerous lotuses in the water of various colours. Before sitting down here, they have seen the Amazon lilies in the cemented tank. This was a favourite spot for both of them. To meet a second time, they again come to Baldha Gardens. Two days ago, the Prime Minister, Nazimuddin, had announced that Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan. Dhaka was very heated. It was popping like *khoi* roasting in sand in a *kadai*. Ashfaq has passed out from the University. He was a bright student. He was going to do his Ph.D in Britain with a scholarship. Everything was arranged. He was not much bothered about politics. He was busy working on his career. He had no deep thoughts on the debate about making Bengali as the national language in the General Assembly. He did want Bengali to be the national language, but he didn't want anything more than that. But in these difficult times in 1952, he was absorbed in the dreams of setting up a home.

Bithi was different. She thought that she had to make this time meaningful. If she lost out, she would lose a great chunk of her own life—not just hers, her children too would find some of their ribs missing.

That day she told Ashfaq, 'From the morning I have been losing things. At the meeting, it was my black pen, during the procession suddenly my hanky dropped from my hand. There wasn't an opportunity to pick it up. I just saw at a glance that it was mixed in the dust under the feet of some undaunted youth. And now I have come to lose myself.'

'Haven't you lost that already?'

'No.'

'And I was thinking of getting lost with you. There is a lovely lake at the top of Mahabaleshwar hill. We could sit beside it with our feet in the water and watch the sunset. Slowly, we would lose ourselves in the darkness.'

'Will our feet still be dipped in water?'

'Of course.'

'Then?'

'We will sit on a *macha* in a betel plantation—in mid-afternoon. We'll look at how the sunshine turns green under the *macha*. How the breeze turns green. We'll both become lost in the green sunshine and green breeze.'

Bithi asked, 'How will we get lost? In the same way as my voice loses itself amidst a hundred other voices in a procession? In the same way as my sensibility dissolves with a hundred other sensibilities and gives birth to a perfect sensibility? The way a known face suddenly gets lost in the distance...'

Ashfaq put his left palm on her mouth. He says, 'No, don't let anything come between us, please. Just you and me.'

'My procession?'

'No.'

'My consciousness?'

'No.'

'My dream?'

'Am I not your dream?'

'You are at one end of my dream bridge. At the other end is another dream of mine. I will build a bridge between both my dreams. A river will meander beneath it. On the river there will be boats with sails. In the boats there will be special boatmen, who will roar in protest, when the time comes.'

Ashfaq shouts out with amazement, 'Bithi?'

'Why are you startled?'

'Aren't you saying something totally different?'

'Of course I am. I can see that moment. I can say what will happen a few days later. Can't you too see that moment?'

'Moment?'

'Yes moment. There is a difficult time ahead of us.'

In front of Bithi's eyes there appeared the debate at the General Assembly after the firing at the procession. In an angry voice the Maulana Debator was saying, 'Jenab Speaker Saheb, when our country's students, on whom depend our future hopes, are risking their lives against police bullets, at this time we don't want to sit here and have a Assembly. First enquiry, then the House can meet. As soon as the Debater had finished, Dhirendranath Datta stood up and said, *'Mr Speaker sir, a serious situation has arisen in the country ... the police rushed into the hospital premises and sir to our surprise, to our shame and sorrow, began to assault the peaceful boys. They not only assaulted the students and wounded them but some of the boys were killed.'*<sup>1</sup>

Amidst all this, Bithi held her head with an inaudible agonized cry.

'What's happened Bithi?'

'Bullets.'

'I don't understand what has happened to you. I cannot see the future like you.'

Bithi laughed. Her laughter did not sound like real laughter in Ashfaq's ears.

'Come, let's go home.' Ashfaq started climbing up the steps.

When Bithi came and got off in front of her gate, she heard her sister Juthi singing. Juthi was in school. She had a very sweet voice. Ustadji had a lot of hopes in her. One day, maybe, she would be a great artist. Before Bithi could get in, her police officer father's jeep came and stopped behind her. As soon as Toyab Saheb got out of the jeep he frowned and looked at Bithi.

'Why are you standing here?'

'I have come back from the university.'

'The time is really bad. You needen't go out much now. Come in.'

Toyab Saheb strode on. Police boots resound. Bithi kept on staring at the boots. She told herself,—just because the times are bad, should one stay away from them? No I am a girl of these times. I will insert these times within me. At that moment she felt that Juthi's song was running around her at a great rate. She walked in with slow steps.

By then Toyab Saheb had changed his police garments and had had a wash. His wife was Jahanara. She was a simple, straightforward woman. She was standing with a cup of tea in her hands. Toyab Saheb took the tea cup

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<sup>1</sup> This section is in English in the text.

from his wife's hands and sipped it, his ears alert to Juthi's song. He shook his head with pleasure. He said, 'The girl's voice is very sweet. She sings beautifully. If she has talents like this, she will have a good marriage. That is why I am teaching my daughters singing.'

Jhanara protested mildly, 'What are you saying? It could also happen that one day the girl is a famous artist.'

'No, never think of such things. I'm warning you, you don't have to be so modern. In training my girls to sing, I have no other wish apart from getting a good match for my girls.'

Jahanara looked on morosely. She felt unhappy. In a sort of desperation she said, 'I feel sad that you can even think like this.'

'Feel sad!' Toyab Saheb grimaced and said, 'What nonsense. I don't approve of all this. If you give license to the girls in this manner, it won't come to any good, I warn you.'

Jahanara did not prolong the conversation and moved away. She knew that she had to live with this man in this manner. She would do the same in the days to come. There was no one to understand her unhappiness.

The next day Bithi was late in reaching Madhu's canteen. From the morning, without any reason, she was feeling sad for her mother. She wouldn't be able to explain this to anybody. She told herself, this was an inexplicable feeling. Actually, it was in seeing Ma that she had learnt to break out of her cage. The girls and boys burst into excitement as soon as they saw her entering the canteen. There was some hesitation in their mind about her. They knew that if her father came to know, he would keep her confined in the house. He wouldn't let her come and join the agitation and procession. But so far, Bithi had not missed anything.

Their conference started. Ghazi's voice resounded, 'Friends, you all know why we have assembled here today. It is because our present Government has betrayed us. After the historic Language Movement of 1948, four years have passed. All these days, the language demand has remained totally suppressed. At that time, when the student community had built up a stiff resistance, the barbaric coercive measures of the Government had descended on them, but the students had not been afraid of such repression. The traitorous Nazimmuddin Government was forced to bow down, once confronted with the agitation. That day he had had to accept the demand for Bengali in the East Bengal Law Assembly and pass the proposal. Not only that, he had recommended at the General Assembly that Bengali be made the only national language. At the same time, he had released those who had been arrested. The arrest warrant that had been issued against particular students was withdrawn. This was the way the student community had been pacified

at that time. Now again, they have unashamedly proclaimed in Polton Maidan, that Urdu will be Pakistan's only national language.'

As soon as Ghazi had said this the students in one voice shouted, 'We don't accept this. We won't accept this.' Slogans were raised: 'We want Bengali as the national language. We want a state for Bengali.'

Bithi found herself sinking amidst all this. She could see the raindrops frozen inside her, as if in a crystal cave. An invisible General Assembly meeting came alive in her. The Speaker could not stop the Assembly's representative, the Maulana Master Debater. The latter carries on speaking in a haughty, arrogant angry voice, 'I don't understand your *Order*, I won't abide by your *Order*. Let the *Leader of the House* first go and see and come back to give a description. Then the *Assembly* can meet.

Speaker: *Order, order, you have no right to disobey the chair. Please take your seat.*

Master Debater: The *Leader of the House* will first go to see and come back and give a description. Then the work of the *House* can continue.

Speaker: *Order, order. Do you mean to say that you will not allow anybody else to speak? You are obstructing the proceedings of the house.*

Master Debater: Let the *Leader of the House* first go and make an *Enquiry*, then the *House* will sit, not before that.

Speaker: *Order, order, Mr Debater, I am very sorry. I may be compelled to take action under rule 16(2) of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly Procedure Rules, if you do not obey the chair.*

Master Debater: You can take any action. Our demand is that the *Leader of the House* first goes and sees what the situation is and informs us.

The Speaker beat the hammer, saying '*Order, Order*'. Once the whole scene became a still in Bithi's imagination, she let out an indistinct groan and looked at everyone with terror-stricken eyes. The boys and girls could feel that Bithi's eyes were open but her vision was elsewhere. Mili shook her and said, 'What has happened Bithi?'

'I can see that time.'

The girls burst out laughing. Ghazi said solemnly, 'Don't laugh. Bithi's sixth sense is working.'

'You are right, Ghazibhai. My sixth sense burns.'

'Bogus,' Nahar said irritably, 'actually, her wedding is fixed, that is why she seems so confused.'

'Good. Let the Language Movement and the wedding become one in Bithi's life'.

Bithi's vacant look became lighted. She looked into everyone's eyes and said, 'You are correct. Both have become one. Both are my lives. One is not separate from the other. I want my married life to be beautiful, which is why I want the Language Movement to succeed. I don't want to see my Barnamala<sup>2</sup> burning in front of my eyes. I don't want to see children learning Urdu. I will forget to sing my songs. No, I won't let such a day come in my life.'

Ghazi said in the manner of giving a speech, 'Bithi is right. There is no alternative in front of, apart from agitation. The organization for students' struggle will be formed.'

On her way back home from the meeting she saw the police van pass her rickshaw. Her father was in the car. In his hand he had a wireless set. Who was Abba talking to? She turned her face away. Thousands of mynas of the golden bamboo groves of Baldha Garden kept chirping in her head. Once home, she got a call from Ashfaq. Juthi came and said, 'Bubu, Dulabhai has phoned.'

'Stupid! He isn't a Dulabhai yet.'

'How does it matter if he isn't. Everything is fixed. Go on, answer the phone.'

When she answered, Ashfaq repeated the old line, 'Can I not meet you Bithi?'

'We have met.'

'I want more.'

'Where will we meet?'

'I will find a beautiful spot.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Why do you have some work to do?'

'Yes, I have some very urgent work.'

'Very urgent? What can be more urgent than me?'

'I mean, the time itself is for work. Not a moment of this time can be missed.'

'When will the work finish?'

<sup>2</sup> The Bengali alphabet.

'I don't know.'

'Still, give me a time, I will wait.'

'Wait?'

'Yes, Bithi, wait. I will wait for you. I will stand and wait till you come.'

Bithi agreed. But by that time, the bee had started injecting its needle into her head: 'Traitor Nazimmuddin step down. We want Bengali as the national language. We want a nation for the Bengal language.' She felt that she wanted to touch a golden deer called 'marriage'. At the same time, she wanted to be part of the procession. She would build a bridge between both and move towards wholeness. Without fulfilment, everyone's life was full of broken bridges.

It was afternoon. Everyone in the Toyab family was having tea at the table. After many days, Toyabsaheb was in a very relaxed mood. Sipping his tea, he asked 'Have you finished shopping for the wedding Bithi's Ma? There isn't much time left.'

'You don't have to worry about these things. I have made the jewellery on my own initiative. I want to buy the Benarasi<sup>3</sup> with Bithi. Since she will wear it, it has to be her choice.'

'You're right. Buy it tomorrow. I will be in the office tomorrow afternoon. I'll send my car for you. You can go out with Bithi.'

'I have something to say Abba.'

'What? What do you have to say?'

'Please postpone the date of the wedding.'

Toyabsaheb shouted at her, 'What did you say?'

Bithi said in a submissive voice, 'That day is National Language Day. A hartal has been declared across the country.'

In a stern voice, Toyabsaheb said, 'I know. But what is that to you? Tell me, what is it to you? Such dirty politics will not be discussed in my house.'

Bithi in utter amazement asked, 'Is it dirty politics to demand your own mother tongue? Muhammad Ali Jinnah had said that Urdu will be Pakistan's national language, do you accept that Abba?'

Toyabsaheb was so angry that he got up from his chair and while pushing it back he said, 'Shut up. I can't tolerate anyone going over the limit.'

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<sup>3</sup> The pure silk traditional saris made in the city of Benares or Varanasi are called 'Benarasi', which are famous for their rich texture and beautiful golden or silver thread-work and are traditionally worn by brides in both West Bengal and Bangladesh.



Jahanara was stupefied. She too walked away, following her husband. Juthi came and stood in front of Bithi and put her arms round her shoulders and burst into tears.

The demand for a nation-wide hartal on 21 February on the occasion of National Language Day had become stronger. Everyday there were meetings. The students were wearing black badges. The girls were going from house to house, collecting donations. The housewives were funding the agitation. None of them voiced any protest. Whatever they could afford was because of their life chord. Amidst all this, Bithi had to fix a programme with Asfaq.

When Ashfaq looked at Bithi, he didn't see an ordinary girl. Something indefinable seemed to be shrouding her. With this mysterious shroud, she was, somehow, different. So Ashfaq said admiringly, 'You are a strange girl, Bithi.'

'Yes, and you are painting dreams for this strange girl.'

'It must be a dream of a nest. Our household, our life. A squirrel climbing down from our tree in our courtyard. Tell me, what name will we give it?'

'A small, beautiful Bengali name.'

'My Abba-Amma will not consent to a small name. They will keep a long name.'

'What sort of name—tell me.'

'Something like, say, my name—Ashok Rasul Mosammat Jahan Binte Usme Kulsum.'

'No, that won't happen. Just as I am fighting to keep the times in my favour, in the same way, I will turn these small things in my favour.'

In a hurt voice Ashfaq said, 'Bithi, should we fight before marriage?'

'Not really. My aim is to construct a beautiful bridge. That will be in our favour.'

'Will you be able to?'

'Of course I will. But I can't do that without you. I can, with you. Now, promise me that you will not oppose whatever is necessary for us to live beautifully.'

Asfaq took Bithi's hand in his clasp.

Two days later, Toyabsaheb came back to the house agitated. He said, 'There is a problem.'

Bithi understood what the matter was. Jahanara said in a concerned voice, 'What's happened?'

'What do you think has happened? The University students think they are saving the country. On the 21st the East Bengal Government has its Budget session. And on that day the students have called for a strike. The Government

has banned strikes, meetings and processions in Dhaka district from the 20th onwards for one month, under Section 144.'

Jahanara was on the verge of tears, 'Will Bithi's wedding take place now?'

'What do you mean? The wedding will take place. That will not be disturbed.'

Toyabsaheb saw Bithi's determined face from the corner of his eyes before entering the bathroom.

Two days later Ghazi phoned Bithi late in the night. His voice was clear, 'Bithi, we have decided that tomorrow we will break Section 144. From the University gate, the procession will start in groups of ten, leaving every few minutes. There will also be a procession of girls. I know tomorrow is your *gaye halud*<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, I am asking you to come.'

Bithi hadn't been able to sleep well in the night. Lying in bed, she could hear her father's police car leaving. She took out the watch from under her pillow. It was six o'clock.

The morning wore on. Arrangements for the *gaye halud* were in full swing. In the courtyard, the women were sitting in a circle. On one grinding stone henna was being crushed, on another, turmeric. Someone was also cutting a big *rohu* fish. Vegetables were piled on one side. A big stove had been constructed in the courtyard. Dry wood had been lit and was flaming. Not henna leaves, but an 'm' or an 'a' were being crushed on the grinding stone. In the bowl, a 'k' was being cut. The Barnamala was being chopped into pieces.

Over there the students had started assembling in front of the University gate. The girls were anxious. They kept looking at their watches. Would they have to start on their procession without Bithi?

Bithi came running into the room. She opened the wardrobe and took out a sari with a fine embroidered border. She undid her plait and combed her hair. Wearing her sari and with a bag slung on her shoulder, she came out cautiously.

—Cut—

Bithi was walking at a brisk pace. Ashfaq came from the opposite direction and stood before her.

'Bithi, why are you here?'

<sup>4</sup> *Gaye halud*, the turmeric application ceremony, is performed in the morning before the wedding when turmeric paste is applied by the female relatives of the bride and bridegroom, on the pair, in their respective homes, before their bath, in a cleansing ritual.

'This is where I'm meant to be.'

'Today is the *gaye halud*. In the evening we have the wedding. But I knew you would do just this.'

Bithi laughed and said, 'Just wait. I'll be back.'

—Cut—

The girls at the University said, 'There, Bithi is coming. She came and stood beside the girls. They all shouted *slogans* together. The procession was ready to start.

—Cut—

A police car came and stood at a distance. Toyabsaheb got out of the car. The girls' procession came forward, shouting *slogans*. Toyabsaheb stood frozen, amazed to see Bithi in front of the procession. Bithi too saw her father. She turned her face away. She walked forward.

—Cut—

The police were sitting positioned with their guns raised.

—Cut—

The boys' procession was proceeding. When Bithi opened her mouth wide to voice slogans, she felt as if the big hammer of General Assembly Speaker had come down on her mouth. Her mouth was filling with saliva. And the Speaker's reverberating 'Order, order' was becoming mixed with that saliva.

In the background, as the procession advanced towards the raised guns of the police, the resounding roar of the Master Debater's voice could be heard, 'While the students of the country, in whom we have our hopes and on whom we rely, are being injured by police bullets in a life struggle, we do not want to sit here and have a meeting. First let there be an *Enquiry*, then the *House* can sit.'

—Cut—

Immediately after hearing that invisible voice, Bithi heard someone crying somewhere.

Her mouthful of saliva tasted like blood. In moments her head reeled. She clasped Mili's hand and said, 'Mili, the strap of my sandal has snapped.'

Mili replied in a normal voice, 'How does that matter. If you have problems walking, walk barefooted. Leave the sandals behind.'

—Cut—

The next moment it seemed as if no one was suffering. Time was talking to her.

—Cut—

She looked to her right. Last night a *poster* had been pasted on the trunk of the big mango tree, 'We want a nation for the Bengali language.' She felt

that there was no other scene around her, only the abstract artwork of the *poster* on the wide *canvas* of time. It was not possible to write it in any other colour apart from that of blood.

Translated by Bashabi Fraser



## REFUGEE (UDBASTU)

Debesh Roy

Having a cup of tea while still lying in bed was the first leisurely moment in, what was, otherwise, a day of hard work. Even if his wife did not urge him repeatedly to get up, he had to leave his bed by eight o'clock because of his own urgencies. By the time he finished taking a wash and returned from the market, it would already be half past eight. Another half an hour was generally preserved for doing some errands like buying coal, medicines, or taking clothes to the laundry. Then eight hours—just the way a prostitute sells herself for one, two and three hours—he did the same, selling his own ability to write English and adding up correctly—and the rest of the 12 hours that the earth takes to turn on its axis, he spent in a half sleep. When through one's own experience, a belief like "we work to live" begins to swing, towards an opposite belief of "we live to work," then such repeated cajoling and requests by one's wife and daughter to wake up and start the day, makes one feel like an affluent and powerful man. With the conviction of that belief, one can somehow go through the rest of the day before sleep time. The amount of money that one is able to save in the provident fund, suffices for a decent post-death ceremony. Once spirit returns to spirit, the whole world recapitulates on a life and comments, 'The man was quite organized, living his life with method and even timing his death well.' One can make out from his children, that the man had a very firm and well spread out base, and that he never left his own land to establish roots elsewhere.

Lying on a cot made from kerosene-wood, and under the canopy of a cotton mosquito net worth Rs. 4.50, Satyabrata was sleeping that day, like a self-reliant proprietor. The woman who was undoubtedly his wife, was trying to wake him up desperately. Feeling much entertained, Satyabrata turned over to his side, though quite unnecessarily, as if Anima's call would

reach his ears and make his heart better if he lay in this position. But Anima said, 'Some people outside are calling you.'

So Satyabrata forced open his eyes and said, 'Who are they?'

'Who knows! I am not sure. I told them to sit, but they wouldn't. So they are standing outside.' Anima said as she left the room. She added, 'Drink your tea, otherwise it might get cold.'

By this time, Satyabrata had swung his legs down and was sitting on the edge of the bed. Instead of thinking himself a proprietor, he looked around the room, very carefully, to see if those things for which those two men had come, were there or not. As if a summon had been sent from the court to put up his house on auction—he looked around the room for a few seconds. Then as if feeling relieved to see Anju lying on the other cot, he turned to look at himself. The *lungi* he wore was worth two rupees and four *annas*, its colour had faded, and he never wore underwear, that is his *lungi* was almost like the sari that the goddesses wore, existing and yet not quite there. He slipped on the vest that lay next to his pillow and tried to imagine what he now looked like, dressed in a thin *lungi* and a torn vest, just awakened from sleep, unable to move. It was as if the two outsiders had come to auction Satyabrata himself. Hearing his wife's footsteps he stopped suddenly, and then the man who till a few minutes back had been sleeping with the look of a proprietor, walked out of the room rubbing his hands against his face, as if about to deny his own name now. Anima could only say 'Listen' before she realized that her husband had left the room. So she placed the cup of tea on the side table and covered it with a plate. Then she turned to Anjana and tried to push her out of sleep. 'Anju, get up, Anju, come on, open your eyes,... what is it?. Do you want a slap now?'

The two men were waiting outside, leaning on a cycle. Satyabrata welcomed them. 'Please come in' he said.

'No that won't be necessary,' one of them said. 'We have only come to give you a message and will be leaving right away.' Satyabrata saw a smile on the man's face and wondered whether there was any chance of an invitation within the next few days.

'Why don't you come inside and sit...'

'No, listen, you must go to the *thana* and meet the police inspector, any time, either today or tomorrow, whenever you find it convenient ...'

'What, you mean I have to go the *thana*!' Satyabrata repeated his words.

'Yes, sir!' one of them said, in a polite tone. The other man took out a notebook from his pocket, turned over a few pages, and started reading out,

'You are Satyabrata Lahiri, isn't it? Your father's name is Punyabrata Lahiri, and you are residing in plot number 230 /A/6.' Then putting the notebook back in his pocket, he said, 'Yes, sir, it's you.'

The other man was turning around his cycle, 'You can go whenever it's convenient' he said, 'there's no reason to hurry. You just need to go there some time.'

The two men were about to start the cycle. Satyabrata stopped them and said, 'Can you tell me why I have been called?'

The two men turned around where they were and said, 'Oh it's nothing much really. What shall we say? The government has sent an order saying that there are many people in your country, I mean city—whether it is a border city or not—we have got news that there are many people in your land who are not really who they claim to be.' And then as if to reassure Satyabrata, they flashed a much rehearsed smile and said, 'What shall we say, sir? What a strange act on the part of the government to claim that those people who are living here are not really who they claim to be. But tell me, what can we do, after all, we have to hold on to our jobs, isn't it? All right then, don't forget to go to the *thana* and introduce yourself some time!'

Even before the two men could speed away on their cycles, Satyabrata turned back and entered his room. Besides, Anima must surely have heard everything from inside. He didn't want to keep waiting on the verandah for too long, and give her the impression that he had become nervous at the mention of the word '*thana*.'

But Anima had apparently not heard anything. Satyabrata had just about taken the first sip of tea, when Anju entered the room, biting a piece of toast, followed by Anima. That meant Anima must have been in the kitchen with Anju all this while. The thought made him laugh out to himself, 'What is this, have I been caught red-handed for some theft which I am trying to hide and not wanting her to know!'

'You know what, the government has ordered an enquiry to find out whether we are really who we are, and that is why we have been asked to present ourselves at the *thana*!'

'The *thana*, you have to go the *thana*, but why?'

'To prove that I am really "myself."'

'Why?'

'It's the government's orders.' Saying this he put the empty cup back on the table and walked quickly towards the well inside the compound. He had to finish his wash, and then set out for the market.

Satyabrata decided that once he returned from the market, he would take some time off from that half hour that he usually preserved for doing sundry jobs and visit the *thana*. That is why he finished his shopping rather impatiently. He bought whatever he could find easily. Yet, those two men had said that he could go to the *thana* whenever it was convenient. In fact, it



would be best if he went to the police station on his way back from work. But then he could no longer hide the fact even from himself, that ever since the time he had got up from bed and heard this news, he had been waiting impatiently to visit the *thana*, he left the purchases at home and set out from the house hurriedly. Of course, Anima tried to dissuade him once.

‘What is the need to hurry so much for, why not go in the evening?’

Anju had also requested him to stay back and solve one of her unsolved maths problems. But Satyabrata went out of the house quickly and started walking towards the police station.

And he returned after sunset. Anima had been waiting for him since the afternoon, pacing up and down rather impatiently. After 10 a.m., there wasn't a single adult man in the neighbourhood whom she could send to the *thana* to find out where her husband was. After spending the entire afternoon and early evening hours just worrying, she finally sent someone to the police station. The boy returned with the news that Satyabrata was, indeed, there. In the meantime, Anima had gone out once and come to know that everybody in her neighbourhood had been asked to present himself at the *thana* for the same reason, that is to get verified that he was indeed the person he claimed to be, and to introduce himself. The ground on which a man had his existence firmly rooted, he would have to leave that ground, the family amidst which he had felt his acceptance, he would have to leave that family, and go to the *thana* either today or tomorrow, to prove the existence of his soul; today or tomorrow, he would have to prove his very existence, today or tomorrow.

Satyabrata felt tired, he let go of himself and was now dragging his feet towards his house. His neck hung low like that of a slaughtered chicken's, and his hair was as messy as a wet dog's coat, there was a death-like chill nestling in his collarbone, his fingers were like a pair of stiff leather gloves. Anima had followed him silently from the gate outside, not wishing to talk outside. For a moment he had placed his hand on her back, but feeling that he might have overstepped his right, he removed it immediately. He sat down on the steps in the inner courtyard, dejected—like a man returning from a crematorium. After a while he shut his eyes, and leaned back. Had there not been a pillar, he might have even leid down. Anima had not bathed, nor eaten anything throughout the day. Trying to search for an answer in Satyabrata's body language, she too sat down on the steps. Perhaps on hearing her sit down, Satyabrata opened his eyes and turned his pupils around in search of something. After all this time, Anima spoke, ‘Anju has gone to a friend's house.’ After hearing this, when Satyabrata fixed his gaze on her, Anima felt that through that intense gaze, she could see something

that made Satyabrata seem like the man she knew. Taking out a bunch of papers from his pocket, Satyabrata handed it to Anima and then closed his eyes again. By then darkness had started gathering all around. Hoping to get some light, Anima came and stood under the evening sky.

### **For the Information of the Public**

Since there was no well edited and well compiled list of the important geographical and historical changes that had occurred during the years 1937-45, as a consequence of the Second World War, it was difficult to allocate to the individual citizens of the world a nation, nationality, language and a family lineage. Each nation had been subjected to such major geographical and historical changes, that it is very difficult to know for certain, who is who. Based on some collected information of an ongoing research we have come to know that there are presently many fugitives and anonymous men on this planet. This is especially so in countries like India-Pakistan, North Korea-South Korea, North Vietnam-South Vietnam, East Germany-West Germany etc. That is why, based on a UN agenda of 'Search for the true man', we are carrying out a test in each country, to establish whether a person is really who he claims to be. And we are requesting every citizen of the world to go to his nearest local *thana* and reveal his or her true identity.

### **The Description obtained at the Ballabhpur Police Station**

One // Sri Satyabrata Lahiri, son of the late Punyabrata Lahiri, originally a native of East Pakistan, and presently living in a house with holding number 230/A/6 has been paying the required municipal tax for this holding for the past 12 years. After a proper verification of the sale documents signed by its previous owner Shri Banabehari Mallik, the said holding got registered in the name of Sri Satyabrata Lahiri at the Ballabhpur Registration office on 10 June 1950 as per the English calendar. But after a special inquiry, it was found that the present legal owner of that holding is one Sheikh Mansur Ali, son of the late Kadam Sheikh, of Halshakeen Raichar, Pabna Zilla. Apparently after the Hindu-Muslim riot of 1950, the late Kadam Shikh had migrated to East Pakistan, along with his wife Noora, daughter Amina and son Hansur, but before leaving, he had handed over the responsibility of supervision of the house to one Shri Banabehari Mallick, whose family had been residing in that area for three generations. And it was in the same year, that Shri Banabehari Mallick, acting as the owner of the holding, sold it to

Shri Satyabrata Lahiri. A copy of the original document dated 13 December 1921, is still lying with Sheikh Mansur Ali, resident of Raichar in the Pabna *zilla*.

Therefore no person by the name of Shri Satyabrata Lahiri is the owner of the residential house located in Holding no. 230/A/6 of Ballabhpur Municipality. Or, the name of the owner of the house in holding number 230/A/6 of the Ballabhpur Municipality is not Sri Satyabrata Lahiri.

Two // After 1947, Shri Satyabrata Lahiri, known as the son of late Punyabrata Lahiri had worked as a clerk, and as a school teacher in both the government and the non governmental sector in the Indian Union Territory. Everywhere he declared himself as Satayabrata Lahiri, son of Punyabrarta Lahiri, and a B.A. graduate from Dhaka University in the year 1945.

On particular days, whenever he was asked to produce his B.A. Diploma certificate, he would say that he could not collect his original copy from the university, because he had to flee the riot-torn country soon after his exams, and it was not possible to collect it now, after the Partition. And in one or two cases, where the concerned authorities pressurized him further, he left his job.

An investigation revealed: that the person named Shri Satyabrata Lahiri, son of the late Punyabrata Lahiri had indeed passed the B.A. examination of the university of Dhaka in the year 1945, but the very next year, while on his way to Khulna, he fell victim to the communal riot and got killed in the train itself.

It could be that the one or those people who had presently misappropriated Satyabrata Lahiri's identity were very closely known to him, and because of that, they were able to use the minutest details of the original Satyabrata Lahiri's identity, to their own advantage. Apparently, the deceased Satyabrata was moving around alive even though he was dead and the presently living Satyabrata Lahiri was actually dead.

A first cousin of the late Punyabrata Lahiri, had been working in Calcutta, much before Independence. In an interview held by the enquiry commission he had said that he knew of at least ten cases where applications for a job had been made in the name of Satyabrata Lahiri. After getting to know the details of those ten cases, it was discovered that there were several other cases, where such applications had been made, all unknown to him. Not only was Satyabrata Lahiri's name and identity used in the professional field; it had also been used to firm up marriage proposals, and there was definite proof of one such marriage having been actually conducted.

A survey of the Dhaka University gazette showed that there were two persons with the name of Satyabrata Lahiri who had passed the BA examination in the year 1945. It was this second Satyabrata Lahiri who had made the entire problem even more complicated. Otherwise anybody who introduced himself by this name and claimed to be a graduate of the Dhaka University in the year 1945 could have been certainly arrested.

From the news collected from various district authorities, it is seen that till now, about 87 men named 'Satyabrata Lahiri' had got married after the year 1947. But it is not known how many of them had passed the B.A. examination from the Dhaka University in the year 1945.

Since the second Satyabrata Lahiri had passed the B.A. examination in the same year, it was not possible to know for certain, which one of them is alive and which one dead. It could be that the 'dead' Satyabrata (or the fake Satyabrata) was sometimes declaring the name the father of the deceased Satyabrata and sometimes of the living Satyabrata, according to his convenience.

Since this criteria of 'being a B.A. from the Dhaka University in the year 1945' was the only ground for the fake Satyabrata to introduce himself as someone else, he never changed it under any circumstance. And one cannot disbelieve him either, because there was really one 'Satyabrata Lahiri' who had passed the B.A. exam in the year 1945. And because the fake 'Satyabrata Lahiri' didn't need his father's true identity for any purpose, that is why that name kept changing.

As a result, there was no one single person who fulfilled all the three criteria of being

- (a) the son of the deceased Punyabrata Lahiri
- (b) a graduate of the Dhaka University in 1945 and
- (c) one bearing the name of Mr Satyabrata Lahiri.

Afterwards, the problem became even more complicated with an element of uncertainty relating to the original Satyabrata Lahiri's death. A news report said that at the beginning of 1946, a group of goondas attacked a train on the way to Khulna, which resulted in many deaths. The name of 'Satyabrata Lahiri' was on the list of those dead. It could be that the name published in the paper was erroneous. This Satyabrata Lahiri could have been someone else. But since the 'Satyabrata Lahiri' who was a graduate in the year 1945, and who was also Punyabrata Lahiri's son never returned from that trip to Khulna, he could be assumed as dead.

Therefore the problem that resulted was the following:

- 1) Was it illogical to assume that the son of the late Punyabrata Lahiri who was a graduate of the Dhaka University in 1945, had died in the

train attack on his way to Khulna? That is, even though the genuine 'Satyabrata' was alive, he was being considered as 'dead'?

- 2) If the 'genuine' Satyabrata had really died, then who and how many had misappropriated his identity as their own?

There was only person who could answer both the questions. The one who had used the names of 'Satyabrata Lahiris' to become one person. For that reason, all those who had married after 1947 and had settled down to a job and domestic life were being asked this question.

Until an answer to both the questions can be found, no 'Satyabrata Lahiri' can, for certain, consider himself as 'Satyabrata Lahiri', no wife will feel certain about her husband being the deceased Punyabrata Lahiri's son Satyabrata Lahiri, and no child can feel assured about her father being the true and original Satyabrata Lahiri.

So please reveal your true, natural and original identity at the nearest police station, and prove that you are really who you claim to be.

Three // On 30 July 1952 Shri Satyabrata Lahiri married Sm. Anima Sanyal, the second daughter of Shri Hemchandra Sanyal—a resident of Mukhera Village in the 24 Paraganas. The marriage was conducted according to Hindu rites. Both the late Shri Vishwanath Bhattacharya and the late Shri Narendranath Chakraborty had conducted this marriage, and it is from both their evidences, that one gets a definite proof of this marriage having been conducted according to Hindu *shastras*. Shri Satyabrata Lahiri and Sm. Anima Lahiri have been living as a married couple for the last ten years, in a house on the plot numbered 230/A/6 of the Ballabhpur Municipality. On 17 March 1953 Sm. Anima Sanyal gave birth to a baby girl at the City Hospital of Ballabhpur. It is worth mentioning here that even though the child was born only seven months after the marriage, it was a completely healthy, well formed and normal baby, born through a normal delivery. In this context, it is also seen from the hospital records that Anima was released within five days of her admission. This child, named Anjana Lahiri, is actually the only child belonging to Shri Satyabrata Lahiri and Sm Anima Lahiri. In response to a call by a world wide agenda on 'A search for the true person', a certain resident of modern East Bengal, named Janab Enamul Haq Chaudhury gave a self-incited report which revealed that Anima's father Hemchandra Sanyal's house in Pakistan, was in the same area as Janab Huq's. During the 1950 communal riots in East Bengal, Shri Hemchandra Sanyal and his family had taken refuge in Janab Enamul Huq Chaudhury's house. The latter's father, Janab Mainul Huq was then alive. And he himself was this Enamul. At that time Enamul had protected the Sanyal family with extraordinary courage. About fifteen to twenty days later, Hemchandra

Sanyal migrated to the Bharat Union. But his daughter, Anima, stayed back in Huq Choudhury's house in Pakistan. Not only did Hemendra Sanyal's second daughter, Miss Anima Sanyal, stay on in Pakistan, but on 5 February, 1951, she married Mainul Huq Chaudhury's son, Enamul Huq Chaudhury, under the name of 'Kumkum.' Janab Enamul Huq Chaudhury sent a copy of that marriage certificate along with this report. In that, the name of the bride is mentioned as Kumkum, and her father's as H. C. Sanyal.

The following circumstantial evidences were found in support of this report: When Hemchandra Sanyal moved to the Indian Territory, none had seen his second daughter Anima with him. After arriving at the Mukhera village, he had even told his neighbours that his second daughter was staying with his first daughter Anjali in a tea garden in Assam. Hemchandra Sanyal's eldest son-in-law worked in a teagarden in Assam. But from their evidence, it is quite clear that Anima had never been there. Therefore, this evidence indirectly proves that when Shri Hemchandra Sanyal left Pakistan in the year 1950, Anima was not with him.

Could it then be that Anima had really married Enamul under an adopted name, 'Kumkum'? But apart from the slight similarity in the initials of the father's name, H.C. Sanyal, there was no other evidence to prove that Kumkum and Anima were the one and the same person.

Again, if that is not true, then why did Anima stay back in Pakistan?

There are two opinions about this.

The first opinion: Janab Huq Chaudhury and Anima Sanyal had loved each other right from their childhood. Both of them lived in the same locality and studied in the same school till the age of eight or nine. Enamul used to address Anima's mother as 'Ma'. Enamul's father Mainul Huq Chaudhury was a very influential person in that locality. Since the year 1947, this romantic relationship between Enamul and Anima and also the close association between their two families, became one of the main reasons for Hemchandra Sanyal not leaving Pakistan. If Enamul failed to turn up at the Sanyal's residence even for a day, Anima's father would immediately send for him. A separate set of cup, saucer and plate was set aside for Enamul at the Sanyal's residence.

It was under this situation that the communal riot of 1950 started. Enamul left his home and took shelter in the Sanyal's residence. Enamul's father Janab Mainul Huq Chaudhury had not wanted to get involved in this matter, but when his only son Enamul came face to face with such danger, he could no longer remain aloof. He brought Hemchandra and his family over to his own house and sought the help of the police and the government for maintaining peace in that locality.

The entire Sanyal family remained confined in just one room with all its windows and doors tightly shut. Any sound outside the door frightened them. Whenever they got to know that Enamul was going out, they would spend the entire time with bated breath until, they were certain that he was back. In that moribund world, Enamul was their only source of strength and support. It was through him that they had come in contact with the Huq Chaudhury family. They could be trusted only if Enamul was present. He would knock on their door, and pass them food four times a day. And there was no separate set of utensils or crockery in this house that was set aside for the Sanyal family. The joyous cries and the wailing all around of the murderers and the injured, respectively, and the silent flames of a growing fire, was rapidly tearing the age old beliefs apart with each impact; just like earthquakes which test the permanence of the earth with each devastating impact. And it was in that deathlike situation that everyone had understood they were trying to ride through that typhoon on the boat of Anima and Enamul's love. If there was no relationship between Anima and Enamul, the Sanyal family would not have been able to come to this house, and Enamul's father would not have compelled the government to take steps to promote peace in the neighbourhood, and Enamul would not have created a peace-keeping force with some of his friends and be involved putting out fires and in helping the injured. All this was proved like a mathematical problem, that both the Sanyal family and the Huq Chaudhury family had together tried to preserve this love, just as our own nerves, unknown to us, try to protect our eyeballs from smoke and dust. For those lives which were being saved from death every minute, this fact was crystal clear.

And it was most clear to Anima. Even if she had been able to meet Enamul privately three or four times a day when the situation had been more peaceful, it was no longer possible to do so during these riot-stricken days. Now Enamul would enter their room only three to four times in the entire day.

Even though it is not proper to present as evidences in a legal investigation things that are difficult to prove, like love, affection and other matters of the heart, the fact that in spite of the two not being able to meet regularly outside, whenever Enamul entered their room at the end of a tiring day, Anima would run to him with a cool towel or a hand-fan, definitely proves that if Anima's love for Enamul had ever taken a conclusive turn, it was definitely during this time and not at any other stage of their relationship. Because, in that deathly situation when beliefs were being broken into pieces, the heartbeat of every member of the Sanyal family was making it visibly apparent, the love that Enamul felt for her. Otherwise, why was it

that when after having tried sincerely for 15 to 20 days, Mainul Huq. Chaudhury finally arranged for the Sanyal family to migrate to the Bharat Union, Anima refused to go to India?

It couldn't be that Hemchandra Sanyal had fully consented to leaving his daughter behind in Pakistan. But maybe, they had felt scared to see their daughter make this announcement without any apparent participation by Enamul, and again, they might have possibly felt ashamed to disagree with this decision after having seen and realized Enamul's sincerity in protecting their lives. Whatever it was, Anima stayed back in Pakistan.

On the 5th of February 1953, after the riot and its ensuing trouble had calmed down, Anima married Janab Enamul Huq Chaudhury of her own free will, and apparently, under an adopted name, 'Kumkum'. There was a registered document certifying this marriage between Kumkum and Enamul Huq. But why was it under a changed name?

Apparently, both Anima and Enamul had felt that if people got to know of this marriage, it would possibly become difficult for the Sanyal family to live in the Bharat Union with respect and dignity, and this is the reason why they had not used the father's full name.

The Second Opinion: Enamul had been attracted to Anima, much before Pakistan had come into being. After it was formed, he wrote a number of letters to Anima. And not having received any reply from her, he tried to talk to her on the road and elsewhere. He would often visit her house, and addressing her mother as 'Ma' would persuade her to serve him tea and other sundry snacks. Finally, one day, he came out of a tea-shop and warned Anima that if she didn't agree to become his 'Bibi', then her entire family would be cut into pieces, and since that day, she was confined behind closed doors and prevented from going out.

In the meantime, in 1950 an incident started a riot. At its start, Enamul lay siege to the Sanyal house with his gang, and publicly announced that if Anima was not married to him, all the inmates of the Sanyal household would be murdered. When Mr Sanyal complained to Enamul's father Mainul Huq. Chaudhury, the latter told the police that Enamul and his group of boys were actually maintaining peace and security in the locality. As a result, the police stayed away from the area and Enamul grew to become the only leader in the area.

One day, at around 10 o' clock at night, stones began to be hurled at the Sanyals residence. Frightened, the family members immediately shut all doors and windows and huddled inside. Within an hour or so, a group of people shouting 'Allah-O-Akbar,' came and surrounded the house and kept threatening that they would set the house on fire if they were refused entry.



It was at that moment that Enamul came close and stood outside the closed door and raising his voice said, 'Just open the door, I will set everything right.' So they were forced to open the door. Enamul then went on to say that the only way their family could be saved was, if they agreed to take refuge in his house. With no other option left, the Sanyal family was compelled to move to Enamul's house. There they had to live every moment face to face with death.

Enamul would sometimes enter their room and ask Anima, in front of everyone, to fan him or help him wipe off his sweat. At that time the Sanyal family had no sense of family bonding among themselves, their sole concern was to protect their own lives, just like a devotee in a temple who needs to have his prayers fulfilled and is not disturbed by the blood of the sacrificial animal. And this kind of an indecent and uncultured behaviour of Enamul towards Anima, made the other members of her family feel relieved about their own safety. It was as if they had reasoned to themselves that if such a remedy named 'Anima' had not been there, then that indecency and discourteous behaviour would have turned to murderous revelry, as if her external looks had detracted Enamul from turning his attention to the blood that ran in her body. If she had ever tried to protect that outer skin of hers, then she would have to pay back the price with her own blood.

In the legal investigation of offences like sexual greed, molestation and torture etc., it is not possible to verify the truth of the incident without paying enough importance to the initial cause and intention that led to the crime. Unless one accepts Enamul's lustful attraction for Anima, one cannot explain why, after they had stayed in the Huq. Chaudhury household for ten to fifteen days, and Enamul suggested that he would arrange for their migration to the Bharat Union, provided they agreed to leave Anima behind, that the Sanyal family gave their consent.

Hemchanra Sanyal couldn't have totally accepted the idea of leaving behind Anima in Pakistan. But he must have calculated and found out which of the two was more beneficial to him—the loss of so many human lives, or Anima being stripped of her dignity and family honour. And finally, he had left Anima in Pakistan and migrated to the Bharat Union.

On the 5th of February 1951, that is, after the riot and its ensuing trouble had quietened down, Enamul Huq. converted Anima to Islam, renamed her Kumkum, and they had a registry marriage.

At that time there was a fear that investigations into such incidents would be started once the riots came to an end. That is why Anima's name was changed and her father's identity concealed by using only the initials of his name.

Apart from these two reasons for Anima staying back in Pakistan, there wasn't any possible explanation to say that Anima and Kumkum were not one and the same person. In fact, on the basis of the evidence given by Hemchandra Sanyal's neighbour in Mukhera, the Assam resident, Anjali, wife of his eldest son-in-law, it had been proved that Anima did not come to the Bharat Union, so there was no basis for assuming that Anima and Kumkum were two different individuals. Then, if the assumption that Anima and Kumkum were not one and the same held, then the problem remained. And one would have to wait till it was decided whether they were indeed the same person or two different individuals. But since that question had not come up, it was indirectly agreed that they were the one and same person.

If it was this Anima Sanyal that Satyabrata Lahiri was married to on the 30 July 1952, then the question is—why and when did Anima Sanyal alias Kumkum Huq. Chaudhury leave Pakistan and arrive in the Bharat Union?

There are two opinions regarding this:

The first one is that, in the month of June in the year 1952, was realized for the first time, that Anima was pregnant. Meanwhile, the usual and common indications of imminent motherhood had already started showing up. Enamul's father, Mainul Huq. Chaudhur, had died a few days back. There weren't enough educated or experienced ladies in the house, and besides, she had become extremely nervous due to her physical condition, and had started calling for her parents and her family members repeatedly.

In this context, a particular matter requires special attention. Enamul had been so surprised at Anima's refusal to accompany her parents to the Bharat Union that he stayed away from home for a long time after their marriage, so as to get used to the now changed situation, and also to give Anima an opportunity to get acclimatized to the new environment. That was because Enamul knew that because Anima was a Hindu and he a Muslim, there would be prejudices ingrained in their respective minds had to be uprooted, and could not be overcome just because of their attraction to each other. Besides, knowing that it was for him alone that Anima had wished to stay back in Pakistan, Enamul had possibly wanted to keep her at a respected distance. It could be that he was always careful not to create any pressure on her. As a result of his father Mainul Huq.'s death, he was forced to come close to her and it was then that he discovered that like him, Anima too had maintained a distance for his sake. After that, it was a happy conjugal life for them. And it was a result of this, that by the end of the first year, Anima had conceived.

Considering Anima's present state of health, Enamul felt that her staying near her parents might do her good and at it might also help him develop an

interaction with his in-laws, so he made arrangements to send her to Mukhera. And yet, he decided that he himself would not go, lest it create any kind of social uneasiness for his in-law's family.

And it was with his full consent and encouragement that Anima came to the Bharat Union, with the intention of getting some mental peace and relief. After having reached the Bharat Union, she sent Enamul a letter stating that she had arrived safely and was staying at her father's house. The letter was signed 'Anima'.

This was her only letter since she left Pakistan. After that Enamul wrote to her frequently, but did not receive any reply. He felt hurt and stopped writing for a while, but later, he wrote again and finally sent her a telegram.

Again, as soon as Anima arrived in Mukhera, Hemchandra informed everybody that she had left her sister's home and had come here because her marriage had been fixed. After that he locked her up in a closed room, and stopped all channels of communication between her and Enamul by confiscating his letters, and started looking around for a suitable groom, who irrespective of the price involved, would be a Barendra Brahmin by caste, a non-Batsya by *gotra*. With the help of Mainul Huq. Chaudhury and Enamul, he had managed to bring back money and jewellery, with which he had been able to procure a house and land in Mukhera and retain his status as a Brahmin and practise his *dharma* in the Bharat Union. He tried to erase the few days in between.

And finally, on the 30 July 1952, that is just within one and a half months of her arrival from Pakistan, Hemchandra married off the already two months' pregnant Anima to Satyabrata Lahiri, the son of late Shri Punyabrata Lahiri. And within seven months of that marriage, that is on 17 March 1953, Anima gave birth to a completely healthy and bonny child, at the Ballavpur Hospital. She had conceived the child while she was Enamul's Huq. Chaudhury's wife, but given birth to it as Satyabrata Lahiri's wife.

The Second Version: After coming to the Bharat Union, Hemchandra had not heard from Anima for a long time. And yet he had hoped and feared that she might come back some day. That is why he had informed everybody about his second daughter and said that she was with her elder sister in a tea garden in Assam. Finally, sometime around June 1952, Anima arrived at Mukhera, in a state of extreme ill health. Apparently she told her father that the very day after he had left Pakistan, she had run away from Enamul's clutches, and after going through a lot of trouble and pain, she had managed to flee Pakistan. Finally, with the help of various sources, she was able to find her father's address.

Having got back his lost child, Hemchandra first tried to tend to her ill health because of which she had to remain indoors all the time and had no opportunity of interacting with anybody outside. She regained her health within almost a month. And even before the doctor who was supervising her could finish his medical treatment, she received a marriage proposal from Shri Satyabrata Lahiri, B.A., son of the late Punyabrata Lahiri. Out of an urgent need to fulfill his parental duty and also for not having enough confidence on his own health, Hemchandra gave his consent to this marriage. And finally, the two were married on the 30 July 1952.

When, after a month and a half, Anima went to visit her parents' house, she was already showing signs of pregnancy. Her neighbours in Mukhera could give supporting evidence about this. At the end of the fourth month, she was sent to Ballabhpur. And at the end of the seventh month, that is, on 17 March 1953, her first child was born. This conception occurred after her marriage to Satyabrata and he also happened to be the child's sole father.

If Enamul had found an opportunity to misuse Anima, then would he have spared her and if she had truly lived with that debauch, then why would she conceive a year later?

An analysis of all possible versions indicates the following:

- a) Did Anima really love Enamul, or had the latter forcefully confined her?
- b) Did Anima change her name and marry Enamul willingly, or was she compelled to do so?
- c) Did Anima change her *gotra* and marry Satyabrata voluntarily, or was she forced to do so?
- d) Whose daughter was Anjana, Enamul's or Satyabrata's?

The true identity of both Anima and Anjana depended on the correct answer to all the four questions. And these questions have also, very rapidly and directly also brought light, certain truths regarding human beings.

Till the time that the true answer to these direct questions is not found, the woman whom you know as your wife, is not really your wife, and the one you consider your child, is also not your own.

Hence, you have to go and provide evidence in your nearest *thana*, to prove that you are indeed who you say you are, giving the full information about your true origin, your natural roots.

Soon a darkness filled the house, slowly covering the windows, the gate, on the stairs and every nook and corner of the room and the *tulsi* corner. It was a darkness that spread like a devastating flood, and like a deathly epidemic. And thinking that darkness to be an ocean of molten iron, Anima

and Satyabrata—the two refugees in search of their own identities, tried to drown in its waves.

What had been their home till a moment back—now seemed like a lightless, gaping socket—as if it was raising its fake lashes and staring at Anima who stood in the courtyard and Satyabrata, who sat on the stairs. It was the same room, the same house, the same family, the same earlier joys that now turned into a demon and created a blinding drowsiness around them, and from the gradually growing darkness in the sky, echoed the words, 'You, you are not Satyabrata; and you, you are not Anima.'

Two completely unrelated souls lay on their face on the ground, waiting for that moment when Anjana would cry out in her childish, sad, lonely voice, a voice that would pierce through the darkness like a dart, and utter the peace mantra for their souls, 'Baba, Ma'.

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

# THE DEBT OF A GENERATION (EK JANMER HRIN)

Dipankar Das

The sun shone through the window and a slanted slice of a ray fell on my desk. Fine particles of dust floated around in the light. I took a look at the calendar on the far wall of the room. It was the ninth of November. It was just another ordinary date. It hadn't been bestowed with any significance on the calendar either. There was no reason to. I looked away. I surveyed the entire office room a couple of times. This was the lunch-hour. There was a sense of relaxed laziness all around. The table next to mine was empty. Paresh had gone out. There was a small crowd at the stall in the corridor outside the room. It was like a mini restaurant. The cacophony, the bursts of loud laughter, the steady hum of conversations gave a feeling of warmth and intimacy to the room. But even in the midst of all this there was a nibbling sense of isolation. Today's date brought about tiny ripples in some lonely corner of my heart and made me feel somewhat bubbly. However, none of my colleagues in the room was aware of the amazing secrecy with which the ninth of November was passing by. I had forgotten too. And there was no reason to remember. Yet when I was rearranging my desk calendar this morning, the date leapt at me and made my heart dance like a bouncing rubber ball. I had become a little absent-minded. Vague memories started coming back. From a certain point of time, sometime in my childhood maybe, this day meant two things that were very close to my heart; a face that was calm and reassuring—that of my dad's, and loving eyes that brimmed with overflowing affection—that of my mum's. I couldn't remember how we spent the mornings, but the whole house seemed to be filled with the fragrance of incense sticks. Then at one point, my mother would take me to the family deity and say—offer your prayers, Shibu. It's your birthday today.

It seemed that winter was going to be late this year. It was the second week of November already but it was still hot and stuffy. I reached out and tried to touch the piece of sun on my table. The warmth of the rays travelled through the veins of my hands to every corner of my body. Suddenly a loud burst of laughter rushed in from the cacophony on the far side of the room. And I had a feeling that the days and memories of my past somehow failed to provide warmth and inspiration to the life that I now lived. I wanted to leave the table, go out, join one of the chattering groups and maybe have some tea. But I couldn't. I was overcome by a sense of laziness and disinterest. I was wondering if there was some way I could add some warmth to this very special day. It would be nice I thought. Should I call someone up, just now? Oju or Ranjana? But was Oju back from their field camp? So it had to be Ranjana ... I could easily call her up—she'd be at her office. And she wouldn't be surprised at all, though we met each other or communicated with each other less often these days. The last time we met was a couple of weeks back. That was under the statue of Kshudiram, opposite the High Court. Ranjana had asked, 'Why do we tend to feel so sad especially in the evenings?' Trying to find a place in the shade of the statue I had replied, 'Evenings mean the end of a day. So probably we are saddened by the fact that yet another day has passed us by.' I wasn't sure if she had understood what I meant. She sat there with her legs folded, plucking the soft *durba* grass around. She was wearing a light purple cotton sari. Then, nibbling at a stem she asked, 'Why should we be sad at the passing of a day, Shibu? Our days are meant to pass by, just meaninglessly. Isn't it a relief for a burden to be taken off...?' I didn't respond to that. That was Ranjana. She then gradually walked away towards the bus-stop, shreds of the *durba* grass clinging to her sari. I had a feeling Ranjana was becoming a shadow in reality too—the shadow of a day that was coming to an end....

I had lost track of time. I got back to reality when I heard Paresh calling me from his table next to mine. I looked at him. Fingers pointing, he said—there's someone looking for you.

## 2

He was wearing a black coat. It had been black once upon a time. The brunt of age had left its many marks and it was now almost a dull grey. At the seams near the shoulder, the stitch had come off. The two buttons in front had been left open, and the shirt and the chest within were clearly visible. He was thin, like me, but not as tall as I was. His battered cheeks were

covered with stubble that added to the drabness of his sunken features. His hair was dishevelled. His eyes were deep-set, as if they were hollows waiting to be lighted up by some extra-terrestrial source. The eyes were balls peering out from the depths of an unknown darkness. This was the man that stood in front of me.

‘Yes?’ I asked, though I was still a little absent-minded.

‘You are Shibubabu, aren’t you?... I mean, Shibabrata?’ he spoke, but his voice was ghost-like. I had never heard such a human voice before.

‘Yes, I am Shibabrata...’ I looked at the man directly. And noticed that his emaciaed body was overcome with a sense of deep exhaustion.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘Could I have some water, please?’ asked the man in a damp, expressionless voice.

I was curious and beginning to get restless. I glanced at Paresh. He was staring at the man too. I got him some water. Then pointing to an empty chair asked him to have a seat.

The man emptied the glass at one go and wiped his lips with the palm of his hand. He put the glass down on my table and spoke.

‘I am Jeeban Ghosh. We haven’t met.’

‘Would you like some tea?’

‘No, thanks.’

I was becoming impatient. He hadn’t said anything yet. He was just taking deep breaths. Maybe he had walked a long distance and was short of breath still. But deep down I suspected that he had borne with him the news of a major catastrophe. I blurted out, ‘I’d be glad if you delivered your message. I’ve got to get on with my work.’

The man looked up at me. My heart skipped a beat. Like a robot he placed a weary hand on my table and pushed it towards me. Underneath his palms I saw a piece of folded paper. His hand was shaking feverishly.

‘What is it?’ I whispered hoarsely.

‘A letter.’

‘For whom?’

‘You.’

‘From whom?’

‘Just read it.’

‘Dear Shibu, bye! Please forgive me. I’ve thought hard and have realized that this is the best course of action for me now. You must be thinking, what a drama from this old sister even as she departs! But don’t take it otherwise, or else, I’ll feel ashamed even to die. Accept my blessings. Yours—Renudi.’



For a few seconds I felt as if someone had exploded a glass full of water in the depths of my heart. Or was it a heavy knock at the back of my head? The pain reverberated through every single vessel of my body. My throat was choked as if I was fast running out of my quota of breath. I swallowed hard, licked my lips with a dry tongue, and then asked quietly, 'When?'

'Late last night'.

'How?'

'From seeping pills. Almost a bottle.'

'Where did you find this letter?'

'Under the pillow.'

'Wasn't it seized by the police?'

'There was another declaration. The police have that. This I removed before the police arrived. For you.'

'Where's the dead body?'

'At the morgue.'

### 3

That was a long time ago. I was hardly six or seven—about thirty years back. Renudi's family had gone to live at Bhagabangola somewhere in the district of Murshidabad. Renudi was a cousin—her mother was my aunt, the eldest of my father's sisters. I was told that after the Partition we found ourselves a rented flat somewhere in the Belegkata area of Kolkata. My uncle and my dad had both studied at the Asanullah College in Dhaka. Both had decent jobs at the Dhaka Corporation. My uncle also had some property near Ghorashol in Narayanganj. But after the Partition they had to leave behind everything—their jobs and property—and flee. Those were very hard days I was told. They found it difficult to pay the rent on time. One or even a half square meal a day was all they had. They said I was born in the year of the Partition. My mother felt me stirring in her womb as she crossed over to this side of the border at Haridaspur, leaving behind long memories and the history of a family rooted in Narayanganj. My mother believed that even in the womb I could not come to terms with the fact that we were being compelled to leave a home that had been built and blessed by generations of our ancestors. So I stirred in protest. I had been in her womb for six months then. But that was light-hearted chatter. My mother used to burst out laughing whenever she narrated this. She found it very amusing. But as I grew up I realized that her humour had no basis. If that was an infant with a spirit to challenge adversity while still in his mother's womb, it surely could not have been me in my present incarnation. It must have been somebody else.

Soon after our arrival here, my father was able to find a job—with the Public Works Department. But not my uncle. And with my aunt and their two daughters—Renudi and Jaya—he was literally gasping for survival. Then as a result of a prolonged struggle against an uncertain life, he gradually began to lose his mental balance. He had been able to obtain some land from a Muslim at Bhagabangola in Murshidabad in exchange for his property at Narayanganj. Finally, one day, he decided to move to Bhagabangola and live there. Once there, they tilled the land and somehow managed to make ends meet. But the mind refused to cope. My uncle probably never got over the shock of having lost the material comforts and social dignity of their life at Narayanganj. So he found it increasingly difficult to adapt himself to the disastrous consequences of Partition. And one fine day, without warning, he sold off his property at Bhagabangola and returned to Kolkata with the family. He wanted to set up a business. But he had no idea of what he wanted to do, where and how. He had neither the vision nor the dedication needed to set up a business with a small capital. Haunted by his past, he had in the meantime, become a shadow of his former self. He hadn't been able to wipe out from his memory the scars of the blood and the death they had had to wade through. The result was predictable. He lost his money and his dignity. Then one day he left home never to return again. The family was now penniless. They looked for him everywhere but there was no trace. Some said he had thrown himself before a train. Others said he had crossed the border in order to get back to Narayanganj and then.... All that was a very long time ago too.

Renudi's family lived in a slum by the canal somewhere in Ultadanga. My aunt made packets from newspapers. And Renudi's job was to carry these to the various shops and stalls that bought these. This was probably their only source of income. Once in a while I used to accompany my mother to my aunt's place. I remember getting off from the bus and walking through a lane along the canal for about 15 minutes. And that used to be a most filthy and ugly lane with drinking joints, thieves, prostitutes, pimps and so on. But my mother used to walk through quietly. Even at that age I used to be amazed at the way my mother walked down that path. She was a woman who suffered from an intense washing mania. And at home she pursued it with a vengeance. We used to tease her, 'You should carry some cowdung-mixed-water<sup>1</sup> when you go out, and sprinkle it along the path you walk...' It

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<sup>1</sup> Fresh cow-dung has certain antiseptic qualities and is thus regarded by Hindus as a cleansing substance, which is used ceremonially to wipe away sins and impurities. By

was amazing how the same person could ignore everything around to walk up to my aunt's dwelling in that slum. Never for a moment did she express any annoyance or impatience. Even at that young age it made me wonder. It somehow seemed that for her, it was a walk towards her own self. It was as if she walked that path to pay back a debt of a generation—her generation.

#### 4

When we left the morgue with Renudi's dead body, it was almost dusk. And in the midst of that softly descending darkness, a few street boys from the locality lent their shoulders to carry her on this last journey. The arrangements were kept to the bare minimum. There were a few flowers and someone had arranged for some paddy stalks. The customary sprinkling lasted only a little while. Soon the packet was empty and the boy had nothing else to do. He shouted out 'Haribol' once, probably just for a change. After a while, he blew into the empty packet, held the mouth tight and burst it with a loud bang between his palms. Then he lit a cigarette, puffed out some smoke and screamed in the direction of one of his comrades carrying the body, 'Hey, Hunter! Watch out man, your side's sagging. Pull up, man. Or Ranudi will fall and conk out again. I swear!'

It was a November evening. Though there was no hint of winter yet, the air was stuffy with smoke and fog. This part of the city was also having a power-cut. The boys carrying Renudi's body moved very swiftly through the darkness and the fog. Jeeban Babu and I followed them, trying hard to keep up. We hadn't exchanged a word since we left my office. We walked faster and faster trying to match the speed of the boys. But I was becoming breathless. Finally, I gave up. The crematorium was still a long way off. It was not going to be possible for me to continue at that speed. I said quietly, 'Let them go, Jeeban Babu, we'll catch up with them.'

Jeeban Babu agreed with a nod. True, we had lost her. There was no point in trying to keep up anymore.

These words somehow made me shiver. The other day Ranjana had mentioned this point, about trying to keep up too. I had said to her, 'Look, Ranjana, you and me... we are so close to each other. In spite of all our limitations, we love each other to the best of our abilities. And we've been together for a long time. Yet time, in an effortless manner, also continues to

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sprinkling water mixed with a little cow-dung, a place is believed to be purified.

create a kind of distance between the two of us.... Ranjana gave me a strange look. And I had a feeling that though her sight was set on me, her eyes had travelled many light years away. That was an evening. We were sitting in the grounds of the fort. She hadn't pinned her hair up that day. It was in a long plait that hung over her neck and shoulders in a coil. For the past few days, her mother hadn't been keeping very well. The pain in the chest had aggravated. So we'd had a long discussion about the pros and cons of moving her to a hospital. But in the end, we couldn't find a single solution that could provide a satisfactory relief to our limited and undignified existence. Maybe that made her a little more touchy than usual that day. To make matters worse, I had mentioned about the distance that very day. She continued to look at me and finally asked, 'Shibu, why did you say such a thing?'

I felt a little uneasy. I didn't reply. After a while she asked in a surprised but cold voice, 'Have I become a burden to you?'

'Not at all, Ranju. Love can never be a burden.' I said those words in a very mundane sense.

Ranjana sat there expressionless. Then she took a deep breath and said, 'Not love, Shibu. I've been thinking of something else.'

'And what's that?' I asked. My voice was becoming lower and lower.

I hadn't realized when Ranjana had taken my right hand in hers. It was quite some time since we had consciously touched each other. Yet, to my surprise I realized that it had no rippling effect on either of our bodies. Our blood seemed to have stopped flowing, never to be alive again.

Ranjana had let go of my hand. And said absent-mindedly, 'Partition was such a long time ago. Neither you nor I was even born then. So there was no way we could be responsible for it. But look at us now—the whole responsibility has been thrust on our shoulders...'

We live with the burden of this anxiety; we live with it and try to survive in spite of it. We don't even realize that this survival is only existence, not living. When you have no ground beneath your feet, it is not possible to build bridges.

That bit of ground beneath our feet—we'd never been able to find. So how could we ever keep pace with time? But Renudi had tried. At least she had been trying to make an effort in that direction the other day. She had taken me home right after office that day, 'Sit for a while, Shibu. I'd like to tell you something important today.'

'Important?'

'Yes, I've been thinking of you lately. Besides, at this moment there's no other relative around apart from you. And it's not something that I would like to discuss with everyone.'

Renudi was seated right in front of me, about four feet or so away. I could sense she was restless, though she was trying hard not to reveal it.

She had paid a huge price for survival. Yet, we had never seen Renudi give up in hopelessness. When my mother was alive, she used to drop in at our place quite often. One day we were told that along with selling paper packets, she had also managed to clear her School Final Exams. On another day she came over to our place with a pot of sweets. She touched my mother's feet and asked for her blessings. She had found a job.

I can never forget that moment in my life. We all knew of my mother as a strong woman. No one had ever seen her lose control over her emotions. But that day when she heard that Renudi had got a job, she was so excited that she couldn't hold back her tears. She kept stroking Renudi affectionately on her head and back and repeated over and over again, 'Oh, *thakurjhi!* ... God has finally smiled on you.'

'Well, what if... now... I mean, at the age of 42... if I end up getting married... you'll make me a laughing stock, won't you?'

Renudi's words brought me back to reality and I looked up at her sharply. What rubbish! After my aunt passed away, my mother had pleaded with Renudi to find a man for herself. She had refused. How could she do that? If she got married and moved away who would look after Jaya, she argued. That was Renudi. She had a job now, but her earnings were meagre. God alone knew how she managed to save from those earnings. It was amazing how she put her savings together drop by drop to buy a few gold ornaments for Jaya. And then, at an appropriate time, she even got her married off. Jaya now lived somewhere near Dhanbad, where her husband had a mediocre job in the colliery. They didn't visit often. It saved expenses.

After Jaya left, we had pleaded with Renudi again. Renudi, think of yourself too. By then, probably, she was thoroughly tired of life. My pleas only made her smile. And then, she would stare out of the window with a heart-rending look. She seemed to say—I've lost out on time! I've lost out on time!

After that I couldn't bring myself to persist with her. We were all losing out on time. None of us had been able to keep up with the march of time. Actually, I could feel that in spite of her apparent indifference, Renudi had always nurtured within her a deep sense of anguish. Partition, its ruthless consequences, and the waste of her entire youth—each of these combined to inflict on her not only deep anger, but also intense pain.

## 5

We caught up with the pall-bearers at the entrance of the crematorium. Some of them were busy, quickly going about the minor formalities of the cremation. Slowly I walked up to Renudi's bier and stood there. There were a couple of other bodies waiting to be cremated. The smoke from the burning wood made my eyes burn too. Slowly I bent over Renudi's body. It lay there covered with a fine white cloth. She had committed suicide. My mother used to tell us tales of boat races on the river Buriganga. We loved those stories. Once the wind hit all of the seven sails, she said, each of those boats would shoot through the water like arrows from a quiver. And if the man at the helm wasn't alert enough, the boat would shoot off in the wrong direction, out into the open sea and be lost forever. These races were held as part of the celebrations of the birth of Lord Krishna<sup>2</sup> on the banks of the Yamuna. And it was believed that on that day there was a call from Mother Jashoda.<sup>3</sup> Every year without fail one person would be taken away into the river to play in her lap forever... at this point, my mother's voice would become heavy with emotion. She would bring her palms together and raise them to her forehead in a gesture of prayer. No one knew whom she invoked!

Whose call had Renudi answered? After so many years? And at such an inappropriate time? Buriganga had moved away from her life quite some time back. That was why the other day she had said—my dad has left behind great deeds from his life! And to top it, he made the great show of going back to Dhaka. And the consequences of those great deeds have sucked the life out of me, Shibu. But then she sipped her tea and said quietly—anyway, forget it. After all, he was my father. Also, the Partition hadn't left our parents with anything, apart from drowning themselves in insanity. She had finished her tea. Putting the cup down on the floor she had continued 'It all happened when I was down with pleurisy. You would never be able to imagine how intensely painful my life had become, how unbearably terrifying the loneliness was.... In life, I've endured a lot, and I've taken on a lot of responsibilities. But I've never had a feeling that I couldn't take it any more. But this loneliness... at this age, alone in a house... made me feel... I mean, these days I feel... that I haven't actually lost my father. He is around. He has returned from across the borders... and says... "Renu, my dear, aren't you going to go? Aren't you going to go home?..." Renudi stopped. She

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<sup>2</sup> Krishna is the Hindu God of Love.

<sup>3</sup> Jashoda is Krishna's mother.

was probably emotionally exhausted. Time ticked away. That day I had felt a kind of eeriness too. It seemed as if my long lost uncle from across the borders was back amongst us again. He could probably be found in some corner of that house. Age had caught up with him—he was very old now. I could see the slush from the banks of the Padma clinging to his feet. His aged skin carried the fragrance of the leaves and grass of his native soil—Narayanganj. And then he seemed to be whispering—aren't you folks going to go home? Aren't you going to go home?

I pulled myself together. Renudi too. Then she spoke haltingly, 'All through my sickness there was this compounder who came over to give me the shots...one fine day I realized... the course of my recovery, my survival had become hopelessly dependent on his presence.'

Renudi had taken a deep breath. A draught of air came in through the open window facing the south. After a while, Renudi spoke as if declaring a final decision—a widower, and a daughter about six or seven years old. Has a decent income. Age almost the same as mine. ... Shibu, am I making a mistake?

She stopped speaking and looked up at me finally. I looked at her too. A battered Renudi, with her 42 years of tiredness, had, for a few seconds, become unfathomable to me. The light shone directly on her. I looked at her in that light. Age and tortuous fate had taken away from her the last traces of softness. Dark black circles had etched their presence permanently around her eyes. The collar bones stuck out from an emaciated neck. Blackheads formed a prominent half-circle on her nose. She had had a couple of grey strands in her hair for quite some time. I felt a heaviness in my heart. In front of me, at an arm's length, sat Renudi. She was not a girl anymore; neither did she find the opportunity to become a woman. In an effort to pacify the all-consuming fire of everyday struggle, she had sacrificed herself bit by bit. In the end, now, nothing else was becoming of her. It seemed as if life was no longer willing to accept her in any other role.

## 6

'Jeeban Babu?' I raised myself from Renudi's bier and looked at him. He was standing on the other side. 'Yes?' His reply floated across.

A fresh pyre had just been lit somewhere. I could hear the crackling from the moisture in the wood. The crematorium was filled with smoke. I shut my eyes hard to let out some of the tears. Then said, 'If I'm not wrong, you are...'

He interrupted before I could finish the sentence. Repentantly, as if he had committed some crime, he replied, 'Yes, I'm the compounder.'

Everything around seemed hollow and meaningless. Maybe it was the effect of the crematorium. I lit a cigarette. And let out some smoke. Then asked weakly, 'Haven't brought your daughter along?'

'What's the use? ... Only unnecessary pain.'

'She must have been very fond of Renudi, then?'

'Very.'

A loud shout of 'Haribol' rang out from somewhere in the crematorium. Jeeban Babu looked up once towards the sky. I was very tired. I felt like a frustrated and distressed watchman, guarding a dead body for ages. Though I had managed to get to the crematorium finally, the wait here for the last rituals was going to be a long one again.

I had to keep up a conversation. So I said, 'The relationship between Renudi and you had more or less been finalized, hadn't it?'

'Yes, almost.'

'Why did this happen suddenly?'

'I've been thinking of that too.'

'You had not suspected anything at all?'

'Not really...' Jeeban Babu's voice was choked. He stopped, and looked at me. Then he held out his hand and asked, 'Can I have a cigarette?' I obliged. He lit the cigarette, blew out some smoke and very absent-mindedly said, 'Somehow I had a feeling that lately Renu had been suffering from a kind of insanity.'

'Insanity?' The words rolled out mechanically.

'Why would someone with such a strong and fighting spirit like Renudi be overcome with insanity?'

'No idea. But recently Renu had begun to become very nervous about taking any decision. She said, her father—I mean your Pishemashai—apparently kept calling her, to go home. But in reality he is dead. He had been dead for a long time and that was a closed chapter.'

The pall-bearers came and took away Renudi's body. The pyre had already been arranged. Now they asked for our consent and set it on fire. The flames pushed through the wood and leapt up fiercely towards the sky. And as I looked, I suddenly remembered—it was the ninth of November. Renudi had given me a birthday present.

We walked slowly towards the banks of the Ganga for the final rituals. The night moved on. Over the river, the fog lay still in a cover of thick coil. I could see a boat cutting through that cover and moving towards the north. I sat down on the steps of the *ghat* leading down to the river. Somewhere, at



another *ghat*, some religious songs were being sung. I could hear the sound of cymbals and tom-toms.

I felt as if my mind was being caught in a net. It was not the effect of death, or the loss of a dear one. I had got used to such things. It was something else that kept erupting all over. It was November. And they say, it is possible to see all the stars and the planets in the sky in November. I was looking up at them. Gradually, I seemed to be hallucinating. I could clearly see a long procession of dead bodies lifting the veil of fog and very silently floating by along the bank of the river. The biers of the bodies floated away one by one, just like rafts on water and the soft light of the full moon fell on the white shroud of the biers. It was a very long procession—one that started from the year of the Partition, the year of my birth. I couldn't recognize all the faces in the procession, but they all seemed to be similar in some way. They all seemed to be those of my near and dear ones. There were no shouts of Haribol. There was no one to shed tears for them either. The procession floated along in quiet neglect and utter indifference from its surroundings. But at the end of the procession I noticed a half-crazed man. His hair was tied in knots, his beard long and grey, his bare body smeared with ashes, and his legs till the knees dripping with slush. Long long ago, at some forgotten place, a similar kind of man had once set off with the intention of crossing the border to return home and was never found again. As the crazy-looking man walked along with the procession, he seemed to wave at me, 'Come over! Come home, you folks! Come home!'

I had goose pimples all over me. My mouth was parched dry. And I felt hopelessly claustrophobic. There was no point in putting up a resistance.

'Shibu Babu!'... had someone thrown a stone into the water? I turned around.

'Shibu Babu!'... in the darkness stood Jeeban Ghosh. He was calling me.

'Are you through with the rituals?' I took a long breath and asked.

'Through?'

I could feel the wet clay of Ganga under my feet. My feet were sinking. The damp coldness of the clay seeped through my feet and into the veins of my body. I called him quietly, 'Do you mind coming here for a moment?'

'What is it?' He whispered back

'Look!' I pointed towards the river.

'Fog.'

'No, a funeral procession.'

'It's the sound of water.'

'No, it's the call of that half-mad man.'

Neither of us spoke. We just looked at each other. It was dark. However close we stood, it was not possible to see each other clearly. And we didn't try either. On one side we had the river on a November evening, the funeral procession of a generation, and the call of that half-mad man. On the other side was the crematorium. Probably another body was being cremated. The flames leapt fiercely from a fresh pyre. And that part of the sky had become reddish.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri



## IF (JADI)

Sunil Gangopadhyay

Hearing the children making a noise outside, Jahanara Begum came and stood on the verandah outside. She was about 70 years old now, but her age did not show up strongly on her face yet. Her complexion was still like that of white lilies and there was a reddish tinge of the setting sun on her delicate face. Today being a festival day, she was dressed in a white coloured silk sari.

The rains had come very suddenly. Jahanara Begum's grandchildren and their young friends who had been burning crackers in the open courtyard, rushed back for shelter under the verandah. The crackers that had been kept in the open basket were drenched, which made the children really annoyed.

The youngest of her granddaughters, Mili came running toward her, and embracing her with both hands complained, 'Grandma, all my *rangmashal* crackers have got wet and are not lighting. The rain is naughty, horrible!'

Jahanara smiled to herself. She had felt happy to see the rains. It had been terribly warm throughout the day, but one felt ominous if it didn't rain on this day when they were celebrating the Shabe Baraat.<sup>1</sup> Tonight the angels would come down from heaven and before that, this earth needed to be cleansed and purified by the rain. As far back as she could remember, every afternoon on Shabe Baraat, she had seen rain.

Running her fingers through Mili's hair she said, 'Doesn't matter, you've burnt enough crackers for the day! Come and have some *sandesh* now, aren't you feeling hungry yet?'

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<sup>1</sup> The night of forgiveness. Also known as Shabe Dua: the night of prayer.

'No' Mili said stubbornly, 'Rehana has burnt three crackers and I have burnt only one!'

Calling out to one of her grandsons, Jahanara Begum said, 'Feroze, give Mili one or two more crackers to play with!'

'There aren't any left, Dadima! Give me some money. I can go and buy some from that shop at the street corner.'

'How will you go in this rain?'

'Oh, I will take an umbrella with me. Give me some money, Dadima.'

It was, of course, natural for children to rejoice today. They would love to get drenched in the rains, and become a little unruly, it suited their age. Nobody could say 'no' to their whims today. She picked up Mili forcibly, even as the little girl continued to swing her hands and legs showing her reluctance, wanting so desperately to accompany Feroze and the rest of her cousins to the shop down the street!

'Go and ask Kamaruddin to give you 20 rupees on my behalf and get some crackers for Mili.' Jahanara Begum ordered Feroze.

The sound of Magareb's *ajan* being sung somewhere in the neighbourhood came floating in the breeze. The new Muezzin seemed to have a very sweet voice. Jahanara paused a little to hear the *ajan*. It was a beautiful day.

Holding Mili in her arms, she came upstairs. This was a large white coloured house. At one time, this area had been quite desolate, with only a rice field behind the house, a pond on the left side and the Chaudhury's mango grove on the right. But recently the metropolis of Kolkata had been gobbling up more and more of the suburban areas. The underground railway had come as far as Barasat, and the Chaudhury's mango grove had now given way to a telephone factory. On the left side, the pond had been filled up with earth, and a row of employees' quarters were now being built there.

It was five years ago, that Jahanara Begum's husband had breathed his last. Kaji Hasan Saheb had retired as a DIG of Bengal police force. He had refused offers for a post retirement job in a private firm, but interestingly enough, having worked all his life in a police force, he had developed an urge for pursuing gardening as a hobby. He had planted a few trees on the land in front of his house and remained busy nurturing them. He kept excellent health, and every morning he would come out with a spade and a bucket of water in his hands. But one morning he met with a severe heart attack, and his body stooped over his favourite trees, never to rise again.

Since that day, Jahanara Begum had taken over the reins of this large family in her own hands. She had four sons and three daughters, all of who were married. Her eldest son worked in an office in Lahore, and now wanted to take his Amma to visit the house that he had recently bought.

The airport was not very far from this house; one could reach Lahore in just two hours by plane. The only other time that Jahanara Begum had boarded a plane was when she had accompanied her husband on a pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharief. But it had not been a pleasant experience for her. That is why she didn't want to board a plane again. Again, it took almost a day and a half to reach Lahore by train ... actually, the truth was that Jahanara Begum did not feel like leaving the family home and going anywhere else.

Her second daughter, Selina, lived in London and had married a doctor from Sylhet. Their entire family along with the kids had arrived here only the day before yesterday. Her younger daughter Niloufer had lost her husband last year and had returned to her mother's house, along with her two children. The eldest of her daughters, Hamida, lived in Benares, but she couldn't come for the festival this year, because of ill health. Her four other sons and their wives had already assembled in this house and the entire place was now bursting with people.

Jahanara Begum's youngest son, Siraj, had married a Hindu girl. In fact, this son had caused her a lot of problem in his adolescent years. Once, while he was still in school, he had tried to run away from home, and had finally been traced in Hardwar. Apparently, he had planned to climb a Himalayan peak all by himself! Then again, when he was in college, he had got involved in active politics. It was strange, indeed, that one whose father was a policeman did not hesitate to participate in public processions on the street. Finally, one day, his father had ordered his arrest.

But Siraj had sobered a lot since his marriage. Though he still participated in political activities, he was equally serious about his profession. His wife, Deepa, was a lecturer at a nearby college. Soon after they had got married, they had wanted to move to a separate house, but Jahanara Begum had not been willing to permit that. 'No, that won't be allowed.' She had told them. 'There are so many rooms lying vacant in this house, why should you still have to go and live elsewhere?'

This child Mili, otherwise known as Milita, who was sitting in her lap right now, was Siraj and Deepa's only daughter and the apple of her eye. Though she was an extremely restless child, Mili would always laugh joyously, even if she were rebuked. Jehanara Begum knew that the child was suffering from a bout of cold for the past few days, and was certain that she would fall ill if she got drenched in the rains. That is why she wanted to keep the child with her. Mili's mother Deepa was away in Dhaka for a seminar, and wouldn't be back for two more days. On entering her room, Jahanara Begum took out two coconut *sandesh* and put one in each of Mili's hands. Even though the child had a distaste for most sweets, she was somehow, particularly fond of coconut sweets.

Then Jahanara Begum sat down and opened the Qur'an Sharif on a low stool. One had to read the Qur'an Sharif several times to keep the mind pure and elevated on an auspicious day like the Shabe Baraat. Outside, it had started to rain very heavily. Whatever little joy the young children had hoped to get by playing in the open air was completely destroyed now.

After reading just one page of the Qur'an, Jahanara Begum got deeply engrossed in the book. Right from the time that she had been a child, she had heard the Qur'an Sharif read by her father and her brothers. She read it herself too; in fact she could even recite most of the *suras* without looking at the text. But each time she read it, she found a new joy in the words.

This particular Qur'an Sharif was a gift from her father. It was not a printed book, but a hand written manuscript, with the margin on each page being embossed in gold paint.

Mili had finished eating the sweets by now. She jumped onto her grandma's back and asked playfully, 'What are you reading, Dadima?'

'Oh it's the Qur'an dear. Let me read the Qur'an Sharif dear. Why don't you play with your toys in the meantime? Let me read just a little more...'

'They've not come back with the crackers yet.' Mili said using the same tone again, 'Tell me a story Dadima, please.'

'All right, Ill tell you a story. But just sit quietly now.'

'What book is that Dadima, does it have a story about a king and queen?' Mili asked.

'Yes, it also has that. Now just get off my back and come and sit by my side. That's a good girl. Now listen carefully. Once upon a time there lived a king named Nomrud. He was a very arrogant man and an atheist also.'

'What does that mean?'

'Well you know, God is Allah, Bhagaban. The man who does not believe in God is called an atheist. King Nomrud had denied the existence of the all-powerful Lord and had declared himself as the supreme God. His subjects used to worship him as the God incarnate, and sometimes they even worshipped his idol. And that was very bad indeed.'

'Why, why is it bad?'

'After all, the king is not really the God. All right, now listen. Among his subjects, there was a man called Ibrahim. He neither disobeyed the king nor worshipped him. One day the king called him and said, "Why don't you worship me?"'

Ibrahim said, "Because I don't worship any God other than my own."

"But I alone am the God." the King announced with an arrogance, to which Ibrahim said ...'

Suddenly there were footsteps at the door. Jahanara Begum turned her face around and saw her son coming towards her with a couple. She needed her glasses to read, but couldn't recognize people far away, with them. Jahanara Begum removed her glasses and looked up; a look of recognition came into her eyes. Siraj had just walked into the room, accompanied by Deepa's elder brother Joy and his wife Bhaswati.

Placing her hand over their bowed heads, Jahanara Begum blessed them both. Of course, Siraj did not bow down to touch his mother's feet, he didn't believe in such petty, ostentatious customs, so he stood a little distance away. Deepa's brother was a renowned nuclear physicist. In fact, it was only last year that the Chinese Government had honoured him, but he never bragged about it to anyone. He would always touch her feet respectfully, whenever he visited this house. Jahanara Begum served sweets to everybody and enquired after the wellbeing of the other members of their family.

'Mashima, were you reading the Qur'an?' Bhaswati asked. 'Sorry we came and *disturbed* you.' Then looking at the others in the room she said, 'Come, let us go and wait in the other room.'

Joy said, 'Mashima, you know that we too celebrate the Lakshmi Puja at this time of the year. It's a tradition that has been practised for many years now. I know that Deepa isn't here, but even then my mother has invited all the children in your family, and all of you, but of course I cannot ask you to come, I know that you....'

Jahanara Begum interrupted, 'But all of you must have dinner with us before you go back today. Guests are not supposed to leave unfed on the Shabe Baraat day.'

'Of course we will. There's such a beautiful aroma of cooked meat floating all over the house!' Joy said. Bhaswati joined in, 'And the bread that you make out of rice flour is also so delicious...' Siraj called out to his daughter, 'Come Mili, let us all go to our room.' Saying this he led his guests out of his mother's room. As soon as they left, Mili jumped up and said, 'Dadima, please tell me the story, what happened after that'

Seeing her childish eagerness, Jahanara continued, 'Okay, so where were we? Oh yes, I remember, I was talking about Normud Raja and Ibrahim. Seeing the King's arrogance, Ibrahim said, "I refuse to think of a king as God. He who can give life to human beings and also take life away from them alone is God Supreme." To this Normud said, "But even I can do that. Would you like to see?" Immediately he ordered two of his prisoners to be brought from the prison. One of them was to be hanged the next day. Normud ordered his release and turned to Ibrahim and said, "See, I too can give life to human beings!" And then he turned to the other one who was to



be set free the next day, and chopped off his head. Again turning to Ibrahim, he said, "See, I can take away life also."

Mili couldn't just contain her curiosity. "Then what did Ibrahim say then?"

'Then Ibrahim spoke out the prime truth. He said, "Every morning, my God brings out the sun from the eastern sky. Can you bring it out from the western side?" The king was completely baffled and accepting defeat, he lowered his head and remained silent.

So you see, dear' Jehanara Begum continued, 'Those who question or doubt God's strength...'

At this time, footsteps were again heard at the door. Having seated Joy and Bhaswati in his own room, Siraj had come back, and was now standing at the door, his tall frame clad in a tee shirt and a pair of jeans.

His handsome face now wore a serious look.

Walking a few steps into the room he turned to his daughter and said, 'Come on Mili, your uncle is calling you.' Then as soon as Mili left the room, he came and stood in front of his mother and said 'Amma, were you teaching Mili the Qur'an Sharif?'. There was a distinct firmness in his voice.

Surprised at this sudden reaction, Jahanara Begum said, 'Not at all. Actually Mili had been playing with crackers, downstairs, but since those had got all got spoilt in the rain, she had become restless and that is why I was trying to calm her down by telling her a story. Why, has something gone wrong?'

As if he was rebuking his mother, Siraj continued, 'What do you mean by that? Deepa's brother and his wife came and saw you teaching Mili the Qur'an Sharif! It was obvious that you were taking advantage of Deepa's absence and trying to initiate Mili into the Islamic religion. Shame on you, Amma! How many times have I said earlier that such things will not be allowed!'

Begum Jahanara felt shocked. 'What are you saying Siju?' she asked in innocent surprise. 'After all, Mili belongs to this family, will she not know even a bit of the religion that her father and grandfather followed? It was she who asked me to tell her a story.'

'Amma, when we had married, both Deepa and I had decided never to force our own religious beliefs on each other. Just as I have not converted myself to a Hindu after my marriage, similarly Deepa too will never become a Muslim. And until they are adults, our children too will not ...'

'Have I ever pressurized Deepa to become a Muslim?'

'No you haven't. But as far as Mili is concerned, you ... Amma, why can't you remember that forced religious conversion is now banned and considered illegal in this country?'

‘Why are you shouting like a mad man Siju? I haven’t really done anything!’

‘Of course, you have! You were secretly trying to make that little girl memorize the Qur’an. But Amma why don’t you just look at that photograph of Jinnah that you have on the wall. Do you remember what he had said at the Red Fort on the 15 August, 1947, the day when he was made the first Prime Minister of independent India? He had been standing next to Gandhi, just a little away from Jawaharlal, Maulana Azad and the others when Gandhi declared him as the first Prime Minister of independent India! It was then that he had given that beautiful speech! He had said that from now on, Hindus will no longer be just Hindus, Muslims no longer Muslims, they would be citizens of Independent India having equal rights. He had also added that henceforth, every individual will perform his religious rites and beliefs in the privacy of his own home, and if anybody ever tried to lay a hand over another’s religion, then....’

Unable to withstand this overwhelming surge of words that kept pouring out, Jahanara Begum stopped him abruptly and said, ‘Quiet! You think you are very smart, don’t you? Do you think I’ll be very impressed with those words that you keep lecturing everywhere in public? Tell me, have I ever forced Deepa about anything? Even if she had wanted to practise any Hindu rite in this house....’

‘But you do know that Deepa does not believe in any kind of religious worship or practices.’

‘Even then, doesn’t she know anything about the Goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati that are worshipped in her family? Does she not read out stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to Mili? Even I know those stories. Then why shouldn’t Mili get to know about the Qur’an Sharif or even *Bishad Sindhu*? Is it not possible to know anything about another religion without converting to it? Siju, after marrying a Hindu girl, have you become a henpecked husband?’

‘Amma, Amma, how could you say something like this to me?’

Jahanara Begum had suddenly become very angry. When she noticed Siraj’s bewildered expression, she stopped. No, this wasn’t at all true of Siraj. Even though he had married Deepa, he had avoided going to his father-in-law’s house. He wasn’t at all inclined towards the Hindu religion. This son of hers was an atheist right from his student days. He never kept a fast during the Roja, nor read the Qur’an, nor did he attend any of the religious functions in Deepa’s father’s house!

Begum Jahanara got up and putting her hand on her son’s head she said, ‘Why are you getting so worked up Siju? It’s not proper to behave like this

on this auspicious Shabe Barat day. I was only reading out stories of kings and queens to your daughter, that's all.'

'But Joy and Bhaswati saw you teaching Mili how to read the Qur'an Sharif.'

'Have they said that?'

'No they haven't, but they saw it with their own eyes.'

'So what if they saw it? What is so wrong about Mili learning to read the Qur'an. It is only proper that she learn, read, and understand everything.'

'Amma, don't forget that you have invited my guests today to participate in the Shabe Baraat celebrations. They have even agreed to have the beef that has been cooked for our dinner today. But tell me honestly, will you be able to reciprocate in a similar way and accept the *prasad* at their house on Lakshmi Puja day? I know you will not, I know that you would never step inside a house where idols are worshipped. Then why did you request them to eat in our house today, on the plea of a religious function?'

'Did I make a mistake by doing that? Don't you know that one shouldn't let a guest go unfed on an auspicious day like this.'

'Well it could be that they too have a similar belief regarding their religious festivities!'

'All right, go and tell Joy and Bhaswati that I will come and eat with them on Lakshmi Puja day. Deepa may not be here now, but I will take Mili with me.'

The day of the Lakshmi Puja arrived exactly nine days later. Taking all the seven children of the family with her, Jahanara Begum set out from her house. It was a long time since she had stepped outside. Of course she wasn't going very far. Deepa's father's house was in Satkhira, a city in Jessore<sup>2</sup> district. It was only a two and a half hours' journey and Sirajul had arranged for a car to take the entire family. On the way to Satkhira, they would have to cross the Icchamati river. It was only very recently that a modern bridge had been built over it. On both sides of the bridge, there were hanging cactus of various types, and in the centre there was a *conveyor belt* for walkers to walk on. Though the construction work had started as early as 1957, it had been left unfinished for many years. Of course, there was a reason for that. With both China and India researching on the politics of war, there had been a great animosity between the nations for a long time. These two neighbouring countries with almost equal population had been further incited by one or two major powers of the world resulting in

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<sup>2</sup> Jessore was in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

the Indo-China war. It was only four years back that the political heads of the two nations had met at a conference in Kashmir and come to such an agreement that even a child could understand it. If they could have made an agreement for the next fifty years, if they withdrew all their armed forces from the borders, then they could save thousands of *crores* of rupees from their defence budget. If China and India could move together, then even super powers like Russia and America would feel intimidated!

After this agreement, India had started work on building roads and constructing bridges with great fanfare. There were now three bridges across the Ganga near Kolkata, on Siindhu-Bramhaputra there were bridges every twenty miles. The super highway of Bombay Karachi had been built and from Kolkata to Dhaka it only took four hours now!

As the Station wagon drove over the bridge, Fazal turned towards his grandmother very excitedly and said, 'See Dadima, people are not walking here, the road is itself is moving!'

Even Jahanara Begum had felt surprised to see this moving road. After all, she had seen so many changes in her life of 70 years. Her own elder brother had lost his life in the 1946 riots. At that time they were certain that India would be partitioned and that they wouldn't be able to live in Kolkata or Barasat any longer, and would be forced to move elsewhere. The Stafford Cripps commission had failed. And after that came Lord Mountbatten.... In spite of being a housewife in a joint family, Jahanara Begum was literate enough to read and follow the news in the papers. The news about the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha on the one hand and the useless bragging of the Muslim League on the other had infuriated her, and she had begun to hate the Hindus wholeheartedly. All of a sudden Gandhi and Jinnah had united and announced 'We will not tolerate this British mastery any more. We will not let our country be partitioned.'... Of course this had sparked off a few riots in the beginning, but gradually all protests subsided. Gandhi and Jinnah had taken the combined oath that no one would be able to utter a word of religion in any political speech or in any election campaign, in fact, that stipulation was added in our own constitution as well. Now it seems that most of the temples, mosques and churches remain quite empty, and not too many people go there. The government is even saying that these may be declared as national monuments....

Jahanara Begum's mind seemed to have strayed for a while, but hearing her grandson, Fazal's words, she said, 'You'll get so much to see in your lifetime dear. What you are now seeing are roads moving while people stand still, but one day you might even see people flying on magic carpets like those stories in the Arabian Nights...'

She paused for a while and again said, 'Children listen to me. We are all on our way to visit Mili's maternal uncle's house, to participate in a special celebration and feast for the Lakshmi Puja. Do you know anything about the Lakshmi Puja? Mili, why don't you tell them dear.'

Putting her head on her grandmother's lap, Mili said, 'No, you tell them Dadima.'

So, Jahanara Begum started telling them the story. 'You know there is a Hindu God named Shiva. He is supposed to have four children, two sons named Ganesh and Kartik, and two daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati

'I know Dadima' said Fazal 'The Hindus call the one with the trunk and the elephant face Ganesh bhagaban! He, he, he!'

With flashing eyes, Jahanara Begum said, 'Be quiet. Don't speak like a fool, and don't behave disrespectfully in front of our honoured guests when we reach their house.'

Siraj was sitting next to the driver in the front seat. He seemed to be enjoying the conversations between his mother and her grandchildren. Actually, he couldn't find anything wrong with what Fazal had just said. He was convinced that true political independence would be achieved only when a man belonging to one religion could freely and openly criticize another religion. If Fazal had found a God with an elephant trunk to be very amusing and funny, then there was no reason for him to conceal his feelings .

Today was going to be great fun indeed, Siraj mused to himself. Why not just wait and see how all of them react when they get to see the Lakshmi Puja being performed? If they show any kind of displeasure or irritation, then Siraj would tell his hosts, 'Why did you invite children from a Muslim family? Were you sworn by some kind of an oath to do so?' After all, Deepa had never bothered her head over all these formalities.

Begum Jahanara didn't know that Deepa would be returning to Satkhira after finishing her seminar. Having heard that her mother-in-law was coming to attend the Lakshmi Puja at her house in Satkhira, she had postponed her scheduled visits to Rangamati and Bux Bazaar.

Deepa's ancestral home in Satkhira was many generation old. It was not a house, but was almost a palace. The *sehnai* was playing in the *nahabatkhana* at the time when their car reached the gates.

Jahanara Begum felt her heart beat rapidly. She was completely against any kind of idol worship and had come here only to keep her word to Siraj. It was true that she had seen a few Hindu Pujas when she was very young herself, she had even heard some stories from her Hindu friends at school but ever since she had developed an adult awareness at around the age of 17, she had not seen any Hindu festival.. Who knew what kind of customs

these people followed! Would she also have to salute a clay doll! No she wouldn't be able to do that, not for the life of her! She couldn't possibly give up her own beliefs, not at this age!

As soon as the car arrived stopped in front of the house, Joy came running to receive her. 'Please come in, Mashima! I was so surprised to hear that you were coming!'

Though he usually dressed in western clothes for his professional engagements, today he was wearing a pleated *dhoti*, a silk *kurta* and had sandalwood paste smeared on his forehead. Even though he was an eminent scientist himself, he seemed devoted to all family customs and traditions and didn't have an irritable nature like Siraj's.

Wrapping the end of her sari tightly around herself, Jahanara Begum walked in along with her grandchildren. The Hindus generally built a canopy over the area which they used as a place of worship, outside their homes, and placed their deity under that. But there was nothing like that here.

As if he had read her mind just by looking at her eyes, Joy said, 'Mashima, we haven't bought any special idol for worshipping this time. After all, all the brothers live outside the city, we hardly get any time to come home, in fact it is even doubtful whether we will be celebrating this Puja from next year onwards. That is why we have arranged for only a symbolic worship this year, with that earthen urn representing our worshipped God.'

Suddenly, without warning, Jahanara Begum sat down on the ground and before anybody could run to her help her, she lay down where she was. The next minute she had lost consciousness. It was a renewed attack of ischaemic pain.

Immediately, a lot of commotion and noise filled the entire place. People rushed to call a doctor. A few others picked her up and carried her inside. Siraj was the one who ran around the most. His mother had never visited his father-in-law's house earlier. She had come here for the first time today, and that too on an auspicious occasion, but if something ominous happened now....

Within half an hour, Jahanara Begum regained her consciousness. Realising what had happened she felt numb with embarrassment. She had come to her daughter-in-law's ancestral home in the midst of an ongoing festival... was this the right time for her ischaemic pain to recur? What if the festive spirit was spoilt because of her, what a shame, such a dramatic event had never happened in her life....

After coming to, Jahanara Begum noticed her daughter-in-law, Deepa, sitting by her side. An image floated before her eyes, draped in a red bordered

silk sari, a head full of curls, a bindi on the forehead ... Jahanara Begum recalled the images she had seen of Lakshmi-Saraswati in the Hindu neighbourhoods, in her childhood, images that looked like Bengali girls with gold bordered saris, their hair like Deepa's, part of their head covered like hers with a *ghomta*—not like Gods and Goddesses—but just like Bengali girls, actually they looked quite beautiful....

'How are you feeling now Ma? Are you feeling any pain?' Deepa asked anxiously.

Jahanara Begum shook her head silently.

Trying to warm her feet with her hands, Deepa said, 'Don't worry Ma, it's nothing very serious. The doctor came and did a check up.'

'Where is Mili?' Jahanara Begum asked, her voice barely a whisper.

'Oh, she was sitting by your side, till a while ago.' Deepa said. 'I'll go and call her just now. In the meantime, is there something that you would like to have? Shall I bring you a glass of warm milk? It might help you feel better.'

Jahanara Begum raised herself slowly. Wonder whose bed this was! She kept looking at Deepa with a fixed gaze. Soon a faint smile appeared on her face. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she said, 'I hope you've been able to complete your Puja properly? Deepa, don't you all prepare a ceremonial *prasad* with some *atap* rice, bananas and *batashas*?<sup>3</sup> I remember having that when I was a child, I used to love it so much, can you please bring me a little of that now?'

Translated by Sheila Sengupta

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<sup>3</sup> This mixture is called *shinni*.

## ANOTHER TUNE IN ANOTHER ROOM (ANYA GHARE ANYA SWAR)

Akhtaruzzaman Elias

*'Oh look at me, turn around, let my eyes take you in...'* On one of the sandbanks of the nearly-dry Padma River in winter, half-ripe berries were dropping at random. The words of the song that Pishima was humming mildly fell upon the thin layer of creamy sleep, and woke Pradeep up. Then he remembered that last night he could not sleep well. He had kept on tossing and turning for a long time till the early hours of the morning. Since he had slept the whole afternoon, sleep eluded him last night. He had also remained awake the night before. He had been chatting with Idris and whenever he felt sleepy, Idris supplied him with cups of tea at least three times. This morning, after wandering here and there, he took a bus from Gulistan and, he arrived at Narayangunj. Again, he wandered around Narayangunj for a while. By the time he took the launch and arrived here, it was 11 o'clock. He should then have had the inclination to see the city.

The city looked the same. As had been 12 or 13 years ago, when he was around 16 or 17, there was just one road, and that too remained the same. In the open spaces or just in front of the offices on either side of the road, there were dirty slums now. The dirty, nude children from these slums would run after the moving rickshaws carrying sacks of flour, pick up the spilled flour in their palms and devour it as fast as they could along with the snot from their noses. These sights could earlier be imagined to take place in big cities only. So now, will their one and only favourite city of Dhaka extend even beyond the Buriganga, Shitalakshya and Dhaleswari rivers?

Pradeep knew where Nanida's godown was located, but when he arrived, Nanida was not there. Pradeep was feeling a bit hesitant—the employees would probably feel uncomfortable seeing a new face—but nothing of that sort happened.



One employee just said, 'Babu is not here.'

Pradeep had a leather bag on his shoulder. One could make out that it contained a few clothes, a toothbrush, a shaving razor, and one or two books. After his polite statement, 'Babu is not here,' the man went back to his account ledgers once again. Just when Pradeep thought of going over to Nanida's house, a rickshaw appeared in front of the godown. Two boys jumped out of it even before the rickshaw came to a complete halt. They were about 18 or 19—no probably one was a little younger—the thin, faint line of moustache on one of them seemed as if he had forgotten to wipe his face after a drink.

'He's not in?'

'Babu has just gone to the S.D.O's office. He'll be coming now. Please sit down.'

The young boy with the faint line of moustache replied,

'What's the point? Who knows when he'll be back.'

'I'll send someone to call Babu back. He had mentioned about your visit. Please sit down.' Then he shouted in the typical Bangal dialect, 'Nopal, Nopal' and sent Nepal to the S.D.O's office. While speaking to Nepal Chandra, he fished out the pack of Dunhill cigarettes from behind the cash-box and held it open for them. Both the boys had long, elaborately styled hairdos and equally long side-burns. It was difficult to locate the demarcating line between the huge moustache and the sideburns of one of the boys. Both wore bell-bottom trousers; one of which was blue, with lots of pockets, both in the front and at the back. He wore an embroidered high-collared *kurta*. The mustachioed boy wore a thick cotton shirt with flaps over the pockets that were studded with innumerable buttons, and maroon coloured synthetic trousers. In whatever manner they spoke, both these Bangal boys really knew how to dress! Pradeep observed both of them quite minutely. The employee glanced at Pradeep and said, 'Sit down. Babu will be coming.'

The godown had a high wooden ceiling, surrounded by walls made of strong tin from which hung some wooden shelves. A small Ganesh idol sat on the shelf. A calendar of some indenting firm in Kolkata also had the picture of Ganesh on it. Another calendar from some local hardware firm sported the picture of Rabindranath Tagore. They had displayed a lot of pictures, but did they really know whose pictures they were? On another wall was a photograph of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, done up in an expensive frame. A bamboo fencing divided the room from the middle. On the other side there were stacks of spices—the aroma of which had made the air quite heavy. From time to time, a sweet, pungent breeze drifted in to scatter the heavy smell here.

Nanida arrived within 15 minutes.

'Oh, Kamal bhai, you have come! I had gone to the S.D.O's office for a little while. When did you arrive?'

Nanida did not even notice Pradeep.

'I was just saying that Nanida asked us to come and then disappeared.'

Nanida stirred to protest at Kamal's words. 'How could you say that? I know that you are very busy running around with the arrangement of the conference. How could I know for certain when you would be here?'

Suddenly Nanida's eyes fell upon Pradeep. 'Hey, you. When did you arrive?' In the same breath he looked at the boys again and said, 'Kamal, please have tea.'

Shoving a ten-rupee note into Nepal Chandra's hand he continued in the same tone, 'Get some *rasamalai* from Annapurna's.'

After bathing at the tube well in the open sunshine, Pradeep had a grand lunch comprising of fried aubergines, *pabda do-piyaji*, *tangra* fish curry cooked with potatoes and aubergines, hilsa—both fried and sautéed with mustard sauce, *koi* fish cooked with new potatoes, potato and cauliflower curry, and thick Radha *moong dal*. He could hardly move after a meal like that. Really, the Bangals still ate such a lot! Basking in the afternoon sun, Pradeep sat in the verandah and chatted with Boudi and soon started yawning endlessly. Boudi loved to hear stories of Kolkata. When the trouble began, everyone ran away to Kolkata, only Nanida went to Agartala. Boudi did not stop regretting this fact. Pishima came out to dry some lentil cakes in the sun and scolded Pradeep, 'Why are you sitting here yawning? Go to my room and lie down for a while.'

So he lay down and woke up only after six-thirty in the evening.

After dinner he sat chatting with Nanida, who expressed resentment, 'What business? How can one live here? As soon as the business prospers, they come hounding in for donations. Look at this small town—you can walk from one end to another in half an hour—but they go on having three to four conferences, seminars, meetings in a week. It's just a ploy for collecting money, don't you understand? Here comes some brother, someone's father, someone's friend—so what can be done? Just give them money.'

These people rule the roost in Kolkata also. But things are more blatant and open here—there is no secrecy at all. I'm pretty sure that within one generation the Bengalis living here will also learn to rob politely, kill people at random. Last night Idris too spoke of this ailment. He had gone to Kolkata during the trouble and had met Pradeep there. He spoke too much. Also, in spite of his stammer—his eyes would water trying to pronounce the 'm's, 'b's, 'l's, and 'r's—he talked a lot. If he did not stammer, then probably by this time he would have spoken a few thousand words more.

'You didn't do anything in India,' Boudi accused Nanida. 'All our relatives have built houses and settled down there. Who will accept you?'

Pradeep lowered his eyes. They too were permanent residents of Kolkata.

'But can we leave just whenever we feel like?' Nanida replied with a loud yawn. 'Can we do business in India? What will you eat there?'

An annoyed Boudi sat up and replied, 'So, sit down here, eat and sleep. Don't we have to get our daughter married off? We can't even send her to college—how will you get her married?'

She looked at Pradeep and complained, 'She had passed her matriculation before the trouble. Then your brother said, "No, I'll not get her admitted in Pakistan. Let me send her to Kolkata. She can stay at Didi's house and attend college there." For nine months we stayed at Agartala, neither Didi nor Jamaibabu bothered—we could not see even anyone's shadow. In the meantime Pakistan became Bangladesh. She came back and got admitted in a college here. But what happened? All the money went down the drain. The same boys who teased our daughter have to be appeased now with donations. Can she ever attend college here?' Pradeep had already heard about the trouble that Nanida's daughter faced in great detail during the afternoon.

As Nanida's yawns grew louder and louder, everybody went to bed.

Pradeep was to sleep in the older part of the house adjoining a long verandah. There were three rooms there. One belonged to Pishima. The middle one was a store room, and the other one belonged to Amit—Nanida's son who would be appearing for his intermediate exams this year. At present Amit had gone to Dhaka to play cricket. Pradeep was to sleep in Amit's bed. The new wing of the house had Nanida, Boudi, their college-going but unable to attend, daughter Indira; their son Probir who had failed twice in the eighth standard; a class-five student, Mandira; and their youngest daughter, Meenakshi. The older wing of the house had now become quite secluded once this new wing had been built. Pishima, now quite old, also lived in this section, a little away from everyone's sight.

Boudi had spread a fresh sheet on the bed. A clean mosquito net had been hung too. Having slept the whole afternoon in this wintry month, Pradeep was feeling rather light-headed. The moonlight was accompanied by a cold wind. Did the moon shine even within the rooms in their 'Shonar Bangla?' A waft of breeze blew in through the mosquito net. Pradeep's throat had become parched at the soapy smell of the washed and sun-dried bedsheet. The window above the head was open. There was the verandah beneath it. The window facing the verandah in Pishima's room was also open. He could make out that Pishima was awake. Baba had the habit of

going to sleep in the winter months with the windows wide open. Did grandfather have that habit too? Otherwise, how could both the brother and the sister adopt the same habit? Pishima was as stubborn as Baba. Baba did not leave the house and go away. He died of throat cancer but even then he always spoke loudly. Whenever he was alone in the house, he would sing *kirtans* in the evenings in his frail voice. When the illness became too critical, Mejda came over, persuaded Pishima, and took Baba to Kolkata.

That had been a terrible time for Pradeep. Staying with Baba in the hospital for the whole night, calling the nurse whenever he was scared, helping Baba with the bed-pan—the days and nights had entwined themselves in a continuous momentum. There was even more trouble after Baba's death. Pradeep was unable to understand the movement of blood relations—in whose favour or disfavour things ebbed or flowed. The memory of that tormenting emptiness engulfed Pradeep once again and he felt very thirsty. He got up, drank the glass of water kept covered on Amit's table at one go, and went back to bed. As he just thrust himself upon the bed, the pillow moved a little. Near his shoulder, something sticking out from under the pillow made him uneasy. The thing remained there even as he snuggled under the quilt to sleep comfortably and kept on nudging his backbone once in a while. At first he thought that some kind of disease had formed within his body in the shape of a square-ish animal that was moving from one shoulder to another.

But the matter was not internal. Sitting up, Pradeep started to feel carefully under the pillow and the mattress till he discovered a thin book rolled up there. A faint light from outside came in over the pillow. Lying down again, he held up the book in front of his eyes and found the image of a woman done up on blue art-paper. On one hand she held up her huge bra-less pinkish breasts. The other hand picked up the petticoat. The string of the petticoat was broken, so one could see a large column of her thighs. But strangely enough, a strip of torn cloth hanging from her waist hid her genitals. The pink and green woman wore a yellow petticoat and the folds of the cloth were brown. Pradeep held up the book towards the light coming in from the window and read the title—'Juicy Palm fruit' Below the title within brackets was a subheading written as 'Najma Bhabi's kernel of love'. The last page of the cover was white. The pin marks at the corner of each page signified that the book had been stapled together. Amit Kumar's regular use had turned the pages rather dirty. In such a faint light one could not read what was written in the inside pages of the book. But there were three more pictures after every eight or ten pages or so, and since they were in black and white, they seemed a bit blurred. Each picture had couples having sex in very complex and unnatural positions. The light would have made things

clearer. But anyway, Pradeep felt aroused. A shiver of excitement ran down his entire body. He decided to switch the light on and read through the book. The book should be properly used. He sat up on the bed to get down but instead of doing that, wrapped the quilt more closely over his body by mistake. As a result the energy to get down from the bed and light the lamp got lost. A small thin shaft of cold air chilled the bare portion of his neck, but his stomach, back, and thighs remained warm. This strange admixture made Pradeep feel sleepy again, but at the same time he desired to switch on the light and read up the pornographic stuff. After vacillating in this manner for some time, he lay down once again. The sound of ripe berries plopping on the cold and silent sandbank of the Padma River woke him up. Hovering for some time between sleep and the unreality of the dream world, he finally got up to see the light on the verandah and heard Pishima humming one of her favourite songs—*'Why do the delicate peaks of hairy reed mats hurt me?'* While speaking to Pishima, Pradeep did not realize that her voice was so melodious. While singing another song, *'There are sindoor stains everywhere, so I die of shame,'* Pishima did away with a lot of finer intonations, but even then, her message seemed to be conveyed correctly. *'If Gokulchandra does not come to Brindaban, sakhi...'* Even before one song was over, Pishima moved over to another one—*'My life is a waste, of no use, oh Gokulchandra, my life is a waste'*—her voice rose and fell. Sometimes nothing could be heard. These high and low words fell upon Pradeep's eyelids and suddenly he opened them wide and fresh. His body felt light—like a light pomelo shell floating along the waves of the river Padma. Unable to sustain this for long, Pradeep moved the bolt and went out to the verandah.

There was no more moonlight. The light from the bulb in the verandah looked weak. The mist covering the courtyard made one easily imagine the new complex of the house to be a ship, or a launch, or a huge whale. Pishima's songs swam along like some unfamiliar fish, occasionally visible, enticing the spectator. Pradeep stood admiring the movement of that fish.

*'I will wander about the city of Mathura, going from house to house like a jogini...'* Her song stopped suddenly and Pishima came out from her room.

'Pradeep, why are you standing in the verandah, son? Aren't you feeling cold?'

Pradeep kept on gazing at her without offering any reply.

'Come into my room,' Pishima said. The room smelt of incense sticks and camphor.

'Are you not sleepy? Why are you standing here all night? Are you feeling sad?'

'No, Pishima, I can't sleep.'

'Why? Why can't you sleep?'

'I slept too much in the afternoon.'

'When? I have seen how your father could sleep whenever he wanted to. Also, if he wanted to, he would get up from bed.'

Then she added, 'Won't you stay for a few days? Or will you rush off to Kolkata tomorrow?'

'No, Pishima. I will leave the day after tomorrow. I'll go to Agartala first and if everything is all right there, then I'll leave for Shilling a couple of days later. I'll spend a few more days in Dibrugarh and Gauhati and then go back to Kolkata.'

'You're just spending your whole life travelling. Didn't Nani just say that you had been to Delhi and Agra a few days back?'

Pradeep actually roamed around a lot with the excuse of doing work. After Baba's death, Mejda worked hard to wind up the business here. Of course, Baba's contractor's business could not be saved. The income from the other businesses—spice godowns, fodder godowns, a cloth shop at Agartala, and some indenting jobs—helped Barda and Mejda to live comfortably with their families. Pradeep's needs were also met from there. Actually, no one ever asked him to travel from one end of the country to another. He just felt uncomfortable staying in one place for a long time. Now it had come to such a state that whenever he met some acquaintance, he would be asked, 'So, Pradeep, when are you leaving?' There was no need to go to Agartala on this trip. He himself had volunteered to Mejda, 'I think the accounts in Agartala are not very clear. I will go and check them personally. And this time I'll go via Bangladesh so that I get a chance to visit our ancestral home.'

'Aren't you hungry? Why didn't you eat properly last night?' Pishima asked.

'No, I ate a lot.'

'Ate a lot?' Pishima scolded him. 'Didn't I see? You're a strong young man, but you eat like a bird. Don't you feel hungry?'

She started to sing softly once again.

There was a small wooden altar on one side of the room on which sat the *shalagramshila*. Pishima was so engrossed with it that she did not pay any attention to Pradeep. But if one listened to her humming carefully, one realized that she was actually not singing. She was just stringing words at random either for Pradeep or as an excuse for something else.

'Your Baba could eat such a lot at your age! Three seers of milk would be thickened to one seer. Huge 'sagar' bananas would be brought from Rampal. Boudi always kept mango jelly ready in her stock. He would eat his rice along with the *amshatta* and bananas squashed in the milk.'

In Pishima's room, the scent of sandalwood played hide and seek with that of ripe bananas and cucumber. These smells would come and go at random.

'Pradeep, want some *muri*?'

Even before Pradeep's reply, she continued, 'Dada would eat a lot, so he could work very hard. When Baba died, I was merely seven or eight years old. Dada became our father. How he laboured in his business, paid off Baba's debts, bought a godown at Kamalaghat, released the land at Rampal, got Didi and myself married! After Didi's death, when brother-in-law married again, Dada went and brought Sabita here. Why did he do that? Because the stepmother would torture her. After Sabita completed her matriculation, he got her married off. When fate decreed that I become a widow, he personally went and requested me, "Sabitri, come along with your children to your own home. Your Radha-Krishna at home are calling you, come along."' "

Pishima was all in tears before she could complete her sentence. After controlling herself, she continued, 'How can I tell you what Dada meant to us. He would look at me, look at his nephew and niece and shed tears. With him we would feel as comfortable as if we were living in our mother's lap. When I became a widow, even he gave up eating fish. I requested him so many times but he did not listen.'

Pradeep kept swinging between Baba's and Pishima's lap throughout this long prosaic speech. This gentle rocking made the night disappear. On the altar, the *shalagramshila* trembled under a mountain of memories; on the small dais, the Radha and Krishna idols made of eight alloys, looked at each other in delight. A naughty smile emanated from Krishna's lips.

'Come, let's get the *muri* from that room.'

Pradeep did not hear Pishima's call. He did not realize when she left the room. He got completely immersed in the calm and rich world of Radha and Krishna's looks. In the process he banished the roof above his head, the walls on all sides and the floor below his feet. For some time, he stood entranced, as if a thin layer of dreams had engulfed his eyes like *kajal* on newborn eyes.

'Pradeep!'

Pishima's call brought him back to reality once again. He was startled. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor of the room fell back in place once again. Looking outside he saw Pishima standing on the verandah.

'Yes, Pishima?'

She was unlocking the room next door.

'What are you doing standing there alone in the room? Let me fry some *muri* with ghee for you. Come sit and eat it.'

'Pishima, I am not hungry. All right, I'll have some. Won't you eat too?'

'Won't I?'

Pishima turned the keys again, but the lock did not open.

Approaching her, Pradeep said, 'Give me the key, Pishima. Let me try.'

'You?' Her eyes showed signs of disbelief. No, not disbelief really, but lack of conviction.

Baba was exactly like her. He would do a lot for everybody, but did not trust anyone.

'How will you do it?'

'Let me try.'

'All right, see if you can.'

Pishima handed over the key to Pradeep rather unwillingly. Baba would never have done that. While opening the lock of the storeroom, Pradeep stood close to Pishima. In the dim light, her white sari looked a sleepy, beige colour. A combined smell of incense sticks and cucumber emanated from her body. Her hair smelt of damp sandalwood.

When Pradeep opened the door easily, Pishima said, 'So you could do it? Then with a smile she added, "Why can't you do it? After all, why can't Satya Roy's son do it?"

'Since we are on the subject, let me add something more,' she said while entering the room.

Who had raised the subject?

'Whatever work Dada took up, he never stopped mid-way.'

As soon as the light was switched on, three or four rats scampered away. A few cockroaches changed their positions. The room smelt musty. Everything in it was grey in colour.

'Now, where did she keep the tin of *muri*? This is her bad habit. She'll take one thing but never keep it back in place,' Pishima kept on grumbling about her daughter-in-law and ultimately rescued the tin. She took a bottle of ghee in her hands and ordered Pradeep, 'You bring the stove along. I'll fry the stuff in my room.' Pradeep picked up the kerosene stove and Pishima the tin of *muri* and ghee. Once out on the verandah, she said, 'Lock the door.'

There was an aluminium *kadai* in her room. As it heated up, the ghee began to splutter. 'You understand, whenever Dada took up a job, he finished it.' Pishima still had not forgotten her story. Fetching the pot of sugar from a low shelf on the wall, she squatted on a small wooden stool and continued, 'You know, once we had a well there. What cool and sweet water it had! Nani spoilt it while building the new wing of the house. Now the tubewell water tastes bitter.' Scolding her absent son, Pishima continued her tale.



'I had a pair of *makar*-headed bangles,<sup>1</sup> each weighing over twenty three grams—you will never see such things now. So it happened that one day, I had cleaned one of the bangles with tamarind and gone to fetch water from the well. The bangle slipped from my hand and fell inside. I was a small child then, so I started to cry. I had a stepmother too. If she complained to Baba, he might beat me. Dada had just come back from school. He ran towards the well with some rope to pick up the bangle. Scolding me he just said, "Don't cry. Keep quiet." By the time he came up, took his bath and his meal, it was nearly twilight.'

As Pishima stirred it, the *muri* gradually turned brown in colour. Pradeep was quiet, the *shalagramshila* was quiet. Even Radha and Krishna, both lost in themselves, were quiet. The framed picture of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa that was kept on a high shelf on the wall, also kept on watching Pishima's activities quietly. A small, little grey mouse, sat close by and watched the world around him with his small beady eyes. The range of his eyes did not reach the walls or the floor. The mouse savoured the smell of the fried *muri*—as if it had been freshly harvested from the mist-laden fields.

Pishima kept on singing, 'If Gokulchandra does not come to Vrindaban, sakhi...'

Like Ramakrishna Dev's pet mouse, Pradeep too crossed one field after another.

'If the colour of the *muri* is like this, then you'll know that it has been fried properly,' Pishima's voice drifted from the other side of the field. 'Your sister-in-law never does things properly. She works for the whole day, shouts at the servants, scolds the cook. When she fried the *muri* for you, she burnt it.'

Taking down a silver bowl from the shelf, Pishima poured the *muri* in it and 'Here you are, have it.'

'You won't have some?'

'You eat.'

Pradeep was adamant. 'No, you too have some.'

'Foolish boy! How can I have it? Do I have teeth any more? They have fallen off long ago.'

She sat watching Pradeep eat.

'Pradeep, tell me. What have you done to your health?' When he did not reply, she asked again, 'How do you stay like an ascetic, Pradeep?' Pradeep gave her a bewildered look. Pishima started humming her songs once again.

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<sup>1</sup> A traditional design in bangles. *Makar* is the mythological aquatic animal, Capricorn.

He stopped eating and kept on staring at her. She stood up and started moving around the idols of Radha and Krishna. He saw that Pishima left the idols behind and kept on watching the photograph of Ramkrishna Dev. Suddenly her face started to melt and began to drip. Did flesh turn into water? Will the water evaporate? The twin idols of Radha and Krishna looked here and there and like cheeky young men and women, escaped through the doorway. Where were they going? The *shalagramshila* flew away in the chariot of the altar without any hindrance. A neat flight. The Paramhansa shelved on the wall also left the room along with his pet mouse. In a huge, unknown vacuum, the body-less liquid Pishima spread out her smoky hair and was just melting. Pradeep kept on gulping in quick succession. His throat was already parched after eating the *muri*. Those dry swallows went down his throat and pierced his empty chest like thorns. He called out for his mother loudly, 'Ma!'

Pishima was startled. 'What's the matter, Pradeep? Are you scared? What's wrong?'

Pradeep came back to reality. The walls fell back in place over their brick foundation; the roof covered the walls again.

'Nothing, Pishima,' he replied.

The Radha-Krishna idols on the dais practised their enamoured looks once again. Ramkrishna Dev sat on his seat and looked for his pet mouse. Pishima also turned back to her normal self. The room came back to its original position, the floor in its own place.

Pishima soothed Pradeep's face and neck very slowly. Pradeep just watched the salty stream of tears trickling down her fair, wrinkled face.

'You are very religious, Pradeep. Our grandfather had left the house along with some *sadhus*. He would sing songs of Lord Hari to the accompaniment of a *mrindanga*. He died in Puri with the Lord's name still in his lips.' Saffron-coloured words emanated from Pishima's lips, 'You are religious! You are religious! What should I do with you?'

'No, Pishima, nothing has happened to me. Let me go back to bed.'

'Come, let me put you back to sleep.'

'No, Pishima. I suddenly felt sleepy. Probably I was a bit scared.'

'Feeling sleepy? What did you see, Pradeep? Won't you tell me?'

Pishima was too eager to know. Why was she so keen to know what Pradeep had seen? But Pradeep had seen nothing. What would he tell Pishima?

Upon reaching the door of Amit's room, he said, 'Pishima, you go back. Let me lie down. There's not much time left for dawn. Please go.'

The mixed scent of sandalwood, cucumber, banana and camphor played in front of Pradeep's nose for a moment and then diving into Pishima's hair, went back with her.

It was Amit's room once again. The bed had a freshly-washed mosquito net hanging from its posters. Once inside, the net formed four walls around Pradeep. That 'Juicy Palm Fruit' or 'Najma Bhabi's kernel of love' was still next to the pillow. Pradeep moved a little, and once the book touched his shoulder he said, 'Bastard, you're still here?' But the book spoilt his mood once again. It would have been better if he took a piece of old newspaper from Amit's table and masturbated on it. This would help him get rid of the book once and for all.

But it was impossible to get down from the bed now. The quilt lay huddled near his feet. Even the stupid cold was not affecting him properly. He slid his hand down his open pyjamas and his penis felt like a shriveled dead scorpion. He felt repulsive. What else could he do now except place his right hand over his head? He could not decide where to keep the left one. In the meantime, the lyrics of Pishima's song, '*Oh, mad man, control your feelings*' crept slowly towards this room.

Maybe dawn was approaching. If this song entered the room properly, it would once again unravel the whole world. This thought started Pradeep and he sat up on the bed again. The window could be shut directly from the bed itself. That was good. Feeling happy because he did not have to get down, he fastened it. Pishima's song hit the closed windowpane and ran away along with its tail.

Relieved from all these troubles at night, Pradeep stretched himself on the bed once again. Since the window was shut, the room resembled a dark square. Within the four walls of the room was the mosquito net. There was a square-ish darkness within the net too. As he started breathing normally in his five-feet four-inches body, Pradeep gradually calmed down to sleep.

Translated by Somdatta Mandal

## ALAM'S OWN HOUSE (ALAMER NIJER BARI)

Dibyendu Palit

As the Bangladesh Biman aircraft left the skies of Dhaka and took off for Kolkata, the thoughts rushed back again.

'Like everything else, there's also a time frame for returning. And once that point is past, there's a feeling that it's not going to happen any more...' Raka had written in her last letter. That doesn't mean that my wait for you has made me tired or that I feel depressed. It only means that there's no point in threatening a visit in every letter.' These and many more words. After such a long time he couldn't recall everything word by word. Alam felt Raka had picked up the language of Kolkata quite well. According to the situation, she knew how to play around with it. He hadn't, however, understood her words, 'certain lands are meant for certain roots only.' He hadn't wanted his hesitation to turn into fear or suspicion, so he had read those lines again and again. But he hadn't been able to gather their essence.

Raka was a woman. And she would somehow manage to withhold some secret somewhere, he had reasoned. It was relatively easy to achieve freedom, but it was not so easy to wipe out prejudices. It had something to do with understanding. And if Alam failed to understand it, Raka had no responsibility of explaining either.

In reply he had written, 'a rise in temper also raises the level of enigma. If that's the reason, it's fine. If not, I have failed to understand quite a few things from your letter. What do you mean by certain lands and certain roots? If I understand it the way you mean it, then don't forget that I was born in Kolkata—in the very house to which this letter is being addressed.

Doesn't that give me roots in Kolkata? Do you know there are far more women in Dhaka by the name of Raka than there are in Kolkata? And none of them stick out here as being different.' But until Raka came to Dhaka, it was Alam who would have to rush to Kolkata—to his own house.

These and many more such exchanges, that were possible only through letters, took place. Yet language also had the ability to create human shapes by stringing meaning together and giving a sense of completeness to that shape. Alam's emotions were such that if he could, he would have carried the letters to Raka himself.

There was no reply. Alam waited for a month or so and wrote another letter—just a few lines. He mentioned about not receiving a reply and the news that he had been invited to a seminar being organized by the Maitri Sansad in Kolkata. If men were allowed to be sentimental, Raka would now get a taste of it.

This time there was a reply but the handwriting was different. He tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. His suspicions were right—it wasn't Raka, it was her mother, Snehamashima. The first news was Raka was out of town. And even when she was in Kolkata, she was busy with studies—her research work hadn't progressed much either. So it was not always possible for her to keep up with writing letters. Nevertheless, Alam should write once in a while to tell them how he was doing. Finally, Raka's father, Meshomoshai, was very happy at the news of the seminar. And so on.

That Raka was not around in Kolkata and that she was not aware of this letter, was quite obvious from Sneha's letter. He had countered his suspicions with reason. May–June were the summer holidays—the university was closed. And they had numerous relatives all over India. Ever since 1946, the family had been branching out in all directions—Delhi, Pune, Patna, Ahmedabad. She loved to travel. It was not impossible for her to visit one of those places on a sudden whim. What was, however, unclear were the words 'not always possible'. The problem was, he couldn't ask for a clarification either from Raka or from Snehamashima.

His breath had become heavy and he realized it only when the smell of a burnt cigarette reached his nostrils. He breathed out and in, and tried to get back to normal.

There was no need to climb thousands of feet in order to travel a distance of just forty-five minutes. Although not very clear, one could see the reality down below—of shrubs, trees, rivers and fields—if one looked down from the aircraft. And some concrete structures too. After having moved smoothly on a straight course, the aircraft had now started to sway. The blue of the sky was gradually being lost to the clouds. Alam felt a slight

change in the temperature inside the aircraft too. It was the end of August. This was the time for the rains. Maybe there was a storm going on outside. At that moment there was the tinkling of the bell and the glowing of lights requesting passengers to fasten their seat belts, followed by a warning from the air-hostess. In the seat next to Alam, Feroze had been busy smoking and running through the paper he had prepared for the seminar. Now as he shut his briefcase he enquired, 'Have we reached?'

'Still about 15 minutes to go,' Alam looked at his watch and replied. 'At such a low flight there's bound to be some bumping.'

As he spoke, the aircraft entered a thick mass of white clouds. But it didn't bump as much as they thought it would. Soon they were out of it, the smokiness changing into a clearer sky.

'This sky space belongs to India.' There was the bell again and the warning lights were out. Feroze said, 'We have no, what you call, fundamental rights over it.'

Feroze looked sideways and glanced at Alam. But at that moment there was nothing Alam could think of to say.

Feroze had said it lightly but it was quite obvious that he was serious. Ever since the invitation for the seminar arrived, he had been constantly looking for counter arguments within his topic. As if otherwise his arguments wouldn't be valid enough. He had argued about this till very late last night. Feroze believed in the cultural difference of the two countries. He had said, 'friendship was a good thing. But it was dangerous to use it as a bait. People wore clothes because they wanted to cover their bare bodies. But that didn't mean they had to wear clothes that were identical in cut and colour as well. Where was the scope for individuality, then?' The problem was, Alam wasn't able to identify with Feroze's thoughts. Was individuality limited to cut and colour only? Maybe, Feroze was trying to express something deeper, that was not quite clear even to his own self. His ideas were directed towards the concept of 'yours' and 'mine'. So Alam said, 'Does it mean anything? If we had the time and patience we could actually have covered this distance by foot. Things would have been very simple then. Where there was no distance, there was no need to organize a seminar especially on friendship.'

Alam didn't know how clear he himself was. But he was happy to have said those words.

Feroze knotted his eyebrows. He pressed the brown lighter in his fist. It was not to light a cigarette.

'What do you mean?'

'I accepted the invitation because I wanted to come to Kolkata,' replied Alam. 'Otherwise, I find these seminars and stuff quite dodgy. We have the same language, similar clothes, same food habits and the same weather. The difference lies only in the politics. What relevance does anything else have?'

'Don't finish off the two-day seminar in five minutes. I sat up six nights and used a whole bundle of papers to prepare this paper...' This was how Feroze was going to build up his argument. He was stalling for time, as if, before getting to the main point. Then said, 'The difference doesn't lie even in politics. It lies in religion. Can you avoid this point however much you try?'

The aircraft had probably begun to descend. The silence at this time was deeper. It was quite possible for any comment to reach the other passengers as well. That is a matter of imposition—at other times he would have pointed out. Since it was the most blindingly assertive of all slogans, it was the most dependable. We concentrate more on the differences of religion than on the differences between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed. And that is because it absolves us from responsibility and makes it easy for us to escape from reality. But then, he thought, there was no point in saying these things. Not all questions had answers. And sometimes one didn't feel like giving an answer either. Was it possible that Raka too had had the same thoughts and same ideas as the ones he had had just now? And was that why she had sent her reply through Sneha instead of writing herself? Or did language mean only the letters?

Confused by his own questions, Alam was trapped into hesitation. He knew quite a bit about Raka's feelings, but not all.

Feroze, of course, wouldn't agree to any of this. He was different in temperament. For the moment he sat ramrod-straight for landing and moved on to a different topic.

'Alam, are you really not going to stay with me?'

'I've told you, it wouldn't be polite.'

'You could have dropped in to see them even if you stayed with me.' Then hesitantly Feroze added, 'The people you are talking of aren't even related to you.'

'Are we related? Yet, if ever I left Dhaka and came back to it, I would always stay with you...'

The aircraft touched down and in the excitement of the impact they were interrupted for a while. Making their way through the standing passengers and climbing down the stairs, Alam picked up the conversation again.

'It's not that you are going to be totally alone. It's a matter of just one night. Rahman Saheb is going to be here tomorrow morning. Besides, there's Khan Chaudhury from the Mission...'

Feroze was quiet.

There must have been a shower sometime back. There was dampness all around. The air was moist, but the light sunshine was gradually taking away the humidity. The sun was soft enough to let it drape around the body comfortably. As he walked towards the customs enclosure a faint memory came back to him. Three years back he had walked in exactly the opposite direction—towards the aircraft. As he had walked away, he had been looking at the visitors' gallery, his eyes searching for Raka. She was there, and so were Sneha and Ananta. He hadn't been able to locate them immediately. There was a large number of people clustered together. And all those who came to say goodbye looked the same. But the wave of a white hand among them had told him where she was. He couldn't bear the scene. Even after the flight had left, for a very long time, he couldn't think of anything else. Today he realized that it was hardly a distance—just forty-five minutes, or maybe a maximum of one hour. And it took him three years to make the journey!

The force of old memories compelled him to look at the gallery again. He was not looking for Raka, though. He was checking out his suspicion. About a week back he had sent two letters by post, containing almost the same information—confirming his visit with date, time and flight number. One was for Raka, the other for Snehamashima. One reason was that he wanted to make sure at least one letter reached, even if the other got lost. But mainly he wanted to be clear in his reasoning. Someone's address couldn't be just Kolkata! He wanted to make it clear that from the airport he was going to go straight to Park Circus. What more could he write! At this moment, looking at her watch, wouldn't Raka know that this morning Alam's address was Kolkata, not Dhaka!

Alam's imagination was being coloured by thoughts such as these. Confirmed that Raka was not there, he looked beyond the bustling crowd.

Khan Chaudhury had himself come to receive them. Along with him were two members of Maitri Sansad. Among them Alam recognized Sudeb Bose. He had been to Dhaka last year on a similar conference. But the assassination of Zia-ur-Rahman had led to its cancellation. On the way to the city in the car he was talking grandly about that. Neither Feroze nor Alam could be his listeners. It was an old story. Even Khan Chaudhury knew about it. Probably it was for the fourth person. Soon he changed the subject and started rattling off statistics on how many people had crossed over to this side after the creation of Pakistan. And Feroze had begun to find mistakes with the numbers. If this continued, the whole seminar would move into this car!

Irritated by the situation, Alam said, 'Feroze, pass a cigarette...'



'All of a sudden!'

'I'm coming back to Kolkata after almost three years. Let me make it stimulating.'

Sudeb stopped. Then he said to Alam, 'Kolkata is familiar to you, isn't it?'

Accepting a light from Feroze's outstretched lighter and trying to light the cigarette with his unpractised hands, Alam replied, 'It is the land of my birth.'

With these words he could submerge himself in his own identity. Was the land of one's birth also one's native land? This question often made him feel homeless. It did now again.

The next subject was the war of 1971. Kolkata was then crazy about Sheikh Mujib. Sudebbabu reminisced about a meeting at the monument grounds of the Maidan. Suchitra Mitra had been invited to sing. Alam remembered that too. He was in Kolkata then. He had stood at the fringes of those millions of people and had heard the declaration of the name of a new country—a country about which he had no idea at all then. And now he was wearing the badge of that country.

As they proceeded a little further, the sky changed. Along with a moist wind there were also fine drops of rain. The advantage of sitting by the window was to be able to indulge in facing the onslaught of the breeze outside. From Nazrul Islam Avenue to CIF Road. The turning on the left led to SaltLake. Next they would pass through Maniktala and Narkeldanga. It was as if these were like responses to the roll call in the classroom—each and every face familiar. He felt a tingling in his veins. It ran through his whole body. He had wanted to experience these familiar faces intimately in the quiet privacy of his own company. And so he had been keen to take a separate taxi. But Khan Chaudhury wouldn't allow him to. He had insisted that the driver would reach him to the address at Park Circus after dropping Feroze at the hotel. It was Saturday today and eleven in the morning. By the time he reached the house it would be noon. Alam was sure Raka would be waiting for him. That is, if she had received the letter. The *kathchampa* tree near the gate would spread at least some fragrance in this rain. He would be surprised if they hadn't received the letter. Today's Raka was probably not the same as that of three years back. He might be surprised, though. They could start an argument on which fish was better—the *hilsa* of the Ganga or the *hilsa* of the Padma. Although he had moved to the banks of Padma, Alam had still remained an admirer of the Ganga. This was something that would surprise Raka's father, Anantameshomoshai. Taste, he had once said, was like prejudice too. Once acquired, it survived forever. So, would Ananta, or for that matter Sneha, be very surprised if in a day or two, while he stayed with them, he proposed the same idea concerning Raka?

Alam had become absent-minded. It was impolite to remain so silent in the midst of others. Yet, reminiscences held him back.

It was 1970. Suddenly, one day, Baba decided to give up his medical practice. He shut down his surgery. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he stopped going out on calls. But he had been physically fit and had a thriving practice. He had become too sentimental, probably. It was a cumulative effect and the impact had set in gradually. Alam had come to know of all this much later.

The previous year his elder brother had gone to Glasgow to study Engineering. 'If possible, stay back there,' Baba had written to Dada. 'Technically there's no problem here at all. You won't have difficulty finding employment. But you might find yourself unemployed in matters of the heart.' Words of this kind had more mystery than simplicity. When the chamber was empty he would make the compounder sit with him and explain to him various theories. 'Partition had taken place in two forms—one political and the other mental. The second one had not been sealed and signed by Mountbatten. Earlier I used the same stethoscope for Ram and Jamal. Those days are gone. There are no Rams among my patients anymore, only Rahims; no Jadus, only Jamals; no Kanais, only Karims. Ram, Jadu and Kanai have all gone to Dr Gupta. We had our medical degrees from the same college and we had learnt the anatomy of the same human being. The dissected body of that human being had no name labelled on to it.'

I still remember Baba sitting with a mountain of rice on a big bell metal plate and chatting with Ma. That was when he had broken the news. 'Dr Gupta has taken a chamber at Ballygunge. His patients have dwindled in this part of the town. The Jamals and Karims don't recover from his treatment anymore. They come to me. Their numbers are reducing too. Those who can are leaving for Pakistan—some for East Pakistan and some for West Pakistan. We should have gone too probably. I can feel a kind of illness in the heart...'

After all these years I didn't seem to remember the words very well. I could only recall Baba's lonely face that was surrounded by silence, and Ma's progressive quietness. And I recalled the depression of my two sisters at an age when their lives should have been bubbly and pimple-ridden. They were like dull bulbs engulfed in silence. Then there was the war. The slogan was—Bangladesh, our Bangladesh! One day Dr Gupta brought the proposal. Anantashekhhar had left Dhaka with his family. He had no intentions of going back. His house and property were lying waste in Dhanmandi. 'You were thinking of moving to Dhaka, too, doctor saheb, so I thought I'll make a suggestion. If you really wanted to move, how about exchanging the property?'

Baba's face had become serious. Later he had said, 'If that's our destiny, so let it be. Let me give it a thought. Bring Anantababu over one day...'

Feroze got off at the hotel and along with him Khan Chaudhury, Sudebabu and the others. They wanted to have a chat about the programme. Maybe there would be other people too. Then there was dinner. Although he nodded at Khan Chaudhury's request, Alam wasn't sure if he would finally be able to make it. As the car moved away from the hotel, he was overcome with a sense of deep loneliness. Then why had he been pining for some privacy all this while? Did he want to swim in a one-way current of memories? Or did he want to experience some happiness—a happiness steeped in the memory of his destination? And now that his destination was nearing, was he being pursued by a sense of fear?

Alam didn't know. At this moment he could only identify a sense of hesitation that existed between him and his destination.

Kolkata had changed a lot in three years. In his efforts to gauge how much Raka had changed, he had been unable to gauge how much he had changed. Whenever we stand in front of a mirror we see our image reflected in it. We become so used to seeing the good or bad aspects of ourselves that we don't feel the need to analyse these. Yesterday's change becomes imperceptible today. The following days merge with previous days. And in the midst of all this, the heart grows too. Any perceptible change in both, the outward looks and the heart of a person, could be identified simultaneously only by a person for whom the past and the present lay in separate compartments. Again, it was time that helped Alam identify that there hadn't been so many potholes on the road or so much graffiti on the walls in this area. The slogan, 'the gun is the source of power,' had faded. A quick look around gave the feeling that the letterings on the walls were a kind of defacement of smooth surfaces. In their rush to cross the roads, even the people on the streets changed constantly. It was difficult to study them.

That Baba had changed so much internally was quite evident the day Dr Gupta brought Anantashekhhar to our house. He didn't move an inch beyond polite conversation. He had said, 'I've heard of the exchange offer. Have you brought any documents related to your property in Dhaka—the house, the blueprint of the lands, inventory etc?'

'No, not really. I just have the deed. But I could give you a rough idea.'

'Rough ideas won't be enough.' Baba had looked straight at Anantashekhhar, 'Look sir, I have made up my mind. You have a good look at my house today. Tell me if you like it. Then let's go to Dhaka—I'll have a look at yours. A man's hard work has a lot of value. It took me four years to complete this house.' This was the first double-storeyed house in this area. We

moved in only after it was fully complete. The terrace is more like a courtyard. After the death of Mahatmaji we held a memorial service up there. After the service was over there was a feeling of emptiness. Standing on that newly built terrace on a winter evening, the sky had seemed unusually big...'

Alam had asked the driver to go slowly so that he could direct him when to turn left and when to turn right. Although he tried to be natural, his eyes got stuck at various places. In places where he had expected single storeys there were now double storeys; the crude exterior of a motor garage shielded a beautiful garden of flowers; new signboards announced that old things could be discarded. But he had no difficulty locating his own house. He would never have. 'It is not possible for anyone to be born twice in the same house...', he had once told Raka, 'except for me.' At least, that was how he thought of it.

The exchange took place in about two months. Alam stayed back. He had been studying for his M.A. at that time. Before sticking to his decision he had reasoned it out with his own self. Baba's problem was not his problem. Ma's problem was Baba. The two sisters had been counted amongst the luggage. So why should Alam go?

'You'll study, that's all right. But where will you stay?' Baba had asked. 'Find a hostel for yourself.'

Alam was shaken. He was sitting in his own house and having this discussion in front of Anantashekhhar.

'Alam is going to stay here.' Anantashekhhar had said. 'If he would have gone with you it would have been different. But if he stays back in Kolkata he should not stay anywhere else. Moreover...' seeing Baba sitting quietly, he spoke more freely, 'the desperation was mine, doctorsaheb, not yours. You gave us an opportunity to find shelter, and in return can we not give shelter to your son? I have a son too. They'll stay together as friends...'

'That's a relief,' Baba had said, 'you know Anantababu, once bitten twice shy. I'm a cow without a shed, so I feel scared at the sight of a crimson cloud.<sup>1</sup> We had stayed together as friends in our respective places too. You've never mentioned of any violence. Why then were you uncomfortable? We were fortunate to have been able to find an exchange deal. But keeping my son with you is a responsibility you have taken on by yourself. Make sure you don't regret it later.'

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<sup>1</sup> There's a proverb in Bengali that a cow whose shed has been burnt once, will always be scared by a crimson cloud.

Then came the crossing of the border. In the early hours of dawn, before leaving for the station, Baba went up to the terrace and offered *namaaz*. He climbed down the stairs and never looked back. As he followed his father around that day, Alam had realized that man's continuity survived in his blood, not in his address.

The attic room was off the terrace. And even after the houses were exchanged, his room hadn't changed. One evening Raka came up panting. Alam had, of course, already heard about the trouble. Raka said, 'There's great trouble outside. Houses are burning. Dada called to say that you should not step outside the house...'

At that moment Raka's face was more valuable to him than the words that flowed from it. Without concealing his surprise Alam had said, 'You've worn a sari today?'

Raka looked at herself. Then forgetting what she had been saying earlier, she said, 'Am I looking bad?'

Where there was attraction, there was neither good nor bad. Only what was imperceptible became perceptible. Raka wouldn't understand that. Alam had conveyed only what he could with his eyes. Nothing more. Coming out of his room, he stood beside Raka on the terrace. In the distance, as the fire spread rapidly, they noticed the sky burning more and more fiercely. The roar of the attackers and the wailing of those being attacked were lost in the general din of confused outcry. It was difficult to identify the attacker from the attacked. And then gradually the sound transformed into a deafening silence. After a very long time Raka had said, 'Here too!'

Alam hadn't said anything. But he suddenly realized they had been standing there like a couple of dolls,<sup>2</sup> and wondered what value life held for such experiences. He thought no further. Not even when they were called away by Snehamashima in the course of her busy chores, and separated.

'Hey! Hey! Stop...'

At his sudden instruction, the car stopped. And Alam let out a long breath. He opened the door and with suitcase in hand emerged out of the car. Before letting the driver off he wanted to be sure that this was indeed the house. But he asked himself if there was any cause for suspicion. Anantashekhhar Sanyal—the words were written clearly on a marble plaque right next to the little gate. After Baba left, the previous name had been erased in about a month's time. There was nothing emotional about it. Most people were unaware that doctor babu had gone away leaving the country forever.

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional handicrafts of dolls of men and women, which come in pairs.

The odd patient would often come and knock on the door. They didn't believe what they heard. The idea of changing the name had finally come from Alam. He had made himself 'care of Anantashekhhar'. But that was not the reason. Doubt now crept in at the absence of the *kathchanpa* tree. And exactly at that place the width of the wall had been reduced and a new room had been constructed. It was a sweet shop. The signboard read 'Madhur.' Earlier the mention of the street and the *kathchanpa* tree were enough for people to find the house. Now probably they identified it with the sweet shop. Raka had never written about these things. There was nothing emotional about this either. There must have been a reason. The house was so big but there were very few rooms... Anantashekhhar had once said, 'the planning wasn't right.' Alam had smiled quietly at this observation. If Baba had heard this before the exchange, he wouldn't have agreed to seal the deal. He had planted the tree in such a way that it was directly visible from the windows of both, the bedroom upstairs and the living room downstairs. There was no point in saying those things to Anantashekhhar. Probably he had put the open space to better use by building the shop. Necessity guided actions.

Alam stood in front of the closed gate for a while even after the taxi had left. He was looking at the house. He could see Baba standing at the window upstairs. He was wearing a *phatua* over a checked lungi, the light from a sunny cloud shining on the hint of a red beard covering his cheeks and chin. It was raining on the *kathchanpa* tree.

His breath longed for that lost fragrance. There was no Baba, just a yellow curtain. Feeling the beginnings of a very mild drizzle, Alam looked up at the sky. There were clouds. Then he realized that his entire journey from the airport had been through the rain. But he knew that thoughts such as these had only emotional value, nothing else. The gate led to a flight of stairs, a covered portico and then the door. It would open at the ring of the bell. Would it be Raka at the door? No, he had gradually given up that hope. Maybe it would be meshomoshai, or Snehamashima.

He waited for quite sometime and then rang the bell again. Half-past twelve wasn't too late in the day. Moreover, they knew he was coming.

The door was answered by Sneha. She was trying to shield a hand that had traces of food. She looked at Alam with a combination of surprise and embarrassment.

'Oh! Alam!'

As always, he bent down to touch her feet.

'Did you receive my letter?'

'Come in,' she avoided the reply and said, 'We were having our lunch... sit down...'

Alam put the suitcase down on one side. In the well-kept living room there was no dearth of place to sit. Yet, a look at the curtain, leading to the interiors of the house, transformed his hopes to a sense of unease.

'You finish your food, Mashima, I'll wait.'

'Right!' Now there was a faint smile on her lips. 'In the meantime your Meshomoshai will also finish his.'

Then she stopped. She took a look at the suitcase and asked, 'You'd like some tea, won't you?'

'Yes please, but only after you've had your food.'

'Why don't you have a seat? Sit!'

Even three years back Alam would have gone right in through the door that Sneha had used to leave the room. There was always someone or the other at the door. On his return it was usually Raka. Of course, he had never returned at any other time. Now there was a yellow curtain there. It was quite possible that the next person to come in through that curtain would not be Snehamashima or Meshomoshai, but Raka. His wait would last only till the next person walked in. And even that wait would have been reduced if Sneha's hand didn't had traces of food on it. Alam thought no further.

The big photograph of Gandhiji was still on the wall. It had come down to this room after the memorial service on the terrace. He had been seeing that photograph in the same position since he had been three or four years of age. On the wall opposite to it was a pair of deer horns. Yet a thin line did not escape his eyes. Of course, that space couldn't be theirs forever. There had been an oil painting there once. It depicted a scene from the battle of Plassey, showing a man fighting shoulder to shoulder with Mohanlal. His descendants used to live in Murshidabad. Baba had pointed to that unknown man beside Mohanlal on the painting and had introduced Alam's grandfather's father to him. The painting had come to them as an inheritance from the house at Baharampur in Murshidabad. That man's son became a magistrate and his son became a doctor. Alam had absent-mindedly travelled into history while sprinkling soil on Baba's grave at Dhaka. Now the deer-horns didn't allow him to think of anything else.

'What news, Alam?'

That was Anantashekhhar. He had begun to ask from the other side of the curtain, even before he had entered the room fully.

'Fine, Meshomoshai.' Alam quickly touched his feet and said, 'You look a little different, though.'

'What do you see? My health has gone down?'

'You've reduced a lot.'

'Maybe. I don't keep too well these days.'

The vest was less clean than the *dhoti*. It looked as if he had put on whatever he could lay his hands on quickly. He opened the window facing the street and sat with Alam.

'Your Ma and sisters—are they all fine?'

Alam nodded.

Sneha came back. Probably she had changed her sari as well. But there was no change in her absent-mindedness. Alam couldn't recollect what the colour of the earlier sari had been.

'I had heard you were coming.' Anantashekhhar emerged from his thoughts and spoke, 'You didn't inform us that you were going to stay with us.'

'What are you saying?' Sneha intervened even before Alam could understand the question properly. 'Where else should he stay when he is in Kolkata!'

Sneha was so clear and forceful that Anantashekhhar could not conceal his embarrassment. In a disconcerted tone he said, 'Well, I didn't mean that.'

'Come Alam, would you like to have a wash?' At that moment Sneha had come forward to rescue him from any kind of discomfort. 'Tea will be ready soon...'

Alam stood up. Following Sneha inside the house he realized that a gap of three years could take away a lot of the easiness. Was it three years, or more? It was quite possible that the details of the letter hadn't reached Anantashekhhar. He was an old man and had understood the whole thing differently. And in that case it was also Alam's responsibility to create a sense of ease.

Sneha had taken out a fresh towel, and a soap case. As she handed these over to him, she asked, 'Would you like to have a shower?'

'No. I've had one in the morning.'

'Have an early lunch today. And then get some rest...' As if showing him the way, she stepped into the courtyard and said, 'that's the bathroom. We've put on new fittings. You know the way don't you?'

Alam smiled. If one took a count of the time Alam spent in getting to know each corner of the house, Sneha hadn't spent even half of it there. But to have a right to it was, of course, a different matter. But then, as he bent over the basin and splashed water on to his face, he realized that the bathroom adjoining the courtyard was for him in a way new. Eight steps down from the attic was the first floor. And the bathroom. It was almost exclusively his own. Once in a while though, Srimantada, Raka's elder brother, used it. And very occasionally, Raka. She had once taunted him in jest, 'Even a son-in-law that lives in his father-in-law's house doesn't get such pampering. We



have to fight over our share, but for you the arrangements are all exclusive!' He hadn't known then that he would receive the news of Baba's passing away at Dhaka, and then gradually he would have to leave his lecturer's job in Kolkata and move to Dhaka permanently. So he had been able to give a repartee too. Giving Raka time to prepare herself for it he had said, 'In terms of share it is best to have exclusive rights. And I would be more happy if I was pampered less.' It was not that Raka did not understand. The impact of his repartee had reached the pupil of her eye and the lobe of her ear. Then she had controlled herself and replied, 'Those who try to win the world only with empty words, also get kicked out by their fathers-in-laws.'

The memories kept Alam smiling. Just a memory of the voice created before him the whole scene in flesh and blood. It seemed as if he could reach out and touch Raka if he wished. And memories only increased his anxiety.

During lunch Alam couldn't control himself anymore.

Sneha spared no efforts in her hospitality. But that also helped to serve as concealment. The vapour on the plate told Alam that the rice had been cooked while he was having his tea. And the extra fries on the plate were meant to make the plate look good. She stood right next to the table and served various items with her own hands. She also continued to speak.

'Your attic has now been converted into a prayer room. After Srimanta's transfer to Delhi, the room next to the living room has been converted into a guest room. How many guests do we have anyway? About a month or so back a cousin's son had visited from Jalpaiguri for an interview.' Then suddenly she seemed to have realized something, and said, 'Have you reduced your intake, or are you not eating properly?'

'I'm fine.' Alam looked up at Sneha. He waited till the last limit of his patience and said, 'I don't see Raka around, Mashima. Is she in college?'

'Look! I had completely forgotten to tell you.' Pouring water from a jug Sneha said, 'Raka's in Delhi. She's visiting Srimanta. She is supposed to be back either today or tomorrow. She knows you are coming. Today's arrival time has passed. So maybe she will arrive tomorrow. It is so difficult to get train tickets from Delhi...!'

Alam lowered his eyes and looked at the plate by now almost empty. Seeming to start his meal all over again he asked, 'Which train is she going to take? The Kalka?'

'I think so...'

He didn't know what to ask next. Or maybe the sound of an elderly cough kept him silent.

Anantashekhhar came over from the living room. Pulling a chair facing Alam he said, 'I had been hearing of some seminar. So what is the subject?'

Anantashekhhar's words sounded faint. Alam was in no hurry to respond. He glanced at the wristwatch and told himself that the Kalka mail reached Howrah in the morning. Only sometime back—when he was in Kolkata—he had taken the train a couple of times to return from Delhi after an interview with the UGC.<sup>3</sup> If she returned tomorrow morning, Raka would be on the train now. And that meant still 18 or 19 hours more to go.

His breath carried the heavy burden of that long wait. And that heaviness, combined with a suppressed belch, spread into the empty recesses of his heart. The only advantage was that tomorrow was a Sunday and he would have the time to wait. He could ask Sneha if he should go to the station tomorrow.

Anantashekhhar was still waiting, his chin resting on his palm—it was a strange posture. There was white stubble on his cheeks and chin.

'Cultural exchange you could call it,' Alam said. 'An exchange of ideas, so that the people from the two countries can get to know each other better...'

'That is fine,' replied Anantashekhhar in his very own manner. 'But can oil and water ever gel together? If they had, then your dad wouldn't have left Kolkata and I wouldn't have left Dhaka either.'

It was as if Anantashekhhar had begun the discussion well prepared about what he was going to say. Even in the midst of his discomfort Alam was amused. He waited to see if Ananta wanted to say anything more and then said, 'Meshomoshai, we talk about oil and water because that's what's been instilled in us. But none of us really knows which one is oil and which one is water. Maybe one day we'll realize that it's all oil or all water...'

'I don't understand it at all—the way you explain things.'

'And you don't need to understand it now!' Having been quiet all this while Mashima interrupted. 'Why have you come up here suddenly? Let Alam get up. The poor boy is tired. Let him relax for a while...'

A distance of 18 or 19 hours could not be reduced to five or seven minutes. It only allowed sadness to settle in. Sneha was right. Tiredness was setting in. If only 18 hours could be passed away in the course of an afternoon's rest! Nothing would have been more wonderful!

Alam got up. He had organized himself while speaking with Anantashekhhar. Now he said, 'I'm not going to have dinner, Mashima.'

'Oh, dear! But why?'

'I've promised them. There's a dinner. I might be also be late...'

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<sup>3</sup> University Grants Commission of India.

Sneha stared at him. She was calm. He couldn't bear the look and got busy in trying to wash his hands and mouth.

The guest room was next to the living room. Sneha had described it to him. The moment he lay on the bed, sleep seemed to be rushing towards him at the speed of a storm. He could only feel it. Was it the speed of the Kalka mail? He turned sideways, made himself cosy on the bed and gradually drowned in his own smile. The comparison could be used in the language of a letter, but wouldn't work in a face-to-face conversation. And then the rain came down in large drops.

He was woken up by Sneha.

'Didn't you say you had to go somewhere?'

Alam looked out and saw it was dusk, or maybe time had travelled further. He felt a damp earthy smell of the rains. Not the fragrance of *kath-champa*. But the rains had gone. There was a knot of burning sensation in his throat. Maybe because he had eaten late in the afternoon. He pulled the wristwatch towards him as Sneha switched on the light. It was almost seven. If only he could spend about twelve or thirteen hours more in sleep.

Alam straightened his back and stretched himself out of sleepiness.

'I've overslept, Mashima. In fact, I'm a little late already...'

His eyes met Sneha's and he became conscious that through the course of his absent-mindedness, she had been watching him. Now as she moved away she said, 'You get ready. I'll get some tea for you.'

Not Sneha's, it was like Raka's voice. She would probably have spoken this way too. And maybe she had. The continuity remained—even though all the links were not always retrievable.

A little later, while walking towards the tram tracks, Alam had had the same thought. The cloudy sky had lent a smoky look to the lights all around. The trams and buses were not particularly crowded on Saturday evenings. Moreover, he had come to Kolkata with just one address—his own house. If he wanted to recall other addresses now, his memory would be blurred like that of a fast-moving scene from within a railway carriage. A sense of unfamiliarity interfered with relationships. So aimlessly, Alam boarded a tram for Chowringhee. Till it was time for him to get back, he would just wander around. After that, he would return and then would have to wait for some more hours. But that may not be too hard. The sooner he got to sleep the faster the distance would be reduced between Raka and him. The house had kept him alive emotionally as it was his own house. He hadn't realized that it was actually Raka that he saw when he saw his own house. If her anatomy could have been analysed, instead of her body, arms, legs and head, he would have seen graceful doors, windows, stairs and attics!

Sneha opened the door for him again. Alam knew where the bathroom was and where the guest room was. He entered the room and found Mashima had laid out everything with great care—a glass of water, a torch and a box of aniseed. There was no room for complain.

‘Will you need anything else?’

‘No.’ Alam tried to smile, ‘and once I sleep it’ll be morning...’

‘Your seminar is from Monday, isn’t it?’

Alam nodded. He wanted to say something, but didn’t. He usually woke up quite early in the morning. He could talk about it then. There would still be time.

He found Sneha looking at him and asked, ‘Do you want to say something, Mashima?’

‘No.’ She seemed to be taken unawares. Then regaining her poise she said, ‘you go to sleep, dear. I’ll leave...’

Alam switched off the light. He didn’t know why he felt so sleepy even after having slept during the day. But it was better this way. As he thought to himself, Alam yawned...he put his hands over his eyes. As he was being overcome by sleep, he became aware that the sounds around were becoming quieter gradually. That was how sleep arrived.

‘Alam?’

Even in his trance, the sound pierced his ears and spread all over him. The voice was familiar, but the feeling was unfamiliar. He wanted some time to get back to normal. So he didn’t respond.

‘Alam, are you asleep?’

‘No. Is that Mashima?’

‘Can I come in for a while?’

This time he switched on the light himself. He opened the curtain and made way for Sneha to come in.

‘Do you want to say something?’

‘I hope you are not uncomfortable in any way?’

‘No.’

Although there was no particular need, Sneha re-arranged the pillows on the bed for Alam. Then she replaced the cover on the half-empty glass of water and said, ‘There is no dearth of cockroaches in this house. The pesticide people had come a few days back and sprayed some medicine. Just a couple of days and the situation is back to normal.’

Alam assumed that she hadn’t come here to say that. After a bit of hesitation he offered her a chair.

‘After such a long time it was so satisfying to have food prepared by you.’

'Oh, you didn't eat much. And it wasn't anything special—just some fish and rice. We had already done the shopping in the morning.'

Alam kept quiet. Now it was Sneha's responsibility to carry the conversation further.

'I wasn't able to say it to you in front of your Meshomoshai...' Sneha suddenly blurted out in a very different voice. 'Please don't mind. But if you have any intentions concerning Raka, try to forget it. The fault lies with my daughter... she has behaved inappropriately...'

Before Alam could be totally shell-shocked, Sneha brought out an envelope from the hand concealed behind the loose end of her sari and handed it over to Alam.

'A letter. Raka has left it for you...'

As he continued to look at Sneha's face, Alam tore open the top of the envelope and took out the folded piece of paper. It was Raka's handwriting—'My commitment towards you was, I had thought, the same as your commitment towards me. But when I received your last letter and realized its meaning, everything seemed to turn upside down. When I asked myself, I found that I had been asking you to come because I knew that you couldn't! Your intentions are noble. You want to take me up to where you are. I am eternally grateful to you for that! But, Alam, I lack the mental strength required of me. There's a kind of resistance, a kind of hesitation—something, somewhere. I cannot explain what it is. And I don't have the strength to break that wall. So there's need to make the wall higher. It was because of this hesitation that our addresses had changed—yours and mine. And many people's before us. But if that hesitation wouldn't have been there, we would probably never ever have had the opportunity to meet. And there would have been no need for this love—the stringing of letters one after another. I wouldn't have had the strength to say these things, standing before a person as honest as you. So I'm running away. The language of this letter may sound somewhat romantic. Maybe that's because I truly love you. I'm running away because your love is stronger. Your pain will be much more than mine. If you can, forgive me. If you can, keep in touch. If you write, I'll surely respond. Besides, there are things in life that we know are illusions, yet we love to keep them alive. Don't we?'

By the middle of the letter, he had begun to make his breathing normal. Now he folded the letter and placed it inside the envelope. A tiny piece of the torn paper had fallen on to the ground. He bent down and picked it up. Then he looked at Sneha and smiled easily.

'Raka has picked up the language beautifully, Mashima. She writes really well.'

'I don't know, dear, why you're saying such a thing,' Sneha said. 'As soon as she heard you were coming she became strangely anxious to get away.'

Alam did not reply.

'Go off to sleep now. I've told my husband to get some *hilsa* tomorrow. I'll cook for you.'

Alam smiled and said, 'Yes, I haven't had *hilsa* from the Ganga for a very long time.'

Sneha walked to the door and stopped.

'Shall I put off the light?'

'Don't worry. I'll put it off myself.'

'At least you still have an opportunity to visit. For us the road is completely shut. We spent our lives there—were born and grew up—and often there's the call of the umbilical chord. It's more so for your Meshomoshai. It's been ten years. Now everything that we have—our own house and property—is here. Yet I don't know why we have this constant feeling of being homeless.'

Silence started where Sneha's words ended. It was quite late at night. He picked up the wristwatch from the table. It was half past midnight. One or two cars passed by after long intervals. There was some noise. There was the musical ringing of the bell from a rickshaw passing by the house. Alam released his suppressed breath. He switched off the light and sat on the bed.

He knew what he wanted to do now. Man's continuity lived in his blood; not in his address. A long time ago, before leaving this house, Baba had gone up to the terrace and offered *namaaz*. Alam had been a witness to that act. Even after having lost everything, Baba still had his faith to kneel down to. Alam didn't have even that. In the darkness of the night, he was quite capable of wiping away the tear that appeared at the corner of his eye.

Alam took the suitcase in his hand, and said, you too are no less honest, Raka.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri



## THREE GENERATIONS (TEEN PURUSH)

Salam Azad

After graduating from Jagannath College, Madhusudan Biswas took up a teaching job. Though there was no similarity between Bhagyakul and Madhusudan's own village in Noakhali, he had, nevertheless, liked Bhagyakul. He had started working as a Bengali teacher of Bhagyakul School on 10 November 1945. This was a memorable date for him for a very special reason. His son Mohit had been born on exactly the same date, a year before he started working. He had, however, got married while he was still in the second year of his undergraduate studies. There was, of course, a small history behind this wedding.

After his vacation was over, Madhusudan had to return to Dhaka. Though he was physically in Dhaka, his thoughts remained entrenched in Shobha's house. For the first few days he could not eat or sleep well. He could not concentrate during lectures. He had written many poems to Shobha at that time. He could not help smiling when he thought of all this now. One of his letters to Shobha fell into his father's hands, who immediately summoned Madhusudan home. The next morning the father took him to the market and on the way asked him 'do you love Shobha?' This was a totally unexpected question from his father. He hadn't anticipated something like this from him. He recoiled with apprehension and embarrassment. The father repeated the question when there was no reply from the son. Madhusudan replied with trepidation, 'Yes'.

'Do you want to marry her?'

Madhusudan was walking behind his father.

He could not see his father's face. He could gauge from his father's tone that he was asking the questions in his usual easy manner. Madhusudan was



very scared of his father. Yet sometimes his father did treat him like a friend. At that very moment Madhusudan felt that his father was a friend. So, without any further hesitation, he replied in the affirmative. His father did not probe the matter anymore. Within a week he brought Shobha to the house as his daughter-in-law. Thirteen days after the wedding he called Madhusudan and said, 'now go back to Dhaka and put your mind to your studies'.

On winter afternoons Madhusudan loved walking along the banks of the Padma river at Bhagyakul. On some days he followed the river to the west, walking towards Kamargaon. While on other days he walked in the opposite direction towards Jasholdiya. In the winter the small waves of the Padma tumbled gently against the shore. The soft pressure of the small waves created wave patterns on the sand. Madhusudan felt these strips on the sand were like the border of Shobha's sari. The blue water of the Padma was the body of her sari. He became fully engrossed, watching this new discovery of his—his Shobha's picture.

Adjacent to Bhagyakul School was Harendralal's *cutchery*. Except for the roof, the whole structure was made of wood. Madhusudan has seen many structures in Bhagyakul with similarly beautiful woodwork. At the beginning he was surprised and looked at them with admiration. The houses with corridors beside them had never aroused any wonder in him. He was used to such constructions. If he had not come to Bhagyakul, he would have been deprived of the pleasure of seeing these wooden configurations. In the north of Bhagyakul was Balashur. Jadubabu lived in this village. Madhusudan had been astonished to see the collection of rare flowers in Jadubabu's garden.

Madhusudan had been working for less than a year in his job. Within that period he had spent two holidays at Noakhali with Shobha and Mohit. One day he was talking to his colleagues in the staff room. At that moment the school attendant came and handed him a telegram. The telegram had no details. It just asked him to come home urgently. That very day he took the steamer, via Narayanganj towards Noakhali. He was not in time to see his father. The riot that had broken out a year before the Partition of the sub-continent in Noakhali had claimed his father's life. The same Muslim patients whom his father had treated free, with mixtures he made because they were too poor to pay, had turned on him and killed him with their sharp knives. Madhusudan had been shocked by his father's death but he was even more shocked by the changed behaviour of some Muslim neighbours in the village. Madhusudan was not the only one who was surprised. The cruelty of a few Muslims had alarmed almost all the Hindus of their locality.

On his return, he noted the same fear in the eyes of the Hindus in the Bhagyakul area. Leaving behind their ornate wooden houses, their childhood,

their parents' memories, the Hindus were running away in groups, to places of safety. To Calcutta, to 24 Parganas, to West Bengal.

Madhusudan had vowed that he would never leave his country, his birthplace, to go anywhere. With the exception of one or two colleagues, Madhusudan was saddened to see how the attitude of everyone else had changed quite suddenly. It hurt him. How do people alter so quickly? In his heart he cursed the politicians. It was because of them that India, especially Bengal, had been divided. Madhusudan spent another four years amidst this kind of mental turmoil.

Like every other day, Madhusudan had come to school in his dhoti and punjabi. The school's Maulavi told Madhusudan that the Muslims in West Bengal and Assam were pouring into East Pakistan because they could not take the torture any more. He could not make Maulavi saheb understand that this was the work of anti-socials. One should not consider one whole community responsible and abuse them for the guilt of a few anti-social elements. It wasn't right. At one stage, the Maulavi saheb attacked the dhoti he was wearing. Madhusudan did not want to continue the pointless argument so he got up and left.

The next day he boarded a boat for Sadarghat. A sister of his lived at Ray Bazar. Madhusudan started walking from Sadarghat, through Nababpur in the direction of Ray Bazar, with the intention of seeing his sister. Before he reached Nababpur, a group of young boys surrounded him, near Rathkhola. With one strong pull they undid his dhoti. An embarrassed Madhusudan was stunned. But something more strange happened in the next few seconds. One boy said 'Yah Ali' and plunged a knife into his stomach. He lurched forward. The blood flowed easily from Madhusudan's body. In this way the soil of East Pakistan was made red with his blood. Though the successors of Kshudiram<sup>1</sup> and Surya Sen<sup>2</sup> had weapons in their pockets, they had learnt to use these weapons to defend humanity. Not to shoot people. They had assumed the role of silent spectators in spite of being armed. Some had escaped to India.

When Madhusudan did not return home, his wife rushed to Bahgyakul. When she couldn't find him there, she came to Dhaka. When after an intensive search, she could not trace her husband, a helpless Shobha Biswas came back to Noakhali, hugging her only son to her breast.

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<sup>1</sup> A well-known revolutionary who was executed during the Raj.

<sup>2</sup> The leader of the Chittagong Armoury raid.

Shobha Biswas's relatives kept sending messages, urging her to come to them. Her Barda from Siliguri<sup>3</sup> sent message after message asking Shobha Biswas to go there. But how could she leave? The place where she was born, grew up in, where she met Madhusudan and had her only child, Mohit. How could Shobha Biswas leave this land in whose soil the blood of her beloved had been mingled? Mejdī was sending letter after letter from 24 Parganas.<sup>4</sup> These letters made Shobha Biswas angry. Was she ungrateful like them?

Shobha Biswas had to struggle hard to educate Mohit and to keep herself alive. Last year Mohit had taken admission to Dhaka University with Economics, and was staying in Jagannath Hall. He was lucky to have somehow escaped from the communal attacks of the mid sixties. Though he had escaped, many like him had been transformed into corpses. In spite of that he hadn't left his country. When he did well in his Master's, he got a job as a lecturer in his own department. Before a year had passed after her son got the job, Shobha Biswas started urging him to get married. Mohit agreed to get married, to relieve his mother of her loneliness.

During that time, at the call of Sheikh Mujib, the whole country was involved in the non-cooperation movement. The mother did not understand these agitations. The moment her son agreed to marry, she asked him if there was anyone he fancied. Jaya's picture surfaced in front of Mohit's eyes. Jaya, the younger sister of Mohit's closest friend, Biplab, was studying in Eden College. Yet till then, he had regarded Jaya like a younger sister. It was this Jaya that Shobha Biswas brought home as Mohit's wife.

Shobha had taken her daughter-in-law to visit Noakhali. Mohit was too busy to accompany them. He had, however, said that once the pressure of his work had decreased, he could accompany them as well. But Shobha Biswas was adamant. The people in the village were eager to see her son's wife. Her greatest wish had been to have the wedding at Noakhali. As Mohit had objected, it hadn't been possible to do that. Since her son's wedding had taken place in Dhaka, Shobha Biswas could not rest till she had taken her daughter-in-law to her village home. The soil of this place was the first thing that had touched her son's body. And in the dust of the house was mixed the footprints of the person she had most trusted.

On the morning of 23 March, Mohit saw his mother and wife off on the Noakhali train. When he came back from Kamalapur Station, he suddenly had an urge to weep. Mohit couldn't understand why he wanted to cry.

<sup>3</sup> A town in the north of West Bengal, now a city.

<sup>4</sup> A district in West Bengal.

On 25 March when the soldiers of the Pakistani army started attacking some places in Dhaka, their prime target was Jagannath Hall.<sup>5</sup> Mohit lived in a flat in the residential quarters of this Hall. Some of his neighbours had put locks on their doors and escaped elsewhere.

What time of night was it? Midnight or maybe a little later. A tank broke through the east wall of Jagannath Hall and started shooting *mortars*. Mohit was still awake. Hearing the sound of firing, he lay down on the floor. The attackers were saying something in a mixture of Urdu and English. He opened his window a fraction, as he wanted to see what was happening outside. But in the meantime, he heard the sound of kicking on his door. As

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<sup>5</sup> In her diary, *Those Days of '71*, under her entry on 25 March, after 23 March Jahanara Ilam writes how '... a sort of dark shadow had surrounded everyone...' And about the night of 25 March, she goes on to say, 'I had fallen asleep. Suddenly I was awakened by a shattering sound..... There were two to three kinds of sounds—the booming sound of heavy bombs, the rat-a- tat-tat of *machine guns* and another screeching sound. Something was lighting the sky from time to time, a light which entered the room and lit it up. We all ran to the terrace. South of our house, beyond the field were Iqbal Hall, Mohsin Hall, a few more Halls and the buildings of the University quarters. Most of the noise was coming from that direction, and accompanying that, one could hear the painful groans of many voices.' Under the next day's entry, she describes how one panic-stricken student whom she knew, a Kamal Ataur Rahman, had escaped the carnage by hiding with some others in a bathroom in the Halls and when the *tracer rockets* stopped early in the morning, he crawled across fields and the railway line, to seek shelter in her house. (*Ekattarer Dinguli*, Dhaka: Sanhdhani Prakashani, 1986), pp. 46, 49, 51.

soon as Mohit opened the door two people armed with guns entered his flat. The other man stood with his Chinese *rifle* aimed at Mohit. The two men inside were searching for something in his rooms with the help of a torch-light. They came back to the door disappointed. One man put the *rifle* against Mohit's back and pulled the *trigger*. Mohit understood everything before the bullet from the rifle pierced his body. It was a humiliation to plead with this barbaric battalion troops who had no knowledge of human kindness or of religion, it would be a insult to humanity itself. The reason why his father and grandfather had not asked for mercy from the ancestors of these human beasts, was the same reason why Mohit did not plead with them.

He fell on the floor. The blood from his body was getting mixed with the soil—the same soil that had effortlessly soaked in the blood of his innocent father and his godlike grandfather.

Translated by Bashabi Fraser

## REHABILITATION (PUNARBASHAN)

Abhra Roy

'I had never killed anything. Not even a bird. Even as a child I had been rather timid. In quarrels and tussles, you know, I always ended up on the receiving end. Yet, things turned out so differently. And I'm really surprised at my own self—that so many evil people could lose their lives in my hands...'

He held out his strong arms towards us as he spoke. As if to say, look at these—how ordinary, how normal; in no way different from yours. Yet, I used them day after day to bring about a flood of a fierce bloodbath. Hard to believe!

'How many have you killed in all? One of us asked excitedly.'

Anowar thought for a while. Then his face lit up with that lovely innocent smile. It made him look even younger and filled his deep eyes with a kind of sparkling joy. He folded his arms back close to his chest and said that it was difficult to assess the exact number. In a joint operation in a jungle, for example, it was not easy to determine who killed how many. Besides, most encounters took place under the cover of night. Unless absolutely necessary, it was a waste of time to count the number of corpses. Then there were the injured, many of whom later joined the list of the deceased.

'OK, but just a guess?' The person was insistent.

They were face to face with a real soldier—young and fiery. And they couldn't contain their excitement! They were starry-eyed about his heroics and were very curious to know how many people he had killed.

Well, maybe more than a *century*... Anowar replied. He had a distant look in his eyes and it was almost as if he was talking to himself.

His face was tense. His eyes travelled to realms far beyond the four walls of the tiny room that he now sat in. The jaws on either side of his sun-tanned

bronze face were strong. And in the light of that room they shone brightly. His legs were spread out in a semi circle before us—he seemed to be rooted firmly to the ground. Probably that was a position from where he wanted to meet all the challenges.

‘A hundred! Or more! What are you saying?’

Two or three of them responded, their voices full of wonder.

Anowar’s expression was gradually turning mysterious. We continued to insist. ‘You must tell us about some of your experiences. Even if you don’t have time, you must tell us something. Who knows when we shall have this opportunity again!’

For everything that was said, Anowar flashed that amazingly innocent smile. He seemed to feel a little embarrassed, just as he was, the first time we met. Yet everything about him—his clothes, style of carriage, voice—revealed his true identity. This was after all the right age to bask in the glory of being a hero! In that dull light, his bright bronze skin, dark blue trousers, well-built body wrapped in a fur-lined foam *tunic*, fanned our imagination. We wondered about the amazing experiences he had gone through at such a young age. He had been through it all—the madness, ferocity and devastation of life. And carrying with him memories of such hair-raising adventures!

Yet Anowar couldn’t overcome his own shyness. He would speak a little and then stop. He would think quietly for a moment. And then his face would light up with that beautifully modest smile.

We had been introduced to him only about a couple of hours back. A private party had been organized to celebrate the independence of Bangladesh. There was some music and food and an endless flow of *adda* to enjoy the evening. An Awami League leader had been invited at the last minute and he was very happy to join us too. He informed us that he was going to bring along two other special young leaders along with him. So finally the celebrations turned out to be quite high profile.

The gentleman arrived exactly on time. He was extremely amiable. Without waiting to be introduced, he walked around and interacted with everyone. As a greeting he didn’t want either a *namashkar* or a handshake. He brushed aside outstretched hands and held each and every one in a close hug. We were overwhelmed by the generosity of his embrace and the intensity of his emotion. We realized that the depth of his happiness at the sight of this independence and the joy of this freedom was not the same as ours. His overflowing emotion was very different. It could not be confined within the compartments of a simple celebration. Finally when he had got over the first flush of emotions, he introduced us to his two guests. One of them was a student leader who had been released from jail after independence. It was out of sheer luck that he had escaped the clutches of those butchers.

The other person was that evening's special guest, Anowar. He was an extremely reliable Sector Commander of the Bangladeshi army, the Mukti Bahini. He was the one who had kept up the freedom of a large part of Srihatta for months on end. Even at such a young age he had displayed exemplary courage, wisdom and power. The leader slapped Anowar affectionately on the back and said, 'they are the ones that saved our honour. They are the pride and future of this country...'

His voice was choked with emotion. He pushed Anowar forward and said, 'Tell them something about your experiences.' But Anowar was too shy to look up and speak. He wanted to hold people close and hug them.

The programme was very brief. The meeting started with the anthem 'Amar Sonar Bangla.' Anowar too joined the others. This was followed by a few short speeches. Most of the time was spent in exchange of greetings, pledge of mutual friendship, recollection of bits and pieces of memories, and sharing of news about near and dear ones.

I had been watching Anowar all the time. He was very young—about 27 or 28. Or may be less. He had very short hair, a broad forehead and wide eyes. But the eyes had a kind of listless and forlorn look. There was nothing in them that conveyed the grandeur of a powerful general. In fact, he looked more like a romantic hero. Yet, this boy was one of the fearless leaders of that bold and defiant war. It was amazing!

Leaning against the chair, he had been listening to the other speakers quietly. And then, on repeated insistence from us, he stood up reluctantly to say a few words. He greeted everyone with folded hands and smiled, 'I don't know how to give speeches. I've made a small contribution to the Mukti Bahini, but that was only because of your support and affection. Today is a great day, a day of great happiness for everyone. But at the same time I cannot forget those friends and relatives who are no longer alive. I'm happy we have been able to achieve what they had laid down their lives for. But the regret is that they are not here to enjoy it. We have difficult times ahead of us. But I'm sure that we shall be able to organize ourselves with the help of your support and affection. Jai Bangla!'

With his head lowered he somehow finished what he had to say and sat down. His face was flushed with shyness—as if he had committed a huge crime. We handed him a cup of tea and a few of us pulled him aside. We asked, 'didn't you maintain a diary or something during the war?'

Anowar smiled. 'I had, but like so may other things I lost even that. Towards the end we had faced a heavy artillery fire and I left it behind in the bunker. That diary, some clothes, a transistor, everything... But I remember the incidents. Once I have some time, I'll put them down in writing and show them to you.'



After finishing his tea, Anowar indicated that he wanted to go out for a while. He was hesitant to have a smoke in front of people like the leader of the Awami League or elderly people like the President of our programme. In a corner of the *passage* outside we wanted to offer him a cigarette. But he stopped us politely, pulled out a packet of an expensive brand from his pockets and said, 'on a special day such as this, let me have an opportunity to offer you something too. You are taking care of everything anyway. Come on, have this.' He took out his lighter and lighted their cigarettes one by one.

Puffing on his cigarette, someone said, 'Anowar bhai, we had great hopes of listening to some of your experiences of the war.' Anowar released a mouthful of smoke and said, 'There's nothing really to listen to. We are like tin soldiers—no arms, no ammunition, no resources, yet we fight with our lives day after day.'

'But how did you manage against their sophisticated weapons?'

Crushing the cigarette butt with his feet, Anowar replied, 'to be honest at times even we wonder how we managed to carry on for so long. We had started with some labourers from the tea gardens equipped with bows and arrows. We had assumed that we could manage. But after being totally overcome by the superior force of the rifle and losing many lives, we saved ourselves by running off into the jungles. And then gradually with training, our numbers increased and we learned to use the rifle and the Sten gun too. It was then that we began to believe freedom was possible. With great enthusiasm we threw ourselves at their camps. But then we realized what it meant to have tanks, mortars and machine guns. Yet the very first time, we were able to kill about ten of them and capture five.'

Anowar stopped again. He lighted another cigarette, probably to calm himself down.

'So brother, how did you manage to retain your morale in spite of such difficulties and uncertainties? We find it a most amazing thing.'

'Honestly speaking, the incessant and inhuman torture of the Pak soldiers never allowed our blood to cool down. It is very true that Ayub had revealed to us our leader and Yahiya showed us the way to freedom. It is impossible to describe in words the horrific torture that was being inflicted on people at certain places. A three or four-year-old infant crying with its face buried on the raped dead body of its mother beside a burnt down house—these and many more scenes. Is it possible for anyone to keep their cool at the sight of such scenes? We found no reason to stay alive. So without worrying for our own lives, we repeatedly threw ourselves at the enemy camps in surprise attacks. Look, whatever little I learnt from the training I received, I realized

that mental strength was the greatest strength in any army. And we also realized that as far as our enemy was concerned, their mental strength was zero. They knew that they had a large number of men and arms to rely on. If one person didn't fight, another would. So they took it easy and indulged themselves in rape and alcohol. And we? We knew that every bullet we used had to reach its target. We had neither a bullet nor a minute to waste.'

Anowar had become rather emotional and had spoken at a stretch for a while. So he stopped. He seemed to feel more comfortable outside the room. There was firmness in his voice and deep confidence in his manner. He looked at the watch again and said, 'today we don't have much time. So we'll have a chat some other day. I have an appointment at half nine.'

Someone asked hesitantly, 'Is the appointment very urgent, Anowar bhai? Can you not be a little late? It's so wonderful to have you with us.'

Again his face lit up with that soft gentle smile. 'In fact, the matter is rather urgent. It is related to the most urgent need at the moment—rehabilitation. And to an extent, for me, it is a matter of personal importance as well.'

'What? Does that mean your relatives are at the refugee camps too?'

'Everyone is my relative. Anowar smiled. 'But this particular one is a case of a tortured young girl who is more than a relative to me. We had rescued her from one of the Khan army barracks in a half-dead condition. The girl's husband had died in action that very day. After rescuing her we had handed her over to the woman volunteers at our base. After staying there for a while she recovered completely. Now Naseem wants to live a life of dignity like any other average woman. But the problem is that we haven't been able to trace any of her relatives in any of the camps so that we can hand her over to them safely.'

'This is a national problem. Your government will surely make arrangements for a dignified rehabilitation of these girls. And hopefully you'll also make sure that they are once again able to participate in a healthy social life.'

'Of course, certainly! But this girl's husband participated in the action at my instruction and laid down his life right beside me. Ever since, Naseem has been in our care. She trained to be a nurse and spent many nights caring for our injured brothers from the battlefield. She did not lag behind even in rifle training. She is quite a sharp shooter now. It was a difficult task stopping her from participating in action. She was determined to accompany us. Can you imagine how strong the girl is mentally? How can we ever let her be neglected or disrespected? So my wish is, if we could trace any of her relatives, we would explain the whole story to them in detail and I would

personally hand her over to them. The rescue of Naseem has been an important experience in my life. It was a very daring operation.'

'Why don't you tell us a little about it? How did you manage to rescue her?'

Anowar seemed to be absent-mindedly speaking to himself. 'There won't be time to relate everything. But I'll tell you a bit. The Khan soldiers had burnt down three or four villages at a stretch and pitched base at the top of a small hill in a mountainous terrain. My information was that they had camped there with a force of a single company. Generally the Khans didn't want to stay in villages to avoid the mud and slush, and they were afraid of jungles and snakes. They attacked people at random, looted them and went away. On finding that convenient spot on the hillock, they were able to keep the nearby villages within their range of control. And if we could take control of that hillock, we could keep them out for several miles.'

'The problem was that there was only one proper road to reach the top. And right at the end of the road a machine gun had been placed so cleverly that unless that was blown out, there was no way to overcome them. However many people we had with us, we would all be blown into pieces if we tried to reach the top. Finally, after a great deal of thought, we arrived at a plan.'

'We patrolled the villages nearby and recruited about four people. One of them was Jamal. We heard Jamal's story. His family, along with a group of people, were fleeing towards the border when they were attacked by the Razakar and the Khans. Jamal somehow managed to escape with his wife Naseem and jumped into a pond. But they were not spared. Very soon the Khans arrived, firing on the water. Then they captured Naseem and went off to that hillock. Jamal managed to survive by somehow hiding himself among the water hyacinths. But after that he couldn't leave the village. He roamed the forests like a madman. And when he heard we wanted to capture the hillock, he was eager to be a part of the group.'

'With Jamal and his three associates we discussed ways in which we could reach right at the bottom of that machine gun secretly. They assured me that if we approached from the north through the cane shrubs and the bamboo woods, it would be possible to reach as close as 20 to 30 yards of the machine gun. But beyond that the space was absolutely clear. The rascals had first cleared the surroundings and then sat there waiting with the gun. They would aim at anything that moved. It wasn't going to be possible during the day—they kept firing at random every now and then. "That's the reason, saheb, why I'm lying low. Otherwise, I would have skinned them alive," Jamal had said.'

'Jamal clenched his fist and crushed his teeth like a raving lunatic.'

'I calmed him down. OK, brother, we'll do something about it. It wouldn't help to lose either our temper or patience. We'll have to plan it out well and then pounce on them unawares. Now, brother, listen to me carefully...'

'It was decided that around three thirty in the morning, Jamal, my colleague Khalil and I would set off along that route of mud and slush. At four-thirty in the morning we would storm the gun. At the same time, my Second Commander would surround the hillock from all sides and start firing. And a column from the Bahini would then go past the destroyed gun and try to scale swiftly to the top. The rest of the force would place itself on the two sides and provide covering fire to the advancing column. I gave a quick training to Jamal and explained to him the nuances of charging a grenade. He turned it around in his palms and checked it out well.'

'At three-thirty in the morning, I instructed my Second Commander to get ready and crosschecked his watch with mine. Then the three of us disappeared quietly into the darkness. There had been a spell of rain sometime back. Our feet slipped if we tried to walk fast. Yet we were almost running up. We had smeared a generous paste of garlic on our hands to keep the snakes away. And combined with the smell of the forest around, the sharp odour became rather strange. From time to time, thorny shrubs and branches of trees blocked our progress. But in spite of all that, we proceeded as swiftly as we could. Towards the end we were almost crawling.'

'We were right there—almost 30 or 40 yards from the machine gun. We still had about 15 minutes to go. There was an eerie silence all around. Raising my hands over my head I gave them silent instructions to take position—Jamal to my left and Khalil to my right.'

'The light of dawn was beginning to break through slowly. In the distance we could hear the chirping of birds. Then the top of the hill became bright red. And it seemed as if fresh blood had been smeared on the barrel of the gun. If we proceeded only about ten yards more, we would be in the clearing, face-to-face with the deadly gun. We were now advancing on our bellies, trying to become almost one with the ground. A few yards more and we would be able to charge at our target with pin-point accuracy. According to the plan, I was going to charge first, followed by Khalil and finally Jamal.'

'We were still surrounded by an uneasy silence. There were no sounds even from the top. Suddenly my feet seemed to sink into something. It must have been a half-dug camouflaged bunker. Breaking a false ceiling of sticks and creepers, I tumbled down noisily into a pit of water and slush. And immediately a bunch of bullets whistled past over our heads. The quiet and

peace of morning lay shattered in a moment. The shower of bullets continued to whistle past overhead. I was sure it was going to be the end of me. And like a fool I had probably killed Jamal and Khalil too. The machine gun stopped after a few more showers of bullet. Then there was silence. I presumed that they had not seen us. Having heard the sound, they were firing at random.'

'I crept out of the pit on my belly. My whole body seemed to have become heavy like a stone. Sweat trickled down in a stream down my back. There was intense pain at the elbows and chin. Maybe there were cuts and bruises. But I had no time to concentrate on that. Creeping on my chest, I moved up to Jamal and found it was all over. His lifeless body lay flat on its face in a pool of blood. Slowly I removed the grenade from his hands.'

'There were just a few seconds to go before four-thirty. Holding my breath I took position. No, I couldn't hear any more sounds. Ripping off the safety lever with my teeth and aiming a little high I charged at full speed. There was a deafening roar all around. Immediately I stood up and threw another. This time I was right on target. Immediately there was another from an angle at the right. I realized Khalil was alive. In seconds we had completely destroyed their strategic gunpoint.'

'The rest of it was quite easily completed. We captured the base in half an hour—even before they had time to get ready. Only the few sentry guards had ready arms. But they had been surrounded so swiftly that the poor chaps couldn't do a thing.'

Anowar stopped for a while. His thoughtful eyes had a depressed look about them. Quietly I put a cigarette in his hand.

He lit the cigarette and continued. 'It was in one of the rooms there that we found Naseem. She was lying there like a creeper withered by a storm. Her meagre clothes were just about enough to shield her modesty. Her whole body bore marks of torture. Along with her there was another girl. She was completely emaciated. There was no way to figure out how old she was. We had, of course, been successful in sending her back to her father. But we were not able to send Naseem anywhere. In the beginning she was almost out of her mind. She didn't speak a word—just looked around blankly. And once in a while burst out into wails. We had thought she would go completely insane. Ah!'

He let out a deep breath as he spoke.

Then he remained quiet for a while and said, 'But that Naseem is now a completely different person. No one can tell that she has gone through such painful events. You should have seen her when I broke the news that Dhaka had been liberated! Her face burst at the seams with joy and jubilation, and

simultaneously there were profuse tears streaming down her cheeks. The smile of happiness was struggling to erupt. Finally, she held my hands and burst into an uncontrollable sob. I tried my best to console her and assure her, but to no effect.'

'I'm still at it. If we could find one of her relatives who is alive and is willing to take her back with respect and dignity, it would be a great relief for me. The death of her husband, Jamal, of course was an accident. It could have been me or Khalil too. Yet, inexperienced Jamal had walked into his death at my suggestion. He had become a martyr at my instructions. Since I happen to be the cause of Naseem's ill fate, I feel responsible for her well-being. And most of all, in spite of such a painful incident, Naseem has placed all her faith and belief in me.'

'Well, does she know all the details of the *operation* that night?'

'Yes, she does. I've told her a lot of things. In the beginning she used cry a lot. But then she became stronger. Now she is a different girl. If she had come along, you would have seen how strong she is, mentally. Today I've sent her along with another family to visit some camps on the border, although I know there's not much hope. All those who were close to her had been slaughtered by the Rajakars and the Khans. But just by chance, if she found someone whom she could call her own, she could, at least, cry her heart out and relieve herself. She, however, is not willing to go around looking aimlessly any more. She says she doesn't need anyone. But the point is that she is so young and it is not easy for a person to continue fighting her fate all alone for the rest of her life.'

Someone came and informed us that Anowar's companions were waiting for him. Anowar glanced at his watch quickly and said, 'So much for today...' and again lowered his head with that soft modest smile.

We said, 'That's all right. Let's go now.'

Anowar pulled the zip of his tunic up to his neck. It was quite cold today. The wooden stairs reverberated at the sound of our footsteps.

As we climbed down the stairs, someone put a hand on his shoulder and asked, 'Anowar bhai, if you don't find the person you are looking for, have you thought about what arrangements you will make for Naseem?'

Anowar climbed down the last step, stood near the door and turned around. Then after a little hesitation said, 'I'm still not very sure, but if Naseem has no objection, I'll take her to my home. As far as I know, she will not resist. So I'm waiting. Once there's some response from her, I'll propose to her with all respect.'

'What do you mean! In spite of knowing that she is a girl who's been raped—you'll...? Will it not have any repercussions on your mind...? Will

your society and your family accept it?' We were amazed and had a series of questions for Anowar.

Anowar seemed to feel embarrassed at our surprise. He lowered his voice slightly and said, 'Don't you read in the papers? Our whole country today is being raped and outraged by raiders. The stains of blood on our country and the embers of fire on our lands have not all been wiped out yet. If we can call that country our mother and if we can build homes over that burnt land, why can we not love Naseem? Is it because she has life? Tell me.'

By now we were on the road. The others were waiting with the door of the car open. As he walked out, Anowar lowered his voice and said, 'You have not seen Naseem. That is why you have such thoughts. If you had seen her you would have said that it was a matter of great fortune for a man to have her as his wife.'

We were dumbfounded. Anowar's last words seemed to have whipped us into silence. Overwhelmed with wonder I stared unblinkingly at Anowar's strong well-built body and his handsome and brightly smiling face. Before getting into the car, he stretched out his hand for the last time. But this time, I pulled him by the hand towards me and silently held him in a close embrace. One by one, everyone held him close to their heart. 'When shall we meet again, Anowar bhai?'

Anowar said, 'very soon. But next time it'll be on the other side—in our golden Bengal, sonar Bangla. And then the venue will be my home. Maybe Naseem will be there too. And you'll get a taste of everything that I have said today—I promise.'

The car left as soon as he finished. We followed the red light of the car with our eyes in pin-drop silence till it disappeared in the darkness in a crowd of numerous other cars.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## THE GIRL WAS INNOCENT (MEYETIR KONO DOSH CHHILO NA)

Imdadul Haq Milan

The sky above the ancient *kadui* tree, standing gloomily on the riverbank, is brightening up shade by shade. The thickly intertwined branches of the tree, and the chiselled leaves trap in the darkness that casts its shadow on the ground beneath the canopy. So the face of the person sitting under the tree is not clearly visible. As the person is wearing a white shirt, he appears as a hazy patch under the dark shadow of the tree. He is puffing nervously on a *bidi* and with every whiff the burning stub-end glows like a firefly.

The early morning *azan*<sup>iii</sup> was echoing a while ago. The villages all around, that were lulled by sleep and weariness, have lazily awakened to that sacred sound. The devout Muslim folk have woken up. The daring cocks perched on the cattle shed near the huts are letting out their full-throated cries. From the cow-shed of some nearby home the mooing of a cow is drifting across. From time to time, she is bellowing in such a manner that it seems likely that it is close to feeding-time for the herd. All over the village, the birds, newly awake, are craning their necks from amidst the palpable darkness caught within hedges and shrubs, trees and plants, to catch a glimpse of the sky and open fields of the liberal crop-growing expanses. Chirping cheerily, they are just trying to gauge by the streaks of light, how long it is away from dawn. The early-bird, the lone *doel*, oblivious of the dark, has jumped down into the householder's courtyard. It calls ecstatically, skipping—hoppity-hop. With every call the *doel's* tail flips up and then down.

The river waters that flow by, almost touching the *kadui* tree, seemed surprisingly calm and composed. The river is called Rajatrekha.<sup>1</sup> During the

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, it means a silver line.



monsoons, the river overflows, restless with the tides and floods, uncontrollable. In summer it is almost like a narrow canal, trickles of water flowing further into the unknown distance.

On this bank of the river are the human settlements, so many villages! On the southern edge of the diameter of the lake is Kamarkhara, at the extreme north, Banikhara. On the west is the village Nashankar. On the east, across the river, stretches the long sandy margin of the silted river-bed, open expanses and pastureland. Far into the distance is discernable a fine line of trees, like the eyebrows of a village maiden, and human habitation—huts and houses. Cowherds on this bank swim across the river with their herd of cows to graze on the river-bed. All the birds from this shore fly over to the other side in search for food, and return through the fading twilight.

The waters of the Rajatrekha swarm with a thousand varieties of fish. *Chiding, bele, pabda, puti, chapila, tatkini, kajli, shilong, gharua, khalla, bacha, ritha*<sup>2</sup>—Oh! what a variety of fish! Attracted by the fish, storks and herons fly down here from faraway lakes and riverbanks. In winter come the migratory birds—the cranes, mallards and brahminy ducks. Peacefully co-existing with these are country birds, the cormorant and the snipe. From the undergrowth around abandoned human homes or from the shady *hijal* tree, the male and female *dahuk* swoop down into the water.

Alongside the birds, humans too wade into the Rajatrekha. Men are no less greedy for fish than the birds. As dawn breaks, there is a flurry of activity on both banks of the river. All sorts of fishing nets—draw-nets, scoop-nets, dipping-nets—are cast into the river. Fishing with nets continues right till the afternoon. Thereafter, the river is crowded with small *dinghy* boats. The afternoon meal being over, in a leisurely fashion, the men drop in their fishing-hooks. Some poor fishermen fish the night long in the dim light of a hurricane lamp. Some lay out the fishing tackle and set the bamboo traps through the night, only to gather these up at dawn. So many people eke out a living from the river!

Most people living in these areas do not need to buy the fish that they eat. Just anyone in the family can sneak down to the river and the daily quota of fish is ensured.

In Kusum's family, she is the one who goes fishing. Before the first streaks of dawn are visible, she wades into the river, a small fishing net in hand. As soon as the sun is up, she goes back. Within that time, the mud pot she carries is almost full of fish. There is enough fish for the day.

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<sup>2</sup> Names of river water fish, popular in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Why isn't Kusum here yet? All around it is almost brightening into morning!

The person squatting under the *kadui* tree, anxiously puffs on his *bidi* a last time, then flicks it and tosses it into the river. Then, across the path, looking further in the distance, almost hidden behind the trees at Kusum's house, he articulates words in his mind: Kusum, Why are you so late today? Come, do come quickly.

'Kusum, O Kusum, aren't you going?'

Kusum is sitting outside the kitchen thatch. She got out of bed a while ago, came straight out of the room and sat down here. As she sits, her pose betrays a sense of complete indifference—with her hands lightly resting on her lap, she stares at the thatch over the larger room.

Behind the large room outside, there are two rose-apple and a few betel-nut trees. Further in the distance lies the bamboo-clump. Jutting out over the clump, a tall bamboo twig bends over the crown of the two rose-apple trees. The early morning breeze plays through all these trees. A mesmerizing whistling sound is produced. Orchestrated with this sound of the wind is the call and flutter of bird wings.

Having spread the prayer-cloth on the wooden floor of the west-facing room, Khalek, the artisan is saying the *namaaz*. 'Allah-ho-Akbar' he chants, then pauses, grips his bent knees with his hands, levels his head and shoulders and waist down, to recite the sacred scripture. Then he stands up 'chamiallahu liman hamida'. Now chanting 'Allah-hu-Akbar', he will touch the floor with his head and pay obeisance to Allah. At that precise moment, the artisan's wife averts her gaze from her husband. She hurries her daughter and looks back at her husband.

What's the matter with the girl today? She is not going out of the house yet! She hasn't even bothered to reply to her mother's query!

The artisan's wife comes then to confront Kusum. Frowning, she asks, 'What's happened, girl?'

Diverting her eyes from the thatch, Kusum looks at her mother's face. Distractedly she says, 'Nothing's happened.'

'Then, why are you still sitting?'

'What should I do?'

The artisan's wife is utterly surprised. 'What are you saying? Won't you go to the river?'

Like a spoilt child Kusum pleads, 'Ma, I don't feel like going to the river today.'

'Why?'

'Just like that.'

'Are you unwell?'

Kusum is somewhat embarrassed by the question. She bows her head and replies, 'No.'

'Then?'

'What then! I told you, just like that!'

Now the woman looks sharply at her daughter's face. She is shocked. The girl's gentle face looks somewhat rough and dry. It looks darkened and drawn. The eyes are sunken and there are dark circles under them. The eyelids seem burdened with sleep. Why has this happened? Hasn't Kusum slept at night! Can the girl look like this after one sleepless night! Or has she not slept for several nights!

In an anxiety-ridden voice, the artisan's wife asks, 'Haven't you slept at night?'

A deep sigh escapes Kusum. 'No, I couldn't sleep.'

'Why?'

'How do I know!'

'From your eyes and face it seems that it's not just last night, you haven't slept for several nights now.'

'Yes, I haven't been able to sleep for three or four nights. I'm awake through the night.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

Kusum gives a wan smile. 'If I did, what would you have done? Would you have lulled me to sleep with the chants and blessings in Allah's name?'

On hearing this, the artisan's wife is slightly angered. In a serious voice she says, 'Don't joke with Allah's name.'

Kusum is again indifferent, and is distracted again. 'Ma, I don't make jokes with the name of Allah. I have great respect for Allah. I am afraid of religion. That's why...'

Before Kusum has finished, the woman says, 'It is good to fear. If one respects Allah, one is deterred from doing anything sinful. If people fear religion, they remain virtuous.'

The artisan's wife takes a pause. Then continues, 'Are you worried about something?'

Kusum smiles weakly. 'What should I worry about?'

Girls of your age have all sorts of anxieties. 'Thoughts about men—worries about marriage and wedding.'

Kusum is quite shaken within by these words. However, she doesn't allow her mother to sense this. She gives her mother a stern look. 'Don't say that,' she says rudely.

The artisan's wife immediately retorts, 'Then, why can't you sleep?'

Kusum stands up. 'Now you needn't worry about my sleep. Go back to your work. I'm going.'

Lying there, on one side of the kitchen is a hand-net. Next to the net is an earthenware pot with a narrow neck. Swiftly, Kusum gathers the net and takes up the pot. Seeing this, the artisan's wife is delighted. Enticingly she says, 'When you're back, my girl, with the day's catch of fish, I'll oil your hair with coconut oil. Coconut oil cools the head. After I apply the oil and comb your long hair, you'll feel so relaxed. You'll surely sleep. Today you won't have to do any other chores.'

Kusum turns a deaf ear to her mother's words; she doesn't even look at her mother's face. She looks towards the wooden-floored room. Khalek, the artisan, having recited the *namaaz*, has come out of the room, unnoticed. He is still wearing the round, white skull-cap. Chanting prayers and the names of Allah under his breath, he is sorting out and arranging with single-minded concentration, his work-tools in the wooden box. He is inattentive to everything else.

This sight quite amazes Kusum. She is going out to catch fish, she is already delayed a while today, on top of that she has had that conversation with her mother—she forgets everything to exclaim, 'Baba is going out to work today? In which house is he going to work?'

Watching her husband packing his tool-box, the artisan's wife is no less astonished. She hears Kusum but does not turn to look at her. Still observing the scene, she replies, 'Who knows! He hasn't said anything to me.'

Both mother and daughter walk quickly and stand in front of Khalek, the artisan. Before Kusum can speak, Khalek looks up smiling at her. 'What my girl, not yet on your way?'

Kusum replies, 'I'm going.'

After a slight pause she asks, 'O Baba, which house are you going to for work today?'

'Not in any house in our village, child. I'm going to Nashankar. I've a job in the Mondal's house.'

At the mention of the Mondal household, Kusum's heartstrings received a jolt. Her face is clouded with disinterest. Nobody notices this.

The artisan says, 'The Mondals have a pretty large house. It's much larger than this house. In our house we have three co-owners in theirs, five. I'm going to Haripada's portion. Father and son have been trading in fish and Haripada has made good money. From the bazaar on the shore of the lake he supplies fish in boats to Dhaka town. The house has two rooms, the big room has a four-level thatch, enclosed by a corrugated tin wall. The smaller room also has a four-part thatch-roof, but is surrounded, not by a tin but by

a bamboo enclosure. Now that is going to be changed. The room will have a corrugated tin wall. The tin, the wood, they have brought everything. I'll be on the job from today. After finishing this piece of work, there is another big job pending in Haripada's house. His only son is Paban, they want to have Paban married. For this reason a room with a wooden floor will be constructed. I'll be doing the work for that room as well. For a month or a month and a half, I should have some proper employment in hand.'

Having spoken, the artisan slung his tool-box on his shoulder. He glances at Kusum and is puzzled. In the interim the girl has become totally distracted. She seems to be engrossed in her own thoughts.

Smiling, the artisan asks, 'What girl, what are you thinking?'

Kusum starts a little. Then looking at her father's face, smiles fleetingly. 'Nothing.'

'Then come, let's go out.'

Before Kusum reacts, the artisan's wife says, 'What's the point of going out with your daughter? The girl is going in one direction and you in another.'

The artisan smiles again. 'Even then, my daughter and myself, going out to work together—the very thought will make me feel so good. If Kusum was my son instead of my daughter, it would have been ideal!'

'Why, you do have a son, don't you?'

'The one I have is not my son. He is a *zamindar's* son. He wakes up from sleep at ten o'clock. If he were as diligent as Paban, there could have been a turn around in our domestic situation. I wouldn't have had to work in my old age. Well, send Malek to the bazaar today. Let him get two bottles of insecticide. The paddy fields are infested with pests. The medicine diluted with water has to be sprinkled with a spray-gun on the fields. Otherwise the rice-crops won't survive. The job in the Mondal household and the paddy crop—I'll club these two things together and marry off Kusum this very year.'

Listening to this talk of marriage, Kusum is suddenly perturbed. Agitatedly she says, 'I'm going Baba. I'm getting late.'

Looking at his daughter, the artisan smiles yet again. 'Wait just a moment, Ma. Let's go together.'

His wife, irritated asks, 'Why are you detaining the girl? How can you go out with her? You can't go out of the house without having your breakfast! Aren't you going to carry your afternoon meal? You didn't tell me earlier that you would be going to a Hindu house for work.'

Surprised the artisan says, 'What's there to tell? It's just a job, what connection does that have with it being a Hindu household or a Muslim household?'

'There is a connection. Can you eat a meal in a Hindu home? For today take some *muri* and *gur* and eat that. From tomorrow I'll prepare some wholemeal flour *rotis*.'

Stroking his salt-pepper beard, the artisan says affectionately, 'Don't you worry about all this. The Mondals are also likely to provide me *muri* and *gur*. They will offer me a meal of rice in the afternoon; I'll not have to eat wholemeal flour *rotis*. Faith is not such a cheap thing that one can go astray by sharing a meal cooked in a Hindu home!'

Then the artisan casts a look at his daughter. 'Come along.'

Kusum does not speak. She begins walking at a quick pace behind her father. They haven't yet passed the compound gate when the voice of the artisan's wife carries back to the two. She is hallooing out to her younger daughter. 'Pari, O Pari, aren't you getting up? It's late morning, yet no signs of this girl waking up! O Pari, Get up.'

Walking down, the artisan steals a glance at his daughter's face. He smiles. 'Ma, just see what your mother's up to! That strapping young son is still asleep and instead of waking him up, she's after the little girl.'

A deep sigh escapes Kusum as she says, 'In this world daughters aren't worth anything.'

A desolate field lies next to the path that people walk along. On the northern side of the field is the village mosque. It does not yet have a brick building. In a large tin shed the devout are called to the traditional prayers five times a day. The *Imam* is Maulana Abdur Rahim.

Adjoining the mosque is a beautiful pond with a brick-built *ghat*. On all three sides surrounding the pond is an assorted jungle of weeds. Piercing through this jungle, to rear up its crests into the sky are several *hijal* and *madar* trees, and a lone *gab* tree. In a hollow of the *gab* tree lives an ancient black cobra that has a long slender body. Sometime back it has changed its home. During the day it slithers through the shrubs and jungles all around. At nightfall, the late evening *namaaz* being over, when the devout Muslims are returning home and everything around is steeped in silence and no sound but the cricket's cry and the wind whistling through the leaves can be heard, the snake eases its slender body into the mosque's prayer-room. It coils itself up and lies on the dry cool ground next to the very spot where the *Imam* kneels on the floor and bows his head in obeisance to Allah. In time for the early morning *azan* and in response to human movements, it vacates that place. Having been suddenly disturbed in its sleep, the cobra is in quite an irritable mood. It feels like baring its fangs on all humans around.

On this bank of the pond, in a corner of the field stands a *bakul* tree. It is covered in dark green leaves. Under this tree the village the trials and arbitration are held. The *Imam saheb* conducts the trials. He is a very person. He wears a pure white *panjabi* that hangs down to his heels. Below the *panjabi* he wears a *lungi*. However, one can hardly see that *lungi*. It is almost hidden

beneath the *panjabi*. The *Imam saheb* sports a pair of sponge sandals on his feet and wears a white skull-cap at all times. Encircling the edge of the cap is embroidery in gold-thread. He applies *surma* in his roundish eyes, and in his hands as strong as a *gab* tree branch, he clutches his rosary-beads. His body, as corpulent as the belly of a pregnant cow, reeks with the strong scent of *attar*. His long beard touches his chest. His salt and pepper beard is dyed red with henna.

Who dares defy this man's strictures!

The *Imam saheb's* justice does not care a damn for the laws and procedures of the land. He passes his own judgement and enforces the sentence.

Each time, immediately after the *azan* has been called, devout Muslims emerge from the neighbouring homes to congregate in the mosque. They squat at the *ghat* for the ritual ablutions and then line up behind the *Imam sahib* to read the *namaz*. Sensing human activity in the mosque, the cobra uncoils itself, utterly irritated. Then it slips itself out through the gap between the tin wall and the earthen floor.

It has gone out today, but not very far. Behind the mosque it is thick with undergrowth. It is shady the day-long and the place exudes a dankness. The snake is slinking around here today. It moves lazily and slyly, but its temper is fiery. Even without any provocation, it wants to spread out its hood. It is inclined to bare its poison fangs concealed in its upper jaws, to pierce somebody. Maybe, that is the reason the cobra is rearing up its head from time to time to survey its surroundings.

In a manner akin to the cobra's, *Imam saheb* too is raising up his head today. With his head in the air he is looking at the sky. A while ago, after the *namaz* was over, each person has gone back to his respective trade to earn a living. Only the *Imam saheb* has not gone, he is taking a walk in the field in front. One wonders why he is in such a foul temper!

At this precise moment Kusum found herself face to face with him. As it is, she is somewhat preoccupied, moreover seeing that it is already broad daylight, she is walking swiftly, so she hasn't noticed *Imam saheb*. She doesn't remember therefore to cover her head with her sari. This infuriates *Imam saheb*. The rosary still clutched in his hand, he stretches his hand out to block Kusum's path. 'You lass, stop.'

Disconcerted, Kusum stands still.

*Imam saheb* says, 'Aren't you Khalek, the artisan's daughter?'

'Yes.'

'Why isn't your head covered?'

Embarrassed, Kusum replies, 'I forgot to cover my head.'

*Imam saheb* now hisses like a cobra with its hood expanded. 'You impudent, shameless girl, you dare to speak defiantly! "I forgot to cover my head!" You may not have remembered earlier, but now that you are standing in front of me for such a long time, why don't you cover your head?'

Kusum gulps down her hesitation and asks helplessly, 'How can I cover my head? I have a net in one hand and a pot in the other.'

These words do not soften the *Imam saheb* even a bit. On the contrary he becomes angrier. Grinding his teeth he says, 'What! What do you say! Throw away the net and pot. First comes the *purdah*, then everything else.'

This makes Kusum a little angry. Her face glum and voice sullen, she says, 'The *purdah* is not for the likes of us. What is the use of the *purdah* if there isn't enough to eat! Why should I throw away the net and pot! If I don't bring home a catch, what will my family eat! Food comes first, then the *purdah*.'

It is beyond the imagination of *Imam saheb* that the girl would stand up to his face and say all this. He is absolutely flabbergasted. Stunned, he stares at Kusum's face then grinding his teeth says, 'You dare to speak like this before me! I'll put you into prison. Shameless as you are, you even talk big. Even Allah cannot save you from my clutches.'

With nonchalance Kusum observes, 'If Allah cannot rescue me then how can I live! Can humans survive unless Allah protects them?'

She says this and does not wait. Swiftly she walks in the direction of the river.

*Imam saheb* is still staring after Kusum. His heart is bursting with uncontrollable rage.

Kusum is about to dip her feet into the river waters, when the person under the *kadui* tree comes and stands behind her. 'Why are you so late? I have been waiting for hours!'

The pain of waiting and a sense of hurt mingles in the person's voice. The words wring Kusum's heart. She turns to face the man. She lifts her eyes and glances fleetingly at his face, then looks away. The pot into which she puts in the fish, is at her feet, using both her outstretched arms she has caught hold of the net, but then she lightly holds back the net against her chest.

Three slender bamboo poles are set up like a triangle and the net is tied to the three corners. Two bamboo poles jut out slightly at the edge where the net has to be caught in both hands and pushed up from beneath. As Kusum has suspended the net at chest height, this end of the net is hitched up far above her face. If one were to look there all of a sudden, it appears that Kusum is entangled in the net. It seems that she herself is a hapless fish in the Rajatrekha. Some clever fisherman has trapped her in his net.



The man notices nothing of all this. He says, 'The cocks crowed long after I came to the *kadui* tree and then the *azan* was called. The moon was still in the sky. I walked down from Nashankar in the moonlight.'

Softly Kusum asks, 'Why have you come?'

Distressed, the man says, 'Don't you know why I come! I can't go to work without seeing you. I am supposed to travel to Dhaka today with a supply of fish. The boatmen are waiting in the boat after loading the fish preserved in ice. The boat can't leave without me. I am quite delayed.'

A deep sigh escapes Kusum. 'Why behave like this!'

'I don't want to do this. Really, I don't want to. I want to forget you, not to remember. I can't do it. I don't have any peace of mind whether I'm resting or sitting, eating or working. All the time I'm only reminded of you. I only see your face in front of my eyes. When I'm asleep, I dream of you, when I'm awake I see you as I would, in a dream. I can't make out the difference between the dream and the reality. I can't understand whether I'm sleeping or awake. I spend restless nights. I only keep thinking—when is it going to be morning, when will I go to the *kadui* tree, when will I see your face! I have no peace of mind when I don't see you.'

Kusum thinks to herself: I too feel exactly like this. I can't sleep one bit at night either. I only keep thinking why isn't it morning yet, why don't I go down to the river! I too feel like seeing your face all the time. See how drawn I look just worrying about you! See how my eyes are sunken. There are such dark circles under my eyes that it would seem that I have applied kohl to them.

What Kusum says, is however, a different story. 'Today I didn't want to come down to the river at all.'

The man is alarmed by these words. 'Why didn't you want to come?'

'Because of you. The things that you are up to!'

'I'm doing nothing wrong. I desire to see you, so I come to see you.'

'Can a person always do the things that he desires! I too have so many desires. I forcibly control my mind.'

'You can do that. I can't.'

'Why can't you?'

'I don't know. It's an apprehension I have that I can't possibly begin any work, without seeing your face. If I were to go to the fish whole-sellers without seeing you, I shall not get any fish. That I shall find the fish preserved in ice that I've loaded into the boat all turned rotten in the ice. I shall suffer a loss of thousands of takas. But I'm not afraid of such loss. I'm afraid of myself, I'm afraid of death. My only fear is that if I don't see you even for a day, I can't stay alive. I'll die. If you hadn't come today, I'd have died, sitting here under this tree.'

Towards the end of what he is saying, the man chokes on his words. His eyes fill with tears. Kusum cannot look up into the man's face. Her heart surges and swells within her. Her eyes feel like bursting into tears.

Kusum restrains herself. Looking towards the river she says, 'What you're doing is not quite right. Calm yourself, make an effort to control your thoughts. You are your parents' only son. They must've built many dreams around you. Your father will build a wooden-floored room, he is going to arrange your marriage. Get married in keeping with your parents' wish, everything should be fine after that.'

'No, it won't be fine. If I sleep in a well-appointed room, on a golden bed with a princess, even then I'll not get any sleep. I'll only be thinking of you. If you're with me, I'll need nothing—no room, cot or bed. If I have you, even if I'm lying under a tree, I'll be able to sleep in happiness. No one but you can ever become my bride.'

Kusum says in a helpless voice, 'Don't say this. It's a sin to even listen to these words.'

'What sin?'

Kusum is unable to control herself any longer. Her heart almost breaks, her eyes overflow. In a grief-stricken voice Kusum says, 'Pabandada, why don't you realize that you are a Hindu! A Mussalman girl cannot become your wife.'

Paban stares at Kusum's face totally bewildered. Then says, 'I don't care whether one is a Hindu or a Muslim, I only care about you. I don't care for religion, I care only about human beings.'

'People in our society will not listen to all this, they won't understand. No one will accept a Hindu-Mussalman marriage in our native villages.'

'If they don't, we'll not live in the native countryside. Hand in hand with you, I'll leave this village and go away.'

'Where will you go?'

As he looks across the river at the vast expanse, Paban's eyes are full of dreams. 'Very far away, on the banks of some distant river, we'll set up a home. All day through I'll fish in the river. There'll be happiness in the lives of two human beings. None will know that I'm a Hindu and you a mussalman. Day by day the two of us will also forget our caste and creed. Will you come with me Kusum?'

As Kusum listens to Paban's words, it seems as though the dreams in his eyes have drifted over and are settling down in her eyes. She begins to see similar visions of such a life. She seems to be totally entranced by it all. She doesn't hear Paban's last words.

Paban asks again, 'Will you go Kusum?'

Kusum turns her face only very slightly in Paban's direction. She does not speak. Through the net, her eyes, a strange look in them, are fixed on Paban!

Looking at Kusum's face, Paban says enticingly, 'If you don't want to give an answer now, leave it for the night. Tonight I'll come to the bamboo grove just behind the big room in your home. If you hear three soft taps on your door, you'll know that I've come. Then you can carefully open the door and come out.'

Kusum shakes her head and says, 'No.'

Paban smiles glumly. 'I'll get something from Dhaka for you. I'll give it to you and listen to what you have to say.'

Kusum again says, 'No. Don't come to our house at night. I'll not come out.'

'Why?'

'Just like that. Listen to the answer you want, now. I shall not go to any other place with you. I respect Allah, I'm afraid of religion. I can't abandon my religion. Give up all hopes that you have concerning me.'

Disconsolate, Paban says, 'Never, I'll not give up hope. At night I'll wait in your bamboo grove. If you wish, you can come out, if you don't wish don't come out. I'll keep waiting.'

Unnoticed, the eastern sky has already turned as red as it is inside the mouth of a *gharua* fish!

The sun is rising. On both banks of the river humans, all greedy for fish, are coming together. Seeing this, Paban does not delay any longer. He quickly walks beyond the *kadui* tree towards the main road.

Then Kusum feels absolutely forlorn! Her heart wants to burst with deep sorrow. She feels like wallowing in the sands on the river-bank and crying. Kusum doesn't even have the scope to cry like that. If she does, all the people who have come to catch fish in the river will crowd around her and make Kusum miserable with a thousand queries. It's much better than that to suppress the heart-rending cries within her breast. It's better to hold back her tears secretly in her eyes.

That's what Kusum does. Pressing her eyes shut with her palm, she heaves a deep sigh. Then she holds the net and steps into the water.

There are three soft taps on the door. The sound startles Kusum, her heart is restless with trepidation. Silently she raises her head a little to see whether anyone has heard. Perhaps they haven't, if they had, someone would have immediately responded.

There are four of them in the room. On the bed is her father, on the floor lie her mother, Pari and Kusum. Malek sleeps in the room with the wooden floor. A strapping young man, how can he live in the same room with his father, mother and sisters!

Who knows how late in the night it is! Inside the room it should have been utterly dark but the darkness is not so intense. Through the gaps and spaces in the fence, slivers of moonlight have seeped in. The frozen blackness has been relieved. If one were to look keenly, every person's face could be seen.

Kusum tries to see these human faces.

Pari is sleeping next to her. She is a young girl of ten or twelve, but the pose when she sleeps, is very like a child's. Arms and feet spread out, she is lying flat on her back. Her face is tilted towards Kusum, her head rolling off the edge of the pillow. Perhaps Pari's lips are slightly parted and her pillow is wet with spittle. An odour is coming from her mouth. Pari must be in deep sleep, otherwise she would have wiped away the spittle with her hands.

On that side of Pari, Ma is asleep. Ma has a funny habit of covering her face with one end of her saree whenever she sleeps. It's not possible to make out whether she is sleeping or awake.

As Kusum looks at her mother she feels like daintily lifting up the edge of the sari covering her face, with the tips of her two fingers. She tries to look at her eyes to gauge whether she is asleep or awake.

No, it wouldn't be right to do that. If she is sleeping, Ma will get up immediately when the sari edge is pulled aside from her face. She'll sit up with a start. If she is awake, then she'll ask surprised, 'What's wrong Kusum? Why are you behaving like this? Won't you go out?'

Kusum never goes out of the house alone at night. She has either her mother or Pari with her.

Kusum continues to look intently at her mother's face. She tries to listen to the nuances of her breathing. For someone who is in deep slumber, the sound of breathing is quite heavy.

Kusum watches a while and makes out that her mother's breathing is fairly heavy.

Then Kusum looks at her father. She needn't have really bothered to look. He had returned after an entire day's work in the Mondal's home, and is lying now on his side, facing the fence and snoring. It is unlikely that he will wake up before the early morning *azan*.

Even after having watched and assessed the situation, Kusum does not stand up, she does not open the door and venture out. As silently as she had raised her head, she eases her head on her pillow. Kusum suppresses a shuddering sigh on the verge of escaping from deep within. No one should be awakened by the sound!

As she was walking back from the river, Kusum had decided that she wouldn't emerge from her room at night. Let Paban stand there under the

bamboo grove as long as he wishes. How long can he stay there! He'll get tired of waiting and will surely go back. And if he doesn't budge, he'll have to go when it's morning. Can he keep standing there after people are awake! From the next day Kusum will not go down to the river to catch fish. She'll tell her mother that she's unwell. Maybe, Ma will send Pari. She is a child, and wouldn't be as quick as Kusum in getting a catch. It'll take time, but one can manage. If she doesn't go to the river for some days, Paban will not meet Kusum and Paban's attraction will weaken. If it comes to that, Kusum will never go down to the river again. She'll somehow convince her mother. Baba has said that once the work in the Mondal house is finished, he'll find a match for Kusum. By that time the paddy will have ripened. At the most it will be a matter of two or three months. As long as she stays away from Paban during the next two or three months. After that where would Paban find her! She will have been married and have left for some unknown village. Once in a year or two she will visit her parental home. Maybe she will not meet Paban again in this lifetime.

Is it likely that Kusum will ever forget Paban completely! Won't Paban's enchanting face still remain etched across her eyes! Won't the vestiges of the memory of a certain man who has wanted to set up home with her on some distant river shore, remain with her? He wants to defy all society, he does not want to abide by any religion! When Kusum will become a wife, busy with a family, husband and children, in some far away village home, won't a sudden gust of air waft across to her the distinctive aroma of Paban's body! Won't she feel restless deep within her mind! Won't the remembrance of Paban distract her then! Kusum seems to be trapped for life in an oppressive situation! Paban is standing at this very moment in the bamboo grove, a fact that is too distressful for her to bear. She only keeps thinking of how Paban has ventured out of his home yesterday at an unearthly hour in the night, has waited for hours to meet Kusum, and has then taken the boat to Dhaka. It must have been well after nightfall when he returned. Who knows whether he has had lunch in the afternoon or whether he has had a meal at night! Who knows whether he has slept even a wink! He is waiting in the bamboo grove. Can Kusum possibly remain totally indifferent to a man who has endured such hardship for her?

Kusum rehearses the words in her mind, Just wait a little longer Paban Dada, I'm coming. But this'll be our last meeting. I'm going to take a pledge in the name of Allah. After tonight you'll never meet me again. If you try to do so, you'll see me dead. I'll die for you.

Noiselessly, Kusum stands up. She opens the door.

Hanging at a slant, the waning moon crowns the bamboo trees. The moonlight is not very bright, it is slightly turbid like the waters of the *Rajatrekha*. It casts an aura of desolation on the human habitations. The homes seem to stand mute in testimony to some timeless and deep sorrow.

Blowing through the leaves of the tree is the night-breeze drenched with darkness. The cry of crickets has mingled with the sound of the breeze. Somewhere in the distance a lonely night-bird is calling and wearying itself out. A bat, its wings bathed in moonlight, swirls past. A lone, daring rat sniffs around Paban's feet as he stands under the bamboo trees outside Kusum's home. There is a slurred noise over the dried leaves. But Paban is quite oblivious to all this. He stares single-mindedly at the large room in Kusum's house. A strange sense of hurt strains at his heart, his eyes burn.

Is it possible that Kusum will really not come out! How can she be so cruel! Isn't she thinking of Paban at all! Or is she unperturbed and sunk deep in sleep! Maybe she hasn't heard Paban's knocks on the door! Doesn't she remember—Paban has arrived and is standing under the bamboo trees!

Paban tells himself, 'Despite this I'll not go back. I'll keep standing. I'll wait through the night. Even when it's morning I'll not go away. Let's see how Kusum stays away from me. If the worst happens, let Kusum's father and brother catch me, beat me up, do what they like, I won't go away.'

At that precise moment, opening the door, glancing cautiously all around, Kusum walks lithely towards the bamboo grove. Watching this, Paban is beside himself with joy. Moving forward a step or two, he grasps Kusum's hand in both of his own. 'You couldn't have stayed away.'

Gently, Kusum disengages her hand. In a steady and calm voice she says, 'A whole lot of thoughts came into my mind before I decided to come.'

'What thoughts?'

'If you hear these, you'll be pained. But I've no alternative but to tell you what these are.'

Paban is silent for a while, then says, 'If I'm destined to suffer, then I shall have to bear the pain. Speak, I shall listen.'

Kusum looks directly at Paban's face. 'I've told you all this earlier at the riverside. You didn't want to listen, you didn't want to understand. Paban dada, you have to promise that after today you will not try to meet me—that, you'll banish me from your mind.'

In a clear voice Paban says, 'I can't do this.'

This answer makes Kusum miserable. 'Then I'll have to find some other solution.'

'What solution?'

Kusum replies indifferently, 'No, I'll not put you into any trouble. I'll do whatever needs to be done myself.'

Paban is scared. 'Why are you speaking like this? Tell me what you're going to do!'

'My brother has brought insecticide to kill pests in the rice fields. The insecticide is poison. I shall consume an entire bottle.'

Paban is really distracted on hearing Kusum's plan. In a frenzy, he grasps Kusum's hand with both his own. In a broken voice he says, 'No, never.'

'I have no other way but this.'

'Why shouldn't there be any way! Didn't I tell you, let's run away from this country, from this village, why don't you agree?'

'It wouldn't be possible for me.'

'Why isn't it possible? Doesn't such a thing happen in this world? Doesn't a Hindu girl run away hand in hand with a Muslim boy? Doesn't a Muslim girl run away hand in hand with a Hindu boy?'

'They do. But I'm not a girl like that. How many times do I have to tell you that I respect Allah, I'm very afraid of religion.'

'Love does not acknowledge any religion. Look at me, I don't accept it.'

'Every person is not the same. What you can do, I can't.'

Paban now grips Kusum's hands with a stronger hold. Distressed he says, 'Don't behave like this Kusum. Show me some mercy. Don't spoil my life. Don't break my heart. I've heard that your scriptures say that breaking a person's heart is the same as breaking a mosque. I may be a Hindu, but I'm human! Why will you break my heart?'

Kusum's feels dejected by Paban's entreaty. Her eyes feel like breaking out in tears. Yet she remains as firm as before. In an emotionless voice she says, 'If you behave like this, that'll be the only path open to me.'

Unconsciously, Paban has let go of Kusum's hands. Unblinking, he stares at Kusum, then sighs deeply. 'All right, I won't show you my face again. This is our last meeting. But you have to agree to my last request. I have brought a small nose-stud for you from Dhaka. Someday, wear this nose-stud for my sake.'

Towards the end of his speech, Paban's voice becomes unsteady. He slips his hand into his book-pocket and takes out the nose-stud wrapped up into a tiny paper packet. He gives it to Kusum.

Unmindfully, Kusum accepts the gift. She conceals it inside her blouse, close to her heart. Then with both her hands she clutches Paban's arms. Tears of distress overwhelm Kusum, her eyes overflow with tears, tears wash her cheeks. Crying uncontrollably, Kusum says, 'Pabandada, I have really hurt you. I've broken your heart. Forgive me for this.'

Paban's heart too breaks with these words, tears flood his eyes. Madened, his hands pull Kusum close and press her to his heart. In a choked voice he says, 'why does man's religion create a rift, and set one human being apart from another?'

Unawares, Kusum has also caught Paban in a close embrace. Her desolate tears flood Paban's heart.

Late at night, one of the three joint-owners of the artisan's house, the one-eyed Hashem, sees two human figures in a close embrace in the bamboo grove. He has come out to urinate in an extreme corner of the courtyard; he is just about his job after lifting up his *lungi*, and this is the scene that he sees in the mixture of light and shade under the bamboo palms. At first he is shocked. Like any other one-eyed person, he has only partial vision. Sometimes even actual things viewed through one eye can appear unreal. It can obviously be even worse if one's eyes are still drowsy with sleep.

This is what has happened to one-eyed Hashem. He doesn't think that the scene he sees is real. He believes that he is watching some supernatural event. These creatures regularly visit the bamboo groves of householders. After midnight, in the dull moonlight, the male creatures stand there in white robes touching the skies, the female creatures wail exaggeratedly. Two such strange creatures must have been united today under Khalek, the artisan's bamboo palms. The male creature is wearing a white robe, the female is wailing.

That was it—at that very moment Hashem lets down his hitched up *lungi*. He is on the verge of urinating, but Hashem's urge has suddenly disappeared. With a frightened cry of horror he flees and is sprinting into the room when his wife appears at the open door. Hashem's wife is coming out of the room for the same reason. Seeing her husband in this bewildered state she asks, 'What on earth is the matter? Why are you behaving like this?'

Seeing his wife, Hashem recovers somewhat. He has lost his voice, so he cannot utter a word. With great effort he points a finger towards Khalek, the artisan's bamboo clump. His wife is utterly clueless. In a whisper she asks, 'What's up?'

Hashem now finds his voice. Trembling with fear, in a weak voice he says, 'It's not just one of them, it's two.'

Hashem's wife understands nothing. Suspiciously she says, 'What are you trying to say, Let me see.'

Hashem doesn't get a chance to wedge in a word. His wife walks swiftly to the extreme corner of the courtyard.

Hashem's heart begins thrashing like tiny fresh-water fish caught in a bamboo trap. He wants to get into the room and bolt the door, alas, his wife



is still outdoors! If by accident those creatures notice her—that would be a calamity!

Before he can decide what to do, his wife comes back to Hashem. Coming close, she whispers into his ears, 'I could recognize the girl, it's Kusum. The boy I couldn't recognize.'

As soon as he hears this, one-eyed Hashem picks up courage. Puffing up his chest he says, 'What are you saying? *Krishnaleela*<sup>v</sup> is being reenacted under those bamboos! Do something, call up one and all in the house, I'll go and wake up Malek. Let's encircle them from all sides and catch them. We'll stop the romantic drama.'

Hashem hardly hears what his wife says. Tying his *lungi*, swiftly yet silently, he goes and stands on the rear side of the wooden-floored room in Khalek, the artisan's home.

Next to the window on this side of the room is Malek's cot. He sleeps with the window open. Today the window is open too. Standing before this window, Hashem muffles his voice and calls, 'Malek. Malek, O Malek, get up. Quick, get up.'

After being called a few times, Malek responds. Looking through the window he recognizes one-eyed Hashem. He sits up on his bed in a fluster. 'What's happened?'

With a wide grin, Hashem says, 'There's a romantic *Krishnaleela* going on under the bamboo trees. Be quick.'

Malek understands nothing, but he opens the door and comes out.

By that time in addition to people from the artisan's house, others from neighbouring houses have also crowded around the bamboo grove. They have trapped Paban and Kusum from all sides. One-eyed Hashem's wife has adroitly done the job. The crowd is shouting and screaming. Paban and Kusum are stunned.

Arriving at the bamboo grove with Malek in tow, Hashem gives a huge jump. Shouting he says, *Krishnaleela* in this house! How daring! Who is in the role of Krishna?

Hashem peers sharply with his lone eye at Paban's face. Recognizing Paban, he screams even more vulgarly, 'Why this is Paban from Nashankar, son of Harihar the fishmonger! Shame, shame! A Muslim girl falling in love with a Hindu boy! Alas, such loss of face for the artisan's family! Come Malek, take the rope we use to tie the cows. Tie her up.'

Malek doesn't budge. His feet seem to be rooted to the ground. He can't pull them free. He cannot believe that his sister Kusum has done such a thing.

Khalek, the artisan, his wife and Pari are all there in the crowd. In spite of her age, Pari is a simpleton.

She cannot fathom anything of what is going on. She asks her mother, 'O Ma, What's wrong? Why are there so many people here? What has Bubu done?'

Pari's words are drowned in Khalek, the artisan's menacing shout. He grabs Kusum's hair. Gnashing his teeth, he says, 'You shameless girl, how you've disgraced me! I'll kill you. I'll kill you and throw you into the river. Come, come home.'

The artisan drags Kusum forcibly towards his own courtyard. Kusum doesn't protest even slightly, but Pari is incited. She rushes and almost flings herself against her father. 'What has Bubu done? Why are you behaving like this? Baba, leave her alone, let Bubu go.'

The artisan shoves against Pari's shoulder and gives her a strong push. She is flung aside and falls some distance away. She is hurt, but doesn't bother. She picks herself up and runs after the artisan and Kusum, screaming, 'Baba, just let Bubu go.'

The artisan pays no heed.

The artisan's wife sits outside the large room, she wails and laments. 'Though she's my own daughter, Kusum's acted like this! To spoil one's dignity and honour in this manner!'

Kusum is sitting on the floor. She's frozen into stone. She does not blink. There is no change in her face. Pari is sitting close, almost touching her—as though she is protecting her sister.

While she cries and laments, the artisan's wife suddenly becomes angry. Glaring at Kusum and grimacing she says, 'You prostitute, if you had to do it, couldn't you choose a mussalman man. We could've married you off. Your chastity would've been saved. Now you've burnt all our boats! How will I marry off a girl like you? Who'll marry you?'

The artisan's wife slaps her forehead in despair a few times. 'All this is the fault of my destiny. Such grief was also in store for me!'

Khalek, the artisan, is sitting close by. Today he hasn't gone to work in the Mondal household. His genial face looks gloomy. He is seething with anger within. Clamping his jaws together, he tries to control his rage so his cheek muscles hidden by his thick-set beard, distend. Seeing his wife beat her forehead, he turns around and looks at her. He scolds his wife harshly. 'You woman, what's the use of lamenting now? Why do you slap your forehead now? Didn't you remember all this before? Didn't you know that when a daughter comes of age you have to keep an eye on her?'

'Why wouldn't I know? I did keep an eye on her! I didn't see anything amiss! She'd tell me that she respects Allah, that she is afraid of religion. Now I see all that is rubbish. If one respects Allah, if one is afraid of religion, can one do such a thing! You ask her why she did this?'

As soon as his wife finishes speaking, the artisan stands up. He enters the room and gives Kusum a resounding kick in her stomach. Kusum groans and is flung out alongside the fence. Pari, sitting next to her has hardly anticipated this. She is taken by surprise. Confounded she runs out and holds Kusum. Kusum does not utter a sound, she does not cry. She has turned into stone, just as she had earlier. She does not blink. There is no change in her face.

Perhaps the artisan would have continued beating Kusum but he sees Malek and desists. Malek comes and stands in the doorway. His face looks ashamed and grieved.

Seeing his son, Khalek asks while coming out, 'What have they done to Paban?'

Malek replies, 'A fine of one and a half thousand *takas*.'

'Did the *Imam saheb* pass the judgement?'

'Yes. The Mondals came to bail Paban out. Hari Mondal stood there with folded palms and pleaded, "My son has acted improperly and on account of this I beg for forgiveness with folded hands. In the trial, whatever punishment you impose on my son, I'll accept it. But I have only one plea to make, I believe that the artisan's daughter is more to blame than my son. Men have the freedom to do a lot of things that girls cannot. My son didn't forcibly pull out the artisan's daughter from her house. By her own choice the girl came out. The girl is more to be blamed."'

Khalek, the artisan nodded. 'What Mondal is saying is quite true.'

'The arbitrators as well as the *Imam saheb* said Mondal was right. That is why they did not touch Paban. He has been fined two thousand *takas*. Hari Mondal pleaded with him to bring it down by five hundred *takas*.'

'Has the money been realized?'

'Yes. They paid the money immediately and had Paban released.'

'Who has the money?'

'The *Imam saheb*. He says the money will be used to have a permanent building for the mosque.'

Anxiously the artisan's wife says, 'Let them do what they please with it. Why don't you say what is going to happen to Kusum?'

Malek sighs and says, 'How should I say what is going to happen! The trial is this evening. The *Imam saheb* has asked all the villagers to assemble under the *bakul* tree. We have all been asked to accompany Kusum.'

In a tearful voice the artisan says, 'That's what's expected.'

Then looking up at the sky, he starts to cry loudly. While crying he keeps saying, 'Allah, before this evening let me rest with you. Let me die. I can't bear this dishonour.'

A field mouse is foraging in the jungle behind the mosque's prayer room. With shifting eyes it is looking around and like a hungry man it searches for food. The cobra has twisted itself round one of the lower branches of the *hijal* tree. Close to sunset, a piercing sun-ray is reflected on the cobra-skin. The serpent's body is so oily that the sunlight seems to be slipping off its back. The cobra cannot tolerate the heat of the sun. Irritated it is uncoiling its body, to look for some shade. It hears the voice of humans under the *ba-kul* tree and the shuffling sound of one wild rat in the underwood and extends its tongue. Ignoring the sound of human voices, the cobra inches silently towards the field mouse like an assailant.

In the Holy Book of the Qur'an, the only and One Allah, has exhorted his beloved prophet Hazrat Muhhamad: 'O Messiah, tell your wives, your daughters, and all devout Muslim women that they should use their *chaddar* to veil their faces. Tell the chaste women that they should restrain their vision and protect their modesty. Tell them not to reveal any other ornament but the usual one, tell them to cover their neck and breast with the veil that covers their head.'

Close to the brick *ghat* in a corner of the field, sitting in an armchair is the Imam saheb. Behind him is the mosque's prayer room, in front, the *bakul* tree. On this side of the field, every person from the entire village has crowded in. Some are standing, some are sitting. But not a single person speaks. No one is allowed to speak when the imam saheb speaks, they cannot even make the slightest sound.

Khalek, the artisan, and Malek are sitting next to each other. Their faces and their postures as they wait there reveal absolute dejection and shame. The artisan's wife, Pari and Kusum stand in a row behind them. The evening sun slants on to the thatch of the mosque and on the tree tops. A patch of diffused sunlight smuggles through somehow to fall on Kusum's face. In that light, Kusum looks like a stranger. This is not the face of the Kusum one has known for years, it is that of someone else. Can any human look so stoic!

Kusum's eyes are unblinking. Her eyes are fixed on the sky over the heads of the assembled crowds. But Kusum is not really looking at the sky. No one has any clue what she is focussing on.

Having finished what he is saying, *Imam saheb* glances at Kusum. Lifting up a finger of the hand in which he clutches a rosary and says, 'This girl is not devout. She is irreverent. She does not observe the *pardah*. She goes

down to the river to catch fish, she does not cover her head. When she is told to cover her head, she bandies words with the imam saheb. She even defies the *Imam saheb*.'<sup>3</sup>

A murmur goes through the crowd when they hear this. They look at each other and criticize Kusum. The *Imam saheb* roars out, 'Quiet.' There is immediate silence. There is no other sound except the wind passing through the leaves.

*Imam saheb* booms out, 'What a courageous fool this girl is not to listen to me! Am I some fanatic? Do I issue confusing *fatwas*? Initially I became a *Kazi*, then a *Hafiz* then a *Maulana*. I learnt to chant, then to interpret the Qur'an Sharif, I have then learnt it by heart before I learnt to expound it. All people in the village and country respect me, this girl doesn't. The day this girl was impudent to me, I knew that very day that this girl was wicked, depraved. She can do exactly what she desires. She has not merely ruined the honour of her mother, father, brother and sister, or violated the prestige of her family, she has destroyed the reputation of the entire village. What do you say, sirs? Hasn't she ruined us?'

The crowd shouted unanimously, 'She's ruined us, ruined us.'

*Imam saheb* looks at Khalek, the artisan. 'What do you say, man?'

Since the time that he has been sitting here, Khalek, the artisan's head is bowed down. After the *Imam saheb*'s words he hangs it down even further. His chin touches his knees. In a choked voice he somehow manages to say, 'Yes, *huzoor*<sup>3</sup>, she has ruined us.'

'So you accept the fact that your daughter has sinned?'

As soon as this is said, one-eyed Hashem springs up. 'There's hardly any question of his not accepting it. They were caught red-handed by all of us in the house. I saw them first. I was shocked. I thought that a genie and a fairy were copulating amidst the bamboo trees. Then I saw, no, it isn't some genie and fairy. It was our very own Kusum, and Paban from Nashankar. It was a romantic drama being enacted in the bamboo grove. It was then that I woke up Malek. Hey, Malek, didn't I wake you?'

Malek does not answer.

Nader of the west locality of the village is standing there with his friend Mizan. Hearing Hashem's story, he sneaks a look at Mizan and jokes, 'Hashem, son of a loud-mouth, maybe half-blind, but he can surely see all the right things.'

No one pays attention to Nader's comment.

<sup>3</sup> A respectful address to a superior, like 'sir.'

One-eyed Hashem then tells *Imam saheb*, 'Huzoor, why don't you ask Malek.'

*Imam saheb* looks at Malek. 'Is this true Malek?'

Malek too bows his head like his father. Weakly he says, 'It's true.'

'Then there is no necessity for any other witness. There is no need for any other witness or evidence to prove the guilt of a girl whose father admits that his daughter has transgressed, whose brother admits that his sister has sinned. Now one can proceed with the trial. What sirs, can't we proceed?'

The crowd shouted unanimously, 'We can, we can.'

*Imam saheb* strokes his beard with the hand holding the rosary. Then looks at the heavens and says in a dignified voice, 'In the Qur'an Sharif the One and only Allah has clearly said, "Those who will not arbitrate and judge according to the tenets of Allah, they would surely be despised as Kafirs." I am a devoted slave of Allah. I cannot become an infidel. I'll conduct the trial of this girl according to the sacred rules of Allah.

'Brothers, in the second volume of the Qur'an in *ayat* two hundred and twenty one, the sacred laws of Allah dictate: "Do not allow your daughters to be married to kafir men. Even if the infidel attracts you." This girl has exchanged her heart with an infidel, in other words, a Hindu man and has indulged in other wicked acts. She did not abide by the teachings of Allah, she has not followed the Qur'an. This girl's trial must be conducted according to the sacred laws of Allah. About such transgressions the scholar Noor, in the second *ayat* of the eighteenth book of the Qur'an has stated, "The woman who sins and the man who transgresses have to be both given a hundred lashes; no sense of pity towards them should overcome your mind when observing the tenets of Allah. That is if you believe in Allah and the Resurrection. If both are to be punished, a group of Muslims need to be present.'" The *Imam saheb* pauses, then continues, 'The accused man is not present. We have passed judgement on him in your presence. He was not lashed a hundred times. He was forced to pay a fine of one and a half thousand takas. That money will come in handy for converting the mosque into a brick building. Now only the girl will be tried. In keeping with the tenets of Allah, the girl has to be given one hundred lashes.'

One-eyed Hashem said, 'Huzoor, where will you find a whip?'

*Imam saheb* smiles. 'You fool, a whip need not be a whip. A broom can be used instead of a whip. Go and get the big broomstick from the mosque.'

Enthusiastically, one-eyed Hashem runs towards the prayer room in the mosque.

At that moment all eyes are on Kusum. She is as indifferent as before. Her face is like stone, her eyes unblinking. Standing next to her, her mother

is whimpering, constantly pressing the edge of her sari to her mouth, but Kusum doesn't notice it. Pari notices. She nudges her mother and asks, 'O Ma, why are you crying? What's happened?'

One-eyed Hashem's wife standing nearby snubs Pari in a low voice. 'You lass, keep your mouth shut.'

Pari, on the verge of snarling at her, sees one-eyed Hashem running towards them, broom in hand and is stunned.

*Imam saheb* says, 'Tie her to the tree. She shouldn't be able to run away when being lashed with the broom.'

Leaving the broom at *Imam saheb's* feet, one-eyed Hashem runs to catch hold of Kusum. Badar, from the *Mullah's* house, joins him. Motaleb, Badar's elder brother, produces a length of rope usually used to tie the cows. Instantly, it is twisted around the *bakul* tree and Kusum is tied to it. No one speaks a word on seeing this, only Pari laments. Giving her mother a push, she asks, 'O Ma, why are they tying up Bubus? Aren't you going to say anything? O Baba, O Brother, won't you say anything? Why are they tying up Bubus?'

The artisan's wife is crying even more. So long her cries were suppressed, now the whimpering is audible. Artisan Khalek's eyes are not dry. Wedging his face between his knees, he weeps silently. Malek suddenly stands up. He is unable to bear this scene. He pushes his way out through the crowd, *Imam saheb*, broom in hand, stands up. He looks at Malek and calls, 'You rascal, where are you walking off? Stand here. This girl's punishment has to be in front of the eyes of her father and brother.'

Malek bows his head and stops.

*Imam saheb*, moves forward towards Kusum inch by inch; he is about to heave up the broom, Nader says, 'Instead of this beating with a broom, a fine can also be imposed. If one and a half thousand *takas* could be recovered from the artisan, that too could be used to construct a brick building for the mosque. *Huzoor*, ask the artisan, if he agrees to pay money?'

Before *Imam saheb* spoke, Khalek, the artisan shoves up his face pressed between his knees. Wiping his eyes with one hand, he says in a clear voice, 'I cannot agree to pay any money. I don't have the money. If I did have it, I wouldn't have paid money. It's meaningless anyway having or not having such a daughter. Lash her with the broom, not a hundred, but a thousand times.'

*Imam saheb* chants a prayer, 'Bismillahi, Rahamanur, Rahim.' Then gives Kusum the first lash.

Kusum is still as indifferent as before. Two men have fastened her to the tree with a rope used to tie cows; onlookers from the entire village are curiously

watching her; the *Imam saheb*, concentrating all his physical strength into the blow, has just struck her with the long, hard broom used to sweep the mosque—nothing at all seems to be affecting her.

*Imam saheb* pauses after dealing the first blow. Looking at the crowd, he tells them, 'Oh *miyans*, you must keep count. I may lose count, tell me when it is a hundred.'

The crowd is stupefied, the only person who is restless is Pari. Once she looks at her mother, then at her father and brother. In between her uproarious wailing, she asks, 'Oh Ma, Baba, Bhaijan, why is huzoor beating Bubu? Bubu will die. Won't you say something? O Ma, O Baba!'

By that time *Imam saheb* has dealt the second lash, no one realizes what is happening, suddenly, Pari runs like a lunatic and grabs the broom in his hand. She tries to snatch the broom out of the imam's hand. 'Why are you beating my Bubu? Why are you beating her?'

Unexpected as this is, *Imam saheb* gets quite a jolt. He then looks at one-eyed Hashem and said, 'Hey Hashem, keep a hold on this lass.'

Immediately, Hashem overpowers Pari with his iron-like limbs. He drags her to one side of the crowd and pins her arms with his hands in such a manner that Pari keeps struggling and screaming like a child. 'Let me go, let me go. They are beating and killing my Bubu.'

No one pays any attention to Pari's words.

*Imam saheb* is wielding the broom relentlessly. Animal sounds emanate from his nose and mouth.

With each blow on Kusum's body, the flowing natural breeze is petrified in embarrassment.

One more blow on Kusum's body and the sun withdraws its natural light, the earth buckles under the darkness of clouds.

Another blow on Kusum's body, the trees hang their heads in deep grief, the clamorous birds are mute. The water of the Rajatrekha changes colour, it turns blue with unspoken pain. The timid fish bobbing up to the surface to breathe, heave a long, deep sigh.

In the shades of the undergrowth, the poisonous cobra seizes the helpless field mouse.

Clinging to Kusum's neck, Pari is lying with her face close to her breast. At twilight, summoning up all the strength in her tiny body, she has almost dragged Kusum home. Their mother, father and only brother—no one even looks at Kusum. After returning home no one speaks a word. Like Kusum, everyone seems to have turned into stone. Only Pari is alive. She feels lost trying to fathom what she should or should not do for her sister. At one moment she hugs her sister, at the next she gently passes her little hands



over her head and back. She inspects the body lacerated by blows of the broom. With deep compassion she comforts her sister. 'Are you very hurt Bubu? The way *huzoor* was beating you, I know it must have hurt very much. One-eyed Hashem caught and held me back. Otherwise I wouldn't have let you suffer those blows. If it came to that I would have taken your blows on myself. Huzoor could have beaten me up to his heart's content. I wouldn't have said a thing.'

As she is speaking, Pari breaks down in tears. But Kusum is not moved. She has not even looked once at Pari's face, not once has she groaned in pain. She continues sitting on the tattered mat on the floor. She is unblinking, her breast does not even quiver at the sound of her breath. She is like someone struck by a thunderbolt.

The kitchen fire has not been lit in this home today. No one in the family has had anything to eat. While comforting Kusum, Pari whispers, 'You've not had anything to eat today. I know you are very hungry. After everyone is asleep, I'll quietly get you some parched rice from the tin. Both of us will share it. Come, let us lie down now.'

Pari has then pulled Kusum down to a sleeping position in the very place where she is has been sitting. She lies with her arms around Kusum's neck, hiding her face in her breast. She is still lying in the same position but is fast asleep.

Gently, Kusum sets Pari's arms aside, silently she sits up. Like last night, in the moonlight that smuggles in through the gaps in the fence, the darkness inside the room is lightened. Hazily, one can see her mother's face covered by the edge of her sari next to Pari, her father lying on his side on the cot, his face turned towards Kusum. Every person is sunk in deep sleep.

Slipping her hand into her breast, she brings out the nose-stud that Paban had given her. Even after the worst assaults on her body, this thing had remained in place. This is not just any nose-stud. It is Kusum's life and her death!

Entranced, Kusum stares a while at the nose-stud. Then she carefully wears it. While doing so, in her mind she addresses Paban and says, I am wearing the nose-stud you gave me. I am thinking of you. If I can die thinking of you, that would be my happiness.

After last night, for the first time now, tears of acute pain well up from the depths of her heart. Her heart is broken, her eyes are overflowing. Unconsciously, Kusum stands up. She reaches out to the shelf on top and takes the bottle of insecticide. Malek has brought it to kill the pests in the paddy fields.

Bottle in hand Kusum then leaves the room.

God's earth looks strangely romantic at that moment. The moon is exactly in the centre of the sky. Silver moonlight is flooding all sides. The leaves and their shadows dangle in the desolate night wind. Somewhere far away, the cry of a lone night bird can be heard. The bird's cry is wafted close by the wind, then swept far away. The music of nocturnal insects was soothing the warm earth. This generous beauty of nature is marred somewhat by Kusum's tears. Tears flood Kusum's cheeks, they flood her heart. Standing in the courtyard, she was looking at the heavens, she is looking at the moon. Then she has upturned the bottle of insecticide over her mouth. That liquid fire flows down burning Kusum's breast. In a split second it makes her vision hazy. Slowly, gently, Kusum collapses on the courtyard floor. Her nose-stud shines brilliantly in the moonlight. In her dazed, hazy vision, Kusum can still see, a strangely beautiful river flowing on. Almost darkening the river shore stands a lone tree. Under the tree, with the pain of waiting in his breast, sits a daring lover. He does not follow any laws, he does not believe in any religion.

Translated by Jayati Gupta



## INFILTRATION (ANUPRABESH)

Prafulla Roy

Dawn hadn't quite broken as it was still a while before it got light, when the group silently descended like insects from the Highway to the dirt road in North Bihar.

There were, in total, eight people from two families, comprising of men and women of various ages. In one family there was Farid and his grandmother, Habiba. The other consisted of the Rashedas. In other words, Rasheda, her father, mother, two younger brothers and one old, sickly Phuphu, meaning Pishi.

The men were wearing lungis, pyjamas and shirts, over which they had chaddars or thick knitted pullovers. The women were wearing loose salwar kameezes with chaddars. On their heads and in their hands were various pieces of luggage—unwieldy tin cases, woven baskets of bamboo and cane, cloth bags and bundles, etc.

A little apart from them, walking in front, was Shaukat. He was a distant Chacha of Farid's and he was the guide of this human regiment.

They were half-way through the month of Phalgun. Nevertheless, a trace of winter had remained in this region of Bihar. Especially in the hours after dark and before sunlight.

Sometime ago, the moon had set. Overhead there were countless stars studded like silver dots over a massive sky. Not a shred of cloud anywhere. But the white mist had merged with the darkness, marring visibility. A wind was roaring across like an invisible current. It created shivers when it touched the body.

On both sides of the dirt road there were bushes and tall leafy pipar trees. Then on both sides there were open fields. One couldn't make out if there were villages near or further away; wherever one's gaze turned, everything

was silent and still. The whole place was submerged under the spirit of slumber.

All around, thousands of glowworms were flying like needles of light, piercing the darkness. From time to time, the hoarse cry of *kamar* birds<sup>1</sup> from the holes in pipar trees, shattered the prevailing peace of the early hours. Apart from this, there was a constant whistling sound audible against the stillness. That was the sound of the breathlessness coming from the depths of Rasheda's asthmatic Phuphu, Anowara. One could gauge that her chronic asthmatic breathing difficulty had increased alarmingly.

In a subdued, weak voice Anowara laboured out the question, 'How much further is it Shaukatbhai?' Once she had finished her question, she started panting heavily. Here, under this sky, there was this pure air, yet it was not enough to revive her weak lungs.

Shaukat did not slow down. He looked back quickly as he continued walking. He said, 'It's close by. Come on, quickly.'

'I can't anymore. I'm feeling really weak. Everything seems dark in front of my eyes, I can't see anything. I'm sure I'll fall down.' The words came from Anowara's throat like a groan.

'There is no other option sister. We have to reach before the sun comes up. There is still about three miles to go.' While saying this, Shaukat turned his face away, 'Before we are spotted by anyone, we need to cross this road. If anyone sees us, there will be great trouble.'

After this Anowara had nothing to say. Her head was reeling. In spite of that she rallied, forcing the remnants of strength in her sick body to carry on, putting her feet forward anyhow, like a blind person.

Farid was just behind Anowara. He had a huge tin trunk on his head which he held in place with his right hand. A big jute bag hung from his left shoulder. He was watching Anowara. When an unsteady Anowara was almost stumbling over, he reached out with his left hand and caught hold of her. He said, 'Hold me and walk Phuphu.'

Anowara said, 'You have such a heavy load on your head. If I hold your hand, you won't be able to manage.'

'I will'.

Putting her weight on Farid's left arm and shoulder, Anowara continued walking.

She said, 'Son Farid, do you know what I'm thinking about?'

Farid asked, 'What?'

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<sup>1</sup> Woodpeckers

'I don't think I'll reach in the end. Before that you will have to bury me beside this road.'

'You shouldn't say such things. We will all reach alive. Look where you are going.'

Anowara did not say anything more. The wheezing sound continued to issue from her lungs.

Carrying the weight of his luggage and one person, Farid thought that the tricks of an adept magician had brought them from their familiar world to some unknown, sleeping planet.

Three days ago, touts had charged them Rs 200 each and helped them to cross the border of West Bengal. On this side, it was the same story. For every person they had to count out Rs 200, not a paisa less or more.

From the border, straight to Kolkata. From there by train to Katihar. From Katihar, Farid and all had come by a branch line and got off at Kamtapur. There, Shakat had been waiting for them. It was he who had brought them part of the way in a bullock cart. Then at midnight, they had started walking non-stop. If Shaukat was correct, they would have to walk another three miles.

Farid was 23. He was born in East Pakistan, three years before Bangladesh became independent.

He had heard that in 1947 as soon as India was divided in two, his Dada, which means grandfather, Mudasser Ali, had gone to Dhaka from Bihar with his Bibi and children. In 1946 when there were the violent riots in Bihar, their house had been burnt down. Though no one in Farid's family had died, many people they knew had been killed. At that time there were murders, fires, streams of blood, piles of corpses, suspicion, hatred and madness all around. In this poisoned atmosphere, Mudasser's breath was choked with terror. He didn't feeling safe for even a moment. For two hundred years, generations who had considered this their country, had to flee from it one winter's night. Behind them they left their land and the ruins of their burnt house.

Once in Dhaka, Mudasser Ali didn't live long. He died within a year. At that time, his son Rahmat, was in the full tide of his youth. He took the full responsibility of the household on his shoulders. In the beginning, he somehow managed to make both ends meet, shifting around to earn a living. He worked from morning till night like a djinn, to keep the household alive. Once he had saved a bit, together with a loan, he set up a readymade garments shop. In two to three years, the business was flourishing. Then he married off his only sister Maleka, and got married himself. Seven years after his marriage, Farid was born.

After many disasters and upheavals in his life, when he had finally settled down well, there were two deaths which deeply upset him. First his wife Maleka, died, then Farid lost his mother, Amina. With time, the sense of pain subsided. But he was so dejected that his heart was not in his household or his business. He just did what was absolutely necessary. At home, he was cared for by his grandmother, Habiba.

In this way, the days somehow passed by. Then suddenly, one day, the Mukti Juddha started in East Pakistan. There was the same religion, but there was a strong hatred and bitterness between Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims, a repeat of those fearful days of rioting. At that time the enemy consisted of people of another religion. Murderous armed regiments emerged from the barracks with tanks, machine guns and automatic rifles, flocking the roads. A strong opposition had built up in towns and villages and in the country. What one heard through the day was the sound of bullets all around, the grating noise of tanks and there was the smell of gunfire, piles of corpses, streams of blood, rape, murder, fire and the groans and shrieks of suffering people in danger.

Rahmat Ali was just a simple man. He couldn't understand the intricacies of politics. He was not interested in anything beyond the boundaries of his shop and household. But when fires burn all around, it is impossible to keep oneself away, to avoid being singed. One day his shop was set on fire; he was also beaten up badly, he survived only because he was destined to.

One day, looking for safety, he had had to come from India to Dhaka. He accepted East Pakistan as his new country with a deep passion. He felt that all the dread, fear, uncertainty and worry had been removed. But now, where would he go?

One day the Mukti Juddha stopped. The new independent country of Bangladesh was born. The smell of gunfire in the air and the trace of blood from the soil were wiped out. But the bitterness, suspicion and hatred against Urdu-speaking Muslims remained.

Still one has to live! Rahmat put together the shop again and opened it, but the business was not the same. The profits were very low.

There had been a decision to take the Urdu speaking Muslims away from Dhaka. A few were taken but some lakhs remained in Bangladesh amidst great uncertainty.

Days passed. Years passed. The plane or the ship from Pakistan did not arrive for Rahmat.

Amidst all this, Farid was growing. After school, he was in college. But ten days before he sat for his B.A. examination, Rahmat Ali died of a fever. Now who was going to pay for his education? It wasn't just the scarcity of

money, Farid was suffering from an acute sense of desolation. Even if he tried hard and obtained a B.A. degree, he would not get a job. What was his future in Bangladesh?

Somehow, seven years passed by after Bangladesh became independent. Most of the Bihari Muslims who had come to East Pakistan after the Partition of India, still dreamt of planes coming to take them to Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. But there were some people whose faith had been broken. They didn't depend on planes from Karachi and Lahore anymore. At night they sat in secret in the Urdu area of Mirpur and discussed the prospect of going back to their ancestral lands in India. They had news from the Urdu speakers who had gone to Karachi as soon as Pakistan was formed in 1947, that they were not liked there at all. There was a strong animosity against the unwanted Muhajirs. Riot and murder formed the order of the day there. Does anyone want to share bread with anybody else?

After days of discussion, their minds were made up. The villages in Bihar where their forefathers had lived for generations, were much more familiar to them than far away Lahore or Karachi. But, it wasn't easy to go as soon as the wish was expressed. It wasn't straightforward to get from one independent nation to another independent nation. Nevertheless, whatever the laws, there were touts in the world. In the cover of night, they had started haunting Mirpur. They were the ones who had told them where they would first have to be put up. They had given the information of an isolated place far from habitation. But it was dangerous for too many people to travel at once. If people noticed them, there would be an uproar. Their advice was that groups of eight to ten were safer. After a few days, the outflow stopped. One would have to make arrangements according to how things developed.

Following a set pattern, the first group had come 15 days ago. Shaukat had come with that group. He was a man who was quickwitted, alert and calm. After that, two to three families kept coming everyday. Today Farid and all had come.

Rasheda was not supposed to have come today. Her Phuphu, Anowara, had been suffering from acute breathing problems. It had been decided that once she was better, they would come with another group later on. But still, they had to come, because of Rasheda.

The wedding between Rasheda and Farid had been fixed long before the exchange of gifts. The reason why the marriage hadn't taken place was because of Farid's uncertain future. Until he was sure of a settled income, he wasn't ready to think of marriage.

Rasheda didn't want to be left behind in Dhaka by Farid. She created such a fuss with her tears and stubbornness that her father and mother had to pack their belongings and leave.



It had been arranged earlier that Shaukat would wait everyday at Kamtapur station. People who came from across the border would be taken by him to the right place. Today he was taking Farid's group.

People were walking silently. Suddenly Rasheda's father called, 'Shaaukatbhai.'

Shaukat answered without looking back, 'Yes.'

'What is the situation like in the place where we are heading?'

'There hasn't been any disturbance yet. But...'

'What?'

'I think the people there know that we have arrived.'

A little behind them, Farid was following, balancing the trunk on his head, the bag on his shoulder and holding Anowara by the hand. Anowara had put her whole weight on him.

Once Shaukat's words reached him, Farid started. Before Ramzan could answer he said, 'I have heard that the place was an open field, that people don't live there.'

'Shaukat said, "That's right."

'Then?'

Shaukat had no difficulty in gauging the implications behind Farid's question. 'You won't find anything more dangerous in this world than the eyes and ears of people, my lad! Whether you go to a forest or hide in a river, somebody or the other is sure to spot you. Once one person sees you, how long does it take for another ten to hear about you!' Taking long strides, he reduced a bit of the long journey and said, 'The day before yesterday, Khaled went to the Barhaulti market which was four miles away, to buy dal, salt and chillies. There he heard people talking about us. Where we had come from, how we had suddenly taken possession of the field—all this. You can say that somebody or the other has certainly seen us.'

For three whole days they had not eaten or slept properly. They had been travelling non-stop in trains, buses, cycle rickshaws and bullock carts. Their limbs and hips were feeling disjointed from extreme exhaustion. Struggling and stumbling over the uneven dirt track, they somehow managed to stay upright as they continued walking. Shaukat's words drove a great fear deep into the innermost recesses of their very backbones. As if speaking for everyone, Ramzan said, 'Will we be able to stay there Shaukat bhai?'

Shaukat replied emphatically, 'We will have to try. Don't be afraid, Ramzanbhai. Some arrangement will definitely be made.'

Walking about twenty feet behind, Farid looked at Shaukat with deep regard. From the moment he could remember, he had known this man. He had heard that in '47 he had migrated with thousands of others from his

native Bihar, to East Pakistan. Shaukat's role in helping the very poor Biharis who had gone early on to Dhaka to settle down, was not negligible. What had he not done for them, in trying to win benefits, making appeals and kowtowing to people on their behalf? And now, after forty years, when these small groups were crossing the border to go back to their ancestral lands, he was enthusiastic. Shaukat never broke down, his backbone never bent in hopelessness; he hadn't learnt to surrender under any circumstance. Farid respected this man who had such great faith in life.

But Ramzan did not say anything. A deep apprehension seemed to shatter the embers of a will to live in him.

They kept walking and walking.

At one point, while he continued walking, Farid became absent minded. He had studied some history in school and at college. He would not be able to say anything about the Hindu or Buddhist periods. Farid had no idea about where his ancestors were in those times, or what their identity was then. He could only talk about the past two hundred years. For a few generations then they were subjects of British India—Indian Muslims. After Partition of India, they went to Dhaka and became Pakistanis. Then, if not in truth, by virtue of being in Bangladesh, they were Bangladeshi. And at this moment, while they went forward, stepping on Indian soil under a hazy dawn sky, he did not know what his identity was.

Like those first travellers in history, without a country or an identity, they were walking for a country of their own and a proper identity. One didn't know whether one would gain that or not.

Just before the sun had risen, keeping the dirt road at quite a distance, Farid's group found itself in the midst of a large low-lying bit of land.

Here, about 30 to 40 huts had been constructed with bamboo, tiles, jute cloth and discarded old tin. These houses belonged to those who had come earlier from Dhaka.

In this colony of vagabonds, in the middle of an isolated, silent field, nobody had yet been disturbed from their sleep.

Shaukat said, 'We've reached. You've been through a lot for three days. Now you can relax.'

Everyone put down their loads from their heads and shoulders and eased themselves on the ground. A dirty rug was quickly spread out for Anowara to lie on. As a result of coming this long way, it seemed that ten asthma attacks were heaving at her breast.

Farid sat in one corner and was observing his surroundings with unbounded eagerness. Shaukat had given the correct description. From here, wherever his eyes turned, as far as he could see, there were no signs of any

people or habitation. The gravelly land stretched till where the sky bent and touched the horizon. On the other side, spreading over a large expanse, there was a choked lake. It was laden with moss and long strands of reeds. Beside the lake, there were a lot of bushes and massive simar and kadaiya trees. On their topmost branches, there were countless cranes sitting quietly with folded wings.

In the meantime, Shaukat had raised his voice and was calling out, 'Hey, Osmanbhaiya, Rustom, Nawabjan, Rahimachachi—how much longer will you sleep! Come on, wake up! They have arrived.'

First one or two, then about a hundred people emerged from those huts.

Seeing Farid, they said, 'So you have come?'

Ramzan replied in a listless voice, 'Yes. But we are almost dead.'

Osman agreed, 'Yes, it's a long way to walk. The bones in ones legs and hips get bent. Was there any disturbance on the road?'

'No.'

'Didn't the Indians suspect something?'

'No.'

'They shouldn't, really. Such a big country. Crores and crores of people. Who is going to keep track of whom?'

After this, it was decided that those who had come and set up shelters earlier, would take turns in housing Farid and his group. A few days later, they would buy tiles and old tin from the Barhaulti market and construct their own huts.

Farid was listening to everybody as if his mind was far away. Actually, three days ago, while he was coming across the border, he had experienced a kind of excitement. Now that he was amidst this huge field, it was as if that feeling had been multiplied unexpectedly a few times. He had heard that the village of Manpanthhal was not very far. It was from Manpanthhal that his Dada with his Bibi and children had gone over to East Pakistan forty years ago. The desire to see this village of his forefathers seemed be gnawing at his heart like a stubborn djinn.

Suddenly Farid asked, 'How far is Manpanthhal Shaukatchacha?'

Shaukat had been talking to others; he now turned and looked at Farid. He said, 'From here Barhaulti bazar is four 'mil'.<sup>2</sup> From there, if you go on for two 'mil,' there is Manpanthhal. Why do you want to know?'

'I will go and see my village.'

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<sup>2</sup> The dialectal word for 'mile'.

Shaukat said, 'Not now *beta*. Let us wait for a few days and weigh the situation properly. The village is not far and will be there. When it's time, you can go there just as you please. I am from the same village. I haven't been there yet.'

All those who were here now, had all one day gone from Manpanthhal or villages around it, to Dhaka. They all agreed with Shaukat and said that no one had gone to see their fatherland so far. It was not just their village, they hadn't set foot anywhere else either. In fear and anxiety, they had confined themselves to this bit of stony land. But some people had gone cautiously to Barhauli bazar to buy a few things.

Farid could understand their feelings. Nobody wanted to take any risks. It was true that 40 years ago this was their country, but now they did not belong here. They hadn't dared to venture out to see their fatherland or birthplace, just in case that jeopardized their position.

Farid didn't say any more.

Shaukat now made arrangements for them. Habiba and Farid would stay with Osman's family till they had constructed their own shelter. Rasheda and Anowara would stay with the Nababjans. Rustom and Gohor Sheikh would take the responsibility of Rasheda's two brothers and her father and mother.

After their lunch Farid and all sat around Shaukat in front of the huts. Today no one was going to arrive from Dhaka, so there was no need for Shaukat to hurry to Kamtapur.

Above their head stretched a bright blue sky. The sun was slowly climbing down its inclined stretch. Though the sun was still warm, it wasn't strong enough to burn anymore. A lot of wayward breezes were blowing across the open field. The combination of sun and wind in Phalgun was pleasant.

What their future could be in India, was what they were talking about.

Farid asked, 'Shaukat Chacha, how long will we be able to hide here? You were telling us on the way that many people have got wind of our presence here. They will detect us here. Who knows where they will chase us to? Apart from that, we need to think of something else.'

Shaukat asked, 'What?'

'None of us has been able to bring much money with us from Dhaka. If we can't earn, we will die of starvation. For that reason, it is necessary to go out from here.'

Farid's words touched a chord in many. They agreed with him, 'That's right.'

Shaukat was listening to Farid's words with great eagerness and noting the reaction of others. He said slowly, '*Beta*, what you have just said is also

what I have thought about. But wait. We have had information about one man here. We think that, through him, a lot of our problems will be solved. In two to four days I will meet him.'

Farid joined everyone else to ask, 'Who is this man?'

Shaukat told them that he couldn't be named now. He was a formidable leader of the political party. But it wasn't easy to establish contact with him.

Farid and many others held their breath and asked, 'Who gave you the information about this man?'

Shaukat said, 'Do you know how many agents are roaming around both sides of the border with various interests? Imagine that I got the news from one of them.'

Farid's apprehension was not removed. 'What if you are not able to meet the leader?'

'We have to! This is a question of life and death for us.'

Silence.

Then Farid said, 'Can I say one more thing Shaukatchacha?'

Shaukat said, 'Why one, ten, twenty—ask as many as you like.'

'It is better to go to our villages than waste our time in this field. If we plead with those who have established themselves in our lands, won't they give us some place to stay?'

Shaukat laughed at Farid's simplicity. Though the boy had studied a lot, he was quite immature about many things, as if he was still in his old childhood.<sup>3</sup> He perhaps believed that the world was crowded with pirs and darbeshes.<sup>4</sup> If one begged of these people, one would be granted whatever one wanted. Shaukat could well imagine what would happen if people like him, who were neither Indian, nor Bangladeshi nor Pakistani, and had stealthily re-entered their old homeland looking for a little shelter, now asked for a share of their land which they once left behind. He put his hand on Farid's shoulder and said slowly, 'Farid *beta*, nobody will give back an iota of land. What was lost will never be regained. Understand?'

Three days passed after Farid's group's arrival. In the meantime, some more people had come from across the border.

Today was the fourth day. Getting up in the morning, after a breakfast of stale roti and sugarcane molasses, Shaukat had gone to Kamtapur to bring people back here.

<sup>3</sup> The word 'bachpan' is used in inverted commas, to denote the use of the Hindustani/Urdu version.

<sup>4</sup> 'Pir' is a Muslim saint and 'darbesh' a Muslim ascetic, a fakir. Both words are culture specific.

As the morning wore on, Farid decided he would go to Manpanthhal that day. A strong attraction to his ancestral birthplace seemed to pull him in that direction.

Now people were sitting in the clearing in front of their huts at ease, talking. There was no need for the men to go out to work. The women, however, had to light fires with bits of wood and twigs to make *bhajis* and *chapatis*. Nevertheless, there was no urgency in all this. Far away from the bustle of the world, they had nothing to do in this wide field, but to somehow manage to stay there in a state of uncertainty.

Farid slowly made his way to the lake. He had already found out from Osman how to get to Barhaulti. And once he was able to reach Barhaulti, he was certain that he could find his way to Manpanthhal by just asking people the way.

When Farid was near the lake, he heard someone saying, 'Hey, listen...'

Farid turned round to see Rasheda. She was as slim and sharp as cane. Her features were sharp. Her skin was like golden wheat. Her two big eyes had magic in them. She was 19 or 20. From their time in Dhaka she had always kept an eye on him. He wasn't able to evade her and go anywhere.

Rasheda came close and said, 'Where are you going?'

Farid had decided he wouldn't let anyone know about his idea of going to Manpanthhal. He said, 'Not anywhere in particular. I was just looking around.'

'That's a lie.'

'What do you mean?'

'You are going to Manpanthhal.'

Farid was taken aback. 'No, no,<sup>5</sup> who said that?'

Rasheda was looking at him intently. She said, 'You won't be able to throw dust in my eyes. Come, I too will go with you.'

When he had been caught, what was there to do? Farid said, 'It is very far. Six miles to go. Then six miles to come back. You will feel tired.'

'Let it be tiring. I'm not going to walk on your legs.'

'No, no, think it over it carefully.'

'I'm not going to listen to any of your excuses. I will go. You know how stubborn Rasheda is.'

Farid had no option but to accept the inevitable.

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<sup>5</sup> The Hindi/Urdu version, 'nahi' is used in the text.

Beside the lake, a narrow path went through the bushes. If one walked along it for half a mile, then there was the metalled road or *pucchi*.<sup>6</sup> This *pucchi* led straight to Barhaulti.

After leaving the dirt track, both went on to the *pucchi*. On either side, the fields were bare after the harvest; watching numerous birds in the sky and talking to each other, they reached Bauhaulti while there was still some time before afternoon.

The place was really busy. One could call Barhaulti a small town. Electricity had already arrived. It was overflowing with cycle rickshaws and bullock carts. In between one could spot autos and scooters. Most of the road was metalled. On both sides there were countless one and two-storeyed houses. But there were some houses made of tin and with tiles as well. On one side of all this was the bustling bazaar.

Once couldn't be sure if one would get food after reaching Manpanthhal. Farid had bought *balushai*, *laddu* and *puri* from a shopowner in the bazaar and found out the way to Manpanthhal, and it was after he had come out that they heard shouts of many people. Farid and Rasheda stood still.

First nothing was clear. In a while one could see a big procession advancing from where the road curved, shouting slogans. Now they could make out the words.

'In the coming election, vote for—Ajeeblal Singh'

'Long live—social worker, Ajeeblal '

'Long live—patriot, Ajeeblal '

'Ajeeblal's sign—elephant—zindabad '

'Put the stamp on—elephant.'<sup>7</sup>

Farid put his ear close to Rasheda's ear and said in low voice, 'The elections<sup>8</sup> are approaching here.'

They had seen election processions, meetings, etc. in Dhaka too. All this was not new to them. Rasheda nodded her head slowly, and said, 'Yes'.

<sup>6</sup> As in 'pucca,' describing more permanent structures than 'kanchcha' or makeshift ones, usually made with renewable material.

<sup>7</sup> In Indian languages, slogans follow a distinct pattern which would seem ungrammatical if reproduced in the order in which they occur. So, the person leading would say, 'In the coming election, Ajeeblal Singh' and the mass would follow with 'vote for him, vote for him'. Then 'Social worker, Ajeeblal' and 'Patriot, Ajeeblal', would be followed by the 'long live, long live', etc.,—which would make sense in Hindi, which is used here.

<sup>8</sup> The author writes 'chunao', the Hindi word for elections and then adds the Bengali equivalent in brackets: '(nirbanchan),' to give a flavour of Farid's mode of speech.

At one time, shouting slogans, the procession passed Farid. Then they didn't wait anymore. They turned into a narrow road on the left and moved forward.

Leaving the edges of the bazaar and town of Barhauhi behind, Farid reached a wide macadam road in a short while. The sweetshop owner had said that this road went by Manpanthhal.

Here there were fields of crops on both sides of the road. In the distance there were farmers' houses visible through dense trees.

There were many vehicles on these roads. Long distance buses, bullock or ox carts, cycle rickshaws, trucks and a few *tongas* pulled by skeletal horses. Keeping clear of the vehicles, the two of them walked along the edge of the road. The nearer they drew to Manpanthhal, Farid's heart fluttered with deep emotion and excitement. It was not clear what Rasheda was thinking about. She seemed to fly beside Farid like a restless bird.

After walking for a couple of miles, they were very near Manpanthhal. Asking the people on the road, they were told that they would now have get off the *pucca* road and walk towards their right. If they proceeded a little way through the field, they would reach Manpanthhal.

Once he was in the field, it seemed as if Farid was walking in a trance. Beside him Rasheda was flying in the same manner as before. In a few moments they reached Manpanthhal.

The confectioner had said that Manpanthhal was a village of dairy-men.<sup>9</sup> This was obvious from the many cows and buffaloes grazing all around the area.

It was now afternoon. The sun had climbed and was right above the head. The heat of the sun had increased dramatically. But just like before, a strong wind was still blowing.

Though he had reached Manpanthhal, Farid did not enter immediately. He stood stock still at its edge. Rasheda had no other option but to stop suddenly as well.

After a long pause, Rasheda asked, 'What's happened? Won't you go into the village?'

Farid started and said, 'Yes, let's go.' While walking, he lowered his voice, 'Be careful, don't tell anyone that we are from Dhaka. Will you remember that?'

'Of course.'

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<sup>9</sup> In the text, the writer says, 'gowar or gowalader', giving the local word first and then supplying the Bengali equivalent.



After entering the village, if one proceeded a little, there was a pond. Farid said, 'Here's the pond<sup>10</sup>- let us first sit beside it and eat. Then we can go and look for the site of our old house and land.'

After finishing eating *puri* and *mithai* and drinking the water from the pond, they started on their search for their ancestral land.

Farid had been born in East Pakistan. He had not come here before. In Dhaka he had heard a lot about Manpanthhal from Abba and Dadi, but it hadn't aroused any sense of belonging in him. His heart had not turned at the thought of a section of the world in an unknown, ordinary village in far off north Bihar. Then his fatherland was to him just something spoken about, a hazy *idea* only. But once he has stepped on to this earth, he knew, that though he wasn't born here and hadn't seen the place, his existence was rooted in Manpanthhal.

He was surprised by one thought, that after the Partition in forty seven, his grandfather and Rasheda's grandfather had lost everything when they had to go to Dhaka. Now, exactly forty years later, their grandson and granddaughter had come back here looking for a refuge, or maybe, an identity.

Like some stubborn travellers, Farid and Rasheda started knocking on every door. But none of the younger inhabitants could tell them if there had been anybody of the name of Farid's grandfather, Modasser Ali or Rasheda's grandfather, Samsuddin Hossain here. But they had heard, that long ago, some Muslims had lived in the village. Who knew where they had gone after independence<sup>11</sup>? But now there were no Muslim families<sup>12</sup> here.

Though he was a bit disappointed, Farid continued his search unabated. At the end, the oldest man in Manpanthhal informed them that Modasser Ali and Samsuddin Hossain had lived in this village. He had known them.

Something like lightning flashed through Farid's bloodstream. He said, 'Kindly tell us where their houses were.' His voice trembled with excitement, emotion and eagerness.

The old man slowly shook his head and said, 'There is nothing *beta*.' Then the land he pointed at in the distance appeared nothing but a cultivated expanse with no sign of any houses there.

Farid and Rasheda went there and stood still for a while. Then they went back with agitation.

<sup>10</sup> Farid uses the Hindustani word, 'talau', not the Bengali, 'pukur'.

<sup>11</sup> The word used is 'azadi', the Hindustani word for 'freedom'.

<sup>12</sup> The English word 'family' is used by the inhabitants of Manpanthhal.

Long before the afternoon, they came back to Barhauili. This time again they saw another procession walking the roads, tearing the sky with their slogans.

'Patriot, Rambanvas Chaubey...'  
 'Zindabad, zindabad.'  
 'Who will become MLA?'  
 'Rambanvas Chaubey.'  
 'Who will become Minister?'  
 'Rambanvas Chaubey.'  
 'Who will bring Ramraj?'<sup>13</sup>  
 'Rambanvas Chaubey.'  
 'In the coming elections, put the stamp on...'  
 'On Chaubeyji's tree.'<sup>14</sup>  
 'Who is my candidate and yours?'  
 'Rambanvas Chaubey.'  
 'Till the moon and sun remain'  
 'Chaubeyji's slogans will remain.'  
 'Long live, long live...'  
 'Chaubeyji.'<sup>15</sup>

The procession for the election of Ramvanbas was a bit longer than Ajeeblal's and more colourful. But Farid had not noticed this. He had heard that in Manpanthhal they had had quite a big house. It was a brick house with a cemented floor, though it did have a tin roof. But what had they just seen a little while ago? A deep sense of hopelessness seemed to surround him now.

Just before dusk, making their way over the stony embankment, Farid and Rasheda reached their desolate refuge while there was still daylight.

Seven days passed.

In the meantime, about a hundred people had arrived from across the border. Somehow eight to ten huts had been patched together. People were busy trying to set up a few more.

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Ramayana*, Ram's rule is known as 'Ramrajya', when, it is said, people lived in peace, prosperity, harmony and contentment.

<sup>14</sup> In Indian languages these lines would be swerved, e.g. 'On... In the coming ...'. 'Ji' is a suffix, denoting respect.

<sup>15</sup> Again, the name would be followed by the refrain, 'long live', in Indian languages.

Altogether there were now about two hundred and fifty people. They had decided that for a period now, the flow of people coming from across the boundary would be stopped.

Today Shaukat finished his breakfast and told Farid, 'Today you will have to go with me somewhere, *beta*.'

Without asking any questions Farid said, 'I'll go.'

A little later, they started. After the lake and the dirt road, once they had climbed on to the *pucci*, Shaukat asked, 'Do you know where we are going?'

Farid was familiar with this part. It was along this very road that he and Rasheda had gone to Manpanthhal via Barhaulti, a few days ago. But Farid did not know for sure where Shaukat was taking him—to Barhaulti or to Manpanthhal? Without replying Farid observed Shaukat with eager eyes.

Shaukat answered his own question, 'We are going to Barhaulti town. To meet that political leader. He's a big man, he might speak English-English, one has to have an educated<sup>16</sup> person around. That is why I brought you.' Shaukat continued talking without a pause, 'I thought to myself, it is not right to wait anymore. Who knows when there might be trouble, and we could be ousted from this place. Before that happens, we should meet the leader. We will go straight and fall at his feet.'

Shaukat had foresight and he was experienced and wise. In his sixty years he had been a witness to countless riots, murders, the unsettled times and madness round Partition in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The great experience of life had taught him to take the right decision.

Shaukat made Farid understand the situation. If one had to stay in India, then political protection was absolutely necessary. And it was with this in mind that Shaukat was taking Farid with him.

Farid suddenly asked, 'Who are we going to Chacha? Ajeeb Lal Singh or Rambanvas Chaubey?' The moment he said this, he knew that he had made a mistake. The fact that he had been to Barhaulti and having been there, had probably knocked at Manpanthhal, was about to be revealed.

Shaukat looked at Farid in wonder. 'How did you know their names? Did you go to Barhaulti?'

Farid lowered his head and nodded in answer.

Shaukat's gaze grew sharp. He asked, 'You have also been to Manpanthhal, haven't you?'

Farid answered in a faint voice, 'Yes.'

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<sup>16</sup> The author uses 'likhipari', a dialectal way of saying 'one who can read and write'.

Shaukat was silent for a long time. Then he said, 'Okay, we'll hear of Manpanthhal later on. Now tell me, from whom did you learn of Ajeblal Singh and Rambanvas Chaubey?'

Farid told him about the two processions that day.

Shaukat said, 'I see. We are going to Rambanvas Chaubey now.'

At one end of Barhaulti was the bazaar, at the other end the 'Chaturvedi Dham'. In the middle of a huge compound, was this massive three-storeyed house, built in the style of an old fortress with a temple to Ram and Sita at the top? The house was surrounded by a ten feet high, three feet wide wall. In front was a big iron gate. A Bhojpuri *darwan* with a curled up moustache sat in front of it, guarding it night and day with a gun in his hands and a magazine of cartridges strung round his neck.

On reaching 'Chaturvedi Dham', Shaukat and Farid informed the *darwan* that they have come to see Ramvanbas Chaubey.

The *darwan* studied them once from head to toe and then shouted in a loud, harsh voice, 'Off, you rascals...'

Shaukat and Farid didn't leave; they kept pleading with him. The *darwan* wouldn't let them enter, but they didn't give up. As the *darwan's* anger mounted, so did his voice. He kept shouting his warning that if they didn't leave at once he would definitely shoot their heads into pulp.

At this moment a deep voice floated over from inside, '*Darwan*, let those people come inside.'

Immediately inside the gate there was a big space. There were an open top vintage car, two jeeps and a horse-drawn phaeton standing here. There were two servants<sup>17</sup> washing and wiping the car and phaeton.

In the distance, in the white marble veranda of the actual house, Rambanvas sat half-inclined in an easy chair, reading the newspaper which had arrived by mail. Beside him, on a table, there were many newspapers in a neat pile. And there were some important files, a pen and a writing pad of expensive paper. On the floor there was a Muradabadi<sup>18</sup> hubble-bubble from the bowl of which, smoke was emerging.

Rambanvas was about 65 to 66-years-old. He looked healthy. Even at this age, his hair hadn't greyed much. He did not have much extra fat on him. Nevertheless, he did wear spectacles.

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<sup>17</sup> The Hindi word 'naukar' is used instead of the Bengali 'chaakar'.

<sup>18</sup> The enamelled metal work done in the town of Muradabad.

The veranda was about three feet above the ground. Shaukat and Farid walked with trepidation to the veranda and stood there with bated breath. They bent low and put their hand to their forehead and said, '*Salaam, huzoor*.'<sup>19</sup>

Looking over his gold framed glasses with incisive eyes, Rambanvas said, 'What's happened. Why were you creating such a row?'

'*Huzoor*, we wanted to come and see you. The *darwan* wouldn't let us get in.'

'Who are you? I haven't seen you before.'

Shaukat told him that they had come here recently. But forty years ago, they had been inhabitants of this place.

Rambanvas's forehead became furrowed. He said, 'Meaning?'

After describing in detail how they had gone to East Pakistan after Partition, then after Bangladesh was formed, what their situation was like in Dhaka, and how they had no other alternative but to return here, Shaukat looked on with an expression of deep worry on his face.

A lightning shock passed through Rambanvas. He sat up straight and said, 'You have stolen into India! You are *infiltrators*! Do you know what a grave crime this is?'

Shaukat and Farid folded their hands and bent double. With stifled breath Shaukat said, 'You are our *ma-baap*<sup>20</sup> *huzoor*, save us. We can't go back. If we can't stay here, we will perish along with our children. Now we are at your mercy<sup>21</sup>.'

Rambanvas was thoughtful for a while. Then he said, 'How many of you are there?'

'About 250 *huzoor*.'

'Will more come?'

'Yes.'

'How many are likely to come?'

'Lots of people. But there won't be more than around seven to eight hundred coming to this part.'

After a brief silence, Rambanvas asked another question, 'Who told you about me?'

Shaukat did not name the tout. With due respect he just said, 'Who doesn't know about you in this world? As soon as we stepped into this place, we heard of you *malik*.'

<sup>19</sup> A way of greeting superiors, which means, 'regards, your honour / sir'.

<sup>20</sup> Literally, mother-father, meaning a caring, benevolent superior, usually used by tenants of overlords or of people in responsible administrative positions.

<sup>21</sup> The Urdu word 'meherbani' is used by Shaukat.

'Let me think over this for a few days.'

Rambanvas had told them to leave, still Shaukat carried on standing there.

Rambanvas became irritable and said, 'What's happened, why aren't you leaving?'

Shaukat bowed his head low and said, '*Huzoor*, many people now know that we have come here. What if they make trouble?'

'Come back in four days and see me.'

Shaukat didn't have the courage to ask any more questions. He said, 'Yes sir.' and *salaamed* a few times and then took his leave.

Rambanvas Chaubey had not given them any clear guarantee of his protection. But he had asked them to go back after four days. What he would say or do then, was not clear yet. While walking in close proximity to Shaukat, Farid felt his breath was choking with anxiety. Shaukat had brought him to speak English, but that had not been necessary. All this time he had been a mute observer in Rambanvas's *haveli*. Now he suddenly asked, 'Was it wise to tell Chaubeyji Chacha?'

Shaukat was walking, deeply absorbed in his thoughts. He didn't quite grasp the implications of Farid's question and asked, 'What do you mean?'

'They are *political* people. What if they put us in danger?'

In truth, Farid had grave doubts about the reliability of people who were into politics. Shaukat said, 'We have to ask the help of somebody or the other. Nobody but a political leader will be able to protect us. Now let us see.'

Farid did not say anything more.

In two days' time, not four, in the evening, two double chinned, stout men beat the ground with their *lathis* and shouted, 'Who are Shaukat Miyan and Farid Ali?'

In moments this rootless habitation in the middle of the field was filled with dread. Shaukat and Farid answered with trepidation, 'We are. Why?'

'Chaubeyji has asked us to take you to him.'

Shaukat could not understand why these summons were sent after two, rather than four days. In a timid voice he asked, 'Do you all know why *malik* has asked us to go?'

'No.'

Shaukat did not ask any more questions. He tried to reassure the panic-stricken people around him a bit, before went with the two men to Barhauili.

Two days ago Rambanvas was alone in his white marble veranda. Today there were four or five people sitting around him in cushioned chairs. One could deduce from the way they looked and dressed, that they were people in respectable positions. They were discussing something in an excited manner amongst themselves, in loud voices. Seeing Shaukat, they stopped.

Ramvanbas said, 'I was telling you all about them.'

His companions noted Shaukat and Farid with a hard, piercing gaze. One of them said, 'These are the infiltrators<sup>22</sup>! I have been informed about their presence earlier. They have occupied the low land beside the lake and set up their houses.'

A few others agreed with him and said, 'We too have heard about this.'

Listening to them, Shaukat and Farid were very anxious. They were sweating profusely.

Rambanvas told Shaukat, 'Today we have called you on a serious business. That day you had said about 250 people had come from across the border.'

In a trembling voice Shaukat answered, 'Yes.'

Now Rambanvas turned around to his friends and said, 'You think that in the coming elections Ajeeb Lal will get a good number of *votes*<sup>23</sup>?'

Everyone answered in one voice, 'Yes'.

'If I have some *sure votes* in hand, I might win.'

'At least 600 to 700.'

Are you sure?'

'Yes, certainly.'

Rambanvas again turned to face Shaukat. He said, 'That day you said that some six to seven hundred more people would come from the other side. Have they come?'

'No malik. I have heard that they will start coming after a few days.' Shaukat spoke as if his breath was stifled.

There was silence for a while.

Then Rambanvas said, 'Do you know that there are elections here in a few months time?'

Shaukat indicated Farid and said, 'I don't know. But he saw two election processions in Barhauli bazaar, one was yours and then other Ajeeb Lal Singh's.

'Right.' Ramvanbas shifted in his seat. He said, 'People don't worry about elections so far ahead. But Ajeeb Lal has entered the field already. I cannot sit with my arms folded. The bastard is throwing money with both hands to win the elections.' Then, instantly, changing to a resounding voice he said, 'Be careful, don't fall into their company.'

<sup>22</sup> The Hindi word 'ghuspeythiya' is used, followed by the explanation in Bengali in brackets: '(anuprabeshkari)'.

<sup>23</sup> All through, the word 'vote' is used, which is indicated in italics.

With a face full of fear, Shaukat said, 'No, *malik*, no.'

'And listen, in the next election you will *vote*. On my symbol. Those who come later from the other side of the border will have to *vote* for me too.'

At this moment Farid had managed to muster some courage and said, 'But sir, we are infiltrators here, how will we *vote* in this country?'

Ramvanbas could understand what he was thinking. Illegal immigrants did not have the right to vote. He said, 'All arrangements will be made. But beware, if you don't *vote* for me, you will be buried alive.'

From his side, Shaukat hurriedly answered, 'Of course sir, we will *vote* for you. My word will not be broken. But what will happen to us? A few days earlier Farid had gone to Manpanthhal. There the place where our forefathers had their homes has now been converted to cultivation. Where will we go now? What will happen to us?'

'Nothing can be done there. Give your vote now, become Indians. Then arrangements will be made.'

Shaukat and Farid kept quiet.

Rambanvas again said, 'Whatever we have said today, don't let anyone know. Keep your mouth shut.'

'Yes *malik*.'

Some more days passed. In the meantime a few hundred people came across the border.

The coming elections had made the atmosphere more and more heated in this region. Amidst it all, one listless afternoon, two people came and put their names on the voter's list. A few days later, on Rambanvas's recommendation, they all had their ration cards made.

The days were passing somehow. Anxiety, apprehension, fear, dread, they were all there, but no one had come all these days to create trouble. But soon after their names were put on the *voters' list* and they had got *ration cards*, 300 men who were Ajeebal's supporters, invaded the place, shouting

'Infiltrators into India ...'

'Get out, get out.'

'Foreigners...'

'Leave India, leave India.'

After shouting for a few hours, these people left.

The Shaukat and Farid came breathlessly to 'Cahturvedi Dham' at Baruhauli. Panting and with terrified faces, they told Rambanvas about all that had happened.

Ramvanbas did not get excited at all. In a listless tone he said, 'Let those people shout. Your names are now on the *voters' list*. You also have *ration*



*cards*. Now you are Indians. No bastard has the power to touch your skin now. Don't worry. Just remember *my vote*.'

'Even if we die, we won't forget.'

A few hours later, while he walked back through the stone-strewn way to their vagabond living with Shaukat, there was this one thought recurring in Farid's mind. At the time of the British they were Indians, then Pakistani, after that Bangladeshi. Because of elections, 40 years later they found a new identity. Now they are again Indians.

Walking as if his mind was far away, Farid *salaamed* the elections a thousand times in his heart.

Translated by Bashabi Fraser

## DELIVERANCE (TRAAN PARITRAAN)

Tridib Sengupta

What could be the origin of the name Bankada?<sup>1</sup> Was it Bankim? Or was it not a derivation at all? Probably it was an ancient and original name in its own right? Maybe one of the toes was not quite straight. Or maybe as a child the man had never managed to sit straight. There could be a host of reasons. He had heard a couple of people in the locality use it, but Sirajul had never addressed him as Bankada, or Bankababu. Actually he had never really addressed him directly. But Bankada always had a smile for him. It was neither the practised smile of a refined man, nor the forced smile of a tired man. It was a smile that reflected the warmth of familiarity.

It was possible to interpret that smile as one aimed at clients for better public relations. Bankada's competitors were on the rise—there were already two competitors in the same alley. The population of greater Kolkata was rising by leaps and bounds and so was the number of grocery shops. And in this cut-throat competition, Bankada was quite justified in using a warm smile to lure customers. But Sirajul never thought of the smile as one specifically tailored for customers, maybe because he didn't want to. There's so much of love, care and warmth that quietly touches our lives everyday—in the breeze around us, in the rains, on the stairs as we climb up and down, by the lamppost, at the tea stalls, at the crematorium, in the queue for milk and so on. And sometimes—very occasionally—we too touch other people's lives in a quiet way. But we don't think of these as being special in any way.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Bank' pronounced as in English 'back,' but with a nasal sound for the 'n' as in French words, and the final 'a' as in 'car'. 'Banka' means 'crooked'.

We are not expected to. It was with this kind of quiet affection that Sirajul had always associated Bankada's smile.

These days Bankada had no smile on, not even a distant trace of it. But why was his expression so ugly? And why did it give Sirajul such a sinking feeling? It seemed to be a very different face, as if it had caught Sirajul redhanded trying to take money away from the plate of a little blind boy while pretending to give some. How could Bankada's face become so ugly?

This reference to Bankada belongs to a phase before the beginning of the story. First it is important for you, the reader, to know the story, and then what transpired before and after. This is a story of drunkenness, a kind of drunkenness that is related to helplessness. But a drunkard is not a self-created being. He is not like God, the one and only supreme and eternal power. So drunkenness has a history of its own, it's very own labyrinth, a labyrinth that is helpless in its existence. And we'll stumble upon that labyrinth as we pursue our drunkenness.

On 26 January (India's Republic Day) 1991, after the news at nine-thirty in the evening (that evening while trying to catch a glimpse of the still photographs of the gulf war, in both the English and Bengali news, we were compelled to listen to speeches being made on the occasion of the Republic day) India's electronic media (audio-visual) had telecast the country-wide celebrations of the Republic Day. From this we got to know that apart from the six union territories, there were twenty-two states in India and (surprisingly) in every state the national flag was the same. That was followed by a kabi sanmela,<sup>2</sup> in honour of Republic Day.

At that point Tridib's wife swung her feet out of the soft Jaipuri quilt and left the room to go off to sleep. (It was quite obvious that she lacked in patriotism.)

Before leaving she declared, 'Hah! Even if some building collapsed somewhere today, that would also be put down as an event marking the occasion of the Republic Day. Not a programme worth watching!'

In the kabi sanmela, the first poet was a Muslim—Azhar Hashmi. His poem lamented the loss of the golden age of Rama. This was followed by a funny poem (it was announced in advance that it was going to be funny). Then there were two more Hindu poets. And then, another Muslim poet, by the name of Bhai Abu Jafer or something. His poem was a hymn in the praise of the greatness of the river Ganga. He said, drinking a few drops of Ganga water could wipe out all sins and that it was like drinking the nectar of paradise which made men immortal.

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<sup>2</sup> A group of poets reading from their own work.

But the story doesn't start here—it had started two months back. It is the writing that starts on the twenty-sixth of January. The story had started around the end of November.

It was the day when Tridib and Keya had gone out to watch 'Cirocco' at the Lighthouse. The film contained a detailed shot of an intimate scene between a couple on horseback; and a few more such softly exciting scenes. It was a good film. Probably as an effect of that Tridib had begun to anticipate some intimate moments of their own as he was climbing up the stairs. Their flat was on the second floor. As he climbed up the stairs, he could see, through a concrete frame, stars in a blue sky. Was it Picasso? His feet were a little unsteady like other nights. Why did these things happen? Was it because of some confusion in the perspective of things?

Sirajul was standing right in front—almost near the stairs. Raushan was a little further away—where it was darker. Yet Tridib noticed Raushan first—although he hadn't realized it was Raushan, or for that matter, that it was a woman. But he had a gut feeling that something was wrong. He had to look past Sirajul to see Raushan, yet he hadn't noticed Sirajul. Why? Was it because of the tiny design of the shining thread at the lowermost fringe in Raushan's *salwar*?

'You're back?' Though tired, there was a clear hint of relief in Sirajul's voice.

'Hey, what's the matter?' Tridib was surprised. But did he also not have a feeling that his spirits were dampening? The nakedness in *Cirocco*... his efforts in the taxi through layers of Swiss cotton to reach out deep between Keya's thighs while keeping his eyes fixed on the driver and the helper... and after stepping out of the taxi, getting a feel of Keya's back while trying to walk across the mound of earth scooped out from a pit dug to repair the telephone cables... enjoying the soft light from the dark skies on the stairs... the continuity of all these events had been jolted, and hadn't that dampened his spirit slightly?

Had Tridib been instantly reminded of the headlines in the papers that day: 'Mulayam determined to oppose kar sevaks'? In the meantime Ashok Singhal, President of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad<sup>3</sup> (the World Hindu Council) had reached Ayodhya—hoodwinking the PAC or, may be, with the help of the PAC because the Provincial Arms Constabulary had a reputation for

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<sup>3</sup> VHP: Viswa Hindu Parishad, literally, the World Hindu Organization is a Hindu organization known for its strong, uncompromising stance. Ashok Singhal is the President of VHP.

a bias against the Muslims. Had Tridib been reminded of all these? Besides, when Abhishek and Sirajul had come over for a chat the previous day, Abhishek had said, 'I'm feeling very scared.' (Abhishek's fear was not because of communalism only. His fear was also related to the fact that it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to depend only on his freelance work. Moreover, his father was going through a bad time and there were some uncertainties involving his girlfriend too. But these were not separate elements—they were integrally related. What do you think?)

Keya was surprised to see Sirajul and Raushan and walked up towards them from behind Tridib. And that was where the story began. Obviously there was nothing better to do.

Just a moment! Before getting on with the story let's decide what the contents of the story was going to be. For example, we can already assume that the two main characters were Sirajul and Raushan. They had come to Tridib's and Keya's flat asking for shelter. Advani<sup>4</sup>, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the chariot of Rama, the temple of Rama—all these might lead to nationwide riots (or so they anticipated). And this story is about their seeking of shelter. The few days of their exile were spent with Tridib and Keya. And during these few days, Tridib and Keya came in close contact with them. They developed a familiarity which grew only from living together in real life. Otherwise what credentials did Tridib have to have a Muslim as one of his characters? Apart from having a few Muslim friends, how much did he actually know about the Muslims? He only knew that just like the Hindus, the Muslims too did not reproduce without intercourse and that the American guns could have killed the Hindus in exactly the same manner as they had the Muslims in Iraq. So this story was actually about Tridib and Keya, that is, it was Tridib's story too.

Again, was this story not that of L. K. Advani as well?—The man, Lal Krishna Advani, who had brought about an amazing realization in Tridib. Only Advani was capable of bringing about such awareness. And this needed to be appreciated by those who call him inhuman. He had given Tridib an identity. Suddenly, in the light of Advani's vision, Tridib realized that he was a Hindu—meaning, he was not a Muslim. Tridib himself wasn't

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<sup>4</sup> Lal Krishna Advani led the Hindu movement then. As the then President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political party, he travelled across the country in a chariot with a huge following and urged the Hindus to pay homage to their hero and God—Rama. A little over a decade later, the BJP became the ruling party of India, leading a government of seventeen coalition partners of which Advani was the Deputy Prime Minister. The BJP lost to a Congress coalition in the elections of 2004.

aware of it. Moreover, it was Lal Krishna Advani who had decided what Tridib's relation would be with those who were not Hindus but Muslims. This story was actually a tribute—a tribute to Advani. We shall come back to this discussion again later. For the moment, let's write down the last paragraph of the story:

Sirajul kept the bag next to the chair. And tucked his shirt neatly around the belt into his trousers. He had done it once, but it was not quite smooth. He adjusted it. After having stayed together for a month and a half, the preparation for their departure now made the air in the room heavy. Maybe that was why Sirajul was a little slow. He stood there looking up, his head tilted at a slight angle. Raushan hadn't quite finished. She was combing her hair in front of the big mirror hanging from the wall in the dining room. She was using Keya's very personal comb—a pink one with a blue wave on it. This was the first time Keya had shared it with someone else other than her older sister and, a couple of times, with Tridib. Raushan had been using it for the past month and a half.

However, this was not the only touch of Keya on Raushan. The green chiffon scarf that was draped around Raushan's waist, neck and shoulders in an anti-clockwise direction, also belonged to Keya. Raushan had worn this same *salwar* suit the day she had arrived. But today they couldn't find the tie-and-dye scarf that originally went with the set. It must have got mixed up with other clothes in the almirah or somewhere, as it happened ever so often with Tridib and Keya's clothes, they could never find things when they needed them. So Keya had given this to Raushan, a green scarf that shimmered in the light. Unlike Keya, Raushan was not used to wearing a *salwar* suit without a scarf.

Sirajul suddenly exclaimed, 'it's the same one—the mask.' Tridib looked up. He was rolling some fancy tobacco that was actually meant for a pipe, into Capstan paper. Sirajul was speaking to Raushan or Keya, not to Tridib. The curtain in the dining space was open, so they were standing directly in front of Sirajul. But from the living room outside, where he was sitting, Tridib couldn't see them. 'Do you remember, I had once mentioned to you that Tridib had said he would attend our wedding with India Kings<sup>5</sup> in one hand and a mask in the other?' Sirajul laughed. The lines on Tridib's face moved a little too. Raushan and Keya's laughter floated in from the other room.

'This mask here—on this wall—did you notice it? Just above the door?'

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<sup>5</sup> A brand of cigarettes.

Probably Raushan gave a response, probably not. Tridib smiled to himself. Sirajul looked around and stretched his hand towards the cigarette that Tridib had just rolled and lighted. Sirajul wasn't good at rolling.

'Oh, you don't know what he is capable of! Or maybe you do, now. He is quite capable of landing up in a mask. He is absolutely crazy!'

Then they exchanged a few more words—the four of them. The heaviness of departure had somewhat lightened. From the other room, Keya reminded Tridib, 'You haven't changed into your trousers yet.' Tridib got up—to change into his trousers. It was just a matter of slipping into them. He would be going to the bus station—to see them off.

The above paragraph will be the last paragraph of the story. We've written it in advance—because of various reasons. We now have a lot of information. For example—we know the spread of the story, and its timeframe. We also know that Sirajul and Raushan, and hence Tridib and Keya, are all alive and kicking till the end. They are all alive. So that would spare us from any additional tension. If one knew the ending of the story in advance, one could avoid any excesses of emotion or melodrama. Melodrama was a delicate element. A tiny slip somewhere could pull down a writer—from a Ritwik<sup>6</sup> to a Sukhen.<sup>7</sup> So it was better to avoid it altogether.

Old Boss—it was a local wine from Goa, made from cashew nuts (or so the label claimed). It had only 25per cent V by V. The bottle had a thick golden label embossed with the picture of a Portuguese (most probably) soldier or musician playing the bagpipe. Some of it had been poured into a glass and mixed with a lot of water—maybe the amount of water was more generous than required—more than the usual amount which even when gulped down rapidly, didn't make one drunk. The drink lay delicately quivering in a beautiful translucence. The description was rather elaborate, but that was how Tridib preferred to describe the mild movement of the drink when he was writing the story down later. There was a tray beside the carpet, it depicted a beautiful scenery of Stuttgart printed on scientific instruments. The print was a reproduction from the cover, captioned 'le dainte de midi' of the 82nd Penguin edition of *Magic Mountain*. Sirajul would put down his glass underneath the silent canopy of the fine light leaves on the tray. Tridib was sure. He knew. And he knew more. He knew Sirajul was not at

<sup>6</sup> A famous Bengali director who made critically acclaimed films on complex psychological themes depicting the grim struggle of the east Bengal/East Pakistan refugee.

<sup>7</sup> A Bengali director popular among the masses for making tearful melodramatic films on family issues.

all drunk. A few loose words...but those weren't loose words really—just careless chatter of an *adda*. He did that whenever he stayed up late to chat with his friends through the night. So, with a slight jerk of his head, he would suddenly blurt out, 'No! ... Nothing!... nothing really happened... it's all false propaganda.' And Tridib would be mildly startled. He was not drunk either. In fact, he wasn't even feeling tipsy. Come on, this was only wine—not whisky or rum! And Tridib was never affected by alcohol. Once, he was out with Arup and had drunk 750 ml of Black Knight *in no time*. And the aftermath was nil, except a mild quivering of the kneecap, very mild; it had no effect on the level of his consciousness. He couldn't have booze though, because of his liver. The moment he had some, his liver would revolt, the stool would suddenly decide to turn white and create a glorious mess for the next seven days. So Tridib too, very matter-of-factly, would take a sip with an exaggerated movement of his lips. And then straightening up his backbone and widening his eyes he would ask, or maybe say, 'Nothing has happened... nothing has happened?' Once spoken, words probably took very little time to travel to the brain via the ears. So he would very quickly continue, 'not a single Hindu writer deals with Muslim characters... how strange!' At this point, the calendar on the wall would flutter in the breeze from the fan. In effect, there would be silence. Then he would again continue—with a hiccup. The hiccup would make the first syllable indistinct, but the famous name would be clear to all, 'Mahesh<sup>8</sup>... was by Sarat Chandra... yet... and Manik<sup>9</sup>... No point—he is left-minded...' To this Sirajul would say, 'Nothing... nothing at all... it's all a big lie... bull... a Muslim with a bull... nothing.' Would Sirajul be able to finish what he wanted to say? If he did, then exactly how would he say it?

There are so many sentences that Sirajul is not able to finish—for various reasons. Sometimes some of the reasons are very familiar. For example, when he had stood in front of the shower and said, 'I'll be going out for a while... I mean... the soap... actually it all happened so fast... we were so rushed.' He hadn't been able to finish his sentence.

It was a common problem—as it happens with most middle-class people. Actually he had been looking for a fresh bar of soap. From his own experiences of married life, Tridib had understood the problem—Raushan was

<sup>8</sup> A short story written by the powerful Bengali fiction writer—Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. It is a story about a Muslim and his bull, Mahesh, in times of famine.

<sup>9</sup> The name used by friends to refer to Saryajit Ray, the Bengali film director who was presented with an Oscar for life-time achievement in films.



not comfortable using a soap that was being shared by other people. It was all a matter of habit. And this was a very common habit. Keya was the same. And did Tridib not have the same habit too? Sirajul hadn't asked for the soap. He had left it incomplete, hoping that Tridib would understand. Tridib's life... having a wife... a new place... if not the soap it could be the toothpaste... if not the toothpaste it could be the towel... if not the towel it could be the bedsheet—these were episodes in life that had a continuity about them. That was why it was possible for Tridib to put himself in Sirajul's shoes, and it was possible for him to understand why Sirajul had left his sentence unfinished. To take off some of the embarrassment that Sirajul was feeling, and to lighten the situation, Tridib screamed at him fondly, 'You rascal, you want to go out, do you? Do you know the way? Will you be able to find your way back from the market? Wait a while, let me call Keya... she'll get one out of her stock... we have some from our monthly shopping.' Sirajul smiled with relief and a sense of ease, as if his relief was because of the humour on his ability, or inability, to find his way back.

Bankada had smiled too—as he usually did. But why was his smile changing? Was it actually changing or was Sirajul imagining it? Why did the smile feel as if someone had thrown up into the atmosphere and that was now permeating everything around it—the light, the darkness and the mellowness of dusk?

Why did the smile pierce Sirajul's whole being in a way that made him feel completely hollow and empty within? Why did he feel as if he possessed no ability at all—nothing at all—no backbone; as if he needed to be tied round and round in order to keep his physical parts together?

Why did he suddenly think of Raushan—a bright face radiant with a smile? Why did his sudden thought of Raushan give him a sudden urge to reach home quickly? Maybe it was because of a pre-historic habit, a habit that has driven men since ancient times to return home at the end of a day, to return to shelter, food, and the warm glow of a sense of security in one's home, family and wife.

Bankada's face seemed to become crooked—more and more—as if sparks of darkness flashed from either side of his face.

Should Sirajul return home immediately? But then what? Will his home take him far enough from Bankada and his smile? Where should he run away to, Raushan and he? What if Bankada's smile started spreading—from his face to his body, from his body to the walls around, and then to the streets, crossroads, the city, the whole of Kolkata, the country, and the whole world? Where could they run away to, Raushan and he?

Sirajul had arrived at some understanding of the smile that he came across everyday and which he had got used to. But he had no idea about the reason for the distance that was now created by that terrifying distortion on Bankada's face. Yet when Tridib smiled, Sirajul could see the face behind the smile, the head behind that face, the brain within that head—its every little fold—and he could see the flow of the sodium and potassium ions through the complex network of nerves. But why? Why did Sirajul see a mind that didn't belong to him—why? Was it because of continuity? Was it the continuity of experience? Was it the continuity of context?

It was because of continuity that sadness was perceived as sadness by everyone alike—Amal, Kamal, Bimal and so on. But every moment of Amal's life was different from Bimal's, and Kamal's. Every single micron present in every single layer of Amal's brain was different from Bimal's, and Kamal's. Yet all three of them are human beings, and all three of them are affected by sadness. In spite of all the individual differences, there was one force that remained the same—the force of continuity. The fact that Sirajul was hesitating, that in fact, something was bothering him, gave Tridib a kind of localization. He could feel the secret discomfort that was bothering Sirajul's married existence. And Sirajul was aware of this feeling of Tridib. This established a kind of similarity between the two of them. Was Tridib not expecting this similarity between them? Sirajul was a Muslim and his history was an Islamic history—very different from Tridib's Hindu history. The unfamiliarity in this regard was very deep. It was not possible to match the two—or was that what Tridib had assumed? This story has a wide span. Long back at the *adda* on one of the evenings, Abhishek and Keya had compelled Sirajul to blush and tell them about Raushan—although he had heard it so many times, Tridib could never remember the name of that girl. At that point, was Tridib tempted to analyse his own self too through the lens of a telescope? But why?

Their feet sank into the mud and slush. Their skin bled from thorns. Was that the sound of firing that they just heard? No. Then, was it fire? No—that was not possible. They had left behind any kind of habitation long back, long long back. And since then, they had walked for two days and one night, or maybe for ten million years. The darkness around seemed to devour the innermost essence of his being—the filth from the intestines, the marrow from the core of the bones and the blood within. Yet they walked. They continued walking. They had to. Their feet sank into the mud and slush. The thorns made them bleed. And they continued to flee. Some of them fell—blacked out—having pushed their bodies to the last drop. Probably they were dragged along by the others, probably not. Their bodies were left

lying by the pond among the insects, to disappear among the jackals. A young man wanted to carry the weight of his pregnant wife. But how much weight was he going to carry—on just one backbone? Was it possible for him to carry the weight of a nation's entire generation that was determined to destroy itself? His pregnant wife wept. Yet she walked. She had to walk.

Not just one person or a cluster of people, there were thousands and thousands of people, millions of people walking on and on. They had to. They were moving towards the borders. They would be crossing the borders. They were going to leave the land they had been attached to. Their senses resonated with just one emotion—they wanted to live. But not everyone managed to survive; some perished. Of course, many survived. And they bore with them a fury, the fury of Partition. Each of their deaths had been mortgaged, each of them who had made their land of birth their native land.

Tridib looked for the door to support him. The anger seemed to burst out from the depths of his being, through every vessel of his body. His rage seemed to permeate through the door he was leaning on, to the walls, the floor, the room, the house and the entire world—and shook it violently. In a ferocious yet quiet outburst, Tridib's father had said, 'get out.' He said it so softly—was he able to hear even his own voice? Was he able to see the revulsion on his own face when he shouted, 'get out?' Was he also able to see the revulsion on Tridib's face? The door, the house, the world continued to shake.

There would be a time when there would be no drinkers and no drunkenness. They would exhaust themselves only with words. And in the midst of such exhaustion, Sirajul would conclude by saying, 'You scoundrel, you bloody scoundrel—Muslims don't domesticate bulls.' Again there was the glass, with some drink still in it. The colour had changed from dark brown to a lighter shade. That was what water did—to alcohol and blood. Then, a last sip, and since that would be the end of that drink, a new one would be poured into the glass—filled with Old Boss—a wine made from cashew nuts. It had such a beautifully yellowish-red colour, youthful and vibrant with life. They were having fun, so why should they leave the bottle unfinished? Anyway it was only wine, not rum that it would harm the body. And even if it was, so what? 'Some scoundrel, some son of a scoundrel says, someone says—bloody Mahesh—a Muslim with a bull?'

Tridib had spent a lot of thought on the question that would be raised by Sirajul at one of the drinking sessions, maybe under the influence of alcohol. He had also brought up the topic on various occasions. People were surprised—'Really?—Muslims don't domesticate bulls?'—So the very basis of the story

'Mahesh' lacked authenticity? The surprise pushed everyone into silence. But Sirajul was his own kind of Muslim, one who experienced his Muslim-ness only when he went to pee or had intercourse. Not at any other times. He was just like Tridib. Or maybe a little more than Tridib. Tridib could never do it, never. Except only now, when riots enter into people's lives along with the Ram Rath. When it invaded even Tridib and Sirajul's practical reason, a place where they had very carefully nourished a feeling of religious neutrality. How fragile that neutrality of Tridib was—very fragile.

Advani's Mercedes Benz had stormed into the innermost essence of Tridib's being with all its force and power. It was so easily calculated that Tridib and Sirajul were not the same. But this calculation and this discussion belong to a much later time. At this moment, a lot of people have rushed into the room on hearing Tridib's father shout—family members. But then Tridib and his father's rage spill out of the family and into the society. What was the role of religion and religious prejudices? Was it possible to destroy our respect for elders in our journey against prejudice? The same question could be asked in a different way—was it possible to insult an individual, an invited guest, on the grounds of religious practices? The personal and individual family incidents of Tridib, his grandmother and his father had gathered their own pace and rolled like a snowball from the concrete to the abstract and from the individual to the general.

Tridib's grandmother was Shashibala Devi who was quite advanced for her times. She had been the wife of a Collector. And after his death Shashibala Devi had been collecting the pension that was due to her by signing on the receipt rather than putting her thumb imprint like many others. She came in through the door and asked Tridib's mother, who was wearing a white silk sari with a red border, to organize some items for her in a brass vessel for the rituals. This was an annual festival, and one that had been celebrated from time immemorial—a festival that preserved the continuity of the tradition of the loyal in-laws of Shashibala. Before going back inside again, she cast a fond glance at her grandson's friends. They were busy in a raucous chatter. They were all young boys and that was how they were meant to be. And after a while they would be gorging down little mounds of fruits, *luchi* and *payesh*. And that sight gave Shashibala such pleasure and fulfilment—it made her life worth living. This festival used to be held at their ancestral home of Mymensingh which is now in Bangladesh. And now it continues to be held here each year with a get-together of her grandson's friends who enjoy themselves thoroughly. Shashibala passed by them. And overheard something. Did she actually hear something? Maybe not. She hadn't heard anything at all because she couldn't hear what was being

said—she didn't want to hear. But one is forced to hear. When words are spoken aloud, someone is bound to hear. And the matter doesn't end there. One also has to react to what has been said. It was a name, just a name. And suddenly in the midst of that loving and affectionate look, all those boys who were like her grandson, found themselves being twisted around like a piece of crushed paper ball. Everything became hazy. The bright decorations at the door of the prayer room became dull. The soft sweet perfume from the smoking resin in the prayer room turned into a repulsive stink, and there wafted in a scent from a distant past—the scent of a dead body, the scent of Partition, of death, blood, corpses, rot, cremation, smoke, death, Partition...

Keya hadn't returned from her office. Sirajul, that bastard Sirajul, had slept away the whole of a Saturday afternoon like a dead goat. His face was swollen and so were his eyes. Tridib was jealous of Sirajul's grogginess. And to get out of the grogginess the bastard had been smoking away butts from the ashtray. He knew that Tridib would soon be back from office and would have cigarettes on him. Of course, Tridib was informed of this by a complaining Raushan. And Tridib was ecstatic—first, to be jealous and finally, to have an annoyed Sirajul trudging down the stairs noisily. He would now have to walk miles to go down the stairs, on to the road, the main road, the crossroads, and the island on the main road to reach the cigarette shop. 'Go! rascal, go! This is what happens when you sleep through an entire afternoon.' Raushan knew how careless Tridib was—probably it was a luxury to be careless. So she got his pyjamas for him from the clothesline in the verandah. They were hanging from a pair of clips that Keya had bought at a bargain from the stalls at Gariahat— 4 rupees 50 paisa for a dozen. She gave a naughty smile and asked, 'Shall I also get your shirt?' Tridib smiled too and nodded his head rapidly from top to bottom. It was the beautifully pleasant season of spring, neither cold nor hot. And the water at this time of the year was such a delight. As the cool water flowed all over him, Tridib was reminded of his childhood and some poems of nature that he had learnt. But he couldn't quite recollect whether it was Jasimuddin or Jatindra Mohan Sengupta or Bibhuti.<sup>10</sup> There was a soft warmth in everything around—the walls, chair, bookcase, soiled clothes, the contractor's plaster that had peeled off at one corner of the wall. It was as if it was a sweltering summer noon and in the midst of that heat, he was lying down in the cool

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<sup>10</sup> Bengali writers.

shade of a cluster of big trees, with a juicy sweet greenish-white star-apple in his hand. Tridib bit into the taut flesh, held it around his lips and let the cool juice run down his throat. The juice came from deep within the earth's womb. Tridib was sitting on a stool, in his five by eight verandah. Raushan had put the kettle on. Tridib could hear the sounds—of putting the switch on, the tinkling of the pots, the stirring of the spoon trying to dissolve the last grain of sugar. From the verandah he could see the entire road—the way that would be taken by a sleepy Sirajul, with a lighted cigarette in his hands, to return to this house. Raushan came into the verandah and stood there with her weight on the railings. She was wearing a kaftan, in a black and off-white print. It was tied in a tight knot around her waist just below the breast. It was Keya's. In a hurry they couldn't bring too many clothes. The kaftan wrapped itself loosely around Raushan's body from neck to toe in a softly feminine manner. Raushan turned her face to look at Tridib. She gave a meaningful smile and said, 'I've left the leaves to soak. It'll take three minutes. So I'm going to count chimpanzee one, chimpanzee two, till 180.' Tridib had taught her this the previous day, in order to make good tea the leaves had to be soaked for three minutes. Also that the best way to keep track of minutes was to keep counting chimpanzee one, chimpanzee two and so on. So Tridib smiled too. His smile did not confine itself to his lips. It spread all over his cheeks and gradually seemed to melt down his jaws, neck and right into his heart—what a delightful feeling it was. Tridib had no younger sister, just an older one whom he hadn't met for the last two years. But the feelings he felt for Raushan were like that for a little sister. Raushan was quite child-like and it was from that child-like spontaneity that she addressed him with an informal 'tumi', and it made Tridib very happy. Yet when Tridib and Keya had first met Raushan at the Academy theatre for the first time after her wedding, Sirajul had hoped that she would soon grow out of her small town upbringing at Baharampur and transform herself to cope with Kolkata as soon as possible. That day, was Tridib slightly surprised when Raushan addressed him as 'Tridibda,'? His only source of information on Muslim lifestyle was through the characters portrayed in serials on various television channels. And as an influence of that probably he had anticipated that she would address him as "bhaiya" or anything else—not "dada." Not consciously, but somewhere in the depths of his heart he was probably disappointed. An address of "Tridib bhaiya", a liberal use of Urdu words and a *salwar* suit embroidered in elaborate shining gold or silver thread would have lived up to his expectations of what he had viewed in the TV serials (like 'Garam Hawa'). All of these were negated by her use of "Tridibda". But again, was that address able to bridge the distance completely?

Probably it was not evident in the way she addressed Tridib, but her non-Bengaliness was surely going to surface at some other time— after all, the Muslims were not Bengalis. The novel *Srikanta*, began very naturally with a football match between the Bengalis and the Muslims. Tridib, though, did not agree with the theory that the Muslims were not Bengalis. But the very act of a denial contained within it the element of difference. Just as the very act of denying the existence of God, contained within it the powerful presence of a seductive youth called 'God.' And then we begin to feel his emphatic and noisy presence. So after having heard the announcement that the tea was being soaked for three minutes, he would normally have reacted spontaneously. But he was guarded in his reactions and before saying anything he turned it around quickly in his mind, to make sure that the distance created between them by the unfamiliarity of culture, did not create any negative effect. For Tridib, Raushan was like a little sister; but somehow not quite.

Although the writing of the story started on the 26th of January 1991, the writing continued. It would continue till the 14th of June 1991. So the past that did not exist when the story had begun, existed now. Tridib had a teacher from his university days with whom he had still kept in touch. He visited this Mastarmoshai sometimes for a chat. In the midst of his efforts to give up smoking, and running his fingers through his moustache, Mastarmoshai would say, 'I've just come back from a visit to Malda. They have taken this up as an election of propaganda, but they are gaining ground for sure.' He moved his head from side to side and scratched his beard. The light shone brightly on his bald head and the thick lenses of his small square glasses. Was Tridib surprised by the reflection of that light? Or had that surprise already existed within him? 'What have they written on the walls? Is the cry of an Iraqi mother who has lost her child more heart-rending than the cry of a Kashmiri mother who has lost her child? This was not possible, this would never be understood by someone who had not interacted with the ideology of the left.' On the other side of the room, on the wall beside a table there were three beautiful prints of Jamini Ray. It was a very pleasing sight, because Tridib's head was reeling—he had low blood pressure. Mastarmoshai had the same problem too. 'Actually we tend to forget something—an incident cannot disappear from the social level so easily...' probably at the burden of his own comment, Mastarmoshai swayed his head as he spoke. 'I've seen the riots of 1964... have the effects vanished already... from the life of a nation?'

Mastarmoshai was in the mode of a conversation, not a monologue. So Tridib had said something too—he must have. Maybe something similar to

Abhishek's 'I am feeling very scared.' These words had no meaning in isolation. They were spoken as part of a flow. So Tridib must have said something similar, or else Mastarmoshai wouldn't have moved on to the next words.

'Actually, who was going to stop the BJP<sup>11</sup>? It would have been possible only if the left parties had been in power all over the country. Because, the nationalism of the Congress is the nationalism of the Hindus—at least its formulation is such, that apart from facing the position of the BJP, there is no scope to even create a counter position.'

The elections were just round the corner. And Tridib had participated in so many of these conversations. But were these conversations able to provide Tridib with a sense of security that Abhishek had been looking for? In the midst of a deep darkness, Kolkata was being wrung into different parts—a Kolkata here and a Kolkata there, but all in all there was no Kolkata—it belonged to everyone. Abhishek had come to Kolkata from Midnapore. He submitted stories to newspapers in Kolkata—his Kolkata—one that was a combination of various communities—the land they were attached to and the land they worshipped. And because they worshipped the land, they were attached to it. The blood from Rajabazaar flowed into Janbazaar, the leaping flames of Burrabazaar had its effect in Bowbazaar where homes were burnt down to ashes. The terror spread everywhere. The bus that Abhishek took to reach the newspaper office was also a target. It had become a part of communal rituals. So how would Abhishek take that bus towards that cramped little room in the Hindustan Building at Dharmatala? How was he going to submit his story on India's foreign policy at the office of the fortnightly supplement? Or how was Sirajul going to go back to Taltala where he had a tiny little room? But so what? At least he had a nice and proper bed there (now he had not one, but two beds—this was his post-marriage phase). The gentleman got off the same bus as Abhishek. He arranged his umbrella, and his dhoti. What was he going to do? He had already retired, but somehow managed to find a job with a private company to maintain their accounts—he had to run his family. But how was he going to reach the destination of his meagre salary of 650 rupees per month? How, for goodness' sake, would the lovers of Kolkata walk down the dusty streets? Even the streets had now been taken over by the communal forces and had been turned into disturbed areas.

It was only a name, just a name that Tridib's grandmother had heard. She heard someone call out a name. And why not? One had to use a name

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<sup>11</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party who played the nationalist Hindu card in the elections referred to here.



to call someone. The purpose of a name was to call it out aloud. And that was how the person was called—Inamul. That was his name—Inamul Kabir. They had a Pomelo tree in their house. It bore fruit twice a year—actually there was fruit round the year. And it was really, really sour. So people had to look for Inamul's sister, Poppy, to ask for some salt—not for any other reason. They peeled the skin, added salt to the soft pink flesh of the Pomelo and relished every bite of its strong stinging taste. That was why they needed to look for Poppy and call out her name repeatedly. And unlike Inamul's, her name gave no indication of the difference in their history. But Inamul's name did, and that was why, just the utterance of that one name transformed Tridib's grandmother's affectionate and indulgent look into a ghost-like one.

Tridib's friends were taken totally by surprise. They were stunned, and couldn't make sense of what was happening. They stood there paralysed, looking from one to the other. And a horribly ugly spirit descended into the room. It spiralled like a whirlwind, went round and round, and sucked Tridib's father into the vortex. And Tridib too. There was screaming and shouting all around and more screaming and shouting to counter that; the building began to shake; a family issue became a social one. From the depths of his throat, grinding the words between his teeth, Tridib's father uttered, 'Get out.'

There was fried fish—thick big slices of Pomfret—and not only Old Boss, but also gin. Both of them liked it—with gin the effect set in very gradually, didn't it? It could take even hours. The gin from the bottle of Forbes was mixed in the glass with the lime cordial. There was a strong and pungent smell of fresh oranges. Was Tridib's hand shaking slightly? What rubbish! Hands always have a mild tremor. Try holding them in front of you without any support—they will tremble. And so they did when Tridib poured a peg, or maybe a little more, into a glass with square angular cuts. And then he would ask a question in surprise, or maybe that was the right way to ask those questions, with a hint of surprise. He would ask, 'What do you mean? Ardhendu Mitra—the latest wanna-be in the market of Bengali writers following the footsteps of Tagore and Ray?' Tridib would have loved to add some lip-smacking expletives, but couldn't think of any. He continued, 'Photography, films, poetry, novels—he has a finger in everything. And to top it all, the scoundrel is a product of left-wing politics—the leftists of the 1940s and the 1950s. Is he the one?' Sirajul held up his forefinger unnecessarily. Unnecessarily because it didn't seem to have any connection with what was being discussed. The finger was oily and yellow from spices of the fried Pomfret that he was having. He held up his forefinger—as if it was the

watchman of eternal Time—and replied, ‘Yes. Yes, yes, yes. It’s the same Ardhendu Mitra. And the sister-fucker has the gall to tell me—why do you have only Muslim characters in your writing? You should use Hindu characters the way Rahaman does.’ The finger went down and the head kept moving gently from top to bottom. It was late into the night and the soft breeze on the window kept swaying the reflection of the lamppost on the panes. ‘You rascal, do you think I am Rahaman? I am Sirajul. Am I a bloody stinking frustrated rascal that needs to use Hindu characters to be successful as a writer?’ Was Tridib aware of this—that not everyone was Sirajul? That there were also those like Bhai Abu Jafar Azhar Hashmi who wrote poems on the Ganga, the golden age of Rama, the idea of going to heaven after death and so on so that they could get a place in a poetry reading session, and be seen on television? Maybe, some day, Sirajul would do the same too.

Sirajul and Raushan were staying with Tridib and Keya. Now this was their residence. So their friends dropped in here, and quite naturally they became friends of Tridib and Keya too. Rezak dropped in once in a while. His wife was Ayesha. Rezak was very good at cooking Korma. And he described the process in great detail. First, the spices—cinnamon, cardamom, cloves etc.—had to be pounded a couple of times and put into smoking oil. When the oil became fragrant, one had to fry some finely chopped onions in it. In the meantime the meat should have been marinated separately with natural yogurt and a paste of ginger, red chillies garlic and onion. This marinated meat had to be added to the spices and onion in the oil on the hob. It was better to use a pressure cooker than the usual *kadai*—it cooked the meat just right for a heavenly and delicious meal. But if one was using a *kadai*, there was need to add some more spice immediately before taking it off from the hob—some cumin seeds fried in oil and ground with a rolling pin used to make breads. The amount of cumin seeds had to be just right, neither less nor more. These had to be sprinkled over the meat. Oh! Delicious! This was how Rezak described the process. In the excitement of listening to the elaborate description, they start talking about having a feast. Come on! Let’s have one! What about Sirajul, Raushan, Keya and Tridib—shall we have a grand feast then? Though Tridib was a Sengupta, in affairs of food he was a true Brahmin. The mark of a true Brahmin lay in his desire for good food and hospitality. And Tridib was delighted not only by good food, but also at the prospect of it. In the excitement of the moment, he declared, ‘I am going to sponsor rasgollas from Chittaranjan and the korma will be sponsored by Rezak. What are the others going to contribute? Please volunteer quickly—the sooner the better!’

The topic of the feast gathered its own momentum like a snowball. And then Ayesha spoke. She took off from where they had left off—a discussion on religious practices, or the irrelevance of it—that religion was a backdated concept, and that it was amazing how the citizens of their country had a silly reverence for ritualistic traditions. She spoke out, ‘let’s have some pork.’ There was some novelty and excitement in the suggestion because Tridib and Keya often had beef with them.

Rezak stopped—for a split second. Maybe he was looking at Ayesha or maybe at the wall. Or was it a look of emptiness that Tridib noticed in his eyes? Or was it only Tridib’s imagination? It was quite natural and logical for Rezak to pause. After all, we use pauses all the time to negotiate the maze of words, thoughts, sentences, speech, change of topic and all such things that fill our lives. A pause is like an idiom that adds value to it and bestows on it significance, the significance of religion and the significance of identity. But Rezak’s identity—in the past, present, future and all times, the pre-Ram Rath age and the post-Ram Rath age—was derived from religion, just like Tridib’s. Rezak’s and Tridib’s identities became different. Was there already an emptiness in the words Rezak spoke and the tales he told? And was that an indication of his identity? At least, that was what Tridib was thinking, and maybe in the same way, that was indicative of Tridib’s identity too. Was the emptiness one of discomfort, or hesitation, or incoherence? Or of having discovered an emptiness?

Was it anger? Maybe not. It was a desire to kill one’s own self—Tridib felt suicidal. He screamed with all his might and the air around reverberated from it. He kept kicking at everything around him—the heap of marigold flowers, the traditional mixture of rice and banana used as an offering and the innumerable brass utensils—he continued to kick all these away like a man possessed. This was a childish reaction—maybe it was, but one had to react. Just as one had to react and move away from the path of an approaching vehicle. So he kicked, and kicked, and he screamed, and shouted. He shouted, ‘I’ll piss down the throat of your goddess Rajlakshmi...’ Yet he couldn’t calm down. He could only see the portrait of a pale face and that portrait being torn into bits and pieces—his friends taking Inamul away from the room, and the portrait lying shattered on the ground. It shattered Tridib too. It tore him to pieces. Was there something more that could happen? More humiliation? He continued to kick—left and right. Was someone holding him by the arms? Was it one person or many people? The chains that held him back were being turned and twisted and shaken all over and the tremors reached the altar. It was as if a wild monster was raising its ugly head, its body twisting and turning in revolt of the fetters, and the chains

were beginning to bend from the impact. But he had never seen chains before. The Rajlakshmi puja was hereditary and it was a festival. So how did it matter whether the guests were Hindus or Muslims? What was the significance of the sanctity of the threshold of the prayer room, and the presence of Inamul and so on? Tridib didn't believe in religious practices—everyone at home knew that he ate beef, including grandmother. So what did it all mean—Hindus and Muslims and Inamul and Rajlakshmi puja... the more he thought, the more confused he became and the monster within him rumbled with more and more ferocity. And it was this ferocity that would bring his father downstairs—at that instant—and ask him to leave.

The atmosphere in the room had the effect of a kind of investigation. There was the wild animal... the kicking... and more kicking... the rice and bananas... the offerings... again the kicking... Tridib... the kicking—everything combined to give it an investigative element. But whose investigation was it? It was Tridib's. But which Tridib was it? The Tridib of now or the Tridib of earlier times? Tridib's investigation was directed towards his own self. And he continued—kicking at everything around him—a kick to the right, a kick to the left, a kick at the offerings to the goddess, another at the marigold flowers, one at the grandmotherliness of grandmother, another at grandmother's progeny and Tridib's inheritance, and this kick was at Haradhan Ganguly for having been their class teacher in classes eight, nine and ten—for three consecutive years, a kick for all those scoundrels who were more than fifty years old and wore their trousers above their navels, this one was at the constitution of India, that one was for harmony, friendship and freedom. But just observe it—observe it along with Tridib. The kicks went round and round in circles, they went round and round in an emptiness. He had been kicking all around—left, right, forwards and backwards. Yet, in spite of all the kicks, it didn't reach the altar of the goddess Rajlakshmi. Why? Was it only because of his grandmother and father? Was it not because of him too? And even if Tridib had been able to kick at the altar of the goddess, would that reason for his not being able to do it have disappeared? Tridib stopped—in a vacuum. Rezak had stopped in a vacuum too. In a split second Rezak joined the excitement, 'Why not? Of course! Let's have pork this time.' Tridib starts writing a story. The pen begins to move again. (The pen had actually been moving all the time—even when it was describing stillness and inaction. It was impossible to make out the moments—of action or inaction.)

In the meantime, we've had the elections—the elections of 1991. And what did we gain out of it? Prannoy Roy. He was the man of the elections—the anchor of the best election analysis on television. He spoke so well, and he

was so smart—I love you Prannoy (not Rasna).<sup>12</sup> It was Prannoy Roy who brought to the screen Indranil Banerjea (he wrote his surname with an ‘a’ at the end, rather than a double ‘e’). He pulled his eyebrows back a little, tilted his head slightly forward and held the mace, not the mace—the microphone, towards Atal Behari Vajpayee. Banerjea asked him if they were planning to have another Rath Yatra so that they could get even more votes. Did Tridib go cold—just for a moment? The camera moved back to Prannoy. One could see him over and over again. Each time he had new faces with him. This time it was the editor of an all-India English daily—Nandan C. Datta Ray. In an answer to a question he said that the BJP was not a communal party—they had an economic agenda. The innumerable votes that had been cast in favour of the BJP were a reflection of the people’s legitimate disillusionment with the economic policies of the previous government. Tridib shouted out angrily, ‘Hey! Kick the mother-fucker in his arse.’ But it had been very inappropriate of him. Because, first, the other person present in the room was his wife, with whom he never used the informal form of ‘you’ as he did in that comment. Second, it was utterly indecent to talk to a lady about someone’s arse, even if it was that of Nandan C. Datta Ray. But, decent or not, such comments sprang to Tridib’s lips very naturally time and again. For example, when his friend Mihir came into their tiny room, sat on the cane sofa with cushions that did not match either in colour or in shape, tilted his head as if surveying the room, looked out for Keya and commented jokingly, ‘Can’t see the lady of the house—is Keya gradually taking to purdah?’ In the meantime, Keya walked into the room, having changed into some decent clothes in place of the flimsy ones she was wearing at home. She looked cheerful. People always looked cheerful when they had guests. Maybe they had to. Or probably Keya had genuinely found something to be amused about—guests also brought a lot of fun with them.

Keya replied cheerfully, ‘What’s the hurry, Mihir?’ And Mihir had to counter that. That was how humour and repartees continued—lingering on to moments that had just passed or were going to pass soon. ‘Oh! So you haven’t gone behind the purdah, like Begum Keya Sengupta or Keya Khaatoon!’ he said.

Did the comment make Tridib cringe with discomfort? It was not only discomforting but probably also stinging. In terms of religion, Tridib was neutral. He was...er...democratic, and it was his duty to uphold that. And it

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<sup>12</sup> A caption from a popular television advertisement of a squash, Rasna, where a little girl says, “I love you Rasna”.

had its own self-imposed codes of conduct—no jokes about the Sardars, no referring to the marwaris as ‘meros,’ and so on. Weren’t these codes being violated? Probably not, not yet—Mihir could stretch his joke a little more, just a little bit more. What Tridib had heard were the alarms of the possibility of a violation. It was actually a moment of micro-decision. Was the comment that Mihir made intended to ridicule the Muslims? And was that why it had attacked Tridib’s sense of secularism? Or did Mihir’s comment have an element of historicity about it? Mihir had actually stated a truth, rather a practical fact—an unbiased, statistical, quiet academic fact that the purdah system was a practice that was followed by the Muslims. But was the fact redundant? Or did it emerge again and again in the form of a redundancy, to be used as an argument for something else—an argument that was very different from stating a fact of life?

Keya didn’t like it either. That was not surprising. The force of Mihir’s comment had attacked Keya too in the same manner, ‘Don’t say that. Kha-toon and Begum do not invariably imply that, Mihir,’ she replied. Her words hardly had any facts, not much of content either, yet the address ‘Mihir’ at the end had a sting about it.

Was Mihir taken aback a little? Maybe. Mihir was intelligent, and intelligence meant the ability to process a number of facts simultaneously. He remembered that very recently a Muslim couple, a friend of their’s, had come and stayed with Tridib and Keya in this flat. So Mihir was a little worried if his words came across as a personal attack to Keya. And even Mihir himself didn’t want to be labelled as a communal. And these were people who, according to Tridib and Keya, were absolutely secular—a Muslim couple, who came and stayed with Tridib and Keya. Secularism was a very good thing—everybody knew that, and even Mihir agreed.

‘Of course, of course, that’s for sure! Absolutely! Right, Keya, can I have some coffee please?’ Mihir said and turned towards Tridib, ‘This percolator that you use to make the coffee—it’s a wonderful thing, I must say. We should get one too. What flavour!’ There was a sense of relief all around. Mihir as an individual had no intentions of attacking Keya as an individual.

But not everyone was taken aback. And that was what Mastermoshai spoke of. He realized Tridib was restless. But he didn’t know the reason—Tridib wanted to have a smoke, but couldn’t do so in case he also tempted Mastermoshai who had given up smoking very recently. Mastermoshai was worried about Tridib’s sitting comfort. So he pushed an extra stool towards Tridib. As if Tridib would stop being restless if he could put his feet on to a low stool. Stroking his beard he said, ‘Loads—loads of comments—they have four or five wives... Bangladesh had just had a severe storm... they

needn't worry... each person would marry five times and in two years the population... actually... actually all this is meaningless. It is creating a panic, you know, a panic—that the Muslims are going to capture everything.' Finally, Tridib lighted the cigarette. 'Have you been through yesterday's Aajkaal? They have mentioned the fact there—not very rigorously, haven't probably mentioned the source either—they say that in India the Hindus were more polygamous than the Muslims, and so on. But what's the point in having facts? Actually it all stems from panic, hate and repulsion. How many of the Muslims in India have come from the Middle East? Most of them have been untouchables—it's the lower castes that have been converted. The fear and panic had always been there—we could never get rid of it—have pointed this out in my writings too. And the present situation is the culmination of that panic. It's panic.' The panic spread. It surrounded Tridib too. Panic bred panic. And created panic about panic.

Had Bankada noticed him in the procession against communalism? But he was not the only one—there were others as well. It had been organized by some Nagarik Sabha or Nagarik Samity. A lot of people had joined in. Walking with the procession made Sirajul feel quite good. It gave him a feeling of being politically conscious. Also, he genuinely believed that communalism was an extremely frightening phenomenon. And such a large number of people had joined the procession because they thought it was justified and meaningful. This locality housed a large number of the working class—those working at the docks and at various other places. Many of them had joined too. Bankada had noticed him in the midst of those people. Was it because of that he had started asking around about Sirajul? Else how did he find out all of a sudden? Of course there was no reason for him to not know—Sirajul had never concealed his religious identity. Yet Bankada had, somehow, assumed that he was a Hindu. But why? Was it because Sirajul did not wear a beard? Because he did not wear a cap, or a lungi? It was not only Bankada whose mind was coloured by such an image of a Muslim man. In one of the Sunday Supplements of one of the newspapers, there was a story about a young modern university-bred and politically active Muslim man. And the illustration from the newspaper's art room that accompanied the story was that of a man with a beard but without a moustache, wearing a lungi and a cap. Sirajul didn't write to them objecting to it—there was no point.

The glasses he wore, the spattering of English in his speech, the air about him of an educated man—all these had contributed to Bankada's assumption. Bankada had in no way been able to think of Sirajul as a

Muslim. He had automatically assumed Sirajul to be a Hindu. But now the assumption lay shattered. Was that the reason why his taunting smile had turned ferocious?

‘The way you carry yourself, one would think you were a Hindu.’

The man spoke in an extremely humiliating and ugly manner. Sirajul felt sick. How did this man have the audacity to speak to him in such a manner? Sirajul was, after all, a writer. He had to his credit five published novels and three collections of short stories. A translated version of his stories had also been published in English. So how did this man at the corner shop have the gall to speak to him in such a manner?

‘All these processions and stuff are not going to help—you understand? We are going to drive away every bloody Muslim—send the bloody rascals packing off to Pakistan. Now there will be only one bloody party here—the lotus<sup>13</sup>—do you understand?’

He was aware that this particular locality had a lot of supporters for the lotus—the BJP. Sirajul was thoroughly shaken; he felt sick; and his whole body trembled—was it because he was aware of the presence of all those BJP supporters in the neighbourhood, or was it because of the unexpected shock of the humiliation, or was it because his mind suddenly went back to Raushan? Or was it panic? Should he run away from this locality? But where to? The fear and terror within him was now becoming almost tangible. He would take Raushan and flee—immediately. But where to? Anywhere. Somewhere—where there was no panic.

The panic was gradually spreading all over the nation. There was panic, and there were rumours about panic, and that created even more panic. The all-round panic had made people tense about panic itself, about partition, and about the torture of the Hindus in Bangladesh. But much of that was made up. Tridib had a part-time domestic help, an elderly lady, Paruldi. She was forever eager to relate her long-winding life story to anyone who cared to listen. Complaining bitterly about her lazy husband one day, she had told Tridib, ‘At least on this side of the border I was able to go out and work.’ That was why they had come away from Bangladesh, she had stated. But in the light of what she had said once, earlier, it didn’t quite make sense to Tridib. He asked, ‘But hadn’t you said earlier that you were beaten up and driven away by the Muslims?’

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<sup>13</sup> The lotus is the election symbol of the BJP.



'Oh, one needs to say such things—they appeal to people,' she had replied.

This reasoning, combined with her wise smile, had taken Tridib completely by surprise—even Tridib the storyteller was stunned. Practical compulsions of life made people so worldly wise! It would surely appeal to the people Paruldi worked for, because they thought that India was gradually being taken over by the Muslims.

Tridib's feet slipped a little. But there was nothing to worry. His arm on the banister stretched just a little with a mild jerk. And then Tridib continued climbing down the stairs, quietly, one step at a time. Sirajul was momentarily alarmed and made some vague throaty sound. Then he too continued climbing down the stairs, quietly. He didn't feel like speaking. He was tired. It was so tiring really to hunt for a house. How many more was he destined to visit and come away disappointed? The open air outside with the sky above was a welcome change from the cramped and stuffy room of the mezzanine floor they had just left. How delightful it was outside. And comforting. Probably that was why he was able to say to Sirajul, 'This is not going to work, you know. I'll have to look for a place in the usual localities—Rajabazar or Park Circus. No one's going to give me a place to live in outside those neighbourhoods.'

Sirajul had a light smile on his lips—it was sarcastic. Or was it a smile of the oppressed? An oppressor could never have that smile, because he lacked in self-realization. Sirajul gave a deep sigh. He was so tired. Why was he so tired and so disappointed? Was it because he would have to delay his wedding if he couldn't find a house? But was it only because of that?

How could the Muslims take over the whole of India? In a place like Kolkata, apart from two or three areas, the rest was out of their bounds. They passed by a street-corner meeting. Tridib couldn't see the speaker very well—he wore very high-powered glasses.

The elections were round the corner, but there was no excitement—none at all this time. Actually, the people are fed up you know, someone remarked, of the huge expenses year after year. Tridib stopped at the street-corner. But why? Was it because the speaker was saying something about the Hindu-Muslim issue? The speaker was a very young man—it was clear from the voice. But he spoke well.

He was saying something to the effect that the Central government had been pampering the fundamentalist faction among the Muslims for its own vested interest. His voice was well modulated. And he continued to speak—changing his tone and his manner from time to time. One of the men from the crowd let off a disgusted and contemptuous 'pooh!' and walked off.

The bottle of gin was half empty. The night was halfway through too. The air carried drops of darkness with it and it seeped into the room through the open window. The head felt very heavy. Why did people have such a lot of sand in their heads? It made the head so heavy, forcing it to bend down.

'To be a bloody successful writer, will I have to bloody include Hindu characters and write from a Hindu perspective? Will I have to be a Hindu?'

Tridib realized Sirajul was gradually getting drunk. He himself was, of course, not drunk. It was just that his fingers involuntarily reached up to his chin, and went around his lips and chin and cheeks and forehead, and seemed to be grinding these with their grip. He hadn't become drunk at all. That was why he could make out that Sirajul was drunk.

'There will be no bloody Muslim at all. Everything, everything will become Hindu. Only being a Hindu can bring success.'

Tridib could feel for Sirajul. He had accompanied Sirajul on his house-hunt. He had seen that Sirajul had not been able to find a place. In the whole big city, he would be able to find a place only in one of the three localities where only people from his community lived. All of a sudden, Tridib became drunk too. Later, while writing this story, he was going to use this drunkenness as a justification for his own self. He was very angry. But why? Was it because he was feeling helpless? Or was it because he had no answer to Abhishek's feeling of terror?

'You... you bloody Muslims too, are... how shall I put it... you bloody... orthodox... you mother-suckers... you are extremely conservative.' Tridib's entire anger found expression in his hands. It moved a little too fast probably. His glass came down on the tray heavily—was it a bit too heavy? A trickle of gin and lime flowed over the breathtaking scenery of Stuttgart. Tridib wanted to say more. He was angry and he wanted to use stronger words. In the meantime, the scenery of Stuttgart was becoming clouded, and there was a mild tremor. The leaves on the trees were actually moving. The alcohol continued to flow over it. It would drip on to the carpet soon—it had to be contained. Tridib couldn't compose his words. 'You guys are mother-suckers... the Shariat... even your own wife... you wouldn't... unless the bloody Shariat tells you to... no.'

He was very angry. But was it only with Sirajul? Where was his immense anger on Sirajul stored all this while? But Tridib was painfully aware of Sirajul's position. It was painful because whatever pained Sirajul, pained him too. But probably he could share Sirajul's pain only at moments when he was not conscious of the fact that Sirajul was Muslim. Otherwise he wouldn't have forgotten the difficult situation that Sirajul was in. He knew very well that it was much more difficult for Sirajul to be secular than it was

for Tridib. Yet Sirajul, in spite of all the difficulties and hurdles, clung on to the beliefs that he thought were true. Tridib was very well aware of this.

'Tridib... you... you are saying this... you rascal... you say I believe in the Shariat... yes, I do... will I bloody disown my parents... my dad, my mum... shall I discard them? I believe in the Shariat... yes, I do, you bastard... so what...? Who are you to point at me?'

Sirajul seemed to be struggling to push his way through a soft, yet interminable, current of darkness. He continued, 'Tridib, you know everything—my background, my people, my village... Tridib, you can afford to remain a Hindu unknown to yourself and unknown to anyone else around you... you can afford to remain a Hindu even when you are secular.' He was very tired. The veins in his head throbbed with pain. Sirajul couldn't cope anymore...if only he could have died... but what does death mean...? Did it mean an endless fall and decline?

'Why should I point at you? Bloody, you were the one accusing and abusing Ardhendu Mitra... you are communal yourself.'

'Tridib, do call me a Muslim, but don't call me communal, Tridib. It hurts because it's a matter of pride—I pride myself in not being communal.'

Tridib knew, at least these days he tried to find out, even after this story was written and completed—that it didn't really matter if a Muslim or a Hindu followed or did not follow the Shariat or the Puranas. Yet, he felt like attacking. But what was he trying to attack? Was it the fear that Abhishek had felt? Was it Advani? Was it the PAC? But they were not present in front of him.

'You call me communal, Tridib...? You... you bastard... you son of a bitch.'

There was a jerk and an agitated stir. Two glasses and a bottle rolled away. The alcohol flowed on to the floor. The scuffle became more and more severe. The air was filled with the sound of heavy breathing—getting faster and faster. Malice, revenge... a desire to kill... the two bodies were stained with alcohol... the feeling of malice, revenge, and the desire to kill emerged from the secret chambers of the two bodies, combined with the smell of alcohol, spread all around the place. These were two bodies that were drunk... and helpless. They could neither kill nor get killed. They just flapped their limbs—bragging and vaunting—in drunken helplessness. Outside the window and the four walls of the room, the world was covered in miles and miles of darkness.

But this drunkenness was only a part of a story. It had never taken place at all—neither before the story nor after. In the world of the story, however, it was a moment of expectation—a tense and anxious wait.

There were four of them—two couples—a Hindu couple and a Muslim couple. It was horribly hot and stuffy for October, and they couldn't stay inside the rooms. They were standing there in the darkness. But how long was the darkness going to last? Not very long probably—usually the load shedding did not last long—a couple of hours at the most.

Was Raushan thinking of her flat in Behala? Was she missing her cosmetics that were neatly arranged on a tray placed on a little table beside the bed in her room? Was that area having load shedding too? Did she miss her own place once in a while? Of course she did. Both Tridibda and Keyadi were wonderful people but this was, after all, not Raushan's own flat. She was now longing to get back. But when—when would they be able to get back there? How was this all going to end? The Masjid will be broken, fine—but what next? Riots had broken out in seven big cities—that was the latest news on TV before the power went off. But what next? Will it become seven times seven, forty-nine? But what next? Raushan started feeling very scared. What was going to happen next? They were all scared—Sirajul and Tridib and Keya.

They kept waiting in the dark—either standing or sitting. The verandah was wrapped in complete darkness. There was darkness everywhere—at the sides, the top and the bottom. There were a couple of dim lights blinking here and there at a distance—as if flames from a candle or a fire. There one moment and gone the next. They continued to wait.

But remember, this is not the end of the story. The story hasn't ended yet.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri



TAGORE  
(RABINDRANATH)

Swapnamoy Chakrabarty

‘Just imagine that you live in the city while your wife lives in your village home. And imagine that you have received a letter from her. And what has she written to you my dears...? Well, let me tell you... she has written—I love you and you love me, I am in love and you are in love, I am fine and you are fine, and many more such sweet nothings, my dears. Then there is a circle at the end of it and she has written I have kissed here and you kiss here too. You read the letter and you read your wife’s words and your heart starts fluttering. You read it twice, you read it three times, and you read it a fourth time, my dear lads. You carry it in your pocket to the office and read it when your boss is not looking. Then you read it in buses and trams, you read it while walking on the road, again at night you reach out from within the mosquito net to read it for one last time, and in trying to do so you upset the lantern and the nylon mosquito net starts burning...’

‘You poor Musalman!’

‘Look, my dear, you spend days reading your wife’s letters. You think of her in your sleep, you see her in your dreams. You spend days thinking of your wife’s love for you. But have you ever thought of the benign Khuda who illuminates the sky to give us light? Do you realize that it is through this light, the breeze, the river—water, the chirping of birds, and the perfume of flowers that he sends us his words of love all day through?’

‘You poor Musalman!’

‘OK, what do you need to repair a shoe? You need nails. And you need glue to put together paper. Then what will you use, my dear, when your Muslim-ness snaps?’

‘Well, Muslims of Iran and Turan; Muslims of Pakistan and Bakistan; American Muslims, Harmonian Muslims and Armenian Muslims; are all bound by the one common thread—the thread of Muslim-ness.’

'Everyone say after me—

Bismilla's Ram and Rahim  
Salam alaika to our fathers  
Salam alaika to our mothers  
Salam alaika to our friends.'

'So, how was it?' asked Amit. Kkari Abbasuddin replied, 'You've erred at the most crucial points—the last words. It should be: "Bismilla's and Rahman's Rahim". And the appropriate way to greet is to say "assalam alaikum arah matullahi abarakatuhu..."'

The play was called 'Ram and Rahim'. Bhajan Sarkar was the playwright and director. He was also the senior cashier of this bank. The idea of a programme on communal harmony was his brainwave. And the play on this theme too was his brainchild. There weren't too many published plays in Bengali on this theme. Samaresh Basu's 'Adab' had already been performed by at least six office clubs. So Bhajanbabu decided to write a play himself.

The play was set in a village. The focus was on two districts. The Muslims lived in one, the Hindus in another. On one side the Muslims were singing their religious songs, and on the other side the Hindus were singing theirs. Suddenly, there was fire at the Hindu site. And all the Muslims started running towards the fire to rescue their Hindu brothers. This situation contained the following dialogue:

'Kadeb Ali: Burn, let them all burn and die in the fire of Hell. Why should we rescue them?'

'Haji Abu Bakkar: Stop. It is a crime to have such thoughts. We are children of Allah. The same blood runs through all our bodies. They are our brothers. They are in trouble. Allah will not forgive us if we don't help them in such a situation. Let's go.'

Haji Abu Bakkar pulled out the charred remains of Bhaktadas Babaji.<sup>1</sup> Screaming with pain he asked for water ... water ... Abu Bakkar said, 'Here, here's some *pani*'. Bhaktadas gulped it down and in a weak voice and said, 'It's the will of Krishna.'

The whole cast would then assemble on stage—some wearing lungi, some wearing skull caps, some wearing *tulsi* beads, and some wearing the sacred thread. The scene would end with Bhaktadas drinking water offered by Abu Bakkar and everyone chanting:

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<sup>1</sup> The name signifies a Hindu religious guru.

Water and *pani* are the same  
 They are both Life's name  
 Krishna and Allah are the same  
 They are both God's name  
 Ram and Rahim are the same  
 They are both Man's name.  
 And the curtain would fall.

This was Bhajanbabu's third script. Earlier he had written a social drama and also a comedy that had no female characters. He had to work very hard for this one. He had been to the Ghutiari Sharif to record the Muslim priest's sermon there. This was the one that Amit had been rehearsing some time back. He was playing the role of Haji Abu Bakkar. He had listened to that cassette a number of times. Today, Kkari Abbasuddin, the accountant from the Khidirpur Branch, was a special invitee. They wanted him to correct their Arabic pronunciation. He had once suggested, 'These chants and stuff don't always strictly follow the Shariat. Also, delete the 'Haji' attached to Abu Bakkar's name. The play has a number of un-Islamic inaccuracies, but I'm helping you out on popular request. To begin with, 'Allah' is being mispronounced. The sound has to be more palatal. And 'Khuda' has to be more glottal. Here... this is the Arabic pronunciation...' Amit tried hard to imitate Kkari Saheb, but couldn't make it. Bhajanbabu interrupted, 'Forget it, Kkari Saheb, he is an average Brahmin; it's beyond him to sound like an authentic Muslim; shall we stick to the Bengali accent, yeah? Kkari Saheb suddenly fell silent. He shot a glance at Bhajan Sarkar. Then with a wry smile asked, 'Are the Muslims not Bengalis too?' Bhajan Sarkar understood. He felt a little nervous. He bit into the coral ring on his finger twice and blurted out, 'Sorry sorry! I hope you don't mind Kkarisaheb. I've committed the same mistake that 90 per cent Bengalis make. Kkarisaheb smiled again. 'Another little mistake,' he said, '90 per cent Hindus, you should say...'

## 2

"I am proud to be a Hindu"—Swami Vivekananda.' The caption accompanied a coloured photograph of Swami Vivekananda. This was a sticker on the almirah. So Bubun was back. He studied at a boarding school run by the Ramkrishna Mission.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The organization set up by Vivekananda, and named after his guru, the saint



He was in class six. Since Amit was busy with rehearsals, Ashima had gone to fetch him. Bubun ran up to embrace Amit. 'Who put up the sticker there?' These were Amit's first words.

Amit knew. It was the Ramkrishna Mission. He had been a student at Taltala High School, a local Bengali medium school. They prayed before classes began: they mechanically chanted something to the effect—'Oh, your desires Goddess, Oh, your... a series of meaningless sounds. Much later he found out they were meant to say—Oh Goddess in the white-lotus-seat and beautifully adorned with white flowers...' Nurul and Saifuddin had to chant the same prayers too. Once there was some problem and some men in beards and skull caps came and spoke with the Principal. Since then Nurul, Saifuddin and some others stood quietly outside the prayer line. And there was Laltu, Amit's nephew. He studied at the Scottish Church School in Kolkata. At the slightest opportunity, the six or seven-year-old would burst into a song from the latest Bollywood hit and dance to its tune. Wind! O wind! Find me my love, he would sing. If you asked him, Laltu, what's your prayer like? He would say in one breath: 'Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those...' he would carry on lipping and the elders in the family would smile at him affectionately. 'Bubun, did you get the sticker from your school?'

'No'

'Bought it?'

'It is from Bhajan uncle.'

Bubun pointed upwards. Now Amit understood. It was their landlord Ramlal Chaturvedi's family. They were members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.<sup>3</sup> Ramlal traded in spices at Burrabazaar.

'In the Gita Lord Krishna had preached, "Chaturvarnyam maya srstam gunakarmavibhagasah".<sup>4</sup> The caste division doesn't work anymore, Amitji,' he lamented in his heavily accented Bengali. 'Now look at me, in spite of being a Brahmin, I'm compelled to indulge in unholy practices of business only for my daily bread. Don't you agree? The youngest son doesn't want to be a part of my business. He keeps busy reading thick books because he

Ramkrishna Paramahansa.

<sup>3</sup> Literally, 'The World Hindu Council'.

<sup>4</sup> The four categories of profession and caste have emanated from me according to the attributes (of Satta, Raja and Tama) and action of individuals

wants to sit for competitive exams. It's been three years since he has graduated with Commerce as his major. If there are any opportunities for him in your bank...'

Ramlal's son was called Bhajanlal. Actually he was his nephew. Amit also knew that the story of his not being interested in business wasn't true. He was interested, but Ramlal's biological son wouldn't have any of it. So Bhajanlal had to look for a job now.

'Oh, come on! There aren't going to be any jobs or anything for people like us. Who cares for the Brahmins? The vacancies are all reserved for everyone else—the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes, other backward castes, the Muslims...' Bhajanlal had said.

'Hey, why are you looking for a job? Why? You have such a successful family business...'

'Business? Let's not talk about that Dada, the shop belongs to my elder brother for all practical purposes.' Bhajanlal's elder brother Keshavlal paints sandalwood paste on his forehead before leaving for his shop every morning. That's when Amit is on his way back from the bazaar. 'On your way to the *gaddi*?'<sup>5</sup> Each time Amit asked this, Keshavlal responded in his heavily accented Bengali, 'Oh, that's just a small shop. Please don't call it a *gaddi*.'

One day Ramlal had wanted to know the maximum amount of loan that could be taken from a bank. He was interested in buying a tobacco shop run by an old Muslim who wanted to sell it off. It was right next to his shop and the old man had asked for 7,00,000 Rupees. He had seven sons from two wives. '7,00,000?' I asked in surprise. Ramlal retorted, 'Well, they have the upper hand these days.' If there was a riot or something, he would sell it off at a throwaway price and run for his life. 'What strange people! They've taken away Pakistan and are enjoying special privileges in India too. That is why it is so important to make India a Hindu country.'

'Bubun, did you ask for the sticker from Bhajan, or did he just give it to you?' 'I had asked for it from Bhajan uncle.' 'You asked for it? Why?' 'Why are you getting so worked up about it, dad? I haven't done anything improper. It's a quote from Swamiji.'

'There are other good quotes of Swamiji, Bubun.'

'Is this a bad quote?'

'I don't know in what context Swamiji had said these words. But I don't see any reason for us to feel proud just because we are Hindus. No other

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<sup>5</sup> A thriving business. It literally means of a thick mattress spread on the ground, from where traditionally the business is run.

religion has such a horrible practice of caste system. In the ancient times, the low caste people were denied even the right to education. No other religion has so many sham rituals involving their Gods and Goddesses. Then there is the practice of bribing the Gods with offerings to get our way...'

At that moment the chanting of *namaz* drifted in from the Masjid nearby. They now had four loudspeakers in place of two. Amit wasn't sure what this *namaz* was meant for. He just heard the noise—a sharp swirling scream. Bubun quietly shut the windows on that side.

### 3

Bhajan Sarkar had been putting in a lot of thought into the sets of his play. He thought of creating a temple and a mosque with cardboard and paper fitted onto a wooden frame. The work was contracted out to a professional set designer and Bhajan gave them a rough outline. The play promised to be very impressive. It was decided that after this programme by the bank recreation club, it would travel to the inter-bank drama competition.

The souvenir was in progress. The volume of advertisements wasn't bad. They had received a full-page advertisement from a tooth powder brand named after and displaying a full-page photograph of Hanumanji, the Monkey-God. He had torn his chest apart to reveal the images of Rama and Sita. It was a proof of the depths of his devotion to them—that he carried them in his heart. This was a shot from the epic Ramayana that was serialized on the television. Bubun had watched that immensely popular serial too, with great interest. And that year, during the famous Kali *pūja* celebrations of their locality, fairy-lights were used to create an electric show of Hanuman at the main entrance of the temple. The advertisement for the bank souvenir depicted Hanuman tearing his chest to reveal a gently smiling Ram and Sita sitting on a throne inside his heart. At the bottom was written Ajanta Art Press.

Now, they weren't sure if it was a good idea to print a full-page photograph of Hanuman on this occasion. They discussed it in their executive meeting and the cultural secretary suggested that it wouldn't be a problem if the words hailing Ram, 'Jai Sri Ram', were taken out of the photograph. A full-page advertisement meant one thousand five hundred Rupees. But the words were set in the design block itself. It was not possible to print only the Hanuman without those words. But it was a matter of one thousand five hundred Rupees, after all. So they decided to print both—the Hanuman and the words.

Bhajan Sarkar had a suggestion to redress the balance. It might be a good idea, he thought, to print a couple of famous lines from a famous Muslim poet on the front cover: "Hindus and Muslims are two flowers on the same stem."

Dilip Biswas commented in his shrill voice, 'What about us Christians then?'

Nitish Barua was a Buddhist, but he loved the spicy preparation of dried fish. He didn't make any comments, though. They had to write an Editor's note. Khagen Rauth was the secretary but he was an extremely busy man. He had no time for things like editorials. Amit had some ability to write, so he was asked to prepare a really good piece of writing. Khagenbabu got him some books from the library for reference—Tagore's *Sanchita*, *Sanchayita* and the likes.

Once in a while Amit wrote essays for a friend's paper, the *Barasat Barta*.

'Sabita, are you getting my tea? ...what a pain!' Amit began—'friends, our country today is reeling from the evil effects of communalism...' Sabita brought his tea. The fine smoke and scent from burning incense sticks hovered around him. In the meantime Bhajanlal arrived. He was wearing a saffron headband. 'I've come to take your blessings, he said. I'm on my way to the *karseva* at Ayodhya.' Amit stared at him with his mouth wide open. 'What do you mean?' He asked. 'There might be big trouble there.'

'That's fine. I'd be happy to die, but we will have to reclaim the Ram Mandir.'

'But is that going to give you a job?'

'It is now a matter of prestige for the Hindus.'

'Has your father agreed?'

'Sure!'

Ashima took out a couple of sweets from the refrigerator and offered to Bhajan. 'Take care,' she said.

'See you, brother. Jai Sri Ram!'

A pamphlet stuck out from the bag swung on his shoulder. Big lettering announced, 'Say with pride that I am a Hindu.'

#### 4

The programme was successful. It was presided over by a well-known litterateur. He was welcomed with garlands by young girls wearing white sarees with red borders. But wasn't this a Hindu practice? The inauguration was done with lighting of lamps, offering of sandalwood paste and blowing

of conch shells. What did these mean? Ships were being inaugurated by breaking coconuts. Even Marx and Lenin were being remembered on their birth anniversaries with garlands and incense sticks. Weren't these Hindu practices? Heaven knows! The welcome of the President was followed by a presentation by the Calcutta Youth Choir. They sang a song on anti-communalism. The play came next. It was very well received. No one forgot any lines. The sets were fantastic with a temple on one side and a mosque on the other. The spotlight alternated between the temple and the mosque. Those sets had been preserved. And that was why they could be used today for a procession on communal harmony. It had been organized jointly by the Bank Employees' Federation. Many other banks had prepared tableaux of temples and mosques too. That had made the procession bright and attractive. Amit and Suranjan carried the mosque on their shoulders. It was quite heavy. Bhajan and Yusuf were carrying the temple. After a while Amit began to wonder if the temple was lighter, and exchanged places with Bhajan. He couldn't change with Yusuf. Yusuf being Yusuf, had to carry the temple. That was the purpose of this procession. Soon Amit began to wonder if the mosque was a little lighter after all. 'Our shoulders are aching from the weight,' Amit called out, 'Let someone else take these over from us now.' ...They chanted, 'Hindus and Muslims are brothers, we want unity, not differences.' The procession approached the Thanthania Kali Bari.<sup>6</sup> Amit had received a letter from Bubun the previous day. Before beginning the letter he had scribbled—in the care of our dear mother Kali. Amit had seen a picture of the Goddess inside Bubun's Mathematics textbook, Goddess Kali flanked by Saint Ramakrishna and Saradamani<sup>7</sup> on either side. The slogans seemed to weaken as they approached Thanthania. Many hands reached up to their foreheads in devotion. In front of Amit, Kanai babu was doing the same. Amit said, 'You shouldn't have done this, at least in today's context.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

'What you did just now...'

'The *pranam*, eh? So, are we not allowed to pay homage to our own God, then? Great! On the other hand, look at our head office—an attic has been done up, with polished mosaic, as a prayer room for the Muslims. They spend Friday afternoons and two hours of working time on their prayers. But why does the union not object to that?'

<sup>6</sup> A renowned temple to Goddess Kali in Kolkata.

<sup>7</sup> Saradamani, Ramkrishna's wife, is considered the Holy Mother by her devotees.

Amit did not pursue the matter. He just said—OK, fine. Now it is your turn to carry this, I'm tired.' Kanaibabu looked up and said, 'I'll carry it, but only because it is a temple.'

## 5

Bhajanlal was dead. He died of police firing. His dead body had arrived from Ayodhya. It was covered with a piece of saffron cloth. His father's ravings and rantings crumpled the saffron shroud. Someone consoled, 'Don't cry, our god Rama has taken him to his heavenly abode...' 'He has done us a wrong... a wrong!' screamed Ramlal.

There were flowers, heaps of flowers. There was incense, a lot of smoke and so many people in front of the house...

Amit was going to the crematorium. So was the dead Bhajanlal. There was no need to renew his card at the Employment Exchange. Bhajanlal had sandalwood paste on his forehead, scent in his body, and incense around him. He was on his way to the crematorium. So was Amit, and so many other people. 'Ram naam satya hai,'<sup>8</sup> they chanted.

Amit knew this Bhajanlal from his childhood days. He loved *muri* with pakoras. But he didn't know quite well the Bhajanlal who was one of those who defied a curfew to demolish the Babri Masjid. He looked at the cot that carried Bhajanlal. He wanted to take a turn in carrying it. 'Ram naam satya hai.'

Bhajanlal used to love Bengali songs and borrowed cassettes from Amit. He took up a part of the weight on his shoulders.

Immediately he started groaning. He had a very painful shoulder. They were bruised. He had had to carry the weight of the temple on one shoulder and that of the mosque on the other. Temples and mosques had bruised his shoulders. He was suffering. And he continued to suffer.

He had something to say to Bubun. Many things actually. Bubun had left for the hostel that day. And took with him that sticker. Bubun, the death toll from bullets at Ayodhya was 27... 37... 47... Twenty dead from riots in Gujarat, 18 in Jaipur, 28 in Benaras. Then there was Kanpur, Hyderabad, Aligarh, Jamshedpur, Jhalda, Khulna, Dhaka... 'Ram naam satya hai.'

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<sup>8</sup> This means: the name of Rama is the only truth and he is eternal. It is chanted in funeral processions.

Bubun, here are some lines that I had come across while preparing to write the editorial. These lines are for you. I had saved them for you, from Tagore:

When passion grips in the guise of religion  
Then blinded, he kills and is killed.  
The Aethists receive God's blessings too  
Without flaunting their religion.  
They enlighten their minds with great devotion,  
Not with scriptures; they commit themselves to the good of all.

Translated by Sarika Chaudhuri

## WILD-GOOSE COUNTRY (BANA HANGSHIR DESHE)

Amar Mitra

'Well, go and have a look, said Jiban Babu, but don't cross the border, it'll be too risky.' Getting into the car, Aloka replies, 'No, not at all, you can relax; moreover Mazarulda is accompanying us, he is unlikely to allow us to cross the border.'

Mazarul smiles, 'Yes, I am the only one here who belongs wholly to West Bengal. But I've been to the border far too often to even keep count.'

'If I could have gone along, things would have been fine,' says Jiban Babu apologetically, but I'm saddled with work!

Jiban Dutta is a contractor by profession. He has procured a contract to cordon off a large stretch of the border with barbed wire. That work has already begun. Aloka has been quite curious about Jiban Dutta's assignment. She has never seen the border. Her forefathers belonged to the country across the border, though Aloka was born on this side, in sixty-five. She has neither any attachment nor any particular emotions about that. Her mother's family belongs to the Bardhaman<sup>1</sup> district. Her father and uncles are all dead. Aloka does not know where exactly their home was—in which specific village, under which *thana* of Barisal<sup>2</sup> district. Yet there is a special thrill in just imagining how one homeland ends and another country begins. She is travelling to the border to have a taste of that thrill. Subir's father is still alive. He often recalls his memories of Tangail. Subir and his family of course crossed over much later. It was during the Indo-Pakistan war of

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<sup>1</sup> A district in West Bengal, in India.

<sup>2</sup> A district in Bangladesh, which was previously East Pakistan and before that, east Bengal.



1965. Subir was hardly seven or eight then. Aloka jokes light-heartedly and says, 'Jibanbabu, Subir is a potential threat, Mazarulda and I would have to restrain him, he may well defect!'

The car passes through Balurghat town. Sitting next to the driver, Mazarul lights a strong cigarette. Aloka keeps up a constant chatter. Aloka says, 'Jibanbabu is erecting a fence of barbed wire along the border, well, isn't Jiban Babu at all distressed?'

Subir guffaws, 'We'll certainly have to ask Duttamoshai!'

'Well, doesn't something like this ever happen—a mad bull, horns aggressively tilted, gores the fence down—Mazarulda, can't something like this happen in your district of Baruipur?'<sup>3</sup>

'It happens everywhere.'

'Is the trafficking of mad bulls banned here?'

Mazarul laughs, 'Who will stand in for the eccentric bull, and who indeed will hold out the red rag?'

After leaving the town behind, the car picks up speed on the highway. The intense sunlight of Baisakh is spread over the green, high-yielding paddy crops on either side. Abruptly, Aloka stops chattering and looks out of the window towards the horizon. Mazarul had just finished smoking a cigarette and lights another. Subir can feel his weakness asserting itself, but he is too timid to overstep Aloka's stipulation about the quota of cigarettes he could smoke. A little later, Mazarul mumbles, 'Well, about my going out to the border—my father's family, has in fact lived in Baruipur for seven generations! But you know that, Aloka!'

Aloka says, 'Weren't you saying that you've been to all the borders—Hili, Gede, Bongaon, Itinda.'

Mazarul replies, 'Except for smugglers, no one has seen the border as frequently as I have.'

Aloka laughs, 'I haven't set eyes on it even once! Well, I could have, *not* seen it—I don't particularly fancy this hype about Bangladesh and East Bengal. Actually, Bengalis are nostalgic creatures, we are so sentimental, yet all this is absolutely meaningless.'

Mazarul says, 'I can't quite understand. Did you see *Komalchandhar*—that scene where the railway lines came abruptly to an end, the camera stumbling against the buffer—it was simply hair-raising!'

'Why would you feel like that? You were never an evacuee.'

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<sup>3</sup> A district in West Bengal.

Mazarul keeps silent, reflects a while, then mumbles under his breath, 'I must've been at the border umpteen times, but I've never felt like crossing over.'

Aloka jokes, 'Are you scared?'

'Yes,' Mazarul replies unambiguously.

Aloka laughs childishly, 'If they, that's the people across the border, claim that you are theirs, a lost son of the soil, and if people on this side charge you for infiltrating, I shall simply not let you cross over. Just think of that weird incident when some persons, were first utterly humiliated and then extradited. Who knows whether our own countrymen were one of those?'

Aloka's voice deepens as her words trail off. Her smile is wiped out. Aloka mutters, 'Weren't you scared Mazarulda, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid?'

Mazarul does not answer, he changes the topic, 'If you had only seen the flock of geese last night!'

'Couldn't you wake me up!'

'They were lost before I could do so. Such deep slumber!' says Subir.

Aloka hadn't seen it. They had been on the terrace, chatting, where Aloka had cuddled up on the floor mat and dropped off to sleep. Well into the night, lying flat on their backs there, Mazarul, Subir and Jiban Dutta had been still chatting. Jiban Dutta was recounting his experiences of the border. He was disgorging memories of the days of the freedom struggle.

Some of it was hearsay, how in 1947, the Pakistani flag had been hoisted in this region for a good three days. Freedom was wrested on 18 August. As the night deepened, bits of memories were being circulated. Jiban Dutta was saying that as soon as the barbed wire fence is in place, illegal infiltration will stop. As soon as the barbed wire is strung, the demarcation will be obvious—that they are separate from us. Mazarul had been listening to this conversation as he stared up into the sky. While he listened, he suddenly became hysteric, 'What's that? What is it?'

The star-studded sky was dazzling. There was no moon but the starlight streaked into the distance and the barren earth, shrouded in darkness, became barely visible. Amidst that emptiness, up above, almost brushing against the cluster of stars, Mazarul was watching a flock of geese. On tremulous wings, these flew across from the east towards the north-west. Subir had exclaimed, 'These are war-planes!'

'That's quite possible', Jiban Dutta had conceded, 'it's a border area after all.'

'No, these are geese.' Mazarul had insisted.

'Geese—at that height and at this time of night?'

'Yes, wild geese.'

Subir had said, 'I could see the lights, they are likely to be war-planes.'

Mazarul had disagreed, 'Nothing except geese could look so white.'

'How could you notice that in the darkness?'

Mazarul had replied, 'I saw them in the starlight, the stars were overshadowed by their wings—how they glided into the distance! It had to be geese.' A while later, they had seen a lone bird that had strayed from the flock, flying past rather low. The lonesome wild goose staggered across the sky. Thereafter Mazarul had sprawled out on the terrace late into the night. Having alerted Aloka, Subir had gone downstairs. Jiban Dutta followed a while later.

The car came to a sudden halt on the roadside. The driver points out, 'That is Bangladesh.'

'Where!' An excited Aloka leaned out of the window.

The driver is pointing out the border-line to Subir and Aloka. About 40 yards away stands a white, triangular pillar. On one side, almost touching the pillar is a thatched hut, on the other side are two old men cutting grass. Aloka shouts, 'Are those old men in Bangladesh?'

'Yes, but they could well be from this side.' Mazarul says, persons living along the border have no homeland.

'The house is on this side?'

'Yes, it's on this side. At one time this side and the other were their own homeland, it's still the same now, but if the barbed wire fence is erected, they will be trapped.' Mazarul says this pensively.

'I couldn't imagine that the border was like this. What about that cycle?'

'Bangladesh.'

'And that spiral of smoke from a brick kiln?'

'Bangladesh.'

'Absolutely astounding!' Aloka trembles and grips Subir's hands excitedly, 'They may well stray to this side by mistake, and if a person is blind, what would that person do?'

Mazarul laughs, 'Some will go and some will come, you're saying something that's absurd. This is just the border—the country extends further, several towns and villages— Dhaka, Barisaal, Faridpur, Chittagong, Jessore, Baguda, Rajshahi—everyone does not live at the border.'

'It's the same with us—so many of our towns and villages are far removed from the border,' Aloka whispers.

Mazarul does not reply. He lights a cigarette. The car starts moving. Aloka continues to wonder. She keeps repeating her words. If she lived at this borderland, she would have crossed over uncountable times. 'No, not

because in some distant past our home had been across the border—just to feel the sense of sheer exhilaration. On the other side they have a different national flag, a different currency—yet 25 years ago, all that was again different, the flag of another country, the currency of another nation—the same people in that one life have belonged to two entirely different nationalities—amazing how people adapt themselves! Don't you feel that these artificial boundaries are all rubbish!

Mazarul keeps silent. Subir says, 'True freedom for those across the border actually came with the Mukti Juddha.'

'That may well be, but this road and that field, are two separate countries, if only we could, like the blind, just step across!' Aloka mutters.

The car comes to a stop. The driver speaks to the border guard. The car crosses the bridge across the Jamuna. The river is dry, there isn't a sign of water anywhere. A country boat is stuck on the shallows waiting for the flow of water. Aloka observes, 'Even the boat is stuck on the border!'

The car takes a right turn and jerks along a narrow, broken road. Soon after on the left, one catches a glimpse of the railway tracks. Mazarul blurts out, 'That is the railway line to Bangladesh.'

'How close! The rail-tracks could also have been on our side,' said Aloka.

Mazarul nods his head, 'All the towns connected by this railway line are in Bangladesh. They had bisected Hili town, one part was given to us, Hili on our side and Hili on the other, Dinajpur on this side and Dinajpur on the other, every thing seems so chaotic. Just think of it, if after the partition, my father had crossed over, I would have been a citizen of another country, a foreigner.'

'Did many Muslims go over?' Aloka asks.

'Yes, two of my father's elder brothers, my uncles, they took along two of their sisters, my aunts as well.' As he speaks, Mazarul stops abruptly. The car cannot go any further. Facing them is a jungle of bamboo trees, then the railway tracks entering into that country at an angle. On the left, about twenty yards across the border, the sunlight bounces off the iron tracks. The trio get off the car.

Mazarul recounts, 'A few years back, there was a railway accident here, the carriage overturned. Since the Bangladesh villages are further away, the rescue-work was carried out by people on this side—who knows what'll happen now when the barbed wire fences come up.'

Many people are walking along the railway lines. Alongside the tracks, under the shade of the date palms, several ten or eleven-year-old boys scheme in a cluster; they sport fez caps on their heads and wear lungis and panjabis. They glance at Mazarul and his companions dispassionately. An

elderly man clothed in a half-torn shirt and trousers balancing a large vessel, walks along the railway line; on his head. Mazarul calls out to him, 'Chacha, what do you have there, what're you carrying?'

The man stops and replies, 'Sweets.'

'Will you come this side?'

Ruhul Amin comes down from the railway embankment and easily crossed the border-line. 'Will you buy some sweets?'

'From Bangladesh?'

The elderly man flashes a broad smile, 'You've come to see the border?'

Ruhul Amin ambles, squats under the guava tree and removes the lid off the large metal vessel. Stark white *sandesh*. Aloka leans close over the vessel and remarks, 'What a shame, we get this on this side as well, tasteless clods of sugar.'

'Won't you buy some?'

'Yes, of course,' says Subir.

Aloka is disappointed and mutters, 'Everything is just the same; yet it's different. Well, what village is that, in which village do you live? Have you some coins of that other country on you?'

The old man's replies are indistinct. Mazarul is unusually quiet. Subir offers Aloka and Mazarul the sweets. Ruhul Amin announces the price, 'Six takas.' Aloka is surprised, 'As much as that!'

Ruhul Amin says, 'Sugar is 18 takas a *seer*, no wonder it is costly, Ma.'

'Will Indian currency do?'

'Yes, but pay me seven takas.'

'Why?'

Ruhul Amin grins, 'Just like that, because you bought sweetmeats from across the border on this side, you do pay more for foreign stuff.'

'Foreign!' Aloka laughs quite amused, 'You call this foreign stuff?'

'It is obviously foreign, I am a foreigner, Ma.'

'But one wouldn't really categorize you as a foreigner.'

Ruhul Amin touches his forehead and mutters, 'Can one really assume that? It's nothing, when stringent laws are enforced, there are clashes between the two countries, trespassers are prosecuted. Now that the barbed wire is being put up, many will be caught, some are still caught, it's not as though no one gets caught; here you were buying sweets, you bought these only because these are foreign.'

Mazarul watches every single thing. He watches as the sweet vendor from across the border, goes back after trading on this side. A family is walking along the rail-tracks towards the railway station. Mazarul looks up at the sky. There are no birds flying in the sun-scorched sky. The village in the distance is drowsy. The tin roofs are dazzled by the sun.

Aloka calls, 'Mazarulda, you are rather quiet?'

'You took back a coin from the other country?'

'Took it?'

'What will you do now?'

Aloka laughs, 'I'll lose it, I may even do something else—pass it off along with our own coins—one wouldn't notice unless one examines it closely.'

Aloka strides ahead. Subir follows Aloka. Mazarul stares at four cautious feet treading close to the border-line, to the right of the pillar. Aloka takes one stride. They both stand now on foreign soil. Laughing, Aloka waves and calls out, 'Mazarulda, join us.'

Mazarul does not move. He stands in stony silence. Aloka walks up laughing, 'Mazarulda, what are you waiting for, aren't you going to step across the border? Anyway, we would bring you back.'

Mazarul does not reply. Perhaps his face is somewhat clouded. No one notices.

## 2

Neither the BSF<sup>4</sup> patrol nor the Customs at the check-post agree to let us take a tour across the border. The Customs office is the very last building at the border-line. The barbed wire fence is at the edge of the courtyard. Three persons are standing there touching the fence. Aloka is talking. She is talking a lot. She stands facing the barbed wire, and Khairul is on the other side.

Right from Hilibazaar to the border-line, for almost the entire stretch of the road, about 70 yards is lined with trucks. On either side of the road, by the wayside, are several tiny shops, a bustling bazaar. The road is filled with varied human voices. People who are crossing the border from that side to this, people wanting to cross over from this side to that, touts helping people to cross the border, middle-men trading their wares. Mazarul senses a latent excitement in the human cries. Amidst this brouhaha, the expression on the face of the rifle-toting border security guard is awkward. He looks so serious! What harshness in his looks and words.

Right there about fifteen yards into the other side is the railway line. Then a few yards further are the border security forces of Bangladesh. Again, it is Hilibazaar across the border. People are crossing the railway line

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<sup>4</sup> Border Security Force

and walking over to the other side, and people are coming over from that side to this. Goods are finding their way to the other side over the barbed wire fence. Young men, hardly twenty or twenty-five, transact this business. Subir, utterly surprised, watches.

Khairul asks, 'Are you coming from Calcutta?'

'Yes, and your home?'

'Hili, Bangladesh—want to walk across?'

'Why?'

'You can catch a glimpse of Bangladesh.'

'How far is it?'

'I'll help you to cross.' As he speaks he suddenly shouts out, 'Hey, Tapash! What news of the Horlicks and Vicks?'

Tapash, a young man, 22 or thereabouts, comes up and stands close on this side of the barbed wire. 'I got the Horlicks, couldn't find the Vicks. I'll give you Jhandu balm instead.'

'Since when are you passing off Jhandu balm as an Indian product? Get me Vicks. There isn't a stock of Vicks in Bonomalida's shop, also get me a cough medicine, Phencidil Syrup.'

'I had it, now it's finished.'

'I don't know, you get it, go quickly.'

Khairul calls loudly.

Tapash goes away. Khairul looks around, then calls to the mango vendor on this side, 'O Kaki, how much a seer, are you selling it for, I need two seers.'

Aloka asks, 'Is there no difference between this country and yours in trading?'

Khairul smiles, 'The border demarcations are for the likes of you, how does it matter, was your home here, in Bangladesh?'

Mazarul advances, 'Brother, do you know Baguda?'

'Why wouldn't I know it, there—that's the bus to Baguda.' Khairul Alam points his finger behind him. The trio can see a shining, white luxury bus parked at a distance. Aloka is excited, 'If one boards that bus one can travel to Baguda, how long would that take?'

'Roughly two hours.'

'From Baguda where else can one go?'

'Every place—Dhaka, Khulna, Pabna, Faridpur, Barisaal— wherever you want to go.'

An agitated Mazarul lights a cigarette, 'Is your home in Baguda?'

'You may say so, I was living in Baguda for quite a while, it's a big town.'

'Do you know Shahidul Islam?'

'I do—three buses, one plying on this route, I've even worked on one of his buses.'

'He teaches in Baguda College, Shahidul Islam.'

'College! no, he is in the bus business, he doesn't teach in a college. You mustn't be in the know of things exactly,' says Khairul. As he talks he gets busy taking stock of the Indian goods. Tapash smuggles out a large packet, tossing it over the barbed-wire fence to Khairul. The pose of doing things under cover is a necessity. Otherwise, the barbed-wire, the border-line in fact, serves no meaningful purpose. What's the use of posting security personnel on either side of the territorial demarcation? Khairul takes charge of his things and returns, crossing the railway tracks in some haste.

Aloka asks, 'Who is this Shahidul Islam?'

Mazarul replies, 'My aunt's son.'

'Your aunt lives across the border, but aren't you from Baruipur?'

Mazarul squints, looking up into the sky. His vision is occupied by an expanse of space—the skies across the border. He mutters, 'Two of my uncles, two of my aunts, all of them live on the other side; I had seen my father's elder sister, my Boropishi, in 1971, during the freedom struggle. She had stayed for some time on this side, my father's brothers, my Jethas haven't kept in touch.'

'But why do they live on the other side?'

'They had crossed over after the Partition. Only my father had stayed behind.'

'Surprising! Your own uncles, your own aunts live across the border, are you in touch?'

'Only with my Boropishi, however, we've had no letters from her for a long time now.'

'Have you been across the border?'

'No,' Mazarul shakes his head vigorously. 'Baba was scared of my going across and then not returning.'

'Don't you feel like seeing the place?'

Mazarul smiles, 'My aunt is very beautiful, when I saw her she was about 45. I've heard my mother say that my father's younger sister was prettier, though I've never seen her, I've not seen my father's elder brothers, my uncles, or their sons.... I've heard that my Boropishi did not want to emigrate, my Pishemashai was brainwashed by my Jethamashai; he tried to tempt my father too....' Mazarul jabbbers on.

Khairul has come back, smiles and asks, 'Want a trip to Baguda, I can arrange that.'

'Don't you know Shahidul Islam, professor of Chemistry in Baguda College?'



Khairul stares at Mazarul and mutters under his breath, 'Professor? Well in Baguda itself there are so many persons having the same name—Shahidul Islam. Sir's business partner is also Shahidul bhai, one Shahidul is a footballer, he lives in Dhaka, another Shahidul is with the Bangladesh Rifles, now he lives in Chittagong....'

Mazarul cannot identify his own Shahidul among these multiple Shahiduls. Khairul seems to know so many Shahiduls but does not know my boropishi's son? Khairul says he knows of at least five different Shahiduls here in Hili, 'There's Shahidul bhai of the Awami League, and there's one who does business in foreign goods who's called Shahidul too.'

Tapash is back again and says, 'India and Bangladesh! Let's shake hands, Khairul.'

They shake hands across the barbed wire. Subir, out of the corner of his eye, sees a list of sorts exchange hands, it goes from Khairul's hand into that of Tapash. 'Thank you,' Tapash says, 'You'll get the goods two hours later. Well, what are these people negotiating, are they going to cross to that side?'

Khairul nods his head, 'No, they are asking about Shahidul Islam.'

'Which Shahidul, the one on this side?'

Khairul laughs out, 'The ones on our side, the ones on yours, do you need cigarettes?'

Nah! Mazarul nods his head and declines. 'You aren't able to give me the news?'

Khairul does not reply. His attention is focused on a family that has just crossed the railway tracks. They have spoken to the border security on the Bangladesh side to come up to this point. They'll talk to the security guards on this side, and cross the border and come away. They are looking around with great curiosity.

Mazarul says, 'It seems they are interested in marketing.'

Going marketing with the family in tow! Subir looks on quite aghast at Khairul engaged in animated conversation with the border security guard.

Mazarul says, 'They'll smuggle some things and get back.'

The family actually enters, the husband has successfully managed to come in with his wives and daughter and are swallowed up by the huge bazaar, lost amidst the merchandise. Gradually they vanish round the bend. Aloka said, 'Only if we could take a trip like this to the other side.'

'I'll not go,' Mazarul says.

'We'll be coming back anyway in an hour's time.'

'Of course we'll be back, but I'm not coming,' says Mazarul.

Aloka watches as far away, a flock of parrots fly over the crown of the banyan tree, penetrating further into that country. Rajshahi, Pabna, Natore,

Baguda, Dhaka, Faridpur, Khulna, Jessore<sup>5</sup>, Rupsha, Meghna, Padma, Madhumati, Kapotakshi<sup>6</sup> ... Aloka knows all the names. A strange feeling of peace descends on Aloka as she recites the names. She knows the names, but is not aware where the rivers and towns are located. It is because she doesn't know that she thinks that she will see these all at once when she crosses the border—Tangail, Barisaal<sup>7</sup>, Comilla, Noakhali, Rangpur, Madhumati, Rupsha, Khulna, Jessore. Each seems to be the name of a different commodity. Those are the names that attract, just as what attracts on the other side is the tea, sugar, rice, wheat, stones, Horlicks, Complian, apples, grapes—on this side it's the compelling force of the Meghna, Padma, Jessore, Khulna, Selaidah<sup>8</sup>, Rajshahi, Natore and Barisaal<sup>9</sup>. It seems that everything is stratified, tier upon tier in the shops across the border.

Subir asks his friend, 'You're not in touch with your uncles?'

Mazarul shakes his head, 'Baba didn't go, so my uncles were very cross with him. I've heard that my Borojetha's son, Anwarbhai is a high-court judge, one of his sons lives in England; Mejojetha lives with his daughter, Jethi is no more.'

'You seem to know every detail.'

'My Boropishi used to inform us in her letters, I haven't set eyes on Chhotopishi, they all crossed over in 1953, I was born in 1956, my younger aunt, married off by my uncles, lived in some village in Faridpur. They were farmers, an indigent household, my Chhotopishi is lost, she didn't come during the period of the war, but she's alive; how my mother wept for her, she was Ma's companion.'

Aloka turns and looks at him, 'Doesn't your Shahidulbhai visit this side?'

'No.'

'He's never come?'

'Perhaps not.'

'During the war?'

'Pishemashai had come with my Pishima, he was in the Mukti Bahini.'

'How old is he?'

<sup>5</sup> Rajshahi, Pabna, Natore, Baguda, Dhaka, Faridpur, Khulna, Jessore are districts that became part of East Pakistan after Partition, which is now Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup> Rupsha, Meghna, Padma, Madhumati, Kapotakshi are rivers in Bangladesh. The rivers in east Bengal are recalled with nostalgia by the ones who were displaced from there, evocative of a lush land, nurtured by turbulent rivers.

<sup>7</sup> Tangail and Barisaal are districts in Bangladesh.

<sup>8</sup> A region in Bangladesh.

<sup>9</sup> Natore is a town in Bangladesh.

'He is about five years older than me.' Mazarul looks to his right, staring at the station.

Khairul is coming back. Accompanying Khairul is a handsome person, wearing pyjamas and *panjabi*. As soon as they cross the rail tracks the whistle of a train is heard. Aloka screams, 'A train!'

Subir looks to the right following Mazarul's range of vision. The yellow building that is Hili railway station is bathed in sunlight. The train is approaching from the left—Parbatipur is on that side. Repeatedly, the sound of the whistle can be heard. The green train enters. Across its body, in bold, big letters is written 'Bangladesh Railway'. The diesel engine was swarming with people, people were piled on the roof, people hanging from the doorways, a thousand curious faces peering through the windows. Mothers who have produced half a dozen children, with babies clinging from hips and over laps come scrambling. So many people! All are foreigners. Amazing! They don't look like foreigners, nor do they speak the language of foreigners. The people travelling on the roof of the train are waving vigorously. Aloka raises her hand. She waves her hand slowly. Aloka remembers—*adhumati*, *Rupsha*, *Kapotakshi*, *Padma*, *Meghna*. She has seen the dried-up river *Titash*, the waves in the *Dhaleswari*<sup>10</sup>. She feels that the train is trudging to the South with all those rivers and *Baguda*, *Rajshahi*, *Natore*, *Selaidaha*, *Jessore*, *Khulna*. Alokas eyes and mouth begin to tremble.

Mazarul says, 'My uncles had all tried to persuade my father, I've heard, but Baba never went, he continued to live on this side, alone. The last time my *Jethamashai* had written a letter was after the demolition of the *Babri Masjid*.'

'Is he still alive?'

'Perhaps he is. I don't know.'

Subir asks, 'Your father....'

Mazarul replies, 'If I could only let them know the news of Baba's death.'

'Didn't you write?'

'I did, but received no reply, *Pishi* hadn't replied either. It seems they've moved. I wrote a letter to *Shahidul Islam* too and got no reply.'

Khairul comes back. The person with him asks with a smile on his face, 'Coming from *Kolkata*?'

'Yes.' Aloka asks, 'You belong to *Bangladesh*?'

'I am *Amal Bhattacharya*, a teacher in the *Baguda Zilla School*. My sister crossed over, *Khairul* asked me to come. I understand that you are looking for a *Shahidul Islam*. The *Shahidul* of *Baguda college*?'

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<sup>10</sup> A river in Bangladesh.

Mazarul's hands are shaky as he lights a cigarette. He wastes two match sticks. He manages to say, 'I was looking for him, my Pishi's son.'

'Is Phooldi your aunt?'

Mazarul leans over the barbed wire, 'You know her?'

'I used to know her. Now she lives in Chittagong with her younger son.'

'How is Pishi?'

Amal Bhattacharya shakes his head, 'That I don't know, I haven't seen her since she left for Chittagong, I haven't set eyes on her for almost three years.'

'Aminul used to live in Dhaka.'

'He was transferred to Chittagong. He's an officer in the Civil Service and travels all over the country.'

'But what about Shahidul Islam, doesn't my aunt visit Shahidulbhai?'

'Is he your cousin, he no longer lives in this country.'

'What's that?'

'Don't you know that he has migrated to Canada?'

'When did Pishi leave for Chittagong?'

'I'm not quite sure of that. Actually I'm so rarely in Dhaka these days, one gets all the news if one is in Dhaka. I only gathered from Ajibur Rahman of Baguda the news that Phooldi's son is in Chittagong; he's also in the Civil Service.'

Aloka notices that Mazarul has grabbed the barbed wire with both hands. The barbs are cutting into his palms. It seems to Aloka that she can see drops of blood. But he cannot speak one word. He is turned into stone. It seems to him that he can even recognize the unknown face of his Pishi's son. He knows them all. Under his breath, he asks, 'When exactly did Shahidulda leave?'

Amal Bhattacharya smiles, 'Maybe about a year and a half—it's a prestigious job, Shahidul was, of course, a good student. He got some kind of an offer for a research project....'

'Strange! We have no information.' As he says this, Aloka looks around and sees Mazarulda stooping over. There is blood on his hands. Can't Subir see that? She calls to Subir under her breath, 'Listen.'

Amal Bhattacharya says, 'I developed a marvellous friendship with Phooldi, she was extremely fond of me. About three years back they relocated from here to Dhaka and I'm in Dhaka very rarely, and now presumably they're in Chittagong. Don't you have all this news?'

Aloka replies, 'We did know, but....' Aloka cranes her neck and notices again that there is blood on the barbed wire. She calls to Subir, 'Hey! Are you listening!'

Amal continues, 'Phooldi was very caring, so like a mother!'

'Very pretty ... how beautiful?'

'You can compare her to the image of Durga.' Amal Bhattacharya laughs, 'At least, we thought so. Why don't you visit Baguda, then I can also go with you to Chittagong. You are not in touch even through letters, but would you, by any chance, have the Chittagong address?'

Aloka says, 'Well, we haven't brought it with us....' Aloka stops. Mazarul's hands are bleeding, he is stunned into silence. 'Are you listening? Listen!'

Subir is talking to Khairul. He is comparing the prices of commodities. They are conversing about the regular traffic on both sides of the border. Khairul is hearing about Kolkata. He had never been to Calcutta. Subir is asking about Barisaal. Amal Bhattacharya glances at Mazarul and said, 'Come over to Baguda, there'll be no problem, that's a standing invitation... what's this! Moshai, what are you doing, just let go of it, O moshai!'

Aloka almost pounces on him and drags Mazarul away, she tears away the barbed wire and pulls Mazarul away; he is almost falling on the other side through the barbed wire. In a subdued tone Aloka says firmly, 'Here you had been saying you had no special attachment!'

Amal counters, 'He may not confess his attachment, but sure enough the roots are there.'

First-aid is administered from the Custom's Office. Mazarul doesn't want to wait even a moment. Amal Bhattacharya, Khairul, they wave their hands. Countless people are waving their hands from Padma, Meghna, Dhaleswari, Baguda, Rajshahi, Pabna, Natore. From Kolkata, Bardhaman, Baruipur, Balurghat, Malda, Aloka, Subir, Mazarul are waving their hands.

Through the piercing wind and sun the car speeds on towards the west. On either side, the road is carpeted with the red and yellow blossoms of Krishnachuda and Radhachuda trees. The wind carries the pollen of yellow flowers. Mazarul sits next to the driver, his eyes firmly shut. Neither Aloka nor Subir are talking.

How long can Aloka remain silent. She says, 'You didn't ask about Chhotopishi?'

Mazarul does not reply.

'Perhaps she may have some communication with Faridpur.'

Mazarul says, 'He did not come during the freedom struggle. Chhotopishi's son Abdul Hamid was on the verge of coming over to India, when his uncle, that's my Borojetha found him a job in the Irrigation Department. My Borojetha is peculiar—he emigrates to that side and snaps all connections with everything this side.'

Subir asks, 'Haven't you ever seen him?'

'For that matter I haven't set eyes on my Pishi, she was so very beautiful, but you know what I feel—my Boropishi, Phoolpishi, the pretty Pishi, the one whose lips were red with betel-juice, not a strand of whose hair had turned grey—she is unlikely to be alive.'

'Really!'

'If she had been alive, would the news of my father's death have got lost across the border? I didn't get a reply—perhaps Pishi's sons didn't think it was necessary.'

'Didn't Chhotopishi know your address?'

'I was aware that when two countries are divided, when the dust is not the same, when the currency, the national flag are all separate—is it possible for siblings to be united. Chhotopishi may not have received the letter, her son Hamid may have thrown it away.'

'You could certainly have kept up the relationship by visiting them across the border.' Aloka's voice is slightly harsh.

'They were the ones who had abandoned their ancestral homeland, why will they not keep it up.' Mazarul replies, 'No one had asked them to leave, aren't there minor misunderstandings when living as neighbours?'

Aloka remains silent. She has heard about the riots, except for the one in '92, she has no memories of riots. Fear exiles people from their homes. Those who can control it, stay behind. Amal Bhattachaya or Mazarulda. But can every person do every thing? Aloka has heard of the terror unleashed by the riots. She has heard of people abandoning their homes and embarking on an endless journey. Who can sit dumb like a tree, but, if roots are not uprooted, if these are not axed, there can be no re-location.

That night, when everyone is asleep, Aloka suddenly wakes up. She slips away from Subir's side. She opens the door. She walks along the verandah, opens the door at the foot of the staircase leading to the terrace, and climbs up to it. The flock of geese she did not see last night, she will see that tonight. A sliver of a moon hangs far away in the western sky. The universe is dazzled by innumerable stars. Aloka is staring up at the sky. Looking up at the infinite space of the sky, Aloka is being reduced into insignificance. Today she has to see the geese. What does the flock of wild geese really look like? Like a squadron of war planes or like whiffs of feathery clouds floating across the sky? That beautiful flock of wild geese, those exquisitely beautiful geese, flying far, in the north-western sky, where is it? That lone goose, will surely show up again—it only drifts away and returns again. It has flown away yesterday, it'll come back, it'll go back once more. It seems that a multitude of stars in the sky are looking down on the earth with their bright eyes. Aloka's eyes meet theirs. Aloka watches Phoolpishi, Chhotopishi their beauty

refracted through the skies and concentrated in this point—within the pupils of her tearful eyes. Mazarul should have been here. Aloka calls out, 'Mazarulda, Will you come...Please remain in the sky... Mazarulda is coming.'

Translated by Jayati Gupta

## THIS BORDER

—To Shaheed—

There was a time when you and I  
Chased the same butterfly  
Climbed the same stolid trees  
With the fearless expertise  
That children take for granted  
Before their faith is stunted.

Do you remember how we balanced a wheel  
Down dusty paths with childish zeal  
Do you remember the ripples that shivered  
As we ducked and dived in our river  
Do you remember what we shared  
Of love and meals, and all we dared  
Together—without fears  
Because we were one  
When we were young  
In those past years  
Before we knew that butterflies  
Were free to share our separate skies  
That they could cross with graceful ease  
To alight on stationery trees  
On either side of this strange line  
That separates yours from mine  
For whose existence we rely  
Entirely on our inward eye  
This border by whose callous side  
Our inert wheel lies stultified



This border that cuts like a knife  
Through the waters of our life  
Slicing fluid rivers with  
The absurdity of a new myth  
That denies centuries  
Of friendships and families  
This border that now decrees  
One shared past with two histories  
This border that now decides  
The sky between us as two skies  
This border born of blood spilt free  
Makes *you* my friend, my enemy.

*Bashabi Fraser*

## THE TRANSLATORS

**Sarika Chaudhuri** (M.A., Calcutta, M.Sc. Stirling) comes from Calcutta. She started her career as a teacher and teacher trainer. She has been Manager of English Studies at the British Council for East India for four years. Having finished an M.Phil in English Language Teaching at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad, Sarika has been involved in various English Teaching programmes in India and abroad. Her English Language training in Stirling and Hyderabad has made her interested in translation work. She now teaches English at Conel College in London.

**Sarmistha Dutta Gupta** (M.A., Jadavpur) is a Calcutta-based book-editor, translator and independent researcher. She is a cultural activist of the women's movement in India. Her recent translations include *The Steam Within* (co-ed., Stree, 1999), *Outcast: Four Stories by Mahasweta Devi* (Seagull Books; 2002) and *Plays by Malini Bhattacharya* (Seagull Books; 2003). She is in the process of forming a non-profit society for the dissemination of information for generating action-oriented public opinion, called 'Ebong Alap'.

**Jayati Gupta** (M.A., Calcutta, Ph.D., Jadavpur) is Head of the Department of English, Presidency College, Calcutta and also teaches at Calcutta University. She is currently engaged in a major research project on British itinerants in India from 1757 till 1857. Her interests include translation work, cultural studies and travel literature. She has contributed to several renowned academic journals and books and has edited *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* (for Netaji Subhas Open University) and *Reading Poems: An Annotated Anthology* (Macmillan India Ltd, 2002).

**Tapati Gupta** (M.A., Ph.D., Calcutta) is Professor of English at Calcutta University. Her recent publications include two volumes of translations (into English) of Bengali short stories by modern writers entitled *Harvest*, and translations of short stories in the USA based webzine, 'Parabaas'. She is now editing a Festschrift in honour of the Shakespeare scholar Professor SC Sengupta. Her interests include Renaissance Art and Rabindranath Tagore's art on which she has presented several papers. She is also a painter.

**Somdatta Mandal** (M.A., Ph.D, Calcutta) teaches at the Department of English & Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan, West Bengal. She has written *Reflections, Refractions and Rejections: Three American Writers and the Celluloid World* and edited *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Centennial Tribute* volumes 1 & 2 (1997); *William Faulkner: A Centennial Tribute* (1999); *The Diasporic Imagination: Asian American Writing* (3 vols.; 2000); *The American Literary Mosaic* (co-editor, 2003); *The Ernest Hemingway Companion* (2003) and *Cross-Cultural Transactions In Multi-Ethnic Literatures Of The United States* (co-editor). She has won a Fulbright scholarship, the British Council Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship and the Salzburg Seminar Fellowship. Her current projects include translation and South Asian diasporic cinema.

**Julu Sen** (M.A. Calcutta, M.Phil, Essex, Ph.D, Hyderabad) Dr Julu Sen is Assistant Professor or Reader in English at the Centre for English Studies, School of Distance Education, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India. For the past 14 years she has been the academic coordinator for an international programme called 'English for Professionals', and is tutor of residential INSET courses. She was awarded the British Scholarship in ELT in 1986–87. She has contributed to national and international journals and books and has composed such units as 'Caring for Others' *Secondary Course 2003 English* and 'The Way You Look: a simplified unit on Genetics', *Secondary Course 2002 English* for the New Delhi: National Institute of Open Schooling. Her interests include photography, drama, batik and handicrafts.

**Sheila Sengupta** (M.Sc., Canada) is a freelance translator based in Delhi. She has been a Lecturer at St. Xavier's College in Kolkata, a Consultant at the Planning Commission and an executive in a consultancy firm. Her translations of fiction, poetry and autobiographical sketches have been published in the *Indian Literature* journal (Sahitya Akademi, India). Her translated books include Sunil Gangopadhyay's poetry *Murmur in the Woods*, a novel, and *Reflective Prose by Bengali Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (forthcoming).

## THE AUTHORS

**Salam Azad** b. 1968, Bikrampur, East Pakistan. By profession he is a University lecturer and a life member of Bangla Academy. Amongst his famous works are the edited letters of scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose to Tagore, on Dr Prafullachandra Roy and critiques of Rabindranath Tagore. His works on the question of Partition include *Hindu Sampraday Keno Deshtyag Korchhe* and *Deshtyag: Sampratik Bhabana*. Azad continues writing on challenging topics and about great thinkers and lives in India.

**Atin Bandyopadhyay** b. 1934, Dhaka. He has been a sailor, a teacher and then an editor. A prolific writer of fiction, he has published volumes of short stories and several novels, which include *Galpo Shamagra*, *Panchashti Galpo* (short stories), *Roddure Jyotsnae* and *Shabuj Shaolar Niche* (novels). A recipient of many awards which include the Bakim Purashkar in 1998 for *Dui Bharatbarsha* and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001 for *Panchashti Galpo*. He lives and writes in Kolkata.

**Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay** b. 1899 Banagram, 24 Parganas, West Bengal. He was a school teacher by profession. He was posthumously awarded the greatest honour for a writer in Bengal, the Rabindra Purashkar in 1951. He wrote stories for children, novels and travel accounts. A major novelist, his *Pather Panchali* was made into an epic film by the sensitive Bengali film director Satyajit Ray, who won the Oscar for a lifetime's work. Amongst his other famous works are novels like *Aparajita* and *Amayak* and his diary. He died in 1950.

**Manik Bandyopadhyay** b.1908, Dumka, Bihar. He died in Bikrampur Dhaka in 1956. He is one of Bengal's leading writers who wrote with left leanings. Amongst his best known works are *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Dibaratrir Kabya*, *Halud Nodi Shabuj Bon* and *Putul Nacher Itikatha*.

**Manoj Basu** b. 1901, Jessore, east Bengal. He is a very well regarded literateur and his works include *Bhuli Nai*, *Bansher Kella* and *Plaban*. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1966 for his novel, *Nishi Kutumba*. He died in 1987.

**Swapnamoy Chakrabarty** b. 1952, Kolkata, West Bengal, where he continues living and writing. He has worked for the meteorological office and is now with Aakashvani (All India Radio). A writer of short stories and novels, he has won many prizes like the Sahitya Sanskriti Prize and the Sahitya Akademi National Award. Amongst his latest works are *Satyikarer Swapna O Sanataner Galpo*, *Phul Chhoyano* (short stories), *Chalo Dubai* and *Abantnagar* (novels).

**Ramapada Chaudhury** b. 1922, Khragpur, west Bengal. He has worked as a joint editor of Anandabajar Patrika. A widely published short story writer, a children's author and novelist, he has won much acclaim from awards like the Sahitya Akademi Ward in 1988 and the Rabindra Purashkar. Amongst his works are *Bharatbarsha O Anyanya Galpo*, *Galpo Shamagra* (short stories), *Achena Ei Kolkata* (collection for young readers), *Akash Pradip* and *Aranya Aadim* (novels). He lives and writes in Kolkata.

**Sachin Das** b. 1950, Kolkata, West Bengal. A Statistical Officer working for the West Bengal Government, he is also an established writer, having received the Award of Bibhuti Bhushan Smriti Puroskar. He is the author of *Yudhya Sanket*, *Aranya Parba* (novel), *Kolkatar Dike Rasta* (children's stories), *Abishkarer Galpo* (stories on exploration) and *Goyenda Sugrib* (children's novel). He is a resident of Kolkata.

**Samresh Dasgupta** b. 1933, Comilla, east Bengal. He wrote in small magazines and was responsible for later founding the Bengali Story Academy in Asansol. Amongst his works are *Paper Colony* (Poetry), *Drakkhya Daho* (novel) and *Nirbachito Galpo* (collection of short stories). He committed suicide in 2000 in Dhaka.

**Jyotirmoyee Devi** b. 1894, Jaipur, Rajasthan. She was the granddaughter of the Prime Minister of the Jaipur Estate. She was specially interested in women's rights and won the Bhubanmohini Gold Medal from Calcutta University in recognition of her work as a writer. Amongst her famous works are *Chhayapath*, *Rajotak* and *Narir Adhikar*. She died in 1988.

**Mahasweta Devi** b. 1926, Dhaka in east Bengal. She has been a cultural force and a powerful literary voice both in Bengal and at the national level, in India. Her work was influenced by her close involvement with the Ganantya group who sought to take drama to rural Bengal. She has worked as a lecturer and a journalist and lives and writes in Kolkata, though, in writing about marginalized communities in India, she has stayed amongst them to understand their lives. Her works include *Jhansir Rani*, *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *Aranyer Adhikar* (novels) and *Nairtute Megh* (an anthology). She has been

awarded the Jnanpith and the Magsaysay Awards and received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Aranyer Adhikar* in 1979.

**Dr Bashabi Fraser** (Editor of this volume) is a writer and academic based in Edinburgh. She has many publications and her recent publications include *A Meeting of Two Minds: the Geddes-Tagore Letters* (2005) and *Tartan & Turban* (2004, a poetry collection). She has just finished an epic poem entitled *From the Ganga to the Tay* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2008). She is now working on a book of life stories on *Scots in India*. She is currently a Lecturer in English Literature at Napier University and an Honorary Fellow at Edinburgh University.

**Narayan Gangopadhyay** b. 1918, Dinajpur, east Bengal. He introduced the endearing character of Tenida in his famous children's stories. He taught in Jalpaiguri College and Calcutta University. Amongst his wellknown publications are *Bitangsha*, *Suryasrashi*, *Shilalipi* and *Timirthirtha*. He died in 1970 in Kolkata.

**Sunil Gangopadhyay** b. 1934, Fardidpur, east Bengal. With a Master's degree in Bengali from the University of Calcutta, he has been associated with the Ananda Bazar Group, a major newspaper conglomerate in Kolkata. He has written over 200 books of prose and poetry and has received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel, *Shei Somoy* in 1985. Amongst his well-known works are *Prothom Aalo* and *Purba-Pashchim*; the latter is a poignant tale of Partition. He has also received the Bankim Purashkar in 1982 and the Ananda Purashkar twice. He is the President of the Sahitya Akademi and lives in Kolkata.

**Gour Kishore Ghosh** b. 1923, Jessore, east Bengal. A highly regarded editor of West Bengals's leading newspapers, *Anandabazar* and *Aajkaal*, he was also a fine short story writer and novelist. His story 'Sagina Mahato' was made into a popular film. His novels are *Lokta* and *Kamala Kemon Achho*. He died in Kolkata in 2000.

**Nabendu Ghosh** b. 1918, Dhaka, east Bengal. He is a well known writer, screen playwright and film director, having made a name in the Mumbai film industry. He won the Amrit Puroskar, the Fimfare and Film World Awards and Indira Gandhi Award for his film *Trishagni* in 1989. His novels include *Nayak O Lekhak*, *Dak Diye Jayi*, *Ajabnagarer Kahini* and his short story collections are *Pancham Raag* and *Shreshtha Galpo*. He now lives and works in Mumbai.

**Selina Hossain** b. 1947 (two months before the Partition of India and the birth of Pakistan), Rajshahi district which was to go to East Pakistan. She has won recognition of her work in the canonization and translation of her works. Her's is the distinct feminist voice, sensitive and powerful, finding expression in short stories, novels, essays and stories for children. Her works include *Hangar Nadir Grenade*, *Tanaporen*, *Japita Jiban* and *Nirantar Ghantadhwani* (novels). She lives and writes in Dhaka.

**Akhtaruzzaman Ilias** b. 1933, Dhaka. Valued as a protesting voice and a humanist in Bangladesh, Ilias is hailed as a great Bengali writer of modern times. His works are *Galposhamgra* (short stories) and *Khoyabanama* (novel). He died in 1997.

**Imdadul Huq Milan** b. 1955, Bikrampur, Bangladesh. One of the leading young writers of his country, he has been awarded the Bangla Akademi prize in 1992 in recognition of his work as a writer and other felicitations have followed like the Natyasabha Purashkare for drama and the Jaye Jaye Din Patrika Purashkar. His biographical work on days spent in Germany, *Paradhinata* brought him instant recognition. Amongst his wellknown works are *Jabajiban* (a serialized novel) and *Bhalobashar Galpo*. He lives and writes in Dhaka.

**Amar Mitra** b. 1951, Satkshira, Bangladesh now living in Kolkata. He holds a government post and is a dedicated social worker. He has won several awards including the Samaresh Basu prize, the All-India 'Katha' prize and the Snowcem-Ananda prize. His works include *Math Bhange Kaal Purush*, *Daanpatra* (short story collections), *Subarnarekha* and *Kantataar* (novels).

**Narendranath Mitra** b. Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. A professional journalist, he is also a famous writer of short stories and novels. Some of his works have been made into films and translated into other languages. Amongst his well-known works are *Chenamahal*, *Surya Sankshi*, *Godhuli* and *Suklapaksha*. He died in 1975.

**Dibyendu Palit** b. 1939, Bhagalpur, Bihar. He has worked in advertising and as a journalist. A prolific writer, he has several collections of poetry, short stories and essays. He has also written novels and stories for children. His works include, *Rajar Bari Anek Doore* (poetry), *Rajat Jayanti* (short stories), Amongst his recent novels are *Maunamukhar* and *Bahudoor Abhiman*. He lives and writes in Kolkata.

**Annada Shankar Ray** ICS b. 1904, Dhenkanel. Grew up in Orissa. In spite of obtaining a first class M.A. in English, he wrote in Oriya and Bengali

but Bengali became his preferred language of expression. He married the American Ann Ford whom he renamed Lila Ray. Some of Ray's well known works are *Aagun Niye Khela*, *Dalim Gachhe Mau* and *Sahitya Sankat*. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Japane* in 1962. He died in 2002.

**Abhra Roy** b. 1936, Khulna district, east Bengal. A retired University professor, he continues working as a visiting lecturer at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. He has published novels, collections of short stories and detective stories for young readers. Amongst his recent works are *Goyenda Baimanik* (for young readers), *Galpo Shamagra*, volumes 1 & 2 (short stories), *Kachhei Acche Atetayi* and *Jege Thaki Aami* (novels).

**Debesh Roy** b. 1917, Rajshahi, east Bengal. He used the pseudonym of Bedouin as a writer, a name he lived upto in his choice of a wanderer's life. He was a freedom fighter and edited Subhas Bose's magazine 'Forward' and was the President of the Khadi organization. A writer of children's stories, poetry and fiction, he won the Rashtrapati Award in 1958. Amongst his wellknown works are *Manush Keno Kshun Kare*, *Siya Ekti Gopan Chakra* and *Hanoi Theke Saigon* (novels). He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Tista Parer Brittanta* in 1990. He died in 2001.

**Prafulla Roy** b. 1934, Dhaka, east Bengal. He is a prolific and well regarded writer of short stories and novels. To mention a few from his long list of published works: *Galpo Shamagra*, *Galpo Shangraha* (short story collections), *Ekhane Pinjar* (which has been made into a film) and *Nona Mati Mithe Mati* (novels). He is a resident of Kolkata.

**Ramesh Chandra Sen** b. 1895 (Bengali year: 1301), Faridpur, east Bengal. He was an ayurvedic practitioner and a progressive writer. Amongst his well-known novels are *Shatabdi*, *Gourigram* and *Kajal*. He has been translated into English, Hindi and Chekoslovak. He died in 1963 (1369).

**Achintya Kumar Sengupta** b. 1903, Noakhali in east Bengal. Died in 1976. Short story writer and novelist with over a hundred books. Amongst his best known works are *Indrani*, *Kakjyotsna* and *Param Purush Ramkrishna*.

**Tridib Sengupta** b. 1964. He is a short story writer and a novelist. His novel, *Tapan Biswaser Khuder Bothrish Ghanta* has been well received. Professionally a college lecturer, he lives, works and writes in Kolkata.

**Sayed Mustafa Siraj** b. 1930, Murshidabad district, west Bengal. He roamed with the travelling performers in the countryside between 1950 and 1956 and wrote *Alkapar Dol*. He has 80 novels and 12 children's books to his name and is a writer of short stories and essays as well. He won the prestigious



literary Sahitya Akademi Award for *Alik Manush* and in 1994, he won the Rabindra Purashkar.

**Rabindranath Tagore** b. 1861 in Kolkata, west Bengal, where he died in 1941. Tagore was an international poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, short story writer, composer, artist, environmentalist, peace warrior and founder of the International University, Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in West Bengal. He is India's national poet, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his English translation of *Gitanjali*.

We have not been able to confirm the biographical details of one writer, namely, **Dipankar Das**. From our research, we have gathered that Tridib Sengupta also writes under the name of Dipankar Das. There is another writer of the name of Dipankar Das as well. In spite of our attempts, we have been unable to establish whether the Dipankar Das in this book is an author in his own right or Tridib Sengupta writing under an assumed name.

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## GLOSSARY

Aamshatta	A kind of mango jelly made with layers of fresh, sweet mango dried in the sun into a solid block. 'Aam' is mango.
Adda	Informal chatter between people gathered to converse/catch up, where topics can range from the serious to the light-hearted, in a friendly exchange, popular to Bengal.
Alta	Lac dye, used by Hindu women to paint the borders of their feet.
Aman	A variety of rice harvested in winter.
Annas	An old denomination, which is still in popular usage. Sixteen <i>annas</i> made a rupee, so today, four <i>annas</i> is the equivalent of 25 <i>paise</i> , eight <i>annas</i> of 50 <i>paise</i> and 12 <i>annas</i> of 75 <i>paise</i> , respectively.
Ansar	A self-styled Muslim group that emerged at the time of Partition in East Bengal/East Pakistan, and was feared by the minority Hindu community.
Arjun	A tree of the <i>digitalis</i> species, the juice from its bark is used for a medicinal cordial.
Ashok	A shade providing tree with dark leaves.
Atap	Rice made by sunning paddy, not by boiling it.
Auto	Short form of 'autorickshaw', a three wheeler which is a popular mode of cheap public transport, usually operating as shuttle carriers. A fairly recent introduction to Indian streets.
Awami League	The political party which fought the liberation of East Pakistan from the dominance of West Pakistan, to form an independent Bangladesh.
Ayat	Verse in the Qur'an.
Ayurveda	Vedas are the Aryan texts, held as sacred by Hindus, of which Ayurveda is the medical text. The other Vedas are Rig, Sama and Atharva.



Azan	The Muezzin's call to prayer.
Bajaan	Father, in a dialect.
Baap	Father.
Babu	A respectful form of address for a gentleman, which is an equivalent of Mr but used as a suffix to a name. The respectful Bengali form of address/description, became a pejorative term in oriental descriptions of the educated Bengali clerk, during the Raj.
Bacha	A silver, delicate tasting, fresh water fish with a single bone in the middle.
Baishakh	The first month of the Bengali calendar, from mid-April till mid-May.
Bakul	A large evergreen tree with a fragrant flower.
Balushai	A sweet made from plain-flour dough, deep fried and dipped in sugar syrup and then flavoured in a variety of ways.
Baro	Eldest or older. Often used as a prefix to address older brothers, uncles or aunts. Always used as a prefix to a name in addressing a person.
Barfi	A sweet made from condensed milk, in a variety of flavours, shaped into dense square or diamond shapes. It can have nuts mixed in.
Batasha	Small, convex, crusty cakes made from sugar or molasses, used in Bengal/Bangladesh to make sweet dishes. Also offered as <i>prasad</i> by Hindus.
Bauls	Bauls have become renowned as wandering minstrels and mystics of the Bengali speaking regions of India and Bangladesh. Known largely through their songs, they are recruited from both Hindu and Muslim communities, privileging the human being over such identities. They sing, accompanied by the <i>ektara</i> .
Bel	The marmelo, the woodapple.
Bele	A kind of fish that likes to lie in sand.
Beta	Son; also a form of affectionate address for a young person.
Bhagaban	The Hindu name for God.
Bhai	Brother. Could be used as a term denoting affection or intimacy.
Bhaji:	A Hindi word for a vegetables; a vegetable curry/dish.
Bhishma	A character of the <i>Mahabharata</i> , the second son of King Shantanu.

- Bhojpuri Of a region in Bihar, where this dialect of Hindustani/Hindi is spoken
- Bibi A Muslim wife.
- Bidi An indigenous cigarette, rolled in a dry leaf, affordable by the poor.
- Bigha A measure of land: of 6400 sq cubits, the equivalent of 1.3 or 0.33 of an acre approximately.
- Boudi Older brother's wife.
- Buri Literally old woman, also used as an informal, often affectionate address for an old woman.
- Chacha Paternal uncle, used by Bengali Muslims and in Hindi and Urdu. Could become a suffix added to the name of the person addressed in a respectful form addressing an elder.
- Chachchari A dry spiced dish of vegetables, cooked in oil, often with bony parts of fish thrown in.
- Chaddar A shawl in Hindi. In Bengali the word is 'chadar' and usually indicates a light shawl.
- Chaitra The last month of the Bengali year, from mid-March till mid-April.
- Chalta A round, sour fruit with acid taste, used in chutneys.
- Champa The champak, a tree belonging to the magnolia family, bearing fragrant flowers.
- Chapati A Hindi word for a handmade, rolled out, flat round bread, made of wholemeal flour. Also, called *roti*. In Bengali, the word is 'rooti'.
- Chapila A small, freshwater fish.
- Charkha The spinning wheel, which was adopted by Mahatma Gandhi to instil self reliance in Indians during the freedom struggle, and adopted by the Congress as part of its campaign. It is now the central symbol on the Indian national flag.
- Chhoto Youngest or younger. Often used as a prefix to address older brothers, uncles or aunts. Always used as a prefix to a name in addressing a person.
- Chire Also *chira*. Flaked rice, made by boiling and then flattening the rice grains. Eaten as a snack and as it is dry, is carried on long trips and eaten with 'gur' (molasses) after being soaked. It is the cheap alternative of rice for the poor in Bengal.

Chowkidar	Guard.
Crore	Ten million.
Daal	Lentil.
Dada	An older brother, and often a form of respect for one who is older than the addresser. 'Da' is a short form of <i>dada</i> , often used as a suffix to a name. The same word in Hindi means grandfather.
Dadima	Maternal grandmother, used by Bengali Muslims and Hindi and Urdu speakers.
Dahuk	The gallinule: a moorhen or waterfowl.
Darbesh	Muslim ascetic or fakir. Also a kind of sweet.
Dargah	Mausoleum of a holy saint.
Darwan	A security guard.
Debdaru	Deodar.
Dham	A residence or abode; a holy place or a place of pilgrimage.
Dhol	Tom-tom.
Dhoti	<i>Dhuti</i> in Bengali. A piece of fine white cloth, worn by men, which became the defining mark of a Hindu at times of communal violence. The recent trend is to have more colours in dhotis.
Didi	Older sister; also used as an honorific to show respect to an older girl/woman and can be used as a suffix to the name. 'Di' is a short form of <i>didi</i> , often used as a suffix to a name.
Didima	Maternal grandmother, used by Bengali Hindus.
Doel	Magpie robin of Bengal.
Dom	One of the lowest of Hindu caste that cremates the dead looks after the crematorium.
Dopiyanji	A savoury recipe which uses lots of fried onions. 'Do' means two. 'Pijan' means onion. The 'n' is nasal as in French words.
Dulabhai	The term used for a brother-in-law by the wife's siblings amongst Bengali Muslims.
Durba	A fine grass, used in ritualistic Hindu ceremonies.
Durga	The Mother Goddess who comes to defeat evil, popular with Bengali Hindus.
Ektara	A musical instrument with one (ek) string (tar), used by Bauls and Vaishnavas.
Fatwa	An authoritative ruling by Islamic law.

Gab	The mangosteen tree; the juice from its fruit is used to coat the strings of a net.
Gaddi	Literally, a mattress. It is laid on the floor and denotes the place from which business is transacted, the shop and office.
Gamchha	A soft, handwoven, indigenous towel.
Gharua	A local name for a variety of fresh water fish.
Ghat	A paved platform with steps going down to the water; a quay or wharf.
Ghomta	The covering of a married woman's head, usually by the end of her sari or a <i>chunni</i> : scarf worn over the <i>kameez</i> .
Godown	The colonial term for a warehouse, still used in India.
Gotra	Descent; family lineage.
Gur	Molasses or jaggery.
Haat	A market held on fixed days of the week.
Hartal	A strike stopping work around a wide area as a mark of protest.
Hakim	A Muslim doctor.
Haveli	A mansion.
Havildar	An Indian sergeant.
Henna	A very sweet-scented flower or its plant used to dye and condition hair.
Hijal	The Indian oak, the <i>Barringtonia acutangula</i> .
Huzoor	A respectful form of address of a servant to his master.
Ilish	Hilsa in English, a tasty estuary fish found in the Bay of Bengal and fished when, like the salmon, it comes up-stream to breed.
Imam	Chief priest, religious leader of the Muslims. in the UK. The 'n' is nasal.
Jamai	Son-in-law.
Jatra	A form of folk theatre typical of Bengal, involving exclamatory dialogue, usually depicting epic tales in stylized performances in which the actors were traditionally men, who could be amateurs, and played the roles of both men and women.
Jetha	Short from <i>Jethamoshai</i> , father's eldest brother. Another form is <i>Jethu</i> .
Kadai	The Indian round-bottom wok, made popular in a recent invention of British Indian cuisine, under the description of 'balti'. 'Balti' literally means bucket.

Kadui	A species of betel leaf palm.
Kafir	An infidel, according to Muslim belief.
Kajal	Collyrium, used for the eyes.
Kajli	A small fresh water fish in West Bengal and Bangladesh.
Kaka	Father's younger brother. The popular form is 'Kaku'. Also, like 'Chacha', used to address a father's male friends and can be used as a suffix to the name.
Kali	The dark and beautiful goddess of female power or <i>Shakti</i> , the destroyer of evil.
Kaliyuga	According to Hindu scriptures, this is the fourth and last age of creation, an age of sin.
Kalmi	A delicate leaf, found in Bengal, whose leaves are eaten like spinach.
Kameez	A loose-fitting dress worn by over a <i>sabwar</i> .
Kancha	Raw fruit, or a rudimentary or makeshift structure, the opposite of <i>pukka</i> .
Karamcha	A tree bearing red, sour berries.
Karma	Action, deed, work. Also refers to a belief in one's actions in a previous life, affecting one's destiny in this life.
Karseva	Offerings to Ram. A Karsevak is one who offers his life to Ram.
Kathchanpa	A tree with large white, mildly fragrant flowers.
Khadi	Coarse, handwoven cotton cloth, that Gandhi encouraged Indians to make and wear during the Indian freedom movement to replace foreign-made cloth. Khadi is still made and worn in India.
Kharam	Special wooden sandals, mainly worn by priests, but also popular as homewear in pre-Partition India.
Khoi	Parched rice.
Khuda Hafiz	God be your protector; <i>Khuda</i> means God and <i>Hafiz</i> means protector.
Koi	The Anabas, a dark, walking freshwater fish.
Kotah	A measure of land of 320 sq. cubits.
Kripanpani	The 'kripan' is the Punjabi sword; 'pani' denotes a hand upheld.
Krishna	The Hindu God of Love.
Krishnaleela	Activities of Lord Krishna. Popularly, the drama of lord Krishna's love affairs is called 'Krishnaleela'. These stories are part of Hindu mythology.

Krisnachura	A tree with delicate leaves and flaming red flowers which bloom in spring. So-called as it is believed that Krishna, the God of Love, played under it with his consort, Radha and her friends, the Gopis.
Kshatriya	The warrior or kingly caste, the second amongst Hindus, entrusted with the administration and defence of a kingdom.
Kurta	A form of loose long garment worn over <i>salwars</i> or other forms of trousers.
Laddu	A round sweet made of <i>gram</i> flour or <i>moong dal</i> (yellow small lentils).
Lakh	A hundred thousand.
Lathi	A staff used by Indian police and fighters.
Lathial	A lathi (staff) wielding trained or professional fighter or guard, earlier employed usually by zamindars.
Lakshmi	Goddess of wealth and prosperity, grace and beauty, who looks after hearth and home.
Luchi	A small and round, light, fluffy fried bread, made from plain flour, popular in Bengal. Eaten as an accompaniment to savoury or sweet dishes.
Lungi	A piece of coloured cloth worn by men, tied around the waist. Actually the lungi crosses religious barriers, but as it is generally associated with Muslim men, during communal tension, it acquires a distinguishing significance.
Macha	A makeshift platform usually made of bamboo and thatch. It is used by watchmen guarding crops and at hunts. It is also used for climbing plants like the pumpkin and gourd.
Madar	The coral tree.
Mahajan	Professional moneylender.
Malik	Master.
Mama	Maternal uncle. Could become a suffix with the description of 'Chhoto', 'Bara' or 'Meja' added to it, to denote youngest, eldest, middle or second uncle, respectively, e.g. 'Chhotomama'.
Mamima	Wife of maternal uncle. Could become a suffix with the description of 'Chhoto', 'Bara' or 'Meja' added to it.
Macha	An elevated, makeshift vantage point in fields and forests, used for growing creepers plants, or for keeping watch.

Moshai	A form of address for a gentleman and often added as a suffix to a name to show respect.
Mashi	Maternal aunt (short for Mashima). Also used to address a mother's female friends and can be used as a suffix to the name.
Mejo	The second in line—of brother/sister, son/daughter, aunt/uncle, etc. Always used as a prefix to a name in addressing a person.
Meshomashai	Husband of maternal aunt.
Mithai	A sweet, which is used in Bengali and Hindi, though the more popular word in Bengali is 'mishti'.
Miyan	A respectful way of addressing a Muslim gentleman.
Moong	Small yellow lentil.
Mridanga	An Indian drum which is played on both sides simultaneously, shaped almost like a tom-tom and is a popular folk instrument.
Mufassil	Suburban; in the outlying districts.
Mukti Bahini	The freedom fighters in the Liberation War of Bangladesh.
Mukti Juddha	Literally it means freedom fight. The popular name for the Liberation War of Bangladesh.
Mukti Joddha	Freedom fighter.
Muri	Puffed rice, used as a snack in Bengal and also eaten as staple cereal in some districts. It is similar to rice crispies.
Nahabatkhana	'Nahabat' is an orchestra with the <i>sehnai</i> as the central instrument. 'Khana' is the room or platform where the <i>nahabat</i> performs.
Namaaz	The Muslim prayer, offered five times a day.
Namabali	Cloth with the names of the Gods, Hari and Krishna ('harekrishna'), written on it, worn by Hindu priests at religious ceremonies.
Naru	A Bengali sweet ball made from shredded coconut.
Neemtala	Neem (the <i>Azadirachta indica</i> ) belongs to the mahogany family and is native to the Indian sub-continent. Its leaves and bark have medicinal value. Literally, <i>tala</i> is the place beneath, usually, the paved or beaten area beneath the tree.
Paan	Betel leaf.
Pabda	A river fish from Bengal, without scales, considered a delicacy.

PAC	Provincial Arms Constabulary
Paisa	The smallest denomination of the Indian currency. A hundred <i>paise</i> (plural) make a rupee. In popular Bengali usage, it can also be a generic term for money, like <i>taka</i> .
Palash	The Bengal kino, with a beautiful red flower. In history, the field where the two Battles wars were fought in 1757 and 1857, is today called Plassey, which is a mispronunciation of Palashi.
Panchayat	A village council consisting of five members. In effect, a democratic representation of the people at the lowest, grass-root level. In Bengali, the word is 'panchayet'.
Panditji	Pundit, a Hindu priest, who can read the scriptures and conducts religious ceremonies. 'Ji' is a suffix, denoting respect.
Panjabi	The <i>kurta</i> or long shirt worn by men in India, named after the state of the Punjab which it is associated with.
Patishapta	A sweet pancake made of rice flour or semolina and plain flour with a filling made with coconut or condensed milk or a mixture of both, popular in Bengal.
Payesh	Usually refers to Bengali rice pudding, cooked slowly on the hob, by condensing milk to a creamy consistency, then with fine aromatic rice added to boil in the creamy milk, flavoured with green cardamon, bay leaves and sweetened with sugar or date palm molasses.
Peyanji	An savoury onion fritter, popularly known as onion bhaji
Phatua	Loose, short informal shirt worn by men.
Pir	A Muslim saint.
Pishemashai	Husband of paternal aunt.
Pishi	Paternal aunt (short for Pishima). Also used to address a father's female friends and can be used as a suffix to the name.
Phalgun	Phalgun is the 11th month of the Bengal calendar which follows the lunar calendar and is from mid-February till mid-March.
Phatua	A light, loose, short Indian shirt, worn by men, usually as homewear.
Pomfret	A variety of the silver moon-fish, in the same family as the plaice, popular in Bengal.
Pranam	To pay respect. In Bengal, it is enacted in the gesture of touching an elder's feet with one's right hand, symbolically



	to take the dust off the elder's feet and touching it to one's head. It is considered a Hindu custom.
Prasad	Food given as offering to the Gods by Hindus and then shared amongst devotees, friends and relatives.
Puja	Ceremonial Hindu worship.
Punjabi	The long loose shirt worn by men in North India, originally in the Punjab.
Purdah	Literally it means curtain. Muslim women are required by religion to stay in <i>purdah</i> (veil). Earlier, Hindu women of middle and upper classes also practised <i>purdah</i> .
Puri	Deep fried bread made of wholemeal flour, popular in North and central Indian cuisine.
Puti	A tiny freshwater fish.
Rabri	Delicious and popular dessert made by setting thick cream.
Radhaballabh	Radha and Krishna, usually images of the pair. <i>Ballabh</i> means, beloved.
Radhachura	In the same family as the <i>Krishnachura</i> , a tree with delicate leaves but with magenta flowers which bloom in spring. It is associated with Radha, the consort of Krishna, the Hindu God of Love.
Rangmashal	<i>Rang</i> means colour, <i>mashal</i> is a torch. <i>Rangmashal</i> is a long, cylindrical firework that can be held and lit like a sparkler. It emits colourful sparks.
Rasakali	The streak of mud worn as a ceremonial mark by Vaishnavs.
Rasgolla	A sweet ball made of cottage cheese from milk curds, cooked in syrup.
Rasmalai	A sweet made of small balls made of cottage cheese in creamy, condensed milk.
Ravan	The ten-headed demon king of Lanka, who kidnapped Sita and held a captive for one year.
Rohu	Known as <i>ru</i> in Bengali; it is a still water fish, found in lakes and ponds in Bengal and Bangladesh and considered a delicacy.
Roja	Religious fasting amongst Muslims.
Roti	See <i>chapati</i> .
Saab	Popular form of 'sahib', used to address a superior.
Saadh	Literally it means desire, longing. The name given to the ceremony in which the favourite dishes of a pregnant

	woman are given to her by women, to ensure the baby's hunger and taste are met with in anticipation of its birth.
Saheb	The Bengali version of sahib, which is used to denote a European or to address a master.
Sal	An Indian timber tree (the <i>Shorea robusta</i> ), yielding resin. Its leaves are used for making disposable dishes.
Salaam	A greeting.
Salagramshila	The black geode worshipped as a symbol of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Hindu Trinity.
Salwar	A form of loose trousers.
Sandesh	A small, delicate tasting Bengali sweet made of cottage cheese/milk curds, with many variations in the recipe, to give it different shapes and flavours.
Sannyasi	One who has renounced all earthly desires; an ascetic mendicant.
Sari	Also 'saree'. A fine cloth draped round as a main garment by women from the Indian sub-continent.
Seer	A measure.
Sehnai	A wind instrument used in Indian classical music.
Shaheb	The Bengali version of 'sahib'. A respectful way of addressing a superior or referring to a gentleman. Could also mean a white man.
Shaora	A kind of a wild tree.
Shastra	Hindu scriptures.
Sheora	A kind of wild tree.
Shiuli	A tree with fragrant flowers with orange stems that blooms in autumn.
Shilong	A big fresh water fish, weighing around 5 kg., which is considered a delicacy in West Bengal and Bangladesh.
Shimul	The silk cotton tree, which bears red flowers.
Shinni	A mixture of milk, flour, coconut and fruits like banana, made as an offering in Hindu worship.
Shraddha	The ritualistic offering of respect at a ceremony, remembering the departed, performed after the cremation.
Sindur	Vermillion, used by Hindu married women in the parting of their hair.
Sitadevi	Sita, the wife of Ram in the Hindu epic, the <i>Ramayana</i> . Devi means goddess.
Sloka	A couplet, a distich, a verse, also used to denote verses from Hindu scriptures.

Sraban	The fourth month on the Bengali calendar, which falls in the rainy season, from mid-July till mid-August.
Sudra	The worker caste, the lowest of the Hindus castes.
Sura	Wine, alcohol, spirits.
Surma	Sulphate of antimony used in the eyes as collyrium.
Swadeshi	The movement for the buying and selling homemade goods (swadeshi: of the country), against foreign manufactures, which came in the face of the first Bengal partition in 1905, led by Bengali Hindus who saw partition as a blow to Bengal's unity and prosperous economy and their own position of power.
Tadi	Arrack, the alcoholic spirit made from toddy.
Tafan	A version of 'taban' in the local dialect, which means the <i>lungi</i> worn by men.
Taka	A rupee in Bengali; also, the currency of Bangladesh. In popular usage, it can also be a generic term for money, like <i>paisa</i> in Bengali.
Tal	Fan palm or palmyra.
Tala	Used as a suffix to denote the place underneath a tree, and by extension, to the place around it, as in 'Neemtala' and 'Tulsitala'.
Talaaq	Muslim divorce.
Tangra	A small, silvery freshwater fish without scales.
Thakurjhi	Daughter of a woman's husband's brother.
Thana	Police station.
Tonga	A horse-drawn carriage.
Tulsi	The sacred basil, planted and worshipped in Hindu households; known for its medicinal qualities.
Vaishnavi	A female follower of Chaitanya, a devotee of Vishnu.
Zamindar	Literally, landowner, usually of large holdings.
Zilla	District.



