



Water Hyacinth

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As if all of a sudden there appeared , at the centre of a thin and wide patch of white cloud, a smaller and gradually widening patch of blue that looked like a deep lake, its surface undisturbed by any wave. From his seat in the moving boat, Digonto Borua was looking at the sky. For the last four or five days, the weather had been gloomy and it was rather depressing to go on looking at the same grey, cloudy sky day after day. Monsoon was coming to an end and autumn was almost there. The sight of that blue patch of the sky gladdened his heart. And then sunshine poured over the purple flowers of the water hyacinths swaying in the cool breeze blowing across the river. The

flowers glistened, and sunlight slid down the dark green leaves of the plants. The whole atmosphere turned magical in a moment. Digonto began to hum softly.

Topon, who was rowing the boat, remained unconcerned about all these. As on any other day, he must have come out quite early in the morning for fishing in the *bil*, the shallow lake connected to the tiny river. After fishing, he guided his boat through that small stream and then down the main river. As he was about to moor the boat, his friend Digonto showed up on the other side of the rice paddy field. Topon wasn't really eager to take him on a river tour. Digonto could very well row the boat himself but Topon would never let him do so. As Digonto was to leave for Guwahati in a few days, Topon became a little considerate, "O.k, let's go. I won't be able to spend much time with you, I'm sorry."

Digonto would have liked to sail further down the river. But Topon really didn't have much time to spare. He had to collect the milk from the buffalo-herders of the river island and then deliver it to the sweetmeat shops in the town. For that he would have to hire his friend Bolen's three wheeler. He needed some extra money as he could hardly make do with what he usually earned from farming.

After quietly rowing the boat for a while, Topon asked, "How is your father now?" He knew that Digonto's father hadn't been keeping well for some time.

"He seems to be much better now. Mother also thinks so.."

"Seems like your presence has pepped him up," Topon said, "You should keep visiting him. Moving to the city makes the youngsters forget their villages."

"You think I'm one of them?" Digonto kept taking pictures with his Android phone.

"I know you aren't. The reason why I let you ride my boat."

"Look, how beautiful those blooming water hyacinths are."

“They’ve just started blooming. Just wait for a few days and they’ll be everywhere.”

A clump of water hyacinth was slowly floating towards their boat. Digonto said, “Could you keep the boat steady for a little while?”

The boat came to a standstill. Digonto kept aside his Android phone and took out a small digital camera, “Come on, give me a smile. The sky won’t fall if you smile for once.”

Topon smiled. The photo should come out well since Topon’s face was bathed in sunshine.

“These flowers are so lovely!” Digonto said, “The plant has a different attraction altogether, although it’s of a foreign origin.”

“Foreign? What are you talking about?”

“Do you think this plant, *meteka*, is indigenous, originally from here? It’s a native plant of South America.”

“What was the need to bring it all the way from America? It’s found everywhere. Are you kidding?”

“No, honestly. Maybe someone was struck by its beauty and brought it here. Now people make all kinds of mats, hand bags and a variety of other items from *meteka* and are making money too. Such a lovely flower, isn’t it?”

Topon started steering his boat towards the bank and said, “I’m really scared.”

“Scared? Why?”

“Did you notice how the water has risen?”

Yes, Diganta thought, during the last two or three days, the river had swollen. It’s been raining like hell. It must be pouring in the hills. If this continues, the rising water will flood the village. Every year one experiences the last rains of the season just before the Durga Puja. The entire village reels under water. And then slowly the water moves to the *bil*. The water goes out through the drains as well. And when the water recedes, the roads turn muddy. The flood damages

most of the vegetables grown by the villagers, but it also leaves behind fertile silt in their paddy fields.

“What does *meteka* got to do with the rising water?” Digonto asked.

“Are you out of your mind?” Realizing that his voice was a bit harsh, Topon softened it a little, “What if the rising water pushes all the water hyacinths through the small river? This morning I faced such a huge and impenetrable clump of water hyacinth that I just couldn’t push them any further. If more and more clumps of hyacinth rush towards the *bil*, just imagine the plight of those who earn their living by fishing in it.”

Digonto had not thought about that before. He felt a bit embarrassed. He was about to say something but he stopped himself and said, “Hey, look over there, to your right. Can you see?”

A large raft made of logs and loaded with logs and planks of wood was slowly making its way through the clumps of hyacinth with great difficulty. A few men, some squatting on the logs covered by sheets of plastic, were working hard to steer it safely through the hyacinth. At night it will be disastrous to make such an attempt.

“What are those thieves up to?” Digonto said.

Topon just glanced at them once and started to row the boat faster towards the river bank.

“Aren’t these stolen from the forest? Should we stop them?”

“Shut up!”

Digonto glanced at Topon and said in a low voice, “Should we inform the police, or the forest department?” He took out the mobile phone and took a picture of the loaded raft and the smugglers.

“Hide that. It’s none of your business. You do your job and stay at Guwahati, don’t get involved in these.” Topon said with slight anger and irritation.

“What do you mean, you, *topa*, baldy,.” Digonto said it to annoy Topon, even though Topon was actually not bald; Digonto and his

village mates just distorted Topon's name to 'topa', meaning bald, to irritate him. "Then who is behind all these? Do you know?"

Topon didn't say anything.

The boat reached the bank. "Get off," he said.

Digonto leaped onto the bank. Topon got down and tied his boat. Then he carried the net and the large *khaloi* used to catch fish on his shoulder. Digonto was still looking at the raft with the logs. Topon said, "Let's go. Don't go on staring at them."

"Why?"

Topon didn't bother to explain right away. After walking for a little while he said, "Once in winter I brought two men to the river. While rowing around, we reached the other bank, and the men rushed into the woods with their cameras and all. I warned them but they just ignored me. The loggers chased them away. If I hadn't been there, they would have been beaten to death for sure. They might even have guns. Crores of rupees are involved in such *business*."

They were walking along the pebbled road when a mini truck sped past them. "Eh! Who is this now, rushing in at a break-neck speed?" Digonto said, covering his face with the handkerchief.

"It's Rupeswar. Who else could it be? The loggers will moor their raft in a deserted place ahead. They'll need to offload and hide the logs quickly."

"Has Rupeswar got a lumber yard?"

"Why does he need to have one? He'll supply these to Bihari Singh's or Doctor Boruah's son-in-law's mill. Those bastards have denuded the entire reserved forest. Now just wait and see, tigers will come out and roam around the villages."

Digonto found this last comment funny and interesting, "Oh, are tigers still around here?"

“There are still a few. Now from the denuded forest, herds of wild buffalos will come out, looking for shelter during the flood. Deer too come looking for higher ground.”

“And you kill them and eat them!”

Topon glared at him and Digonto hurriedly changed the topic, “Since when has Rupeswar been doing this?”

“It’s not just him, there are so many engaged in such activities,” Digonto said. “Rupeswar is used by those who have connections and can’t be touched by the police or forest officials. Nothing will happen to these loggers. And the poor fellows who enter the forest just to collect some firewood are beaten up. And then hundreds of monkeys descend on their villages and destroy everything. The plundered forests have nothing for them.”

Digonto asked him, “Do you go fishing every day?”

“Don’t talk of fishing now. What if, as it happened last year, all the hyacinths move down the river and engulf the entire *bil*, suffocating everything in it?”

Hemo slowly came cycling towards them. He got down from his cycle and looked at Topon, “I’ve heard that water hyacinth has covered everything. Could you do some fishing?”

“Yes, for a little while.” Topon didn’t want to elaborate, he was already late.

“Well, the situation doesn’t seem to be good. Water has been rising fast ” Hemo said, “ Water has already entered our village. And then, these hyacinths...they seem to grow so fast!”

“Some of these grow up to two-three meters a day.” Digonto said.

“Meter? How tall exactly?”

“Say around eight of nine feet.”

Hemo was shocked, “Oh, this is really dangerous! If babies grew this fast, or even trees...!”

They laughed. They found the observation rather amusing as it came from Hemo who had earned fatherhood only recently. Topon asked him, “How about your daughter? Is she growing fast?”

“No. I go on talking to her all the time, she doesn’t utter a single word!”

“Everything has a time, right? It doesn’t go as you wish,” Topon proclaimed.

“They should grow up fast.”

“It’s better if they didn’t.”

“Why?”

“All the problems arise once you grow up.”

Hemo changed the topic, “Hey, Topon, I heard that Kripasankar, the owner of the shop you supply milk to, used to deal in timber. And now he sells sweets.” He gave an amused laugh.

“So you’ve come to know about it now?” Topon said. “There wasn’t any other option for him. It was getting risky to deal in timber. So he sold off everything and invested in that sweet meat shop. I don’t know if he has any other illegal business too.”

With his left foot on the pedal, Hemo said, “I heard that hyacinths have choked Dina kokai’s paddy field. I’m really worried. This year I started planting rather late. What if somehow hyacinths move to engulf the field? I should go and check if everything’s fine.”

Both Tapan and Diganta looked at each other’s face. They were shaken by Hemo’s words. They were from rich farmer’s families and naturally, were better off than most farmers.

They parted ways near the fields in front of the primary school.

It started raining again in the evening, though it was not heavy. Digonto had to take his father to doctor Phukan’s clinic. His father had been facing problems in breathing normally since that afternoon. Bolen, who owned an auto-rickshaw. would have come readily to take his father to the doctor’s chamber but the journey

won't be comfortable at all for a patient. So Digonto went to Jiten Borah, the only person in the village who owned more than one motor vehicle. His sons usually took the biggest vehicle to the town. Borah was known to have some share in the illegal timber business and everyone happened to know that, although he loved to claim that he brought timbers from Arunachal Pradesh. One of his sons had a furniture house in the town. Most of the time, one of his sons would stay in the upper floor of the two-storied house he had built in the town. The shop located downstairs also stocked readymade wooden furniture so that none could accuse Jiten Borah of selling furniture made from smuggled timber.

Jiten Borah immediately sent a small car with his driver Bokul. He said, "Wait, I'm going to talk to the doctor so that you don't have to wait in his chamber."

Digonto was grateful to him.

The car carrying Diganta and his father was moving along the road that skirted the bil when a man almost stumbled across the car. Driver Bokul stopped the car and scolded him, "Are you blind?"

Digonto recognized the man. It was Okon who lived on the other side of the rivulet that dried up in winter and got filled up with water in summer.

Digonto got down from the car and before he could ask anything, the man said, "I was wondering how I could go home."

"Why? What happened?"

"The way home is blocked now. The water hyacinths pushed and broke the wooden bridge over the stream."

"When did it happen?"

"Just a while ago. It was repaired only last year."

"How do the hyacinths have so much strength?"

"You'd have known if you had only seen how they smashed everything in seconds! "

Digonto was speechless for a moment. In the falling darkness he could see only the clumps of water hyacinths. It was difficult to imagine that there used to be a *bil*, a lake with crystal clear water, where hundreds of birds used to feast on fishes during the day. Nobody had seen a single bird on the lake since last few days.

“So what are you going to do now?” Digonto asked

“We’ll have to make a detour to reach home.” Okon said, touching the heavy bag on his shoulder. “Really, hyacinths could have such strength to cause such devastation!”

Looking at the lake covered entirely by water hyacinths, Diganta slowly walked to the car. He heard his father mumble, “All the fish will die.”

A small crowd had gathered near the bridge. Digonto leant towards his left and silently indicated that he would be coming back to meet them. And he did so. On their way back from the doctor’s chamber, the driver dropped him near the crowd. Digonto heard someone say, “How strange! The clumps of hyacinths have gathered so thick as if someone had tightly packed the *bil* with them. One can even walk on them to cross the entire stretch of water. Paddy fields, *bils* and ponds, all have been covered by hyacinth.”

Digonto silently listened to their conversation. How lovely the hyacinth flowers were in the morning,, and now....

Topon came up to him, “You were right about them. It’s scary, how fast the hyacinths grow! ”

While having dinner, Diganta’s elder brother Hemanta said, “Hyacinths have rushed into our fields as well. And if they keep on coming like this, we won’t be able to grow rice anymore. The flood water has inundated the river islands. I saw a herd of wild buffalos trying to cross the *bil* and then swim across the small river. I’m worried. What’ll happen if the buffaloes fail to get out of the *bil* because of the thickly packed hyacinths? Such strong animals, yet we don’t know what might happen to them. It’s so sad!”

Digonto could visualize the scene---the buffaloes desperately trying to make their way through the clumps of water hyacinth even as thick clumps of the plant advanced en masse to surround and push them down, deeper. The scene shook him to the core.

His father expected Digonto to be near him. Otherwise, he would have gone out, at least, for once. Flood water had rushed across the road to enter their homestead. If the water had risen even higher what would or could he do? He looked at his sleeping father. The man who once didn't bother to move an inch even when angry male buffaloes came charging at him was now lying so weak, so helpless!

He was sitting near his father's bed. Around midnight his father woke up and was surprised to see his son still sitting beside him. Then he started mumbling, may be still a little drowsy, "We had a pair of buffaloes. You don't remember, I guess. How healthy and how beautiful they were ! For two straight years flood destroyed our crops. We were forced to sell the pair. It broke my heart. A Bihari milkman took them. He used to make them pull carts. I told him , "Don't be too harsh on them. Don't let these poor creatures suffer."

"What did he say?" Digonto asked—a little absent-minded.

"What else would he say? He laughed and said something in his Bihari language which I couldn't understand. Since then I stopped going towards his place." His father let out a long sigh and then fell silent. After a little while he said, "Now there is no need for bullock or buffalo-drawn carts. Oh, you don't need to go on sitting here. Go and get some sleep. Now I feel much better."

Digonto woke up late that morning. It was drizzling outside. He didn't feel like getting up that early but he had no other option as his mother went on calling him His elder brother Hemanta had already left for their paddy fields. Then after coming back, he would have an early lunch before leaving for the school where he worked as a teacher.

In the morning, some villagers saw two or three wild buffaloes grazing in the field. Now they disappeared. They might have entered someone's backyard, looking for higher grounds.

Digonto had the food prepared by his mother and went out. He walked fast to reach the group of people who seemed to be heading towards the *bil*.

He heard the shrill voice of fisherman Bubai, "You know, a raft carrying logs of wood got stuck in the thick masses of water hyacinth last evening."

"Where?"

"Near where the little river merges with the *bil*. And that large raft just disappeared amidst the dense masses of hyacinths as if in an instant! The thieves swam across the water and escaped. Logs worth a fortune must have got wasted."

"They wo'nt be wasted." Topon said, "The whole lot'll stay there, and once the water goes down, it will come out. But who will be the owner then? Are the forest officers aware of this?"

"What can they do even if they knew? Logs of so many expensive trees such as teak, *tita chapa*, and maybe *khoyer* were there." Bubai said.

"What? Are you drooling over it now?"

Seeing Bubai glare at him, Topon said, "I was just joking."

"Listen, yesterday in the evening I saw ten to twelve wild buffaloes. They got stuck in the masses of hyacinth. And after moving a little ahead, they just disappeared. I'm not sure whether they managed to climb up the bank and reach some villagers' backyards or paddy fields. "

Someone butted in, "Maybe they couldn't get out of the thickening masses of hyacinth. I saw two or three buffaloes from a distance while coming this way. After a while I just didn't see any of them. Perhaps they got buried under the hyacinth!"

Digonto could hear Topon's voice, "Yes, what if, pressed by water hyacinths from all sides, they just failed to breathe! O, poor creatures, what sufferings they had to go through!"

"Don't say that, let's go and see what we can do." Digonto started to walk towards the *bil*.

The densely packed clumps of dark green water hyacinths continued to float quietly down the water. The area surrounding the *bil* was calm and quiet. Only a gust of wind kept blowing from the river some distance away, carrying an odd smell from the hyacinths. Everyone was silent and still. Suddenly it started to rain heavily. Faced with the possibility of some disaster, the men stood there, speechless.

It rained intermittently during the day. By the evening It started raining heavily. Water rushed into most of the houses . And all the hyacinths that were in the ponds and tanks rushed out to enter people's homesteads.

In the wee hours of the night, whether in his sleep or in the wakeful state, Digonto heard a strange sound. Drowning myriads of sounds of the night, the sound of water reverberated, close to his ears , surrounding him and pushing him down. He desperately tried to push himself up and come to the surface, his breathing about to stop. He felt suffocated as masses of water hyacinth started to surround and choke him. To get some air, he started pushing them forcefully with his head and hands. Finally, he succeeded in making his way through them. He woke up, and lay still for quite some time.

And then came, like waves, from underneath the water hyacinths, the indistinct, insistent and primitive screams of a herd of buffaloes. He didn't know whether what he'd heard were the cries of agony or helpless rage.

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Subhajit Bhadra is a writer, poet, critic and translator. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Bongaigaon College, Assam. He has authored seven books and edited five books. He has also published four books of translation. He has published research articles in various national and international journals.

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