



A Deathly Summon

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A gang of village urchins was not gazing now at a flock of wild parrots or some scampering forest rabbits for they blinked their eyes, scratched their chins, crooked their brows, bit their parched lips and suppressed their juvenile laughter since the spectacle ahead was no less than a bizarre one. They saw a middle-aged man, a spade in one hand and an earthen pitcher in the other was scrupulously looking for something on the hard, arid land—a graveyard of the verdant riverside. The dry, brownish-yellow, lifeless patches of grass were witnessing man's greed to scoop out the wealth— a great treasure of

nature that had once nourished the bandit-humanity as her own sons and daughters.

"What's he up to?" they muttered, their bewildered eyes sticking to the so-called strange man. And, one of them spoke out, "Ho...what'll you do with this?" They pointed at the man's spade and, moreover, at the earthen pitcher looking so out of place.

The man threw a glance at them and answered before long, "Boys, I'm searching for a softer and wetter patch of land here, so that I can dig out some water of this river for Baltu, my little grandson."

"River!" one of them said brusquely. "It's gone...dead. Look at that." The boy lifted his hand to point at an enormous concrete structure, a barrage under construction emanating thunderous and deafening sounds. Its long row of divide walls and sluiceways as though mocking at the humanity witnessing how peace could be overpowered by the cruelest of weapon---high-tech machineries.

"I know," the man with spade raved on, "this's an infiltration into our peaceful life. It'll kill us. We have been robbed of Phulee's fresh, sweet water. We have been robbed of the lush green vegetation of this place and there're no birds, chameleons, rabbits and patches of green grass...a deliberate infiltration." The man gave vent to what his heart and soul propelled him to do.

The hot, engulfing sun of May always ensued a very familiar but an untold misery for the village folk. Even for trickles of this sweet water they invested their last limit of muscular effort to dig the sandbank of the river Phulee or most often trudged their way even for saline water to Bikrampur, the neighbouring village almost five kilometers away the exact way a caravan of camel traverses the expanse of dreary landscape in search of the survival resources. The folks needed water— to keep their gullets supple and stomachs tenantable

for the would-be digested food particles. Chaitanyapur was deprived of any suitable water supply. Some threw their accusations on the *Gram Pradhan* (the village headman), Batakrishna of embezzlement. An open secret as it was that all his glory, say a brand-new Scorpio, newly built two storied mansion in the city, Gobindopur, ten kilometers away from the village and the dazzling gold chain and a ring studded with a sparkling diamond were the results of the man's levity to his duty. The village folk witnessed how the *Pradhan* sitting in his cosy mattress smirked, rubbed his hands, puffed his hookah in a luxurious fashion and looked at the complainant as mysteriously as the later had thought his case to be. A bundle or two of a hundred-rupee-notes, if promptly put forth, the matter would never be found itself in a courtroom. Such a nightmare must better be avoided rather than becoming publicly known and, later be harassed. Consequently, the *Pradhan* was complied with. Things went on like this. Lives—countable or uncountable went on like this.

Old Kalicharan in a supreme mood to relish his hookah did never ever care for his intermittent cough that would resonate in the yard. It often brought his six-year-old grandson Nondur who either in innocence or in a childish whim asked, "Dadu, how do you do this?"

"Boy," the old man replied looking at his eyes trying hard to judge the little one's puckish countenance, "for long I've been drinking but this rubbish saline water. It infected my throat. So I'm coughing and you're hearing such a sound."

"Stop this rubbish!" hollered the mother of the boy, Lajbanti, in her thirties, a broom dangling under her arm, her dupatta

tied round her waist. "Stop puffing it and your cough will vanish."

"No," the old man released a trail of white smoke into the air and looking straight at it spiraling upward remarked, "this hookah is my close companion for decades. It's no trouble! Only Phulee's clear sweet water can cure my ailment. It's years since we had drunk her water...Mother, Mother she is! The nectar of the heaven." He coughed once more.

Mohonlal, a thin, lithe man in his late forties barged into the yard. He strode up to the old man and butted in, "It's been three years since we all had drunk the water of Phulee. Now it's turned into muck where only wild pigs are found wallowing, and, it's only because of their new project."

"I know...I know," reposted the listener, "you've given your flesh and blood but to keep them alive we need water...fresh, sweet water. When you had swum and bathed into the river in your young days, did you ever think that your eyes would witness such a day? My village has lost the smell of her soil."

Three years ago village Chaitanyapur would boast of a lush green vegetation flanked by the shimmering and wavy sand dunes of river Phulee. The river would generously feed the village folks. Haroon, Nalia, Rakhal with their whole tribe set sail across the river, spreading their fishing nets and habitually witnessing their eyes with silver-gleaming, leaping fishes—a means of their survival. Their women collected crabs and snails to sell them in the village weekly market that could help them ward off the pangs of hunger and usher a substantial happiness. Then one day this happened what the villagers thought must not to have—an infiltration to their very peaceful and the secured life. The village *Pradhan* had his drum beaten one day at the place they called *Ghanta Ghaar* (the Bell Tower-House), a giant iron bell hung on top of a very old, moss layered watch-tower made of bricks at the village square which was on its last legs. Still the surviving old men of

Chaitanyapur narrated with their ever-alacritous tongues the amazing stories of a good English officer, Hamilton Saheb, who by dint of his gracious and kind nature, had that iron bell installed there to warn the village folks against the threatening monsoon flood. A man deployed on the watch-tower would chime the bell when river Phulee swelled up to her brim. The place was also the vantage point with four main roads leading to the neighbouring villages and towns along with crowds' ears and eyes in the converging market place. The drummer announced, "Do keep your ears to my words that as a part of government's project Chaitanyapur village panchayat has decided to help build a dam to start off a new hydroelectricity project. Now Chaitanyapur is going a step ahead to prosperity."

Some tea-sipping youth, eyes full of dream at the village tea-stalls were found remarking, "Now we've a hope to get some positions there..."

Another would quickly cut him off with a note of exclamation, "Yes, certainly...if you're one of the kins of *Pradhan*! Real prosperity will be visible soon. My cousin recently got an employment in the revenue department and could make his through because of Pradhan's recommendation letter." The prompt listener scowled finding his hope diminished after hearing him.

Thus, amidst such dreary speculations and gossips times strode away. The youths of the village remained unemployed to see the slots filled up by city fellows leaving them only to cry over their misfortune. Then, one bright afternoon the insane mendicant of the village, a Ganesh who plodded villages after villages singing his incomprehensible and impenetrable mystic songs declared at the village square: *Misfortune is yours, it's indeed so, / Dear ones, you don't know who is your friend and who is your foe./ You, all are seemingly in a wrong notion,/ What I do say an infiltration...infiltration and infiltration.* Some pretended to decipher his mystical

verse, some despised and others laughed away saying that a mad man hardly knew the real world around him and thus, he gave his words such a degree of vigour and strength so as to make others believe that the quality of insanity was a God gifted endowment.

The construction work for the proposed hydroelectric project was being carried on gradually turning the river's northern side dry, thus, making the village deprived of its only source of fresh, sweet water.

Then, one night Kalicharan's throat vented out pangs of harsh, grating noise and, with it trickles of blood that left spattering horrible spots on the veranda, terrorized the old man to observe that the saline water, the worst enemy of his would not spare anyone who consumed it, however, one tried to catch at the last straw of life. He, therefore, knew that his days were coming to an end. The villagers' too. Slow but...a steady killing motion. No job for the unemployed village youth but a pitcher full of saline, brackish water was the ultimate gratuity of the village men's hard-earned livelihood. Then, the time came when the village panchayat office took the employment notice off when the barrage came to its completion.

Why?

Hopeless amidst all this, the village youth could but wrung their hands and puckered their brows. Some said, "The so-called eligible cities' men filled the slots." Some blurted out, "Sarpanch has a direct hand in the recruitment." But, the village youth, disturbed at seeing their hopes being camphored away and aspirations impregnated with an ancient, unscrupulous principles, were left at sea.

Then one morning Kalicharan was found lying dead, bed cloth soaked in blood. Nandu, who was the first to discover it, had frolicked into the room with a muddy frog holding between his fingers, to ask his grandfather, "Have you ever been so courageous as to catch a frog like this?"

But the old man, whose mortal tongue ceased to reply, did ultimately sent forth an answer —a piece of paper peering out of the mattress caught the little one's attention to be taken out promptly and unfolded to read its content. It went thus:

The river was our Mother-Boon,
Now, we have lost her forever.
Your dancing nets will cry soon,
For fishes shall come never.
Dry shall be your lips and throats,
To its last dregs, even if you drink.
For greed forbids your sailing boats,
Poison shall make the water stink.
What have you got man...eh! Nothing!
Our life is puffing, a breathless puffing.

The piece of paper fell off the boy's hand but he picked it up no more.

He ran off.

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An ardent onlooker of rainbow-coloured life, Debasish Banerjee, a freelance writer and teacher of English Language and Literature. He completed his M.A. in English from Burdwan University, West Bengal, India. Some of his English short stories like His Last Cay, Golok Bagchi's Silver Coins, Modern Filmy Saloon, Brihannala's Canvas, The Blue Lehenga were brought to light by the renowned Contemporary Literary Review India (Pune), The Indian Rover, Otherwise Engaged Literary and Arts Journal (U.S.A), YAWP Journal (Assam) and Kitaab International (Singapore). His work also got published in Readers' Club Bulletin (NCCL of NBT, India, Vol.28 No.02, May-July 2023 and Vol.28 No.04, Nov-Jan 2024).

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