

The Scars of History

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Sitting on the fifth floor of the university accommodation in King's Cross, London; it was becoming difficult for Suchorita to pen her final thoughts for the PhD upgrade paper. Though she loved her research topic thoroughly, the sound of the vacuum cleaner next door—the wheeling of the busses on the adjoining street — the siren of the police car parked opposite to her building, divided her attention. She thought, it was always easy to concentrate amongst the cacophony of Kolkata or the darkness filled silence of the Sundarbans—world's only mangrove tiger land. In searching for an answer for the lack of concentration, she failed to acknowledge the sense of belonging and personal comprehension that Kolkata or Sundarbans expressed for its guests or dwellers. In London, she felt out of place. On her way to becoming a feminist historian, she recognised the intensity of the bordering practices in London. The cops are always extra careful of the brown and black population. It has been the same in any public place that she had been to since her entry into the United Kingdoms. Enough reason to miss obscure places from the Global South, where the sense of spirituality has not yet been entirely lost to the claws of modernity and exclusion. Back home, it would be the early hours of the day when she felt comfortable to write. Devoid of the urban cacophony she could unite with her inner self to create sentences which made sense to her sentimentality — provided worded existence to her optical experiences. One such ocular encounter is the pecking of the sparrows from their nest in the small ventilator of Suchorita's dilapidated Kolkata house.

Since childhood, Suchorita had learnt to remember places through her olfactory sensations. Kolkata to her was the jaggery filled winters or the incense packed Dugra Pujas in October. Sundarbans was always fishy—fishing, prawn, and crab collection are a major source of income in the tiger land. However, the metaphoric meaning of the word shall unravel itself later. And London very bland, making your nose run as soon as you are out in the tempestuous wind. In the 90s, Suchorita's father took her to the Sundarbans for the first time. She came back home disappointed on not being able to spot a tiger or even a small crocodile. To fulfill her wish of seeing a tiger, Sundarbans became a yearly pilgrimage for their family. Alas! Till date, she has not been able to spot any except for hearing the parched roars on silent nights from her Dulki

guest house. The desire to spot a tiger must have been the calling that she became a researcher of the life and culture of the Sundarbans islanders. Though she did not witness the tiger or its paw prints during the months of her fieldwork in the winters of 2018, she was still met with the consequences of living with the tiger.

One night, while all lay asleep, there was a sudden knock at the door of Suchorita's room. Kanu Mondal, the manager of the Dulki guest house had come to wake her up. In breathlessness, he exclaimed, "Didi, the house behind our resort has lost its man to the tiger! Come see." Suchorita barged out spilling several questions for Kanu. Kanu remained silent. Not knowing how cold it was outside the room, Suchorita shivered forth for the household in distress without having wrapped herself in the shawl. On reaching the venue, she was shocked to find no one there. She was informed that the members along with the widow had gone to the local police station to file a complaint about the missing body. She was also told that this shall help the animal attack widow claim financial security from the government. Such securities usually come in the form of the *bidhoba bata*, West Bengal Government's widow pension scheme. Suchorita enquired, "Dada, where did it happen?" Kanu obediently replied, "Where else? The same place. Pirkhali. This is the twelfth case of this month." Pirkhali is famous for its tiger attacks, but because it is abundant in fish and crabs the islanders are forced to visit the area and try their luck at having a good catch. The cases of death by tiger attacks are always under-reported — it might be a government ploy or the incompetence of the local authorities to record and report the proper numbers. It is common for the tiger to leave its prey half-dead at the spot of the attack. And come back later to pull it away to its den for a feast. But this time, the tiger did not leave the human carcass at the point of attack, rather dragged it into the forest. The men on the boat were so frightened for their own lives that they could only chant lines from *Bonbibi'r Johuranma*. They could have saved the fellow fisherman if they tried to scare away the tiger by throwing stones at it or by lighting a fire. But in such a circumstance, you are never really prepared to work in a trained fashion. It is always a new experience — jolting — even if you have had seen tiger attacks before. It is, however, entirely different to have heard about it and experience it first-hand. Suchorita thought it best to leave the premises for the night and come back again the next morning to imbibe the situation and gain more information about the bureaucratic dealings. She did go back to see the widow the next morning after a scheduled interview with a sixty-year-

old tiger attack survivor but had no questions for the people in the household. Now she stood as a silent observer. The life of a researcher has taught her to be patient and, in some ways, humbler and accepting. She felt sorry for all that she took for granted till date — the home, the groceries, nightlife, branded clothing, and accessories. Suddenly she was made to feel the burden of the carbon footprint left by her and her likes on the environment throughout history. These people among whom she stood was now in the frontline to face the repercussion of the exploits made by humans like Suchorita. Sundarbans is being gnawed at by the rising sea levels. The islanders have no place to go to. They must depend on the forest for survival. But the forest is what belongs to the non-humans. And this gives rise to the never-ending clash. The sense of unity established by the dictates of Bonbibi is thrown into disequilibrium. Following the attacks, the people are compelled into villainising themselves. Toeing the line of the tale in the *Johuranama*, they believe that those that are attacked are greedy. Because they were taking more than that is required from the forest, the Bonbibi punished them in the form of an animal attack. This amounts to immense psychological burden and social ostracization.

A small hut with a solar panel on the thatched roof beside a pond where women sit cleaning the utensils — the preview picture of Santosh Mondal's homestead on Suchorita's DSLR camera captured the silent encroachment of urbanity on simple rural lives. Santosh Mondal is a tiger attack survivor from twenty-three years back. His twelve-year son had saved him by hitting the prowling tiger on its head with the boat's oar. The tiger had just jumped — positioning itself to land on the neck of Santosh when his son noticed it and immediately reacted to the situation by hitting the tiger on its head with the oar held in his hands. The tiger had lost its sense of direction and had landed on the bow of the boat — half its body hanging in the water. But this did not allow Santosh to go unharmed. While the tiger sought ways to land safely, it had placed both its claws on the left shoulder of Santosh and dragged it all along his back and left thighs before landing. The trauma of the attack has rendered Santosh voiceless. Hearing how the lack of medical facility in Sundarbans results in the death of animal-attack survivors, pained Suchorita. Either the poison spreads or the blood loss is irrecoverable. Nonetheless, stars had been in favour of Santosh, and he survived till the time he was being transferred to the Nil Ratan Sarkar (NRS) Hospital in Sealdah, Kolkata. It is the hospital nearest to the Sealdah Station, hence the selection. The transfer of animal attack survivors to the specific hospital has nothing to

do with speciality treatments. Suchorita met the son, Mahesh — now an adult — maybe, a hero to his clan. If not, obviously a hero to his family. He was rather thin and not at all a well-built man which would reflect that he must have handled a tiger in his young age. But we must not judge a book by its cover. Suchorita placed the consent forms beside her and fixed the camera on the tripod to record what Mahesh has to say. He narrated the incident for Suchorita to record. The lines that kept ringing in her ears was, “I thought I lost my father. He is alive. But we have lost him. He no more speaks. Mother says that the claws of the tiger have certain poison in it which can kill a living being little by little. Since the attack, my father has been embroiled in dermatological troubles and mental break downs. The doctor calls it Post Traumatic Disorder (PTSD). We call it the curse of the Bonbibi. What use living like this? I do not blame the forest. The forest gives us food. I do not blame the tiger. The tiger is saving the forest. Thereby, it is saving our livelihood. Otherwise, the rich men would have deforested the area for sky-scrapping buildings. I do not espouse sending my children away to the city. If we leave, who will respect the forest? Who will take care of it? Not all are trained for it. For example, you. It is not like Kolkata. People here are simple. Not busy and lost after wealth. We can survive here only if we can forge an equilibrium with mother nature. If not, we will be washed out. If we go, people like you will also go with us.”

The scar on the body of Santosh Mondal resembled the scar of history to Suchorita. Though historians mean the colonial borders when they talk about the scars of history, Suchorita, found in the scar her own and society’s involvement in creating it. The scar, which like the concept of maintaining sovereignty in new nation-states reflected the division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Somehow, we have not been able to keep the West separate from the East. In aping the West, we have harmed our own. And this cannot be altered. Alteration can only be induced if unity and equality are sought and preserved through faith in spirituality. But in a fast-moving world, such changes are delay. And everyone wants progression. It is for us to think where this shall take us. Where it shall end. And if the end is something desirable.

Suchorita removed the camera from the tripod. It had been recording the interview of Mahesh and Santosh. Santosh, however, only sat on the chair with no visible expressions while Mahesh spoke from beside him. Placing the camera in a variety of angles in her hand she clicked

a few pictures of the visible scar. A part of it near the neck still had an open wound — may be due to the dermatological problems, Santosh has been encountering since the attack. One of the shots captured a tiny fly sitting by the gaping wound. The wound reeked of pus. The fly had fishy intentions. It was there to garner its food in clever manners and after that, it would fly away without any responsibility of payback.

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