



The Swim

Madan Sarma

Translated from Assamese by Subhajit Bhadra

The river seemed to be chasing, following him, and not only him but the entire town together with its people, homes, shops, trees and flowers. They say, much earlier the river used to flow far from this small and drowsy town. Then the river inched forward, eventually encircling the entire town. Wherever he went in and around the town, his eyes were sure to land on a smooth bend of the river, or a zigzag section of it as the river rushed in and then quickly went out of the town. After wandering around the town, he finally rented a

house and that too by the riverside. The day after he joined work, he wrote a long letter to his beloved, Upama. He wrote, ‘I think the river won’t stop pursuing me. My mother always tried to keep me away from rivers, but they keep chasing me with a vengeance.’

‘...No matter wherever you go, you’ll feel that the river goes on peeping at you, or that you’re staring at it. You would never know, unless somebody told you, that a lovely, innocent-looking river with swift currents was flowing just a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet away from my house. It’s not very wide. However, it widens a little beyond the outskirts of the town.’

‘The river flows ever so silently that one might not take it to be a river at all. In the silence of the night, especially late at night, I would sometimes hear the overlapping sounds of wind and water. The river is said to be quite deep. I haven’t been to the river yet.’

He remembered those days in their village. There was a mirthful hilly river running through the fields in front of their house. It was rather shallow, its flat bosom covered by sand, pebbles and stones. There was no question of swimming in it. One could somehow wet one’s head just by taking a hurried dip in it. When it rained heavily, the water would suddenly rise and keep rising for a few hours. The surging water would carry along a few uprooted trees and occasionally, a fawn too.

He passed his childhood and teens, playing by the riverside, taking an occasional dip and frolicking in its shallow water. He never got an opportunity to swim. If he had any, his mother would surely not allow him to go to the river. The cause was his father died suddenly, untimely by drowning not in such a shallow river but in a big sea when his boat sank. Since then he and the siblings were brought up by their Bordeuta, their father’s elder brother, under a strict regimen and discipline...One fine morning they discovered a badly mutilated body of a young man on the bank of that frolicsome river. Tension mounted in the neighbouring villages. People said, it might be the handiwork of the police or the army. Should a young man, a rebel or not, be killed the way animals are slaughtered. People took out processions and held meetings on the bank of the river in protest.

His uncle forced him to stay at home and not to venture out. He said, 'No need to get involved in these. Don't forget your responsibilities.' He nearly stopped going to the river. His friends taunted him, called him selfish and cowardly. The matter didn't end there. His uncle sent him to a distant city for further studies, just to prevent him from ever getting involved in what he termed as 'hassles.' His mother didn't forget to drill it into him that he should never go for a swim in any pond, tank or river.

A few days later, his colleagues decided to go for a picnic on the bank of a fast-flowing hilly river. They went down to the crystal clear and icy water of the river and had great fun splashing about in it. Some of them decided to brave its strong currents and started swimming. No one could persuade him to go down to the river. He just went on sitting on a rock. He cupped a few handfuls of cold water and splashed these on his face, letting a few drops wet his head. He said, 'I promised my mother. She keeps on worrying about me. Some astrologer had told her that swimming might spell disaster for me.' Some of his colleagues laughed and mocked him, while some said, 'Might be true. Don't people talk of ill-luck and omens?' He was embarrassed. Was he really so timid?

He lay on the flat top of a tall rock and looked at the cloudless sky. He kept on gazing at a broad patch of the sky that looked like a deep blue lake. The sights brought to his mind that big tank he saw when he was a little boy. Once when he was just a little kid, he accompanied Raghu who worked as a domestic help, to pick flowers from the plants and trees that grew on its banks. A huge crowd had gathered there. Raghu climbed the flowering trees and plucked flowers and he gathered them in a basket. Then he noticed some men moving about in small boats. Some of them carried long bamboo poles and continued to prod and search for something in the water. And then they lifted out of water the body of a young man and laid it carefully down on the bank. He was overcome by exhaustion as he went on swimming in the tank for quite some time. Two days after that incident he dreamt of that enormous tank. He saw the huge crowd, the flowering plants and trees dancing in the wind, and a corpse lying there. It was his corpse. When he narrated

the dream to his mother, Raghu was soundly rebuked for taking him to that cursed tank.

On a late afternoon, a year after that, he was returning from a nearby village when he thought he saw an apparition gliding over the lotus leaves of an old pond near a bamboo grove. His body shook in fear. So he started wearing charms round his neck. He had no idea where those evil spirits or wandering souls had gone. His grandmother used to say that the wandering souls and spirits had lost their refuge because of the constant pursuit by humans. He laughed. But then, he felt sad too for there was no one to talk about such things, and excite the young children by narrating the stories filled with such wonder and awe. He often wondered if simple and innocent superstitions could really be less harmful than orthodox beliefs.

It was already getting dark when they returned from picnic. The minibus carrying the picnickers broke down just as it was nearing the town. They had to wait for half an hour on the river bank. He took a casual walk by the river and then stopped at a spot, when his eyes were drawn to a thicket that was slowly getting enveloped by dusk and mist. He thought he had seen that mysterious-looking thicket before, but where, when could that be? A few tall trees stood still. He wondered what secrets - beautiful, frightening or unthinkable- might lurk behind them, and for whom? Could it be somehow the same thicket on the bank of that gay river he had known since his childhood, where he had almost lost himself while looking for the straying bullock? He had entered that thicket around this time. Carefully skirting the thorny grove of canes he came to a sudden halt at a clear spot between two trees. It was getting darker and yet he could see two ghosts or phantoms, one jumping onto the other. Very slowly and silently, he kept backing off and in a single leap got out of the thicket and ran to the road. Huffing and puffing, he stood under a barren mango tree when he saw the bullock with a white mark on its forehead approaching him. As he was walking behind the bullock on his way home, he met a villager, Bhadaram.

‘Hey? What are you doing here this late in the evening?’ Bhadaram asked.

He was still trembling with fear. He said in a shaky voice, ‘I saw something over there--in the thicket.’

‘What did you see?’

‘I think I saw two ghosts -one was pressing the other to him.’

To his surprise, Bhadaram started laughing. As his laughing stopped, he said, ‘Two ghosts, for real? Did you look properly? Did one of them have long hair?’

‘Might have, I’m not sure.’ He tried to remember what he saw exactly.

‘Alright, I understand. It might be a witch.’ Suddenly Bhadaram seemed grave. ‘Listen. Forget what you saw. Don’t tell anyone at home about it. Otherwise, when you come this way again a ghost shall chase you, take hold you and possess you, making it impossible for you to live. Don’t forget. And don’t tell your mother.’

He never told anybody. Now looking at the thicket, he felt like laughing aloud. Still, could there possibly be a spirit lurking somewhere in it as well?

In his second letter to Upama, he narrated his last experience in a language aimed at making it seem funny. She gave suggestions, on the phone too, that he should not court danger by trying to unravel the mystery of any thicket. Who knows what dark forces might be active in such places?

What danger? Till now, everybody has been protecting him from every possible and impossible danger. He has been used to leading an uneventful and sheltered ordinary life. His mother’s sudden but not unexpected death continued to perturb his mind for some time. After all the funeral rites and rituals got over, his brother asked the priest, ‘Please advise us about the do’s and don’ts.’

The priest went on, ‘You’re not supposed to do so many things during these days. Our experts in the Shastras haven’t left out anything. They took care of all eventualities. So listen carefully – do not climb trees, though you have no idea about climbing trees; do

not drive any vehicle, though you can't afford one; do not cross rivers, though you don't know how to swim. Anyway, stay away from all possible dangers and sit quietly at home.' He looked at the priest's smiling face and smiled. Suddenly he felt free.

Naturally, he had to cross rivers daily, not by swimming though. He had to cross many rivers to arrive at this small town and the small river that surrounded it.

The rainy season began. The river water started rising. People said that many years back, when the town was flooded, a part of it was washed away by the river,. Considering the size of the river, it was hard to believe. This river was very different from the familiar cheerful river of his childhood. There was no doubt about it. This river seemed to be grave and intense, and mysterious. It might, however, be just his imagination.

For a few days, the wind blew furiously and continuously. It poured incessantly. For one whole night it rained non-stop. Waking up late in the morning, he opened the front door while brushing his teeth and noticed that the river had been transformed into a sea. Water came up to the topmost step attached to his verandah. Just four or five feet away from where he stood, a snake slithered towards the corner of the veranda. He shut the door with a loud bang. The snake might have left. He was afraid to get down into the water. The veranda at the back too was in the same state. The entire town was flooded. Only the houses stood there like small islands. The sounds of people talking, arguing and shouting travelled over the water. His neighbour Barman's young son waded through the flood water to bring him his daily newspaper as the hawker could not come to deliver it. He requested the boy to make a telephone call to his office to let them know that he would not be able to go to work that day. He was not even sure whether he could go out of his house. Hearing him, the boy bared his teeth and started laughing, 'Should I ask them to send a boat for you?' He was a smart boy, indeed! He wasn't scared of snakes, didn't worry about breaking his legs by treading on something or falling into some unseen holes. And simply because he knew how to swim, he was so sure of himself.

All the rivers were in spate. They had flooded vast plains, destroyed houses and property. Seated comfortably on the bed, he watched news about floods on the television. He saw helpless people everywhere-on the embankments, on high grounds, in schools and shelter homes. He looked out of the window. There was no such danger for him. Flood here was only a temporary mishap, or a minor calamity. After the calamity passed, the city came back to the normal rhythm of life. It is then that he got Upama's letter. She had complained that he had been inventing excuses to delay their marriage. She complained, 'I guess you've started considering me as a nuisance. You should be more forthright.' What could he possibly say! Let him postpone his response for some time.

The days passed slowly, as if limping. The river assumed its familiar lithe form once more and got back its mystery. Every evening he began spending some time on its banks. There was no place good enough to go to in the city. It seemed as if the city had nothing of its own except the river.

Though he had three days' holiday for Durga Puja, he didn't go home. After his mother had passed away, he felt so lonesome and their house seemed so deserted! He could have gone home for Upama's sake. Did he want to keep away from her?

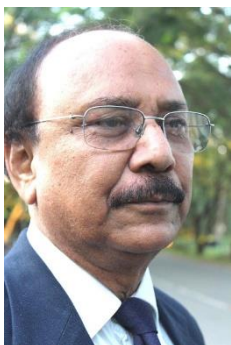
The town wore a festive look. All through the evening he would wander aimlessly and then come back to his room exhausted, as if he was just a disinterested observer. Observing everything from a distance was his duty, not getting involved in anything. However, in the end he had to get involved. He was waiting at the edge of the water. It wasn't the spot chosen for ceremonial immersion of the idol. Yet on very rare occasions one or two groups came there to immerse idols. On hearing the shouts of young men and the noise from the vehicles he turned and looked at the river bank. A motley crowd had come to submerge an idol, and within seconds the quiet and relaxing ambience of the place was destroyed. Amidst the commotion some people carried the idol of goddess Durga to a boat and pushed it into the river. And then scores of men rushed down to the water. He wanted to leave that spot and climb up to the bank but

just could not move at all. The surging crowd pushed him towards the river. He sensed that his feet could not touch the ground anymore. He felt like screaming loudly in absolute terror but his voice was almost choked. The boisterous young men laughed in joy and pushed him into deeper water. He struggled to get out of the water. Several elders kept shouting from the bank, ‘Help him, help him, he’s going to drown.’ No one bothered to help him.

All the sounds – the blowing of conches, the beating of drums, the playing of cymbals, the songs from the blaring sound system somewhere on the bank, boisterous laughter of the young men—kept on moving in circles around him. A few men were swimming towards him. In utter panic, he stretched his hands and started beating the water with them. After some time he realized that he wasn’t at the same place anymore. Was he swimming, or was the current dragging him away? Gradually, the gathering cleared, the familiar river bank moved out of sight, the noises came to a stop. Dusk had started falling. He raised his head, looked to his right, and went on looking dumbstruck. He found himself moving towards that mysterious thicket. The thicket seemed to be covered by a translucent screen of fog. A gentle breeze flew past the trees. He turned and looked to his left. He had left the light from the city and its indistinct, the incoherent sounds far behind him. So he would have to go back swimming a very long way. It was astounding. How did he come so far? He was not frightened by the fast approaching darkness that engulfed the thicket, nor did he tremble even for once, knowing that he won’t find any boat or couldn’t expect any help from anyone, and that he must swim, keep on swimming, all alone.

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About the author



Madan Sarma

Madan Sarma is a leading short story writer and critic of Assamese. He has so far published six short story collections, three novels, a collection of poems and six books of criticism including three on world literature. He retired as Professor of English at Tezpur University, Assam.

About the translator



Subhajit Bhadra

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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