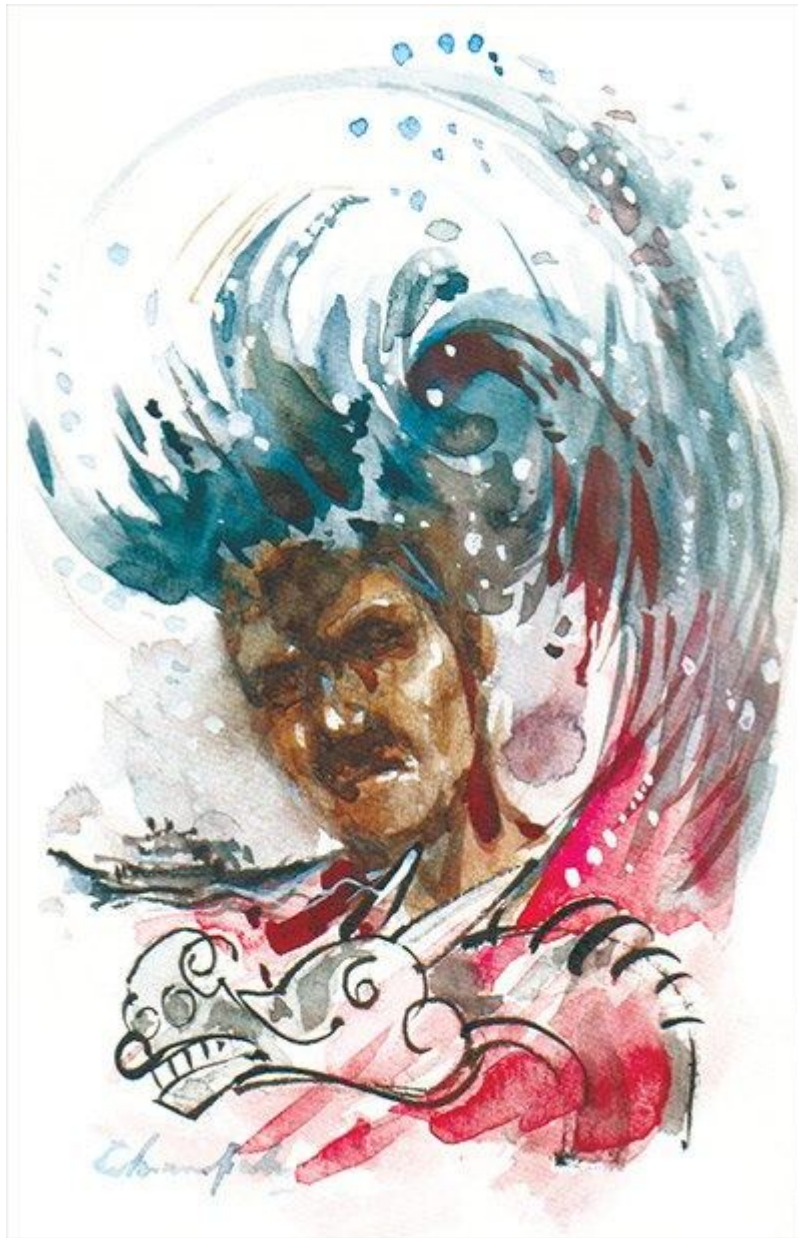


THIRD EYE EDITION

Troubled waters



The first visuals are coming in. For a tiny milli-second you feel a catch in your throat, beginning just when you pause to flip channels. Somewhere between the sales pitch for the perfect hair colour and the high-end car gliding over a silky highway, your attention is caught by the strained, high decibel voice-over of a reporter as a breaking news unfolds. This time it is not a car bomb going off in Iraq, nor an earthquake in Japan. It is closer home, in a place that seems to have just fallen off the map a long time ago, but only to be resurrected by this horrendous tragedy. Imagine this. Between Dhubri and Medertary *ghat*, a creaking, ramshackle ferry boat weaves its tenuous way across the vast stretch of the surging Brahmaputra. The ferry's old engine groans and shudders. Inside, people are crammed together, with hardly any breathing space, the windows closed to kept out the

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brewing storm. Imagine the babble of voices, mothers suckling their infants, green grocers with gunny sacks of vegetables, daily labourers in sweat stained clothes, farmers implacably waiting for the rains to turn their fields green. Above, on the deck, there are more people, watching the grey scudding clouds, the dying glow of a westerly sun, maybe even a dolphin or two rising up in an arc as the ferry leaves behind a frothy white trail on the water. Humble people with few belongings and fewer dreams. Sitting there, crammed on the hard benches, elbows squashed against ribs, crying babies, tinkle of cheap glass bangles. Tired bodies, slumped in stupor. There were some old men among them, with lined, wrinkled faces, gap-toothed, feeble, weary after the trip to Dhubri back and forth for their old age pension. Only they would never need that pension after all.

The great river had always ruled the fragile lives of these forgotten people. It was at times a friend, yielding a silvery bounty of fish, generously silting their fields of paddy. But it could also be a cruel adversary, swallowing up their land, surging into their homes, sweeping away their cattle, a macabre dance of death repeated each monsoon. Some of those people, patiently waiting for the ferry to touch the other shore, must have remembered the river in the mellow sun of winter, a placid, restful Luit almost asleep between vast stretches of white sandbanks. But winter would not come for them. They would never know how divers would search for them below the waters, how their families keened brokenhearted on the shore, how the newsmen stood filming the tragedy and hundreds of people stood there, stunned by what had happened, an old ferry split in two, spilling people into the waters. You find the names of those lost people in the newspaper the next day. That is what they are. Just names. Names with a few belongings and fewer dreams. And a whirling storm of wailing winds and treacherous waters sweeping them to oblivion.

Scribes have compared it with the *Titanic*. It is a tragedy which is indeed titanic in scale. It was covered in regional, national and international media. It elicited condolences from the Russian head of state. What is it that we learn from the Medertary tragedy? What is the moral of it? That one must not tempt fate, not board ancient, creaking ferries, not go searching for old age pensions? We did not know those people, and now we never will. And after all this is over, after the *netas* are done with their inept clucking of sympathy and fingers stop pointing and the ex-gratia relief promised, the river will flow on towards the outstretched arms of the sea. Like a brief flare before the matchstick burns out, Medertary became the place that returned from oblivion. And as the river rolls on its journey, we will forget this place even existed, for it will have once again fallen from the map.

Rivers and seas are an intriguing theme in literature, poetry, fine art, theatre, music and film. It has been used as a metaphor for birth and rebirth, violence and death, self-discovery, inspiration and renewal. Heroic figures like Odysseus return from Troy across the sea after ten long years. Hemingway's old man is not heroically struggling to hook the marlin as much as he is defying the sea and the elements ranged against him.

The rural poor views the river very differently from the city slickers. For us, the limit is what we point out to visitors with an airy wave of the hand – "that's the Red River, comes all the

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way from Tibet. Majuli? Of course, I'll help you get a tour operator. No problemo. You could take the cruise, you know." We know we cannot tame the river, so we tame the Guwahati riverfront instead, neat flowerbeds, trees, walkabouts flanked by grassy stretches, wrought iron benches. Down on the edge of the waters, ferry boats wait for people to walk cautiously down the creaky gangplank and settle on the deck for music, food and laughter. Very few look out to the river, the menu card seems much more interesting. This self-absorbed city slicker takes it for granted that this river is just a prop to add atmosphere to his evening of fun. A low curse escapes from his lips when there is a sudden power cut. In that four minutes of darkness, he sees the river turning silver in the moonlight, the hills of North Guwahati are dark, rolling mountains asleep beyond the waters. Some day we must take the river cruise to Majuli, remarks his wife. He grunts. So when the ferry disaster occurred, he was the first to inform his wife, and their dream cruise was never mentioned again. He also tired of reading and listening to the anti-dam tirade and the Chinese plans. A weekly dinner of gravy chowmein and Manchurian chicken was the only Chinese connection he cared about. The city slicker also tends to view Nature through foggy, rose tinted perspectives. Nature is supposed to be green, calming, aesthetically pleasing – bird song takes over vehicles tooting, clean air with a hint of floral fragrance. Bountiful fields that do not know drought or pests or fertilisers. And the villagers... hardy folk who toil to put food on our plates. We don't care if he, the farmer, is in debt, if he is being cheated by middlemen, or that his child has malaria. For us, he is not very different from the oxen he follows, as they, yoked together, drag the plough through the muddy fields. In the city, watching a Satriya dancer perform on stage; an artist presenting Picasso with a local twist, or watching some highbrow, experimental play, the Everyman makes it a point to introduce himself to the performer, lavish him/her with praise and adroitly has his picture taken with the celebrity. And the farmer who puts food on your plate – no matter what – who braves the fiery sun, the lashing rain, marauding elephants, pests... day after thankless day – what happens to him? Doesn't he deserve a few words of appreciation? You wouldn't get down from your car on some lonely highway, tramp across a muddy field, and chat up a weary, taciturn, sunburnt man in a *dhoti*, would you? Of course no. You find the very idea quite ridiculous. You don't want to know how the majority in India lives. That is not your comfort zone.

As we grieve for the Medertary victims of the ferry boat crash, I realise it took the dead to remind us of the living. After the divers call it a day and the *netas* depart, sirens screaming, leaving wheel tracks on the rutted roads, Medertary will again fall off the map, and we will perhaps never again hear of those people with few belongings and fewer dreams.