

THE TREE

Manoj Das

WHEN the season was on the brink of monsoon the village elders had begun to look grave. The sinister cloud formation on the mountains several miles away and a wide ring of uncanny aura around the moon had informed them that it was going to be terrible that year.

The flood came at a little past midnight. Although the village was enveloped in sleep, the long moaning howl of jackals woke up several people. They called out to each other and, reassured by collective awareness, soon gathered on the river-bank, with lanterns or torches of dry twigs. The flames danced in the gusts of wind, making the people's faces alternately appear and disappear.

The moon was completely draped in clouds and the stars looked as pallid as the eyes of dead fish. Nothing much could be seen of the river, but one could feel it bulging and hear it hissing. The wind carried the smell of crushed raw earth.

Flood waters never entered this village, although hardly a season passed without the river playing havoc with the villages a couple of miles down-stream. The people there knew when to climb to their roofs or perch on the trees. After three or four days they came down and settled again.

But even though flood did not enter this village, it nibbled at the high ridge and once in a while gobbled up a chunk of the grassland stretching along the bank. The villagers felt scandalised every time their familiar, tame river expanded and looked alien and began to hiss. It gave the sort of shock — in a much greater degree, though — that one felt when a domestic animal suddenly went crazy, unresponsive to any amount of endearment. One just looked on helplessly.

And that is what the villagers were doing when they suddenly realised that the situation was much more grave than they had imagined. They heard a chugging and the faint sound of voices already tired and cracking. They raised their lanterns. The voices grew more plaintive. The villagers strained their eyes to see through the darkness and the mist. A few of them could make out the black shape of a boat on the ashen waters. They shouted the only sensible advice that could be given to those caught up in a flood: 'Have patience. As soon as it is dawn the villagers down-stream will throw ropes to save you. Keep on shouting. God be with you.'

Such boats generally came from the forest at the foot of the mountains where they went for timber. Sometimes, other stock advice was given: 'Throw away the load and make the vessel lighter, but do not go too light' — a vessel that was too light became a plaything for the boisterous waves.

The sound from the darkness became fainter and more remote, random syllables blown away by the erratic wind. The wind grew stronger and colder and was soon accompanied by a thin shower. All ran to take shelter under the banian tree. The wicks of their lanterns were turned low so that the glass would not grow hot enough to crack at the touch of raindrops.

The leaves chattered their familiar language of hope and courage. The boughs that spread overhead had been the very symbol of protection for generations, affording shelter not only to those who bore love and regard for the tree but even to those who had behaved impudently towards it — though, of course, only after first humbling them to their knees. The elders would point to a mound covered with grass and shrubs, not far from the tree, and cite the ancient proof of this fact. The mound had decayed through centuries, but it was still 'as tall as two men'. They did not expect anyone to ignore a fact so solid and as tall as two men.

The mound contained the ruins of a king's palace. It was neither possible nor necessary to recall the name of the king who had built it, or whether he had been of the solar or the lunar dynasty. What was frequently recalled was that he had dared to cut down a few branches of the tree to make room for his palace. Perhaps he had planned to cut more, perhaps even to destroy the tree totally, but before he could do so a terrific storm had broken out. The palace collapsed. The king and his family took shelter under the tree and were saved. The king clasped the tree and wept. The storm subsided.

Further back in time, it was said, the tree had taken off and flown to the Himalayas or other such meaningful places, at the behest of a certain great soul who lived under it. But that was in the Era of Truth, and, in the absence of concrete evidence like the mound to support this legend, elders of the present generation spoke relatively less about it than had their predecessors.

The trunk that had once been clasped by the king had decayed and disappeared long since, after having

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sent down shoots which had now formed new trunks. The tree, its branches spreading over an acre, resting on these trunks had become an institution long ago. Beside one of the trunks rested a stone which was the 'banian goddess'. She had no priest especially devoted to her service. Whoever so desired could approach her and sprinkle vermilion on her. In the course of generations the vermilion crust had come to account for the greater part of the goddess's body. Devotees ordinarily did not prostrate themselves to her, but everybody, while passing before her, bowed enough for her to take cognisance of his devotion. In matters complex and formidable, the villagers prayed for the intervention of famous deities of distant temples. But small issues were referred to her from time to time. Children in particular found her helpful in crises arising from homework not done or the ill humour of the pundits of the primary school.

The area around another trunk was the usual site of village meetings. Relaxing beside a neighbouring trunk, eyes shut and jaws moving in a leisurely rhythm, the village's much respected sacred bull could be found. In the afternoons of the market days, an old woman from a village on the horizon sat leaning against another trunk with a sack half-filled with greens and other vegetables. The market, still two miles distant, was her goal; but her knees, she would declare with a quiet, toothless laugh, refused to serve her any more, obliging her to sell her wares sitting there. At sunset she would rise and offer a handful of whatever still remained in her sack to the sacred bull.

In a hollow at the foot of another trunk resided a family of snakes which never harmed anyone and, in the branches above, lived innumerable birds.

Though it was not something of which there was any need to speak, everybody believed the tree to be immortal. Immortality being an attribute of the gods, it was godly. Nobody would easily flout a decision that had been arrived at in a meeting under the tree, for, even when the decision was unpalatable to someone or some party, behind it there was the seal of an invisible and inaudible power.

THE RAIN stopped, though not the wind. The first touch of awe and excitement passed. They could all go back to their homes now, and return in the morning. It was more out of reverence for the river, to show that they had taken due note of its changing mood, than from any fear of the flood that some people must always gather at its edge.

A crashing sound stunned them. Suddenly the earth seemed to rock. The few who were nearest the river were splashed; had they been standing a little closer they would have been gone forever. In the dark, no-one had noticed the crack that had developed in the ground before the huge chunk of the bank slipped into the water.

Nirakar Das, the retired head-pundit of the primary school, shouted: 'Come away, come away, all of you'. The authoritative voice was instantly obeyed.

A few snakes crept out of the hollow under the tree and wriggled away towards the mound. Some saw only one snake, some saw two and some three; but to all it appeared to be the exodus of a thousand snakes, a stream of life abandoning its ancient body.

It was now about dawn. Nirakar Das advanced to near the tree and looked up for a long time. 'My eyes are gone', he declared again as he had on countless occasions during the past decade. Scanning the people who were now beginning to extinguish their lanterns and torches, he called one of his ex-pupils, Ravindra, the founder-proprietor of the village grocery, and asked him to look up and see if there were birds in the tree.

Ravindra and others gazed up into the branches for a while and reported their finding: 'No, not a single feather.'

Nirakar Das looked glum. 'Can any of you recollect another instance like this?', he asked the people of his age-group. They too looked grave and shook their heads: 'No'.

'Far from a good sign', Nirakar Das observed. 'Snakes and birds fleeing their shelter!'

Not long after this, Ravindra and others with better eyesight detected an extensive crack, in the shape of a sickle, with both its ends pointing towards the river. The semi-circle embraced the tree.

'If the tree falls, it will carry this whole huge chunk along with it into the river, for its innumerable roots have made all this earth like a single cake', a young man explained to his two friends. They were the only boys from the village studying in a college in the town. This was their first visit to the village since they had grown long hair and sideburns.

'What! The tree fall? How dare you say such a thing? What do you know about this tree?', an old Brahmin, notorious for bad temper, shouted at them.

'They have developed bones in their tongues', commented Ravindra. 'You are reading in the college, aren't you? Come on, save the tree with your English, algebra and what not', he challenged them.

'Why should we?', the spokesman of the trio asked haughtily.

'Why should you? As if you could do it if you pleased! Is this what you imply? Well, please do it out of pity for us, out of pity for fourteen generations of our forefathers. Would you?' This time, Ravindra was supported by a number of people. The young man blinked and muttered: 'What I meant was how can we save the tree?'

'Now it's how can we! If this is the limit of your capacity, how did you dare to grow such obscene hair?', demanded the bad-tempered Brahmin.

'Look here, my young fathers. Just promise, not loudly, but silently within your hearts — let none but the spirit of the tree know — that if the tree is saved you will shorten your hair. Please, my fathers, make a solemn promise', implored Shrikanta Das, the meek and mild Vaishnav, his palms joined in the shape of a lotus bud, out of humility.

As the sky in the east grew lighter it was observed that the ground between the tree and the river had tilted towards the river.

The young men tried to appear engrossed in discussing something highly sophisticated among themselves. Shrikanta Das raised his voice: 'Hearken, you all. Not only these boys, but we all have our share of sin. And if the tree is going to collapse, it is because it cannot bear the burden of our sins any more. Let everyone of us confess his sin, addressing the spirit of the tree, silently, in the heart. Let us pray to be pardoned. *Hari bol!* Glory to God!'

All shouted '*Hari bol*'. But it sounded like a cry of lamentation.

WHEN they stopped, the silence seemed biting sharp. With the gradual brightening of the sky the seriousness of the situation became more and more apparent.

A few kites circling above the whirling waters at times swooped down on the crowd, as though to show the contempt of those who dwell at such a height and see from horizon to horizon for the wretched men below.

The crowd swelled rapidly. Almost all the villagers, women and children included, were now gathered together. In different words all asked the same question: 'What is to be done?' A part of the tree was clearly leaning towards the river.

Once the college boys had been humbled, there was no hesitation in openly discussing the impending fall of the tree. Something, no doubt, had to be done. If one only knew what that was.

The crowd spontaneously looked at one after another of those who had claims to some sort of distinction.

Shridhar Mishra was a homoeopath. He had saved many from certain death. When the people looked expectantly to him, his lips quivered as they always did when he was about to diagnose a disease. The villagers were accustomed to read in that quiver the promise of remedy. But now the quivering did not stop even when the people had looked at him for a long time, so they focused their attention on Raghu Dalbehera, the only villager who had a gun. He was rarely seen without his gun, although the list of his kills during a period of twenty years was limited to a handful of birds and a greedy fox — the latter merely dazed by the sound and

smoke from the gun and killed in an operation in which many had the privilege to participate. When Raghu realised that the crowd had already been staring at him for five minutes, he raised his gun at an audaciously swooping kite, took aim and continued to take aim. 'Don't, Raghu, don't', warned Nirakar Das; and Raghu brought down his gun with relief. People sighed and ceased to concentrate on him.

Just then, someone brought the news that the honourable Member of the Legislative Assembly had been seen on a nearby road, perhaps heading for the next village.

'Bring him here. Run boys, run', said the elderly villagers. A number of young men disappeared, running. Freed from the obligation to think or do anything now that the M.L.A. had been summoned, all stood peacefully looking towards the bend of the road where he was expected to appear.

The M.L.A. arrived, walking at a running pace, wrinkling his brows.

'Do you see the situation, M.L.A. *baboo*? We are doomed!', more than one voice cried.

'Who says you are doomed? People further down are really in trouble. Flood waters have entered their village and are threatening their houses. You are in a comfortable position and, I hope, will continue to be comfortable', said the M.L.A., displaying the particular variety of smile with which he aroused the conscience of his listeners.

'We voted for you', exclaimed an unformed voice. The three college boys now elbowed their way forward, throwing glances back at the crowd as if defying it to stop them from confronting the leader. They were, of course, two to three years below voting age, but they were determined to regain face after their earlier humiliation.

The M.L.A. paled, but ignored the boys. He asked the elders: 'What would you like me to do?'

There was no reply. Recovering his courage and flashing the conscience-rousing smile again, he repeated the challenge: 'Order me to do and I am ready to do.'

'Do, eh! What can you do? Only remember that we voted for you and that it is during your reign that the sacred tree which has stood here since the Era of Truth is going to jump into the river', said an old man.

'Reign? Who reigns nowadays? Neither the British are there nor the Rajas. You are the Rajas now and myself only your humble servant', retorted the M.L.A.

'Servant, are you? Let us see you serve us then. Stop this tree from falling.' It was again one of the college trio.

The M.L.A. suddenly grew spirited. 'Why don't we all try together? Gird your loins. What were you all

doing for so long? Fetch as much rope as you can — thick and strong. Go, go, I say'. He girded his own loins.

'Yes, yes, run, run', shouted several others. Though all knew how unrealistic the proposition was and how difficult it was to obtain even a few yards of rope such as the M.L.A. had specified, some of them were ready to set off under the spur of the leader's clarion call.

But suddenly a part of the tree resting on several trunks slid into the river. Water shot up in fountains, touching the wings of the scared kites.

'O God, O God!' The crowd stood thunderstruck. The silence was broken by an anxious voice: 'What will happen to the banian goddess?'

No sooner had this been said than the ill-tempered old Brahmin rushed to the remnants of the tree. He sat down on the muddy ground — a spot which had been considered dangerous even by the snakes — and, mustering all his strength, pulled up the small stone that had stuck to the spot for years. Holding the up-rooted goddess close to his bosom as though to protect her from invisible enemies he returned to the crowd.

'Give place to the goddess!' The people shouted with excitement, thronging closer around the Brahmin. Someone spread a towel on the grass. The Brahmin put down the goddess and patted her. All looked at her with the sympathy which an orphan infant deserved. They pressed around, dangling their hands in eagerness to do something for her.

Another mighty splashing sound. The entire tree was gone. The old branches wrestled with the mad waters as they were carried away.

'Gone! The tree-god gone! *Hari bol, Hari bol!*' For a long time, under a continuous drizzle, they kept up the chant with all their hearts, all of them stunned and some weeping.

Old Bishu Jena had seated himself before the banian goddess. Someone saw that he had begun to shiver, and cried: 'I think Bishu is falling into his trance.' People rushed to their homes and brought out cymbals, drums and conch-shells. In days gone by, when there was no vote and no college for village boys, Bishu used to become 'possessed' before the banian goddess. Drums, cymbals and conch-shells had to be played close to his ears as loudly as possible. He began with shivering. Then he would fall down in a swoon and rise up with face beaming supernaturally, eyes wild with inexplicable experiences. Often, though not every time, he would utter words that were understood by only a few, who nodded.

Bishu was in a trance again, after at least two decades. Those who used to play the instruments close to his ears had now grown old; yet, their sagging skin flapping like empty purses, they were doing their best.

Bishu opened his mouth. The sounds stopped. 'I will be born again — again', he said. He closed his mouth and eyes and resumed shivering. The instruments were played again. Again he opened his mouth, and the instruments stopped. 'I will be born as a thousand trees — here and there — everywhere.'

'*Hari bol. Hari bol!*' The instruments played more loudly, as younger hands took over from tired old ones. Along with Bishu, Nirakar Das, Shrikanta Das the Vaishnav, and several others danced, their hands raised in ecstasy. '*Hari bol, Hari bol!*'

'My God. But the sun is rising!' A boy drew attention to a luminous crack in the clouds, and clapped his hands.

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A LARK

Lost in its blue room like a dreaming girl
Practising scales. Then song,

Each song perfect and each song the same
As full of light as on the day it came

Unbidden in an unguarded hour. The bird
Opened its beak and sang the thing it knew

'My love, my love' — a bluer blue than blue.
The work was done. The song is always true.

Larks found no need to change.

—DAVID CAMPBELL