

FOR three days, the extraordinary man we were looking for proved elusive. "I saw him meandering here," we would be told. Alas, he just wasn't there!" It's not easy to find him," said a neighbour when we located Soudagar's hut. Nevertheless, he left us a clue. And at last Viswam (the publisher of *The Heritage*, a magazine I edited in the '80s) and I closed in on him, standing guard at the two gates of a mosque where he offered *namaz* without fail on a certain day. Local friends stood behind us to identify him.

It was the director of public relations of the Union Territory who had given us an account of Soudagar. From All India Radio, Port Blair, I had obtained a script of a feature they had lately broadcast, under the bizarre title, "The Man who survived on human flesh". Soudagar, found guilty of murder in 1935, had been deported to the Andamans. He had forgotten what he had done in his youth. What made him a moving curio was his experience in the hands of the Japanese.

We practically forced him into our car the moment he emerged from the dispersing crowd. "Do you propose to kidnap me?" he asked with a smile. A little coaxing removed his reluctance and he grew fluent as my tiny tape-recorder began whirling. This is what he told us and what he had already told AIR:

By the middle of 1945 the islanders were left with no food. Allied bombardment was making it more and more difficult for any ship carrying foodstuff to reach the harbour. Starvation was followed by a plundering spree and anarchy — a culture pioneered by the Japanese themselves.

Five hundred villagers were taken to an island and machine-gunned. There were no survivors and the others knew nothing of it. Heaps of bones were found by investigating officers only after the Japanese occupation ended and the horror was revealed.

But before this happened, the new masters of the island one day announced they would create the opportunity for food production on the virgin soil of some uninhabited islands. Those willing to work were asked to gather in front of the Cellular Jail. Five hundred people responded. They were detained there for 24 hours. "Happiness will be yours in a few hours," the hungry multitude was told. They were driven in trucks covered by tarpaulin to Aberdeen jetty and herded onto a ship. It was raining and a bitter, cold wind bit into the starving passengers. The ship was nearing Havelock Island.

"Jump, you fools, jump into the water!" The command sounded like a thunderclap through the lashing wind. Was someone playing a joke? All that could be seen was the white foam dancing on the waves. No, the voice must have been a hallucination!

But such hope, however desperately cultivated, was to prove wistful. Before long, the passengers were bayoneted and many were beheaded. Flashes of lightning showed dozens of swords at their sinister best. Within minutes the ship was emptied of its human cargo.

Now, let us hear Soudagar, who was on the ship, awaiting a new life at dawn. "I was at the rear of the boat

## MY LITTLE INDIA



Illustration: DEBABRATA CHAKRABARTI

## A night to remember

By MANOJ DAS

when the bayoneting started — waiting till the last moment. Then blindly I took the plunge. I splashed and gulped mouthfuls of salt water. I was sure my end had finally come.

"I started swimming — rather floundering in whichever direction the ocean on that dark stormy night chose to push me. Then my feet touched sand. 'Come this way folks, shore this way,' I shouted to my invisible fellow-travellers."

Soudagar reached the shore of Havelock island. As dawn broke, he saw corpses floating about, some with their stomachs ripped open, some half-eaten by the sea creatures. He counted up to 150 and gave up. Then he wandered and met others who had managed to save themselves.

"The first thing we did was light a fire by rubbing bamboo poles together. We kept the fire going. In a single day, all the small insects of the shore were eaten up and we were nearly 150 hungry men prowling about. There was nothing more to eat. Rain water was the only means for quenching our thirst."

For the first starving week, they would sit in batches and plan ways of keeping themselves alive and escaping to safety. But, after 10 days: "I saw groups sitting here and there, waiting for their deliverer — Death! Their bones are still lying all over that island. Have you ever been there?"

Soon he felt something undefinable in the air. Those who still nurtured a

flicker of life in them started forming packs and moving about. There was something stealthy, something mysterious and ominous in their movements. Occasionally Soudagar would get a whiff or the sinister smell of burning flesh. He was bewildered. Then one day...

"Three persons approached me. Because I was a gardener, they wanted me to identify edible leaves. I went with them. While I was searching for such leaves, one of them suddenly caught me from behind, trying to gag me with one hand and stab me with the other. Here — look, I still bear the mark... And remember, he was also very weak and it was I who was getting murdered — life is the dearest object, *Saab* — so I pushed him off with all my might and he fell flat. I walked away. I was not chased because my would-be killers were left with no strength in them."

The bewildered Soudagar soon found out how the handful of survivors moved about like packs of wolves and pounced on a loner and killed him. They then roasted him and ate his flesh. "The assassins themselves were pitiable, their stomachs sunk into their spines, their rib-cages showing and trembling with the rhythm of their feeble hearts. Each of them had started counting steps towards the dark abyss from which there was no return.

"My brain dim and hazy with hunger, I grasped a bizarre idea. Couldn't I do that? Oh no — not killing someone and

eating him. That was beyond me. But there were corpses — quite fresh. One after another they fell, never to stir again. Could not I? Could not I? Something had also started moving in closer — every moment — closer. I knew any time it would overtake me and I would also lie down for good. So, what's wrong in it? What's wrong in it? Damn it, what's wrong in it?"

"I got accustomed to it. But I think human flesh is poisonous. After a few days my eyes turned yellow. But I continued... until, one day, I could feel that death — that creeping shadow — was just there, standing behind me. My companion was lying on the beach — we did not have water for three days. My tongue felt like a dry twig. I thought I was being punished for my sin. I knelt down in meek supplication — I was praying to God for death, then suddenly... there was a shower!"

"I accepted the grace of God in my cupped palms. I drank — and then soaked my shirt and wrung drips into the mouth of Govardhan Pandit — my only companion who also survived."

The same day, Soudagar and his companion were rescued by an American battleship that was heading towards Port Blair. Earlier, on 14 August 1945, Japan had surrendered the islands. The *Rising Sun* was brought down from the official buildings and for the next two years the Union Jack fluttered. Soudagar was flown to Singapore as a witness in the court martial of Vice-Admiral Hara and 36 Japanese officers charged with atrocities against the islanders. Hara was executed for causing wanton killing.

A grey, old Soudagar, a little befuddled, roamed the streets of Port Blair till the early '90s. He is no more, I understand.

Why did the Japanese carry out such massacres? Here is an extract from *The Statesman* of 27 October 1945:

"It is alleged that after the Japanese Civil Governor had declared that the Japanese would be unable to feed the civilian population of Port Blair, about 700 natives, including women and children, were told that they were to form a new colony on Havelock Island and that they would embark at night. They set out, but a hundred yards from the Island, they were attacked and flung into the sea."

We left Soudagar in his thatch behind a bazar. He was happy to recount his recent feat in a running race, the laurels he received and how his picture came on the TV.

And I remembered the *Ancient Mariner*:

*I pass, like night, from land to land;  
I have strange power of speech;  
That moment that his face I see,  
I know the man that must hear me;  
To him my tale I teach.*

*O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been  
Alone on a wide sea:  
So lonely 'twas, that God himself  
Scarce seemed there to be.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all. ■*