

Scars

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An ordinary idyllic village it was, the like of which is hardly to be seen any longer these days. As far as the eyes went on all sides, lush green paddy fields sporadically dotted with small water bodies or ponds full of duckweed could be seen. There were the occasional bamboo thickets, and the dusty path meandering through the village. Sparsely populated as the village was, the dwelling huts too were at a considerable distance from each other. Even the newly constructed metalled road that went by the village hardly saw any much human movement along it. The unevenly planted areca palms, varendas and banana plantations seemed to be the only presence out there. In a word, life here was like still waters. The metalled road went up till Mashaldanga, where the soil of India and Bangladesh met each other, albeit under the strict vigil of barbed wires. The wire fencing looked like a sore wound scarring right through the hearts of two innocently beautiful villages.

After a long walk that commenced at daybreak, Asman had now reached exactly this point where the wires were planted as festering wounds, as it seemed to him. His journey was as it were an escape from the dingy lanes and soggy life in the city that had all but filled Asman with a sense of claustrophobia.

Years ago, when he was only a child, Asman had come here once with Asgar. He had hardly been able to go around the place in any great detail. The day was spent playing with kids of his age in the courtyard of the house and the adjoining grounds, caring a fig for all the dirt and dust that they were bespattered with. And when evening descended, they'd sated their appetites with rice and warm milk got from the cows in their shed, and then slept off huddled closely together

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in the tin-thatched room with beds laid on bamboo machans. Childhood was indeed so very different. The swampy ditch at the southern end of the house never had much water, and with the young brats of the neighbourhood Asman too had revelled in catching loads of small fish. Today, as he went back to that same place after ages, Asman was literally retracing his lost boyhood. It is not as if everything was fresh in his memory, but the constant re-telling by his grandmother Zahira virtually kept bringing back sparkling memories of a bygone time. It is true that when the mind intrinsically refuses to grow up, it keeps searching for every opportunity to break free of shackles that continuously ensnare and enslave the desire for breaking free.

Now that Asman's granny has come into the narrative, one must begin from quite some time back in the past. Asman's grandfather and grandmother were not natives of this place. They were witness to the Liberation War, and more so to the riots that accompanied the glorious upsurge, and brought about the deaths of many a near and dear one. Torn amidst the paradox of an independence attained at the cost of innumerable killings and resultant migration of many who were forced to leave behind their home and hearth in East Pakistan to set forth on an uncertain future, Afzal seemed to be losing the very sense of belonging to his homeland. He began to feel an increasing need to run away from his own place in order to survive in relative peace. The likes of Afzal had never grown up with any sense of religion-based othering; rather his surroundings had always felt complete and meaningful in the company of friends like Parimal or Kanai or Surath. Their courtyards never knew any boundaries; awareness of one's own religious identities was never a spoiler to their intense friendships. It was therefore natural that the human spoils of the Liberation War filled Afzal with memories that continually haunted his troubled mind.

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Whenever news poured in of riots happening anywhere, Afzal would get shaken to the core of his being ...childhood memories haunting and tormenting him to the point of getting unsettled.

The decision to leave his homeland in the darkness of night with a pregnant Zahira, their three children, and a few bundles of utensils and clothes was a sudden one. This was a desperate move by a man whose heart would pine for the lost souls as evening descended at the end of every single day. Afzal would keep staring into the darkness of the horizon where the earth and skies met in the darkness, and he would get ensnared by nightmares every single waning day. One midnight finally, he woke up Zahira in the middle of her sleep and said:

– Hei Zahira, have you slept? There’s something I wanted to tell you. I have a strong mind to leave this place for good.

– Leave our own land? And where shall we go?

– Come on, Zahira, let’s leave tonight. I really don’t have a mind to stay here anymore. As I look into the darkness, unknown faces seem to hover around my eyes – let’s move out.

There was hardly any time to wait and waste in thoughts any longer. It barely took any much time to pack up their little belongings in a few bundles. They woke the children out of their sleep, and set forth on the road, trudging across canals, marshlands, and forests on their way, with only a torch light to show the path ahead in this direction-less journey. The only trigger that Afzal had was the necessity of erasing the scars of the riots that were deeply implanted in his psyche. They had walked all night and by the time it was day-break their tired feet just refused to budge any

further. By then the family found themselves in some unknown location that was desolate and silent and not pierced by the sound of gunshots; so when they heard the dawn-time azaan, Afzal decided to rest there for a while. Finding some respite from the sound of machines or from the constant prowling of men from the cities on gun-laden trucks seemed enough of a comfort for the family in the wee hours of the night. It was sheer luck that in no time, the simple village folks of the place made Afzal and his family comfortable, and gave them the feel of being one of their own. Seeing the grief-laden lives of these new set of people, Afzal too seemed to be regaining his long lost composure.

For Zahira who was heavy with child, finding a place to put up in such a difficult time and after such an arduous journey on foot, was a blessing. She couldn't else have really carried herself much further. Shorn with the travails of the long walk, and added to it an overwhelming sense of tiredness with despair, she went into the pains of childbirth and eventually delivered the baby. Since then, they stayed on in this village, without trying to go anywhere else. Their provider was Rahim Sheikh, who had a tin-thatched single room hut where he stayed with all his livestock, and he had no hesitation in extending hospitality to this imperilled family. He even went so far as to offer Afzal some of his scattered agricultural lands to till as a share-cropper. For Afzal's family, this was obviously much more than what one could even dream of in an alien land, and so they had no reason to risk going any further and run into the uncertainty of being homeless yet again. They however had no understanding then that the land where they found moorings, was actually a

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Chhitmahal. It did have a formal name – Mashaldanga; but in reality it was a slice of Bangladesh within the territory of India. It was too early for Afzal to actually comprehend what it was a place that kept the people living here in a state of perpetual grief. To him what mattered most at that moment was that even though they had traversed quite far from their ancestral village, they found the security of a slice of land to work on and make a living. He in fact went so far as to be quietly happy over the fact that while they had left home and hearth, they were still living on the soil of Bangladesh. With time however, and with newer revelations of being duped, Afzal gradually came to realize that this wasn't their country – this couldn't be anybody's own country ever for that matter.

While there was land to till, there was no ownership. Even when one undertook all the labour and pain of growing crops, there was no fair price to be obtained for the produce. Things were so bad that even if one's harvest was stolen from the fields, one couldn't stand up against it or even lodge a complaint anywhere. Like all others in the village, Afzal too now stood face to face with this terrible reality. He soon began to realize how futile his entire plan of leaving his place of birth was turning out to be. The same scars were getting raked up in newer ways by the might of incomprehensible forces, and new bruises appeared. Setting up digs in a new place couldn't therefore offer an escape from old wounds. In his initial euphoria, Afzal had named the newborn son Swadhin; with time however he realised the name had a tag or deep pains attached to it – a heavy load indeed. To carry it for the rest of life meant that he was bequeathing a great burden on his own son.

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Around this time a new catastrophe struck the family. Their eldest daughter Noorina who had gone to fetch the calf from the grazing grounds, went missing. One day Afzal was working in the fields and as dark clouds gathered in the skies with a wild storm breaking forth, Noorina who was a little grown up than the others and knew the terrain by then, naturally went out to find their calf. But long after darkness had descended and it was well into the night, the girl had not returned. Naturally a search began but that was to no avail. Many a villager went on to say that she must have been possessed by ghosts, much like Gafur's wife who had however returned home finally. Noorina was not as lucky; her ravaged and blood-spattered body was found by the ditch after two days. Even as hurt and deep pain welled up in the hearts and minds of Afzal and Zahira, there was little they could do about it and their grief was eventually consigned to the nothingness of a fire that is consumed by its own ashes. What remained were their loud wails and the deep pricking of conscience where resolution of any kind was utterly unavailable.

A few months later, during Ramadan, Rahim Chacha's son who stayed and worked in Delhi, came home with some decent amount of money that he handed over to his father. This was hard earned out of his labour, not something grabbed the illegal way. With this money, the house received a new look as more rooms were added. To neighbours, this came across as a new way of overcoming their grief-stricken condition by migrating to other states and overcoming financial distress. The question that remained however was that if everyone went off as migrant labour, who would be left to stay and care for what was called 'home'. Afzal's son Asgar had received some elementary education over one or two grades in the village primary school, so the idea of migrating to Delhi in search of work got into his head as well. He almost demanded to be taken to Delhi. In fact, his demand wasn't outright unjustified either, for in pen and paper at least Abul and Asgar

were stepbrothers. As Rahim Chacha and Jahirul Sheikh were permanent residents in that part of the village which fell within mainland India, Afzal's family had to establish their identity by feigning blood ties with them. Such were the unwritten codes of the Chhit. There was no other means but such a parasitic existence by which refugee families like Afzal's could eke out a living in this country. Their own roots were not good enough for them to draw sustenance on in this land. It did not matter that it was this very soil that they tilled, set up tenements, and even dreamt of living on. The land was not theirs.

There was no way Abul could board the Delhi Mail back to his workplace without Asgar in tow. The rest became history. Since then, Asgar had been with Abul in Delhi and Rajasthan wherever work took them, and the young boy was quick at learning the trade. Finally, he stayed back there as a migrant labourer, for Asgar had realised the hard way that returning home only meant consigning himself to that same old parasitic existence. This came across as a more prudent option – compared to the manifold uncertainties of peasantry, it seemed much better to live as a migrant labourer, even if that meant life as a mazdoor. With time Asgar too raised a family of his own.

A number of years thus passed by. Indeed, it would be quite many if one tried to count the days and months. For Afzal and Zahira, however, going through the inevitable process of ageing was the only thing there was to happen. For one thing, there's no way that any winds of change can ever impact the drudgery of a routine life in these Chhitmahals. The placidity of life however came to be interrupted by two sudden happenings one after the other. The first of these was the

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death of Afzal, an undiagnosed fever for a brief spell of time abetted by the lack of treatment claiming his life. There was no way he could be brought out of the enclave and taken to the hospital. In any case there wasn't even time or opportunity enough to take him to the hospital in the nearby town. On getting the news of death, Asgar had come down with his two sons – Aasman and Miraj. He could be at home for only a few days, beyond which he had to return to his workplace to resume duty. It was the rainy season in Mashaldanga, and that meant there was no way one could step out of the swampy mucky surroundings or engage in any kind of external activity. So all that Asgar could do was to stay put behind doors and occasionally catch fish in the nearby ditch before he went back with Aasman and Miraj.

Within the next few days, Rahim Chacha too passed away from a cardiac ailment. Thus, only Zahira and Nurjahan were left behind to cope with their grief, and to look after whatever little was left of their respective families.

Life thus went on for some more years. Afzal and Rahim were both long gone. Age was catching up quite fast with Zahira as well. She was largely accustomed to life in the Chhitmahal, though interspersed with occasional pains of loss and un-fulfilment. The hopelessness of people around her was no different either, only that they were not refugees like her family; perhaps most of them were natives of the place. However, the pervasive darkness that surrounded life in the chhit spared none. The basic attributes of a decent life like education and medical facilities were never available to them; government laws or various schemes for employment or welfare projects were not for them. They had come to terms with the fact that the very government was not one that was of their 'country'. To avail of benefits doled out by the government of their country would

require the Chhitmahal residents to go very far indeed; and none of them had the wherewithal to get that far.

The last time when Aasman came to Mashaldanga he'd got a small radio for his granny. Since the old lady had almost lost her eyesight, he felt that she at least could hear voice of people from her country and get to know what was going on all around. She did not have any formal education, but life had indeed taught her much. So perhaps if she could at least hear of the changing times, she would be able to form some idea of all that they had never known in their time. Asgar and Aasman had in fact insistently tried to persuade her to come along with them, but Zahira never wanted to leave behind her other children and neighbours to pursue a life of her own. The darkness in which they lived was after all not theirs alone. She had often heard from the elders and village leaders that such chhits abounded the borderlines of India and Bangladesh. It was a common sight for them to see government officials arrive in cars, hold meetings, make tall promises, and then leave just as they came. The villagers waited for brighter days of the kind that those gentlemen kept promising. Those days never arrived; only her eyesight got dimmer as days passed by.

Finally, however, the much-awaited day arrived in their lives. An unknown happiness brought tears to Zahira's otherwise dried up eyes. For years on end, in official documents of this country, Rahim Sheikh has been the father of Asgar and Swadhin. Allah alone knows how big a lie that was. Rahim Sheikh was the one who gave them shelter in the village, and rumour mills of the village have always been agog over it. The elders too have been curious to no end – the whisper was that Zahira was Rahim's second wife – a wife on paper. It hardly mattered that Rahim Sheikh's

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wife Nurjahan and Zahira's husband Afzal knew without an iota of doubt that Zahira had never called Rahim Sheikh anything other than Bhaijan all his life. Alas the irony of it all; such was the travesty of relationships that life in a chhit subjected people to.

There was now the hope that all this was about to end. The residents of the chhit have all along known that the only way out for them was to be recognised and accepted as part of the mainland. Even then a chilling sense of doubt kept hovering in the minds of the women. This was after all a place where nobody's life was free of precarity; and needless to say that this was much more so for the womenfolk.

Notwithstanding it all, this chhit was home to Aasman's father, and hence it was very much his own too. While it is true that hope was niggardly here, yet how could one not look upon that dwelling which had offered shelter from sun and shower for years on end, as anything but his own. To a pragmatic understanding it was indeed a fallacious thought; but there was no denying that this fallacy was inextricably bound up with the lives of everyone in this chhit. It could well nigh be that their dwellings fell in one country, and the lands on which they eked out their livelihood was in another.

The winds of independence had just about begun to blow over this chhit, filling the people with a sense of relief and joy. There was no end to the swarm of the high and mighty from Kolkata and Delhi who were fuelling dreams of the residents with tall promises. It was being said that the days of suffering and identity-less existence would now be over. Aasman though couldn't make much sense of it as yet; for life was still dependent on kerosene lanterns and wax candles. There

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wasn't even a health centre or a school till then. Sitting in the darkness of her room, Zahira's faint eyes however still tried to find some ray of hope out of all that she was hearing. Elections were round the corner and the buzz was that they would all get to cast votes. Now this was indeed something that they had never ever known in life. It was a fact that government officials were scurrying around the chhit in cars, trying to take notes of the demands of the dwellers. The metalled road that Aasman now saw was a new one. The excitement of these new happenings sometimes made tears well up in Zahira, as she remembered with what eagerness her late husband would keep waiting to witness these signs of independence every time government officials visited their chhit. Only now it was being said that they would get their due recognition as human beings – life would now enable them to differentiate between darkness of the night and brightness of the day. Yet all this was still in the realm of hope and wishful thinking, in reality there was no trace of electric lights as yet. Zahira remembered her visit to the fair in the town where Zahira had seen the colourful glitter, the magical grandeur of a land of dreams. Life there seemed to be so full of hope – she sat in her dark corner and reminisced it all and waited in hope of better days the promises of which filled the air. Truly, this was the only discussion that one could hear all over the place – everyone would now have government housing with concrete structures, well-made toilets, even a tap with running water by the roadside. It all seemed unbelievable. There was something more that was being spoken of by everyone, and Zahira could make no sense of it. The young boys of the village seemed to be very interested about it – a 'job card' or something they would be talking about. The whole village seemed to be wearing an endless festive look. A lot of new projects were also announced. People all around seemed to have lost count of day and night, and were always to

be seen clamouring by the huge tree in the middle of the village where they had even set up a resting place with bamboo stalks. Everyone seemed really ecstatic and immersed in a new wave of dreams.

For some unknown reason, Zahira did not feel like immersing herself in this spate of happiness that her neighbours were so taken in with. As the evening set in to the flickering lights of the lantern, her grandson Aasman came and sat by her on the hollow bamboo machan. The boy had this strange liking for listening to stories of bygone days time and again. They were soon joined by Meher Ali who was returning home after participating in the animated discussions that were in the air all the time. Learning of the boy's eagerness, he began to recall and narrate past incidents one after another, and the weight of memory soon overwhelmed Zahira's light heartedness of the moment. She remembered the face of Rahim Sheikh's son Abdul, who had joined a band of robbers. He had indeed made Zahira's family his own in a very short span of time, and the unnatural death of Noorina left him shattered. He went missing the day robbers broke into the neighbouring village and ransacked the entire place. Zahira now wondered if Abdul had got some whiff of who Noori's perpetrator was, and might have been part of the robbery as an act of revenge. Could he have come face to face with the ghost of Noorina ...was he able to get hold of her killer –

The gory spectre of Noorina's corpse, all bruised and battered still returns to haunt Zahira. She was so fair and had such a perfectly beautiful face. Since the riots broke out, they were always very cautious about her safety. But in the end, on that ill-fated afternoon when they were perhaps

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no longer as careful about things, the unthinkable happened without anyone being able to fathom anything. Close on the heels of Noorina's gruesome death came Abdul's act of robbery. Although he was somewhat elder to Noorina, yet all day long the two of them would be playing around like childhood buddies. The mishap really hurt him very deeply. It will still take a lot of time for both families to erase the scars of these two fateful happenings in the same house within such a short span of time. Who knows if these scars will ever heal. The scars of death, the scars of disappearance – do they ever heal? Zahira has no answers.

...And yet, there is in Zahira and her folks that ardent longing to see the world beyond the barbed wires...for once at least...