

Short story

## SHADOWEY VIBRANCE

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Crisscrossing Kolkata is a network of canals predating even the birth of the city! Once heavily used for navigation, the canals today are faithful carriers of urban sewage. Situated on the sloping banks of the canal running through the Bagmari area near Maniktala, is the *Bagmarikhalparjhupri*<sup>1</sup>. As one approaches the settlement, one can see hundreds of makeshift shanties populating the sloping space between the canal on one side and the heavy vehicle road on the other. The landscape is bleak with dusty asbestos, bamboo and plastic huts, sandwiched between the busy polluting road and the foul smelling slow flowing canal. Suspicious eyes, shrill calls, sunken cheeks, cuddled figures amidst addictive fumes and domestic lives on open road invite you in through a clutter of cycle-vans resting between two trips.

Escorted by the activist as one anxiously stepped down the perennially slippery concrete steps to the canal – it seemed that layers of *maya* dissolved to reveal deeper truths. Stopping by one of the many shaky huts the activist called out - “Is *Pacha’sMa* in there...?” A frail frame with smoky locks crowning a thin face emerged from the darkness within – but oh her smile! So shy, so battered, so perfect with those missing teeth ... so grateful to be remembered! *apaapabiddham!* Is it only in the worst of struggles, when the ego is completely crushed out, that such smiles bloom...?

Two smaller beings clutched their Mommy’s saree and peeped from behind. On went the activist with her questions about the mother and the sons. The frail angel hesitatingly complained that the smaller son wanted to visit his aunty across the border – they had come down for a few days and since then the child has been day dreaming of a vacation. The activist instantly roared back – “Do you even know where and how they live? Have they even cared to stand by you when *Pacha* was run over by the truck and we spent days of desperation trying to prove our relation to him without any birth certificate, and paying bribes getting him released from the morgue? Don’t you know how risky is it to send children to half known people across the border?” The smiling eyes turned pale and drooped in helpless shame, while the smaller frames recoiled at the rebuke – agony coloured their

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cheeks, disbelief tightened their frowns and shifted their visual bond to a distant nowhere – will even *she* scream at them... ? She who had promised them fresh green in their graves? – “What to do...?” the mother continued, “the small one hugs me tight all night and cries for his brother – at times screams out scared, ‘look Ma look.... Brother is sitting there!’ In this dismal surroundings, he cannot overcome the trauma!” The heated heart softened as she pulled the resisting little darlings close to her... Wet with empathy yet stern with concern, she made them promise that they will never again speak of crossing the borders for visiting relatives. Deserted by the father, the mother spent hard days wiping the floors of a local temple and at times begging here and there. With the elder earning eloped by fate, her days were even tougher.

As one moved on, a spontaneous voice, hardly distinct from the hammering backdrop called out from within her hut, “Didi come into my room... !” Hammering hundreds of metal plates to clips would earn her a rupee per kg – she was missing all the fun outside... ! This keeps the ladies economically engaged as the males are away with their loaded cycle vans. A bunch of most odd ladies – teeth red with tobacco and attires unkempt – greeted one into the mossy concrete path at the lowest level of the canal bank. Here wide cracks cradled water flowing down from the road surface – this water was used for cleansing... ! Out in the canal plastic covered shaky bamboo structures dug into the canal silt promised privacy to internal cleansing. Apparently, the reigning goon was stink! Distracting again from the outer covers of revulsion was a rather shy chorus of wondrous humanity – “someday come down and have lunch with us... will staying back for a night be too difficult... ?” One suddenly remembered that they came from lands where none bade farewell to guests without having treated them in a sumptuous meal – far off rural lands of scanty grains and golden hearts. What situation could steal them of such grandeur... ?

Back on the flat road surface, stepping cautiously across the suckling mother feeding rice to her elder one, the parrot sung out loud defying its bars... !

Note:

<sup>1</sup>Bagmari canal-side squatter settlement