

A Birthday Tribute to Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

“Moshla Bhoot” or Ghostly Sacks of Spices

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

Hajari Biswas was sitting leisurely in his spice-shop. It was around noon and the market price of spices was not going well. There were not too many buyers even though one could detect quite a few foreigners in the market. Hajari was fanning himself with a palm leaf and was dozing off. Suddenly, he woke up at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Are you listening, Mr. Biswas?” Putting his walking stick at a corner, Jatin Bhadro took a seat right in front of Hajari. Jatin was Hajari’s contemporary and they had known each other for years. Fortune had recently smiled kindly on him as he too got involved in spice business. Hajari sat up straight as he smelled some proposition in Jatin’s voice. Whenever he came, he brought in some ideas, and usually good ones.

“It’s useless to just wait for buyers, you know,” said Jatin. “You also have to keep your eyes and ears wide open.”

Hajari welcomed him, “Of course, Jatin. I’m all ears.”

“Times have changed, brother. Now, tell me what will you give me in return of the information I’m about to impart? Maybe I talk too much but I’m not a fool... Now listen carefully...”

His information was interesting indeed—A cargo ship called S.S. Rangoon of the Graham Trading Company with sacks of goods from some East Indies Dutch company had sailed toward Kolkata. Most of the sacks were loaded with spices-pepper, turmeric, cumin, bay leaves—all that one can name. Each of the sacks weighed about two and half a maund. The entire cargo was of spices. On entering the river Ganges, the ship lost its course in the thick fog, struck upon one of the sunken islands, and drowned. The helmsman tried his best but could do little to save the ship. Some of the people on board also drowned. Most of the sacks with spices, however, did not go down. The staff of the port commissioner noticed the floating bags and they had those dragged out of the river. Those sacks will be auctioned the next day.

The shrewd businessman Hajari Biswas immediately understood the implication. He was not a well-to-do businessman for nothing. Before taking leave, Jatin remarked, “Look brother, if you want to make money, this is the chance. The goods will be sold cheap. The auction will start at 8:30 in the

morning. I’ll come and meet you at 7:00.”

The next morning, Hajari started off for Khidirpur with Jatin. They could hear the uproar at the auction even from a distance. Hajari followed Jatin and hoped that they did not miss the auction. He sent Jatin to the auction bench to count the sacks while he went to the officer to pay respect. They whispered for a few minutes and Hajari ran to the clerk and the auction was halted.

Jatin asked, “What happened, brother? Did you manage to do it?”

afternoon and the entire place was in chaos. Only three people worked with the sacks and Hajari was screaming at the top of his lungs. The police had arrived as well, to hasten the process.

Jatin, too, jumped in with the workers and finally, they were able to put the last sack inside before nightfall. The warehouse was fully loaded with sacks of spices. Those were big sacks that looked like domes. Finally, when Hajari and Jatin returned home, it was quite late. Hajari’s servant locked up the warehouse

closed and the fat paddock hanging outside. Who could have entered the place? It almost seemed as if some people were pushing against the door. The sounds continued till dawn. With the first light, they stopped altogether.

Next morning, the bazaar was ablaze with all kinds of rumours. News of robbery reached Hajari and he hastened toward his warehouse. He had the gate opened and sacks were counted. Not a single sack was missing. Who were telling tales then? And why? He suspected the jealous rivals who never wanted anything good to happen to him. But even the servant admitted that he heard a lot of noise from inside the warehouse. Hajari reasoned if robbers had come, why would they leave without taking anything? Could it be that local people were trying to play pranks on him? Hajari thought the whole thing over and decided to spend the night there himself.

Before going to sleep that night, Hajari and his servant walked inside the godown and inspected the place carefully. Then he kept a window of the warehouse open and locked the door from outside with not one, but two heavy paddocks. He chatted away with the servant till late night and finally fell sleep. It was almost at the end of the night when he woke up. The servant Hari had heard it already, but he lay quietly. But the sounds increased as if someone was jumping up and down. And then it was as if some monsters had started fighting. Hari and his master, both woke up to check on the door. They found it tightly locked. Then Hajari looked through the window and what he saw made his eyes go round in fear. Two large sacks were pushing against the door. How could it be possible? Were the sacks alive? In all probability, he had lost his senses because he had not slept well for two succeeding nights! Hajari closed his eyes and lay down on his bed, pretending to be asleep.

When Hajari finally decided to wake up, it was morning. Day-light had entered the warehouse through the window. The sounds had stopped and the servant said, “The same thing happened last night, Master. The sounds stopped as soon as it was dawn.” Without uttering a word, Hajari entered his godown. Nothing was missing, but all the sacks appeared disturbed. The sacks that were in the back row, seemed to have been moved about the most. Hajari could not make head or tail

of the matter. If anybody wanted to steal his sacks, why would they make so much noise? And how did the thieves enter the place as the door was locked? Hajari was really worried.

On the third night, Hajari got two strong men and waited in front of his warehouse. He was determined to solve the mystery. He had slept through the day so that he would be able to keep awake at night. The clock ticked away and Hajari stayed awake. The pendulum clock in the next house rang four times. Nothing stirred when the sounds began. It was as if hundreds of people were breathing together heavily. Hajari woke up his men and sent them behind the building to check if thieves had broken in. And he unlocked the front door to see the matter.

There was no thief. The sacks started to straighten up and stand in rows. The servant Hari whispered, “Master, look here...” Hajari looked at the scene and whispered hoarsely, “What, are my sacks of spices dancing?” The other two manservants ran for their lives.

And the sacks all sprinted out of the warehouse one after another. The largest sack was the one of sea-salt; and it ran out before all others. Then it headed directly toward the river Ganges. The other sacks continued to dance on the pavement for sometime and then they marched toward the Tram road in the strand. The sacks he bought at the auction led the way followed by the other sacks of his godown. Not a single bag stayed behind.

It was the end of night. There were specks of clouds in the sky. Muted moonlight reflected in the waters of the Ganges. Hajari gaped at the scene dumbfounded. He did not have the strength to call out even. The sacks of spices reached the highest point of the embankment and dived into the river one by one. They were followed by the other sacks of his warehouse.

Hajari went bankrupt within one night. His neighbours and peers all nodded and exclaimed, “Of course, what could one expect? The ship went down on the last day of the dark fortnight. And then the sacks were bought by our miserly Hajari Biswas. Thanks to our stars that we didn’t go anywhere near. We all would be done for.”

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Hajari replied impatiently, “Will tell you later. Now how many sacks did you count?”

“More than a hundred.” Hajari took in the sacks piled up in a row—hundreds of sacks stood like pillars in the street. He would be so relieved to transport them to his godown.

“We’ve no time to lose,” Hajari told Jatin. “Call a truck and take them to our warehouse. I’ll go ahead and make arrangements.”

The bags were too many in number. It took two trips to get them all to the destination. When Jatin finally went back to the warehouse with the second load, it was late

and took his bed outside like he did every other day.

Right before dawn, some kind of sound made people of the surrounding buildings wake up. They suspected robbery and called the servant. Waking up from a deep slumber, the servant got a light and went to investigate. How would anybody enter the locked-up place? He held the lantern up in his hand and walked around the warehouse. Everything seemed to be in place; the main door still tightly locked. Then they heard the sound again. Someone definitely was inside the warehouse. But all the doors and windows were

Kabarsthan

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

As the many fingers of fascism grew out of the copper earth,
Bats hanging like nocturnal fruits from the spaghetti-hands of the banyan took notice;
Icecaps felt in their crystal bones a slow tremor—a long hum of death;
Forests sensed the incoming flight of excavators ready to skin it alive and scattering it to faraway cities in various shapes and sizes;
Free voices suffused in the air were defeated by the orchestra of fascism’s smog and CO2 molecules;
Airplanes and souls of the dead saw the ozone withering away slowly but surely and flashing a ghostly smile at them;

As fascism grew,
The world as we know it started preparing
For its departure
Leaving only echoes and songs and vestiges of its glorious existence
Where is it going, though?
I’ll search my nearest Kabarsthan.
And when I do, I’d be wary of my careless footsteps.
After all, she’d be resting there with all her children—
Leopards, bears, humans, freedom, forests, mountains, rivers—,
And it wouldn’t be okay to disturb their slumber.

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The Art of Weaving Time

MOHAMMAD SHAFIQU L ISLAM

Maybe you forgot, or dementia possessed you before our union—how else could you keep aloof from your soul, your other soul, your eupnoea?

You whispered in my ear, later asserting openly how heart unites life to life, turns an enemy to a friend—now everyone waits for a time to raze cells or heal.

I never wanted this awful detention, my love, when microbes deface the world, scowling as ostensibly invincible monsters, wreaking havoc with indemnity.

Nowhere does anyone dream to pass a lonely time but the elusive assassin is driving us towards isolation from our realm where we breathe with our souls.

Slipping into an invisibility outfit, the killer casts a curved look at the humans all over the world, giggling loud as if to mollify fury, rising from hell.

I’m waiting for a time, now quarantined within vicious circles, to incite the frozen nerves of the world—like a young woman weaving a quilt I weave time.

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