

essay

Entering the Third Millennium

by Raana Haider

WE have come a long way. Yet, there remains a long way to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots. What has characterised the notion of development in the last thirty years is the wellbeing of all humanity and the highlighting of issues that have emerged or become more critical in a fast changing world.

Since the World Population Conference held in Bucharest in 1974, a series of global fora have characterised the growing consciousness of the crises that face us. The 1990s witnessed an explosion and that too often — an explosive series of international gatherings that have included environment including climate change in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the umbrella issue of population and development in Cairo in 1994, social injustice and development in Copenhagen in 1995, gender complexities women encounter in Beijing in 1995 and human settlements including the critical urban habitat in Istanbul in 1996. The first global meeting of the third millennium in June 2000 is the five-year follow-up assessment in New York of the Beijing Conference on Women — Beijing+5 Women 2000. An auspicious start?

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At the risk of appearing overly pessimistic, the depth of misery of the world's poorest is staggering. Some one third of the people of the South live in a state of abject poverty at such margins of human existence that the defining language is inadequate. We are also not talking of widely-spaced pockets of extreme poverty but globally — dense poverty-stricken areas. The gap between rich and poor has doubled worldwide since the 1960s and continues to grow. The lot of some poor has improved but the affluence of some rich has multiplied manifold.

At the threshold of the third millennium, the world's population has already crossed the 6 billion mark. Some 80 per cent of these billions live in developing countries. Over 1.5 billion people live on less than \$1 a day — a global mass of humanity; under-nourished, illiterate, homeless, jobless and by all accounts hopeless. Despite

widespread reductions in average family size in most developing countries, natural increase in numbers will double the population every 35 years even in countries where the annual rate of population increase is 2 per cent.

In this context, it is worth extending the bad news to the following facts emerging from critiques of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Joshua Karliner writes "Today, the revenues of the top 50 companies in the US make up about 60 per cent of the country's GDP. Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations, and only 49 are countries. Thus the combined revenues of General Motors and Ford — the two largest automobile corporations in the world — together exceed the total GDP for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. And the combined sales of Mitsubishi, Mitsui, ITO-CHU, Sumitomo, Marubeni and Nissho Iwai, Japan's top six trading companies, are nearly equivalent to the GDP of all of South America!" Interestingly enough, the 1999 WTO round of talks was held in Seattle, Washington, USA — the seat of Boeing and Microsoft.

A cardinal observation to date is that women are the principal recipients of inequality, poverty and violence. Notwithstanding the universal pedestal of Motherhood, Dr Nafis Sadik, the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) declares "And with motherhood so glorified, we still don't have enough attention given to it." Furthermore, "Of 133 million births annually, 50 per cent are unplanned and 50 per cent are unintended by a qualified worker. Some 15 per cent of all pregnant women, about 20 million each year are victims of bleeding or infection and need access to skilled health worker or a hospital. Improved maternal care could prevent 3.5 million deaths and 1.4 million stillborn births. Complications from unsafe abortions are among the leading causes of hospitalisation for women of reproductive age in developing countries" notes UNFPA.

Mark Hanna, political mastermind of American William McKinley's 1896 presidential bid remarked: "There are two things that are important in politics...The first is money — and I can't

remember what the second one is." This brilliant insight at the close of the nineteenth century is even more relevant at the start of the twenty-first century. It crossed my mind that the same Hanna declaration has some relevance to development. Kofi A Annan, the United Nations Secretary-General has warned the international community of the 'Starvation Diet' of the availability of United Nations funds for existing critical development requirements. One United Nations agency, the UNFPA has seen its funds drop by 14 per cent in two years — from \$292 million in 1997 to \$250 million in 1999. To the existing survival measures have been added in recent years, the alarming increase in United Nations assistance required for natural disasters, ethnic warfare, refugees and emergency humanitarian assistance.

In the 1999 Annual Report on the Work of the Organisation, Kofi Annan notes — "While declining aid flows are part of the problem, increasing aid is not a panacea. In some cases, aid has made a real difference in reducing poverty; in other cases, aid has made

little or no impact. What makes the difference is how the aid is used. Where foreign assistance is misused, it is of little benefit to those in need." The missing second important thing in the Hanna Declaration (per se development assistance) is accountability. Often years of development aid have benefited the few and profited the many. Annan adds that "minimal levels of human security, inclusive political participation and respect for human rights" are also necessary ingredients since "development cannot occur in a vacuum." National priorities are indeed vital for humanities' pace of development and prosperity. By one account, \$17 billion needed by UNFPA for implementing crucial reproductive health care programmes and other social underpinnings of economic development is less than one week of the global expenditure on armaments.

Lord Palmerston, nineteenth century British prime minister once dismissed the horribly complicated question of Schleswig-Holstein (historically disputed land between Denmark and Germany) with a growl, "Only three people have ever known the answer to that question — one had died, one had gone mad and he himself had forgotten it."

Mercifully, the question of development has not yet been so dismissed.

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fiction

Purnimar Raat

by Gautam Sengupta

Translated by Mir Waliuzzaman

Last part

Jiji's place is so crowded today that the assemblage has spilled out into their next door neighbour's flat. Her uncles and her father's friends were seated in Monica's drawing room. Jiji's mother Binata is receiving her brothers and her colleagues in their own flat. Binata is seen reclining against Jiji's bed-post; her whole existence seems slackened, body and soul. Her sister is holding her hands. Before them, a photograph has been placed on Jiji's reading table, propped against a fat Oxford dictionary. Jiji's uncle is taking that photograph for lamination today.

Last year, her father had taken that snapshot just before going to the Elephantia Caves. In its left corner, Jiji is seen laughing merrily, putting on a pink dotted frock. Binata stands in the middle of the frame, embracing Jiji and wearing a scarf, a pair of sunglasses and a tight-lipped smile. Most of the space in the right half is filled with the embroidered border of her fluttering saree. Looking intently, one might even be able to discern the familiar motifs of Worly paintings woven intricately all across her 'aanchal'. Also, part of the old mansion of the Taj Hotel peeked from behind them through the aanchal of the saree.

Jiji's aunt is managing all the cooking in the kitchen. The older aunt is suffering an acute attack of her chronic gout; so, restricting her movement, she has settled herself on a wicker stool placed conveniently at the kitchen entrance. Mallinath, Jiji's father is looking after the guests busily, moving about constantly in and out of the two contiguous flats. He is donning a becoming red ochre punjabi over mustard pickle corduroy trousers. Both his hands are engaged — one holds a cup of black coffee and the other, a cigarette. His aunt, a very old lady finds him at the door and solaces him whimperingly — don't you lose heart, Bholi (Mallinath's nick name) dear, it's all divine tests, you know. God ... my foot ... Mallinath swears inwardly and dropping the cigarette butt right there on the door-step, tramples over it grudgingly and saunters away.

Ripe mangoes are being dressed for treating the guests. Besides, platters laid with delicious sandesh (dry sweets made of posset) and pots of freshly brewed coffee are there. But no one is particularly minding the refreshment. Someone picks up a sandesh at the most, or a slice of mango ... Perhaps you have sliced the mangoes too small, haven't you, Nambu? Jiji's aunt pointed out. — Oh, don't worry, sister, I'll be providing forks with it. But where will you find so many forks in this disarrayed place? Sarama, the house-maid informed haltingly while cleaning the tea-cups, ... dozens of them are there in the upper shelf of our show-case.

The older aunt snubbed her gravely, saying, you better mind your cleaning job, Sarama. The guests have brought in ample quantities of fruits, flowers and sweets ... both refrigerators (including

the neighbour's large BPL one) are almost full ... it wouldn't make much difference if I take some of them home. Sarama contemplates ... the children would be just thrilled ... as it is, none is going to offer her anything as a gift; these people would rather waste things, than parting with them to make anybody happy... then, suddenly she remembers Jiji. Just a few days back, she recapitulates ... the cute girl used to run after her, calling her 'auntie' ... 'auntie' ... all over the place, wearing red nickers. She had grown up so fast, Sarama wonders, ... in only months, she was towering as tall as her father! Ah ... Sarama laments mentally, tears welling up in her eyes.



Today, Jion, the son of Jiji's younger uncle, is the happiest soul around. Stopped by none, he has managed to bring out a Barbi doll from the show-case, taken it to the small, blue basin at the corner of the verandah and now ecstatically giving it a thoroughly drenching bath there. Today, nobody is asking him to eat, or to put on shoes, or even to stop playing with water! Well, it's not so bad ... Jion chuckles to himself ... it's so good to enjoy such freedom at times ... and he manoeuvres with the faucet to spray the face of the lovely doll with water. He knows this much that those wicked men have killed his Ji didi (sister). Yet he didn't cry at all, because he is certain that the chivalrous He-man should be arriving with a sword in his hand any time now and bring his didi back in one piece, only after entertaining them with a heroic fight.

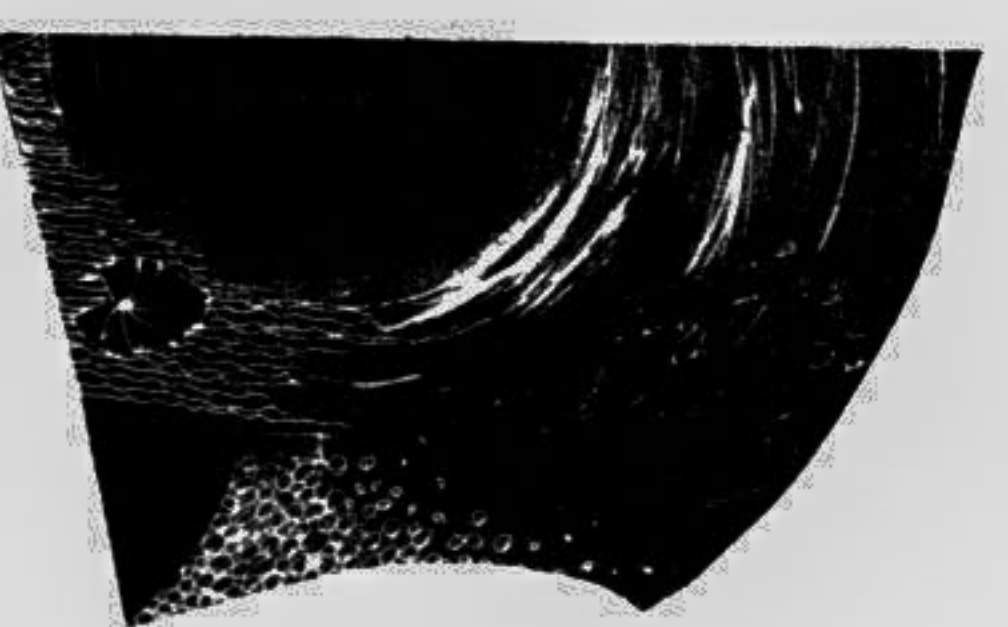
By the end of the third day following Jiji's tragic ending, Nellow was murdered in front of Jama's old tea-stall, in the lane behind the fresh commodities market. Early in the morning at five forty-five, when after rousing Putia, the vendor, Nellow could collect his 'stuff' and was returning to his den through a short-cut route, a deadly group of eight suddenly appeared there from nowhere and surrounded him tightly. They were armed with swords, choppers, pipe-guns and revolvers. They fired four shots aiming to pierce Nellow's head thoroughly; only one of them sculpted a new sign in the back wall of the market. After he fell, they pushed his corpse aside, using the tips of their toes. Thus they cleared the middle of the alleyway for the benefit of the pedestrians. Then they made their exit through the open market, singing a popular Hindi number in chorus, clapping their hands to the tune in unison and advanced leisurely towards the

railway tracks. It's needless to mention here that instantaneously after they quit, all the shops in the market pulled their shutters down and all souls evacuated. As a matter of routine that follows such incidents, after another killing or two, peace has been restored (or, considered to be so) in the locality and everything is functioning normally.

The lights which were fixed along the brims of the lake after Jiji's mishap have disappeared again with the passage of time, plunging the area once more into its former dark cover. Consequently, the lovers, the police, the addicts and the vendors of hot patties as well as other 'stuff' — all are back in their respective cosy corners. Everything is going on as usual, peacefully. All is well in the state of Denmark, one might say.

The Buddha Purnima has arrived this year, five days in advance compared with the last year's calendar. Once again the sky looks not so vacant, putting on the full, yellow, mellow moon on its forehead. Binata sleeps in Jiji's room these days. She was lying in bed in a pensive mood ... nobody remembered Jiji today ... none came to share her sorrow ... in fact, it was only her personal loss, the rest of the world is no more bothered ... she concluded.

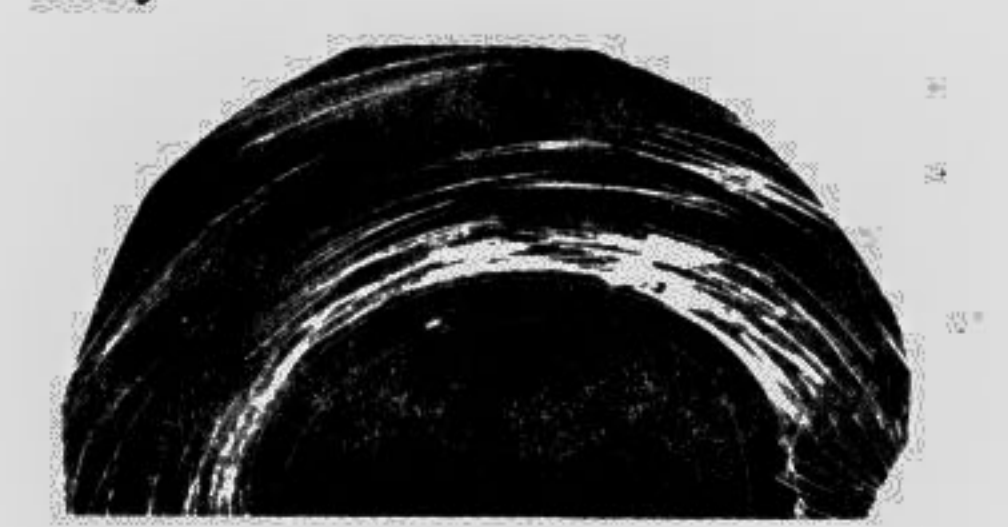
There's none else in this flat today except herself. It's about nine months that she has quit her job. She spends most of her time in the Mission library. Many of her evenings are passed in listening to the Upanishads or the interpretations of the Geeta (a holy book revered by the Hindus). Her Guru asked



her to prolong the meditation sessions. But whenever she closes her eyes, sitting on her mat for meditation, Jiji's face surfaces of her mind's screen again and again. Despite frantic efforts, she fails to concentrate and rises. Then she gets busy rearranging Jiji's books, or she unfolds and smells her dear daughter's clothes, only to tidy them again. She had also considered bringing in their maid Sarama's daughter to live with them, but it didn't materialise finally because her husband Mallinath seriously objected to the proposal.

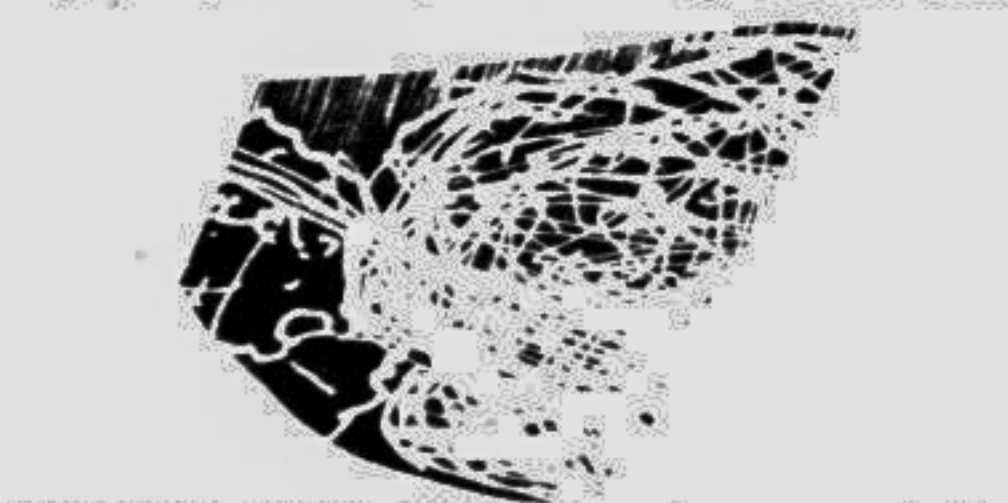
Many of their friends and relations suggested that they should go for another child. And why not? They argued: at thirty-seven, she could very well be a mother again. That might not be impossible, Binata ponders ... but she somehow despises the whole idea of it from her very core. Her physical desires and needs seem to have diminished to nothing; Mallinath, rejected by her repeatedly, called her 'a frigid bitch' on

one occasion. He was about to slap her face once! Now she realises that their current hackneyed relationship might come to an end anytime. But such feelings cannot persuade her to condescend and gratify Mallinath any more ... no way ... she shakes her head involuntarily.



In the afternoon today, Binata had brought out Jiji's dresses again; she selected a skirt-top, fondly draped that around her bosom and sat silently there, like a rag-doll — reminding sadly, ... What happens if the door-bell keeps on ringing someday, ... and ... and the little dollface Jiji of the past jumps up into her cradle, as soon as she opens the door expectantly? ... That cannot be, ... she whimpers, she sobs desperately ... from somewhere unfathomable within her pitiful existence, the unstoppable wailing surfaces once again, wave after wave of that undercurrent inundating her present, ... her future ... Lifting her face, Binata found that the brazenly, accursed moon was staring down at her without a flutter; fountains of moonshine were pouring into her room through the open windows, rolling down the floor, swirling against the white walls ... an utterly eerie experience, she thought ... and shivered. Wiping her eyes dry with the soft saree-end (aanchal) and moving about the room, she drew the curtains close and shut the windows, frantically trying to stop the moonlight streaming in.

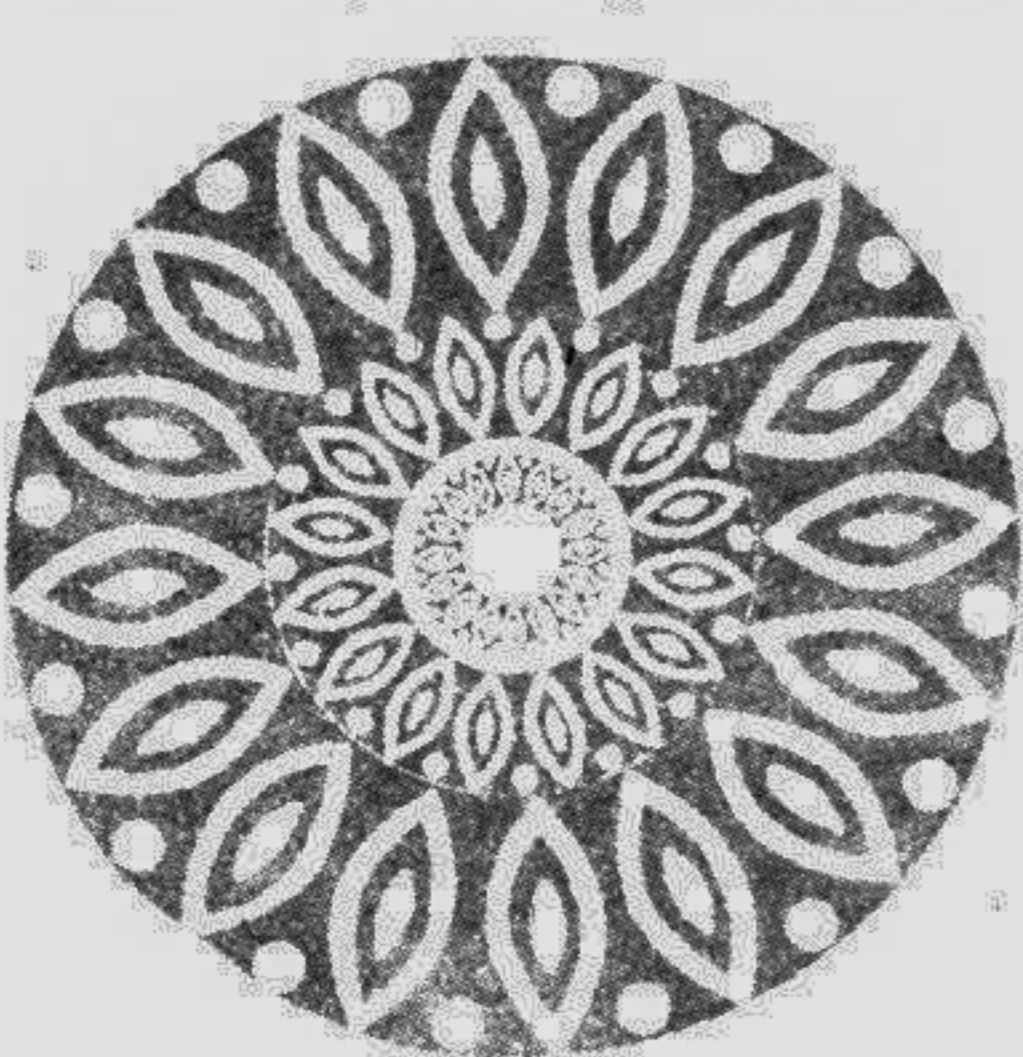
The days of Mallinath are spent in lecturing his students, attending seminars and meeting friends at different haunts; but he cannot write poems any more — he's lost that facile pen ... whatever little literature he spins, ends up in idle reminiscences only. On rare occasions, when he remembers Jiji, the professor reconciles himself to the fact that he wasn't born to sing dirges ... life is only a larger kaleidoscope, frequently changing patterns emerging at every turn it takes, he considers. A man can only view the colourful, bright images it produces, or one may record the



impacts that one experiences while passing by ... that's about all, he dismisses the subject there. Hence no death should reasonably cause any special sorrow or joy to humans, he decides inwardly in a tone of finally, while chastising and burying the uncomfortably tender feelings murmuring within

himself.

They have ceased haunting the Coffee House on Thursdays and Saturdays; now the peers meet in the evening of the full moon every month. These sessions take place in the residence of one of Mallinath's friends or the other — but much dismayed though he was, he had to stop hosting such parties himself about a year back, as Binata started just detesting the energizing frolicking at last. Since he realizes it very well that going around his pal's places all the time, seeking selfish fun should be utterly unbecoming on his part — these days, Mallinath finds it difficult to join them as freely as he would otherwise. Yet this evening ... it was an altogether different occasion ... a most rare event — they had all gathered on the



rooftop of Badal's house in Salt Lake satellite town. Mallinath's boyhood pal Badal, the poet had invited his friends to celebrate the silver jubilee of his first publication 'An ethereal journey'.

Luxury grade Scotch whiskey flowed freely from large flagons branded The Blue Label and The Black Dog; a bottle of 'Gold Reserve' was kept separately for the special palate of Mallinath the connoisseur. Huddled in a corner, he was enjoying the recital of the vintage verses composed by Badal twenty-five years back ... with his eyes closed under the spirit-heavy lids, he was mentally journeying back ... he could visualize the other Mallinath ... twenty-five years younger ... zealously carrying the freshly printed volume ... right from Durlava's printing shop to the Coffee House ... and from there, ... to KayTee's joint, en masse ... oh, oh my years, I should really have retired by now, having traversed for so long, ... heaving a long sigh, he trembled, opened his eyes and tried to erect himself.

On his way back home, half-lying in the back seat of a taxi, Mallinath could feel that he had imbibed a little too much that evening. As they were passing by that grotesque statue placed about the mid-section of the by-pass stretch, he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his profusely perspiring face and then ... suddenly, he could see ... reflected in the rear-view mirror ... that a huge baillish demon of a full moon was chasing them! It reminded him of the

delty Tejkaliepocho, who is scary and believed to be causing riots and massacres all over the world when activated.

While counting the change handed by the taxi-driver, Mallinath realised that he was breathing with difficulty. He proceeded nonetheless, but soon he found himself learning against the closed shutters of the general store in front of their house ... I used to buy Cadbury's chocolate bars for Jiji ... cigarettes for myself ... from this vendor, he thought and slid down unawares into a sitting position. Was that a cardiac attack? ... he wondered ... no, no, he shook his head again, negating the suggestion himself. He convinced himself of his head again, negating the suggestion himself. He convinced himself of his toughness and that he wouldn't be going away just like that ... without a fight, no, it shouldn't be so bland, so colourless and affair ... and then ... he saw Jiji standing there, sporting her snow-white round-neck tee-shirt. With her head slightly leaning on one side, she was smiling and saying, Sachin is greater than your Gavaskar, Babi ... and again, and again ... Hey, what's happening here? Mallinath made his best efforts to control his wits, to grasp the situation ... and he desperately struggled to rise from his throne of dust. But ... the hapless expanse of space in front, cradling the brazen moon embedded in it, swooped down upon him at that very opportune moment and dashed past his forehead and the eyes, in a meteoric motion.

And, coincidentally, on the top of the block of flats known as 'Akash Dweep' (or, the sky lamp) which looms high on the opposite side of the street, front to front with the shop, Ravi, the newly-married caretaker of the building was busy orientating his wife with the skyline and the environs of his place of posting at that very juncture of time and space, about when and where the fall of Mallinath eventuated. The caretaker was trying his best to impress the village belle-turned-wife, a new-comer in Calcutta, with the free show of the skyscrapers surrounding them and the young woman from Beldah seemed moonstruck (dazed) as she was slowly savouring and absorbing the motion picture like scenario. Suddenly, her eyes fell on the supine and inert form of Mallinath resting on the pavement opposite theirs, and touching her husband in the waist, she showed him the seemingly out of tune spectacle. Ravi looked down upon Mallinath and smiled nonchalantly. Then he said, oh, that's our Malli Babu, ... must have boozed a trifle overly tonight ... don't you worry, he'll be all right soon ... and queried, hey, darling, did you ever behold such a large round dish of a moon in Beldah? The bemused bride looked again at the unearthly silhouettes of the tall buildings and the brazen platter of the moon in the background and realised that she had never witnessed that she had never witnessed that diabolical a moon before in her village; everything about this night of the full moon gratified her.

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