

SHORT STORY

Night Journey

SIDDHARTHA DEB

YING awake in the dark, I would hear the trucks changing gears all night as they grunted their way up the slopes. It was better than closing my eyes and trying to count sheep. The trucks went on and on, a live soundtrack throbbing and shaking the wooden floors, the sudden beams of light glaring through the deep dark curtains until the monsters faded into the highways of my sleep.

The trucks occupied my mind on the rain-washed weekdays as I waited for the cozy bus which sucked me into the routine of school. But I never spoke with anyone there about trucks or night journeys. Sometimes, after my bi-weekly NCC drill, if it got late while waiting for my father at this office, we would drive back home past the vanguard of the convoys. In the shadowy, halogen-swathed streets, they would bear down on us and then race past, disappearing into the darkness around the frayed edges of the town, on to the national highways.

'Where do they go?' I often asked my father, as he leafed through his files. 'Aizawl, Kohima, Imphal, Itanagar', he would say, not looking up from the files that so occupied him for most part of the day. I longed to be with them on their night journeys into the unknown, which I knew only through wonderful names. At school, in the geography they taught, they told us nothing about these places, and neither could the slant-eyed boarders who went home there during winter holidays. In the dots and crosses we marked on the map during the term exams, I only had to remember the big industrial cities and trading ports of the dusty plains, which was from where the trucks apparently came with their loads of fruit, vegetables, grain and fish. I had seen the names painted above the windscreens, 'All-India permit for Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh/West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya...' I only had license to dream until dark.

But it wasn't as if I had never taken the same road as those caravans with their black water containers made of strips of tire rubber, their sides decorated with tridents, birds, flowers and eyes that looked at you. Once, there was a journey during some sudden crisis when we traveled past the lumbering vehicles with their long tail of dust-clouds, and saw them parked with lines of drippy washing and coir charpains next to some tiny gurgling spring. And on the same trip I seem to remember just after Sonarpur on National Highway 44a truck lying upside down like a little toy on the parched riverbed below.

But that was the extent of my travels. NH 44 was all I knew, for I never saw what dramatic change took place when 44 became 45. My father had been to all these places, he had traveled throughout by road in the past, but now preferred to fly unless it was a short trip to Guwahati or Silchar. Once, on the way home one of those late evenings, I asked him why he didn't go by night along the road. 'Too risky', he replied in his usual monosyllables, but it was enough to fill my mind with the untold, exotic dangers of carrying supplies to far-flung places. When he felt more inclined to talk, he would tell me of the machinegun-manned checkpoints that came down with the dusk over the streets of Kohima or Dimapur. Or of the masked men who walked into his friend's office one day and shot him dead. These stories didn't make me apprehensive of my father's weekend tours. I felt envious instead, even if he was going by air.

I was alone with Moon, our jolly, hefty driver one of those evenings, waiting for my father to come back with some files he had forgotten, when I asked him how one could get to travel with those trucks. 'Well now, when I was riding those trucks, nearly fifteen-sixteen years ago', he began. He must have seen the surprise in my eyes (You, Moon, on those trucks, and you never told me...), for he settled back as he always did when he had a story to tell. 'Now, when I was riding those trucks, that was nearly fifteen-sixteen years ago, that was the thing to do. I wanted to learn driving and though I hung around the bus terminus and taxi stands, no one would teach me. So, he paused to examine his betel-stained teeth, 'so, I ran away from home.'

Dusk had come down hard on the Additional Secretariat building, lifeless now that almost everyone had gone home. A few drivers hung around with the night guards, solitary windows gleamed in the

building that had suddenly masked itself, and I could hear the traffic on the cross-roads in front, the hoarse rasp of heavy engines pumping thick black blood, the whine of giant bodies breaking free. 'Now in those days, for someone like me who wanted to drive, that was the only thing. In those days, you understand', he warned. 'I'll teach you to drive next year. But anyway, I pleaded with this big Punjabi driver to take me with him. He was on his way back through Assam, West Bengal, U.P., all the way back home to Ludhiana, where his boss owned fifty trucks and there were hundreds of small guys like me hanging around to become drivers. But still, he took me.' I listened in silence to this hidden past. 'I traveled for three months with the Punjabi, he made me carry water and wash the windscreens and press his legs. But at night, after he had emptied a bottle...you know... he would teach me to drive.' Moon trailed off.

'Then?' I asked. My voice must have conveyed my excitement: what about all the places you saw, what did you feel when, hands on wheel, your headlights sliced through the night, when at break of dawn you found the towns gently yawning at the sun along the valley in all those places, what robbers and highwaymen did you run into on those at least forty-three other national highways that surely exist on the surface of the earth?

'Then? Two years riding trucks as a helper, finally driving them for another four years, six driving city buses, and then the department milk vans and now, finally, I'm the director's driver and tomorrow's a beautiful day because it's a Suuunday', he sang out, his throat and belly wobbling with the effort. 'No, it isn't a beautiful day because there's still an inspection tour', he groaned. My father came back and we started off for home, not even the promise of learning to drive next year outstripping the excitement of the night journeys that Moon had embarked on, and the way he had begun it all.

No, I didn't run away from home, though it became a part of the fantasies that spun around in my head when the classroom hours dragged on for ever in the long afternoons and the sound of engines was silenced by the pine trees that curtained off the outside world. I didn't learn to drive either, not next year, it seemed I never would, that day when Moon dropped my father back for the first time in that green Ambassador plastered with 'We have a jumbo problem--save elephants' stickers. For once, Moon wasn't carrying any files, just a little package that was the farewell gift for my father from the department he had served for thirty-seven years. He looked at Moon as they sat with their forgotten cups of tea. 'See if you can find a small second-hand car, Moon, then, maybe...' We all knew the subterfuge, he didn't have the money to pay Moon even a minimal salary, let alone buy a second-hand car. But Moon smiled, 'Yes, saab, of course, my wife thinks I should relax more now. I think I know of someone who wants to sell a good Fiat, just perfect for us.' He cried as he went down the steps all the same.

In the coming days, I saw my father lying awake at night for a long while. The trucks seemed to disturb him and he would sit up in bed at times, when headlights flashed in the dark. Maybe he was remembering the road, for all his outward prosaïness. And? What time did I have for those chariots of the dark as they fled the change that seemed to overtake all who sit and wait? As I waited, the world that I knew was crumbling, and not even the pine trees could cordon me off any longer from the sound of bombs and cries, the smell of roasted flesh that was fanned towards us on the night wind. Riots had broken out on the eve of my pre-university exams, and as the town got sucked into a vortex of mayhem and curfew,



the only sounds at night were the fierce purr of police jeeps as they circled us like beasts of prey.

No, don't imagine for a moment that life around us was like those vignettes from the riot-rocked plains which came alive in newspapers and television from time to time. Even in the middle of the madness that had come over my hometown, sanity was never quite jettisoned. There were deaths and stray gunshots, there was fire, but still many people insisted--during the long curfew-ridden monotonous afternoons--that things would be normal again. I jerked from day to day towards the exams, and my parents stayed away from any discussions about the future. But I knew it couldn't last. What with the riots, my father's retirement and the end of my school days, it all meant that change was gathering its forces around me. Sometimes I felt I was bound to go trucking at last, at other times I would wonder about more mundane things such as where my parents would live, what and where I would study, until my watch would hurry me back to pages and pages of equations. And engines were never quite as interesting when reduced to two-dimensional drawings on paper.

On the last day of the exams, I walked out of the gnarled old building with a sense of relief. It was the middle of April and the weather was that strange, capricious creature which flirted with winter and summer every changing hour. The curfew had been reduced now, from seven at night to dawn, so the town had limped back almost to normal. I took the slow winding road back to our home, my depression and fears momentarily lifting. Our house could be seen a long way off from the other end of the arm of the 'u' that cradled it, across the shallow gorge that ate into the road. But I must have been dreaming, because I was only ten feet from the staircase when I saw the cars parked in front, my uncle's circumscribed Standard Herald prominent among them. Inside, my father was stretched out on the bed mumbling incoherently, my uncle talking to him in a very loud, self-assured voice. 'Wait downstairs for the ambulance', he said, as he saw me.

My father came back in my uncle's comic-strip car after three weeks in hospital. He was well enough to sit, but that was about it. We had begun to make arrangements to shift to the plains, where my father had built a house I had never seen except in blue-penciled plans.

My uncle was indefatigable. He visited us daily, once on the way to his chamber and again while coming back from there. One by one, all the middle-class odds and ends that my mother had acquired over the years and stored--mostly under the beds--had to be taken out, dusted and packed. The curtains were stripped off the windows on the last night. I lay awake late, looking for the first time into the blackness. There were no beams to follow now, since the trucks left town just before the curfew hours began. We were setting off next evening, travelling at night when it was cool. The truck with our belongings would leave first, the taxi later with my

parents and me. I would not be on the truck, though my books, my cricket bat and tennis racket were roughing it out. My uncle had brushed me off when I mildly suggested whether it might not be a good idea for me to travel with the goods, in case they got damaged. 'You'll go in the car, it's much more comfortable, and besides who'll accompany your parents?'

It was a long, drawn-out summer dusk as the truck was packed, the sides securely lashed with tarpaulin and ropes, and waved off. Only we waited, the human baggage, in that gentle twilight for the taxi to arrive. Just before seven, when night has come down on a crystal-studded sky, we move. Everything is in order: the weepy faces of the women, the silent, bare house, the excited handshakes from my former classmates, my father wrapped and cushioned against future shocks, and my mother's last gesture of supplication, hands raised to her unseen, silent gods. It is only the solemnity, the people gathered around, and the fact that there is no green Ambassador and one fat, jolly driver that says this is not the promised holiday trip arrived at last. We set off, the head-lights picking out an already deserted town, gathering speed on the main road. The shops are nearly shut, under the halogen lamps the glint of leather and steel of a police patrol. We are out of the town before the curfew tolls, silently looking at the hazy outlines of meadows and tree clumps we have always taken for granted.

We picked up the small convoy of trucks an hour later, each of them laboriously moving towards the cliff-face to let us pass. And then for a while only the sound of the engine, the swaying of two arcs of light, the world framed in tar and stone. We passed Jowai, a small highway town asleep amid the vacant stare of solitary lamps outside shops and garages. The world around was in slumber, nestled in a cocoon of routine, but I was moving. I was alive, responding to every twist and turn, my senses registering the sudden gleam on the dashboard, the engine as it moved beyond the second wind that every athlete must be content with. The locked gates outside a timber camp, heaps of coal along the road, the sudden shape of a fox frozen in the lamp, it all grows upon me like a fever as the road gets steadily worse and the car bounces over boulders, swerving past them when space allows. I sit back for the last leg, we are descending sharply... and I remember. There is a whiff of lime in the air. Probably the same trees that had come to my rescue many years back, when coming back from my grandfather's funeral I had been overcome by nausea. I remember, and dream, of border countries where the only wheeled traffic is olive-green in colour, I see road-gangs piled upon the back of trucks releasing a hundred bids into the air, I hear the scream of terror and see, in a close-up view, the contorted face of a driver suddenly jolted awake by the earth coming apart at the seams; like old pictures from issues of the National Geographic thumbed at school, the road comes alive that night in the technicolour of my dreams as somewhere in the background my father's voice tells me the complete story, connecting together scraps garnered from the years, past and future.

It was still dark when the driver woke me on a long bridge faintly lit, lined with alien-looking soft-drink hoardings. 'Which way?' he asked.

'Huh?'
'Which way to your house from the main junction?'
'Link Road'.

'Don't know where that is, you'll have to guide me.'

I looked back helplessly at my mother. 'It's, it's near the State Bank', she stuttered. 'Take left and keep going. I'll tell you when to turn' a clear voice spoke out from the dark. My mother and I stared at him for a moment. My father was sitting upright and awake, the man who had had to be carried to the car, the silent passenger slumped back, seemingly beyond waiting and the excitement of journeys and their ends.

We turned off into a narrow lane and stopped in front of a house, its fresh lime-washed walls reflecting the headlights and the slow dawn. My father spoke again. 'That road' he said, gesturing back, 'leads to Aizawl. And then you can go beyond, to other places'.

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On Samar Sen, poetry and Bengali Marxism

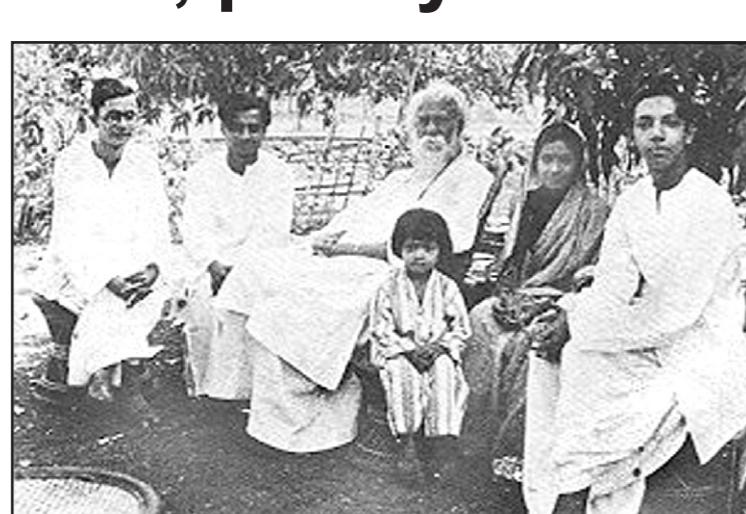
RAMCHANDRA GUHA

BENGALI Marxism is an intensely lived yet deeply insular culture which has generated its own icons, texts, language, lifestyle and sectarian heresies. It is, in all these respects, akin to a tribe, a tribe inhabiting a mileu quite different from the worlds I was familiar with--principally, the cities of Delhi and Bangalore. I came, however, with the inestimable advantage of a surname well known to the tribe. My last name Guha, a surname most recognisably Bengali, is more usually rendered among the Tamils as 'Guhan'. But I had reason to thank the shorter form (a family peculiarity) because my informants were utterly convinced, despite my disclaimer, that I could trace my ancestry to a long-forgotten Bengali prism in southern India.

...Anthropologists studying village India have written of having had to take sides, willy-nilly, with one or other caste or faction. One might have taken residence in a Brahmin household, or early befriended the chief rival to the village headman; these chance alliances then having a determining influence on the course of research.

My own community (and focus of research), as I have noted, was sub-divided into three clans (CPI, CPI-M and the Naxalites), each claiming common ancestors but now worshipping rival totems. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was to increasingly throw in my lot with the Naxalites. This was largely a matter of choice, for I was deeply attracted by their agrarian bias and their relatively greater openness to the ecological questions that preoccupied my in my own research.

Identification with the Naxalites led me to my third field site in Calcutta, the circle around the radical weekly, *Frontier*. The journal



Samar Sen, Buddhadev Bose, Tagore, Protibha Bose and Kammakhi Prasad

heart of the city, some six miles north of Jadunath Bhawan. The first time I visited the *Frontier* office, I was irresistibly reminded of a description in Leon Trotsky's autobiography of the journal *Iskra*, run in exile by a handful of Russian revolutionaries. *Frontier* was housed in the back of a building set apart from a small lane, itself hidden by a huge cinema house from the bustling main street. I felt palpably a part of an underground operation. This feeling was made more intense when, on entering the office, I was introduced to a lean, intense man with sunken eyes and a goatee. He could very well have been the young Lenin in Zurich.

The man in the goatee now runs *Frontier* with a devotion and meager financial reward almost unequalled in the world of Indian journalism. At that time, however, he was assistant to the editor, Samar Sen, one of the more remarkable figures in the history of Bengal Marxism.

Samar Sen was born into a typically middle-class, *bhadralok* family, a background he wryly caricatured in his memoirs *Babu Brittan* (A Babu's Tale). Growing

written his first poem. At seventeen has burnt his first tram. At nineteen has joined the Party. At twenty-one has left the Party. At twenty-three has written his last poem. At twenty-five has joined the World Bank--and at thirty has left it to rejoin the Party.'

The poetry apart, this is not a curriculum vitae that matches Samar Sen. Always an ironic, detached man who personally stood apart from politics, he never at any stage openly identified with the Party. On renouncing poetry he became a journalist. For nearly twenty years he worked in the establishment press, for about half that time as a correspondent in Moscow.

When I first met Samar Sen, he had only a few years to live, and *Frontier*, started with savings of the editor and his friends, had been going for a decade and a half. From the beginning, the weekly had appeared in quarto size on yellowing newsprint. Its austerity was a reminder of its modest origins and of the cause it came to hold.

Frontier was formed in the wake of the uprising at Naxalbari in north Bengal, when movements of landless peasants and tribals were erupting all over southern and eastern India. For a while it seemed that the country would go the way of China. The ruling classes were scared and a wave of business houses moved out of Calcutta.

In West Bengal the Naxalite movement was crushed through state repression, aided by fratricidal warfare among its cadres. At the helm of the anti-Naxalite operation was Inspector General of Police, who called himself a Marxist, opposing the Maoists for the left-wing adventurism--clearly an infantile disorder. Withal, he was a hero among the historic enemies of the working class. The poet Dom Moraes has written of accompanying this policeman for lunch at the Calcutta Club: when they entered the dining room,

suited businessmen stood up and applauded vigorously.

Anyway, at the time of which I write the Naxalites were in complete disarray. In parts of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh they continued to work courageously among the most deprived sections of Indian society--tribals and low castes. Yet the Indian Revolution seemed as far away as ever, and a once-united movement had fragmented into many parts. These sects were largely agreed on the character of the Indian state--semi-feudal and comprador--but quarreled bitterly on the correct identification of the Soviet Union: was it social-imperialist or merely state capitalist? They were equally divided on events in contemporary China. Some were pro Lin Piao, anti Gang-of-Four, pro Cultural Revolution; some anti Lin Piao, pro Gang-of-Four, anti Cultural Revolution. Other variations were permissible, but all were, of course, pro Mao himself.

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Without any prodding from its subject, a legendary aura had grown up around the journal's editor. It was rumoured that Samar Sen was not Maoist, but some kind of anarcho-Marxist. I actually never heard him talk politics. But one

could infer his editorial policy from a line of Trotsky's he liked to quote: that there was no *Pravda* (truth) in *Izvestia* (news), no *Izvestia* in *Pravda*.

In his character, Samar Sen exemplified the simplicity of living so characteristic of the best kind of Indian Marxist. He lived in a tiny flat in Southern Calcutta. Although the editor never burnt a tram, he traveled to his office in one--a journey of over an hour, each way, that he made daily till he was seventy and ailing. I remember him as a gentle little man with a shock of white hair on his head and round glasses on his eyes, a cigarette forever until upon his lips. In conversation he was incapable of anger or bitterness. The only time I saw him upset was when his friends planned a *festschrift* in his honor, a project he resisted with all his heart.

As an imaginative writer drawn almost against his will into radical politics, Samar Sen was a reminder that Marxist intellectual practice too could occasionally have an exquisite lightness of touch. His early renunciation of poetry notwithstanding, he retained an abiding love of literature, especially Russian literature. In a polemic I once wrote for *Frontier* I invoked as a model thinker for our times the radical theologian and environmentalist Ivan Illich. The editor had never heard of Illich; assuming I had made a mistake, he changed it in the proofs (without my knowledge, and rendering the sentence meaningless) to Ivan Illyich--a character from Tolstoy I had never heard of.

Ramchandra Guha writes on anthropology and cricket. The above has been taken from his *An Anthropologist Among The Marxists And Other Essays*, 2001, Permanent Black, New Delhi.

...Never do the old days return.
I look up at the sky,
At where the ball of fire
Burns heedlessly;
Dust blows, the bald oak with its head held high
Stands in a fired, old pose.
Youth returns to trees every year
While we drown in the mire of our acts.

This easy life, then death--
Which is moonlight above the oak tree
Or else fog upon a desolate hill.
O Dhupadi, peace is not ours to possess;
On our journey from sleeplessness to nightmare
Crows caw,
The dark sound of a sunblacked, anxious face.
In Bengal, in Bihar in voices free of thunder
Twisted corpses cry
We walk to the graveyard
Or to the burning ghats.

Death perhaps brings amity:
All are equal at the cessation of being--
Bihar's Hindu and Noakhali's Muslim
Noakhali's Hindu and Bihar's Muslim