

SHORT STORY

PREMENDRA MITRA
(translated by P. Nandy)

WHEN Saturn and Mars come together, you may also discover Telenapota.

On a leisurely day, after hours of angling without a catch, when someone comes and tempts you, saying that somewhere there is a magic pool filled with the most incredible fish anxiously waiting to swallow any bait, you are already on your way to Telenapota.

But finding Telenapota is not all that easy. You catch a bus late in the afternoon. It is packed with countless people and by the time you get off, you are drenched in sweat and dust-smearred. Actually you are even unprepared for the stop when it comes.

Before you even know where you are, the bus disappears in the distance, over a bridge across the low swampland. The forest is dense and dark, and night has arrived even before the sun has set. There is a strange wind that blows, an eerie quiet. You will see no one anywhere. Even the birds have flown away, as if in fright. There is an uncanny feeling, a strange dread slowly rearing its head out of the lonely marsh-land.

You leave the main road and take the narrow muddy track that winds into the forest. After a while, the track gets lost in the thick groves of bamboo.

To find Telenapota you need a couple of friends with you. You will be going there to angle. What their interests are you have no clue.

Your first problem will be mosquitoes. They will arrive in hordes and you will try to scare them away. Failing, all three of you will stand and look at each other, wondering what to do. And slowly it will grow quite dark, the mosquitoes will become more insistent and you will wonder if it would not have been better to get back onto the main road and catch the return bus.

Just then a strange noise will startle you. A noise from that point where the mud track loses itself in the forest. Your nerves being on edge, you will imagine this phantom scream coming from the dumb forest and you will immediately become tense and perhaps a little scared as well. And then, you will see in the dark a faint lamp gently swaying. Slowly a bullock cart will amble out of the dark forest.

It is a small cart. The bullocks are also very small. They will all seem dwarf-like, and yet the three of you will climb onto the cart and huddle together in the dark interior where there is only room for one. The cart will return the way it came. The dark, impenetrable forest will yield a narrow tunnel that the cart slowly enters. The bullocks will move forward, unhurried, as if creating with each step the

path they slowly tread. For sometime you will feel terribly cramped in the dark. But slowly you will drown in the depths of the blackness around you. From your familiar world you will enter another. An unknown mist-clad universe, bereft of all feeling. Time will stop dead in its tracks. And then, suddenly, a howl of drums will wake you. You will look around you and find the driver of the cart furiously beating an empty drum. The skies will be full of countless stars.

You will ask what the matter is. And the driver will casually tell you that this din is to drive the tigers away. When you wonder how one can scare away tigers by just raising a racket, he will reassure you that these are not real tigers. They are panthers; and a stick and a drum are enough to keep them at bay.

Tigers! Within thirty miles of the metropolis! Before you can raise your eyebrows, the cart will have crossed a wide moor lit by a late moon. Ruins of deserted palaces will gleam in the phantom moonlight. Lone colonnades, broken arches, the debris of courtyard walls. A ruined temple somewhere further down. They will stand like litigants, waiting in futile hope, for the recording of some evidence in the court of time. You will try to sit up. A strange sensation will once again make you feel as if you have left behind the world of the living and entered a phantom universe peopled only by memories.

The night will be far gone. It will seem an endless dark in which everything lies stilled, without genesis or end. Like extinct animals preserved in museums for all time.

After a few more turns the cart will stop. You will collect your tired limbs and climb down, one by one, like wooden dolls.

There will be a strong smell in the air: the stench of leaves rotting in the pool just in front of you. Beside the pool will stand the feeble remains of a large mansion, its roof caved in, walls falling apart, and windows broken--like the battlements of a fort, guarding against the phantom moon-light.

This is where you will spend the night.

First, you will find yourself a room, somewhat habitable. The cart-driver will fetch you from somewhere a broken lantern and a jug of water. It will seem to you ages since someone had walked into that room. Some futile efforts have been made to clean it up and the musty odour will reveal that this was a long time back. With the slightest movement, plaster will peel off and bits of rubble will fall on you from the roof and the walls, like angry oaths from a resident spirit. Bats and flying foxes will shrilly question your right to stay there for the night.



Of your friends, one is a sod and the other would have snored through a holocaust. Your bed will be hardly ready before one of them hits the sack and the other the bottle.

The night will wear on. The lantern glass will gather soot and the light will softly dim. The assault of mosquitoes will become unbearable. This is the blue-blooded anopheles, the aristocrat who carries malaria in his bite. But, by this time, both your companions will be in worlds of their own, far removed from yours.

It will be hot and oppressive. You will take a torch and try to escape to the terrace, to beat the heat. The danger of the staircase giving way will scare you at every step. But something will draw you on, irresistibly. You will keep on climbing till you arrive.

On reaching, you will find the terrace in ruins. Trees have taken firm root in every crevice, every nook. As if they were fifth columnists, making way for the inexorable advance of the forest.

And yet, in the wan moon-light, everything will look beautiful. It will seem that if you searched long enough, you would find that inner sanctum of this sleep-drenched palace where the captive princess has been asleep through countless centuries.

And even as you dream of such a princess, you will notice a faint light in one of the windows of the tumbledown house across the street. And, then, you will see a mysterious shadow walk up to the window. Whose silhouette is it? Why is she awake when everyone sleeps? It will baffle you: and even as you wonder about it, the light will slowly go out. Was

it real? Or did you see a dream? From the abysmal dark of this world of sleep, a dream bubble surfaced for a while, floated silently in the world of the living, and then suddenly melted away.

You will walk down the staircase carefully and fall asleep beside your friends.

When you wake up some hours later, you will find morning already there, with the delightful chatter of birds.

You will remember what you had come here for. And very soon you will find yourself sitting on a broken, moss-covered step beside the pool. You will cast your line into the green waters and wait patiently.

The day will wear on. A kingfisher perched on the branch of a tree beside the pool will occasionally swoop down, in a flash of colour. A snake will emerge from some crack in the steps and slither slowly into the water. Two grasshoppers, their transparent wings fluttering in the sunlight, will keep trying to land on the float of your line. A dove will call out from the distance, its lazy notes will bring on a strange ennui, as your mind will wander far and wide.

The reverie will break with the sudden ripples on the water. Your float will gently rock. You will look up to find her pushing away the floating weeds and filling up a shining brass pitcher. Her eyes are curious; her movements unabashed and free. She will look straight at you and at your line. Then, she will pick up her pitcher and turn away.

You will not be able to guess her age. Calm and sorrowful, her face will tell you that she has already walked the pitiless

road of life. But if you look at the thin, emaciated lines of her body, you will think that she had never grown out of her adolescence.

Even as she turns to go away, she will suddenly pause and ask you what you are waiting for. Pull hard, she will say. Her voice is so mellow and tender that it will not surprise you that she should have spoken to you, a complete stranger, with such familiarity. Only the suddenness of it will startle you and, by the time you pull the line, the bait would have gone.

You will look at her somewhat abashed. And she will then turn and go away with slow, unhurried steps. As she walks away, you will wonder if you saw the hint of a smile breaking through her sad, peaceful eyes.

Nothing will again disturb the loneliness of the afternoon. The kingfisher will fly away. The fish will ignore you. Only a strange feeling of unreality will remain. How could she have come to this strange land of sleep?

And then, after a long while, you will pack up--a little disappointed with yourself. When you return, you will find that the news of your fishing skills has preceded you. You will ignore the wisecracks of your friends and ask them how they knew you had fared so poorly.

Why, Jamini told us, the tippler will reply. She saw you there. Curious, you will ask him who Jamini is. You will learn that she is the same person you saw beside the pool, a distant relation of your friend. You will also learn that you are going over to her place for lunch.

You look at the ruins across the street--where you had watched last night's silhouette framed by the broken window in the wan moonlight and you are surprised by its wretched condition. You had not imagined that the veil of night, now stripped rudely by the harsh daylight, could have hidden such an ugly nakedness. You are even more surprised to know that Jamini lives there.

It is a simple meal. Jamini serves it herself. Looking at her now, closely, you are struck by the tired sorrow writ on her face. It seems as if the mute agony of this forgotten and lonely place has cast its dark shadow across her visage. A sea of infinite tiredness swirls in her eyes. You know she will crumble slowly, very slowly, with the ruins around her.

You will notice there is something on her mind. You may even hear a faint voice calling from a room upstairs. And every now and then you will notice Jamini leaving the room. Each time she comes back, the shadows lengthen on her face and her eyes betray a strange anxiety.

After the meal is over, you will sit for a while. Jamini will first hesitate, and then call out

in despair for the other side of the door: Manida, can you please come her once? Mani is your friend, the tippler. He will go to the door and you will hear his conversation with Jamini quite clearly, even though you have no intention to eavesdrop.

Mother is being difficult again, Jamini would say, in a troubled voice. Ever since she heard you were coming with your friends, she has become quite impossible to handle.

Mani would mutter irritably: I suppose it is because she imagines Niranjan is here.

Yes. She keeps saying, I know he is here. He hasn't come up to see me only because he is embarrassed. Go, fetch him. Manida, I don't know what to say. Ever since she went blind, she has become rather difficult. She won't listen to anyone. She is always angry. I am sometimes scared she will collapse and die during one of her fits.

If only she had eyes, I could have proved to her that Niranjan is nowhere around: Mani would reply, somewhat annoyed.

A shrill, angry scream will come from upstairs, this time more clearly audible. Janimi will beseech him: Please come with me once, Manida. See if you can make her understand. All right, Mani will reply a bit roughly. You carry on; I'll come.

Mani will mutter to himself: Why, for heaven's sake, does this mad woman refuse to die? She can't see; she can hardly use her limbs; and yet she is determined not to die.

You will ask him what the matter is. Mani will reply, annoyed: Matter? Nothing very much. Years ago, she had fixed Jamini's marriage with Niranjan, a distant nephew of hers. The last time he was here was about four years ago. He told her then he would marry Jamini as soon as he returned from abroad. Ever since then, she has been waiting.

But hasn't Niranjan returned? You will ask.

Of course not! How can he return when he never went at all? He was lying; otherwise, the old hag wouldn't let him go. Why should he marry this rag-picker's daughter? Yes, he is married all right and rearing a family. But who is to tell her all this? She won't believe you; and if she did, she would die of shock immediately thereafter. Who's going to take the risk?

Does Jamini know about Niranjan? You will ask.

Oh yes. But she can't speak about it to her. Well, let me go and get it over. Mani will turn to go.

Almost unaware of it yourself, you will also get up then and say: Just a moment. I will come with you.

You? With me? Mani will be very surprised.

Yes. Do you mind?

No, of course not, Mani will reply, a trifle taken aback. And,

then, he will lead the way. After you have climbed the dark, crumbling staircase, you will enter a room that looks like an underground vault. There is only one window, tightly shut. At first, everything will look indistinct. And then, as your eyes get used to the dark, you will see a large, decrepit wooden cot. On it you will notice a shriveled up woman, wrapped in torn rags, lying still. Jamini stands beside her, like a statue.

At the sound of your footsteps, the bag of bones will slowly move. Niranjan? My child! You are back at last! You have come back to your poor wreck of an aunt! You know, I have been waiting, keeping death at bay, knowing that you will be here someday. You won't slip away again like last time?

Mani will be about to say something but you will interrupt him by blurting out: No, I promise you I won't.

You will not look up but you will feel the stunned silence in the room. You could not have looked up even if you wanted to, for your eyes are riveted to the sockets of her old, unseeing eyes. Two tongues of dark will emerge from the empty sockets and lick every inch of your body. To feel, to know. You will feel those moments falling like dew into the vast seas of time.

You will hear the old woman saying. My son, I knew you would come. That is why I am still in this house of the dead, counting the days. The sheer effort to speak will leave her panting. You will look up at Jamini. You will feel that somewhere behind the mask of her face, something was slowly melting away, and it will not be long before the foundation of a vow--a vow made up of endless despair, a vow taken against life and fate--will slowly give away.

She will speak again: I am sure Jamini will make you happy, my son. There is none like her, even though I, her mother, should say so. I am old and broken down, and often out of my senses. I try her beyond endurance. But does she ever protest? Not once. This graveyard of a place, where you will not find a man even if you search ten houses, is like me, more dead than alive. And yet, Jamini survives, and manages everything.

Even though you may want to, you will dare not lift your eyes should someone discover the tears that have welled there. The old woman will whisper: Promise me you will marry Jamini. If I do not have your promise, I will know no peace even in death.

Your voice will be heavy. You will softly mumble: I will not fail you, I promise.

And soon it will be late afternoon. The bullock cart will appear once again to take you back. One by one, the three of you will get inside. As you are about to leave, Jamini will look at you with those sorrowful eyes of hers and softly remark:

You are forgetting your tackle.

You will smile and reply: Let it be. I missed the fish this time--but they won't escape next time.

Jamini will not turn her eyes away. Her tired face will softly light up with a smile, tender and grateful. Like the white clouds of autumn, it will drift across your heart and fill you with a strange and beautiful warmth, an unexplained happiness.

The cart will amble on its way. You will not feel cramped this time; nor will the monotonous creak of the wheels bother you. Your friends will discuss how a hundred years ago, the scourge of malaria, like a relentless flood, carried off Telenapota and left it here, in this forgotten no-man's land, just beside the frontier of the world of the living. You will not be listening; your mind will be drifting elsewhere. You will only listen to your own heartbeats echoing the words: I will come back, I will come back.

Even after you get back home to the city, with its hectic pace and harsh lights, the memory of Telenapota will shine bright in your mind like a star that is distant and yet very close. A few days will pass with petty problems, the usual traumas of the commonplace. And even if a slight mist begins to form in your mind, you will not be aware of it. Then, just as you have crossed the fences, prepared to go back to Telenapota, you will suddenly feel the shivering touch of the oncoming fever.

Soon the terrible headache and the temperatures will be on you and you will lie down under a lot of blankets, trying unsuccessfully to ward off the fever or at least come to terms with it. The thermometer will register 105 degrees Fahrenheit and the last thing you hear before passing out will be the doctor's verdict. Malaria.

It will be many days before you are able to walk out of the house and bask in the sun, weak and exhausted by the long fever. Meanwhile, unknown to yourself, you mind will have undergone many changes, the inevitable transformations. Telenapota will become a vague, indistinct dream, like the memory of a star that has fallen. Was there ever such a place? You will not be sure. The face that was tired and serene. The eyes that were lost and lonely, hiding an unknown sorrow. Were they real? Or were they, like the shadows of Telenapota's ruins, just another part of a phantom dream?

Telenapota, discovered for one brief moment, will be lost again in the timeless dark of the night.

Premendra Mitra is a well-known Bengali poet and novelist. P. Nandy has translated numerous works by Mitra into English.

TRAVEL WRITING

In the second of his two-part series on travels inside Tibet **Tenzig Sonam**, a Tibetan poet and film-maker currently living in New York, enters Lhasa, the capital, and finds that none of it is as he had imagined it growing up in exile in India.

A Stranger in My Native Land

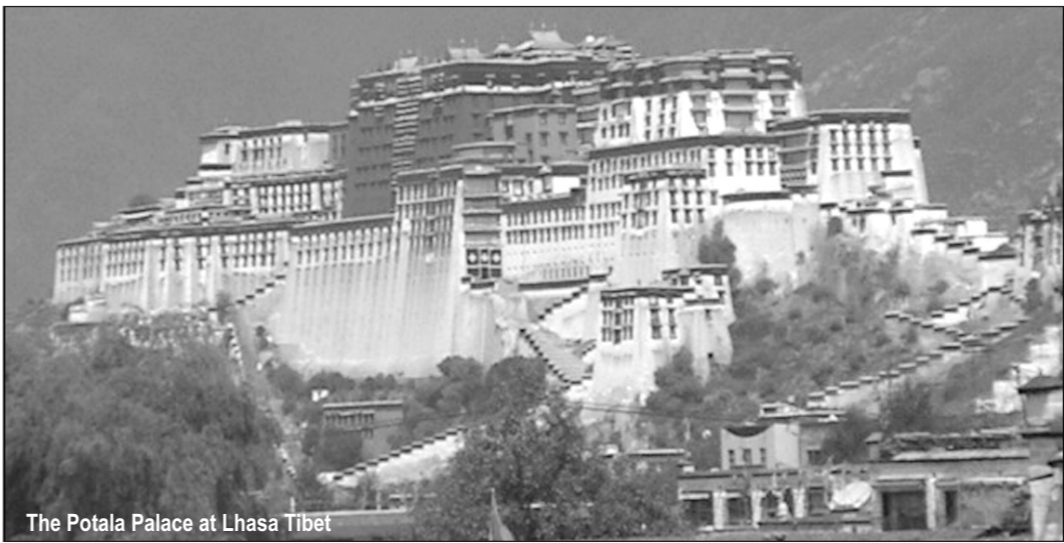
IT is early afternoon when we enter the broad Lhasa Valley. At the outskirts of the city, the highway becomes a wide boulevard, its verges neatly fenced and landscaped. I have no illusions about Lhasa -- I know the Chinese have transformed it beyond recognition -- but even so, I can barely contain my excitement. Every Tibetan, old or young, in Tibet or in exile, years to visit Lhasa; it is our Mecca, the focus of our identity as Tibetans, and its over-whelming physical symbol is the Potala Palace whose familiar outlines are etched into our psyches like the subliminal imprint of our origins. I strain to catch my first glimpse of the Potala, but all I can see is block after block of modern houses, clinical and characterless, their signs mostly in Chinese. The first and most depressing truth about Lhasa hits me like a blow between the eyes; it has been reduced to just another, provincial Chinese city. We drive past a roundabout which encloses a travesty of a public monument -- two giant, golden yaks posing heroically in a posture that only Communists could imagine -- and suddenly we are released into a vast, empty, concrete square, and here, towering above us, is the Potala itself.

The palace is enormous, larger than any picture could ever convey, and it is breathtakingly magnificent, undiminished in impact despite its iconic familiarity. It seems to have magically evolved out of the hard escarpment -- an organic unity of form and colour, massively solid and yet exuding a sense of lightness, like a giant ocean liner straining to break loose from its moorings. Once, the historic village of Shol lay at its foot, but only recently most of it was bulldozed to make way for this broad, soulless plaza. Street-lights shaped like kitsch chandeliers line the brand new boulevard that traverses the square and leads into the heart of what remains of the old city.

The Yak Hotel is situated on the busy Beijing Shar Lam in the old quarter of Lhasa. The street is crowded with shops, restaurants and karaoke bars, and threaded by small alleyways that lead into mysterious recesses. Cycle-rickshaws with bright, Tibetan-style canopies ply the street, and on this one stretch Tibetans seem to be in the majority. A side street near the hotel leads to the Jokhang temple, Tibet's holiest shrine. The square in front is a heaving, surging mass of humanity, an exhilarating conflation of motion and colour and sound.

For a moment we just stand there, the crowds eddying past us, our senses reeling under this onslaught of visual and aural stimuli, my mind stunned by a profusion of conflicting emotions -- joy, amazement, sorrow. Stalls selling trinkets of every description disappear into the Barkhor, the narrow souk-like marketplace that circumscribes the temple complex. Pilgrims and traders from every corner of Tibet, represented in a bewildering array of costumes and hairstyles, lend a festive touch. Here, one can still catch a glimpse of the old Tibet, precariously preserved, like an oasis in the middle of an encroaching wasteland.

In the small courtyard in front of the temple entrance, pilgrims make full-length prostrations, the flagstones dark and glistening, polished by the ceaseless sweep of their bodies. We enter the temple, following the beacon of flickering butter lamps held aloft by the faithful, lulled into a reverie by the continuous drone of murmured prayers and the smell and aura of sanctity that smother us like a gentle, blinding fog. Swept along by the measured shuffle of the crowd, we enter the *sanctum sanctorum*, aglow in the golden wash of giant butter-lamps. We look up at the Jowo Rinpoche,



Tibet's most venerated Buddha image, swathed in khatas -- the white scarves that symbolise respect and goodwill -- his face incandescent and compassionate; a shiver runs down my spine. The throng of people push us along, around the statue and out. We wander as in a dream through the maze-like interior of the temple, along corridors where shafts of light paint passing pilgrims in medieval chiaroscuro. We make our offerings at the multitude of shrines that lead one into the next until we seem to merge into the substance of the place itself, becoming a part of a continuum that seems to stretch back to some ancient and unremem-

bered past. Perhaps this is the essence of Tibet, its elusive *genius loci*, this alchemic concoction of magic, tradition, faith and spirituality.

We find a steep staircase that delivers us, blinking and dazed, into the blinding sunlight of the rooftop. Everything seems silent, then the hum and bustle of the city intrudes and the spell is broken. Rinu points out to me that we are standing on the exact spot from which a Chinese police videographer shot some of the harrowing scenes of police brutality against unarmed monks here inside the Jokhang during the pro-independence demonstra-

tions of March 1988. That footage was smuggled out of Tibet and the more graphic scenes were subsequently broadcast throughout the world. One particular image leaps to my mind -- less publicised because the scene it depicts is so fleeting: a plainclothes officer in trademark leather jacket is standing in the shadows -- perhaps right there on that level below us -- surveying the mad scramble of panicked monks as they are chased and beaten up by uniformed policemen armed with batons; suddenly, he launches into a vicious kung fu-style kick at an unfortunate monk who strays too close to

him and then, having made crunching contact, coolly withdraws into the fringes of the action, as if that premeditated burst of violence was merely routine target practice, as if the monks running helter-skelter in blind terror were no better than animals.

We walk across the roof terraces. All that terror and mindless violence seems far away. A group of young monks are huddled together in the courtyard below us. One gets up, laughing, and runs away; the others chase him in boyish excitement. In the distance, the Patala Palace looms like a sombre shipwreck beached on the shores of an alien city.

Lhasa is a microcosm of the effects of four decades of Chinese rule in Tibet. Walking around it is to see a city violated and brutalised beyond belief. And yet, this systematic deconstruction of the history and culture of an ancient civilisation is taking place utterly brazenly, without even the pretence of subtlety or subterfuge. Thus, the blurb on the ticket to enter the Potala Palace ascribes its construction to the seventh-century Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo and makes no mention of the Fifth Dalai Lama during whose reign, a thousand years later, the major



part of the palace was built, and nor does it allude to the fact that until 1959 the palace was the residence of the Dalai Lamas. The tickets to visit Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's summer palace, contemptuously refer to it as Luo Bu Lin Ka. Newscasters on Lhasa Television are made to read Tibetan in the nasal, whining tones of Mandarin Chinese, perverting the language beyond recognition. And while the city expands and preens its glass and concrete achievements, the Tibetans themselves are ghettoized into the confines of the old city, useful only as adjuncts in the sanitised reduction of Tibetan culture into a tourist attraction.

Within living memory Lhasa was an entirely Tibetan city, the spiritual beacon for a civilisation that stretched from the Himalayan kingdoms to the steppes of Mongolia. In 1950, when the first troops of the People's Liberation Army entered Lhasa, there were perhaps a handful of Chinese here -- mostly traders and businessmen. Today, at every level, Lhasa is dominated by the Chinese and the Tibetans are a minority, strangers in their own city.