

NON-FICTION

Striped Lightning*

TAHAWAR ALI KHAN

Question 1: How swift is a tiger's attack?
Question 2: How powerful is a tiger's blow?

If I answer that a tiger attacks 'with lightning speed' or 'in the twinkling of an eye' or 'in a split second' you may think that I am employing a figure of speech and am referring to an event that actually extends over, say, three or four seconds. Similarly, if I tell you that a tiger can break the neck of a full grown cow or buffalo with a single blow, it will not give you a fair idea of his power because some celebrated 'strong men' have been known to perform this feat.

While hunting in the Sunderbans, I witnessed a rare example of the incredible swiftness of a tiger's spring and the devastating strength behind his blow. Let me tell you the story so that you may understand what a 'split-second attack' really signifies, and what is meant by the ancient phrase, 'strong as a tiger.'

I was hunting on the western bank of the Malancha River in the vicinity of Mandarbaria Khal, when a keen shikari I had known for some time--a Forest Guard named Abdul Razzak--spotted me from his canoe as he was passing by on his patrol beat. He immediately came over and joined me on the beach with a warning to be careful as a couple of tigers had been seen several times on the previous evening in that area. We decided that the matter was worth looking into, and so we set off together on foot along the Mandarbaria Khal.

We reached a creek running left from the Khal and saw a large herd of cheetal (spotted deer) crossing it about 400 yards away. The wind was blowing in the right direction and enabled us to get close to the herd by walking just inside the forest. We concealed ourselves behind a large tree and watched nearly two hundred animals cross over to the other side. The creek was flowing full and fast, and as cheetal do not normally cross water-courses till they are almost dry, we deduced that the large-scale evacuation was an emergency move forced on the deer by several tigers operating in the area.

We continued along the bank of the creek for two hundred yards or so and then Razzak showed me fresh pug-marks of a tiger cub leading to a small depression in the

ground. Here the animal had rested only a short while ago, as the grass, which had been flattened down by his body, had not sprung fully erect. No prints could be seen beyond the depression as the ground was very firm, and so we began to search around for the cub. After a little while Abdul Razzak said he would call up a full-grown tiger.

I had seen the man call up a tiger before in a very unorthodox manner. In the Sunderbans, it is usually done by holding a round earthen vessel close to the mouth and sounding into it in imitation of a tigress calling to her mate. The hollow vessel gives a deep resonance to the call, which is immediately answered by the tiger who begins to move towards it. Call is answered by call in this manner, and the tiger is lured nearer and nearer till he comes within shooting distance of waiting guns. Razzak, however, did not imitate tiger calls. His method was to hide behind a bush and shake it violently with the barrel of his gun, while he seized his windpipe with the left hand and uttered loud distress calls closely resembling the strangled cries of a cheetal hind caught by the throat. The rustling bush gave the impression the 'victim' was threshing about in agony, and if a tiger was nearby, he usually came out to investigate whether a rival was poaching in his preserve.

Telling me to be ready, Razzak went a few yards away and hid behind a screen of bushes which he began to agitate, giving at the same time a startling imitation of a deer's distress call. This was repeated at intervals and I looked about anxiously, waiting for the tiger to appear. Four or five minutes passed, when I heard a sudden frightened yell, and to my astonishment and alarm, saw Razzak leap straight up into the air with this gun as if he had been catapulted vertically from the ground.

...On his way down he fired a barrel wildly from his hip, and there some confused scrambling behind the bushes for a second or so. The next moment, a terrified tiger cub--about as big as a spaniel--shot out of the thicket, followed by Abdul Razzak, who was swearing fluently in Bengali. The cub scampered away into the forest and the disgusted guard fired his second barrel in its direction, more as a gesture than with the intention of hurting him...

"After giving the distress call, sahib,"



artwork by apurba kanti das

Razzak explained, "I paused for a while and looked around. I couldn't see you from my position and when I heard a soft tread behind me I thought it was you. Then I felt two light taps on my body--one on my chest and the other on my back. Looking down, I saw the foreleg of a tiger across my chest and thought I was being hugged by a man-eater. The only way of escape was upwards through the encircling legs and so I jumped..."

On our way back, as we were passing a large clearing by the side of the creek, we heard a great commotion in the trees ahead of us near the Khal. It seemed that every bird and monkey in the area had joined in to sound a general alarm, and there was a riot going on between the jungle folk. It was also clear that whatever was causing this disturbance was moving fast in our direction. Razzak thought it was a fight between two male tigers that would be worth watching. We broke off a thin branch, slung our guns from the projecting stump, and climbed quickly into a tree from which we could look down into the clearing. The farther end of it, about fifty yards away, was blocked by a large number of trees which had been cut

down by woodcutters and left lying there for some reason.

We had scarcely settled in the tree when a large cheetal stag rushed into the clearing from a point below and to the left of us. Horned stags cannot run fast through thickly wooded forests because of their spreading antlers and so this animal came at a medium trot, his ears twitching and flanks heaving with fear. Bounding along almost lazily on each side of him were two full-grown tigers who made no attempt to seize the deer but merely headed him off as he tried to escape to one side and then the other.

This behaviour of the tigers was puzzling for a moment till the explanation arrived in the shape of two tiger cubs who entered the clearing a few yards behind the fleeing deer. They were both about the same size and, for all I know, one of them may have been the cub responsible for Razzak's recent discomfiture. I was deeply thrilled when I realized that we were watching the cubs being trained by their parents to hunt their traditional prey!

The little ones pursued the stag dutifully like two schoolchildren trying to behave under the watchful eyes of Papa and Mama. Their quarry had put on a sudden burst of

speed and come up against the dead end of the clearing, where he made frantic attempts to break through the thick rampart of felled timber. The tigers on both sides of him fanned out immediately and the tigress, which was the smaller of the two animals, sat down at the edge of the clearing to the left of us in front. The big male tiger took up his position near the bank of the creek about twenty feet from the deer. When the unfortunate animal turned round, he found escape cut off from all sides because the cubs, too, had sat down in the middle of the clearing to face him.

To get a clear picture of the situation, you can imagine the stag at the center of a circle of about 20 feet radius, facing into the clearing, with his back to the felled trees. On the arc of the circle, equidistant from the stag and from the cubs, sat the tigress on the right of the stag and the tiger on the left. The two cubs sat close together directly in front of the stag at a distance of about seven or eight yards.

The youngsters beat the ground with their tails, like happy little puppies, and looked in turn towards their parents and the cornered deer. The tigress was gazing at them, muttering low growls of encouragement, but I am sure the tiger never removed his eyes from the stag for an instant. Whenever I looked at him, he was sitting alert on his haunches, staring intently at the trapped animal who seemed rooted to the ground with fear.

When encouragement from the tigress had no effect on the cubs, she got up with a threatening growl at the stag and went over to her offsprings. Seizing one of them by the tail and twisting it with her mouth, she slapped the protesting little hunter on its rump till it hopped forward and sat down again on its haunches some four yards away from the deer. The tigress seemed to be satisfied with this display of enterprise, and went back to her original position with a low mutter of approval.

The young trainee again took things easy till the tigress growled impatiently, at which he hopped forward and then crept on his haunches till he was only a couple of yards from the stag. The nervous cheetal pawed the ground in front of him and jerked his head up and down, presenting his sharp horns to the cub, who must have felt like skipping school for the rest of the day.

The tigress, who had been rather indulgent towards her offspring, suddenly lost her patience and roared out an imperious command which made the cub leap forward to attack.

With a quick movement the stag put his head down and then up, catching the cub on his horns and tossing him back to the ground about three feet away. I cannot say if the game youngster was injured--I hope he wasn't--but he seemed to lie dazed for a moment. The stag immediately lunged forward with his head down, intending to impale the cub on his horns.

The stag moved fast--but the tiger moved faster!

While the horns had travelled only two feet towards the cub, the tiger had cleared 20 feet!

It was an incredibly swift attack, and all I saw was blurred streak followed by a sharp 'whoosh' like the sound made by a passing shell. Then I heard a dull thud as if a heavy weight had been dropped from a height on soft ground.

No human eye could have followed what actually happened, but the stag literally vanished from our sight. He was lunging forward at one instant, and then, within that instant, he was not there any more! In his place was the tiger who was looking on while the tigress licked the cub.

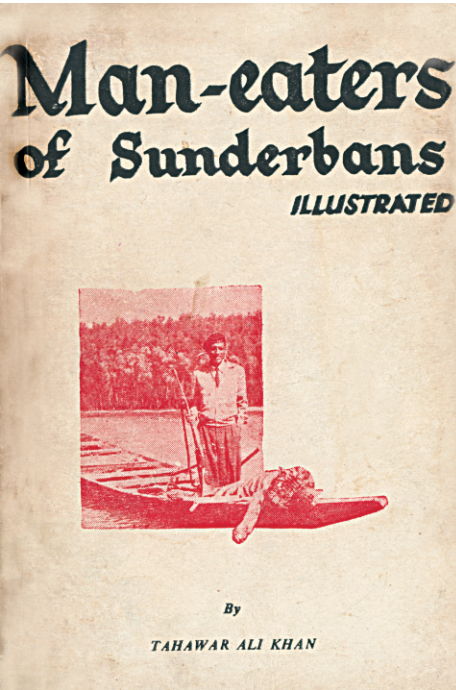
The whole family then moved slowly into the forest, leaving two excessively amazed men rubbing their eyes disbelievingly in a tree!

We found the cheetal among the felled trees blocking the end of the clearing. To say that he was dead would be a gross understatement. He looked like a mangled thing from another world with his head knocked right into his body and only a part of his antlers showing. His spine had collapsed and the broken ends of his ribs were sticking out of the flesh. Both forelegs were fractured in two or three places.

And all this, including the tiger's 20-foot leap, happened--as I have told you--in the part of a second that it took the stag's horns to travel only two feet towards the tiger's cubs!

*From Man-Eaters of Sunderbans (see article below).

Shikar tales from the Sunderbans



ravines to guide you. The creeks make you change direction very often till you don't know where you are, and -- most important of all -- you don't know where the tiger is. For the same reasons, you seldom know whether you are travelling with or against the wind in the forest, and this is a factor that gives the maneater a big advantage over you."

It is this very different shikar terrain - swampy, watery, humid, with shifting tides and overcast skies, peopled by honey gatherers and wood cutters - that gives Tahawar's shikar tales of the Sunderbans such a different feel. The Royal Bengal Tiger, from the time of the travelling French priest Francois Bernier (*Travels in the Mughal Empire 1656-1668*), had a reputation for ferocity, and it was still living up to it when Tahawar roamed the Sundarbans in search of it, leaving behind only the heads of its victims after eating the rest of the body. There are some photos in the book which are not for the squeamish!

With the hindsight of the tragic history of Pakistan, it was gratifying for me to read how much Tahawar came to love the forest: "Sunderbans! Spewed up by the impatient sea and set like a unique emerald upon its sapphire breast! The dense forest, dark green and mysterious; the luxuriant trees, half-veiled by purple shadows; the beach, gleaming like polished silver; the wrinkled turquoise, blue ocean, breaking on its shore in tumbling, foam-crested, sun-spangled waves..." He came to know the *chars*, channels, islands and *khals* intimately, and got along well with the forest's inhabitants and the Bengali forest trackers and rangers. Tahawar thus has left behind a unique chronicle, in words as well as in photos, of how the Sunderban forests in then East Pakistan seemed to one man during that now lost, and politically troubled, era.

He was also unavoidably a man of his time, and therefore readers may note that the language of his book is shot through with an outdated British idiom, which is perhaps the result of a mission school upbringing as well as the fact that hunting tigers in India and Pakistan in the mid- to late '50s, barely a decade after independence, was still a tradition left over from the British colonialists. Another thing to note is that, unlike the later Jim Corbett, who evolved into a naturalist and wrote some of the first passages about the flora and fauna of Naini Tal, Tahawar unfortunately did not record, except in passing, the Sundarban's stupendous variety of natural life. One wishes that he had done so. It would have made a rare account of a magical natural wonder that much more valuable.

Khaleel Mahmood is a Pakistani expatriate in New York. He is a retired doctor/volunteer at a community health clinic and amateur naturalist.

Tenzin Tsundue: poet of Tibetan resistance

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I came to know about Tenzin Tsundue back in 2003, when the-then writer of 'Letter from Katmandu' Ajit Baral proposed an interview with a Tibetan refugee poet in India. It was the first I had heard about Tenzin. I said why not. Ajit interviewed him and we ran it in December 2003. It is an interview that I am gratified to see has been reprinted in Tenzin Tsundue's second book of poems and essays named *Kora*, a copy of which he recently sent me with a Bangladeshi courier from Dharamsala, the enclave in India where the Tibetan resistance movement to Chinese occupation of their homeland has found a home -- of sorts.

'Home' is what Tenzin broods about -- the loss of home, imaginary homes, temporary homes, home meaning food and songs, home signifying a cruel absence, home among the camps and streets of Indian cities. We who have homes, walk about in our own lands, cannot know, or perhaps, are unable to feel what is home with the same intensity. As Emily Dickinson once pointed out:

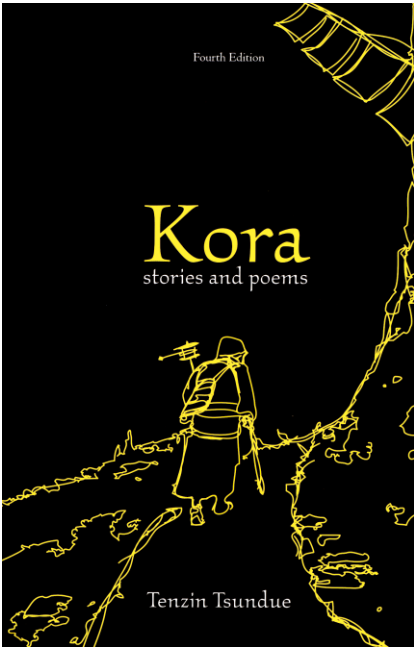
*Not One of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear a Victory*

*As he defeated - dying -
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear*

Home is what led Tenzin to activism on Tibet's behalf, home is what keeps his fires burning. After the publication of the 2003 interview, I slowly began to know a bit more about this poet, exile, and Tibetan freedom fighter. We exchanged emails intermittently, he sent me poems which I published, I heard about him from a poet friend in Mumbai--he's such a tiny guy' she wrote me, carrying the weight of occupied Tibet on his shoulders. I remember seeing a well-known photo of him -- perched high up on a ledge outside the 14th floor of the Oberoi Towers in Mumbai where he had climbed to unfurl a Tibetan flag and hang a banner proclaiming 'Free Tibet' for the benefit of visiting Chinese prime minister Zhu Rongji in 2002.

Tenzin represented Tibet at the SAARC literary conference in New Delhi in January 2005. Hopefully he'll be invited again the next time around and we can sit around and talk about poetry and resistance and long desolate winter nights when there seem to be more enemies inside one's camp than outside. And the fact that the fight must go on. Tenzin's poetry can be fiery, with short lines that can crackle in rapid fire, revealing the rage of those who have never known anything else except the life of a refugee:

This slim book contains prose pieces too, where the language has



the clarity of those forced to say very large things in a small space. One is 'My Kind of Exile', which won the 2001 Outlook-Picador Non-Fiction Competition. It begins: "Ask me where I'm from and I won't have an answer. I feel I never really belonged anywhere, never really had a home. I was born in Manali, but my parents live in Karnataka. Finishing my schooling in two different schools in Himachal Pradesh, my further studies took me to Madras, Ladakh and Mumbai. My sisters are in Varanasi but my brothers are in Dharamsala. My Registration Certificate (my permit to stay in India) states that I'm a foreigner residing in India and my citizenship is Tibetan. But Tibet as a nation does not feature anywhere on the world political map. I like to speak in Tibetan, but prefer to write in English. I like to sing in Hindi but my tune and accent are all wrong. Every once in a while someone walks up and demands to know where I come from...My defiant answer 'Tibetan' raises more than just their eyebrows...none of them can ever empathise with the plain simple fact that I have nowhere to call home and in the world

at large all I'll ever be is a 'political refugee.'" Tenzin may be wrong here. We Bengalis were once refugees too, in India, in 1971. We too were in camps, we too were beaten and chased and starved and died. So there are people in the world who have been where the Tibetan refugees are now. It may be small comfort, but it is a comfort. One of his poems, 'My Tibetanness' ends with the hope: *I am Tibetan. But I am not from Tibet. Never been there. Yet I dream of dying there.*

Amen, may Tenzin Tsundue be granted his wish!

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Mothers Wade To Work

SHATADOL CHAKRABORTY
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

The rains come. The city's grand mansions wetted into safe field-mice nests. The silver-robed magician in his air-conditioned lair has never been caught in the rain. After the meeting the white car whisks him away to his marble-and-glass palace where 'water' means mineral water, cooler, geyser.

In America when it rains avenues are not water-logged Rows of colourful umbrellas hoist a rainwater fair And choruses rise in schools 'Rain, rain, come again...'

In Third World alleys rainwaters heave and toss Mothers of tiny children wade to work Fathers repair shacks, lean-tos, thatch roofs The teastall boy is slapped for breaking a cup--

Yet, it rains, and boys and girls naked Frolic in the mudslime with the gods.

Farhad Ahmed is a contributor to The Daily Star literature page.