



THE SNAKE THAT FELL ILL

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Back when the river used to zigzag through the village's green skin like a sky blue snake and uninvited things did not invade the ambience, Anjum would drive his cattle to the water body for temporary relief from the unbearable heat. His daughter Roop would follow him too on the holidays; sometimes even skip school for this activity. As opposed to her little brother, she was never afraid of their boomerang like horns and bulk. They would dip their cloven hooves into the river first, walk over the stones, and then descend slowly until they attained the feature of a boat. Roop would soon climb on one, preferably the brown one or 'Laal' as her brother named it. However, he always avoided 'Laal' since it often seemed to be engaged in a battle against the birds that sat on its horns and hump. They would wade through the friendly portions of the river; two of them having Roop and Anjum on their backs, and the little one would stay at the bank, squint his eyes at them, firm in his decision of never riding on the backs of any of the cattle. Another activity that they loved was fishing. All three of them would participate in this one though, where Roop's little knowledge on fishing and their types would be beaten by her brother's.

Tourist boats with tourist luxury always passed by, and the tourists wore tourist clothes with tourist smiles and held tourist cameras in front of their eyes because the cities never prom-

ised such "untouched" beauty. It was a luxury for them to be in the boat, under the designed tarpaulin that gave them shelter from the sun and rain, to take in the endless greenery, witness the cattle wading through (sometimes with Roop on them, sometimes with some other person with a skeletal body). They lived in buildings which sprouted from city grounds like fast trees and aimed to touch the sky and on which birds would accidentally stun themselves. Everyone was happy. Tourists, Anjum, Roop, her brother, the cattle, the farmers, their wives, and the river animals.

But on the present day, the previous scenario feels like a distant memory. Its sediment will never dissolve. It will always be there to remind everyone of the better past, when the snake like river was keeping well, doing good for the villagers when not a lot of powerful men did. On the present day, the river isn't of any help. It has been stripped of its might. As the big corporations fixated their eyes on the body of the river; as though its bed stored cash for them, they declared the construction of a dam like it was just a regular notice. It was the people versus the powerful again and the people went down in history forgotten. The corporations sucked the river's life out of it and stored it on the other side of the dam for their own wellbeing. The migratory pattern of the river animals changed soon after. Their propagation plans were foiled. People were displaced due to low harvest and the intolerable mosquitoes (the dam acted as a

breeding ground for them). They hovered over the village in clouds. Farmers used pesticide more and more as the soil begged for mercy. But they had to make up for the loss created by the dam as well. Occasional flooding killed many whenever the dam opened and let the water out into the river's original body. 'Laal' was once seen floating on the murky waters with its eyes pointed towards the sky, horns into the water and legs up in the air — a capsized boat. The portion of the river that was let out from the dam was hot and gutted the ecosystem. The eco system around the river couldn't acclimatise. The corporations brushed off the concerns about the villagers as they planted this demon that loomed over the village, smiling with its shiny tusks. Issues were raised and burned, proposals were argued and forgotten, the corporations made profits, the people lost the battle (and their lives), but the birds always glided in the sky like roller-coasters without tracks.

The devastation drove Anjum and his family far away, to a city slum, where the cattle and the river were missed, where there were no tourist people arriving in tourist boats with tourist smiles, where rivers were not a common site, where the sun always beat down on the glasses of the tall buildings and crows died on the electric poles occasionally.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi wants the perils of his life to be like stormtroopers: always missing easy kill shots. Send him prayers at tazrian1234@gmail.com