



FICTION

A translation of Hrittik Ghatak's short story, "Gaachhti"

# The Tree

TRANSLATED BY SARWAR MORSHED

There the tree tom-tomed its existential glory on the bank of the small river at a distance from the village.

Arboreally, it didn't have any extraordinary feature.

It's an old, old tree. The anatomical topography of the tree was marked by clear signs of senescent decadence – the trunk rendered hollow by the consumptive activities of insects. All the branches of the banyan tree were well past their photosynthetic phase. The tree, it could be assumed, was youthfully robust in the oblivion-devoured past.

Alas! As its halcyon days were gone, the banyan did not bear either cosmetic or utilitarian value anymore. The tree, by now, was reduced to a botanic signpost – people knew that the next turn was Haru uncle's

uncultivable chunks of land. Fatigued passers-by would sit under its soothing arboreal arch and untying their self-crafted makeshift cloth-bag would indulge in the luxury of eating *chira-muri* followed by a drink of the river-water. Then, routinely, the sojourners would start for their destination. On moonlit nights, the solitary tree created a kind of undecipherable mysterious aura. What a soul-calming, celestial sight it was! It was, as if, drooping on the unceasingly flowing water, on such unearthly nights, the tree was dreaming of some grand transcendental mysteries.

The tree weathered six seasons phlegmatically. The sun kissed it and the rain drenched it and the stormy wind contributed to its capacity-building. The river though supplied life-sap, also encroached

in the arboreal retreat.

It was close to the heart of every villager. On hot summer noons, some of them would haunt it. The tree extended warm hospitality to them by comforting and soothing their body and mind. Sitting on its intricate network of roots, they would unmindfully listen to the murmur of the river.

The sub-humous, sub-aquatic portion of the banyan was equally hospitable. It housed many schools of fishes, big and small. The fishermen and even their young ones would have good catches from this encroached area.

The geriatric segment of the village people nurtured their share of intimacy with the tree. They frequented it, leaned against it, and watched the youthful boisterous merriment of the juvenile ones. They would cast a look at the fishermen engaged in their food-chain maintaining activities and sighed. Did they, in retrospect, excavate the archaeological landscape of their gone-by memories? Did they brood over the fag-end of their terrestrial sojourn?

None of them, albeit this near-umbilical connection, could gauge the intensity of their cross-species bond with the tree. They took it for granted – it had always been there and would remain there till the doomsday. To them, it was an imperishable part of the village toponymy – a postcode in flora! The OLD BANYAN past Haru's turn.

It could have supplied oxygen and provided comfort to some more generations had not the government arboricidal contingent appeared with their guillotine. The government had approved a new plan to widen the river aimed at reforming the irrigation system and multiplying food production. Thanatos-like, they came and defying the feeble protests, wantonly executed the death sentence. The saw-teeth, demon-like, gnawed at its core and the old, old tree kissed the ground.

As the tree was effaced, the landscape wore a new look. The government scheme converted the self-willed river into a docile canal. The old elements were blotted out. There were new people, new houses and what not? Soon the tree was forgotten. Only the octogenerians and the likes could not erase it from their memory-cartography. When these grave-close people happened to cross the spot, they sighed nostalgically and started in a lotus-induced, trance-like manner, "Once upon a time there was a huge, huge banyan tree..." If there were any inquisitive young souls around, they would listen raptly as if the grey-haired men were digging out memories of the distant past of an alien land!

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smithy and after it started the village.

Only once in a year, during the *Charaka* fair, the tree received preferential treatment – on the auspicious day, with its annual deified status, it would bask in the glory of tribute paid by votaries from remote villages. Worshippers and joy-seekers from far and near thronged the village field to enjoy the carnival. Only that was the special day in the drab terrestrial existence of the tree. For the rest of the year, it was doomed to its plebian status. The string of routinized activities around it was not diverse. Cows grazed in the surrounding

it by eroding the ground-soil. Boats crossed it – wonder-laden eyes of kids would peep from inside to have a glimpse of the big tree.

Aha! It allured the young boys with the irresistible temptation posed by an ice-creamwallah. The tree was an alfresco club for them. The intractable troop of boys would play on its branches with simian acrobatic skills. To add to their sylvestral prank-profile, they would easefully jump into the stream. Some other school-going boys would dupe their parents; by skipping classes, they preferred to spend their times