

A Translation of Syed Manzoorul Islam's "Seventy-One"

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The title of the story could have been "Tiger," just "Tiger," as, for a few days in 1971, a tiger had been the cause of a massive terror to us. According to Baba's description, the dread was stronger than the distant noise of gunfire and explosions, or the flames wiggling above the eastern night sky, or the cries and uproar of people. Baba would tell us, and we would know, somewhere, people were dying, some village was burning. We would know and we would imagine that at that moment of time and forever, these people's lives would be filled with a void too deep for them to confront, and the unfolding nightmare would push them into another realm, where the life they would live would no longer be theirs; a life that belongs to those who have seen their children and kin die before them, or those who have lost their honour, or those who are forced to turn into refugees. As if history had drawn a clear line between their past and their present, and said, "From now on, this

returned. It was difficult to recognize him; it was as if he had been chased by a ghost, or a tiger or a crocodile. He gave Ma a single day to pack up everything. The next day, at the break of dawn, we left. At first we went to Kaliganj, then to Shyamnagar, then through the Kholpetua River towards the south. Until we stepped into Burigowalini, Baba's terror persisted. But even after my fear had subsided, the forest's unnamed horrors penetrated my core. Baba's colleagues – four trustworthy foresters – had made a tree house of sorts with wooden floorboards and a thatched roof made of sun grass high up in the sturdy branches of a strong rooted tree. Baba was very satisfied when he saw our new shelter. Smiling, he told Ma, "The place is safe unless you decide to make it otherwise."

"How would that be?" Ma asked.
"If you stay put in the tree house and don't climb down, and if you don't fancy befriending a tiger, then there is nothing to fear."

Ma's retelling of the tiger story sent a cold shiver down my spine. Damnation! I asked Baba, "Can't we leave tomorrow?"

Baba laughed. Bhaiya said, "Owly, wait for a few more days. I'll see to it." I don't know why hearing Bhaiya utter the pet name "Owly" gave me immense joy. I felt that there was nothing to be afraid of. After a couple of days, when Bhaiya went to Shyamnagar with Naju, I thought to myself, "This is it. Just a few more days... Once on the road, it won't take long to reach Bashirhaat."

It was as if the name "Bashirhaat" contained all the safety and security in the world.

I realized what a forest was after coming to Burigowalini. The days were hushed, the nights were breathless. It was difficult to keep track of the innumerable birds' chirping. Sometimes, I would hear the bleating of deer, and at other times, the squawking of bats. But the noise for which I would keep my ears pricked, the noise whose absence I felt would be good for the world – the tiger's roar – could be heard only once in a while. When Baba would hear it, he would say: "It has hunted down its prey," or "Maharaj is hungry," or "Has it really come within 300 yards?" Why wouldn't the tiger come within 300 yards or even 3 yards, I wanted to ask Baba, but Baba himself had told me one day, "Tigers think before they act." I'm sure the tiger was thinking about us. One day, it had been raining since morning, and it was as if the forest had lost its breath or had been suffocated by its steamy wetness. It was stuffy and hot; I was sweating profusely. As soon as I stepped on to the little open space on the deck, my gaze locked on to something afar. Maharaj! A luminous black-and-yellow face, piercing eyes, razor-sharp vision. Did our eyes meet? I only realized that I was about to lose consciousness when Ma held me. Ma called out for a forester named Muna. By the time he climbed on to the deck, the tiger had taken its leave.

It started from then.
Baba said, "The tiger has been so mesmerized by Fairy that he won't move from this place now." He said this in jest, to shoo my fears away, but it did work. I was also helped by my realization that, no matter what the tiger was, he was not as savage as the Pakistanis. Rather, he was a 'gentleman'. He had appeared, and he had left. If I live on this machan, it won't be a problem; he won't attack. Baba knew tigers don't like noise. With the use of ropes, Muna Ali and Indra Shil had tied many empty kerosene tin containers to the trees nearby, and they would often pull on the ropes. It would create a racket. I too, was taught how to play these percussions.

is your life, or whatever is left of it; this life is one of unending sorrow, suffering, sighs and/or pride – whichever way life will now direct you." But then, the name of the story is "Seventy-One," since the tiger too had at one point, been claimed by the amazing alchemy of '71. He never got out of there.

I spoke of losing honor because, when March of '71 was barely over, that is what had a strong grip over us; like a monster from Arabian Nights. Us, as in, Baba, Ma, Bhaiya, and I. My elder sister too, even though at her in-laws' house in Old Dhaka, the monster was crouching in the shadows. I would put my sister aside; she didn't have much to think about honour, but from the day I heard that Pakistani soldiers had infiltrated Satkhira, I became like a cat on hot bricks. In '71, I was fourteen years old. Ma would say I resembled Suchitra Sen. Baba would call me Fairy, and Bhaiya, with a pinch of mischievousness in his voice, Owly, because apparently my nose was like an owl's. I have never seen an owl up front, so I cannot be sure of the credibility of Bhaiya's statement. And yet, I would get provoked when he would call me by that name. I would cry. But Bhaiya stopped calling me Owly towards the end of March. We would lock up the doors and windows of our Satkhira home and tremble indoors, Ma would pray and weep, and her tears were mostly shed for my honour. Some of it was for Baba too, as he was in the forests – either in Munshiganj or in Burigowalini or some other place. Baba was a range officer of the Forest Department. Keeping us in a rented house in Satkhira, he would go off to do his work in the forests. Ma had gone to visit the forests with him thrice, and Bhaiya two times. I would become terrified when I listened to tiger tales or crocodile stories. Sunderban can be beautiful, I'd think to myself, but I don't want to see its fearful underbelly. As a result, I hadn't gone inside the forest.

Within a couple of days, Baba

"Say that to your daughter," Ma said in a teasing manner. Ma was unable to comprehend how she would live or cook in the tree house which Baba jokingly called a machan, or a hanging platform, and wondered for how long she would have to live like a forest-dweller. But the fact that we were safe from the hands of the Pakistanis for now came as a huge solace to Baba. There was no use blaming him. He knew the forest like the palm of his hand. He was not afraid of the forest in any way. Besides, we had four men to guard us. They had managed to get a supply of beds and mattresses, they had bought pots and pans, and they were bringing water in a pitcher everyday. They were delivering vegetables, spices, meat and fish. They would stay up at night. Baba would sometimes take a boat to his office. He would come back and speak of the manslaughters and village burnings. One day, he sat with Bhaiya and did some calculations – of rivers, roads and distances. And of financial means too. Our ancestral home was in Bashirhaat. An uncle still lived there. Baba's calculations were also about the stretch of geography between Burigowalini and Bashirhaat. Baba wasn't concerned about the financial means needed to live in Bashirhaat, but rather of the expenses of the journey. He was sure his cousin would welcome us with open arms.

Baba's calculations gave Ma a sense of relief. One day, one of Baba's guards, Naju Sheikh, told Ma stories of the tiger widows. If one left the vicinity of Burigowalini and ventured out into the localities towards the east or the north, he said, tigers were sometimes sighted. As a result, occasionally, people lost their lives when they entered the forest. Tigers could smell human flesh from miles away. Ma later told me, "These poor souls have to go into the forest – for firewood, if not for honey and fish. Some never return. Their wives are made widows for the rest of their lives."



And yet the tiger didn't stay away. He could be spotted at times. Baba began to be scared. One of the guards, Ruman Mian, knew how to fire a gun. But there were only a few cartridges. The Pakistanis had confiscated all the cartridges. Baba had also heard, the Pakistanis would soon be launching a military operation in the Sunderbans because a marine commando team of freedom fighters was becoming active in the area. The problem was, Ruman Mian wasn't a precision shooter. Neither was Baba.

The biggest setback was, Baba was stuck because of the tiger, despite the fact that he had already decided to quit his job and travel to Bashirhaat. The guards were afraid to collect water and vegetables. There were tiger footprints on the banks of the Kholpetua. The river wasn't wide enough and if one would navigate through the middle of it, one wouldn't be out of the tiger's reach. As a result, we were short of provisions. Our meal preparations were minimal. And the lesser the time Ma had to spend on cooking and cleaning, the more time we had for thinking up frightful images which pervaded our thoughts. One day, I heard the tiger growl from a very short distance away, and I said, "We will never be able to go back, Ma. The tiger is our destiny."

During the rains, gaps appeared in the sun grass roof; the machan was prone to danger. We would collect rainwater, but it was difficult to find a dry spot for making a cooking fire.

The tiger would see us and feel satisfied. He would think to himself, "Just a few more days..." We would also hear the tiger, and it was as if we could smell the odor of his body. I could see his luminous glory, and his unforgiving pair of eyes the moment I would close my own. Ma said, "My son doesn't know the tiger is lying in ambush. What if he arrives here now?" In the meantime, one morning, Indra came and said, "Last night, the tiger had come too close to the machan."

The tiger had come for me. I am Suchitra Sen. But he won't take away my honor. He would only take my life. As least that's one less thing to worry about.

But before the morning reached its full glory, I could hear distant gunshots. Baba said, "The Pakistanis are here." Indra said, "The tiger is restless today." We thought we would either die by the Pakistanis' bullets or by the tiger's paw, or both. This was our fate.

However, the Pakistanis' boat didn't come all the way to the Burigowalini river. Why? Who knows! That night, we stayed up the whole night in darkness. We figured, the tiger was lying in wait. But he wasn't making any noise. Maybe he was telling himself, "Just one more day..."

The next day I heard gunshots from a close distance. Indra said, "They've set fire to villages. They will probably take this path to proceed to Munshiganj."

However, at around 11 o'clock in the morning, we could hear a huge uproar from a little distance away. One could sense panic in the collective clamor. One could also sense anger. It was not difficult to feel a sense of pain commingled with terror. I heard the sound of firearms. Then at one point, the tumult receded. Only some people's voices could be heard. Muna came running. Baba was standing on the machan. Muna called out to him and he got down. Both of them hurried towards the north.

Some very nervous minutes ticked by, made more edgy as there was no sight of Baba. Ma and I held our breaths. At some point, Baba returned. He told us that seven or eight Pakistani soldiers had come in a small gunboat. They had burned down two villages; they had killed about 10 people. On the Kholpetua, a tiger had suddenly pounced on them in their boat. The impact toppled the Pakistanis and some were flung into the water. The tiger had broken one's neck, and killed another with a powerful swipe of its paw. Some of those who were in the water had drowned. The survivors of the burned down villages killed the rest of them with sticks and sickles.

Baba's voice broke. With tears in his eyes, he said, "Maharaj has probably died too. He was hit by bullets."

Baba, the guards, and some people from the villages found the tiger before noon. The bullet wounds had caused its intestines to jut out. Not one, but two bullets. A Herculean body, a Herculean grandeur. Tied on bamboos, the tiger was brought to Burigowalini. Baba said, "Unquestionably, Maharaj is our friend, a freedom fighter. He must be buried with honor and we must give him a salute."

After burying him in a pit the four forest workers had dug up Ruman Mian shoved a cartridge into a rusty gun, the only one that was left, and fired a shot in the air. Baba said, "This is a gun salute." Then he gave fifteen minutes to Ma. We had to leave immediately.

After many years, Baba brought us back to Burigowalini. Standing next to the tiger's grave, Baba said, "What a strange magic Maharaj had pulled that day! Don't you think so, Fairy? I think he emerged from the depths of the forest to keep an eye on us. Maharaj knew who was the enemy, who was the ally, and who wanted to turn the nation into a cremation ground. It's so surprising that he didn't wait for anyone's call or any training; he didn't need any preparation. He fought a war on his own terms. Such a colossal life, and he sacrificed it so generously!"

I was surprised at Baba's words. He had aged. There was not much logic in what he thought or said.

When one gets old, one says such things. Right?

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