Spring in Birbhum

A village school in Simlipal, Odisha

Chronicling the other Bengal

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PARIMAL BHATTACHARYA

Writers are drawn to the bleakest of places, Arundhati Roy once said, the way vultures are drawn to kills. I didn't know the full import of the statement until I began to work on my book, *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land*. I began with a straightforward query: Where did the drop-out school children go? I read in a government report that eight out of ten children who enrolled in primary schools dropped out before they completed school education. Eight out of ten! This was a huge number, many times more than the official statistics on child labourers. So, where did the rest of them go?

I fished around for some time for a clue until I realised that I had stepped into a vast and complex labyrinth. Primary education, I discovered, is a prism that refracts a whole spectrum of factors that otherwise remain inseparably muddled in our society. These factors range from the economic to the social, from the cultural to the environmental. The more I searched, the more confused I became, and I found myself obsessively touring some of the most backward and ecologically critical regions of our deltaic land. Then I remembered Arundhati Roy's somewhat unsavoury simile about writers and journalists. Yes, we are sometimes drawn to the bleakest of places the way vultures are drawn to kills.

But there is a reason behind this. The connectedness of a complex spectrum of factors is often starkest in the most backward of regions, just as bone structures are best visible on an emaciated body. Let us have an example. A tribal girl in a remote village doesn't go to school because both her parents go out to work in distant paddy lands and she has to look after her younger siblings, collect water and firewood, and run the household. Her parents travel long distances to work because they do not own any land and there is not enough work in the village. There is not enough work in the village because the farmlands there are not properly irrigated. The farmlands are not irrigated because there is no electricity. There is no electricity because .... It can go on. One can begin to trace the metatarsal and end up at the ribcage sticking out on a wasted body.

But perhaps the metaphors of vulture and the wasted, skeletal body are not very apt, because here we are talking about a traditionally fertile land. Deltaic Bengal, which covers both West Bengal and Bangladesh, is a relatively young landmass. In my book, I have called this waterborne land because it has been built by silt-carrying rivers, and it is being constantly made, unmade and remade. The fertility and accessibility of this land via its rivers and the sea have drawn people into undivided Bengal since prehistoric times. Agriculturists, artisans, merchants, freebooters, and colonisers have made Bengal one of the most prosperous and happening regions in the subcontinent. Oceanic trade and commerce thrived here for many centuries.

Sadly, all that is in the past. The majority of the people who now inhabit this landscape, the people whose story I wrote in my book, are either tied to subsistence farming or are transiting all over the distant states of the Indian republic to work in its informal sectors. Their lives are constantly being battered by cyclones, floods, and that most cruel hand of history: the Partition. As I travelled to some of the odd and out-of-the-way places in West Bengal and the eastern part of the neighbouring state of Odisha, sometimes chasing a question, sometimes a whim, I found fragments of a story that is so different from the one we the so-called *bhadraloks* of Kolkata have been telling ourselves for more than a century. This is a story of untold misery. But more than that, it is also a story of remarkable grit in the teeth of adversities. And it is connected with the story of our subcontinent in interesting ways.

In a flood relief shelter in Nadia district, I met a remarkable man named Nakul Sardar. A pucca school building had been converted into the camp, where nearly two dozen families from three inundated villages were staying when I visited it. It was late September. They were waiting for the flood waters to recede, exchanging information with one another about the water which was standing neck-deep, waist-deep, and knee-deep on their homestead and farmlands. The human body had been turned into a measuring scale. Cast away from it by the fury of a river, the land was never far from their mind. Neither was water.

I met Nakul Sardar at the back of the school building, away from the huddle of uprooted men. Bare-chested, wearing a blue lungi, he was hunched on the ground, repairing a small fishing net. When I learned this was his third year in the same flood relief shelter, I asked him how many times had he been uprooted by floods.

'Counting this one, I have seen eleven floods in twenty years,' Nakul told me. 'This bitch of a river won't let me be for two consecutive years.' He uttered these words with a thick vehemence and then, the deep lines on his face melting into an indescribably soft expression, he added, 'And yet, I can never imagine a life away from her.'

I met Savitri Munda in a tribal hamlet on top of Ayodhya Hill in Purulia district. Savitri had lost her husband and her two children when a mysterious disease – possibly cerebral malaria – visited her village. A *salishi sabha* had sat in judgment and decided that Savitri had a hand in the plague. They declared her a witch and asked her to pay a hefty fine of two lakh rupees and arrange a feast for the entire village. Her husband owned two acres of land that was now legally hers. But Savitri had committed another crime. When the census people came to her village, they had enlisted her as literate. So here was a woman who could read and write, who owned a plot of land, and who, according to the *salishi sabha*, had killed her husband and children. As a witch, Savitri had three options: to pay up, be killed, or flee. She chose the third option. She drifted about for a year until she turned up at a non-formal school for drop-out children that also had a creche for babies.

Savitri looked after the kids. For three days I watched her feeding them, keeping them quiet, while their elder siblings studied. Never once did I see her go near anything relating to reading or writing, open a book or assist a pupil. When I asked her why, Savitri smiled mysteriously. She cast her eyes downward and began to draw inscrutable patterns on earth with her toe.

I met Dibash Kotal in the last inhabited village on the southern margins of the Sundarbans. Dibash, too, was from a Chhotonagpur tribe, one of the earliest settlers in forested mangroves crisscrossed by a dizzying network of rivers and creeks. The title Kotal, soldier, was conferred on them by the zamindars who had brought them here two centuries ago, to fight the Arakanese pirates. Dibash was a high-school dropout who had worked in the local primary school on an ad-hoc basis until he lost his job when regular teachers were recruited. He farmed a tiny parcel of ancestral land. His wife urged him to leave the village and go to Baruipur, where she had her relations, to explore opportunities. Dibash beamed a sad smile.

'It takes no effort to say, let's go. But is going really that easy?' he said in a tired voice. 'You leave the land fallow for a season and the forest will come back to devour it. It requires such hard labour to reclaim it.'

His words seemed to rise from a deep core within his being, deeper and older than Dibash himself, than even the civilization on these mangrove islands. Three years after I visited his village, Cyclone Aila battered the Sundarbans. The entire settlement, including the portion of the island jutting south into the broad expanse of Kalindi, vanished under the raging waters. It just dropped off the map. The two dozen families who had their homes there could never be traced. They included Dibash Kotal and his family.

During my frequent trips there, I came to the realization that the Sundarbans is more than a geographical space, more than a biosphere that is spread on maps like green scales on the flared tail of the Bengal Delta. The Sundarbans is a metaphor: it stands for anything that is sinking, threatened, delicate, fecund, fabled, uncanny, ancient and young – all these and more, at the same time and in the same space.

Thirty years ago, Ghoramara was one of the larger islands on the Gangetic delta that had two dozen villages and 8,000 families living on it. The island has been shrinking every year, every hour in fact, its fields, orchards and homestead lands dissolving into the swirling waters like lumps of jaggery. When I started making my trips there, seven villages stood on Ghoramara. Three years later, when I visited it the last time, many of these villages were just names alive in the memory of the uprooted people – Mandirtala, Chunpuri, Bagpara, Khasimara ... Only a chunk of Khasimara was still standing: a row of date palms, a clutch of cottages huddled on a rise, encircled with grey water. Freestanding mud walls, cracked and flaking, mimicked the maps of the Sundarbans. The notched date-palm trunks told a story of winter tapping, of chill mornings, weak straw fire and cold-benumbed hands reaching out from under cotton wrappers, of rooster calls and the scent of warm jaggery, of a settled way of life that was no more.

Writing *Field Notes from a Waterborne Land* has changed me in undefinable but fundamental ways. It has changed my outlook on the human as well as non-human aspects that have shaped me as an individual and also as a member of a community. What I think I learned during my travels across multiple landscapes was how to listen to stories. These were extraordinary stories, told by seemingly ordinary people, about themselves and about the land on which they lived. For over a decade, I made these trips at different times, by boat, bus, train, toddy-palm canoe, vano (motorized tricycle), and a motorcycle on whose rear-view mirror was printed: OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR. In the end, all that has remained with me are some objects – words and images, a glint in the eye and the murmur of a sigh. They got closer and closer until they seeped within me.

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Fisher family in Sagar Island

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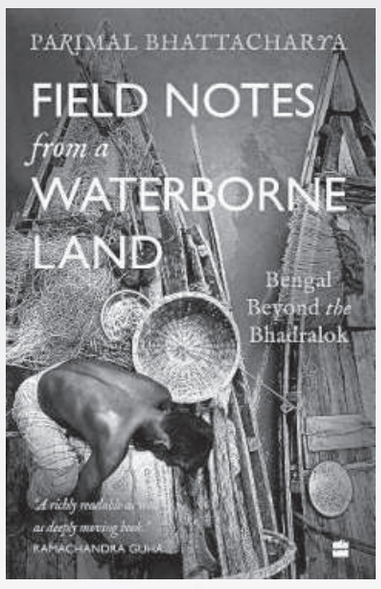

Book Cover

Crossing Matla River at Canning
Photographs: Parimal Bhattacharya