

Duruduru

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“Do you know of the snake-tree?”

With the boy, I started another new day. His left fist always clenched, as if he were hiding something. He donned a loose t-shirt, blue shorts and rubber waterproof boots almost up to his knees.

I was busy fortifying the river bank and did not have time to lift my face to him.

“Do you know of the snake-tree?” He asked, and without waiting for my response this time, he opened his left fist and took something from it into his right palm. Squatting on the silt of the river bank, he drew a picture in the soil with it and showed me- “See here, the snake-tree”

This, apparently, was the picture of that plant! I said “You have seen such a tree yourself?”

“How did I draw it otherwise?”

“Where did you see it?”

The boy did not answer. He stood there in silent thought.

The river waters of Sundarban, named after its jungles of Sundari trees, were already swelling with the arrival of monsoon.

From dawn I had joined the villagers in repairing the cracking river banks.

The boy arrives suddenly, he departs suddenly. I don't quite know where he lives- maybe in the neighbouring village, maybe in the village across the river. The women of the village, who stand in waist deep water all day catching shrimp clutch from the river say they have seen him approach the village on a bamboo raft. The villagers who go to the forest to break honey from bee hives have seen him come towards the village astride a buffalo.

If the river bank isn't built high, a couple of days' constant rainfall would flood the whole village. Everyone lends a hand in carrying the soil to the riverside, dumping it in piles along the bank, and my task is to arrange the soil mounds- spread them over the cracks in the river bank. Women and girls of all ages join in this task. They stand all in a row, waists bent half, to spread the soil evenly.

The boy seemed to be in a trance he now woke from and said in a low voice “there is an island. It is girded by fog. On that island I have seen the snake-tree. At dawn, the tree seems to play the chirping of colourful birds like it were music. The snake-tree has never bitten any of the birds though. No flower blooms on the snake-tree, but a beautiful fragrance will always reach your nose.”

“If no flowers bloom, then what are those big things in the picture? Looks like flowers.”

“those are the leaves of the tree.”

After a brief silence, he spoke again “but when did I see the island, where did I see it- I cannot remember anymore. Maybe it was a few hundred years back. Maybe it was a few thousand. Maybe in a birth even before that, I had seen the island. How I had reached it, I cannot remember however hard I try.”

Could the boy recall past lives then, or was he not even human- was this a ghost or a djinn before me? Mustering up the courage, I asked “How can someone remember things from a few hundred or a few thousand years back? Is that possible?”

“Couldn’t it be possible? Isn’t it possible for anyone?”

“Impossible”

The afternoon was fading into a pale twilight. The evening star had bloomed in the sky. The boy raised his finger to it “That star has been there for millions of years, yes? Yet we can still see it the same. My island is also lying awake in the breast of some ocean somewhere. When I can remember, I will be able to see it again. Won’t I? Look here, my heart is quivering, it is going duruduru.” He said, and wandered away across the riverbank mud somewhere far off.

Like this, the boy suddenly arrives, and departs as suddenly. He does not speak every day. The days he does speak, he says such strange things, it’s difficult to not listen.

One day, after standing in a long silence, he said “trees, birds, rivers and the stars in the sky, human beings cannot live without these, you know.”

Having said this, he thought to himself for a while. Then he said again, “A land without a river is a land with much grief. I have seen. You know, the river is like our mother!”

Noticing my idle hands standing around, Judhishthir dada called out from behind me, “What is this matter that is mattering so much Omerto? What does the brat want now?” My name is Amartya. The elders of the village call me Omerto.

The boy did come to me often these last few days, but never did he ask me for anything. He only looks around. If a thought strikes, he tells me. Like that day he asked me if I dream.

Another day, when the drizzle since daybreak had given way to an afternoon calm that lit up the sky and descended on the river water, when far to the west the treetops of the jungle was smudged in orange hues, the boy turned up from somewhere and said “The dream you dreamt last night, tell me what it was.”

Startled, I said “I didn’t dream at all.”

“You did dream. You cannot remember.” After a while he spoke again “I dream every night. Mother used to say my face turns blue when I dream. That is why my name is Swapnaneel. You can call me duruduru too.”

“If your name is Swapnaneel, why would I call you duruduru?”

“My heart quivers quite often, it goes duruduru.”

“Haven’t you seen a doctor? Don’t you take any medicine for it?”

“Oh no, how could I have any medicine? One leaf of the three-leaved clusters of the Snake-tree is the only medicine for this. But I cannot tear leaves from trees.”

I have spent nearly six seasons in the Baanbhashi village now, named after the floodwaters we fortify the rivers against. I arrived one early summer and now another summer had arrived and is gone. I came here to teach at the school. It is the only school in Baanbhashi. Pushing the salty river water aside with a dam, the villagers built this mud school house on it. Earthen walls, tiled roof. It used to be a primary school. This year it grew to the tenth standard. I too had recently ended my student life to start teaching. Along with teaching at the school, I must lend a hand in the tasks around the village. The roots of the Bonkanta tree spread far and hold the soil together tightly and prevent the riverbanks from collapse. Cutting branches of this mangrove tree and planting it along the riverside is also a task. I help whenever I can, however much I can. Without the ability to make the villagers’ sorrows and joys their own, how would an outsider become trusted by the villagers, after all!

One afternoon, I saw the boy approach. Upon arrival he declared “I cannot take you to the snake-tree. I cannot remember the way to get there.”

I was busy correcting the students’ exams, and with some annoyance I replied “Fine then, the day you can remember the way, you can take me there.”

He did not miss my rough tone. Why else would he say “Did I say something to make you angry?”

All this time I was listening to him with my eyes trained on the exam papers, and had replied like that too. Now, looking up, I was amazed. Where had that loose t-shirt gone! Instead, I was looking at some jungle king’s son! He was wrapped in a robe of leaves and vines held together with dried twigs, on his head, a cap of bird feathers. Such colourful feathers!

My amazement he did not notice. Instead, he added to my surprise, saying “I cannot take you to the snake-tree island, but I will tell you the way to the Panchhiped village. You know what Panchhiped is? The bird-tree. The village is called bird-tree too. You can find it on the mountains blanketed in deep forests. Do you want to go there? The month when the sun is angry in the sky all day long, when it rains down fire on us, when the ground dries and cracks, I will come again on that month.

At first, he had spoken of the snake-tree. Now he's talking about the bird-tree. One on a fog girdled island, the other atop the forest covered mountains. The stories are difficult to believe, but not so easy to dismiss either.

2

Around mid-May, when the schools closed for the summer vacation, I saw the boy approach along the cracked river bank and remembered this was the time the sun rains down fire all day.

He showed me a picture of a tree laden with bunches of bright red fruits and said "This is the panchhiped. The bird-tree. There are many bird-trees like this one in Panchhiped village. In this village, from morning to evening, you will not hear any human voices, only the melodies of birds near and far as they chatter without rest. The things those birds sing into the mountains and forests all day long, if you could understand, you would be filled with awe."

It was impossible to not be drawn in by the boy's story. I found myself saying "What do those birds say in the forests? Can you tell me some of their stories?"

"If you sit under a bird-tree quietly all day, you will be able to hear all their conversations. The bright red fruits of the tree are their favourites."

"If I want to visit, how will I get there? Will you take me there?"

"No. I will tell you the way to get there. You will have to go alone."

One dawn he came to me and explained the way to Panchhiped village.

The summer holidays went by in preparation for the school service exam. Afterwards, when the school closed again for sixteen days of the Sundarimela, I began my preparation to leave. This fair has been held at Sundarban for three hundred years. Named after the Sundari trees of the jungle, this fair gained its name of Sundarimela.

On the third day of the fair, I set out on my journey. But Duruduru's directions was not of use to me.

Duruduru had explained the way to Panchhiped village starting from a river. The morning star shines brightly over that river.

Howrah, Shewdaphuli, Shwet Akandapur, Bardhaman, Bishnupur, where ever I asked anyone about the mountain-river that leads to Panchhiped village, forget showing me the way, no one had even heard of such a place.

I went to Sealdah, Shiliguri and Satmandirtala train stations and asked anyone and everyone I could find. A village by that name, or a morning-star lit river leading there was unheard of, and often disbelieved to exist.

Meanwhile, wandering here and there on buses, lorries and hired cars saw the Sundarmela holidays end. Tired and dusty, I finally returned to our village in Sundarban.

The next morning, as I was strolling along the newly cracking bank of the Vidyadhari river, with a poor night's sleep, the cool river breeze making me drowsy, suddenly the boy appeared from somewhere and started to say "Mountains, just mountains. Only ranges of mountains. Behind them, again mountains ranged, beyond them more ranges. Behind one row, raising their heads, yet another row. All the mountains covered in thick forests. Wherever you look, it seems countless green woolen sheep herding close together, standing forever all over the mountains. Morning and afternoon, white clouds rise slowly from below. They lay down in the mountain's lap, wherever they find some space. Panchhiped village has many trees with bunches of red fruits. Those are the panchhiped, the bird-trees. The trees aren't very big, each tree like a bush. Every now and then one will grow ten-twelve feet tall. The tall tree tops are the most crowded with birds. All day the birds ceaselessly arrive. Some birds fly away the moment they finish eating the bright red fruits. The smaller trees are also visited by birds all the time.

"You have been there? You saw this bird-tree with your own eyes?"

"I go there often. Panchhiped village is my grandfather's village after all."

"Your grandfather's home is in that village?"

"The whole village is his."

"So, your grandfather is the head of the village?"

"No, no, the owner."

"How can a village have an owner?"

With his eyes trained on the glitter of dawn in the river water, the boy thought for a while. Nearby, in the goran mangrove tree, a bird had settled and was whistling between pauses.

"Can you understand?" The boy turned his face from the river to me and said "What the bird says, can you understand?"

"That's a doyel. It's whistling. Doyels whistle all the time."

"no, no. It's speaking of its heart. I know what it's saying. Those who don't know, don't know."

The wagtail, or dowel as we call it, was whistling as it always does, I could not understand anything it might be saying. I said impatiently "What's this about someone being the owner of a village? Is that also something only you understand? Only you know? No one else can know or understand?" I could not suppress the annoyance and disbelief in my voice.

The boy was probably lost in thought, listening to the wagtail's whistling. He suddenly came up to me and clenched fist and all, took my two hands in both his and said "Will you be the owner of Panchhiped?"

"Have you gone mad?"

"It's Panchhiped that will drive me mad! Listening to the birds talk all day in that village is making me go quite mad. If you could understand what the birds say, you too would think only about them all day long."

The boy might really be mad! Hard to know the meaning of anything he says. Anyway, no one gives time away for free that I should be wasting mine listening to such madness.

"Will you be the owner of Panchhiped village? I will need to leave Panchhiped now. I will have to go the snake-tree island. My grandfather is not earth-bound for many days either. Look here, my heart is quivering so much.

With his left fist pressed to his heart, he concluded "Someone has to listen to the birds of the village!"

As I was thinking over the boy's words, I noticed the boat that had shored nearby. Most passengers aboard were students at my school. Seeing so many people on such a tiny boat is cause for fear, but anger too. So many people lose their lives in these rivers when overloaded boats capsize.

Moving towards the students coming ashore, I said to the boy, "listen, I don't have any more time to spare. I am a teacher and it's time for school."

"You are a teacher? You know, the birds of Panchhiped teach so many things. Will you go to Panchhiped village?"

Listening to the boy since dawn, I never noticed how late the morning had grown, it was getting late for school to start, and hearing the boy's question on top of it all made me rather angry. I too asked him a question "What books have you read, tell me?"

3

Within a few days of my arrival in Banbhashi village, I noticed a plot of land along the north end which lay empty. Quite a large plot. No one farmed or lived there. It had been so for many years. The villagers believed the huge wasteland was home to ghosts.

I had to leave for Kolkata for a few days. Upon my return after three days, just as I alighted from the boat, I saw Duruduru in the distance. He wasn't approaching along the riverbank as usual; he came from the north of the village. My eyes must

have shown surprise or worry or curiosity, noticing which, Duruduru said with enthusiasm "I just planted some Panchhiped seedlings in the village wasteland."

This is another madness of his. How could a mountain plant survive here! It's all salt water rivers here.

Before I could voice my thought, Duruduru understood and said in a slightly hurt tone "I know it's impossible. But someone has to try."

We were walking along an aisle of the paddy field. For a long while, neither said anything. Noticing some bird calling out as it flew overhead, Duruduru said to himself "Woe! Birds, trees, rivers gone would mean humans gone too!" Then, seemingly becoming aware of my presence suddenly, he said to me "You must know this?"

Can it be said like this exactly? With quite so much conviction? I said "I don't rightly know."

"Oh, Why? But you are a teacher!"

"A teacher need only teach one subject in school, a subject they have studied well themselves."

"One subject? Oceans, mountains, birds, trees, the sky, the wind, the world, how can it all fit in one subject!"

I said slightly annoyed "I was gone for three days, I missed school, there's still quite a bit of the syllabus left!"

"what's a syllabus?"

We were at the school house, in which a room was assigned for my residence as well. I would just have time to put my bag down before I had to go into class. I said, "You won't understand. I have to go inside the school now."

"Is syllabus murkier than the fog around the snake-tree island? Is it very difficult to get inside?"

Now I had to stop. I said "All year, what needs to be studied from which book, there is a list made of that at the very beginning of the year. That list is called a syllabus, you won't really understand."

Astonished, Duruduru said, "Does it list anything about the bird-tree? What about the leaves of the snake-tree? Does it list anything about the breeze from the swaying of those leaves- the breeze once touched by, a person can do no ill?"

Ding, dong, the school bell began to toll, giving me an opportunity to get a rest from listening to Duruduru's strange thoughts.

"Class is starting, I must go." I said as I marched into the school.

I did not meet Duruduru for days after that. I heard from a honey collector; he was seen going towards the wasteland at the northern edge of the village one dawn.

That afternoon when the man was returning with his honey, he had seen the boy returning too.

He came to the village, spent the whole day in the wasteland, yet I did not meet him, it made me melancholy.

In the month of Kartik, before winter, just after the harvest, one day I was walking along the aisle of the paddy field to visit a sick student of mine, when I saw Duruduru coming towards me. The student's father is a farmer- he had spent the last few days in the paddy field with his father. The midday sun and the dawn and twilight dew had touched his head and given him a fever. He hadn't come to school.

When I had almost reached their mud hut, Duruduru was still walking towards me. Turning towards him I yelled out "Take a stroll along the aisles of the paddy field for a while, I will join you soon." My brisk strides set a flock of birds flying from the scattered grains.

This village has no doctors, no medicine to be got. I was relieved to see the boy had recovered well even without treatment. He wanted to go to school tomorrow.

Once outside, I found Duruduru sitting very close to the birds in the field, watching them. The fallen grains left behind in the field after harvest is eaten by burrowing field mice and birds flying from far away. Duruduru was absorbed in watching the birds. As I walked up and stood next to him, he gestured for me to lower myself to the ground and sit next to him. His gaze remained on the birds. The birds had flown away when the students were going back home, now I saw them returned, peacefully pecking away at the scattered threshing residues. The damp stalks of the harvested crop were crowded by flocks of sparrows.

I mostly knew all the birds that visit the farmlands, save two or three. Duruduru pointed to one such unknown bird and whispered into my ear "panchhiped's bird."

"your panchhiped seedling has grown already, has it?"

My voice sent all the birds fluttering at once.

Duruduru stood up and said calmly, "You have not learned patience."

Why did he speak of patience? Was it because the birds flew away at the sound of my voice? Or was it because I asked about the Panchhiped seedling? I had thought because the seedling had grown, it had drawn the bird of Panchhiped to this village!

Seeing me sit in silence, he said again "Will you go to Panchhiped village?"

"I wish so much to go. I even saw the tree in my dream one night."

"That, I knew. But leaving behind the school, leaving behind this village, leaving behind your home, can you go?"

"How will I know the way?"

“Let’s see, if I can, I will take you myself.”

“I have to think it over. I have to talk it over at home. I need to take leave from the school’s headmaster too.”

Duruduru walked away towards the distance and disappeared before my eyes.

4

He was not seen for many days after. One midday, suddenly he turned up. A look at his face showed his heart was full of sorrow. After a long silence, speaking as if to himself, he began “A leaf of the snake-tree will fall away this very month.”

“Great! Then the duruduru of your heart will now be cured too!”

“No, how can that be! If a leaf falls away the tree loses a hundred years of its life!”

“You cannot do anything about it. You cannot grow the leaves of a tree, neither can you stop them from falling.”

“It is true I cannot grow them, but can I not stop them either? I have to be able to. I can at least try and see.”

“The tree, a leaf from which would cure the pain in your chest, you will not tear from; the tree, a fallen leaf from which is all you need to cure your illness, why do you want to prevent from shedding? When it’s time to shed, the leaves of trees fall away all by themselves.”

It seemed he was holding tears back with effort, without a word, as he closed his two eyes, a pair of teardrops flowed down his cheeks.

What could I do besides look at his face in wait for him to open his eyes? After a while longer of this nothingness, Duruduru parted his lips. As if he were speaking from far, far away, he uttered “One leaf falling away would mean the people of this world would commit more evil. What should not be done, they will want to do.”

Duruduru clutched his heart with his left fist and painfully concluded “Everyone will tell lies then!”

I could see his pain, but still, I couldn’t help but say “Just one fallen leaf of the snake-tree will cause this?”

“Seven hundred years back, one leaf had fallen, and that is when human beings began to tell lies.”

The sky was black. The air was still. The heat was oppressive. It seemed a storm was brewing. Storms hurt these villages of Sundarban heavily. The school house roof wouldn’t fly off, would it?

Duruduru stood there still, clutching his breast. I felt he had more to say.

“Eons ago, the birds of Panchhiped carried off a fallen leaf of the snake-tree before it touched ground, that’s why birds don’t tell lies. The deer, squirrels, crickets of the forest, not one of them tell lies. All night long in the jungles, the insects talk amongst each other endlessly, making so many sounds, not one insect makes a false sound. They were all touched by the breeze of the leaf the bird carried back.”

I did not believe his words.

Duruduru understood my thought and said “How much of the world can you know through belief after all! Once, humans believed the earth stands still and the sun goes around it.”

With these words, he turned to leave but I stopped him and said “How will you find the island?”

“the Panchhiped birds will show me the way.”

“Such a far-off place, how will the birds know the way?”

“Don’t the birds of the snowy mountains find their way across thousands of miles to come to your land?”

Duruduru did not stay any longer. He walked far, far away along the riverside, gradually shrinking, and then fading as I gazed at his departing figure. If I didn’t have to be back at the school soon, perhaps I would have run after him and brought him back.

Whether I believed in his words or not, I could not wipe them from my thoughts. Even when I am busy with my tasks, things he had said float to my mind.

After just a while, I noticed, Duruduru was returning. He walked up close to me, hand pressed to chest, and said “The bird-tree seedling in the norther edge of the village has sprouted new branches. Take care of it. The more foliage the tree grows, the more the birds will visit. You can sit under the tree and listen to the birds. One day they will tell you the way to the mountain girded bird-village.”

Speaking was painful for him. He fell silent. Maybe to catch his breath. His face had turned blue. His two eyes were shut. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he has more to tell me. As I am in such moments, I was silent. Suddenly Duruduru opened his eyes. Seeing the storm rush in from the river, he exclaimed “I have no more time! I must stop the shedding of the leaves.”

This was no ordinary storm; it seemed a river-flinging typhoon! I grabbed his clenched left fist and pleaded “Don’t go right now in this storm.”

Duruduru said nothing. He pulled his hand away and was lost in the storm. It seemed he flew away.

No one ever saw him again.

(translated by Jhelum Ghosh)

