

# THE FERRY

***Samaresh Basu***

*(Translated from Bengali by Asit Biswas\*)*

Workless and so the two remained seated. At that moment the beasts crumbled down with a crash from the eastern highland. The beasts, spreading dust and trampling the jungle, came down, like a large cluster of cloud, with grumbling.

The two remained seated, one leaning against the trunk of a short, bushy banyan tree, another lying on the ground. One is male, the other female.

Assheorah and Kalkasunda plants spread themselves around irresistibly. Here and there banyan, peepul, pituli, horseradish etc. self-sprouted plants raised their tops as if subordinating the tender bushy plants underneath. The land with the bushy plants crept up gradually towards the east. Yonder in the north a factory building is seen on a highland. The rest is hidden behind the trees. And in the west the ground sloped down gradually and spread down to the bottom of the Ganga.

It is the Ganga of the month of Asharh . After the ambubachi the bloody flood- water has put her in spate. The virgin Ganga has achieved motherhood. She has become bulky; started growing; current has grown stronger; she is swinging, dancing, throwing herself continuously to the ground; swelling, inflating, as if unable to control herself. It seems that she will grow larger. The current is assuming a snaky dimension with a sudden turn and then onomatopoeically whirling like a top. Those in the course of the current are small eddies. Had they been larger they would swallow human beings. But no fear for human beings, the animals do not die in it. There fall down dry leaves and twigs and at once she devours them. It is the sport of eddies, as if having rest after a rapid race and then again rushing.

The two were watching. Clouds assemble after clouds; the large lumps of clouds have come down to the lips of the current, to the eager breast of the waves, to the tops of the trees and stretching the hands to touch the tender sprouts of the asheora and kalkasunda. The clouds are crushing and lumping with the strokes of the wind. Then they again spread and come down.

Workless and so the two remained seated. For nothing they were watching. At that moment they got startled at the arrival of the beasts.

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This side the bank of the Ganga is rather uncongested. People scarcely sojourn here. From outside the factory seems slumbering at this cloudy noon. The Ganga here is much wide. On the other side the brick-field is expressing the state of desolateness. It is now Asharh, the end of the season of burning bricks. So that place is also lonely. Fishing boats have not crowded so much yet. In this situation these two remained seated. Here there are the saffron Ganga full of flood of the Asharh, the bushy jungle uninhabited by humans, the cloudy sky and beneath it those two. They, suddenly appear to be the male and the female sitting in the insecure lap of the jungle in the prehistoric age.

The man is glazy black, with the napkin under his head and tightly clothed. The moustache has grown but still the tender woolly condition has not gone away. The face has already grown rude and thorny. He has lain down on the ground, stretching his legs on the thighs of the woman.

The woman is also dark complexioned, has matted hair and only the hints of the pasted mud-coloured vermilion tip marked on the forehead a few days back. Wrapping the waist with a short piece of cloth she has spread the rest on the breast, thus satisfying the mind but not the body. She has the growth of the tender age, mature and uncovered like the jungle kakkasunda plant. The nostrils and the ear-holes are expressing emptiness. She was sometimes killing lice, sometimes loosening herself, pressing the breasts on the man's body.

Physically close they had been sitting in this manner since morning. No work and no food and so they were sitting here.

The hands and the legs were slackening. Eye-sides have grown dark. Fatigue out of hunger is marked down on the face.

They had taken their meal in the night before yester night. They worked till the previous week. Then the door of the 'micipalty' (municipality) was closed. There is no work.

Nonku is a rural man. Here he is the head of the sweepers. He had brought them two months back in order to provide them with jobs. They had been living at the village, earning food as wages by rearing the boars and the sheep of BabuNaginprasad. Nonku, twisting his moustache and expanding his chest told him, "Join with me. You two will earn rupees sixty per month."

Oh my God! Sixty rupees! Then they had got married just six months back. He is not single to be lacking in temperament of mind and confidence in body. Their fellow villagers used to utter a proverbial remark that there is no such work as is impossible for a not caste male and a female coupled together. That's right. Then flood of vivacity prevail in their mind. They are the two, male and female of a not family. They, if coupled together, can undergo any expedition. They came with Nonku, without informing Naginprasad.

But where is the amount of sixty! They together earned only rupees thirty two in a month.

After one and a half months the two became surplus. They had no duty. Only accommodation was available in the sweepers' slum.

But no work and so no food was for them. He said to Nonku, "Why no work?"

### ***The Challenge***

Nonku replied, “Because (v)ote is over. Before the (v)ote, performance is to be shown. And so many people are employed. It’s over and so they dismissed.”

They said, “Then what’ll happen?”

“What!” probably Nonku first decided to shout a rebuff. But he delivered a barking weep, “Alas, Rama, Rama, Rama. I’ve committed sin. I’m the offspring of a boar, of a jackal, I’m sinner.”

All gathered and began to console Nonku, “Stop, stop, stop, Sardar don’t weep. You’re a good fellow. Something will be managed for ‘em.”

The two alone got confused and silenced. Nonku in weeping voice asked, “Will?”

“Yes, yes”.

Some provided the two with food somehow for seven days. They got food last in the night before yester night, then no more.

They spent the whole yesterday here. Today also they, coming here, loosened themselves. It is impossible to stay in the town. There is seen the sweepers’ slum after walking a little across the eastern bank. It is impossible to stay here also. Here one has to be panting like a hungry dog with hanging tongue. Hunger is instigated to see anybody eating. It is possible to stay rather in this solitude.

Possible, but no more is possible. The two hearts of the two came down to the stomach and were having a respite. And they were keeping their blood circulation on by touching one another’s body. As if they were deriving courage out of blood by leaning against one another. By smelling, squeezing and licking their bodies they were squatting away the frightful danger which was attempting to abolish them by coming up through their bodies. The sky was also getting dark and coming down in order to frighten them. The water was getting more reddish and was whirling with bubbling noise. The south wind turning a little bit eastward was launching sudden crazy blows. The lumps of earth warms were piercing out from the wet ground. The ants were rushing from all around them under the banyan tree.

They came at the commencement of a tide. A full tide has gone upstream. Then there came down the flood of an ebb-tide for a long time. Then again there started the tide.

At this moment the beasts came there from the eastern highland. The herd of male and the female beasts, with deep black eyes, pointed faces came down like another coat of black paint on the expanse of the cloud.

They, the male and the female also got up and sat down side by side.

The herd of the boars suddenly stopped still to see a couple of humans in the jungle. Then they spread around with grumbling.

Behind them there were seen two men. One is considerably roly-poly, wearing gold earring. Two of the fore teeth are made fully of gold. Roaming about the whole sweeper locality he has bought the boars, and will take them to the other bank of the river. He is attended by another man, the driver of the waste carrying carriage of the front slum.

To see the two he said to the gold earring man, "Sir, can your work be done by these two?" The gold earring man came forward, observed the two.

The woman began to pull the cloth on her breasts. The male was watching the two men doubtfully. The cart driver said that he knew them. They were unemployed and so might agree.

The gold-earring man came closer and again observed the two for a while. And the herd of boars, in search of tender roots, began to ransack the sloping land.

The gold-earring man, while seeing them, blew out a controlling code sound 'hmm', on his own. And the two were thinking whether to depart from the place.

Then the gold-earring man asked, "Will you work?"

Work, that means food! The loose body got a bit stout. The male asked, "What's the work?"

The gold-earring man replied, "The boars are to be taken to that side of the river."

Oh my god! The river is fulfilled and swelling more, inflating, dancing and pushing upstream. They, the lad and lass looked at each other. The hungry eyes expressed a sign of blooming hope.

The male said, "But we need a controlling boat."

That means, an empty boat is required besides the boars. This is the practice. But the gold-earring is antipathetic. He will not spend the boat fare.

They got a bit depressed, looked back at the river and then at the boars, black, peculiar and lumpy. Most of them are female. Their eyes are oblique, not readable but fixed at the people.

They again shot their eyes at each other. At that moment they agreed mentally, their racial not blood had a commotion. Restlessness was felt in the stomachs. Remaining workless seemed to be death. They two tightened their clothes.

But the woman after all was merely woman. She said, "Can we, without boat?"

The man said, "It's to be managed."

The gold-earring man said, "Yonder, in the north, on the other side of the river a Siva temple is seen, they are to be landed up there. Your remuneration is twenty nine anahs for twenty nine

animals. And as bonus, you'll get an amount of kerua oil for massaging the body after getting up from the river. The punishment of losing one is imprisonment for six months.”

Saying this he held forward the long staff towards the man. The woman, removing the leaves broke a stick from kalkasunda plant.

The gold-earring man and the cart driver got astonished and looked at each other. The two agreed? Will they not kill the beasts and then themselves? But to see their manner of escorting the boars he got dazed.

They took their positions at the two corners. The woman, in her shrill voice, blew out the long code sound, urrrrrr-ah.

And the man, in his mixed voice, shouted out, a—h hoom! a—h hoom! As if the man added a rhythm to the long tune of the woman. The sound was emitting out of their hungry stomach. So fatigued and profound was the tune. As if it suddenly spayed out a delusion of a variegated vocal music in this sloping forest land. The tune got united with the tumults of the turbid water. Carried upwards by the wind, the tune reached the clouds.

The beasts grumbled at the doubtful affectionate tune. They raised their heads one by one through the apertures of aggregation of the bushy plants. Raising the pointed faces, they seemingly smelled the nature of the call. The deep black round eyes sparkled out. All closed up side by side. All of them began to get assembled in between the two.

urrrrrr-ah, urrrrrr-ah....

a—h hoom! a—h hoom!

The gold teeth of the gold-earring man sparkled out. The cart driver with the round eyes as of the beasts began to appreciate silently, yes, as if exactly the genuine parents of the boars.

And their fear of death out of fasting was as if lost in the tune. The pain of hunger in the empty stomach was mitigated with the taste of a restrained hunger. The heart was hardened in expectation of availability of food. A job has been available, it must be performed. It is a very tough one.

The job is tough but the beasts are familiar. Since long back they had been with them. They reared them always at the village. They know them, know their nature and habits. They are not acquainted with the river only. The red river is running rapidly with strong current. Tide has come, there is no wave. But the current is heavy. The river is deep also. It is growing by spreading itself out. Multitudes of black clouds are coming down!

The beasts are getting assembled. From a distance they seem to be an aggregate of large black ants lumped up. And also audible are the affectionate whisperingcalls of the boars.

As much they get assembled, so much the two also come closer. The woman obliquely looked at the gold-earring man and the cart driver, then at the Ganga. In a low voice she said, “There’s no boat, nothing else. Very wide is the river!”

The woman is merely a woman. That is not her retreating instinct. She wants to undertake the job by measuring up their courage and power!

The man is masculine. Twisting his moustache he measured up the river, in his sharp eyes. Then he said, “Yes, very large.”

It means, it’s very wide but must be crossed.

The woman again asked, “How much is twenty nine anahs, more or less than a full rupee?”

The wife is young but woman! Her mind is not satisfied unless rate is verified.

The husband is male. He becomes extravagant when everything is favourable. He said, “It’s less than two rupees by three anahs.”

Well. It seems to be a wonderful sweet taste of fresh hunger. The body and the mind also feel an urge for work. It is to be crossed within the time of tide.

The woman again said, “Now there is too much water in the river. Why does he take them now?”

The man said, “They’re businessmen. They don’t bother about the trouble of the beasts”.

They are shouting by yoking the tune with tune and are talking. While talking they are counting. Two are male and the rest are female. Yes, but one is pregnant! Pregnant boar! They beget gold. Someone begets five, someone six, even seven if so productive. Will she be able to cross the river!

Yes, early stage of pregnancy, still light.

The tone of the call is changed. It is the tone of driving forward. While driving them the man paused. He busily turned to the gold-earring man. In anxious voice asked, “Sir, are their stomachs full with food and drinks?”

The gold-earring said, “Yes, yes.”

My God! So wide the river, how will the beasts struggle? They, the two might be empty stomachs. They are going to struggle for food and drinks. They do not know why the beasts should struggle.

The next moment the man, raising the staff, shouted out a shrill sustained call from his empty navel, “Haaai-eeeeee- ha-ha...”

The woman vented out, “Urrrrrr-ah, urrrrrrr-ah....”

At the indication of this rude but new tune the beasts suddenly got startled. The round oblique rolling eyes expressed suspicion. To hear the call they attempted to push themselves forward. But to see the swaying staff and stick they halted abruptly and began to push each other. The expression is what does all this mean? There rose a rustling noise of rubbing the bodies against each other. The dry mud began to fly like dust.

Then at the direction of the staff and the stick and indication of the call they, drawing close together, turned to the river. Then the staff of the man, without warning them, gently fell on the crowd of the beasts. Frightened suddenly the herd, creating a strange sound on the ground began to get down to the lower ground. Twenty nine beasts are in the enclosure of the hands of the two with staff and stick. They are beasts of a large species.

Then the tide in the Ganga of the Asharh with a sweet babbling noise has already come. It is growing and will grow more.

The waves of the black thorny backs were falling with pauses. The boars want water but not to fall into the current of river. Their eyes are full of fear from turbid catching current. The throats are full of agitated suspicious sound. As if they are asking, “What’s going to happen? Where’s to go?”

The man in between the calls is humming out a tune of adulation, “A—h hoom, a—h hoom, a—h hoom, get down, get down, get down. Let me make you cross, then ... Ho-i... ha..ha..”

“Urrrrrr-ah, urrrrrrr-ah....”

The woman is only noticing; the river is swelling. As if the closer she comes the faster it grows, swells; the force of current is passing smoothly in a zigzag motion. She is noticing and turning to the man. The man also notices and his face gets hard. They have come, they have reached the riverside. The beasts, raising the tails are moving forward. Pushing forward each other everyone itself is retreating. Thus they are going forward unwillingly.

Suddenly a beast with strong scream came out. That is the pregnant boar rushing and shouting out a sky tearing voice. As if she pours out her protestant pitch, “I’ll not go, never!”

She will not go. She is frightened. The wretched is carrying babies, so. But when in dismay the woman while chasing them, stumbled down and again getting up was about to rush forward the man shouted, “Don’t rush.”

Getting muddy the woman almost bare bodied halted. The hard chubby breasts are smeared with mud. The hair has also caught mud. She was, for much, merged with the multitude of the boars. The man said, “Call them, call them, we’ve to go forward with them.”

They did not lead the herd of the boars into water. They were walking across the bank, while releasing soft tune, ‘urrrrrrr-ah, urrrrrrr-ah, a—h hui, a—h hui!’

### ***The Challenge***

The female boar has gone far away. It has stopped, it is shouting aloud in a stranger voice, but at intervals lowering down the face, picking up and eating something.

These two are going forward with the herd across the shore. The female boar is watching them, eating and shouting. Then suddenly shouting in the same manner rushed into the herd, but was still shouting in the same manner. Lowering down the neck, looking at them obliquely it continued shouting, "You, scoundrel human beings, you're knowingly taking us to death."

The woman and the man once again shot eyes at each other. It is the time now. Now, now, water touches the feet. It is touching and going back. Again it is overflowing a large area.

The boar is shouting as before. And the man seemingly understands its every word and says, "Hoom, hoom! Don't worry. Hoom, hoom. , A—h hui." He saying this looked at the Ganga. Ganga, mother Ganga. As if she is laughing a giggling laugh, saying something in babbling voice and as if staring at them. They cannot realize what she says. Only the goddess river seems to say, "Coming? Will you come? You're starving and I've grown so large." ... saying thus and smiling. Smiling and running in jerking motion, with drunkard mysterious eyes. She has grown red in joy.

The man and the woman both have unlimited curiosity. As if both want to watch up to the bottom of the Ganga. What mystery is there? What is the fear, what fatal trap is set there?

Now it is seen that the two are as innocent, as fearless and as courageous as a child. The woman is tightening her loin-cloth round her waist. The upper portion of the body is quite bare. The chest is as fearless as an invincible mountain peak, even in storm, rain and thunderbolts.

The man is twisting his moustache. Thorny is the moustache and rugged, lumpy, stony is the body.

They two seemingly tell the goddess river, "Yes, we've been starving. So let's cross. The gold-earring man is a businessman. He is ferrying the animals in the month of Asharh, without boat. My God, twenty nine animals, two people, oh dad! The beasts are innocent. Oh mother, you've been watching us for two days, we're also innocent."

They are telling and the river casting an invincible oblique glance, as if is advancing with babbling and giggling music of a professional dancer. Water level is rising up and they are gradually shifting up and preparing themselves.

The beasts in suspicious eyes are looking at the two people, hearkening the air and water. As if they are trying to read the language of air and water. All are grumbling. The female without bothering about anything is shouting as usual.

"Now, now", the man, in interval of the code language of taming the beasts, said to the woman, "Come up, a little bit."

"Yes, it's ok. Go forward a little, yes, stop".

The woman stood still. The animals had to turn to the water. Now they will have to be chased forward. Just after getting into water there will be the force of current. Then there will be no scope of pondering over anything.

The two for the last time looked at the water, the other side of the river. The inquisitive grumble of the beasts sounds louder.

The next moment the throats of the two sounded a sharp shout and at once the staff and the stick began to fall repeatedly on the beasts.

The next moment the beasts are seen to have been drawn much away by the river. The two also plunged into water.

But leaving them behind the beasts began to float towards the north. Going in this manner from this very moment they will be able to cross never. The boars are to be turned towards the other side of the river. Had there been a boat there would be no such trouble.

The man shouted out, “Get to the upland, quick”.

Still then there is chest-high water. They got to the upland on jumping.

The beasts are also attempting to get to the upland. The boars are creating a peculiar, sweet metallic noise in the water and whispering something from pointed mouths. The voice of the pregnant boar is also much subdued.

They two came up, rushed across the upland to the forefront of the boars. Twenty nine beasts seem to float like one frightful demonic figure. The man plunged into water in front of them. The woman fell into the middle position.

The man just falling down, raising his staff turned the face of the herd to the west, the other side of the Ganga. The woman from back beat the stick with splashing sound repeatedly. Only the southern side was empty. The force of the tide is coming from that direction. The boars will be able to turn to that direction by no means. And the western side is also empty. They will have to be driven forward to that direction.

The man rising up his staff began to shout, “Haa-i! Haa-i!” The woman behind him was sounding ‘hoom, hoom’ and saying, “Caution! Don’t turn face to this direction.”

The boars still then are pushing each other and grumbling. Probably still now they have the expectation of retreat. After sometime they themselves will push each other to go forward. Now their eyes want to come out in fear and panic. In front of them is that large area of water and its strong current. “Where’re they taking us, ah! To death? What do they want?”

They want to take them to the other side.

The man can by no means stay before the boars in the north. Terrific is the current. Moreover, it is not uniform, often it flows obliquely.

The woman by no means can follow the beasts. She is being floated to the more northern position, near the man.

The man shouted, “Struggle to stay, struggle. Don’t come here”.

The woman is struggling. But the strong current is as if tearing away the hands and legs. It is colliding against the chest.

Now humans are not seen. All have transformed into boars. In place of twenty seven there are twenty eight females and three males in place of two.

The upland is at much distance. The south wind is rushing down on the water. The place where it jumps down is jerking in a strange joviality. Had it not been the time of tide this force of wind would make the Ganga billowy. Large tumults would rise up. Then the beasts would definitely die.

The gusty east wind at intervals shows the sign of waves, and that is the cause of caution. The clouds lumping up are coming down somewhere speedily. Somewhere it is rising up and while rising becomes divided into two at the two corners. And from the aperture there appears a line of strange light. As if some mystery will be revealed just now. But the very next moment it is covered up under deep darkness. The symptoms are not sweet. It causes the clouds to come closer. Deep darkness is drawing near.

The two are looking at the sky and hurling the hands and the legs in the water. Sometimes the staff and the stick are rising. Gradually they feel fatigued for the force of flowing water. But there is no scope of thinking of or feeling it. He is creating an oral sound, ‘ha—ha—’. The woman has become silent.

Sometimes some beasts are screaming out. And they two are looking into water. What happened? What harm and who has done it to you? Has anybody gripped your leg, with teeth under water?

On thinking they attempt to tear off the terrific terror under water by the strong stirs of their bodies. It’s nothing, there’s nothing, nothing to fear.

Suddenly the woman waved up with warning words. The man also jumped up like a porpoise above water. What happened?

Three female boars turning back are rushing towards the north-east quickly. They’ll not go, no, by no means they’ll. The force of current is increasing and it is swelling. It is merely a plan to perish.

The man for a moment got motionless. Then lowering down the staff chased the three female boars, getting closer met them face to face. Raising the staff he beat the water with a splashing

sound. The pointed faces turned back again. That's the pregnant one. The rest two are of adolescence age, the proper period of preparing for pregnancy. Still now have not learnt to judge human beings, has no confidence in mind.

The man got angry, and also had mercy. He only said, "You, beast, quite bestial. Haai—haai!"

The three beasts showing their yellow teeth began to rush towards the herd, on shouting. The staff stayed still skyward.

In the mean time the woman has gone far with the rest of the beasts.

The man chased them for hurrying. Diving into water repeatedly his eyes also look like those of the boars. He said, "Am not I with you? Scoundrel!..."

In anger and endearment he began to utter filthy words.

He came close to the woman and they faced each other. The eyes of both looked like those of boar. But in the eyes of the woman there is a kind of suspicious sight.

Both felt that the current was growing faster. The river is overflowing, still growing, swelling. At some places the water is as if swelling up from the bottom. It is coming up and running sharply. Again it stands still at some places. It is to be felt that there is wrath of water, pretended wrath. It is the artificial eddy of extensive current.

The boars have formed a hive. They are denoting remonstrance with the sides of their faces in water, talking of something in groaning voice. As if they also have discovered the depth and the terrible self of the water and so are swimming forward together at their own responsibility. They have formed a procession, the war is with water. Yet they are shown the staff and the stick. Still they are gobbling up all the dirt floating in front of faces on water.

They see the river running forward gradually. Deep is the river. They could not come to the middle yet. Due to force of water the veins of their hands, legs and heads have got contracted. The water is cold but their bodies are emitting heat and sweat. The water and the sweat are getting mixed together.

The water is laughing a babbling laugh; the straight current is getting curved. Curved and swelled the current gives them immersion one by one and says, "Have ye come? Come, come closer."

They are saying so and coming aloud by exhausting the sea.

Yes, we must go. O mother, mother, river, we must go. Many a strokes have been charged on your body, in order to frighten the beasts. How endurance you have, mother! We have no guilt, no audacity. Man has to cross the river always.

The face of the woman can hardly be looked at. The tide of the river is gradually swelling and in her eyes grows an ill foreboding. She is pushing herself forward but incapable and is gradually carried away. The hands are no longer raised up. They have been lowered down.

The man wants to ask her something but cannot in fear; lest she says, “No energy, I can no longer ..., bid me farewell”. At their wedding ceremony BabusahibNaginprasad killed two boars and sponsored one mon of rice. He also gave four large jars of tadi.

The sky-cloud is coming down, more. Suddenly a spark of lightening from the west came down and vanished over their heads. The next moment there was a sound karh-karh, boomm.

At once the beasts disunited the procession and became disorderly.

Some screamed, “Ah..ah”.

The woman jumped up like a large katla fish. The stick is again in her hand. The man raising the staff shouted, “Alert, nothing to fear. Proceed as soon as you can.”

The few fishing boats that were here and there were anchoring at the bank.

The more western the place is the more is the force of current. It is curved in the west. Water is there monstrosly eroding soil underneath. Where is the temple, the shiumandir? That is it, far away. Still now half is left. That is before the yonder turn where the current is crazily fidgeting.

They are gradually being floated away from the boars. The boars have formed a hive. This is why they have a discipline, control in their motion. They are being spattered away like twigs.

The beasts have resumed their confidence in the two human beings. They get frightened to see them carried away. So they are shouting in frightened and suspicious voice.

And they try to stay close by fighting the current but cannot. The more they fight the more they get paralysed. Contraction has begun in shoulders and theknees.

They two are close to each other. The woman raised her face. The face is wet in water. The eyes are red! She said, “Well, how’ll we return? Will he pay us the fare for ferry?”

The woman is womanly. She is now bothering about return! The man replied, “I don’t know.”

Suddenly there is a new current. Here the water is as lineless as iron but dangerously agitated. It does not pull but as if throws away.

The woman in a moment got out of sight. Then again rose up. The entire face is covered with dishevelled hair.

Where’re ye?

Here.

No, not drowned. Now the man tries to smile under his moustache. Now he is afraid of losing the woman. He said, “Very much fatigue?”

Fatigue! Does it need to be asked? But the woman silently nodded, “No.”

It seems to be night. It is darkening. Again snaky lightening sparkled not from a single direction but all. As if it blows with a stick on the wet, glossy backs of the beasts and their heads. As if the thunder is falling down straight on their heads. As soon as the sound of the sky stops the noise of water seems to be doubled. The herd of the frightened beasts are crying.

Now the staff of the man has also come down. Both have forgotten their hunger, long back. Now it is to cross with the boars, that is the only target, the only bothering.

Again the speed of the beasts is geared up. That means the force of current is increasing. The water wants to touch the sky and the sky the water. The water underneath is pushing up a gust to legs, belly and chest. The form of the current has again undergone a change.

They again have come close. The beasts have also assembled close together!

The woman is pulling up something; the clothes. She is pulling up her clothes as it is loosening. The palms of both have been wrinkled by swelling like the pancakes made of new rice. The man cannot stare still at the eyes of the woman.

She is drowning again and again and looking at him with the eyes as opaque as this water.

How melodiously Ramu played the flute in their wedding! And today they are in this destructive river—.

Chick, chick, doomm! At this sound the yellowish loathsome teeth of the beasts came out.

The man drank water in gulps several times. He asked, “Are ye present?”

“Yah, I’m”.

The woman with panting and pauses said, “We’re befooled to work at twenty nine anahs, aren’t we?”

“Yah”.

The Ganga spreading its chest, pushing up bursts into a swaying laughter at their remark.

Again; “Well, where will we stay in case it’s night?” Frightened they noticed, at a short distance the northward tide has suddenly turned southward. Has it been low tide? Utter calamity! They

will have to swim backward, after coming near the temple! There is no boat. And twenty nine beasts are under the care of two people.

The very next moment she screamed out, “Eddy, eddy!”

The beasts also sensed the signal of danger in the scream. They began to advance towards the man.

The western side is swallowing soil invisibly. There has been formed an abyss as there is a whirlpool.

So the northward water suddenly turning southward has formed a large eddy.

Large eddy, it will swallow human beings, beasts all. Oh my God! Hei mother! Again the energy is restored in their bodies. The man raising the staff, screaming out a cry rushed to the south of the beasts, “Caution, caution!”

He went near the eddy in order to save the beasts. The woman to see the life risk of the man wants to come close to him, but cannot. The next moment she felt, some burden got down from her body. What? Her cloth. The river has robbed off her cloth.

The man drawing closer to the beasts on the south is emitting a life betting cry so that they getting frightened rush northward.

But a beast fell into the pull of the south. The man screamed out, “Gone, gone, the scoundrel.” That is the pregnant one. The more incredulous and suspicious fall down thus. What is the remedy now?

Separated from the herd the female one is crying. It is a few cubits away, out of some lines but unable to come by overcoming these. The man also cannot go to her. He will also have to struggle and then die with her. But what is the remedy?

The woman shouted out, “Come on, let her die.”

“Let her die! It’ll die carrying so many pigs!

Again lightening. It inconsistently began raining cats and dogs. At last it came inevitably. Oh sky, you’re merciless.

Suddenly the man raised his head with a stroke. His figure looked more terrific than the boar. He began to approach towards the eddy line gradually. He judged, by sight, the distance up to the boar. Then he extended the staff up to the mouth of the boar, “Take it, snatch at it with teeth if ye can.”

But as if the boar is gradually floating away. The man advanced a little more. It is for the last time. The boar is struggling. Then after repeated struggles it suddenly caught hold of the staff,

### ***The Challenge***

with teeth. Yes it has caught. As if the brain of the boar has had the manifestation of intellect, for sake of survival. Some yellow teeth of the lower row are seen. The nostrils and the pointed lips are trembling fearfully. The hard hairs on the neck have stood erect. The man gave a life betting pull. He said, "Snatch at it properly. If you can't I'll leave".

The man began to pull; the boar began to give a shoving. Then suddenly the staff slipped away. It was seen that the boar had come near the head of the man. Both were floating northward. The staff going to the north suddenly took a turn and went to the abyss in the south. In the mean time the woman with the other animals had floated far away; it was impossible to stay before the force of current.

The boar was shouting more aloud. It cannot shout incessantly due to water but blowing out a throat cracking cry. As if it says, "I already had told that you would jeopardize me. I would die just now, just this moment."

The man began to utter slangs, "Shut up, shut up, you wretched beast. Had yebeen my pet I would beat you half dead today on upland."

The voice of the woman was heard from distance, "What happe—ned?"

"Survived", the man replied.

The rain is not ceasing. The rumble of the cloud is increasing; it is sparkling frequently. Even the Ganga has swelled up; it is fulfilled, yet dangerously running in the same way.

The full tide has submerged much of the front side base of the temple. But the woman leaving the temple is floating away with the boars.

The man leaving the female boar floated there.

Coming close he saw the woman sinking again and again. And the boars are floating beside her by overtaking her.

The gold-earring man from the upland is shouting, "Here, here they're to be landed up."

But then the woman is sinking. The man coming close embraced her in two arms and pulled her. But a wonder! The feet can reach the ground. Then why is the woman sinking?

The woman then is bitten by cold and the wet face expresses the agony of shame and fierce fatigue. She whispered, "I'll have to remain submerged. I am quite naked."

O yes, the cloth has been snatched away by the river. The man said, "Stay here, then. Let me land up the beasts first".

He landed the beasts up. Then removing the napkin from his waist put it on and threw his own short cloth into water.

### ***The Challenge***

The gold earring man was accompanied by two men. They all began to laugh, the gold-earring man also. He said, “Gave it to the river?”

It is darkening. The rain also came heavily. The slum of the gold-earring man is nearby. Escorting the boars all came there. It is late night. Just on the bank of the Ganga beside the boar cages under a thatch the two are spending the night. With the money of the remuneration he has bought flour and fried vegetables. They have prepared roti. Now sitting together they are eating. In the oven a piece of timber is burning, raising its own flame. They are eating in that light.

The river then is sporting in terrible tumults. Everything is mixed up in dark. It is raining incessantly. And the sudden east wind seems to threaten in whispering voice. Here and there the beasts are grumbling.

This is the meal after the night before yesterday. But tears burst out from the eyes of the woman and dropped down. The short cloth after wrapping up the waist could not cover the breast. She is taking the food and wiping her eyes. The man passing his palm lightly over her body said, “Don’t weep! Don’t weep.”

After taking food the man taking the woman in his embrace began to fondle her. Now displacing the low tide, a high tide arose in their blood as did in the night before yesterday. He jabbed off the light of the burning timber. Then they began to feel the taste of survival, by yoking the blood with each other’s.

Some electricity lamps nearby and some at distance seemed to be uncanny in this prehistoric atmosphere.

Long after that the man began to murmur, “After ages you, Mahavir, the son of Pavana came—haiRamo.”

His Rama is sleeping peacefully. The wind and the rain are showering down in deep dark.

## NOTES

1. Ambubachi: A Hindu religious occasion occurred in the month of June.
2. anah: A currency unit (One Rupee is equal to 16 anahs)
3. Asharh: One of the Bengali months; it usually starts from the second half of June.
4. Assheorah: An Indian plant usually called toothbrush plant.
5. Kalkasunda: An Indian herbal plant.
6. Katla: A kind of fish in carp family.
7. Kerua: A kind of cheap oil seed.
8. Mahavir: The great hero; here Lord Hanuman, the faithful servant of Lord Ram.
9. Micipalty: municipality

10. Mon: An unit of weight (forty kilograms).
11. Pavana: The god of Wind
12. Peepul: Typical Indian medicinal creeper.
13. Pituli : An Indian plant
14. Sardar: Headman.
15. Shiumandir: The temple of Lord Shiva.
16. Tadi: A kind of cheap country liquor.