

## APPENDIX III

### Maa

(Translated from Purabi Barmudoi's original Assamese "Maa" by Mridusmita Dutta)

In the monsoon season, at least twenty-one stairs remain below water level. When the river dries up, more than half of the stairs remain above water. Where does one go down along the stairs? To the depth of water? Can anybody go down to the twenty-first stair when the entire staircase is immersed in water?

If anybody climbs down at least six of the stairs and gets drowned, then will the body remain floating in the water? Does that imply that no one can reach its depth? Usually what is found in the depths of water is known to all. Have the scientists left it upon us to discover the underwater contents by our naked hands? What else can we do? Diving inside the river one gets to see many sparkling objects of red, blue and many other colours. The village folk collect water from the river, climbing down the stairs. It is as simple as that.

The idea of a concrete staircase does not go well with the river. Previously, there had been many ghats in that river. The village people who catch fishes, who swim in the river and wash clothes in the riverbank, hold the river as special in their hearts. The waves of the river are as integral and vital to their lives as breathing. There are numerous ghats in this river and each one of them is given a beautiful name.

Our favourite ghat is 'Mahimeliya'. The mighty river has taken a turn at this point. The Gorgori brook meets the river at this bent itself. There is a big shore at one side of that edge. Flocks of partridge birds from the nearby forest fly down to this shore. Even if they see any human at a distance, they fly back to the forest. The noise of the partridge fleeing back to the forest submerges the sound of the brook falling into the river. The sound of the birds, the insects, the wind and the Gorgori brook synchronise to form the music of the river. The wind that passes through the reeds in the continually flowing river plays the background music to the insects' songs. Even the little Tuni bird living in its nest in the bushes of Kukurshita regularly sings and celebrates the untiring journey of the river.

Because of its uninterrupted continuous flow, the nearby trees, bushes, the birds, all bow down before the river. The tips of the bushy reeds touching the river water in an inclined position sometimes want to flow along with the current. They are not sad for not being able to join the

current but are enjoying themselves by swimming in the water. The stream of water flow down to mingle with the depth of the ocean. These tiny droplets carry only the soft touch of the reeds along with them.

The 'Balighura' bird runs accross the shore to the river edge. It starts to move up and down after putting its long beak in the water. It also pays its respect to the river. At the happiness of touching the river, the bird dances, frequently swaying its tail.

River is permanent and life is unlimited. Receiving the blessings of the river, the riverside people carry the river in their hearts. Wherever they go, they carry the river with them. These people think - can man live without river? Is there any country in the earth, which can sustain itself without a river? If there is no river, how will man be immortalized with its touch. Water drowns man, but the touch of that water itself immortalizes a man. People who have faced destruction by the river come back to the river again.

Why does the entire living world including the plant kingdom love the river so much? Can the river make all of them asleep by singing songs? Does one's heart lighten up after listening to the river's soothing music? Yes, yes river is equivalent to a mother; every mother is like a small or big river. River embraces their children - Somdhiri, Solengi, Suwonsiri, Dikrong, Dholpur, Hawajan, Pishola, Mornoi, Dubiya, Rongajan, Chatrong Baalijan, Brahmajan, Buroi, Borgang, Bharalu, Dikorai, Dihing, Dikhou, Bhogdoi, Dhanshree and so many are like mothers to the countless number of people living in the riverside.

Lakhipriya is a mother living in the riverside. The first shower of the rainy season causes the river to overflow and flood the surrounding areas. Lakhipriya comes and stand on the bank of the river. She keeps the jar covered with banana leaf on the ghat and facing the river, she bows with folded hands. After standing in that position for some time she takes the jar and walks down the side of the river and pours milk into the water. Whom is she trying to plead to? To the deathless immortal life?

Lakhipriya's son Krishnadulal goes to school. The reeds beside the river like 'kohowa', 'kutkora', 'bihmona' and all kinds of small and big trees become a part of the forest and across the forest there is the school. No one has ever encountered a tiger in the jungle, but there is a herd of fox roaming around. A small boy crosses the forest all alone on his way to school; Krishnadulal is frightened. His mother cannot even send somebody with him. He begins going to school alone, passing through the forest, walking beside the river.

Few days past, Krishnadulal began to have a strange feeling. He consciously felt that while crossing the forest he was not alone. An unknown woman always accompanies him on his way to school. Who is this other woman? She tells him - "you can hold my hand if you are scared". He could never feel the touch of that hand but he felt someone's presence beside him. He made up his mind to tell this to his mother.

Krishnadulal does a chore for his mother daily. He has to carry the clothes of his mother near the river, which she wears after her bath. His mother keeps her and his sisters' clothes hanging on a rope in one corner of the bedroom. He could easily pick up his mother's clothes from the bundle only by her scent. In his mother's clothes, he got the mother-smelling scent. When he was going through the forest alone, all of a sudden he got that special scent. He was not surprised. But he remembered that his mother was working in the field then. How did the air bring his mother's scent from such a vast distance? He would ask his mother about this thing too.

The strangeness that Krishnadulal encounters on his way changes after he reaches home. He himself forgets what he had to ask his mother. His mother is so busy in the household chores that it becomes difficult for him to interact with his mother alone. But there is also another reason behind this. He knows that he can ask anything to his mother, but if someone else eavesdrops their conversation, will they not consider him as a coward? One day he finally got an opportunity to clear his doubts, but at that moment another topic became very important for him - "Mother, why do you pour milk in the river water?"

'Do you mind?'

'No, I don't mind mother. I am just curious to know the reason'.

The substance of what his mother told Krishnadulal is something like this - Look, what she does for us. We bathe in the river, wash our clothes and vegetables, drink water, irrigate our fields, and catch fishes. What will we do without the river? I pour milk and pray to the river. You also pray to me. I am your mother, river is also your mother, and river is everybody's mother. Mothers keep on bestowing her blessings on their children. We seek blessings and pray to our mother.

Krishnadulal understood that both Lakhipriya and the river are his mothers. Then did his mother-like scent come from the river? Yes, yes, today he got the answer to his other question too. He is at times very scared that if somehow his mother gets old and dies, he would

be all alone. But if the river is also his mother, then his fear is meaningless. The scent of his mother will stay with him forever and in times of need it will flow towards him.

In their village, there are only a few literate persons. Whatever little knowledge he has about the outer world is taught to him by his teachers at school. His science teacher is a young knowledgeable man. During textbook reading, as far as possible, he tries to cite examples from their environment. At every opportunity, he verbally attacks the rural superstitions and beliefs and tries to make his students strong in reasoning. Only because of his effort, now most children do not believe in spirits, ghosts, and witches and hence they can lighten up their minds and make space for good things. One day the teacher has told to his class that pouring milk in the river is useless and is wastage of nutritious food. This information has created turmoil in his heart and he has shared this piece of information with his mother. He asked his teacher if a river can be one's mother. However, his teacher asked him back sternly, 'You already have a mother, don't you? Why do you need one more? And didn't your grammar teacher tell you that the river is not feminine gender. Although we call the Brahmaputra river as father and river Ganga as mother, yet the river is actually a water body and from the view point of grammar it is neutral gender. Krishnadulal does not have enough knowledge to debate with his teacher, but he is tensed with the thought of losing a mother. That day, while returning from his school alone through the forest, he breathes deeply to inhale his mother's smell. He is not sure if he has succeeded or not. He has not even been frightened. If he would have got scared, his mother would have definitely offered her hand - "Hold my hand, dear!"

He likes his teacher. He will never disobey or disbelieve his teacher, but he cannot lose his mother and become lonely. Searching desperately for his mother's scent he has stepped down the river. Before going down he has kept his books in the grass and bows before the river. As soon as he has got inside the water, he has joined both of his hands in the posture of 'prayer'. Immediately when he takes a handful of water to wash his face he has got the smell he has been searching for. It is the scent of his mother. No, no, it does not get lost. He is stunned.

The first time when Krishnadulal has seen the concrete staircase built across the side of the river he has realized the combination of the concrete stairs and the river do not go well together. When his teacher says pouring of milk in river is wastage and according to grammar river is neutral gender, he gets afraid of loss and then when he sees the condition of river in a city, he feels even more shocked. When he finds the city encroaching the river from both sides he realizes it is as if the citizens are determined to kill the river. Until he has seen the river, he

could have never imagined that a city produces so much of garbage. From both sides this garbage is covering up the river. The flow of the river gets obstructed. No poet has the capability to express the drastic change of the previously calm and serene look of the river.

Krishnadulal is reminded of his mother's words. Every river is a mother to many. Can this river smell like somebody's mother? A different kind of smell comes from this river and spread far away. If anyone tries to inhale this smell deeply, he would faint instantly. He is reminded of the tale of Parashuram. Parashuram had caused an ocean to flow to escape from the greatest sin of killing his mother. The creation of a river can rescue oneself from the sin. Nevertheless, what is the escape route of these people for slowly killing the river? His science teacher said that pouring of milk in the river is wastage and a superstition and he could not disagree with his teacher. However, he has also kept in mind his mother's words. If the people residing near the river love her as their mother, could they have thrown human waste and all sorts of garbage in her and transform her into a pit of Hell? Unknowingly a few words come out from Krishnadulal's mouth - "Welcome Science! Congratulations to your capacity to destroy the age-old belief structures. However, till when do we have to wait for your wisdom to change the behavior of mankind?"

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