

Lal Salaam  
Avnee Jetley

A cloud of dust had appeared at the corner of the mud tracks. Within it, a small red cloth, whipping furiously with the wind. Slowly, the dust settled and a man emerged from within, peering back to check on his passengers. Too long. He failed to see the crater in the middle of the road and sent his cart flying. Behind him, the two children dove further into their mother's sari and buried themselves into her hefty bosom. He turned back and shouted above the roar, 'Hold on tight. It will only be a few more minutes.' He lifted one arm to wipe the beads of sweat from mud-crusting face and pedaled on.

Aarif Khan was a man no more than twenty-five. Yet age had played a cruel joke and slowly accumulated on his face like moss on damp stone. His skin was dark and hardened under the Bengali sun. The lines that ran across his body seemed like the traces of a river of youth that once flowed across them but had now left his body arid and dry. In fact, the only thing remarkable about Aarif Khan's appearance was his eyes. The lightest of browns speckled with a green so vivid that it would inspire marvel and then, the next instant, shame and intimidation. Under his thick, dark brow, this gave Aarif a permanently startled appearance.

Having dropped his passengers and pocketed his fee, he turned his cart around and headed towards the sea.

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I took off my crumbling rubber chappals and dug my feet into the sandy warmth of the beach. The water sneaked in between my toes and clawed at the sand. As my legs gave way beneath me, I sighed a breath of relief and lay back against the soft sand to look up at the sky.

Coming back in the evening, having exhausted all energy, carrying people all over the place in the sun and heat, was the hardest part, I decided. For everybody else on that journey, there was a final destination – a house, family or if nothing, a comfy bed and a hot meal prepared. For them, life was a fucking Bollywood movie. For me, this is a never-ending nightmare. My days would repeat themselves in circles, and like the wheel of my cart, I would keep living life in those circles till I, like the wheel, got so worn out that it broke one day and could not be repaired. This – This part made it worth it.

My first memory here was with Amma. I was barely five years old and clenched on to her finger, terrified by the tremendous roar of the ocean, shielding myself behind her as I looked out at the vastness before me. She pushed me forward.

'Jao, there's nothing to be scared of.'

'Tumi ki aamar sathe aasbe?' Will you come with me?

Once again, I held her hand and we walked into the water, the sea lapping at my knees, threatening to swallow me whole. Ammi looked up at the horizon and turned her head towards me. 'Aarif, there is a whole world out there. We have grown up ignorant in this small town our whole lives, putting together every paisa just to survive. Our time has gone. But you Aarif, you can be whatever you want. Everything is in your grasp.' The air was damp and heavy, I stuck my finger in my nose trying to breathe easy and looked up at her blankly. She suddenly seemed to realize that I was just five years old and waving a hand, started to walk back home.

The sky had turned orange now and in the distance a group of fishermen were pulling up a line. Their collective grunts could be heard despite the expanse between us. The water lulled back and forth up the beach and turned it into an expansive mirror. The tremendous light from the sky now reflected down until all that lay ahead of me was the endless sky and the silhouette of the fishermen as they emptied their nets. I screwed my eyes shut, trying to permanently burn this image into my head. When I opened them, there was a small boy less than five inches from my face. "Macchi?"

I swatted him away and bought some fish after having examined his goods. He swiftly gutted the fish, tied it up in an old newspaper and carefully counted his earnings, his face pulled into deep concentration as he struggled to count. Having confirmed that I had not cheated him, he skipped back towards the fishermen and I turned homewards. At my door was yet another notice. I scanned it briefly and threw it in my hut, saving the excitement of government-issued letters for later, and sat down to make myself dinner.

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There was nothing extra-ordinary about the next morning. But years for now, I would look back towards this day as the tipping point of my life. Slowly climbing off my charpoi, I cracked my joints furiously – neck, back, fingers, toes, neck again – ah there! Rubbing my eyes furiously of sleep, I set a cup of sweet tea to boil and stepped outside to stretch. It was still dark out but I could hear the quiet but distinct gunghroo of the women as they went to collect the morning water from the pump. This was the kind of calm that was only present first, at the sea and second, in the wee hours of the morning when the world was asleep. But we all know peace never lasts long.

"Aarif Bhai! O Aarif Bhai!," came Sailaj. Basu's son. He was hardly thirteen but he had started work on the fields. His lean muscles seemed odd placed on his tiny frame.

"Khuda Hafiz Sailaj. Kamon Acho?" What is it?

"Khuda Hafiz. Baba is calling you. He needs some bags delivered to the market this morning."

I nodded a sign of assent and he hurried back into the distance. I whipped out a new dhoti and slapped my chappals to get the dust off. This was not a good idea. A cloud of dust rose up in the air, making me wheeze and cough, and a new layer of dust settled on the white surface of the cloth. Cursing, I tipped the hot contents of the cup to my mouth and swallowed it whole. So, with a ruined dhoti, close-to-destruction

chappals and a severely burnt tongue, I ambled towards Basu's fields to get started on yet another day.

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The first thing one grasped about the city was not its beauty or its awe-inspiring modernity, but the pure chaos it was enveloped in. For miles, I had been the only one on the road but once within the city walls, in an instant, I was lost in the crowds of millions. Amongst the over-zealous salesmen who cried out, 'Bhai! One cup of tea atleast, on me!', amongst the zig-zag of cars, scooters, rickshaws and pedestrians, amongst the vendors with their spectacular displays of fruit, mehendi patterns, baskets, sweets, who was I but a mere illiterate villager caught in a storm of the unfamiliar. Reluctantly, I shut out all the excitement and fought my way through the markets, past the Howrah Bridge and reached Old China Bazar Street to the company warehouse.

The building was an old British post-office but nothing about it seemed foreign. It had blended in so well behind mangled telephone wires and the plastic colored boards - Aparna's Fabulus Fabrics, Chetan Garments -that it now seemed to form a part of the natural Kolkata skyline. It was blackened heavily in some areas, and as I went through its archways, paan spit-marks had covered the walls so extensively that it seemed like they were the bloody reminders of a war fought a long time ago. A pair of eyes followed me as I climbed up the staircase, took a left and knocked on the door of the State Warehousing Corporation.

"Aarif! Come in, come in," smiled Joshi, waving a hand absently into his air-conditioned office. My sweat evaporated in less than a second. Suddenly I was conscious of my presence in such an auspicious place.

"Namoskar Joshi Ji. I was just bringing in some supplies from Basu. I was wondering if your men could.."

"Haan haan Aarif, that's all fine but how's the situation back home?"

"Ki, sahib?"

"No no, with all the fiasco this morning and everything?"

I raised my hand to my forehead. I had been in the sun too long. "Ki?"

He raised his eyebrows and looked down at me, his glasses down to the tip of his nose. I suddenly recalled an image of my old school masterji, peering down at us ignorant fools, and clucking his tongue in disapproval.

"Oh good lord son, surely you have heard about what's going on in Nandigram?" He swiftly turned, his kurta whipping behind him, and turned on the small TV attached to the upper left corner of the room. We sat side by side peering up at the grainy black and white image, straining both our eyes and our ears to understand the man at the

desk.

“We’re back at Today’s Breaking News with Shudipto Basu. News has just reached the station that the police continues to proceed with evictions at Nandigram, despite recent controversies on the establishment of a new Special Economic Zone in the area. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattachariya claims that the men were unarmed and peaceful. While he acknowledges the process of eviction has been improperly carried out, he refused to accept the blame on his party, the CPI(M), and instead blamed the situation on bad judgment by the I. Contrary to his statement, reports coming in from Nandigram inform us that evictions are being conducted in a violent manner and against the will of the people. Opposition members have strongly criticized the move calling it ‘unjustified and barbaric’. We now go to Mamta Roy, at Nandigram, for further information”

I continued to stare at the screen as a woman debriefed the situation, but I could no longer hear any sound from her lips. I just saw them move, forming words that were changing my life even as I sat there. I felt a hand on my shoulder and again, Joshi Ji peered at me enquiringly but I shrugged it off and stumbled out of the office and into my cart cycling home as fast as I could.

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Salle bahenchods, they had destroyed the place. My door was balancing precariously on a hinge, its screw loosening under its weight, and my belongings had been thrown onto the street. But as I looked across the town, I felt ashamed to even voice my anger. I didn’t deserve to be angry.

Beside his broken hut, Santosh Kaka sat on his hunches, his face buried deep into his arms. When I approached him, he looked up and said in a whisper barely audible, ‘I didn’t even have anything and I feel like I’ve lost my entire world. The bastards rounded us up like cows. Told us to get lost. Where are we supposed to go? When I asked him on whose authority they were acting, the bastard didn’t even bother replying. He just waved his lathi in the air.’ There was a tear sitting in the corner of his eye and as he scrunched up his eyes, all the lines on his face intensified. He brushed it away hastily and with that, he buried his head into his arms once again.

With a heavy heart I walked to the chai-wallah where some of the villagers were seated. They were in the middle of a heated debate.

“..salle, lets also see what they can do. They can’t get away with this bullshit. They just come here one day and demand we leave. It’s our land.”

“Who says it’s our land? The government decides whose land it is. You produce one paper to claim it yours, they’ll produce ten. Or they won’t even produce a paper. By the time you take it to court, twenty years will pass us by.”

“What are you trying to say? That we just leave? To that ‘refugee’ camp they told us to go to? If I wanted to be a refugee, I would have gone to Bangladesh.”

“Arre, who said that? I’m just saying we need to think about this instead of just..”

“Haan, he’s right. We need a game plan.”

There was man sipping chai in the corner, his ears pricking up every so often. He seemed to be a babu-sort. His dhoti was clean and starched, his fingernails trimmed and he had the gentleness of a person who had never worked a day of hard labor. He seemed to shut his eyes emphatically as if honing his other senses by blocking out one.

“We should write a letter. To the Chief Minister, to the District Commissioner. Who is the District Commissioner?”

“District commissioner, my ass. He probably orchestrated all this.”

Slowly the man got up as if it were an severe strain on his body. He opened and closed his mouth and raised a finger in thought. He looked extremely sorry to have to enlighten us fools.

“Bhaiyon and behno. I’m afraid you’re not quite grasping the severity of the situation. The government is not going to pay attention to any letter. Have you been paying attention to any of the notices they stick on your doors? Well, they have been telling you to leave – your homes, your work and your life. This is the gift of democracy – masking injustice with an air of civility. Paisa is what runs this country, nothing else. This government says it’s Marxist, that it works for the common man, for you. But here they are, throwing you out on the streets and cutting deals with the wealthy. They want to put up an SEZ here. Salle, they’re inviting the British back to rule our lives – to become our bosses, take our rightful resources and dictate where we live and what we do. And meanwhile, they’ll send you to some basti to live out the rest of your days.”

Cries lifted up in the air as the sun started to settle.

“They’ll be back tomorrow, and day after, and day after that till you all have no choice but to leave. They’ll point their guns and do what they please. You think a letter will solve anything? I doubt it’ll even reach anybody.”

More cries. My heart sank. “What’s your plan then?” I shouted out. “Should we just stand here, all hope lost, and wait for them to steal our lives away?”

“God Forbid, my child. We must stand up! We are not domestic animals brought up to follow the wishes of our masters. We are the flesh and bone of this country. We must protect our women and our children and our land. I say, when the police show up again, we will fight. Let them try bully us. We will not be bullied. Let them try destroying our spirits. They shall not be destroyed. Let them throw stones at us. We will throw stones back.” With this he sat down, and the crowd stood up hooting and clapping. And even as I surveyed him, doubted his motives, I felt the blood pump through my veins as I prepared myself to fight.

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There was nothing peaceful about the sunrise that morning. The men gathered around the town and brought with them ploughs, seythes, spades and whatever they could get their hands on. We stood on the road that led to the city and looked down to where it met the horizon. There were thirty of us, yet none of us had the courage to start what we had so assertively set out to do. Not a muscle twitched. We looked at each other from the corner of our eyes until finally a man broke away from the pack. There was a prominent hole in his wife-beater through which his skin shone smooth as a horse's coat. His dhoti was limp and dangled loosely around his ankles. Despite his appearance, the crowd parted instantly to make way for him as if he were a deity of some sort, their heads bowed in respect and awe.

Poised with his weapon mid-air, his blood-shot eyes darting back and forth between us and the city, he finally brought his spade crashing down. As the surface broke, another man joined him, their arms swinging in unison, their muscles throbbing with the impact on the ground. And one by one, we spread ourselves along the road and destroyed every inch of that damned thing that brought us nothing but trouble.

By the end of the week, there was no road leading to Nandigram that had not been completely destroyed. Everything to and from the city stopped. We had cut ourselves off. We had carved ourselves our very own piece of land, where we were free from the tyranny of the world outside.

I stopped my driving. Instead, I worked with Roy on his farm, my payments being food at the end of the day. Roy was a cheating bastard and stingy with his liberties. His wife though, ki item! I watched her from the corner of my eye as she rolled her chapattis, the bangles on her hand sliding back and forth on her arm and her breasts moving up and down in perfect unison as she struggled to flatten the bread in a perfect round. What beautiful breasts. I broke a piece of my chapatti and dipped it into the curry, munching and staring. Suddenly, a crack whipped through the night and she looked up, catching me red-handed in the act. I hung my head in shame.

"Ae Ram, what in the world was that?" said Roy, as if waking up from a drunken stupor.

We could now hear faint cries in the distance and leaving our food half-eaten and our hands unwashed, we ran into the night, our chappals slapping hard against the ground, slowly being drowned out by the commotion we ran towards.

The first thing we saw was the two sides facing each other threateningly on either side of the bridge. One the police, armed with guns and shields, and on the other side, the villagers, stones in hand. There was a crowd in the middle of the gathering and through a slight parting of the horde, we saw there was a boy on the ground. He seemed frail and limp but it only struck me that he had been shot when I saw the dark, red pool that had collected under his torso. Several people had formed a protective ring around him as a woman ripped off the pallah of her sari and wrapped it around his wound. The village crowd behind them moved back and forth, hissing at the police.

A policeman behind the crowd raised his lathi and struck a man, trying to navigate his

way through the crowd, onto the other side. A domino effect occurred as the people quickly scattered away from the point of impact, breaking the ring, the only buffer between the khaki-men and the boy. Only the woman stayed, attempting to pick up the boy by his arms and drag him away. Without thought, the policeman struck her on her head and she fell to the ground in an instant, the blood running into her eyes and creating a pool under her head.

The only sound that remained in the night sky was now the woman's quiet whimper. A hush had fallen over the crowd as they watched the two people from a safe distance. The devil dressed in khaki had retreated, ashamed but it wasn't till the last of them left that some men dared approach the two. Quickly assembling make-shift stretchers out of bamboo and saris, they lifted them high above their heads, making them look like pallbearers as they headed towards the medical centre.

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In the forest, the more dry and deprived the land is of water or sun, the faster the fire spreads through it. Likewise, with the second incident ignited a fire so fiery within our hearts that it consumed us and made our prior resistance seem like a brief, bleak spark. We gathered with a new ferocity but with the anger so deep-seated in our hearts, it seemed impossible to give voice to the horrendous ideas that came to mind. My dreams were no longer about far away, happy places but had become intertwined with reality so I could no longer distinguish what was what. For days, I dreamt of walking into the centre of the bridge, taking the lathi from the policeman's hands and bringing it down on his head, again and again and again, till blood took over the whole scene and I woke up covered in cold sweat and out of breath.

A month had gone by since the incident but the heaviness in the air was still present, reminding us every day of what had transpired under our very noses. Our crops were going bad, our food running low, but all anybody could do was sit and stare absent-mindedly away while the town fell to pieces around us. There were a few people who had left without a trace - nobody knew where they had gone. Some said they had gone to the city, some said they had been taken away by the government but nobody really knew. News had come from Khejpuri that a tent city had been put up there for the 'people like us'. But if anybody had been there, they would know that the 'city' was nothing more than bamboo sticks with plastic bags patched together for a roof. There was no bathroom, no clean water and the nearest market was miles away. It was better to stay here than live like animals there.

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Konkana Mausi worked as a care-taker for a big man just outside the town. She had done so ever since anybody could remember. Every morning she hobbled down the road to the big, fancy house and returned before sunset, always bringing something back with her. It could have been an old cricket ball the kids had stopped playing with,

old clothes the madam had stopped wearing, a few odd onions and potatoes. But now she brought us news. She became our lifeline to the outside world. Every day she came back with a newspaper tucked under her arm and we gathered around the chai-wallah as the children recited the words, each sound carefully pronounced as they digested the words they did not understand.

Slapped on the front page of the newspapers were policemen in full gear climbing into their vans, smiling and saluting the cameras. The headline read, 'Nandigram Nightmare continues for CPI(M)'.

'Police continues to enter the Nandigram area in hopes of settling down the controversy of land acquisition. The government under CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya is still under heavy fire from human rights activists such as Kavita Shrivastava, Arundhati Roy and Romila Thapar who yesterday released a statement saying, 'We deplore the recent attack on the CPM office at Nandigram, but deplore even more strongly the policy of retaliation advocated by some constituents of the Left Front Government, and the use of armed elements against the villagers, already at the cost of several lives.' The Chief Minister when asked for a reaction commented, 'I'm particularly eager to persuade these people, these intellectuals about the policy of the government. You must try to understand that I can't just allow these Naxalists, these small groups of Naxalists, to change the government policy. 99% of the people are with us, I'm sure I can convince them of the benefits of the SEZ. The state simply has to move from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, that is my belief as a Marxist.' When asked what the government would do if the people were not convinced, the CM declined to comment.

Meanwhile, the party has justified police intervention in the area on account of Naxalite activity in the area. A large problem in the 70s, recent years have seen a rise in their presence in Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, areas that border the Nandigram area. Government officials believe that these insurgents are the reason for civil incorporation in the area and have therefore, resorted to 'clearing' the areas, according to the CPI(M) and Central Govt. policy towards such political groups.'

Naxalites –Nobody liked to talk about the time of the Naxalites. When they did, it was hushed in barely audible whispers within tightly-knit, close circles. They called it the Lal Upradi – the Red Terror. In the late 1960s, a man had gone missing suspiciously, immediately following a public confrontation with his landowner. Before anybody knew what had happened, a riot had broken out in the area. Naxalites and supporters retaliated on the area's landowners, advocating the destruction of the class, dragging people out of their homes, lining them up and shooting them in cold blood. The

people who had joined on their side thrived and prospered, taking over the rich man's land, until one day it all came crashing down on them. When the government struck back, they ensured that everyone involved had been permanently subdued. Everywhere people disappeared – some said they had been gotten rid of, some said they had retreated into the forests of Andhra Pradesh, waiting to come home – but one thing was certain; that they were never seen in the area again.

Combing through my memories, through the bits of information I had pieced together, I pondered over the past and it was not long before I realized that we had found ourselves in the Red Terror once again.

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It was around noon, when the police started trooping in. They couldn't bring their jeeps and vans but they made up in numbers. They walked through the fields, trampling the crops till the farmers cursed them away. Our people had slowly gathered under the big neem tree and were staring suspiciously at troops when an officer stepped out and took hold of a loudspeaker, clearing his throat into it sending feedback reverberating through the town. He moved it away and once again put it to his mouth.

“Bhaiyon aur Behno. We have orders to clear this land as part of the land acquisition for the SEZ.”

An uproar. Somebody threw a stone in the direction of the police.

“Oi! Watch it! We are here on government orders and the move has been approved by the development authority. Any attempt to resist will be subdued. I recommend you all pack your bags and leave. We want to keep this clean and simple.”

Another stone.

“You may make your claims for compensation will be given at the development authority office...” A stone struck the officer and he growled as he spun towards his subordinates and issued an order.

The calm had broken. Suddenly, the police lined themselves up and fired into the air. Bullets? I rushed to the front but something whizzed by me. Smoke was now spreading in all directions, making it hard to breathe or see what was going on. Tear gas. Coughing I wrapped my turban cloth around my face and picked up a stone.

“Get lost you bastards!” and flung it in the air.

“Harram Zado, you think you can take our land?” Another stone flew.

Soon there were enough stones in the air to compare to the arrows in the Mahabharata. Even as the police expelled more shells, the crowd only dispersed briefly

coming back together hissing louder and angrier like a hive of bees that had been provoked.

Suddenly there was a different sound in the air. Shots. Bullets this time. A man at the front fell to his knees. Panic. We had stones but they had guns. And even as we hurled harder, scraping our hands with the rocks, deep within our hearts we realized we had no chance against their power.

“Send the women to the front. They won’t shoot women!”

“They’ll shoot anything that moves.”

Suddenly the man next to me fell, withering upon the ground. As far as I could see, we were too far from the firing. Another shot flew into his arm. I turned towards the bushes and caught a flash of metal. Suddenly a man rose up and held his rifle in front of him and fired again. His shots seemed arbitrary as he hunted people with his eyes in an instant before he pulled the trigger.

I held my ground, shocked into immobility until a strong hand pushed me away. The man continued to fire as he retreated back to the police lines.

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The town medical center consisted of one doctor and three nurses. On their busiest days they handled one or two farmer injuries or a birth. So when the injured came up by the dozens, the clinic neither had the ability or resources to address the injuries. While the doctor busied himself with bullet wounds and broken bones, the nurses flitted in and out behind a mysterious curtain, shouting across the room every now and then for some urgent supplies. Within the first hour, they were out of cotton wool and disinfectant. With the supplies unable to reach the town through the roads, there was no hope of getting them in before early morning the next day. I quickly resolved to head to the city myself, scraping together all the money I could. Soon there was little light left in the sky and I blindly navigated my cart through the empty spaces between gutted streets and fields.

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It was as if anything had happened. In fact it seemed more as if a celebration was taking place. Mithoi-wallahs loaded boxes with sweets, grinning as they folded their hands together and thanked their good luck. The women stopped by the bangle-shops, carefully running their hands over the multi-colored array of glass bangles on offer. I couldn’t tell if they didn’t know or simply didn’t care. If we didn’t matter in a city less than twenty kilometers away, where in the world would we matter? If I left today, right now, would anybody even care?

My words, that I had so carelessly thrown out to the wind fluttered into the air and echoed back at me. What if I left? It was not like I had anything to stay back for. The police, the Naxalites, whoever they were, they would come back and we would resist. We would resist and we would fail. There was no way to end the fighting without complete destruction and humiliation on our part. We were a people who were lost in the country of millions, scapegoats in the politics of democracy and the race to succeed but the incredible thing was that nobody would remember us or what we sacrificed. If we truly believed in the cause of industrialization, if we were willing to leave our homes to it, to sacrifice all that was familiar to us, would we be remembered? No, we would merely be reduced to a headline in the city newspaper, looked at for one morning and thrown in the trash. We were the underdogs of the country. The cart I drove endlessly, day after day, had made its own track so deep that it was impossible to drive away from it. I couldn't change where I was going unless I got off that cart and walked away – away from the meaningless, eternal rut I found myself in.

The money knotted in my kurta swung against my leg, reminding me every second of what I was about to do – warning me, pleading with me. I ignored it and drove on towards the Howrah Station. Carefully parking my cart by the entrance, I sat on it for a while longer, my fingers fitting perfectly into the shape of the handle. My thumb on the bell lever, blackened by the years of contact. I could not bring myself to get out. I ran my hand across the golden tinsel that hung down from the sides, creating little blinds for the passengers as they moved through the countryside, and looked up at the night sky. The fog of the city had dampened out the stars but in the distance, the city skyline glowed in a warm, sepia light, reminding me of the town that lay not far away from here. A cab driver was now honking and shouting at me to get out of the way, glaring his headlights straight into my eyes. I unhurriedly climbed out of my cart and turned my back on it. Then, with a sudden swiftness, I walked away and into the station. There was nothing I had to look back for.