

MONOGRAPH

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MONOGRAPH

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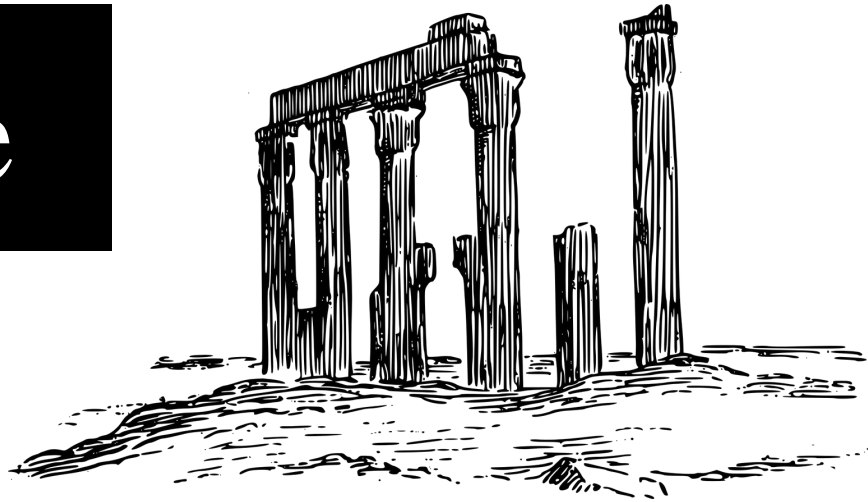
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Editor's Note



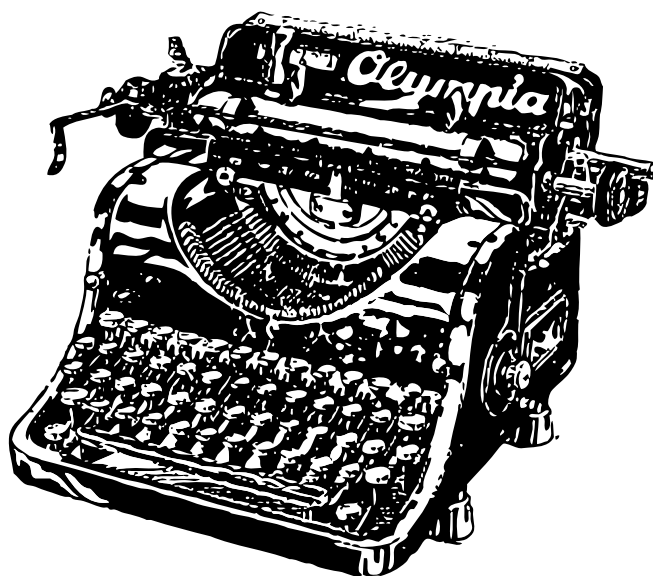
This issue of Monograph brings with it extraordinarily written articles, stories and poems. As we inch closer to our third anniversary, I would like to take a moment to thank everyone who has stuck by us through our various chances, editorial, stylistic or otherwise. On 26th August, 2020, as I conceived Monograph, I could've never imagined that it would grow so. Personally, I had just seen it as another creative outlet for me and my friends, and had hoped almost foolishly that there will be an audience who would like to read what we wrote. And now, as our mails get flooded every month by submissions both national and international, as our team is divvied up into print and digital, and as we start exploring different streams of revenue, I would like to take a moment and thank you all, members of this loving community, who have chosen to support our venture out of all the others. The duty has fallen upon me, as the Editor-in-Chief, to be the voice of this community and I would like to thank you all for giving me this responsibility.

Anuraag Das Sarma
Editor-in-Chief
Monograph



Editorial: Racism Is In The Air

Caiityya Pillai



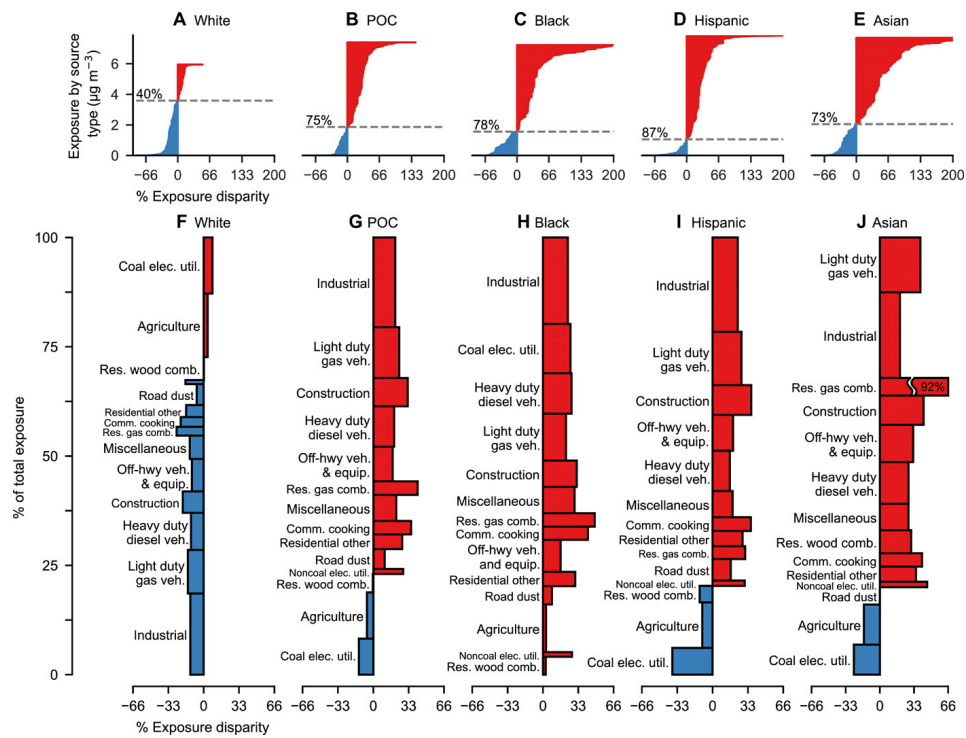
A study published by Science Advances on 28th April 2021 and covered by the United States Environmental Protection Agency on September 20, 2021, shows how this disproportionate effect of pollution (PM_{2.5} pollutants) holds for all income levels, states, urban and rural areas and emission sources.

PM_{2.5} pollutants refer to fine particulate air pollution, which is the leading cause of environmentally caused human mortality, it is the cause of 85,000 to 200,000 excess deaths per year.

The POC groups in question are Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. To analyse from the perspective of emission sources, these sources are divided into 14 groups.

Namely, industry, agriculture, coal electricity generation, light-duty gas vehicles, heavy-duty gas vehicles, off-highway vehicles and equipment, construction, residential wood combustion, road dust, other residential sources, commercial cooking, residential gas combustion, noncoal electricity generation and miscellaneous.

The table below highlights the disproportionality across these sources.

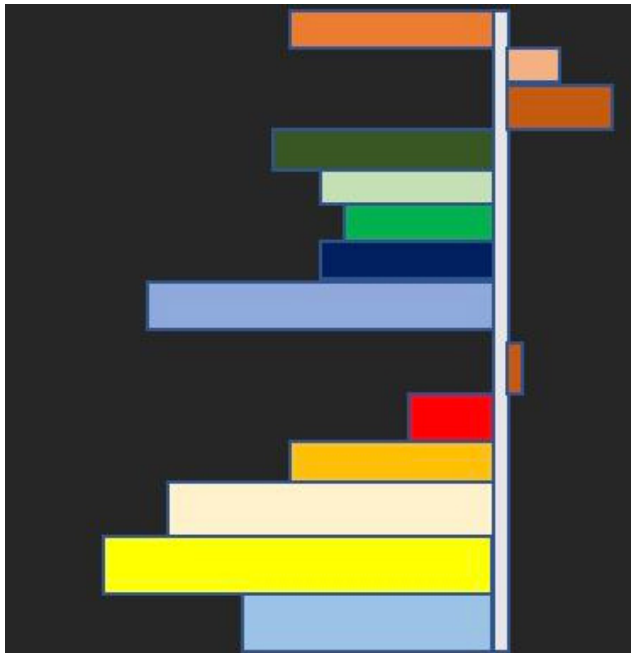


The study is extremely crucial because in the words of Patterson, a transportation and equity work fellow at the congressional black fellow foundations, says, "If there is no data, it doesn't exist."

Through this study, policymakers can comprehend that while their regulations towards pollution have made a national impact in general, vulnerable communities that are disproportionately affected will need targeted action plans. These action plans should target inequities that persist in these communities that prevent the regulatory benefits of national or broad scheme plans from impacting them and subsequently reducing pollution and its adverse effects.

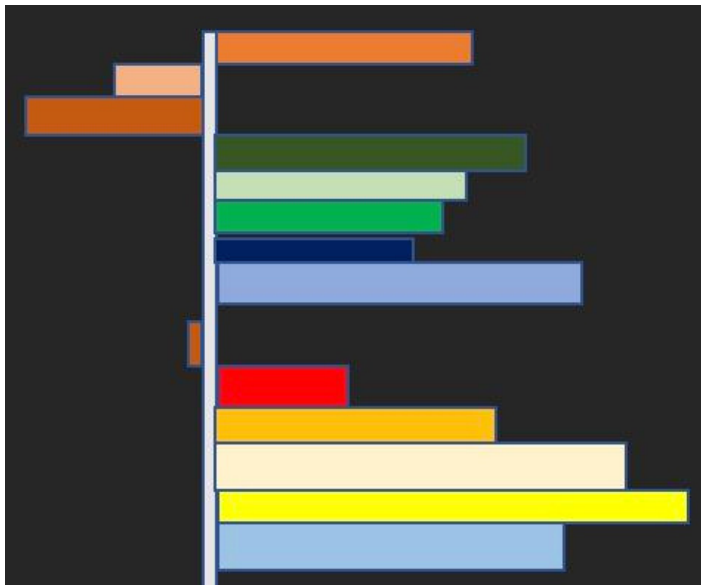
The tables below show all people of colour face more disproportionate exposure than white people in the case of most sources and black people face more disproportionate exposure in all sources.

White People

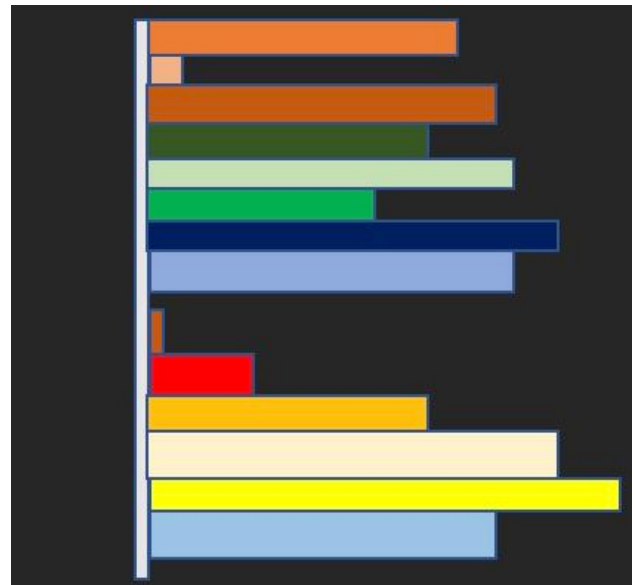


INDUSTRY
AGRICULTURE
COAL ELECTRICITY GENERATION
LIGHT-DUTY GAS VEHICLES
HEAVY-DUTY GAS VEHICLES
OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLES AND EQUIPMENT
MISCELLANEOUS
CONSTRUCTION
RESIDENTIAL WOOD COMBUSTION
ROAD DUST
OTHER RESIDENTIAL SOURCES
COMMERCIAL COOKING
RESIDENTIAL GAS COMBUSTION
NONCOAL ELECTRICITY GENERATION

All People Of Colour



Black People



From an economic standpoint, taking income level into view. The average exposure difference between POC income levels is 2.4 times smaller than the average exposure difference between whites and POC.

Data studies reveal racial disparities in this context are caused by systematic biases and policy formation that is inherently racist rather than economic disparities caused or not caused by systematic racism.

Through state comparison, in 45 of 48 states, POC is more disproportionately exposed to PM2.5 than whites. The black population faces the highest level of this exposure (77%).

Through the rural and urban comparison, there is a notable difference: Asians are exposed less than average in Urban areas like California, where there are larger Asian populations.

Systematic racism and the history of slavery in The United States have caused disparities that are posing hurdles in attaining equality for all people of colour. These inequities have branched out to environmental factors that directly affect different aspects of the lives of people of colour, from an increase in daily expenses, and a decrease in general productivity to even life expectancy.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the medical implications caused by exposure to PM2.5 are cardiac arrhythmias, heart attacks, asthma attacks and bronchitis.

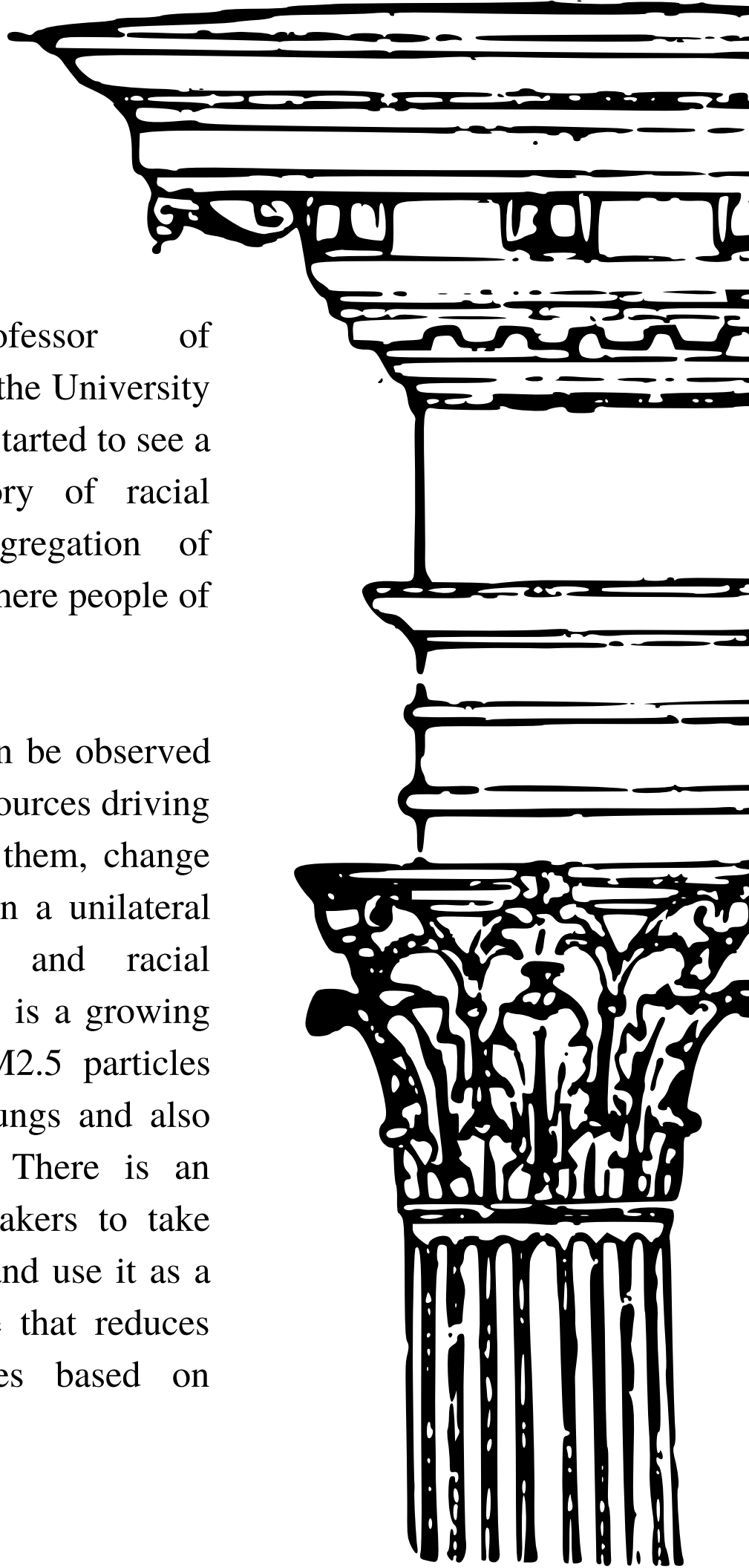
The daily life inconveniences are increased hospital admission, absences from school, emergency room visits etc.

These inconveniences restrict activity days and reduce the productivity of POC, further marginalising them and promoting a cycle of the vulnerability of these communities.

A singular cause for this disproportionate exposure cannot be named but its roots are in generational prejudice and systematic racism.

Paul Mohai, professor of environmental justice at the University of Michigan, says, "We started to see a pattern with the history of racial discrimination and segregation of industry being located where people of colour are concentrated."

Through this study it can be observed that there are not a few sources driving this disparity but all of them, change will have to be made on a unilateral scale keeping ethnic and racial disparities in mind. This is a growing health hazard, these PM2.5 particles can get deep into the lungs and also enter the bloodstream. There is an urgent call for policymakers to take this study into account and use it as a basis to provide change that reduces environmental disparities based on ethnic and racial lines.





Neither Of the People nor For the People

Adrija Dutta

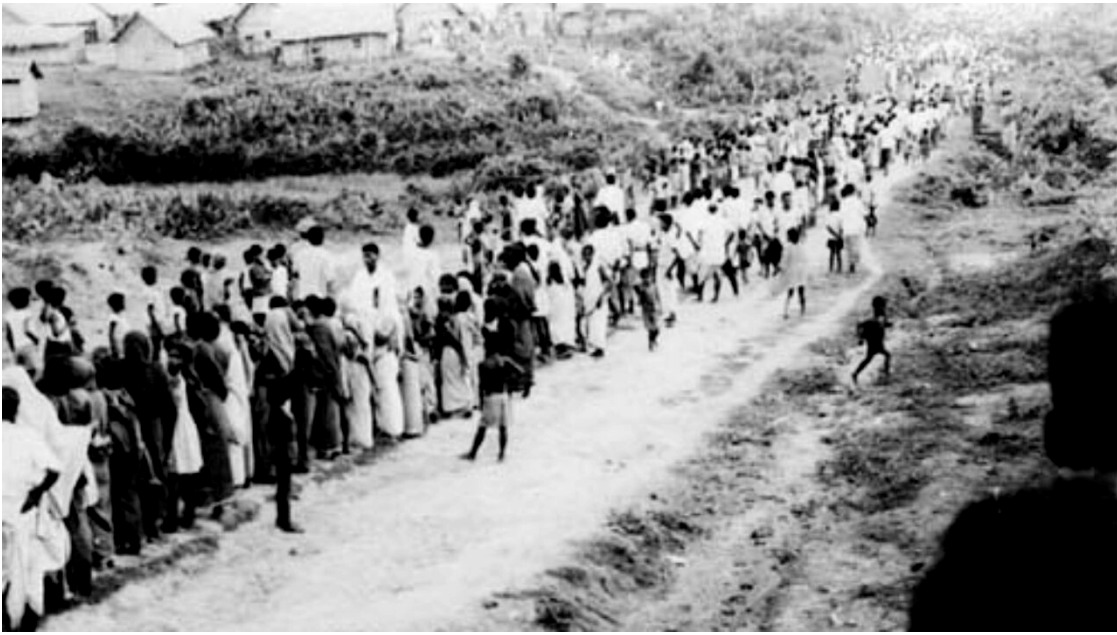
Recalling the Forgotten Left-Led Marichjhappi Massacre in 70's Post-Colonial Bengal.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai, the whipper-snapper adolescent protagonist, the dweller of the cities, the connoisseur of everything urbanite, inherits a peculiar story from his left-leaning, village-dwelling, school-teaching old dreamer of an uncle, Nirmal. He recounts the tale of the Utopic Tide Country to his novice nephew, telling of a particular British Knight, Daniel Hamilton in Calcutta, who supposedly had purchased nearly ten thousand acres of the desolate, uninhabited mangrove-covered lands of the Sundarbans. This was the early 1900s. The tale evolves into the picture of the Sundarbans that developed under the careful gaze of Hamilton Saheb.



In no time, these uninhabited lands, consisting of nothing but mud and unadulated forests - manifested heavily with the likes of tigers, crocodiles, and leopards - soon had the swirl of civilisation looming above them. People from all across the country, in hoards, came to occupy the lands. The reasons being two - very simple yet daunting: This is the early twentieth century; natives are in search of land; the Sundarbans became the most alluring opportunity for them, since these lands were closer to home, closer to Calcutta, unlike the far-fetched dreams of Trinidadian, Burmese or Malayan lands; besides, these stretches were free to settle into, uninhabited, potent for use. As word spread, the Sundarbans soon attracted people in vast numbers. They came from the north of neighbouring Odissa, from the Santhal Paragans, from Eastern Bengal. Hamilton welcomed all without discrimination, without qualms; however, there was one catch - in return for the indiscriminate welcome which he meted out to anyone seeking a stay at the Sundarbans, he asked for the reciprocation of the same indiscrimination. Everyone would be welcomed, thus, but no one would bring along their petty ideas of division, casteism, and religious differences. Ghosh writes, "Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together". What was born, as a result, was a near-utopic inhabitation of a landscape. What Daniel Hamilton, a white minister in the land of brown people, was essentially trying to build was a new vision of a society, a 'new kind of a country', that would be run not by hierarchies of labourers and consumers, but by co-operatives. There wouldn't be exploitation or land divisions. Instead, everyone would be entitled to a fair share of fertile land, and everyone would work, shoulder by shoulder.





The utopic proliferation of the Sundarbans under Hamilton Saheb's influence brings to mind the core tenets of Leninist-Marxist practices of social reform and livelihood. A land without divisions, a land without caste, a land that is socially distributed among everyone in equal shares. Besides, a vision of a society that is driven by equal work, equal pay, and equal yield sounds much like the promises that the Communist Party of India (CPIM) leaves for the people in its vows. However, the most important question - and probably the only one that should matter - is whether the CPIM, like every and any other political authority, has been adept to keep its word? The answer is a most definite resounding No. The CPIM, when they had first come to power in the state of West Bengal, in the 1970s decade, was buoyant with the promises of shaping a Bengal landscape that would be built against the sectarian and revisionist social landscape that the long reigns of the Congress had left behind in its wake.

The reason I refer to The Hungry Tide and bring the reign of the CPIM in respect is because I want to highlight one of the vicious incidents that had gone down under the watchful gaze of the party, upon the Dalits of the land; not under the gaze alone, in fact, under the very supervision of.



Our commonplace history archives, official records or word of wise mouths fail to recall the events of the atrocities; this, which most definitely constitutes a foul, putrid patch upon the otherwise knowing CPIM, has been misinformed, misstated and eventually forgotten from the collective consciousness of the people. Decades later, works like Amitav Ghosh's, aspire to recall and bring the existence of such back into life, once again. Literature, which always has been subjected to misplaced notions of being the safe haven for maladaptive daydreamers and escapists, definitely serves a more important purpose. It cannot be separated from the culture, the very situatedness of its social and political dimensions. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* vouches for that. After all, where academic, intellectual work - lauding itself to be 'un-literary' and hence serious - has been severely scanty in commemorating an inevitable portion of Bengal's post-colonial history, Ghosh's *Literature* has filled the gap.

Rest assured, this won't subject anyone to sit through a painful, spurious review of Ghosh's book. There are many available, right under the doormat. This isn't one of those. Although, I do refer to Ghosh's book time and again, along with two other works, which I have stated below. In order to get a firmer grasp on the matter, let's take a quick detour into the immediate history after India's partition.



Post-partition, the Congress had been beyond successful in splintering the strongest Dalit governmental alliance which had been in power in the country, in the colonial era. The East Bengal Namasudra Movement, being the most notable, politically-mobilized movement by the Dalits (in alliance with several Muslims), had kept the Hindu-dominated, landlord-enhanced Bengal Congress Party in opposition since the 1920s. However, with partition, the Dalit government inevitably suffered a heavy backlash, losing their unified vote-block, as it was now divided between the separate lands of India and Pakistan, becoming minorities in both the countries. West Bengal, now uplifted with the support of higher-caste Hindus, saw the election of the Bengal Congress Party at the State level.

The first wave of Migrants that Bengal received from East Pakistan happened to be the Hindu upper-caste landed gentry and the urban middle-class. This was 1948. The migrants, constituting most of the upper-class section, owing to the privilege of their educated and well-connected networks, settled in and amongst their influential friends, relatives and political associations. Others squatted on public and private lands in the city and its outskirts.





The 60s and 70s saw the second wave of migrants. This primarily constituted the poorest and lowest caste of the Hindu population, who fled from East Bengal after becoming the direct recipient of communal agitations from the Muslim-dominated Pakistan populace(triggered specifically after Mujibur Rahman's assassination). This wave of migrants to enter Bengal, owing to the scarcity of their resources and connections, had to be completely at the mercy of Governmental aid. The Congress, now in power, sought to, however, scatter this wave of lower-class Hindu migrants to colonies and settlement camps in other states, vouching that West Bengal lacked sufficient land to spare for these people. They instead were landed mostly in the uncultivated, infertile forests of Dandakarnya, already the traditional home to the tribal people. Even relocated here, the Dalit migrants didn't find an ultimatum. They were, once again, the ripe targets of the local Adivasi tribes whose native lands were being encroached upon.

The CPIM was steadfast to locate in such a turn of events, an important initiative to take up the cause of the deported and displaced refugees and present a strong oppositional lead to the Congress Government. They urged for the resettlement of the deported refugees to their native Bengal, a land which faithfully belongs to them. Jyoti Basu was not amiss in proclaiming that it would not be “an easy, administrative affair to get rid of the refugees from their colonies”. They pushed forth the cause of how - and here comes in the anecdotal reference from The Hungry Tide - the Sundarbans along the Ganges delta laid vacant and could pose as an appropriate settling ground for the refugees. Having championed the cause of the Refugees, the Leftist opposition seemed to gain a sound political base among the exiled people as well as among those belonging to the lower castes within Bengal.





Jumping to more recent times. Bengal of 1977. The Left Front transitions from Opposition to coming into power. They are suddenly a little taken aback, when they find that the exiled refugees have taken them at their word. The refugees, growing desperate under the hostile circumstances of their exile and unfurnished settlement camps, saw the Left's coming to power as a nourishing relief. Keeping in mind the Left's previous boisterous support for the refugees' cause to provide them proper shelter, the exiled refugees sold all their belongings in an attempt to secure resources to transport back to Bengal. As many as 1,50,000 refugees arrived to Bengal, in the resplendent hope, expecting the Left, now that it was in power, to honour their word.

The Left, who braved themselves as the '*people's government*', now seemed to unheedingly walk back upon their own promises. With the sudden influx of the refugees - which the Party wasn't quite ready to handle yet - now seemed to grow consciously concerned about how it might adversely affect the state's economic recovery. The ensuing contradictions led to a certain level of clash arising between the people's government and these hoards of homeless, uprooted people, already at the brink of their limits.



The People's Government, thus - democratically elected as it was, lauding its inherent support for the grassroots level workers, labourers, artisans whom they believed to form the bedrock of society, emphasising staunchly the idea of a classless, casteless society much in accordance to that of Hamilton saheb's – was suddenly adept now at dismissing the migrant crisis. Their dismissiveness did not certainly seem to affect the rich and elite wave of migrants who had made their way home to Bengal and settled in the crannies of the city already. Instead, the brunt fell upon the exiled group of refugees, primarily constituting the Dalits, the poor and the lower-class Hindu migrants.

In no time, the Left now have these refugees arrested in numbers, and deported back, forcibly, to their resettlement camps. With much irony, they were doing what their predecessors (The Congress) had done, for which they weren't quite amiss in issuing criticism before. Thus, while the upper-caste squatters, influential migrants of the first wave were getting their colonies, lands and shelters legalised widely in Calcutta and the outskirts, the group of Dalit Hindus, already uprooted and without a destination, were being transported cross-state to settlement camps, yet again.

In the chaos that ensued, a certain number of refugees did manage to escape the government's hold. They filtered down and escaped to various places within West Bengal, one of them being the Marichjhapi Islands of the Sundarbans, within the fertile, unmade, untouched grounds of which the fleeing refugees could envision the promise of a potent home.



May 1977. Nearly as many as 30,000 refugees, belonging to the SCs and other backward castes, find their way into the uninhabited lands of Marichjhappi. This is where our real tale begins, except it is no tale at all. It is history. Let me paint a picture of Marchjhappi for you, the state that it was in when the settlers stumbled upon, evading the grid of the government: wide stretches of uncultivated fertile earth, a fresh and virgin lands, without the barest whiff of human civilisation; a welcoming breadth of soft, yielding tide country mud. Such was the appeal of the Marichjhappi islands, fresh and alluring before the hoards of abandoned refugees, exhausted, frustrated, broken. It is difficult not to situate uncanny parallels between the welcoming landscapes of Sundarbans of Hamilton Sahib, and the inviting embrace which Marichjhappi extended to the dishevelled bands of migrants.

Forsaken by the government as they were, the migrants, given their incessant travelling and subjection to unceasing disavowal, were steadfast to fend for their own livelihood. Within a mere span of a couple of weeks, they had birthed a civilization out of the unmade wilderness of Marchjhappi. Paths were laid out, badhs were settled; wide stretches of lands, barbed and fenced up, were divided into smaller plots; a networking system of fishing was laid down. Huts, with thatched roofs and mud walls and bamboo support, were built, and dwellings were uniformly arranged.





The society which the Dalits built, evading the surveillance of the government, exuded utmost industry and admirable diligence. To shape a civilisation out of purely natural means. The society that shaped Marichjhapi within a mere sum of weeks alone, is not commemorated or recorded widely within any official record. But one can efficiently rely on one's sense of acuity, that the civilisation which Marchijhappi housed would not have been much different from the utopic vision which Hamilton saheb might have dreamed of. Marichjhappi, however, did not see the realisation of a mere dream of a single white man; instead, it was the materialisation of a dream that numerous natives, people of the home, dreamt of - and worked together, beyond the radar of the government - to collectively constitute.

However, the near-utopic state of affairs seemed to have been built in doom, for as fast as it saw proliferation, it saw, with equal rapidity, a drastic decline. The Marchijhappi islands, despite witnessing the marvellous feat, were not without qualms; They belonged to the Forest Departments, which only meant that the Government would soon intervene to evict the people, whom they would identify as 'squatters'.

Intervene the CPIM do indeed. But what went down in the CPIM's brutal attempt in evicting the Dalit refugees rarely have found expression in the official records or historical recollections; it has rarely been put forth before the common people's knowledge and instead has been pushed beneath the carpet, overlooked, overwritten and eventually forgotten.





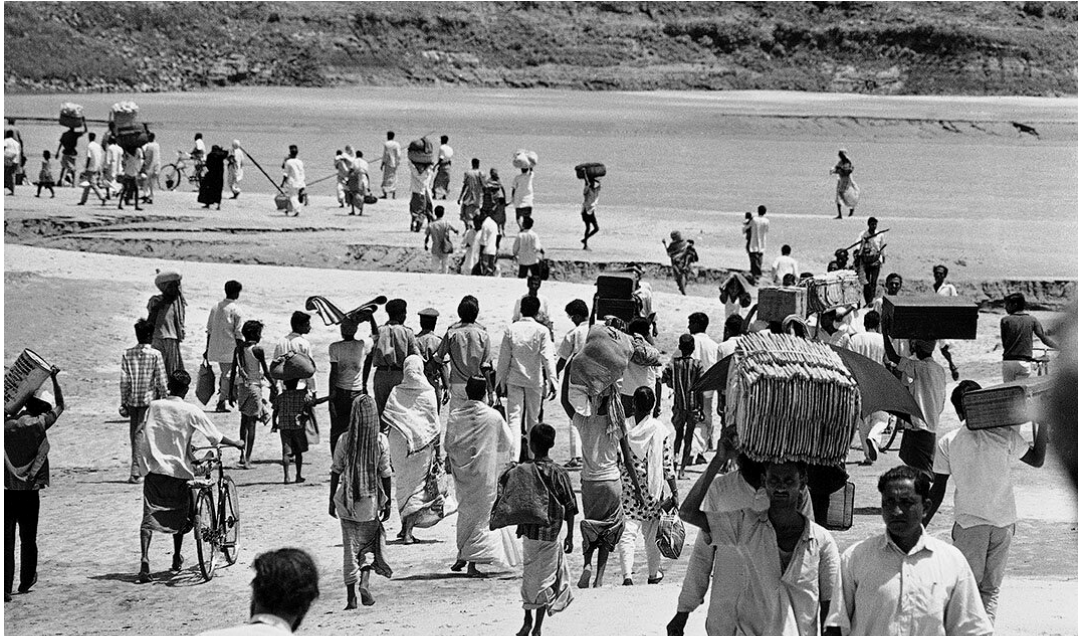
January 26, 1979. In an ironic twist of fate, on Republic Day, the CPIM brought down an economic blockade upon the Marchijhappi settlements, with thirty police launches surrounding and isolating the island out. The community was brutally tear-gassed. Their huts were vandalised; wells, tube wells, irrigation facilities and every other facet of livelihood was destroyed.

The following day, on the 27th of January, the government pulled the Forest Preservation Act into force; simultaneously Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code was invoked, prohibiting the movement of five or more people together at the same time. The boats of the refugees were sunk and destroyed. Their dinghies were massacred. With their boats and bhotbhotis, the only communication linking them to the mainland, shambled, the community lost all ties with the outer world. The food and water resources were depleting, and rice and drinking water in their stores were rapidly shrinking.

On the 31st of January '79, the police opened fire on the refugees' settlement, killing around 36 people in the wake. No official count exists of the incident.

Radical Journalism, specifically on the pages of Jugantar and Amrita Bazar Patrika - renowned Bengali dailies - was adept at reporting aggressively on the events occurring at the Sunderbans. Sensing potential threats from the power of media, the Jyoti Basu-led government soon declared Marichjhappi out of bounds, preventing the movement of journalists in and out of the islands. To distort the situation further, CPIM urged them to write in support of the eviction program, keeping in mind the 'national interest' and deemed the reportage on the massacre a mere act of sensationalism.





Isolated, alienated and cut off from the larger world, the Dalit community found itself without powerful allies. They had appealed to the national untouchable federation of the BAMCEF, but to any avail. Even the central government at the time, led by Morarji Desai, refused to issue commentary on the matter, maintaining their support for the Communist Party.

The people back in Calcutta, in support of the refugee movement, appealed to the High Court and had their cause championed. While the Calcutta High Court did rule in favour of the refugees' cause, and against the party's attempts at evicting them, CPIM outright denied the occurrence of any blockade before the court. Despite the court's judgement, the party continued their eviction mission and brutal attacks, going under the radar.

With the unceasing treatment the government subjected the refugees to, the refugees remained boldly formidable in their resistance in the face of barbarism. Scholarly research work carried out on the matter, much later in the day, indicates how numerous people, children included, meanwhile fell victim to death by cholera and other diseases; many perished out of starvation. In a final unravelling of events, the State Government of Bengal ordered the forcible evacuation of the refugees from the islands.



May 1979. This program lasted three days, taking place from May 14th to May 16th, 1979. Targeting the religious sectarianism in mind, gangs of Muslim men were employed to assist the police in evacuating the heavily Hindu-dominated refugees out of the Marichjhapi isles.

The agitation that rained down was no less than a ‘misplaced’ war. No records or accounts of the same of reliable vigour exist across scholarly and academic circles. Annu Jalais’ report suggests how the refugees battled the government forces till their last breath. With all their resources either destroyed or depleted, the islanders battled the officials with arrows made of wood; they attacked them with bricks of dried mud and the like. The government official, making up the other end countered the islanders with tear gases and guns. Police camps were set up in the neighbouring villages, and their launches were all puffed up with wire netting for protection.

With such ferocious intent, the CPIM-led officials were successful in ridding the Marichjhappi islands completely of the refugee settlements. The men were first separated from the women and the children and were escorted out by the officials. The women and children were reported to have been subjected to the brutal rape and assault carried out by the police. The corpses of the refugees - nearing several hundreds - were dumped into the river to be washed out by the tide.

Within about two weeks’ time, all signs of thriving civilisation that the Dalit refugees had put together over the span of 18 months were demolished.





It is impossible to conclude with proper accuracy the number of people who succumbed to death over the brutal span of the evacuation program. However, what is conclusively known is that no officials, no government ministers or members of the police were ever confronted, investigated or arrested with regard to the large-scale open massacre that was carried out. The official Marichjhappi file, as Ross Mallick notes, carried evidence in the form of newspaper clippings, about nearly 236 men, women and children who were killed by the police, before the incidents of May. However, while compiling the annual report, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Commission of the Central Government stated that there were no atrocities committed against the Dalits in Bengal.

The left further went ahead to state that the eviction was put into action, citing that the occupation was “disturbing the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.” From an excruciatingly objective point of view, such a cry for environmentalism does seem appropriate. However, when it is the lives of thousands of living and breathing human beings of flesh and blood pitted against the animal rights and claim for natural reservation, it becomes a daunting task to decide on the behalf of whom the scales should tip. The CPIM, having called themselves the People’s Government, seemingly failed to stand by its own people.



In an intriguing and equally infuriating unfolding of events, having driven the Dalit group of refugees off, the CPIM arranged for the settlement of its own supporters upon this land. They made use of the facilities left behind by the evacuated refugees, and suddenly, the government's strategically-motivated drive for environmental conservation was relegated to the backseat.

The unfolding of events at Marichjhappi saw the emergence of a truly Marxist utopia as Ghosh's Hamilton Saheb would have imagined; but this utopia was short-lived, and it was, ironically, the communist party-led violence upon the poorest and most underprivileged of people who had to sacrifice their lives and livelihood to privilege the cause of fauna and natural assets.

Flagrant and deliberate attempts, both at the state and the central level were made to cover up the left-led massacre brought on upon the economically and socially backward, achieving the extent of blatantly denying the occurrence of any such violence. Silence loomed equally among the Intellectual circles of Bengal Academicians. No detailed scholarly work or appropriate academic study was conducted regarding the matter for the first thirteen years of the incident. The most prolific study which does exist, came over a decade later, in the form of an unpublished doctoral thesis by Nilanjana Chatterjee. Valid accounts of the same came later from Ross Mallick and Annu Jalais. While the incident did receive regional press coverage (very limited), no appropriate coverage was aired at the national and international levels. Much later, Amitav Ghosh, in his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* heavily references the incident, crafting his tale in the backdrop of the same.



The question that haunts us, as a nation, in the wake of an incident such as in Marichjhappi and numerous others of the same vein - some of which receive recognition and some don't - is this: The preservation of wildlife and forest resources certainly is of value, but can they attain a priority when they come at the cost of the lives of human beings? In an attempt to give an answer to this, although highly theoretical in nature, Ross Mallick writes :

“Unless environmentalists are prepared to spread the costs of preservation so that the poorest people are not the only ones to pay the price, there will continue to be resistance to the imposition of alien values on these marginalised people...Unless prior arrangements for alternate livelihoods are made and compensation paid, the pursuit of a preservationist agenda will result in human tragedies.”



The Hanging Crows

Sarah Hall-Murphy

The boy and the girl walked through the forest. Crows hung from the branches. Their beaks were open, eyes bulged, feet bound with twine. The boy cast them strange, fascinated glances as they passed. The girl walked by them in silence.



The boy's clothes were still damp. His skin was pale, and it was bitterly cold. For three days rain had fallen. It had bled day and night into one, the noise of the thunder echoing through the woods.

'Here,' the girl had said, pulling the skin of a Ware apart, and there they had outlasted the rain. He remembered the face on the Ware, gristle in its teeth, the yellow of its eyes.

A large slit ran down the middle. They had not been the ones to make it- the beast had been dead when they found it. The boy hadn't been sure what they would have done if it was still alive. Died themselves, probably. No, that wasn't right. He looked at the girl again. She would not die easily. There would only be one of them lying still on the forest floor.

The girl wore a crown of daisies. Her hair fair, eyes colourless, skin pale. Yet her feet, weighed in the same clogs as he, moved with a gracefulness, a lightness, akin to the Fae.



Their mother, as the girl grew older and more beautiful, had often accused her of such things. ‘A challenging.’ The old woman had spat, her face lined with the years she had wasted. ‘A challenging, and a sore one to boot. She belongs in the fire. We oughta’ve tossed her there at birth.’ He had sat by his mother’s knee and rubbed at his stockings. He wanted to tell her nobody belonged in flames, not people, not the beasts in the forest, nor the Kings and Queens of other lands. Flames were hard to undo.

He was not devious like her (Mother, so dutiful, to have tempted them into the forest and commanded them to wait) nor did he have the cunning of his sister. But he was kind.

He poked at a hole in his many-stitched waistcoat and stared at the crows. The rain had slicked their feathers to the colour of tar, and he felt a strange pity for them.

‘You’re awfully quiet,’ said the girl.

‘I’m hungry,’ said the boy.

Though his hunger pains had quieted, the closest thing either of them had had to a good meal was dandelion-stems. The boy pointed to a nearby crow.

‘Why don’t we take one of those crows down? Father showed me how to light a fire with a flint. If we could find some...’ But even as he suggested it he knew it was futile. The crows had begun to appear a half-mile back. There was darkness here. Whether it was the darkness of Pagans the Holy Men of their village warned against, or the darkness of witches, or Ware-Wolves, or simply that of evil men, he did not know. Nothing good would come from the crows.

As they turned a corner the trees began to thin. His heart hammered in his chest. They walked into an open plain, the trees forming a canopy above. The air was warmer here, sunlight filtering through the treetops.

But that wasn’t the best part- there was a house! The thought of a good meal and a bed was intoxicating. He made to stride forward but his sister held him back.

‘What?’ He whispered.

‘Isn’t this strange? Just look at that house.’



He looked. The walls were the colour of cake, and the smell of biscuits wafted from an open window. The windows were glazed. He blinked, trying to be sure, but yes- actually glazed, like icing. Thick wafers formed the roof. Chocolate tears hung from liquorice gutters, and a row of jelly-beans paved a path to the front door.

It was like something out of a dream. He licked his lips.

‘I’m hungry,’ He said. His sister sighed. They should be cautious in the forest, but he was so hungry. Thoughts would come clearer after a good meal.

The girl insisted on knocking at the door. The boy poked the wall, and was surprised to be met with resistance. Not cake, then, but biscuit. Marshmallows grew around the door. He took a bite. It was the best thing he had ever tasted. His sister opened her mouth to chide him, but before she could say anything the door opened.





Before them stood the oldest woman he had ever seen. She had gnarled hands like the washer-women in their village, but none of the kindness in her eyes. Her skin was grey and moulting, her teeth yellow. Her eyes reminded him of the Ware.

‘Why don’t you come in?’ The woman smiled.

They spent the night there. Their beds were soft, and the woman gave them a wonderful supper. The boy woke the next morning with the smell of breakfast beckoning him downstairs. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he was surprised to hear his sister and the woman were deep in conversation.

‘You’ll teach me magic?’ His sister’s voice, excited, rang cleanly through the wall. He heard the clink of cutlery, the scraping of a plate.

‘For the right price,’ the woman said. ‘For a week’s labour, I can teach you a spell that will return you to your village.’

‘Or?’

‘Or I can teach you how to never need anyone again. Even him.’

The boy staggered back. He snuck out the backdoor, carefully, and sat on the grass. The woman was a witch! The thought unsettled him. Magic wasn’t bad in itself, but those who used it often became bad. He didn’t want that for his sister.





After a few minutes his sister joined him. She put her hand on his shoulder. A sliver of daylight between them. They sat together for a long time. Eventually the girl rose. ‘She wants us to work.’

They worked.

That night his dreams were festered. He rolled in sweat-stained sheets, grunting softly, fists clenched. He was with his father, on the mountains. The air was sharp and sweet, the goats bleating. His father looked well, which was largely how the boy knew this was a dream.

‘You look rough,’ said his father.

‘I feel it,’ the boy stared up to the mountains, which were covered with snow. ‘It’s nice up here.’

‘Don’t dawdle. Work is work.’ They continued down, herding the goats along.

‘Dad?’

‘Aye?’

‘Why?’ It was the simplicity of the word, more than anything else, that caught the breath in his throat.



His father thought. ‘I did my best with you. But the fight’s not in you. Like these goats. Made for sacrifice.’

‘Sacrifice,’ the boy repeated. He looked at the snow, which had begun to smother the land. Wind stung his eyes.

‘All magic requires sacrifice,’ His father said, in the witch’s voice.

The boy felt distorted as he woke. The mountains slipped away. He lay in the bathtub, up to his neck. His sister was speaking. He tried to reach out for her, but his arms were heavy. The coldness of the mountains was still on his skin.

The witch’s hand was on his sister’s shoulder. She was mumbling words, faster and faster, as the water rose over his eyes.

His skin turned to feathers. His eyes shrank. Pain ran like claws down his spine. When it was over he curled up, but she straightened him out. She took him by the feet. He already knew where they were going.

She picked the lowermost branch of a Hawthorn tree. His brothers did not look surprised to see him. She was crying, naturally, but his sharp bird-eyes did not miss the pleasure. The expectation of magic. She tied him to the branch, too low-down to see the rest of the crows; for this, he was glad.





Days, weeks, months. She sat with him often. Sometimes she brought excuses, other times blame. Never news from home. He watched as his sister grew into a woman, her reputation growing with her. The witch disappeared one day and did not come back. His sister stopped coming to speak to him a long time ago. He wondered if she remembers which one he is. Insanity is normal for crows, flickering, as they do, in their half-tongue, but he held on to himself. Waiting.

One day, it happened. His sister stood, holding her staff high. Flames swirled, dark golds and wicked orange, and soon the house was alight. Smoke ate up the canopy. Heat singed his feathers. He came to her, with deadwood wings.

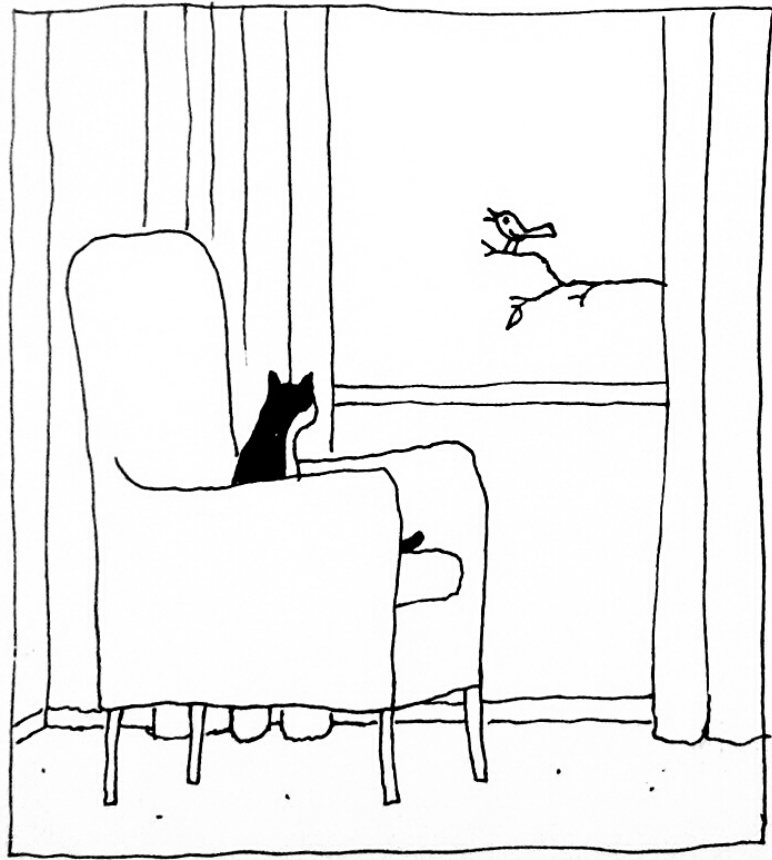
They stood, once-girl and not-boy, and watched the walls fall, the roof cave in, the sky a shroud in black.

Locks Of Medusa

Rituparna Mukherjee

Preeti saw her phone blink twice and fall silent. Her hands could not measure the distance between her frame and her phone, both lying on the queen bed, both islands unto themselves. She wanted nothing more than to sleep before transitioning to the next day.

It had been a year since her husband had shifted to Bangalore, taking a promotion in a multi-national company and she was in Delhi completing her PhD in English literature. She was lonely without him, of course, as life had taken over their marriage, after four years. She had thought it was too soon. She had not unpacked all the experiences yet. But the constraints of living in a middle-class family meant working long hours, taking promotions and moving to other cities, while their relationship took a back seat, huddled in one corner of a dark room.





Skype calls were never enough, they soon ran out of words. She would want to look at Kaushik's face but then it seemed silly considering the work that had to be done. As she saw Kaushik fall asleep on video, the white light suffusing her face, Preeti would wonder about the gap in her chest, where her heart was purported. The gap expanded a little each day, eroding cavernous spaces in the hollow of her chest where the wind would play noisily. She felt her mind had branched into a plethora of compartments, taking care of her work, her assignments, her calls to her family. She would often observe her voice in those calls as a disinterested outsider. She marvelled at its calmness and tried to equate it with the person that roamed the emptiness of her one-bedroom apartment, and her mind. She knew she was slowly unravelling each day and would often have bright images at odd hours plunging her eyes painfully, while she would be out.

Preeti knew she was in trouble. She couldn't begin to think of a means to describe her problem even to her closest confidantes, some of whom commented on her hollowed eyes and general restlessness. She often felt that her problem, stemming from loneliness, reeked of privilege. So, she corked it tighter each day, sleeping fitfully with eyes tightly shut against the darkness, opening her eyes at times, till they took comfort in the inky blackness of her room, shapes silhouetted in the faint street light streaming through dense curtains. She took to reading during these hours, to kill time, to distract her mind, to find kinship.





A few days back, while rain seeped every corner of the city and thunder proclaimed itself proudly, Preeti saw her phone blink. A message in the messenger application. She usually didn't check these messages. She found most of them unwelcome and unsavoury. But that night, she was particularly lonely and this familiar face's text, "What keeps you up so late?", stunned her. She could not grasp why she was so curiously surprised. She knew this man. She had seen him visit the university for academic work a few times. She had always been polite and distant. So, she did not really know how to best answer that text. It was 2:30 am. She escaped leaving a formal 'hello', switching off her phone in dread. As she lay in bed cajoling sleep to come to her, she mused about her visceral dread, clutching at her rib cage, crushing her muscular heart. She fell asleep soon and the next morning nodded her head ruefully, admonishing herself for overthinking.

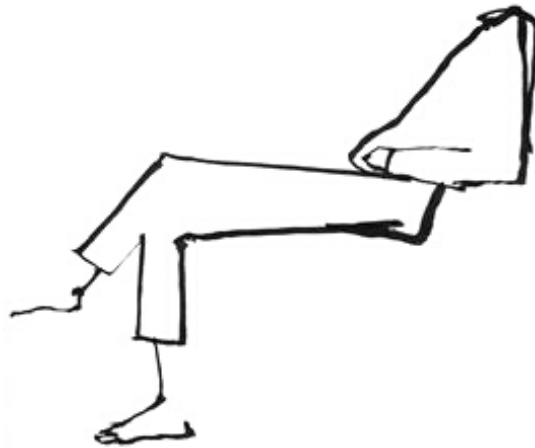
She had been reading a particularly interesting story the next day, around 2 a.m. at night, when her phone blinked again. It was the same person who had asked an expressly poetic question. She told him she didn't know how to answer that question.



Her mind had immediately become clouded and her senses befuddled, but somewhere in the corner of her mind, she sensed a thrill, a dangerous thrill and a tenderness that she had not felt in the longest time. She thought to herself, “Don’t be a goose. Talk to him”. The conversation stretched for an hour, in which she tepidly walked the surface in circles. The next morning as soon as she switched on her mobile data, a morning message popped up from him. She felt happy and the joy expanded through the day when he repeatedly asked her to meet and they sent songs, poems and letters to each other in the rain. She wondered how easily she had fallen in love, although she knew that it wasn’t that simple, she needed a more complex term for what she felt. Love was pure, simple, she wasn’t sure what she felt for him- this acute need, qualified as love per se.

She had made that digital room her own. She was fulfilled suddenly, at peace, but unnervingly happy, and that escalated bliss was the first she had felt in her life. It scared her in equal measure. She was a rational person and she watched herself pouring her soul out to this man, his attentions vacillating over the course of the two weeks they had been speaking to each other, till they reached her in a few, insufficient droplets. She reached out to hold on to the last vestiges of self-control. She had weaned away from food, sleep, friends, and conversations with Kaushik were perfunctory at best. What she was amazed at was how normal she acted, how ordinary she sounded, while her insides screamed in silent ignominy, in utter loneliness.





She thought she would tell him, this man who had appeared suddenly and twisted her mind into such intricate knots that it took all her intelligence to separate them- she would tell him how she yearned for his messages, as if her life at that moment amounted to nothing more than the digital dream she had constructed. She did. She received a lukewarm response- “Work pressure, love”, with colourful emojis that stood for nothing, just like digital intimacy made no sense to her, it made her lonelier, suffusing her body with strange yearnings that knew no home. The casualness of his message, his offhand assurance and his wish for her to take care of herself, numbed her thoroughly, which was immediately replaced with dazzling pain. Pain shot through her chest in bright red, emanating in innumerable tentacles like Medusa’s head lodged deep and angry in her insides. In her pain, she rationalised and forgave him, how did she matter in the bigger scheme of things? What did a few messages at the guilt of night matter? She couldn’t comprehend her own unraveling in the past two weeks, that had sped too fast and crawled too slow depending on the state of her mind.



Preeti got up and slowly made her way to her wardrobe. She touched Kaushik's shirt and smelled it, pressing it close to her chest. But it only smelt of rain, mildew and naphthalene balls. It wasn't him. Her pain crippled her so completely that she felt she would burst if she didn't do something. She couldn't shake the image of Medusa's head from her mind and she looked at her image in the mirror. Feeling too weak to walk, she slid across the floor to the dressing table and opened the drawer. She held Kaushik's hair trimmer in hand. Taking a long look at herself, she spoke softly, "What is the point of such sadness?". She took the trimmer and slowly shaved her head, long threads of pain, clumps of desperation and wisps of longing falling all over her. Her shorn head shone in the dim light. She rubbed her fingers on her clean scalp and smelled it. It smelled of talcum, shampoo and freshly mown grass. It was oddly calming. Preeti didn't feel as light as she thought she would, but there was a supernatural calm, a stillness as she looked at the night sky. The phone blinked white but she didn't want to look at it anymore. She knew that the next morning was another matter. She would come to it slowly, like dawn leached into the skyscape.



“I am Speaking from Hell”

Sonakshi Srivastava

*Translated from Harishankar Parsai's
“Main Nark Se Bol Raha Hoon”*

O! Idol worshippers! You are not in the habit of listening to the living, therefore I am speaking after dying. You take out a procession for the rotting corpse of someone whose existence you never acknowledged while they were alive. You light a lamp at the grave of someone you hated all your life. You do not bother to offer a handful of water to someone as they lay dying but take their ashes to be immersed in the Ganges. Arre, you mock the living and worship the dead, and this is why I speak after my death. I am speaking from Hell.

But what came to me that I, who had stayed tongue-tied all through my life should venture to speak thus from this corner of Hell? Why, I became privy to the news that my unfortunate death has ruffled quite a few feathers amongst your ministers.





I heard that your minister claimed in the Parliament that I did not starve to death, rather I died by suicide. Oh, to be murdered and then be held responsible for the murder!

That I should die of hunger and hunger be not acknowledged for my death? That I should die scrambling and screaming for corn, and it be not mentioned as the cause of my death? Well, I could have tolerated all of this – I have measured my life savouring scorn so much so that compassion had become as unappetizing to me as the pure ghee of the countryside to a city dweller but for an incident that occurred today.

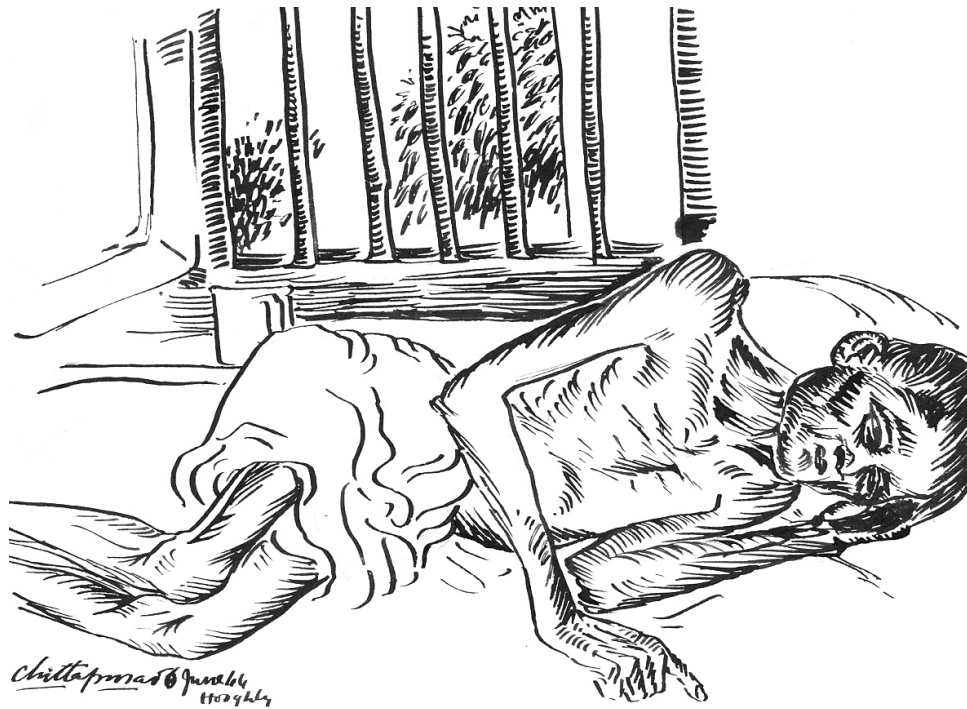
It so happened that this morning, my dog saw me through a hole in the wall that separated Heaven from Hell, and with a “*kurr-kurr*” began to violently express his affections. My surprise and disappointment knew no bounds when I figured out that my dog was in Heaven while I was in Hell. My dog is very dear to me – dearer than his own dog was to Yudhishtira. He had stayed by my side even when my wife eloped with a rich man, and he had also died by my side. He did not abandon me.



The wealthy merchant from the next door nursed a desire to pet him, and his wife absolutely doted on him but he refused to leave me, he refused to be tempted. I was delighted to see him so merry in Heaven but I could not also forget the injustice meted out to me. And anyway, this was no Earth, where no appeal is heard, where only the appellant is punished. Where, due to red-tapism, the order to extinguish a fire arrives only a year later. Here complaint is heard immediately. So, I too went to God, and prayed, “After enduring so many wrongs on Earth, I came here with the hope that justice will be served, but what a miscarriage of justice is this – my dog is in Heaven while I am in Hell. I never committed any wrong all through my life. I died of hunger but committed no theft. I did not beg anybody for anything, and this dog is just like any other dog. He was beaten quite a few times for stealing and eating your offering, and you have placed him in Heaven?”

God glanced at his big book of accounts and declared that it mentioned suicide as my cause of death. I replied, “No my Lord! I died of starvation. I did not commit suicide.” He reverted, “No! You are lying! The food minister of your country has written that you committed suicide. The autopsy of your body also warrants this claim.” The Lord narrowly escaped from falling off the skies when I declared that the report bore no degree of truth in it. There had been no scope of an autopsy, for my body had already been burnt. It was only ten days later when questions about my death were put up and answered in Parliament. Did they conduct an autopsy on my ashes? And then, I began to narrate my story.





You listen to it as well. You would not know where I lived, where I stayed or where I died. The world is so large that one cannot keep an account of others. And what do you know that even while I was breathing, I was alive? I was alive in the sense that I kept deferring death day after day. In reality, I had been alive only for a brief second after my birth for my death had begun from the very next moment. You must be aware of that mansion in the bazaar? Behind it, there is a door to clean the toilet from one end, and on the other, seeking the support of the wall is my shanty. The owner of the mansion wanted to tear down my shanty and construct another of his toilets there. Had I not died, I would have also witnessed the victory of the rich man's toilet over my humble dwelling. I had just stayed in that shanty all my life. There was food all around me. The rats who came from beyond the wall would grow fatter each passing day and would stay absent for a day or two as they were busy paving a new way for their fatter selves. But despite all this, I was starving, I was wasted. The grains costed ten rupees a seer. My death was cheaper than this. At last, Death stopped for me. The day It arrived was also the day the rich man's son from across the mansion was getting married. He was very affluent. The entire village was aware that he housed thousands of sacks of grains but their lips were sealed. He was afforded protection by the police. And that day, Death with Its black claws had inched closer towards me.

Small, If Uncharacteristic, Gesture Of Affection

Akash Kumar

White, and white, and white; discoloured, though, and getting discoloured more for the dust in the air — he said he liked his room bare, because when it was bare, there was nothing to get sick of, no colour, no poster, no plant, no postcard, no painting, no framed photograph with a face that you might hate to look at the next morning you woke up.

But that's where you're wrong, I tried to reason with him — of course you can grow to be sick of it, you can grow to be sick of nothing being there.

“Then I'll put something there and take it away while it's still new or unfamiliar in its place, and then even the bareness is unfamiliar for a while.”

I said: “So you'd rather have nothing, than have something and be afraid you'll grow to hate it?”

“No,” he said, “no...no, it's not being afraid. It's being safe.”

“What's the difference?”

“You don't get it, do you? — tell me something, would you rather have a parent, then face them having to die; or have a parent so aloof and petulant you can hardly hate them enough? Or would you grow up alone and have only to face yourself?”





Aren't you the one to ask that question, I thought, and almost scoffed. "For me, it's not a choice," I said.

He scoffed. Hah, the scoff said, that's what I thought. "Well, for me it is a choice. And I choose to not acquire and love."

Doesn't that make you a hated coward? I thought, but did not dare to say out loud. I stood up and left the room, awkwardly slow because I wasn't sure if he deemed the conversation complete, thinking it a terrible, and heinous paradox that the fear of losing what you loved, or losing your love for it — and the two were hardly two different things — should precede even making an acquaintance with what you might go on to love, so much so that the fear heisted all your patience, and softness, it took to nurse love alive.



After grief and other things that go down in history as turning points

Aakriti Jain

How did they go
Day after day
Sitting in the same
Corner seat of the metro
When so many stations—
They had left behind them

All simmering in the summer
And dormant in winter nights
With a cut-off tower standing
In the middle of the city
fighting for its religious rights

And when another was being built
From scratch right in front
Of everyone's eyes

But at each station,
You became hopeful
To live the past
And leave the past
Behind



And leap out
like a ballet dancer

Wasn't it at Jor Bagh
You could get off and gather
Every sweet little outing
With your mother even
When the world was
Half in-there and out-there

Your mother
Who insisted at home
to let the memories blossom
into escapades of her own mother
gone like the whispers of a young heart:

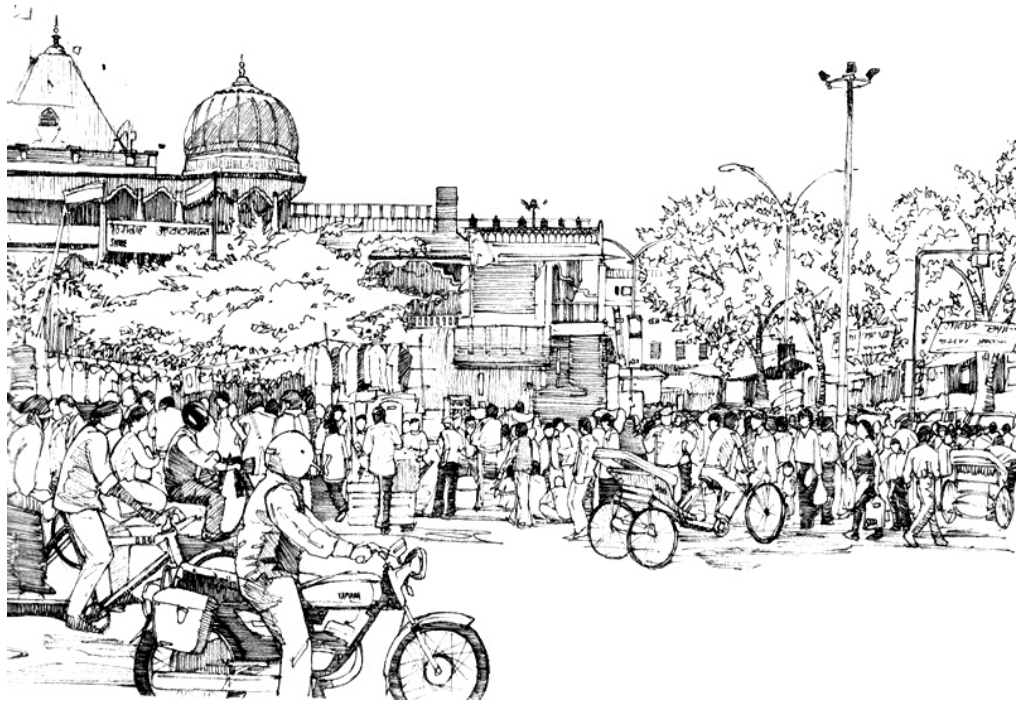
Let's go then, go to Khan

That colony market that
Built itself up on the scraps
Of those who came and those who left

Leaving some open houses with stucco balconies
and 80s music chiming in
— and—

Some book stores too that line on its face
Sitting quietly in a time-worn place





Where every

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Every

Dilliwalla

Non-Dilliwalla

And future Dilliwalla

Walks by

without

As much as a thought to the past

But sitting in that noiseless tube

Going up and down the city

Like a kiddie roller-coaster

Did they really hope

That the new

Stations

Progress

Buildings

Modern

Will bring in convenience,
Or just a different pink, magenta
or purple line?

Trembling Teacups

I look at your hands
As you carry my teacup
With your trembling left hand
And I wish you don't spill it.

You light up the cigarette
Dangling on my lips
And they curl a little
Looking at yours.

The clock is ticking
A little too loud today,
And I feel, a little faster, too.
But you don't really seem
To care for clocks.

You rush from here
To there. Without having
To catch a breath. And
Somehow I, too, forget
To catch one, today.

I can't stop hearing
The ticking clock,
So you lend me your hands
To cover my ears,
And the world goes silent,
Once again.

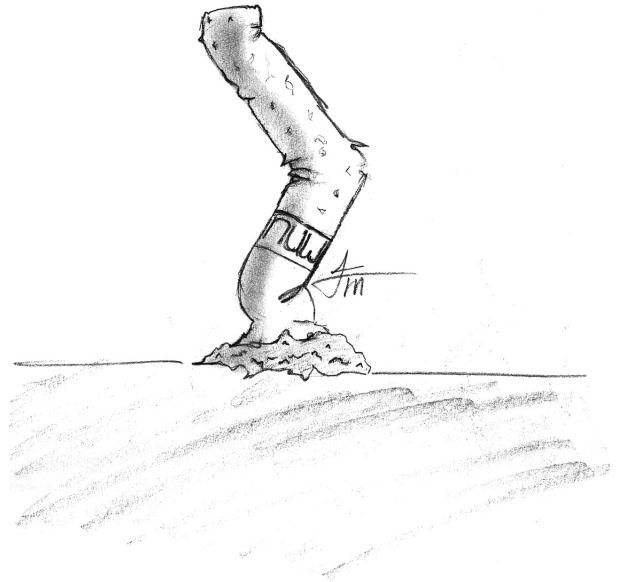
Apoorva Phutela



I look at the cigarette
Burning between your fingers;
I burn a little with it, too.
You shed its ashes on the floor;
I almost fall.

My head feels dizzy,
Probably the lack of breaths
That I've taken today. But
You're still moving,
So I try to catch up.

The clock is still ticking
And your cigarette is
About to finish.
I think I have to lift your hands,
Before I go deaf, and I think
I need to breathe
Before you shed the final ashes.



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