EVENINGS AT DADANGIR

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'A personal reflection on the ways in which the wild overwhelms the outsider' - a fictional sketch by the author on his stay in the forest of Abujh Mad.

Though not strictly on DNT" lines, this beautiful sketch takes us to the original living style not only of the Adivasis of Mad but also of some of the communities notified criminal in course of time.

The Sun was about to go down the distant western hill. I sat by the perennial Dadangir stream. The pigeon flew by. Every evening it flew over Garpa, the village that had offered me residence during my stay in Abujhmad. I asked the pigeon to come and sit by me, and to tell of the lands he had seen during the day. He said it was not the time for tales, and that he was in a hurry.

“The Sun is dying and I am going to have a last look at the Sovereign.”

Uneasy, I inquired who said the Sun was dying? “All inhabitants of the forest know. They are rushing to the hill while you sit here dipping your feet in the stream”, admonished the pigeon as he disappeared towards the hill. Though I watched the sunset everyday from there, it was for the first time I noticed the sun sets behind the same hill, at exactly the same time, in the same primeval fashion, and above all, everyday. For the first time I received a hitherto elusive permanence about this simple and lucid certainty. For the first time, too, it registered that while the sun is “dying” the wild is starkly silent; much more silent than during any other part of the day-night cycle.

I did not know wherefrom the Dadangir came, what sources fed it or what vegetation mingled with its edges. A few meters short of the eastern-most hut it disappeared underground. After flowing sub-terrain it reappeared some 1500 meters further on, on the southeastern edge of the village. But this time it emerged as hundreds of tiny drops of water, from a small gorge in a wall-like elevation, collecting into a crystal clear small pool. From this overflowing pool the Dadangir again took its stream-like form before inscrutably disappearing into the vegetation once again.

That evening, like all other evenings in Mad, was starkly silent. Not a blade moved, no rustling in the woods, the dust raised by children playing in the distance fell silently; as though they were solemnly enacting an evening ritual of centuries. They seemed to be playing silently,
raising and kicking dust. Their noises mingled so well with the ancient silence, each partaking of the other in ample measure.

There is something mystical and unknowable about evenings in *Abujhmad*. For the greater part of the day, however, the wild is a quiet world, still and frozen. Any sound that occurred obtained a strange mystery; all mysteries are usually silent in one way or the other. The region added to such mystery an enhanced magnitude, bordering on both awe and human vulnerability. The wind penetrates the density of forest without a whisper. A sudden crack somewhere, intelligible to the ear but without sound. Almost invariably, while walking on a trail, I would deliberately infringe this silence, advertising my presence in a place I seemed irreconcilably different from. It always appeared to me as just the note that jarred. Though it was to reassure myself and warn the creatures that a stranger, too, was on the move; only my movements — and the occasional aircraft that flew overhead — seemed to make a sound that had no intelligibility in the circumstance; the only sounds dispossessed of silence.

Awe and wonder came easily, sometimes exultation — sometimes, for a man ‘alone’ there, fear. The wild required new sets of life-related proportions, lesser scales and structures to measure oneself with lest one felt dislodged. There was very little of my upbringing and sensibility, significations, concepts and constructs, the infallible certitudes and exactitudes that had driven my belief systems and the scientific secularism; the repressive and totalitarian discourse which has lent a lurking illegitimacy to me and my universe; very little of my equipment that could be put to sane use. Not that one never had any surmise of such tyranny earlier; here it came with an unanticipated starkness. It was humbling.
The forest is too vast, too impersonal and variegated; too deeply labyrinthine, shadowed and too much of a poser for one not nurtured in that sensibility where clarity absolved itself of precision and certitude. Forest and man here have no precise boundaries between them; and whatever forms of it exist have non-secular value and significance, ever ready for restructuring and redefinition. Observance and infringement of such boundaries were never antithetical. There was fear but no conflict. In the outside world nature and most of human activity seem to be in continuous conflict, the magnitude of it varying with time and context. Something as ‘natural’ as traditional farming, too, has been in such conflict. The greater the land usage the lesser the space for wild animals and vegetation who have very little space to establish themselves without threat to their lives. I have a childhood memory etched in my mind of a visit to my native village: birds hopping behind ploughs looking for insects, like beggars, assured and scared simultaneously. They build their nests and identify watering holes in and around agricultural settings. Agriculture caused a relationship between birds and man where very little existed, certainly not of the kind we have come to see; man came to mediate between earth and other creatures. Wild has very few birds; the difference is conspicuous and occasionally surprising. But then wild has no agriculture.

Here one needs a fellow man for reassurance. Even a tiny fire in the dark distance creates immeasurable magic with one’s disposition, momentary or enduring. Alone he may lose all significance. There are reassurances of another kind. Warmth, light, moisture, time and space, love and generosity — so essential for life — are always present and dependable. Above all, a discourse that was conspicuous more by its absence, a discourse of silence, generous and accommodative, without the repressive exactitudes and certitudes that characterize the tormenting contemporary freedom, rigorously imposed. There is much love inherent in
accomodativeness, just as there is much hatred in not letting be. The Madias’ attitude towards an outsider can be summed up as, ‘We may not be able to do much for you but you can be here’. Silence is probably the primary ingredient of democracy and freedom. Hasn’t life continued in these dense wilds over times immemorial, relatively unchanged? Freedom is something not to be aspired or worked for. It is there, along with warmth, light, moisture, time, space, love and generosity.

In his less than meager loincloth, Banda was every inch an emperor. Stout, straight and dark, he was mostly silent, with a dignity that surfaced in his majestic appearance and magic in his fewest of words. At may be less than 50, he was the ‘grand old man’ in the village, having lived a ‘fulsome’ life. He didn’t appear to have many premises, presumptions or inferences. ‘Everything perpetuates itself’. For him everything arises both spontaneously and perpetually all the time, everywhere; in the sunset behind the distant hill, the Dadangir flowing along its way, the gurgles and crackles, the weeds that spring up in the rains; the continuity between the dead and the living is tenacious and indivisible. For Banda, the wild perpetuates itself just as the sunset perpetuates itself every evening at exactly the same moment, in exactly the same fashion, behind exactly the same hill. There is a certain permanence about things, which the Madia does not want to change; a certain everlasting-ness in his culture and way of life, in his relationship with the world around and beyond him. Banda lives in an economy of permanence.

‘Who can change the circumstance of birth, death and the interregnum, and to what end? Change is an act of transgression, un-silent and shrill. Our wilds are a perpetuity of
immeasurably ephemeral presences and ephemeral absences; in all its seen and unseen forms’. Such are the intangible promises that keep Banda directed and full of reassurance, but no guarantees; guarantees are constructs which don’t exist in the indivisible reality of body and location; pursuits which are ‘futile and foolish.’ For him the only proximate tangibility is his tiny thatch hut and acceptance that someday he too must come to an end just as his hut has many a time over in his own lifetime. In search of guarantees, my mind has often argued, ‘why don’t the Madias live in caves which are scattered everywhere, made up of rock, closed on three sides, safe and secure, reassuring of a greater endurance of life under such conditions’. But for Banda, the assurance or guarantee is not the issue. The greater the distance from the grass hut into civilizational constructs the greater the avoidance of the enduring and everlasting. ‘You can escape only into impermanence’. Unlike a predominantly rational being he remains free to mystically participate with both the animate and inanimate of his life and times.

(This note was written sometime in 1983. It was initially a field note.

Photography was prohibited in Abujhmad. The pix were taken many years later in areas surrounding it.)