

It Takes a Village

Abed Chaudhury

A village has no visible borders and yet it identifies its boundary in intangible ways enough to cause its inhabitants to identify with her. Like a tree or a river there is no confusion about its existence.

And yet there has to be a discrete space where a village begins. Is it a certain bend in the river where the forest ends, spawning a valley that undulates miles upon



dazzling miles of flowering mustard? Or does a village begin at the edge of a marsh so large that it is called a haor (Shagor, shaor then haor). In search of the origin of the village where I was born I recently made a journey east following memory and reclaiming momentarily the

acute sense of wonder of my early childhood. I was determined to see and touch the spot where my village began.

In the east of where I was born there lies a large cluster of hills, almost a mountain, framed against the sky. Elders described to me of once deep forests where roamed the kuki tribesmen riding on long sticks to gallop fast and hunting for prey for human sacrifice.

Green always looks blue from a distance and such is also the allure of past; it illuminates through all our miseries and lights a shining lamp making events that were once plain seem romantic. The blue hills of my childhood, magnified through memory is thus part real and part artifice. Distinct from the sky-blue the forest-blue seems painted on the lighter blueness of the sky; like inept water colour on a rain-filled day of July.

On the foreground, closer to what I can touch different hues of green mingle and coalesce; the brighter yellow closer and the distant ones darker towards green slowly shifting dreamlike into the pale blueness of the sky, and slowly becoming a part of the distant landscape. As I moved towards it in my car the distant scenery slowly unravelled, exposing rice fields, rows after rows of Jarul trees and beyond them the beginning of the climb of a hill. On the right was the river Manu coming down gushing from the elevation and framing the whole landscape into a stream of

turbid water with undefined edge as the water rises and crosses the bank, depositing silt on the adjoining plane.

And then, suddenly I was struck by an amazing sight. Beyond the water on the other side of the river stands an erect shining structure, metallic and steely, quite foreign to this landscape both in its sudden ugliness and severity. I got a jolt, almost a thud, as in when dream ends and one becomes awake into a present that is hard by its edge and viciousness. For that metallic structure of huge barbed-wire disfigures the landscape and prevents me from even viewing the edge of this extended greenery. I have now come to where Bangladesh literally ends and a fenced border declares the presence of India beyond. This is the wall of barbed wire that now divides Bangladesh from India; a metallic mega-construction of India that has even been described in Time magazine recently.

Annada Shankar Ray wrote many years ago, describing the partition, roughly in translation

“you are upset with the little girl because she has broken a glass jar?

What about you, old fools, who have broken the face of Bengal?”

Aghast at the sight of this border barricade I tried to construct a similar poem but failed. Poetry wasn't meant to depict barbed-wire fences. It is an example of how the green-blue reality and memory of a village is pitted against the assertion of a state with all its paranoia and fear .

So now about the beginning of my village I have a concrete story with a modern edge. My village, along with Bangladesh itself starts at a fence of barbed wire and flows into a beautiful valley inwards into Bangladesh. As to the other side of the barbed wire, there are other older stories and dreams that I will revert to later.

So in space, village always starts somewhere and begins its unfettered journey claiming landscape, waterways, hills and valleys and merging into successive villages till the journey faces another man-made border. In time a village is created out of the proto-villages of thousands of years ago when our nomadic ancestors left a life of roaming and settled down and became known by the space of where they lived rather than the length of the journey or the number of sheeps they had. That transition and the drama behind it will constitute our next story.