The Hungry Tide

Amitav Ghosh

Published by HarperCollins

The Tide Country

Kanai spotted her the moment he stepped onto the crowded platform: he was deceived neither by her close-cropped black hair, nor by her clothes, which were those of a teenage boy – loose cotton pants and an oversized white shirt. Winding unerringly through the snack-vendors and tea-sellers who were hawking their wares on the station's platform, his eyes settled on her slim, shapely figure. Her face was long and narrow, with an elegance of line markedly at odds with the severity of her haircut. There was no *bindi* on her forehead and her arms were free of bangles and bracelets, but on one of her ears was a silver stud, glinting brightly against the sun-deepened darkness of her skin.

Kanai liked to think that he had the true connoisseur's ability to both praise and appraise women, and he was intrigued by the way she held herself, by the unaccustomed delineation of her stance. It occurred to him suddenly that perhaps, despite her silver nose-stud and the tint of her skin, she was not Indian, except by descent. And the moment the thought occurred to him, he was convinced of it: she was a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture, in the way she stood, balancing on her heels like a flyweight boxer, with her feet planted apart. Among a crowd of college girls on Kolkata's Park Street she might not have looked entirely out of place, but here, against the sooty backdrop of the commuter station at Dhakuria, the neatly composed androgyny of her appearance seemed out of place, almost exotic.

Why would a foreigner, a young woman, be standing in a south Kolkata commuter station, waiting for the train to Canning?

It was true of course that this line was the only rail connection to the Sundarbans. But so far as he knew it was never used by tourists – the few who travelled in that direction usually went by boat, hiring steamers or launches on Kolkata's riverfront. The train was mainly used by people who did *daily-passengeri*, coming in from outlying villages to work in the city.

He saw her turning to ask something of a bystander and was seized by an urge to listen in. Language was both his livelihood and his addiction and he was often preyed upon by a near-irresistible compulsion to eavesdrop on conversations in public places. Pushing his way through the crowd he arrived within earshot just in time to hear her finish a sentence that ended with the words 'train to Canning?' One of the onlookers began to explain, gesticulating with an upraised arm. But the explanation was in Bengali and it was lost on her. She stopped the man with a raised hand and said, in apology, that she knew no Bengali: *ami Bangla jani na.* He could tell from the awkwardness of her pronunciation that this was literally true: like strangers everywhere, she had learnt just enough of the language to be able to provide due warning of her incomprehension.

Kanai was the one other 'outsider' on the platform and he quickly attracted his own share of attention. He was of medium height and at the age of forty-two his hair, which was still thick, had begun to show a few streaks of grey at the temples. In the tilt of his head, as in the width of his stance, there was a quiet certainty, an indication of a well-grounded belief in his ability to prevail, in most circumstances. Although his face was otherwise unlined, his eyes had fine wrinkles fanning out from their edges – but these grooves, by heightening the mobility of his face, emphasized more his youth than his age. Although he was once slight of build, his waist had thickened over the years but he still carried himself lightly, and with that alertness bred of the traveller's instinct for inhabiting the moment.

It so happened that Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescoping handle. To the vendors and travelling salesmen who plied their wares on the Canning line, this piece of luggage was just one of the many details of Kanai's appearance – along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and suede shoes –

that suggested middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence. As a result he was besieged by hawkers, urchins and bands of youths who were raising funds for a varied assortment of causes: it was only when the green-and-yellow electric train finally pulled in that he was able to shake off this importuning entourage.

While climbing in, he noticed that the foreign girl was not without some experience in travel: she hefted her two huge backpacks herself, brushing aside the half-dozen porters who were hovering around her. There was a strength in her limbs that belied her diminutive size and wispy build; she swung the backpacks into the compartment with practised ease and pushed her way through a crowd of milling passengers. Briefly he wondered whether he ought to tell her that there was a special compartment for women. But she was swept inside and he lost sight of her.

Then the whistle blew and Kanai breasted the crowd himself. On stepping in he glimpsed a seat and quickly lowered himself into it. He had been planning to do some reading on this trip and in trying to get his papers out of his suitcase it struck him that the seat he had found was not altogether satisfactory. There was not enough light to read by and to his right there was a woman with a wailing baby: he knew it would be hard to concentrate if he were occupied in fending off a pair of tiny flying fists. It occurred to him, on reflection, that the seat on his left was preferable to his own, being right beside the window – the only problem was that it was occupied by a man immersed in a Bengali newspaper. Kanai took a moment to size up the newspaper reader and saw that he was an elderly and somewhat subdued-looking person, someone who might well be open to a bit of persuasion.

'*Aré moshai*, can I just say a word?' Kanai smiled as he bore down on his neighbour with the full force of his persuasiveness. 'If it isn't all that important to you, would you mind changing places with me? I have a lot of work to do and the light is better by the window.'

The newspaper reader goggled in astonishment and for a moment it seemed he might even protest or resist. But on taking in Kanai's clothes and all the other details of his appearance, he

underwent a change of mind: this was clearly someone with a long reach, someone who might be on familiar terms with policemen, politicians and others of importance. Why court trouble? He gave in gracefully and made way for Kanai to sit beside the window.

Kanai was pleased to have achieved his end without a fuss. Nodding his thanks to the newspaper reader, he resolved to buy him a cup of tea when a *cha'ala* next appeared at the window. Then he reached into the outer flap of his suitcase and pulled out a few sheets of paper covered in closely written Bengali script. He smoothed the pages over his knees and began to read.

> 'In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river's journey – and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands.
>
> 'Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands. But that is what it is: an archipelago, stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh.
>
> 'The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *ãchol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands; some are immense and some no larger than

sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago. These islands are the rivers' restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. Some of these channels are mighty waterways, so wide across that one shore is invisible from the other; others are no more than two or three kilometres long and only a few hundred metres across. Yet, each of these channels is a 'river' in its own right, each possessed of its own strangely evocative name. When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumour of land, echoing back from the horizon. In the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a *mohona* – a strangely seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement.

'There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.

'When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the

foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.

'There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as "the Sundarban", which means, "the beautiful forest". There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the *sundari* tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word's origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide – *bhati*. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as *bhatir desh* – the tide country – except that *bhati* is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the *bhata*. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name "tide country" is not just right but necessary. For as with Rilke's catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide

'we, who have always thought of joy
as rising . . . feel the emotion
that almost amazes us
when a happy thing falls.'