

A. REFUGEE STORY

CHAPTER - 1 :

A small little brick cottage with a thatched bamboo roof stood at the outskirts of Nalamara Village in Jessore district of East Pakistan. Behind the cottage lay acres of green fields covered with the changing shades of paddy. To the left of the cottage on a few small plots, slim jute plants swayed, ready for harvesting. A small courtyard stretched in front of the little cottage separating it from the road and fenced off with twigs bits of bamboo and some barbed wire. A cow stood in a corner with hay piled up neatly in stacks behind it. A few ducks quacked gaily at the far end of the courtyard. A little plump girl with rosy cheeks - about 5 years old was building little huts and figures with clay. At the doorway of the cottage stood a thin, haggard, young woman - her face showing signs of strain and possible disease. The little child, the cow or the road did not exist for her unseeing eyes, for she was deep in thought. A month ago she had lost her husband, of that dreaded disease that people called T.B. He was a farmer by profession but also supplemented his income by being a retailer of rice. He used to go to neighbouring villages quite often on work and always on returning would bring back some small knick knack for her - a bead necklace or a new cooking pot and some sweets for the children. Atul Biswas for that was his name was both a loving husband and an adoring father. Then he developed that horrible cough which became worse day by day. She used to ask him to give up smoking the Hookah because the village doctors had said that that was bad for him but he would not listen. She remembered the day when he suddenly coughed out a little fresh blood. This had worried her and she insisted on his going to see a bigger doctor in the nearby village. There the doctor had examined him and advised daily injections. On enquiring at a chemist they found that each injection would cost Rs.5. They bought two vials and after they had been administered and Atul had told her that he felt much better. Being a lower middle class couple even 10 Rupees had been quite a drain on their income. Where could they afford daily injections? She remembered that Atul had appeared to improve but later he began to get worse day by day and one day a month ago, he had collapsed while she was trying to give him his lunch. His death came as a great shock to her, more so because it closely followed the death of her youngest child - Momta - 5 months - from a disease that had sent the child into horrible contortions and spasms.

Savitri's life was shattered - she had 3 little children to look after 10 years old Anand, 8 years old Lohi and 5 years old Sabita and she knew that her husband had not been able to save much. What would a widow do in such a circumstance?

A month had passed and with the help of the neighbours and with her brother's wife she had managed to reorganise the household a bit and start her work for her children's sake. But the previous zest was missing. She used to suddenly feel very tired and was not able to concentrate on her work - whether it was cleaning rice, cooking or washing clothes. What was more a week after her husband's death she had begun to cough and though the sputum was always whitish she had the urking suspicion that she may have contracted the disease from her husband.

Her thoughts were suddenly disturbed by the sound of pattering feet and she looked up to see Anand and Lokhi come running in panting heavily. It was only 10'0 clock and school never gave over so early. She wondered what had happened.

Anand was the first to reach her and in his excited shrill voice told her about the strange men in uniform they had seen near the market place and about the shouting and yelling and running of people. Their school teacher had asked them to rush home immediately. On the way they had passed their uncle's house and every one there seemed to be collecting things and getting ready to leave on some journey. By the time, Anand had finished his story - She heard the sound of heavy footsteps and turned to the roadside to see her brother come running towards the house. "There was no time to lose", he said, "since the army had begun looting the village and everyone was heading for the woods". They were lucky since the houses were on the outskirts of the village but soon the army was bound to reach there. Asking her to collect as much as they could he had them run into the woods to the east of the village and hide till he joined them. Then he rushed back towards his house. Savitri was so surprised that she did not know what to do. But he had said that there was no time, so she rushed into the house - got out the only two large cooking pots they had, hurriedly put some of the food grains they had into them. She asked Anand to collect all their clothes in a sack and Lokhi was asked to take the lamp and little bottle of oil. Sabita watched all this activity with great excitement but was unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Within about fifteen minutes four figures - a woman and three little children could be seen making their way towards the woods. Once safely within the boundaries of the forest they stopped to take a few breaths - and began to ask the other women what had happened. Some of them who had been in the middle of the village and had fled as soon as the trouble began told about the killing of people and that the army was burning down their huts and taking the corrugated metal roofs. Some said there had been argument with the men folk before the trouble started - something about harbouring Mukti bouj volunteers or something.

The little group waited-nervous and tense Minutes grew into hours and it was only in the evening that some of the men-folk reached the woods. They talked about the looting and wanton destruction of their homes and how anyone offering resistance was shot at once. The roads in the villages were littered with bodies of wounded people. Many women had been rounded up and taken away in trucks by the army. One thing was clear - this raid was just the beginning. They were bound to return tomorrow, There was only one thing to do and that was to begin a journey into neighbouring India which was about 42 miles away. The villagers had heard about some trouble and even about an exodus a few day ago and now they too were being forced to become part of it.

It was 10 p.m. by the time the people had gathered in the woods some had returned to their homes only to find smoke and ruin - destruction and desolation. They retrieved a few more articles from the ruins and came back with a few bullock carts.

All the dead had been collected near the market square, while the sounded but alive had been brought some how on makeshift stretches of bamboo orcarried in bullock carts. There was no time to loose. With their hurricane lanterns all lighted the group of about 500 villagers began their long journey. There was complete silence except for the occassional cry of a child or a clang of a metal pot againt as other. A silence of sadness grief and despair. 500 peace loving villagers had become refugges. The march had begun.

CHAPTER II.

Anand walked a little ahead with Lokhi while Savithri followed on a bullock cart with Sabita. Her brother had insisted that she should travel on a cart since she was ill. Her cough was becoming worse. She had noticed this even earlier that exertion only increased her symptoms. Sabita was full of questions. Where were they going? Why at night? Why was every one so silent? Why did uncle who used to always laugh and play with her look so grim? But she was in no mood to answer any of these question. The bullock cart jogged along over the muddy roads. - A small caravan of carts and groups of walking humanity. It was noon when they reached the edge of another forest. The group settled down for some rest - everyone was tired and the silence still prevailed. No one was in a mood to start a fire or cook so they had to eat puffed rice and Bengal gram. Some had managed to bring a few vegetable which they now munched raw.

When the organge glow of twilight spread over the grey skies, the group rresumed their journey. The whole day had passed slowly but they had to be patient since they new movement during the day time., was bound to be noticed by some of the army units which were raiding the neighbouring villages.

Three days and three nights the march continued. The bullock carts had to be abandoned near the river-side and small country crafts manned by courageous young boatmen ferried the marchers to the opposite banks. Here

and there they saw desolate uninhabited villages with smoke rising from the smouldering ruins. Jute crops had been burnt by spraying them with special oils. Few bloated bodies lay floating idly on the riverside.

Little groups of people could be seen coming from other directions as the Indian border was nearing. No one dared to travel by the roads since the Pakistan army would surely be stationed there. Through Jute field and wading through paddy fields they made their way. Silently but expectantly, till they were sure they were within the Indian Border. It was so difficult to make out since the fields on the India side just merged into the fields on the Pakistani side.

On entering Bongaon the first Indian village the marchers were surprised to see a small board welcoming them and directing, them to a border reception Office. Having a sigh of relief many of them reached the office. A large Q was already there waiting to be processed. The procedure was imple simple. The refugees were given Typhoid, Cholera inoculations and small pox vaccinations. Then a border slip was handed over to the head of the family with the number of members written on it. They were then directed to the Government Office at Bongaon Camp. It was a long wait sometimes upto 5 days but soon all were given shelter in makeshift, bamboo huts or tents. The whole place was packed with refugees. Savitri lay on a small mat which Anand had been able to get after talking to as ochre robed monk who had been busy with the arrangements for the refugee. ~~Ma~~makrishna Mission was the ~~name~~ of the voluntary organisation that had taken on the task of feeding and helping this mass of humanity. Anand used to stand in line and get some food daily at their centre which he shared with his mother and two sisters. Savitri hardly ate anything. She was very tired and her cough had become unbearable. A day after arrival she too had brought out blood in the sputum. She was convinced that she had become the victim of that dreaded disease that had killed her husband.

For Anand and the two little girls seeing their Mother so ill was frightening but waht could they do. Anand tried to ask his uncle to help but now everyone was thinking only about his own family and its survival, Who had time for a dying widow and her 3 little children.

One day while talking to some other refugees Anand was asked to take his mother to Barasat. "There, "the camps were less crowded and medical aid was easily available. Anand was yet too young to understand the seriousness of his mother's illness but one thing he knew she must be shown to a doctor soon.

Next day he somehow managed to take his mother andtwo sisters with their two large metal pots and a sack which were the ~~KE~~ only material possessions they ~~XXXXXX~~ possessed to the Bongaon Railway station. With great difficulty they managed to get some place to sit in one of the compartments of the electric train. To the children the ride was interesting but so Savitri life had become painful and dreary. The pain in the left side of the chest which had begun two weeks ago was becoming unbearable.

At Barasat most of the refugees got out and Anand looked around to find

where he was to go. On enquiry he found that their journey had not ended. He was told that he would have to walk 4 miles to Neelganj village where a new camp had been opened for the refugees. Savitri was at her wit's end. She had no energy left to walk even 100 yars. 4 miles was out of question. But Anand and Lokhi coached her and they began the journey. Every 15 miles Savitri sat down to rest and catch her breath. The journey was very tiring and too strenuous for her. Poor Subita had got tired of walking of walking - but who would carry her ? Both Lokhi and Anand were carrying the pots and the sack and mother looked too ill.

The journey took them the whole day and at dusk a small board by the edge of a narrow canal announced the fact that they had reached Neelganj. Savitri was too exhausted and she must sat down by the side of the board, too tired to talk or walk any further. The night was passed steeping at the entrance. They still had little puffed rice which they finished. Four little figures lay crouched in a corner under a dirty sarree with a starry sky for their roof and hard clay soil for a bed. In deep slumber they soon forgot their travails and their suffering.

CHAPTER 3:

Five days had passed since their arrival at Neelganj. Anand had been lucky enough to meet a volunteer called Neemai wearing a uniform who was very helpful. Seeing the condition of their mother - only parent and security of three little children - he had taken pity on them and had immediately allotted them some space in one of the huts. 5 feet by 8 feet was all they got but that was more than enough - better than the open fields and the open sky. Neemai had also arranged for a mat for Savitri and had hastened the processing of the ration card for the family. What would have taken about 6 - 8 days due to Government red tape was done in a matter of a day and Anand had managed to collect their rations on the 3rd day after arrival. What worried him however was the thought that he had not been able to contact a doctor. He asked Neemai about it and was directed to a small hut marked Govt. Health Unit. On enquiry he was told that unless he would bring the patient there, no medicines could be given. He tried to explain that his mother was not in position to even get up and sit down - but it had no effect on the doctor - he has just rude and brusque and repeated the rule.

As they were returning after collecting vegetables, Lokhi and Anand saw a lady in white and a young man wearing glasses walking among the huts, with a cane basket full of something. Here and there they stopped to talk to some people. They entered their hut and knelt beside them to give them some medicines. They must be doctors Anand thought, and asking Lokhi to hold the vegetable he ran towards them to investigate. He asked some people standing near the hut, where the two had entered and was told that they were doctors from a nearby college and had volunteered to serve in the camps. Nothing more was known of them - because they spoke a language that was quite different from their Bengali - only a few words sounded familiar but they managed with signs and had been giving medicines to the sick and the suffering.

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Anand waited till they came out and requested them to come and see his mother. The smile on the face of that lady was so warm that he took an instant liking to her. The doctor had a grey tube with a silver knob dangling round his neck. He was tall wore glasses and as he held Anand's hand, Anand felt happy for something told him that, here were people who would help them. The smile on her face and the warm firm grip of the doctor conveyed all this to him and even more.

Soon the doctor and the sister were crouching on the mat in their hut and examining their mother. The doctor examined her chest with the grey tube while the sister took a thermometer and placed it in the patient's mouth. Three little pairs of eyes watched the whole proceeding with great interest. Ten minutes later the two of them discussed the case and the doctor gave Anand some medicines to give to his mother. He also gave some biscuits and a white sweet powder in a small packet. They promised to come and see her daily. As they left the hut Anand felt happy, for the first time in many days. His mother was going to get well soon, he felt. The young doctor visited their hut regularly along with the nurse. After three days Savitri began to sit up but she was still too weak to attend to her household duties. Anand knew that he had to bear the responsibility and so began, busy days for them. He had to bring the wood-fire twice a day, collect the rations and the vegetables, collect milk and bread which some other kind looking, friendly volunteers were distributing from another hut, look after his sisters. Too much for a little boy of ten - but he had no other choice.

A few days later the young doctor brought another colleague of his. This one was shorter and had a striking moustache. He too examined Savitri and after discussing both of them asked Anand to bring his mother to their hospital which was about 50 yards away. They arranged with Anand's neighbours to help to bring the woman the next morning.

Next morning when the medical team arrived in Neelganj, Anand was waiting eagerly at the door of their dispensary. As soon as he saw them he rushed to his hut and within a few minutes brought his mother to the dispensary with the help of the neighbours. She stayed there the whole day and was given intravenous fluids and other things to eat. All talk to him or given him a word of cheer. After many days Anand felt a sense of security. Days passed. Anand brought his mother daily to the hospital for about 4 days and he was happy to see her look much better. After 4 days the doctor began to visit her in the huts itself. Daily one of them came to give her an injection - They always brought her something to eat and Savitri too felt a sense of hope and joy. Within two weeks Savitri felt much better and was able to supervise the work done by her friends in that dispensary. Every one smiled at him - and often gave him biscuits or something nice for them to eat. His little sister Sabita soon found that that she too was always welcome. Lokhi however always stayed with her mother and so she did not get as much attention as Anand and Sabita.

One day Anand was called aside by the doctor—who had seen his mother on the 1st day and after a long friendly talk he was asked to come daily to the dispensary and help them with the work. The doctor spoke to him in broken Bengali but he understood everything. He agreed and from the next day, (about 3 weeks after meeting these people). Anand became the ward boy of the Caritas Dispensary at Neelganj. Every mornig he used to help sweep out the dispensary, fetch water from the nearby pump, wash instruments and help collect cards and give out biscuits and glucose in packets. A very nice lady wearing a sari who was working in the hospital used to give him all sorts of odd jobs to do and he enjoyed himself. He was a good pupil and within a few days he did so much that even outsiders, who occasionally dropped into the hospital were surprised to see a little boy working so diligently with the medical team. Every morning this sister used to cook hot dishes for his mother and send it on a small plate four times a day. She would also send a large glass of milk and of course biscuits and orange juice. She also gave him lots to eat which he shared with his sisters. The doctors were very kind. They arranged for his mother to be shifted to the hut next to their dispensary. So close in fact that as Anand worked in the hospital he knew that his mother was resting just on the other side of a bamboo mat that constituted the wall of the hut. The doctors gave them clothes, towels and warm blankets for his mother. One day they even brought a bed made of mats stuffed with hay which one of the doctors had made with his own hands. Another day one of the doctors and the nurse came to their new hut and helped them clean out the hut throw away all their junk and replaced it with new items which they had brought for them. The sister also gave sponge baths to their mother and later taught the two little girls how to give their mother a bath. The days passed and the three children were very happy and secure. The dispensary had become a second home to them. They walked in and out at will. One day one of the doctors stayed back in the afternoon and taught Anand the alphabets while Sabita sat beside him drawing - Strange little figures on a piece of paper. It was on this day that Anand confided to the doctor that he too would like to be a doctor when he grew up.

A few days later the doctor called Anand and told that they would soon be leaving for their home which was hundred of miles away. He told Anand that he should not worry and that all the new doctors who would come to the Dispensary in the months to come would look after them with the same interest that the three children had got so used to.

Anand bade them farewell with tears in his eyes as they left the hut after bidding Savitri goodbye. For a widow and her three little children the St. Johns Medical College team at Neelganj, had meant love, hope and a future. The team too was satisfied for if they could bring cheer into the hearts of even one of the families among the millions they knew their task had been well done.