

elegy for
the east

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*A story of blood
and broken dreams*

DHRUBAJYOTI BORAH

Translated by the author from the Assamese original
KALANTARAR GADYA



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To Loy and his mother, Sharodi

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ABOUT PRABHAT

I

Prabhat was hurrying back home. Dusk was descending. A curtain of darkness was about to envelop the city below. The neon and halogen lights that flickered to life along the wide roads tried to push back the veil of darkness.

At the end of a routine day like any other, Prabhat was on his way home from his tuitions. As he walked along the dark road, his eyes opened wider.

What struck one about Prabhat when one looked at his face were his large eyes. With well-shaped eyebrows, his eyes were his most attractive feature. Barring them, his face was the ordinary, sweet face of a young boy in his teens. But people were easily drawn to his pensive pair of eyes.

His name was ordinary too—Prabhat. Apparently, he had been born early in the morning; hence, the name Prabhat, meaning dawn. An undergraduate student in college, he had never been able to excel academically despite studying regularly and attentively. He played cricket with his friends, but never found a place on any team apart from the class team. He occasionally read a detective novel, and stories that appeared in the special puja supplements of newspapers and magazines. The books he had read so far had not been able to leave any impression on his mind; perhaps, he was yet to come across or discover such a book. Every morning after breakfast, he would board a bus to college and regularly present himself in the classroom.

Like most other boys his age, he had just learnt to shave. When he saw pretty girls in college, he would experience a mysterious delight. But unlike his friends, he could not muster the courage to flirt harmlessly with the girls—let alone tease them. His fantasies about women were still very simple, almost innocent. He liked listening to ghazals and subsequently experiencing a sense of self-indulgent desolation.

Prabhat was an ordinary college-going young man.

From the wide road to Prabhat's house, one had to walk for almost 200 metres. That was a narrow stretch, though one could make out that it had been paved once upon a time. All that remained now were stones and potholes. Several small alleys branched out from that narrow road, with houses packed against the alleys on either side. As he crossed the first alley, the familiar odour assailed his nostrils. That odour given off by piles of rotting garbage. A part of that road was unoccupied and the residents of the neighbourhood had made it their garbage dump. A sickeningly foul smell emanated from the pile of accumulating garbage—a smell so nauseating that it churned one's insides and made them gag. People who took that road regularly had got used to the smell. They found it uncomfortable, but unlike the new passers-by, they did not gag. Once in a while, municipality trucks would cart the garbage away. A crowd of labourers, with their noses covered, would shovel the garbage onto the trucks. The odour from the dump, prodded and pushed, would spread wide on that day.

When he reached that spot, Prabhat picked up speed out of habit. When he was a young boy, he used to be scared of crossing that spot, because of the few snarling feral dogs who would be nosing the dump.

Was somebody following him in the darkness? Suddenly, Prabhat had that feeling. He looked over his shoulders. Darkness was enveloping the road.

Barring a few, most of the street lights were yet to come on. Where was he? There was no one in sight. Then the street light in front of a house next to the road blazed to life. A man stood there. Prabhat was right; his instinct about somebody following him was correct.

The man was looking at him. Prabhat hurried into his house.

‘*Baba* (affectionate term often used interchangeably with given names in Bengali), there you are,’ his father called out from the porch. Perfunctorily acknowledging his father’s greeting, he made his way inside, calling out to his mother. In spite of being in college, he was like a little boy, his father thought to himself. ‘Listen, I would like a cup of tea,’ he said to his wife. It was getting cold. Gathering his shawl, he made himself comfortable on the bamboo chair with the day’s newspaper. Now that his son was home, he was relieved. He could read his newspaper in peace. All he wanted was a hot cup of tea. What was this fragrance emanating from the kitchen? Fried papads? Right, it was fried papad. Smiling under his moustache, he started reading his paper.

Sitting next to his mother in the kitchen, Prabhat started having tea and fried papads.

How different were our school and college days! About 20-30 years ago?

The letters on the newspaper blurred.

The world then seemed so simple, enclosed in comprehensible patterns. Success in life was defined by the ability to study a technical subject such as medicine or engineering. ‘Taking a line’... that was known as taking a line then. If you could take a line, your future was secure. A government job, marriage, an undramatic sex life approved by society, children, a house or two, a good second-hand if not a new car, and finally—a quiet demise. On the day of the funeral, the daily newspaper would carry an obituary penned by an overenthusiastic nephew or a friend of the children. It was then that the world discovered that such a man lived.

There were very few occurrences to disrupt this uneventful life. The news of somebody's child marrying outside the caste was a sufficiently significant piece of social news.

Every 10 years, there would be an agitation over language and medium. At places, there would be fisticuffs between the Assamese and the Bengalis. After a few days it would subside, and life would go on in its familiar orbit. After some time, the demands to build a bridge over the Brahmaputra or an oil refinery would heat the air.

Life was quite peaceful then.

Back then, nobody took politics so seriously. Politics was left to a class of soft-spoken, khadi-clad, lawyer-like men. The socialists talked about revolution in their meetings and the communists organized armed protests among farmers, but their activities created few ripples in the lives of men like Narayan Hazarika. The deputy commissioner seemed to be the most important man around.

Today, Prabhat and his friends lived in a completely different era. The world had transformed beyond recognition before their eyes. Now, there were no celebrations among young men without liquor, and no politics without guns.

Yes, time had changed. And people like Prabhat's father, the Narayan Hazarikas, found themselves in trouble. They straddled two worlds uncomfortably; the old world was changing fast and they were unable to find their bearings in the new.

With a heavy sigh, Narayan Hazarika flipped the pages of the daily newspaper. Sipping his hot tea and munching fried papads, he began scanning the paper for some juicy news.

It was then that he heard the knock on the door. Hazarika started at the unexpected sound.

Who was it at this hour? What might be the time? He looked at his watch; it was past eight. Who was this visitor knocking at such late hour? Hazarika was a little annoyed. He had had a hard day at work. It was already evening by the time he had got home

after the day's grocery shopping. The winter days were short too. And who had turned up now?

'Paresh, *baba*, can you check who's at the door?' he called out to his younger son.

Prabhat's brother Paresh was in high school, and was studying in the next room. He rose to answer the door.

A stranger stood in the verandah. With a smile, he asked for his father. Paresh ushered the man indoors. Scanning the room, the man gave out a long yawn. Before he finished yawning, Prabhat's father had stepped in.

With a namaskar, he asked the man, 'I am sorry, but have we met?'

'I am from the police intelligence,' the man replied, rising to his feet and reciprocating Hazarika's greetings.

Prabhat's father was surprised. Police? Why was a man from the Police Intelligence calling on him? A sense of dread gripped him; the fear showed on his face.

'Please have a seat. Why are you here, if I may ask? I mean, you are from the police...'

'I am making routine enquiries,' the man answered matter-of-factly. 'You know how bad it is right now. And it will only get worse. The things we are forced to do now are beyond our imagination. I have been calling on many houses in this area.'

'But what have you been calling on about in this area? This is a very peaceful neighbourhood.'

'You are right, there have been no disturbances in this area,' the man nodded in agreement. 'But there are a lot of people here, the houses are cheek-by-jowl. And almost every house has tenants. Many of these tenants are school and college students. We have to keep an eye on such houses.'

'This is a very old, middle-class area. A gentleman's area. Everybody knows everybody else. They are all Assamese people who have lived here for a long time.'

‘What about the tenants?’

‘Yes, there are quite a few tenants, but most of them are professionals. You know, this was a very good area once upon a time, but it has deteriorated now. Do you see the state of the roads? And that awful garbage dump? It is difficult to use that road because of the stench. This neighbourhood is deteriorating and nobody is paying attention. This has become a very neglected area, you know.’

‘Unfortunately, these are the places we have been forced to keep an eye on. This is where the terrorists get the most support.’

‘Terrorists!’ Prabhat’s father was stunned. His eyes widened and his mouth gaped in amazement. ‘Terrorists? Here?’

‘How would you know that they aren’t here? And if they are here, all of us have had it. That is why I am here, asking for your help. I am looking for some information.’

‘What information will you find in my house?’ There was a note of panic in Hazarika’s voice.

‘Isn’t Prabhat Hazarika your elder son? Please call him,’ said the man in a commanding voice.

Prabhat’s father felt very uncomfortable. Fear rose in his heart as he looked helplessly at the man. Who was he? Was he really from the police? Police Intelligence? Why, he had not even produced an identity card. Hazarika had a strong urge to throw the man out, but he could not muster the courage to do so. Would he be wise in offending the authorities? Would it be right to antagonize the police? How the man stared. A voice inside Hazarika spoke: ‘Save Prabhat, keep him away from this man.’

The man kept staring at him.

Narayan Hazarika turned indoors and called out helplessly, ‘Prabhat, *baba*, come here for a minute.’

Prabhat walked out, dressed in a shirt and an old pair of pyjamas. He looked inquiringly at his father and the stranger.

‘Isn’t your name Prabhat? Here, do sit down. Let’s have a small talk.’

‘Don’t you know anybody associated with the terrorists?’ asked the man with a hint of mockery in his voice. ‘Have any of your friends from college joined them? You must have heard some of them talking about arms and ammunition... Guns? Revolvers? No? Has no one ever mentioned them? I know you won’t lie. Have any of your classmates joined any extremist organization? Have any of them suddenly come into a lot of money—buying new jeans, expensive shoes, tape recorders? Money which their parents cannot provide? Haven’t you noticed?’

Narayan Hazarika was furious. What sort of questions was this man asking Prabhat? Even though his voice was low and conversational, was this the proper way to talk?

Wrapping his shawl closer to him, he got on his feet pointedly. The man looked at him once. Then he spoke to Prabhat, ‘Keep your distance from the extremists. They have infiltrated schools and colleges. One does not know how many there might be among your classmates.’ The man then looked at his father and said, ‘Times are bad, Hazarika. It is better to be careful.’ Turning to Prabhat again, he ordered, ‘Pay attention to your studies, but keep your eyes and ears open, always.’ He then stood up and spoke to Hazarika with an air of authority, ‘Today is Friday. At 11 am on Monday, Prabhat needs to come to the police station. Do you understand? Send him across sharp at 11. He has to ask for me when he gets there.’

After he left, Hazarika stood rooted to the spot for a long time, staring at the door. He seemed to have lost all strength to move. Prabhat stood where he was, apparently unable to move, too.

The seconds ticking by on the wall clock in the next room broke through the silence.

‘Has the guest left?’ asked his wife as she walked into the room with a cup of tea.

Hazarika started. He looked at his wife. Then he pounced on his son.

‘What kind of friends do you have nowadays?’ he exploded in anger, helplessness, and sorrow.

His mother quickly moved to stand between father and son, spilling the tea in her haste.

‘What is wrong? Why are you behaving like this? Is this the way to treat your son?’

Paresh and his younger sister Pratima hurried out, fear and surprise writ large on their faces.

‘He has joined the terrorists! Do you hear me? Your son has joined the terrorists!’

‘What are you taking about? Who was that man?’

‘He was from the police!’

‘Police! What was he doing here?’

‘That is what I have been trying to explain... He told me that your son has contact with terrorists.’

‘Lies, Deuta. Ma, these are all lies.’

‘Lies?’ Rage welled up in Narayan Hazarika. ‘What did that man say? Guns, revolvers, pistols. You will be the death of all of us. You will destroy us. Listen to me, if you have really taken these things up, you should know that there is no place for you in this house,’ his voice broke.

‘What inauspicious words are these? Do you have to lose your head over whatever anybody says? I wonder who that man really was. He was not even in a policeman’s uniform! Go inside, baba. And you two, go to the table, as dinner is ready,’ said the lady of the house.

Like any other day, after the children had finished their meals, Hazarika and his wife sat down to eat. ‘You know, he has been asked to go to the police station,’ Hazarika spoke up almost immediately, as if to himself.

‘To the station? But why?’

‘I have no clue. To answer some questions, I suppose. He was asked quite a few today. Prabhat said he did not know anything. I wonder why they have called him again...’

‘Has somebody been spreading lies about him out of jealousy?’ asked the wife.

‘Apparently the terrorists have set up dens in areas such as ours. Those boardings for boys, it seems they are dangerous. Does he visit these boardings?’

‘I do not think so. He had told me once that some boys from his college boarded nearby.’

‘Those...those might be the dens. Ask him to be careful. Ask him not to go out and just stay at home.’

‘How do you expect a grown-up boy to stay put indoors? In any case, he does not really go out too often. Tuitions, besides college. And then he visits his friends sometimes. How do I stop him every day?’

‘These friends are the cause of all trouble. They give him all the wrong ideas.’

‘Have your meal, you are only picking at your food. Baba did not eat properly either. Have another piece of fried fish, please.’

‘Do you remember that nephew, or was it a brother, of our tenant? Is he still around? Don’t you recall what a burly fellow he was? Had the built of a wrestler. How can you be sure that he was not a terrorist? Is the boy still around?’

‘No, he left the day before yesterday. He said goodbye before he left.’

‘You have to be very careful. Keep your distance from strangers, young men in particular. You women are taken in very easily. It is hard to say where these extremists lurk with their bombs and guns. The boys who lodge with the Borahs? Are they around?’

‘I have no idea. I think you are worrying unnecessarily. They will probably ask *baba* a few more questions at the police station, and

that would be it. Didn't you tell me that the man appeared to believe him when he said he did not know anything?'

'That's what he said. I wonder if he really meant it.'

'I wish you would not worry unnecessarily. You have not touched your food at all. All this talk about terrorists...this is the first I am hearing of it.'

'Hasn't anything come up in the *namghar* (prayer house for congregational worship associated with the Assamese community)?'

'Not at all,' shrugged the wife. But quietly, she remembered that Mrs Barua had brought it up... Apparently, young men were taking up arms to free the state. Mrs Das had told her later that Mrs Barua's youngest son had joined them. Did that mean that they had infiltrated their neighbourhood? Had Prabhat joined them as well? Her heart missed a beat. But she mentioned nothing to her husband.

'Do you have to worry so much just because he has been called to the station? Why don't you go with him?' she said, while clearing the table.

Hazarika rose to his feet with a long sigh. Washing his hands, he helped himself to some *saunf* (anise) from the jar on the kitchen shelf. Wrapping his shawl around him, he went out to lock the gate.

He locked the iron gate and then shut the glass-paned front door. From the dark room, he peeped through the glass. There was a light fog. The streetlight in the distance flickered, throwing the road near the house alternately into light and shadow. Two boys were hurrying ahead, slipping in and out of the shadows with every flicker of light.

Who are they? Where are they going at this time of the night? Are they terrorists? A shudder ran down his spine. Hurriedly pulling down the curtains, he went indoors.

'Listen,' he called out to his wife, 'why are the lights in the house switched on for so long? Turn them off, we have to sleep. All of us must go to bed early.'

Lowering the mosquito net, he got into bed. On other days, getting into bed, he would switch on the table lamp and read a book. *Ramkrishna Kathamrit* or Swami Vivekananda's essays. As he read, he would wait in eager anticipation for his wife to join him. After finishing her chores in the kitchen and checking on her sleeping children, his wife would walk into the bedroom, carrying a glass of water. When she shut the wooden bedroom door, Hazarika would be aware of her presence. The words on the book open in front of him would mist over. When his wife put the glass of water on the table next to the bed, he would steal a glance of her face, reflected in the light from the lamp. Sometimes, if her eyes caught his, she would smile and Hazarika would feel a little embarrassed. After she'd get into bed, he would start a conversation with her, using the book he was reading as a topic or any other topic he could think of—minor domestic topics which only a husband and a wife talk about.

Today, Hazarika did not reach for his book. When his wife got into bed, he switched off the lamp and said, 'It is better to turn in early, you see. It is not good to keep the lights on very late.'

His wife did not reply. They stretched out in silence on either side of the bed. Time ticked by. The wall clock struck 11, 12, 1, 2. Suddenly a long whistle shattered the night's silence. Where did it come from? The police? Hazarika sat up startled.

'You do hear whistles at night sometimes,' his wife said.

'Aren't you asleep?' Hazarika asked his wife. Then, with a faint sigh, he said, 'Go to sleep. It's 2 am.'

II

'But why did you insist on Prabhat going to the police station?'

'There was no way out. How could he not go after being summoned with a date and time?'

Narayan Hazarika was talking to Partha, the journalist, seated on the verandah in front of his house. Partha observed that Hazarika had dark circles under his eyes and his forehead wore a permanent wrinkle. He appeared to be battered by a sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

‘What did he have to say?’ asked Partha.

Hazarika went on to narrate the whole dialogue that took place between him and his son.

‘Prabhat said to me that he did not want to go to the police station; that the man who had come the other day had asked him all sorts of questions which he knew nothing about. He asked me, “Do I have to go just because they have summoned me?”’

‘Then what did you say to him?’ asked Partha.

‘I told him he had no choice! That he had to go, because he had been asked to by the police! And he retorted that nobody just goes if called like that, that he just wouldn’t go!’

‘And then?’ Partha asked.

‘I tried to explain to him that this was all about law and order, and that the country’s citizens have to follow its laws. He then asked me what the law was behind such arbitrary orders. I told him that there must be one, otherwise why would they call him. A faint suspicion did creep into my mind though, and I wondered if such a law actually existed. Then I tried to put some sense into his head and said that the police had called him only for some routine enquiries, not to sentence him.’

‘Did he finally understand?’ Partha enquired.

‘No! He was still adamant and refused to go. “I mean it when I say I am not going. Nobody else would force me to go the way you are forcing me to” was his stance!’

‘So, what was settled then?’ Partha asked.

‘I don’t know. I got a little paranoid. I started asking him if he had told anybody, about being called to the station, that I had told