

HUMANITY

(One-Act play)

Bhaskar Roy Barman

Characters

Male

Samir (27 years)

Samir (7 years)

Pradip

Samir's father

Sumit

Other youths

Female

Rasmani (28 Years)

Rasmani (35 years)

Samir's mother

First Scene

(Divided into two zones)

Zone I

Place: Vicinity of a forest

Time: Afternoon when the sun slants down to the western horizon

(Samir, Pradip and other youths imagine themselves sitting on the bank of a pond, blood-besmeared choppers in hands. Pradip gets up to his feet, faces the audience and soliloquizes.)

Pradip: The sun's flooded the earth with its majestic grandeurs for crores of years and during this space of time the earth was soaked through by human blood.

Samir: What are you thinking of, Pradip, standing there?

Pradip: (turning round and heaving a loud sigh): I'm thinking, Samir, perhaps we've dragged ourselves on to a wrong path. We're wrecking vengeance only on innocent tribals who had nothing to do with the riot and even opposed it.

Samir: (fingering his chopper): In a war, in a communal riot, only innocent people get killed, don't they? Those who trigger off the war or the communal riot know it very well, they do.

Pradip: Yes, they do. But...

Samir: (interrupting him) I know what you'll say, Pradip. Your parents, brothers and sisters and ours did no wrong, did they? But they were killed. Tell me why they got killed.

Zone II

Place: Depth of the forest

(Broken pieces of a pitcher are seen on the stage. Sumit is seen crying and Rasmani, 28 years old, scolding him)

Rasmani: You've broken the pitcher! You know how I got hold on the pitcher, risking my own life. I had gone outside the jungle to bring the pitcher from a deserted tribal hut. The Bengalis are roaming around, searching for tribals to kill in retaliation, don't you know it?

Sumit: Maa, give me water!

Rasmani: How can I give you water? Who told you to help yourself to water from the pitcher? You've yourself broken it, while heaving it up! Wait until the sun dips down the western horizon and the darkness descends on the earth! Then I'll go out to the pond and bring some water on a broken part of the pitcher.

Sumit: (still crying): Maa, I am thirsty, give me water!

(Rasmani raises her hand to slap Sumit across his cheek, but restrains herself, then relapses into soliloquizing)

Rasmani: I'm only to blame for what has happened. I ought to have given him water, I had thought it was not wise to have him drink water into his empty stomach. I went a little distance to gather for him stray fruits. But Sumit got so overcome by thirst he lost patience to wait for my return. I shall go outside the forest to the pond whatever the consequences and bring him water on a broken piece of the pitcher. I won't bear to see him succumb to the thirst. (Turns to Sumit.) Stand as you are here, Sumit, I'm

going outside the forest to bring you water from the pond on a broken piece of the pitcher.

Zone I

Pradip: Let's get to our feet. Evening's drawing on.

Samir: Just a minute! I'll have to wash my chopper in the water. It's edge has been besmeared with blood, you see.

Pradip: Why not throw your chopper into the pond?

Samir: What do you mean?

Pradip: Let us forgo vengeance. We've enough of killing. Do not augment the burthen of sin by killing innocents! You'll find yourself unable to bear it.

(Samir flies into a rage and glares ferociously on Pradip. He makes as if to pounce upon Pradip. He stops short, as he sights Rasmani standing transfixed at a little distance, in hand a broken piece of a pitcher. He looks extremely surprised.)

Samir: Who is she standing over there? A tribal woman to be sure..

(Pradip and other youths turn round.)

Other Youths: The woman over there is a tribal woman.

(Samir gestures at them to go bring her over. They drag her in by hand)

Rasmani: (her voice trembling): Look, Brothers, kill me as you are keen to. My seven-year old son is dying over there in the forest for water. Do, please, let me go over there with water and have him drink water.

Pradip: (his voice firm): You say your son's dying over there in the forest for water! Take water from the pond and have your son drink water! I'll accompany you!

(A distinct expression of gratefulness looms large on Rasmani's face. Samir's face turns scarlet with rage and other youths glare at Pradip's face,) Take water from the pond!

Samir: How dare you go against us and prevent us avenging ourselves!

Other Youths: Let's kill the woman! No mercy should be shown on tribal people, no matter whether they are men, women or children.

Pradip: You've lost all human feelings in a frenzy of avenging yourselves! I've not lost mine completely, mind you! I won't let anybody prevent her getting her son to drink water, even if it costs my own life.

(Other youths advance on Pradip, but Samir stops them.)

Samir: We'll gain nothing by quarrelling among ourselves/ We'd rather follow them into the forest. The opportunity won't fly away/

Other youths: Who knows she isn't duping us into entering into the forest by telling us the story of her son dying for water? Some tribal insurgents may be waiting there to waylay us. They may have seen us talking among ourselves.

Samir: (heaving a deep sigh): Now that we've come out to avenge the killing our dear and near ones we've left behind at home the fear of death. Death's lurking everywhere around us.

Second Scene

Place: Depth of the Forest

Time: The sun is on the verge of dipping down the western horizon

(Sumit who is waiting anxiously for his mother to return with water becomes frightened at seeing Samir, Pradip and other youths coming, choppers in hands, after his mother. Rasmani holds the piece of the pitcher before his lips.)

Rasmani: Don't be frightened, Sumit! They're your uncles and won't do you any harm. Drink water to your satiety.

(Rasmani is getting Sumit to drink water. The scene of a mother getting her son to drink water, death hanging over their heads, moves everybody. The scene throws Samir into a frenzy of tearing his own hair and shaking his head to and fro violently.)

Samir: No mercy! No mercy at all!

Pradip: Cool down, Samir, cool down! We know the circumstances that have led you to take to vengeance, Why should you have it out with this hapless woman and her child who have taken shelter in this forest? What good will come out of killing them, innocent as they are?

Samir: You say what good will come out of killing them! Tell me what good did come out of their killing my parents, my brothers and my only sister?

Pradip: But...

(Samir stops him.)

Samir: You can't but out my oath of vengeance! How can I forget that night when the tribal insurgents all of a sudden attacked our house killing my parents, my brothers and my only sister? Having lost my wits at this sudden and unexpected attack, I stumbled out of the room, completely forgetting about them, and jumped into the dried-up well on the courtyard. Do you know, Pradip. What happened ten minutes afterwards?

Pradip: I don't know. You've just told us that the tribal insurgents killed them. What happened ten minutes afterwards?

Samir: Ten minutes afterwards their chopped heads fell down one after another into the well just on to my knees.

(Silence clamps down)

Pradip: (breaking the silence): This is certainly horrible and heart-rending. But this woman...

Samir: (stopping him): You want to say this woman is innocent and let him go scot-free! If we let her go, she'll go today or tomorrow and instigate her husband against us.

Pradip: Your heart's got so hardened against the tribal people you can't bring yourself to believe this innocent tribal people!

Samir: It's the tribal people themselves who have shattered my belief in them. (After a pause) We did believe those tribal people who killed my parents, brothers and my only sister, taking advantage of our belief. They belonged to our locality dominated by Bengalis. Despite our assurance that we would protect them, they fled.

We couldn't imagine they had pre-planned fleeing the locality in order to attack the Bengalis. You want me to believe her, this woman!

Pradip: All tribal people are not that bad. Think of my case, Samir. You yourself know the tribal insurgents killed my parents and raped my sister. Smouldering with fire of revenge I killed many tribal men and women before your eyes, didn't I? We only killed innocent tribals. We couldn't even touch the hair of any tribal insurgent.

Samir: (advancing on Pradip): I don't want your speechifying! If compassion has welled up in you go back home! Don't hinder us from doing what we're determined to do!

Pradip: I'll go back home sure, but I won't let you do anything to this hapless woman and her son?

Samir: You dare us a challenge!

(He raises his chopper to hit Pradip. Pradip raises his. Other youths side with Samir. Rasmani intercepts them.)

Rasmani: Please do not hit your friend, Samirbabu. (Turns to Pradip, gasps choking her voice.) Please do not quarrel with your friends, Pradipbabu, for my sake. I know I'll have to atone for the sins of my husband.

Pradip: Your husband! What's his name?
(Rasmani keeps silent, bending her head down)

Samir: (in a harsh voice): What's his name, tell me what's his name?

Rasmani: Nil... Nilmani Deb Barma.

Samir: Nilmani Deb Barma is your husband!

Pradip: Nilmani Deb Barma is your husband!

Other Youths: Nilmani Deb Barma is your husband!

Samir: We're searching like mad for Nilmani Deb Barma. If we somehow round on him, we'll burn him alive! Some hapless Bengalis ran over to him, the headman of the

village. On the pretext of giving them shelter in a school room he had them brutally butchered, irrespective of men, women and children.

Other Youths: How dares this woman, wife of that notorious Nilmani Deb Barma, expect us to let her and her son go scot-free without bearing the brunt of what her husband did!

(Rasmani rushes to Pradip and grasps his two hands)

Rasmani: My son's just seven years old and untouched by any sin. He doesn't deserve to be killed. A child always stands for innocence. In killing a child you'll kill innocence, (Pauses, ungrasps Pradip's hands) I always opposed my husband and did my level best to persuade him to nip the riot in the bud, But he was carried away by the oratory of that accursed leader of a tribal organization, Kamini Rupini his name; he lost all his senses and turned a brute.

Pradip: Cool down! Tell me what Kamini Rupini said in his oratory that carried your husband away.

Rasmani: Kamini Rupini said in his oratory that on the heels of the partitioning of India there was an exodus of Bengalis into this state. We, original inhabitants of this state, embraced and gave them refuge. Instead of being grateful to us, they capitalized upon our ignorance and innocence to grab hold on our properties and push us into remote areas.

Samir: How?

Rasmani: Kamini Rupini cited an example of how Bengali refugees exploited tribal people. They loaned money to tribal people on the condition that they would repay it in paddy after the harvest. Even by giving them huge quantities of paddy tribal people could not even finish off the loan.

Samir: Our grandfathers may have exploited tribal people in this way. But our parents, our brothers, our sisters did not. Why did the tribal insurgents kill them?

Pradip: Likewise, the tribal insurgents killed our parents, our brothers and our sisters, but why should we take our revenge out on this innocent woman and her child?

(Samir looks outwitted, but other youths take up the gauntlet.)

Other Youths: Do not let yourself be befooled by Pradip, Samirda! He's got enamoured of this beautiful tribal woman. Lets kill them at once.

Pradip: What rubbish you are talking! The fire of revenge has dehumanized you and rendered you senseless.

(Other youths rush at Pradip, but Samir stops them.)

Pradip: (turning to Rasmani and heaving a deep sigh): You see they've turned a hardcore fanatics, Ma'm. I can't save you. You said a child stands for innocence. I'll save your son, even if it means my death and the death of my friends at my hand! (His bold assertion embarrasses Samir and other youths. Rasmani's face brightens in gratitude.) Tell me where I shall take him.

Rasmani: A distant relation of mine lives at Banamalipur, Agartala. He married a Bengali girl and has settled there thirty years now. His name is Rebati Deb Barma. I call him Rebati Uncle. Everybody knows him over there. Please take my son, Sumit over to him. I shall gladly die, knowing that he will live on with my uncle.

Pradip: Rest assured, I'll take your son over there to your uncle. I'll have to mention your name to him. What name shall I say?

Rasmani: Say Rasmani Deb Barma.

Samir: (aside): Rasmani Deb Barma!

(The chopper slips off his hand. He looks abstracted and is reminiscing.)

... Light off...

...Light on...

Flashback I

Place: Playground. There is a pond offstage.

Time: Afternoon (playtime)

A few children are seen playing a toy football, all laughing and shouting. Suddenly a child hits the ball in the direction of one of the wings. The ball rolls out through the

wing into the imagined pond. The children run after the ball and stops before the wing and keep shouting. ‘The ball has fallen into the pond. A child age seven goes inside through the wing, making as if to catch hold of the ball. Other children are shouting, ‘Don’t bend down so much, Samir, you will slip into the pond.’ After a while a splashing sound is heard from behind the wing and the children are crying out. “Samir has fallen into the water...He is sinking,, ‘A tribal woman, 35 years old, enters from the other side, saying, ‘What has happened?’ The children chorused. ‘Samir has fallen into the pond and is sinking.’ The tribal woman rushes out through the wing. Another splashing sound is heard from behind the wing After a while the children are shouting delightedly, ‘Auntie has saved Samir’ After another while the tribal woman, dripping wet, reenters the stage, carrying the dripping unconscious Samir. The children crowd around them. Then they all go out through the other side.

...Light off...

...Light on....

Flashback II

Place: Samir’s house

Time: Evening

(Samir is seen lying unconscious on a bed, his father and mother nursing him. A few people crowd around the bed, bending over Samir’s face. At a little distance the tribal woman stands, beaming with happiness. After a while Samir opens his eyes)

Samir’s Father: See, Samir’s Maa, Samir’s opened his eyes!

(Samir’s mother and the neighbours grunt in relief.)

Samir’s Mother (bending down to fondle Samir): How are you feeling now, Samir? Samir: Fine!

(looks around at the neighbours. His eyes stop at the tribal woman. He points a finger at her.) Who is she, Maa?

(His mother, his father and the neighbours get conscious of the presence of the tribal woman.)

Samir's Mother: This auntie's saved you from drowning. God Himself has sent her down to save you.

Samir: (smiling a grateful smile) "What is your name, Auntie?"

(Looking a picture of happiness, the tribal woman walks over to the bed near Samir and kisses him on his cheeks.)

Tribal Woman: My name's Rasmani Deb Barma. (To Samir's mother) How old is your son?

Samir's Mother: Seven years old.

...Light off....

...Light on...

(Samir jerks his head to and fro and soliloquizes still in trance.)

Samir: Since then Rasmani Auntie had come to our house on every opportunity and brought me different kinds of fruits. I ate them, sitting on her knees. (Unconsciously heaves a deep sigh.) She left the locality many years ago. God knows if she is still living or some Bengali roughs like us killed her.

Other Youths (breaking his trance): What are you murmuring, Samirda? It's almost evening. We'll lose our way back home. Finish them off, this woman and her son!

Samir: I'll kill you all if you dare touch even the hair of this tribal woman and that of her son! Throw away your choppers, all of you!

(Habituated to obeying Samir, Pradip and other youths throw away their choppers, quite bamboozled. Samir looks as if in trance.)

Samir: (turning to Rasmani): Don't be afraid, Rasmani Auntie! Nobody will touch even your hair. We'll escort you over to your Rebat Uncle's house at Banamalipur. (To Sumit) Come along, Samir.

(Rasmani, Pradip and other youths look extremely bewildered. Pradip walks over to the front of the stage and addresses a soliloquy to the audience.)

Pradip: Samir has somehow gone mad. This tribal woman is not much older than he, one or two years older. He has addressed her Rasmani Auntie and her son Samir. The spirit of this forest may have turned him mad.

Samir: What are you pondering on, Pradip, standing there? Let's go out of the forest as soon as possible. We've to walk a long way to reach Banamalipur.

(Pradip looks surprised at Samir's clear voice)

Pradip: Are you all right?

Samir: (smiling): Yes, I am, as always.

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