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How Quietly The Padma Flows

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Rain was pouring from the sky in silvery sheets, and a fierce wind was thrashing the coconut palms standing like sentinels at the edge of the village—a cluster of fifty-odd fragile homes made of bamboo poles, hogla grass, and corrugated sheets. The mighty Padma, swollen with the monsoon's fury, was surging forward, its turbulent waters clawing hungrily at the village's western edge. Only a narrow strip of farmland lay between the rampaging river and the trembling homes. Then, suddenly, the first row of coconut palms toppled into the water, collapsing like soldiers felled by invisible gunfire. From their rickety shacks, the villagers were watching in helpless terror as the unforgiving river kept devouring chunks of paddy fields and kitchen gardens, swallowing the land piece by piece like a beast savoring its prey.

Each year, the river nibbled away at the alluvial farmland, advancing toward the village like a ravenous Bengal tiger prowling soundlessly toward an unwatched goat pen. As summer approached, the villagers diligently reinforced the mud dike the government had built two decades earlier, but it had grown too fragile to hold back the river's onslaught.

Three hours had passed, and there was no letup in the torrential rain or the flood's fury. The villagers had reinforced the dike by placing sacks of sand along its base, but soon they were scrambling to salvage their meager belongings as the river threatened to break its banks and inundate the village. The air was filled with the screams and cries of women and children. Just as the villagers managed to move their belongings to safety, the floodwaters tore through a massive hole in the dike, and a powerful surge of muddy water rushed into the village, plunging everyone into panic and forcing them to flee the danger zone.

Shafiqul, a forty-something, sun-leathered fisherman, and his clove-complexioned, thirty-five-year-old wife, Bushera, huddled over their salvaged tin trunks, brass pots, and sodden quilts. Shafiqul's eyes stayed locked on his father's cemented grave—now just breaths away from the advancing floodwaters—while Bushera shielded their three-year-old twins against her chest. Nearby, Noor, their ten-year-old daughter—her head and back draped in an empty gunnysack, a stick gripped in her hand—stood watching the three goats tear hungrily at the durva grass that fringed the sodden track.

The villagers' eyes were despondently locked on their houses, watching them vanish one by one before the relentless rise of the river—until nothing remained. As their homes slipped from view, their gazes wandered aimlessly, searching for something to cling to amid the chaos.

An hour later, the floodwaters were lapping at the grassy mound where the village's small cemetery stood. Then came a wet crunch as Shafiqul's father's grave split open, exactly as he'd

feared. First, the gravestone crumbled, then the bricks gave way, and soon the bones swirled in the current like shattered keys from a ruined piano. Accompanied by a few neighbors, Shafiqul waded through belly-deep water to gather the remains. They frantically tried to collect them in a bucket, but most slipped through their fingers. Shafiqul lunged after the skull as it rolled downstream, vanishing beneath the surface before popping back up. The current was too swift; it carried the skull faster than he could swim. Just as it drifted beyond his reach, one of the neighbors dove in to retrieve it. Before long, a treacherous current swallowed the entire cemetery. *For a few moments, the bones of the dead spun in the muddy whirlpool like a cupboard full of porcelain crockery hurled into some monstrous grinder, their collision releasing a ghastly, clattering music.* The villagers wasted no time wading into the churning water, desperate to recover even a fragment of their dear departed.

As evening approached, the lashing rain eased, but the flood in the mighty Padma raged on, unrelenting. The womenfolk hurried to prepare rice for their families, who had yet to eat even lunch. When night fell, the villagers settled in to sleep—some on charpoys, some on bamboo *machas*, and the rest on the soaked earth, their bodies curled on jute sacks or threadbare *kanthas*. With solemn reverence, Shafiqul positioned the bucket cradling his father's remains at the head of his charpoy, its weary frame creaking in protest as he lowered his weight onto the worn ropes. He closed his eyes against the oppressive dark, but sleep refused to come. The thought of starting anew—of rebuilding from the ruins—clawed at him, leaving him staring into the starless void.

Days later, as the floodwaters receded, the villagers gathered to choose a site for their new settlement. Before raising their shacks, the carpenters cobbled together two dozen coffins from driftwood for the remains of the deceased. The entire village gathered to lower the coffins into graves dug near the site they had chosen for their new home.

Once the villagers completed their makeshift homes, they returned to their work—some casting nets into the Padma's currents, others bending over flooded paddy fields, while carpenters shaped new boats from salvaged wood. Six months later, the village had fully recovered from the flood's devastation, its air vibrating with the hum of work and children's laughter.

The villagers had been reporting dwindling fish stocks in the river for several years, prompting some to seek new professions. Shafiqul sold his ancestral fishing boat and opened a provision store in one corner of his humble shack. As the only store in the village, his business flourished rapidly, enabling him to send his two younger children to school, but it was too late for Noor as the village school would no longer accept students her age.

Each morning, Noor would assist her mother with household chores, and in the afternoon, she would take their goats to graze in the lush pastures on the village outskirts. Bushera milked the goats twice daily—at dawn and dusk—using some milk to brew tea while sharing the remainder with her children. She spent her afternoons cultivating vegetables in the kitchen garden or embroidering saris for village women, earning extra cash to buy cosmetics and clothes for both herself and Noor.

One early afternoon, three white SUVs with tinted windows glided into the village. When they parked, four elegantly dressed men and two women emerged. A man in a brown three-piece suit—his eyes concealed behind sleek Armani sunglasses—boomed through a megaphone, summoning the villagers to gather at the community center, its thatched roof resting on a small jungle of bamboo poles at the heart of the village. Anticipating either financial aid or free medicine, the villagers crowded inside, only to be disappointed when the speaker revealed they were representatives of a foreign-funded NGO conducting a survey on climate change effects in Bangladesh.

He tossed around scientific jargon that soared above the villagers' understanding—phrases like 'rising sea levels,' 'global warming,' 'El Niño, and 'the greenhouse effect.' He then asked about observable changes: their dwindling fish catches, the river's unpredictable flooding, and shifting weather patterns. A woman with a face as round and broad as a Viking shield, draped in a stiff aquamarine sari, snapped rapid shots of the participants with her high-resolution camera while an affable young man in blue stonewashed jeans recorded the entire event on video.

As the meeting ended, an official passed out chilled bottles of mineral water among the villagers, who felt disappointed as they had been hoping for fizzy drinks. After bidding farewell with radiant smiles, the officials vanished inside their air-conditioned SUVs. The vehicles roared away, churning up a storm of dust that enveloped the villagers in a choking cloud. The barefoot

children ran after the vehicles the length of four paddy fields, hoping a hand might emerge from a window to toss them toffees—but none came.

They had spent seven years in the new village, and Shafiqul was thriving. His prosperity showed in his crisp cotton kurta and freshly starched lungi, always immaculate. For sandalwood-skinned Noor, he gifted a pair of gold earrings; for clove-complexioned Bushera, two gold bangles that never left her wrists. Each morning, the women smoothed sandalwood-turmeric paste onto their faces and hands before wrapping themselves in saris blooming with floral patterns. Already, the couple had begun assembling Noor's trousseau—clothes, furniture, and crockery—for her marriage to twenty-five-year-old Arafat, their next-door neighbor. Arafat, who owned both a fishing boat and a small paddy field, represented stability. Now, both families waited only for the monsoon to pass, when Noor would tie the knot with Arafat.

One summer evening, as the women of the village were busily preparing dinner, the Padma suddenly ran amok, its waters crashing against the village's edge. Just as the villagers began moving their possessions to safety, the floodwaters raged through the village.

While the villagers were having breakfast, the floodwaters crept into the graveyard where, seven years ago, they'd laid two dozen coffins to rest. The earth around the graves gave way beneath the swelling waters, and soon, Shafiqul's father's coffin floated to the surface. Ignoring the swift, deep currents, he dashed to retrieve it. Around him, other villagers scrambled as well to salvage the coffins of their loved ones.

After seizing the coffin, he tucked it under his chest and swam toward his wife, who stood with their children, breathless with terror. As he reached the water's edge, his thick dark hair shimmered in the saffron sunlight, and his checkered lungi clung to his drenched thighs.

A week later, as the floodwaters began to recede, some villagers started rebuilding their shacks at a safe distance from the river, while others chose to migrate to Dhaka. 'How long must we fight this river's brute force? We keep running from it, yet it keeps chasing us like a cobra. We're worn out from this endless battle,' the village chief lamented.

Shafiqul and Arafat reburied the coffin containing Shafiqul's father's remains in the government

graveyard, ten miles from the village. Afterward, the two men sat at the foot of the grave, reciting prayers for the departed soul.

When Shafiqul returned home, he asked his wife. 'We're moving to Dhaka.'

'Are you certain moving to Dhaka will be best for our family? For our children?' Bushera asked, terrified at the thought of moving to that far-off monster of a city.'

'Sure, no problem.'

'Let's think it through carefully before we uproot ourselves from the land where—'

'I've thought about it a thousand times. There's no other way. This river shows no respect for the living or the dead.'

'And if Dhaka swallows us too?

'Better swallowed by the streets than by the fangs of this goddamn river.'

Arafat, who had lost his boat to the flood, convinced his aging parents to move to Dhaka—where, in his words, '*the streets were paved with gold.*'

That afternoon, the neighbors haggled over the prices of the nonessential belongings Shafiqul and Arafat offered for sale. Yet, when dusk fell, those same neighbors laid out a feast. They all sat together under the honeyed glow of lanterns, sharing laughter and fond memories late into the night. For hours, no one spoke of tomorrow.

When the crimson sun peeped over the horizon, four cycle rickshaws stood ready to transport the families—along with their charpoys, trunks, and tarnished aluminum cookware—to the bus station twelve miles away. But Bushera was nowhere to be seen. After shouting her name and scouring the village, her husband finally found her on the bank of the Padma.

'How quietly the Padma flows,' she babbled like a little girl.

Shafiqul nodded, his gaze distant. 'True, but beneath that calm, it hides a fury that can turn it into a monster.'

'Does the Padma flow near Dhaka?'

'No, the Buriganga flows near Dhaka.'

'What kind of name is that?'

She filled her canteen from the river, splashed water over her moon-like round face, and took a few gulps.

'Shafiqul, how sweet this water is! Does the Buriganga taste as sweet as the Padma?'

'I don't know. Let's go—they're waiting for us.'

Bushera rose wearily and shuffled toward the cycle rickshaws, her husband trailing behind. She looked over her shoulder and cast a loving, nostalgic glance at the Padma.

Memory overtook her: Draped in a crimson bridal sari, she sat on a cushioned reed stool in the middle of a boat, pedaled across the water while men and women sang, danced, and clapped to the chaotic beat of drums. The sound of the shehnai resonated in her mind, bringing tears to her almond-shaped, smoky eyes.

She suddenly paused and murmured, 'Shafiqul, do you remember our wedding? The day you brought me from the other side of the Padma?'

'Yes, I do, honey—as clearly as if it happened yesterday.'

'Are the banks of the Buriganga as lush and green as the banks of our Padma?'

'Yes, they are—probably greener than the banks of the Padma.'

'I haven't seen the Buriganga, but they can't be.'

As dusk fell, the newcomers arrived in Dhaka—a city teeming with people like a river on the verge of overflowing. They erected two shacks on the northern bank of the Buriganga River, where launches, motorboats, and ferries jostled endlessly across the dark, slimy water. Both banks were littered with the shacks of homeless migrants, makeshift outhouses, and piles of rotting rubbish. Stray dogs prowled the riverbanks, their territory, while acrid smoke coiled continuously upward from burning trash. Like the long-time residents, the newcomers drew water from rusted pumps along the shore, cooked over open, smoky hearths, and used flimsy

outhouses—each no more than a square meter of space, enclosed by four bamboo poles with a weathered cloth wrapped around them for privacy.

After settling into their new homes, Arafat and his parents-in-law began searching for work in the bustling city. Within a week, Shafiqul was hired as a gatekeeper at a textile factory that produced designer clothing for an international brand, while his wife found work packing the finished garments. Arafat, meanwhile, bought a tuk-tuk rickshaw to earn a living.

Every morning, Arafat navigated stop-and-go traffic to take his parents-in-law to the factory in his tuk-tuk. After dropping them off, he would spend his day transporting passengers to their destinations for fares. When their shift ended, Shafiqul and his wife would wait at the factory gate, eagerly looking out for their son-in-law, who typically arrived shortly after to drive them home.

Three months later, Arafat and Noor married in an intimate ceremony attended by only a few close guests. Women from neighboring shacks sang traditional wedding songs, clapping and dancing joyfully around Noor as she sat gracefully on her new double bed, radiant in a scarlet sari. Though her parents could afford only a modest trousseau, Noor was jubilant—she was marrying the man of her dreams. After the nikah, Arafat hosted a simple one-dish feast to express his gratitude to the guests who had brought warmth and joy to their special day.

Two weeks had sped past, and the two families were content with their lives. One late afternoon, the three breadwinners returned home to a devastating sight: newlywed Noor, her aging in-laws, and her two siblings weeping beside the rubble of their demolished homes. With tears streaming down her face, Noor recounted the tragedy to her parents, while her mother-in-law hurled curses at the officials who had torn down their dwellings. Arafat's father, voice thick with bitterness, spat, 'They claimed we'd built on government land—but I told them this was Allah's land. Those bastards wouldn't listen.'

Noor had salvaged a few pots, boxes, and clothes, but most of their possessions lay crushed beneath the rubble. Her new double bed—too heavy to move—stood abandoned among the ruins. In the distance, two hulking excavators were relentlessly gnawing at the corrugated-steel shacks and reed huts that sprawled endlessly toward the horizon.

Beneath the soft glow of evening twilight, the two families perched on the debris mound where their houses once stood, weighing the choice between returning to their ancestral village or forging ahead in the city.

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