



Calcutta Calling by Arun Debnath

Chapter One

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It may be the autumn of my life, but outside it is spring. As I look through the patio doors into the green garden and to the cloudless blue sky, the story of my life flows through my mind. As ever, my memories take me back to a single day, more than half a century ago, and the event that changed everything in all of our lives.

Fatehpur, East Pakistan, 1962

It was a warm sunny morning and, as usual, I'd gone to the weekly village market to buy some *takhti* sweets to share with my eight-year-old sister, Sonali. After buying the sweets and hearing some good news, I was desperate to share both with my sister. Bubbling with excitement, I started to run home like an Olympic sprinter.

I reached the main gate of our house, shouting, 'Sonali, *eei* Sonali, come over here, I've got a lot of goodies and some great news for you,' I shouted, running into our courtyard like a puppy.

We lived in an old house with mud walls, a wood frame and hogla leaves covering the roof. It had been built by my ancestors. My mother came out of the main gate. 'What are you shouting about, Barun?' she said. 'Sonali isn't home yet.'

I ran towards her, panting. 'Ma,' I said gleefully, 'Sonali is lucky, I've got some great news.'

'What is it?' Ma asked, 'has she won a school prize?'

I could barely contain my excitement. 'Sonali is so lucky,' I repeated. 'Maulobi Sir wants to marry again.' The Maulobi was a local Muslim scholar and a warlord. He ran the madrasa that my sister and I attended. He was the most powerful man in the village.

Ma looked confused. 'So, what? What are you talking about?' she said.

'You don't understand, Ma, it's true. I've heard it myself, Maulobi Sir wants to marry again.'

Ma laughed dismissively. 'He has four wives. How can he marry another girl?' she said.

'He can do anything he likes,' I told her sagely. 'He's a teacher in Sharia law. He'll give *talaq* to one of his wives and then he'll be free to marry again.'

Ma squeezed her eyes, shook her head and asked, 'Okay. So why is that lucky for Sonali?'

'You don't understand, Ma. It's her.'

'Who's "her"?'

She wasn't getting it. I was bursting with happiness and pride for being the bearer of such good news. 'You don't understand, Ma!' I told her again.

'You're talking in riddles' she said. 'Tell me, what I don't understand?'

I decided to start again. 'I went to the market...'

'What's so special about that?' she interrupted. 'You go every week, like it's your religious duty. And your Thakurma spoils you – giving you money to spend on *takhti* that you eat like you never tasted it before.'

'I also do my reading and writing,' I said defensively. 'My friends Dulal, Shiv, Mostaq, Siraj – all the boys go there, too.' I loved the whole atmosphere of the marketplace, the shouting of the hawkers and the haggling of the buyers and sellers. Then there was that wonderful smell of freshly baked puffed rice mixed with the unique aroma of the boiling date-palm juice used to make *takhti*.

'Ha!' she shot back, 'did you ever see a single woman there?'

I must say, I never noticed that.

But Ma was right. Muslim women were not allowed in the market with so many men there. Some men were looking for the best deals, but many just went there for fun. They loved to gossip and share each other's stories in the village.

Ma was also right that on that morning our beloved grandmother, or *Thakurma*, had given me a few paisa coin to buy sweets to share with my younger sister. I loved *takhti* so much; I would suck it really slowly, trying to prolong the sweet taste. Thakurma knew this and she would spoil us. Even my parents couldn't deter her.

After paying the sweet-seller, I'd found a quiet place in the corner of the vendor's dilapidated shed and started to enjoy my precious purchase. As the *takhti* began to soften and melt in my mouth, I saw some young bearded Muslim men talking animatedly outside. I overheard something about the powerful village

Maulobi. I was curious and tried to listen to what they were saying, peering out from the cover of the jute and paddy straw shack.

'You've got a big job coming up soon,' said a wide-chested man with a big belly called Abu Mia. He was talking to his rough, muscle-bound friends Majid, Toyab, Akram and Imran. They were all well-known and much-feared *goondas* working for the Maulobi, known in the village as his *chamcha* or henchmen.

'What is it?' asked Majid.

Abu Mia looked smug. 'Maulobi has asked me to bring a young bride for him on Friday,' I heard him say.

'But he already owns four wives,' said Majid. 'How can he own another one? It's against Sharia to own a fifth.'

'You, stupid brainless fool!' spat back Abu Mia. 'Don't you know, he knows Sharia like no one else in the village? He can do anything he likes.' Abu Mia was right; I had heard this before. I peeped out again and saw that Majid was looking at Abu Mia curiously. 'You're a *pukka gadha*,' he continued, 'a real ass. He will surely give *talaq* to one of his wives. All he needs to do is to say "*Talaq, Talaq, Talaq.*" Just three times and the job is done. The wife is divorced and he's free to replace her. It's easy.'

'So, who's the lucky girl?' said Majid, leering.

'Oh, it's that *jungle* Hindu girl at the madrasa.' Abu Mia sounded suddenly serious.

I straightway knew that he was talking about my sister. She was just a year younger to me. Elderly villagers used to call Sonali a *jungle* – a girl from the jungle – for her love of the woodland and the wild outdoors. She would often wander in the forests around our village, picking up wildflowers and fruits and rescuing orphaned bird chicks.

I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. I was so excited. My mind was filled with joy at Sonali's good fortune.

'How lucky Sonali is!' I thought. The powerful Maulobi had kindly agreed to marry her. But I was also a bit anxious. Villagers used to say that Maulobi's bulky body and large head, with his long, grey hair and beard scattered in wild tendrils, looked like the giant ten-headed Ravana in the *Ramayana*. Some people said that Maulobi enjoyed this comparison with a menacing mythical man-eater. That said, overall, I felt happy for Sonali. Even as a child, she was already considered beautiful. She was a thin girl with long black hair and big black eyes, a golden complexion and a smiling, dimpled face. Everybody in the village loved her. I thought Sonali would

now be safe from the attentions of the Maulobi's *goondas*. Once married, she would be protected. I would enjoy a grand feast at her wedding, and I planned to advise my parents to employ a *takhti*-maker during the celebrations.

Cheered by this thought, I planned to invite all my friends to Sonali's wedding. I could now boast to them that I had a powerful ally on my side. I was certain that once married into my family, the Maulobi would convert me to Islam. Then no Muslim villagers would be able to insult me anymore, by calling me a *kaffir* or non-believer. I hated that because I knew all kaffirs burned in hell, just like the Hindus burned their dead bodies.

I planned to give Sonali some of my coloured glass marbles to convince her to accept Maulobi's proposal. I had also saved her plenty of the *takhti* sweets.

Back home, I repeated the wonderful news to my mother. 'You don't understand, Ma,' I told her. 'Maulobi wants to marry Sonali.'

Just after I said this, I was distracted by my dog, Bulu, pulling at my shorts and wagging his tail. I gave him a fuss; when I turned back to my mother, she was slumped down on the veranda. I thought she was dead.

I felt as if I was drowning in a swirling river. My body was sinking down deeper and deeper and I was desperately gasping for air. Eventually, I managed to speak. 'What happened to you, Ma? You're not going to die?' I asked tearfully.

She didn't respond. Fortunately, just then our housemaid, Meethu, came to the veranda. On seeing Ma, she hurried back to the kitchen, brought a tumbler full of cold water and sprinkled it over her face and eyes.

A few moments later, Ma's eyelids flickered open. She held my hand for support and slowly got to her feet. She didn't say a word, and I didn't understand what I'd done wrong by giving her my news. When she came back to life, her face had the ominous look of a dark black rain-cloud before a torrential downpour. I felt that my 'good news' was to blame. Was she too excited by it, I wondered?

I sat down silently and went over the events of the morning in my mind. I started to blame myself for everything.

It was only when Thakurma sat me down in her house-temple that I began to understand the gravity of the situation. Surrounded by images and statues of many gods and goddesses, she explained the real story.

'Barun, you must remember that no parents from a cultured Hindu family would give their eight-year-old daughter away to an uneducated and backward warlord to become his fourth wife,' she said. 'Once married, she would have to live in slavery until freed by death.'

Thakurma's explanation began to make some sense to me. I realised then why Maulobi's four wives worked non-stop, fetching water from the wells, carrying earthen jars on their waist and heads or collecting and chopping wood for cooking. The wives looked so thin and sad, but they worked hard from dawn to dusk even if they were obviously ill. Strangely, they never complained.

No wonder Ma was devastated by the news. If Maulobi wanted to marry a minor Hindu girl, no one would dare to question his decision, let alone oppose it. I chastised myself for my naïve, foolish thinking and my juvenile celebration. I began to fear for Sonali's safety. How could we save her from the life of a slave?

Chapter Two

We lived in an isolated, tropical and tranquil village called Fatehpur, not far from the shores of the Bay of Bengal. It was surrounded by narrow canals and a green landscape of short shrubs, long trees, and woodlands. The country was called East Bengal then, though Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate and 'Bard of Bengal,' had called it *Sonar Bangla* or 'Golden Bengal' for its vast, golden paddy fields, its beautiful rivers, and green woodlands full of fruit-bearing trees like coconut, betel nut, mango, lychee, jamun, and guava.

Our family had been living in Fatehpur alongside our Muslim neighbours for centuries, some said, since the time of the Mughals. No one knew exactly when our first house was built in the village, but the current one dated from just after Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations.

We were part of a close-knit Hindu family headed by our beloved Thakurma. No one knew how old she was as we didn't have any modern system in the village to record births, marriages or deaths. Our parents were both in their forties. Our mother oversaw household management and our education, and *Baba*, our father, a school teacher who had once fought against the British in India, was notionally in charge of everything else. But if our mother ruled the family like a modern prime minister, Thakurma was the queen, and like Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the unwritten law was that nothing would ultimately pass without her consent.

My mother told me that I was born on a stormy day in 1953. I was a sickly and tiny boy, and to counter her worries about my health she named me after the powerful Hindu god of the wind, Varun, with the hope that he would bestow his blessings upon me. Thakurma, however, didn't like my name being associated with the god she worshiped, so she used to call me Barun. Everyone followed her, so 'Varun' became 'Barun.' As it turned out, the god might have thought me born in the wrong place at the wrong time and into the wrong religion.

A year or so after I was born, my sister, Sonali, arrived. My mother called her Sonali because she was like *shona*: a golden child, born in the early evening when the western sky was painted with aureate clouds. She not only resembled the gilded clouds, but her natural golden skin made her the most beautiful girl in the village.

'Pure twenty-two-carat gold,' Father used to say.

The not-so-golden boy, of course, was jealous. I don't remember that far back, but my parents would joke that all I gave the new baby was a foul mood and a grumpy face.

When I was born, Fatehpur was still in the British-named province of East Bengal. In 1955, it was renamed East Pakistan, becoming a part of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; governed by the non-Bengali politicians from West Pakistan, over a thousand miles away across India. But this didn't affect us at the time. Our ancestors had lived in Fatehpur village peacefully for centuries, alongside their Muslim neighbours. And that was not going to change just by calling the country something else.

'Who cares about a name?' my schoolfriends and I used to say.

My sister and I grew up together with the love, guidance, and discipline of our family. Sonali was an intelligent, forthright and no-nonsense girl. Villagers used to say she was like a 'Bumbai Chilly': beautiful to look at and lovely in curry, but if you accidentally bit into it you would cry for a day and night. Apart from the universal laws of sibling rivalry, we were the two musketeers in our mischievous adventures, all for one and one for all. Sonali and my beloved dog, Bulu, would always tag along with me wherever I went and whatever I did. I was a real rascal in those days. I preferred grazing the cows in the open paddy fields to studying, and swimming for hours on end or catching fish in the swirling river. I liked to pinch exotic tropical flowers and fruits from the neighbours' gardens, and to collect eggs and chicks from the nests in the hollows of large trees, in competition with the cobras. And whatever I did, Sonali would compete with me. The allure of the open paddy fields, the soft breeze from the faraway sea, that carried the intoxicating smell of flowering mango and lemon, the scent of dew-soaked tropical flowers, the taste of the neighbours' ripened guava, and the chirp of newly hatched chicks, were too tempting for both of us.

Whatever I did, Sonali would just copy me. And when we disagreed, and she lost her temper, I always gave in. I could never bear her long face and tearful eyes. And, of course, the thought of my mother's cold shoulder also kept me from upsetting my little sister. At the time, it all felt so unfair, although I knew deep down that I was the real culprit when it came to the havoc we caused. God knows how many times I made Ma cry because of my naughty behaviour. But despite all my misdemeanours, the villagers were forgiving and kind, tolerating and sometimes even enjoying my imprudent behaviour. When I think back now, my mother's love and forgiveness for what I threw at her brings tears to my eyes. I know everyone's mother is the best, but my Ma was the best of the best as far as I'm concerned.

In the village, everybody knew everybody else. We lived like a large family, or so we thought, surrounded by a group of close friends, both Hindus, and Muslims, in

a harmonious natural environment. We would visit our Muslim friends for Ramadan and other religious ceremonies and they, in turn, would come to our Hindu festivals.

Our nearest town was Bagerhat, home to a few thousand people at the end of a broken brick built *pukka* road four tortuous miles from the village. Villagers could reach Bagerhat only by walking on the muddy road and crossing the dangerous river Daratana on wooden ferry boats called *kheya*. Bagerhat's main attraction was its British made, or *Bilayeti*, narrow gauge steam train.

Things were quite primitive in the village; we had only kerosene lamps at nightfall, and used dried wood and cow dung as cooking fuel. I read in amazement about people talking to each other from faraway places through a machine called a telephone, and watching a box that could show pictures from thousands of miles away. Modern science was fairytale stuff to us. The other magical thing that we could occasionally see for ourselves were aeroplanes. Sometimes, we would see one pass by in the sky like Arjuna's flying horse-driven chariot in the *Mahabharata*.

This little village was our home, our paradise, and the only place in the world we knew and loved. I was so proud of my village that I wanted to show off its beauty to others. It was surrounded by flowering evergreen and fruit-bearing trees and plants of all shapes and sizes. Beyond the last houses and settlements, narrow canals and streams flowed quietly, snaking through the paddy fields, eager to join the tributaries of the nearby river, the Daratana. Big fruit bearing trees like mango, jamun, and lychees, mixed with the tall and slim trunks of coconut and betel nut, overlooked vast paddy fields as far as the eyes could see. In the spring, Fatehpur was glorious.

At the age of five, I was admitted to my village madrasa, the only school in the area. A year later, Sonali followed. As this was a religious school, there were very strict rules and severe punishments for any infraction. Nonetheless, our many Muslim friends – and the few other Hindus there – made school life enjoyable.

But we were living in a cocooned world. With our carefree village life, we were yet to appreciate the real world our family and millions of other minority families were now living in, this newly created Muslim country, this 'pure land' of Pakistan, where non-Muslims were not welcome and the police, the courts and the government all acted accordingly.

I knew I was a nasty rascal who would start a fight with friends for nothing and run away on his thin legs, carrying 'a big head full of cow dung,' as Ma used to say. But I had to admit, against my will, naturally, that Sonali was a very intelligent, beautiful and popular girl in the school, with many friends of both faiths. She was

classed as a clever girl who knew her times-tables and the alphabet, while I was always behind in my studies.

Although Sonali had a lot of friends at the madrasa, her best friend was a Muslim girl called Fatima, who was a couple of years older. The two of them were inseparable. The elderly villagers used to call them 'twin sisters from two mothers.' Both were rebels as well; with their forthright attitudes, they would argue against anything they thought were not right. They would even fight with the boys over their bad behaviour. So, they were also known as the two *baghinis*, or tigresses, in the village.

But Sonali and Fatima were powerless when it came to the Maulobi. They couldn't do anything about the way he looked at Sonali's developing body under her frock. The Maulobi owned a lot of land, and he was protected by the group of young *goondas* in the village. Moreover, he knew Sharia law from top to bottom, so the villagers respected and feared him. No one would dare to say a word against him. He had real power over people.

Since I'd heard of his wedding plans for my little sister, my fear for Sonali had become a monster, hurting my head hard every time I breathed in and out. I became restless, irrationally blaming myself for creating a shameful and dangerous situation for her by discovering the Maulobi's plan. 'It was my creation, my fault,' I thought. 'How can I save my sister?'

Not finding any immediate solution, I came up with a childish plan to create a criminal gang of *goondas*, like one I'd read about in a detective novel. I decided to ask my closest friends – both Hindus and Muslims – Dulal, Shiv, Mostaq, Siraj, Mujaffar and a few others, to join my gang. And then, I thought, we would teach the Maulobi a really good lesson.

Chapter Three

I worried all afternoon, hatching and then discarding different rescue plans inspired by adventures stories I'd read. But I knew it was hopeless. I was a skinny nine-year-old boy; I could not fight alone against the Maulobi. Finally, I realised that the best plan was to help my parents, rather than act alone.

Ever since he'd heard the news, my father had been pacing about the house, while Ma, her face like thunder, kept herself busy with useless domestic chores. Thakurma had confined herself in *haitya*, a prostrate position of prayer, whispering to the many gods and goddesses in her house-temple. No one told Sonali what was going on, and she went to bed as normal after a full day with her friends from the madrasa.

All this purposeless activity continued until the sun set behind the trees, leaving a streak of pale red and black cloud in the western horizon. But for me, the usually mesmerising village evening was not characterised by the normal chorus of birdsong, chirping insects and croaking frogs; or the sound of the conch from Thakurma's house-temple and the *aajan* from the mosques calling everyone to evening prayers. Instead, I was aware of nothing but my own paralysing anxiety. But after a whole day of mental anguish, I had come up with what I thought was a brilliant rescue plan. I would hide Sonali in the house of my best friend, Mostaq. Surely, no one would suspect a Hindu girl hiding in a Muslim house, I thought.

When Baba heard about my plan he said, 'It's a good plan, Barun, but everyone knows how close our family is to Mostaq's. The Maulobi would surely search their house after he'd searched ours.'

Then Ma dropped the bombshell. 'The only way to save Sonali,' she said, 'is to take her to Calcutta.'

I didn't like the sound of this at all. 'But people say that's a long and dangerous journey,' I protested, 'and we don't know anyone in Calcutta.'

'We know that, Barun. But...'

I didn't let Ma finish. 'It's a very long and dangerous journey,' I said again.

'Yes, you're right,' she said kindly, 'but that's the only way to save Sonali from an even greater threat.'

Then my father spoke. 'Barun,' he said, 'you better stay home to look after your Thakurma. Your mother and I will take Sonali to Calcutta.'

I didn't like the sound of this either. I didn't want to go to Calcutta, but neither did I want to be left behind. Ma was going to say something, but I cut her again. 'But

how are you going to get there?' I pleaded desperately. 'And where will you stay if you can reach Calcutta?'

'Don't worry,' said Ma. 'Your father will find a way.'

That didn't stop me arguing. 'It's such a big city,' I said. 'It's a harsh place. No one knows their neighbours. No one cares about anybody. I know it. I've read about it in books.'

Baba smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. 'Don't worry, Barun,' he said. 'I've been to Calcutta before. We'll find somewhere to stay. At least Sonali will be safe.'

I had great faith in my father, who fought against the British Shahebs to free India, and I knew Ma was a very intelligent and brave woman. I had no doubt that together they would somehow get Sonali to safety. But I wanted to know how.

Baba seemed to know what he was doing. 'First,' he said, 'we must escape from the village without anyone knowing anything about our plan. We'll take a train from Bagerhat to Khulna. From there we'll go to the Indian border.'

I liked the idea of a thrilling escape. Then I thought about the dangers. What if the Maulobi discovered our plan and caught us on the way? I kept this thought to myself. My concern about Sonali's safety meant my heart overpowered my head. 'When are you going to go?' I asked them.

'Tonight,' said Ma.

I jumped up. 'Tonight?' I shouted. 'How can you leave tonight? It's evening time now. You don't have much time.'

'We don't have a choice, Barun,' said Ma.

'How can you travel without bumping into someone in the village?'

'Yes, that's a worry,' said Baba.

My boy detective brain leapt into action. I thought for a few moments and then said, 'Can you not go by boat in the Daratana river?'

Baba's face lit up, but then his expression changed once more to despair. 'If we try to hire a boat,' he said, 'then obviously the boatman will ask why we're traveling at night to Bagerhat.'

I felt my father's helplessness. Suddenly, the answer came to me: Sonali's best friend, Fatima, from the madrasa. Fatima's family and our family had helped each other out for years. 'Fatima's brother Rahim has a boat,' I told my father. 'Why don't we ask him?'

Baba jumped up and hugged me.

‘Okay, Barun,’ said Ma, taking charge, ‘you go to Fatima’s house with your father.’

I felt big and grown up and proud. I was pleased to have something to boast about to my friends as well. It all seemed such an adventure.

While my father and I were getting ready to leave, we heard a soft knock at the main gate. Bulu started to bark as if possessed and ran towards the front of the house. It was very late by village standards and we were all frightened. Who could be at the gate at this hour? Was it the Maulobi?’ I was terrified.

Before I could say anything, I saw Ma had already picked up an iron machete and my father was carrying a long wooden pole, ready to defend Sonali against the Maulobi’s henchmen. Ma stood beside Baba like Mother Durga about to kill the demons and save the world. They walked to the door, Bulu still barking, and me behind them.

‘Hello, who’s there?’ said Baba

‘It’s me,’ came a muted reply.

We all recognised the voice. It was Ibrahim, Fatima’s father.

Everybody relaxed.

Ibrahim hurried inside. ‘I’ve heard very bad news about your family,’ he said.

‘About the Maulobi?’ said Baba.

Ibrahim uncle nodded and said, ‘The old Maulobi told my neighbour that he will marry Sonali, by hook or by crook, after Friday prayers.’

Baba grabbed hold of Ibrahim’s hand and said humbly, ‘Ibrahim *bhai* – brother Ibrahim – we were going to go to your house. We need your help.’ His voice sounded strained.

‘Don’t say it like that Aswini bhai,’ said Ibrahim. ‘Your family has always helped mine; your father helped my father to build our home. Without that, we would have always lived under the thrall of the Maulobi and his exorbitant rent. Our family’s debt to your family cannot be measured in rupees or gold.’ His voice croaked with a mix of anger and resolve. He let out a deep sigh, gritted his teeth and put his hand on his heart. ‘Don’t worry, Aswini bhai,’ he said, ‘*Insha’Allah* – Allah willing – I will give my life to save your daughter.’

I almost cried; I felt as if Ibrahim uncle was a saviour sent by god to clean me of my sins, of discovering the Maulobi’s wicked plot and throwing the family into chaos.

'You can't fight alone against the Maulobi,' said Baba. 'He has many *goondas* working for him. The only way to save Sonali is to take her to Calcutta, at any cost. If we can get her there, then she'll be safe.'

'Insha'Allah, that's a good idea,' said Ibrahim enthusiastically.

'To go to Calcutta,' my father continued, 'we have to reach Bagerhat without being seen by anyone in the village.'

'Don't worry, Aswini bhai. Insha'Allah, Rahim can take you to Bagerhat in his dinghy. The Daratana is calm tonight; he'll be happy to take you to catch the first train.'

Baba sighed with relief. 'Ibrahim bhai,' he said, 'I don't know how I can ever repay you.'

'Please don't talk about debt,' said Ibrahim uncle. He looked at Ma and said, '*Bhabi* – sister-in-law – you better get Sonali ready. I will talk to Rahim.'

A few minutes later, Baba carefully opened the heavy gate for Ibrahim uncle and he quietly disappeared in the darkness, watched only by thousands of glowing insects on the trees and the countless stars shining indifferently in the sky.