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## Mythology of a Wall

Sreelekha Chatterjee

It all started with the thundering noise of earth being dug up. Ratan and his family, along with other villagers, woke up to the sound of scores of people shouting and heavy vehicles moving about in their neighborhood, which seemed to be rather disconcerting. It was the same with Yusuf's family and his villagers across the border. Both the villages were situated at the foothills of the Himalayas in the north-western part of Kashmir. Ratan and Yusuf were neighbors in the sense that their houses were at a distance of 10 feet from one another but belonged to two different countries—India and Pakistan.

Ratan looked at his pregnant wife who was sleeping peacefully next to him, enveloped in the fervid brilliance of the morning sunlight that had imperceptibly made its way into the room. She seemed unaffected by the commotion that was heard outside. He craned his head in order to peep out the adjacent window but nothing was visible, perhaps all the tumult of shouting and screaming was happening on the other side of the road. He got up and shifted towards the window at the other end of the room. For a moment he stood unmoving by the window, gazing at the world's most magnificent mountains, the Himalayas. It brought a sense of peace whenever he positioned himself there watching the peaks draped with snow, and his eyes would invariably drift to the lower ranges which remained covered with dense growth of dark-green trees and underlying vegetation. The rays of morning sunlight fell on the sparkling peaks exhibiting an unearthly elegance, arresting him in its beauty and saturating his soul with a profound happiness that could hardly be articulated in words.

Every morning Ratan would spend at least a few minutes breathing in the calm, serenity of his surroundings. But that morning was different as he felt distracted and couldn't ignore the urge to visit the place from where the disturbing sound originated. He dressed up quickly and rushed to the place where a large crowd of onlookers had gathered, beaming with enthusiasm, peering over their shoulders with nervous, yet curious, eyes. The people were passing contradictory news in general consternation from which no sense could be gleaned about the presence of visitors in their locality. The crowd of spectators kept observing a group of grim-looking people who were perhaps working out a plan to build something, intermittently inspecting the movement of cranes fidgeting with the earth at a distance, and the laborers with yellow-colored metal head gears who were cleaning the area at frequent intervals.

"We're building a wall bordering the two villages. It'd be something like the Great Wall of China," someone said to no one in particular, putting an end to all the speculation that was going on amongst the local villagers.

A wall was being set up to separate the two villages, Ratan reckoned. His eyes fell on the heaps of cement, stone-chips and sand that lay scattered all over the place among piles of bricks and boulders, which were destined to create a great wall depicting a hostile environment between

the two nations. He glimpsed at his fellow villagers who seemed to be mere spectators, watching the entire episode with an innate detachment.

A group of Indian soldiers dressed in camouflage suits and armed with machine guns were strolling around that place, keeping an eye on every villager and also, the construction work. Another group of Pakistani soldiers along with Yusuf's villagers were also there. It was difficult to make out whether the construction work was being carried out by Indians or Pakistanis as the men working at the site weren't wearing any uniform. It was probably a joint effort, Ratan thought.

"What's going on?" Ratan felt a gentle pat on his back. He turned around to find Yusuf.

Ratan fumbled for words, smiled thinly on being unable to respond suitably.

"The senior officials have decided to demarcate the boundary between the two nations." Someone from the crowd said.

Nobody knew who these senior officials were, they always remained obscure yet their orders were followed with extreme diligence and sincerity. The ordinary citizens, whether living in big cities or small villages like these, seldom had anything to do with political revolutions and were never the reason for big wars or rivalries among nations. They lived and died, remained static for generations, obeyed the instructions of officials and awaited the next set of orders, maintaining loyalty and faithfulness towards their country, enveloping themselves in a veil of helplessness, indifference, and portraying an inability to crush any kind of wrong-doing. Though they never directly participated in any sort of decision-making process, leave alone listening to their own conscience, the history of growth and destruction of nations involved them.

Both Ratan and Yusuf were aware of the fact that they belonged to two different countries, but they didn't know where exactly the boundary was between them. They had always considered themselves as neighbors, living in that area for more than 50 years, ever since they were born. The wall, as announced, was meant to protect them against their enemies but they were totally ignorant about who exactly was their foe—the everlasting poverty; the ignorance due to lack of appropriate education; the thieves and criminals born out of starvation, inadequate employment opportunities threatening their very being and whose never-ending barbarity troubled them every now and then; the fearsome predators that invaded them often from the nearby jungles; or the volatile weather that brought in crippling heat during the hot summer months; freezing, bone-tickling cold in winters; torrential rains during monsoons, jeopardizing their lives and challenging their survival at every instance. Would the wall be good enough to protect the villages from these impending dangers of existence?

"This is no man's land. Step back. We are going to mark this area clearly." A Pakistani soldier pointed in a matter-of-fact manner to Ratan and Yusuf who were standing near the construction site.

Both looked at the soldier and then stared at each other, stupefied and bewildered on thinking how the 1-yard long playground bordering their village, where they, their sons, grandsons have been playing ever since their birth, could suddenly be considered as a “no man’s land.”

Ratan felt a lump in his throat, a sudden fear was slowly gripping him under its seductive charms; an overwhelming strange, unaccustomed realization about Yusuf being a foreigner, a known neighbor getting distant. He kept wondering what would happen when on a windy day the clothes of an Indian household would be blown away and dropped at a Pakistani household. In earlier occasions, they could go over to each other’s houses to get them back. After the wall was raised, they wouldn’t be able to cross the barrier. In several instances, Yusuf’s pet doves would sit on Ratan’s balcony. Yusuf’s grandson would pelt stones at them and whistle strange tunes to route them back to his house. In future, would such an action be considered as a crime, an unlawful intrusion, and countered with firing from the soldiers?

Ratan returned home only to be attacked by a set of questions that his wife had for him, leaving him worried and impatient. He looked at his wife’s protruding belly thoughtfully. It was almost 7 months now and the baby was due after another couple of months. The baby was perhaps listening to his parents talk about the decaying society, the traits of hatred, rules of enmity that soured relationships, triggered political and regional conflicts. What would happen if he ever decided to forget hatred and fill himself with love and compassion? Would he find a way to the path of righteousness? Would he be lost like Abhimanyu, the brave son of Arjuna and Subhadra in the epic Mahabharata, who knew the road to enter the Chakravyuh, the seven-tier defensive spiral formation at the battlefield, but didn’t know how to exit? Would he be trapped in his own superficial learning, entangled in fake values of life and never be able to break free from the Chakravyuh, the shackles of narrow-mindedness, and adopt a profound understanding about the widened horizon of tolerance? Would he fight bravely and wreak havoc on the social injustice and irrational bigotry that were rampant in their world?

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For the next few days, the construction work went on and the villagers watched the progress with ambivalence, perhaps with a sense of loss. Initially, villagers of both the countries were upset, as the construction had dampened their spirit of coexistence. The concept of “no man’s land” was new to them, and to a great extent, scary. But gradually they got used to the construction work, hoping that it would get over soon and they would be spared the privacy that they enjoyed earlier. They didn’t want to be another village near the border frequented by soldiers. After all, soldiers were worshipped as brave men who protected their geographical territories but not to be seen everyday or considered as one amongst them.

Amidst such a grave situation, the children remained unaffected. Their natural inclination to replicate something new in a restricted form seemed to develop manifold and erecting a great

wall was considered no less than an innovation to them. Their excitement knew no bounds as they collected portions of broken bricks, stones and started building walls in their house compounds, placing the elements with a precision that they'd observed in the masons working at the construction site. They leapt with ineffable joy on creating some sort of a wall as tall as 1 feet and then dance around the structure in the moment's exhilaration. The structure would inevitably collapse after a while but nobody analyzed whether it was due to the weakness of the construction or the vibration of their jumping feet. At times they would themselves make the structure fall at the stroke of their long, firm sticks. The liberty to create and destroy that they enjoyed were no longer there with the adults who'd constraints of social pressures and inexplicable notions. The innocence and simplicity of the children were noteworthy. It was presumed that such ignorance was bliss, as it didn't bring in any thought of untoward incidents related to the wall that were haunting the villagers, eating away their peace.

Finally, the day came after two to three months' time when the construction was complete. The large wall, almost 6 feet in height, between the two villages stood mockingly, defying the friendship that the villagers of the two nations once had amongst themselves. The construction of the wall wasn't a continuous one and had gaps in between, which were closed with barbed wires. Nobody knew till where the wall was built as the villagers hardly travelled outside their area.

Ratan had climbed the nearby mountain to get a better glimpse of the wall that seemed to be standing tall when viewed from the village. He looked over the wall from a certain height with deep sadness and resignation; the disturbing view of the two villages split by an inanimate yet influential boundary brought tears in his eyes. The unbreakable wall seemed greater than the grand Himalayas. The highest mountain in the world appeared to be small, insignificant with respect to the wall that had now occupied the lives of the villagers, who were experiencing a loss of vitality, immersing themselves in an eternal gloom of melancholy. His heart pained to imagine the fear in the eyes of his dear friend Yusuf, who silently drew away from him. The world felt small, broken up into fragments, separated by huge boundaries, bereft of love and humanitarian feelings. A sudden anger seized him and the pride that he lived in a village at the foothills of the greatest mountain in the world slowly withered within him, as he felt tormented by the feelings of shame mingled with repugnance about the construction of an insurmountable barrier that was built with an ingenious contrivance, which could hardly be prevented from being created. He wished that the world came to an end, longed for the arrival of Kalki avatar (incarnation of Vishnu)—the destroyer of Evil—to eradicate the decadence of Kali Yuga (Age of injustice), save the good, and put an end to oppression and all the iniquities of racial prejudice and reestablish the age of righteousness, Satya Yuga (Age of Truth).

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The gauzy-walled frontier was a new realization in the lives of the villagers of both the countries, a sudden understanding about their differences, a restlessness about an imposed self-centredness, and above all, a line demarcating their feelings, their concerns, their oneness with each other, successfully leaving the civilization wild, unsettled for years to come and uprooting their values, humanistic ideals with the help of an unwanted barrier.

But life was stranger than one could imagine. The humans had been adapting to changes, even to the ones that were unwelcome, forced on them. In that case, it was no different. The wall was worshiped with a strange devotion. On the Indian side, prayers and other rituals were conducted for the long life of the wall. At the other end, verses were read from the holy Koran for the well-being of the construction.

At the end of the ceremonious day when the villagers went back to their houses, they felt the sudden silence which seemed weird as if enveloped by a stagnant emptiness. The nagging sound of the hammers, moving cranes, incessant shouts of construction workers had wracked their nerves for so long and destroyed their sleep. The villagers at first had to accommodate the noises in their lives and then get accustomed to the silence. After a bit of initial struggle with the sudden noiselessness, they went off to sleep and so did Ratan's and Yusuf's families. The exhausted soldiers crushed in their respective tents.

That night Ratan's wife showed signs of labor starting with strong, regular contractions and finally, her water broke. The mid-wife was called in and within hours a baby boy was born to them. Ratan felt an overwhelming affection holding his son in his arms which was soon washed over by a feeling of perpetual pain and vulnerability as if he'd deprived his son of an environment that every human being deserved—one that was pure, free from fatal prejudices.

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The following morning both the villages woke up to another turmoil, something similar to what they felt when the construction work had begun. But this time it was the violence of the nature that they were about to witness, stirring their souls from the state of slumber and raising them to wakefulness of their inner minds. The wind came crashing down their houses and it rained incessantly like never before, unleashing havoc on the inhabitants. Within a few hours, the two villages were inundated with floodwater and the rain refused to stop, causing mayhem across the area. A huge stream of water started flowing from nowhere and dragged along with it the houses, animals, humans. Both the countries tried to deal with the natural calamity, coping with the ferocity of the floods and its chaotic aftermath. The soldiers already stationed in the area started helping the villagers, moving survivors to hospitals and relief camps on higher grounds. A number of rescue teams visited the area in a bid to save the villagers. One such team noticed that the people of both the villages were helping each other in the moment of crisis. Some were shifted to safe places in Pakistan and some moved to India. Nobody bothered about their nationalities and the great wall was forgotten by all.

Ratan and his wife shifted to a safe place along with other villagers. It was the same place where Yusuf's family had taken shelter. All of them were shocked and alarmed on witnessing the devastation, still struggling to come to terms with their displacement caused by the raging monsoon floods.

“This is no ordinary rain. It's Manu's deluge.” Ratan kept saying like a madman to each and every body he met.

A rescue team happened to remember the wall that was built a few days ago. While looking down on the villages from the helicopter they noticed the remnants of the mighty wall which probably came tumbling down along with the strong wind and the heavy rainfall. Perhaps Ratan was right. It was Manu's deluge, a wilful damage that was in favor of retention of humanity. To add to nature's triumph, restoring the ramshackle wall was not in the agenda item anymore, at least not in the near future.