The canal that flowed through Mirzapur divided the village into two equal halves. On one side lay the Hindu settlement, and, on the other, the Muslim. Perched on the canal bridge, two boys of eleven or twelve were engaged in animated conversation. One was Sayed Hameed Reja and the other, Shankar. Reja was the only son of the sardar, the headman of the Muslim settlement. And Shankar? He had lost his parents and was the darling of his widowed aunt.

Taking two guavas from his shirt pocket, Shankar said, “Here, Reja, have one. I stole it for you. Had nearly forgotten about it. Go on, eat it!”

Contented, Reja took a bite. “Come on,” he said, “let’s share.” Reja looked around and stood up. After a while, the two friends parted.

Reja and Shankar had gone to the same school from their earliest childhood. Although they belonged to two different religious camps, none would dispute that they had one soul and body. Not a day could they live without seeing each other. If Shankar seemed to be ill, Reja would come running to the Hindu side of the village. Since he was not allowed to go inside Shankar’s house, he would content himself with looking at Shankar through the back window.

Shankar was no different. He might take the mandatory bath after touching a Muslim, but Reja’s slightest worry or discomfort made him run
to his friend’s house. Children of two hostile camps, their souls were tied by a single thread of love. Their simple hearts could never harbour hatred.

It was getting dark. Just as Reja was leaving the house with a ripe papaya in hand, Sardar Mohammed Khan called out his name. Reja had never heard his father call him in such a solemn voice. Slowly, he came over and stood before his father. “Where are you off to?” asked the sardar.

“To meet Shankar.”

The sardar’s face became grave. “To meet Shankar, I see!” he exclaimed. “Listen, my son, from today onwards you are not to visit with that Hindu boy. Understood? And if you insist, you will have to face the consequences. Be sure of that. Now get back home!”

Reja felt stunned. This was too sudden, too unexpected. His eyes filled with tears. As an only child, he had always enjoyed a special place in his father’s heart. But why was he rebuked for no reason today? Why was he being told not to meet Shankar? What had he done wrong? Despite his efforts, he failed to find a reasonable answer. He looked at the papaya concealed inside his clothes and then threw it at the fence. The papaya dashed against the fence; its pieces lay scattered on the ground.

As he gazed at the pathetic sight, distracted, tears rolled down from Reja’s eyes. He felt stifled. He was very much in the custody of his father these days. Once or twice, he had snuck away from the mosque but had had to return disappointed. The sardar was mad at him. Such a grown-up boy! It was shameful that he could not abide by the norms laid down by his community.

Reja noticed that the gatherings in his house gradually swelled in size, and he felt frightened. At times, he asked his father why he wasn’t allowed to see Shankar. Some of his Muslim friends jeered at him. “You must be dumb!” they exclaimed. “Don’t you get it? Those Hindu idol-worshippers need a lesson! The Muslim League has been insulted by the Congress Party. So why do you go on getting together with that Hindu brat—to make friends with the enemy?”

None of this made any sense to Reja. What, after all, did Shankar have to do with the League and the Congress? It was enough that he and Shankar could meet up, play, and steal fruit together. What did it have to do with the Hindu-Muslim question? Reja was confused.
The next day would be Durga Saptami. Everything was quiet—perhaps the lull before the storm. In a room in the sardar’s house, many people huddled together. Reja strained his ears. He was startled as he heard his cousin’s voice: “We should set fire to the first house in the Hindu settlement.”

“The first house!” thought Reja. “But isn’t that Shankar’s? Arson in the dead of night?” What a thought—Shankar would be burnt to death. A tremor of rage tore through his heart. No, he would never allow such a thing to happen. Never!

Durga Saptami finally arrived. Everyone was in a festive mood, but there was no smile on Shankar’s face. Every year on this day, he used to steal a portion of the food offering made to the goddess. Reja would sit waiting patiently on the bridge. He relished the taste of the delicious offering. But such times were nearly over.

Shankar felt a sense of disquiet. “Why don’t you go and take part in the celebration?” his aunt urged. “Why do you sit still at home?”

“Not now. I’ll go later,” said Shankar, as he lay listlessly on the bed.

The night came on. The bustle of the day gradually subsided. There was an ominous silence all around. Like ghosts, a group of assailants moved swiftly and silently toward the bridge, armed with wooden clubs, torches, and knives. Reja, who had just dozed off, woke with a start. He sensed that the mob was in an aggressive mood and was scared to death. What would happen to Shankar and his hut? He could not bear to think about it.

Reja sprang up and ran breathlessly toward the bridge. By now, everyone in the Hindu settlement had been alerted. With whatever they could lay their hands on, they rushed toward their side of the bridge. Amid the commotion, Shankar heard their menacing cry that today they would bury the son of the sardar and settle their score.

The silence of the night was shattered. On each side of the bridge, a mob gathered, hurling a volley of slogans. “Jai Hind!” “Pakistan Zindabad!” Some of the Hindus had smashed parts of the bridge, but this did not deter their rivals from advancing. Amid the turmoil, a cry could be heard: “Shankar, my brother! Shankar!” It was Reja, the sardar’s son.

In the faint glow of a torch, Shankar stood in the front of the mob and faced Reja. Two young Hindu men emerged from the crowd wielding clubs. Were they going to kill Reja?
“Reja, Reja, step back!” urged Shankar in a fearful voice. The mobs stood face to face. Heedlessly, the two friends approached each other. The crowd became still. Two cries were heard: “Reja!” “Shankar!” Two palms came together, and then a deep splash echoed through the village as two bodies fell into the dark waters.

It seemed like a heavenly union. The souls of the two boys were united forever. The tender flower buds floated inexorably into the mouth of the mighty flood.

“Shankar, Shankar, my beloved, where are you?”

The plaintive cry of the Hindu widow shook the very bowels of the earth. Grieving uncontrollably, the old woman collapsed on the ground where Shankar and Reja had stood. “You murderers!” she wept. “You’ve killed my Shankar—my darling!”

A few burly youths ran toward the sardar. “Shall we finish off the old hag?” they yelled, their clubs raised to strike.

“No!” came the firm reply. “Go back to the village!” Strange. There were tears in the sardar’s eyes. His precious Reja was no more. The mobs eyed each other and slowly retraced their footsteps. The sardar stood alone. His gaze fell longingly on the swirling waters beneath his feet. He averted his eyes and turned back toward the village.