Lance Naik Jayanta Rout, of the 32nd Sikh Regiment, feebly kicked twice at a mound covered by fallen leaves, three feet below the water.

Everything was at a standstill. But the sky above was unusually dark. Angry, rebellious clouds awaiting the final showdown. An imminent storm. A tropical cyclone. The sky looked unrecognizable, like a stranger, and the green earth seemed to have been invaded by outsiders. It was as if the inhabitants of an evil planet had ransacked the peace of the earth. Could this be possible?

For the past three or four days, the sea had been rough and wild. But now the roar had subsided. Had the sea retreated or changed her direction? Who knows?

Less than six months ago, Lance Naik Rout was in the Poonch sector with the indomitable and undaunted Sikh Regiment, climbing steep mountains with a rope tied to his waist. There, under the cover of towering slopes, he had fought hand to hand with the enemy. He had crawled like a snail across snow-covered peaks. He was unaffected by below-zero temperatures. Rather, his blood boiled when he heard the command, “March, march—forward, march!”
For a soldier, a battle is a battle. You have to fight to your last breath—it doesn’t matter if others call it a “shadow war.” You have to bend and duck your head to dodge passing bullets that almost kiss your eyes. Sometimes, you must throw your body onto the ground and camouflage yourself. You have to ignore your friend, who has been mortally wounded and lies drenched in blood, and march on. There is little hope of retracing your steps. If you do come back that way, you find your wounded colleague, living or dead, and carry him on your shoulders.

The Sikh Regiment had returned victorious from Poonch sector. Jayanta had been wounded in the battle and was on leave to his village after his release from the army hospital. A bullet had been extracted from his leg. His injury was not considered serious, for a soldier. In the hospital, there were many with more grievous injuries. Captain Himmat Singh, twenty-three years old, had been hit by twelve bullets. Lieutenant Kuldeep had lost an eye, and one of his legs had been amputated. Kamal Yadav, from Bihar, lay on his hospital bed singing songs. A bullet had been removed from the right side of his chest. He did not cry out in pain, lest he be looked down upon. It would have been shameful for him.

While dragging himself across the battlefield, Jayanta had beat his own chest. It would be better for him to die in the field than to accept defeat and bite the ground beneath his feet. He would die a hero at least, fighting to his last breath.

But now he was just an ordinary coward. Just a mound of wet sand. No enemy in sight. Only ruins all around.

The cyclone had ended, but that was now meaningless. It had already done its worst. It would have been better if he had been devoured by the monstrous storm. It would have been better if he had disappeared like smoke or fog in the dark, dreary, unruly night. Jayanta’s mind was crowded by all these helpless thoughts. Known has become unknown, familiar unfamiliar. He was numb, paralyzed. Where was his home? His village? The altar before his house? Where had they disappeared to? He could not decide whether to keep moving or not.

Suddenly, he stopped, leaning on the stick in his hands. He saw a large storage jar lying under an uprooted tree some two hundred feet tall. Perhaps a newly wedded daughter-in-law had brought some food from her parents’ home, and her mother-in-law had had no time to cook it on the
earthen hearth. Where might the jar have been kept? In the kitchen . . . or the granary? Had its contents been intended for her husband’s sister’s marriage or some other auspicious occasion? The cyclone had dragged it, and many other valuable goods, out of their safe places. These might contain some food, like raw, fried, or flattened rice.

With the help of the stick, Jayanta slowly inched forward, sending ripples through the water all around him. With much difficulty, he was able to get near enough to grab the jar, which sat shining in the dark, murky water. The thought of fried rice reminded him of Arati. She had been without food for three days. He would go back if he could get some food for her. He crouched on the tree to get a grip on the jar. The tips of his fingers were raw from being immersed in water for the past three days.

A huge jar. Its top was well above the water level. He climbed up onto a branch of the fallen tree and peered into it. Instead of being delighted, he shivered. A girl child, about three years old, was curled up inside the jar, sleeping unperturbed. Her thick hair was tied back by a ribbon, and between her eyebrows was a large circle of kohl to ward off evil spirits and their effects. In her red dress, she looked like a dark doll. Jayanta felt a ray of hope. At last, the face of a living human being! The parents must have put their daughter into this large jar before the seawalls crumbled and their home was submerged under water. Jayanta lifted the child out. Her silver armlets and numerous talismans tied in black ribbon clinked and clanked.

But why were the hands of the girl so heavy? Why was her neck so loose, hanging down like a vine? Frightened, Jayanta shouted, “Dear little girl, open your eyes and look up! Look at me!” His fearful cry shook the place. But the girl, who could have filled the empty lap of Arati, was no longer alive. How did she die? When had her end come? There was no one to answer the question.

Jayanta had lost his six-month-old son on the first day of the storm. When the mud seawalls crumbled, he took his uncle—his father’s younger brother—on one arm and Arati on the other and led them into their house, which was well constructed, with stone walls. But the roar of the Bay of Bengal could still be heard, five or six kilometres from their village. Soon, water from the sea began rushing into the village. Like the poison created when the gods and demons churned the ocean of milk to
produce the *amrita*, it spread through the whole village, consuming it. There was no Lord Shiva to gulp down the poison and save them. In the great battle between the gods and demons, human beings had no role to play. A man was an insignificant, helpless, pitiable creature, entrapped by the vast waters. He was sinking, lost in the endless ocean. No trace of him.

The victims of the cyclone looked everywhere for a helping hand, but there was none. Bereft of family and relatives, they were enveloped by an all-pervasive dance of death, in which the world and the sky were reeling.

Jayanta had carried Arati over to the stone wall. Because flooding water would overpower her, he tied her to a palm tree that had been uprooted by the deadly storm and had fallen on the wall. Uncle was standing near another wall, with Jayanta’s son in his arms.

His uncle and son were already waist-deep in the water when Jayanta plunged in to save them. In the driving rain and lightning, he struggled to reach them. He held onto them with all his strength and had almost lifted them from the water onto the stone wall when suddenly his wounded leg gave way. It snapped like dead bamboo. For a moment, his grip loosened, and his uncle and son fell into the water and were swept away by the mighty waves of the sea. Within the blink of an eye, they disappeared.

Amid incessant rain and wind, Jayanta was searching for two generations—the one before him and the one after him, his uncle and his son. In his search, he was carried fifty feet away, from land into water. He saved himself by climbing a hillock and holding onto a half-broken palm tree.

Arati drifted in and out of consciousness. She was all alone, tied to the tree. After the storm let up, Jayanta returned. He untied her and lifted her down. Arati sat with her back to the wall, her tear-filled eyes more terrible to behold than the storm-tossed sky. For some time, Jayanta held her to his breast. He caressed and kissed his wife, who had lost her son. They sat holding one another. They did not utter a word. After some time, she pressed her breasts with her own hands and moaned.

After searching for a long time, Jayanta at last spotted a small clay pot floating not far away. He quickly grabbed it, in hopes of offering some food to Arati. Inside it, he found soaked and swollen green grain. It was the only food he could give her. He collected the rainwater in a plastic bag, the one household article he had. Both drank the water from the bag after filtering it through his torn clothes.
The main part of the village was about one and a half kilometres from the new house. Jayanta’s parents had died long ago. His elder uncle, who had embraced the Mahima faith and become a devotee of Alekha, had shifted his home to this side of the village, nearer to their land. That was just after Jayanta’s marriage. The elder uncle had then constructed a new house, with stone walls instead of mud ones. He was solidly built himself, five and a half feet tall. He had planted trees, brinjals, and betel plants. He had built a big altar in front of their house. He had also persuaded four more families to move to this side of the village. The cyclone had uprooted all of them and sent them to oblivion.

Jayanta could see that his land was submerged. He caught sight of two dead bodies as he was lifting Arati down from the palm tree. He tried to recognize them, but they were too badly disfigured. By that time, he had seen seven or eight dead cows.

Jayanta could not leave Arati for a moment. The memory of her six-month-old son haunted her.

The roads to the village were washed out. It was difficult to reach it. Trees as much as fifty or a hundred years old had been torn up. Wherever Jayanta looked, he could see nothing but carcasses of animals or human beings. A pungent smell rose from the corpses. Jayanta’s wounded right leg had started to swell. His left leg had been pierced by sharp shaft of bamboo. There was no trace of his village. Jayanta looked from side to side, into the distance. Only water, water—nobody was alive. Still, Jayanta shouted out some familiar names. Perhaps somebody might still be living. He shouted, “Jaya is calling you, brother! Answer me if you are alive.” But to no avail. His face was a mask of despair. He had fed Arati the soaked and swollen grain he had found yesterday. Bewildered by his own suffering, by the ecstasy of finding Arati alive, and by the gruelling effort to find food for her, he had forgotten even the death of his son.

Jayanta held the unknown girl he had found in the storage jar against his chest. The water had started receding. He started forward, intending to stow the jar in a safe place.

He had participated in immersing the image of goddess Saraswati in water after worshipping her. The image must be left in waist-deep water. Today, he had to bid farewell to this little doll in the water. Tears ran down his cheeks. His heart bled. His whole body was wrenched with pain,
writhing in grief. It was as if his whole existence had been drowned or had been lost in the water. Oh God! Why did you create such a soft and delicate weapon to break man into pieces and mix him with the earth?

Oh, forget it all! Let it be a bad dream, Jayanta thought. In spite of his heavy heart, he approached the jar. Look at what care the mother had taken to make the child a bed to sleep in.

The sun was still high in the sky. There was time to dry Arati’s saris. In such a terrible time, one cannot afford to throw away even a length of thread. Jayanta could not believe his eyes when he lifted a corner of one of the saris. He found flattened rice falling out—the corner was loosely knotted. He quickly collected the rice and bundled it up for Arati to eat later.

A helicopter hovered above his head. Jayanta felt relief. He ran toward his home, not fearing the water and mud.

Now food would be dropped from the sky. Relief would come. A rescue party would soon appear. A VIP would arrive. Everything was not lost, Jayanta thought. He heard the siren: “March, march—forward, march!”

He fashioned a pole from bamboo. He tied a red napkin to one end and lifted the other, waving it for some time. The rescue party failed to notice the red napkin. Jayanta thought, Tomorrow, they will notice me. The water was gradually receding. The next day, he would make a raft by joining banana trunks together. He prayed for the night to be over.

Night makes one lonely, weak, and emotional.

Lance Naik Jayanta Rout of the 32nd Sikh Regiment lay on a mat made from dry straw and the branches of a coconut tree. His head was in the lap of his wife, Arati. He had not eaten anything for four days. He had drunk only water. Hunger had almost paralyzed him. How long could his body of flesh and blood withstand hunger? He had tried, for the past two days, to speak some words of solace to Arati, but he could no longer do it. His body could no longer help him.

The gnawing hunger blinded him. Everything looked dark. He would die if he did not eat something. He knew it.

Arati could feel that it was not the fever but hunger that had paralyzed Jayanta. She swallowed hard and asked, “Why did you tell me lies, Jayanta? Why? That you had eaten the flattened rice? Why, dear?” Her voice trembled. There was no answer. Jayanta merely curled up tighter in Arati’s lap.
Arati had lost the son she had been breastfeeding. Dreary darkness, along with the black water of the sea. Where was her little one? Who had snatched him from her? She felt a terrible pain in her chest. Despite the pain, she was overwhelmed with a mother’s warmth. The mother in her was looking for her unfed child. Her breasts were overflowing with milk.

Jayanta was severely lashed by hunger. He was without nails, without claws, without feet. He had nothing. He was left with no strength, no resilience. He lay there like an innocent child, like a breastfed baby. Terrible hunger had squeezed every drop of blood from him. For his bare life, he held onto Arati, like a child clinging to its mother.

Arati lifted the child and brought his mouth to her nipple, from which the elixir of life was oozing drop by drop. The unflinching and bounteous love of a mother gradually parted Jayanta’s closed lips. His face was wreathed in smiles. Life flowed into his veins. Jayanta looked up. A dauntless soldier kneeling down before a mother.