

HOMETOWNS  
A biopic on Suresh Biswas

by

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an Original Screenplay  
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All dialogues not in English have been italicised. The specific language spoken in a particular scene has been indicated within the scene. Only song-lyrics and some Sanskrit phrases appear in the spoken language, accompanied by English translations.

INT. FILM PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY (PRESENT DAY) 1

A large office space with a lot of buzz. Young people are all around, working intensely or chatting. A fancy glass cabin on one side with a long table. Upbeat office decor is dominated by colourful posters of recent Hindi films.

Opposite the cabin, there is a large TV screen where 'Republic' news channel plays on mute. Election results pour in. Coloured pie-diagrams with shades of orange dominate the screen. Images of politicians Narendra Modi and Amit Shah hog the limelight.

Standing close to the cabin, is a woman in her mid-forties, dressed in an elegant white cotton sari, a big red *bindi*. She wears glasses and has an embroidered bag hanging from her shoulder. This is SHRAVANI BANERJEE. In her ethnic outfit, she is an oddity in the corporate ambiance.

She tries hard to look away from the TV screen. Makes occasional glances nevertheless. Some employees are keenly watching the TV instead of their computer monitors.

A tall man, stout, around 50 years, walks with swagger towards the glass-cabin, talking animatedly on the phone, greeting people on his way. This is MR MEHRA, the Producer, flashing a thin gold chain and a steel bangle below his sports blazer. He certainly looks like a confident and important guy out here. Inside the glass-cabin there is a young woman and two other men in business suits.

SHRAVANI realigns her sari as she sees MR MEHRA approaching. She looks nervous. He sees her waiting near the cabin and smiles.

MR MEHRA  
Shravani, right?

SHRAVANI  
(nodding)  
Glad to meet you, Mr Mehra!

He readily extends his hands. Graciously opens the door for her, still talking on the phone, mostly listening. She is ushered into a plush conference room.

(CONTINUED)

MR MEHRA

Please, please come in.  
Sorry I'm a bit late. Too  
much going on! It's crazy.

A bronze Ganapati statue and incense sticks stand on one side while rose petals float in a brass water-pot below. There are TWO EXECUTIVES in business suits and a bright-looking young woman seated at a distance.

MR MEHRA

Please give me a minute.

He keeps texting. SHRAVANI looks around in discomfort when her eyes run into the bright eyes of the young woman, about 25 years old. This is KAVITA MASCARENHAS, wears jeans and a T-shirt. She comes over and hugs her warmly as if she knows her. Shravani returns the embrace but looks confused.

KAVITA

I was so looking forward to  
meeting you!

SHRAVANI

You are ...?

KAVITA

Kavita. Kavita Mascarenhas. You  
taught us at Sofia's School of  
Communication, remember?

SHRAVANI acknowledges but struggles to remember her. She is pleasantly surprised. Looks closely at KAVITA's stylish kohl-outlined eyes.

The TV screen can be seen through the conference room. Now two people are standing below the screen who are closely watching the ongoing election results.

SHRAVANI

Mascarenhas, you said? From Goa?

KAVITA nods.

SHRAVANI

(still absorbing it)  
So, you were at Sofia's?

KAVITA acknowledges smilingly.

KAVITA

Are you still in Bombay or  
moved back to Calcutta?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

3.

SHRAVANI

Actually, I am from a place in the south of Bengal. Near the Sunderbans. 200 km from Calcutta.

KAVITA

Sunderbans! Oh, *The Hungry Tide!* I just finished reading it. (rolls her eyes)

KAVITA puts her hand on her chest, emotionally.

SHRAVANI

Amazing, isn't it?

SHRAVANI smiles lovingly. Embraces her again.

Surprised by the hugging, MR MEHRA turns to them.

MR MEHRA

You know each other?

KAVITA

She was my teacher at Sofia's. She. Is. Amazing. I can never forget her classes.

MR MEHRA

Wow! That's something!

SHRAVANI looks pepped up with the praise. They settle down in their chairs around the conference table.

The TWO EXECUTIVES in business suits who were going through their laptops, stand up to greet SHRAVANI as they are introduced.

MR MEHRA

That is Pradeep, this is Ankur. Kavita is in charge of development of new projects.

EXECUTIVE 1

Glad to meet you Shravani! It's a real pleasure.

EXECUTIVE 2

Same here.

They shake hands and then settle down.

MR MEHRA

You may know we just had two back-to-back releases. Both doing pretty well at the box-office.

MR MEHRA's phone rings.

(CONTINUED)

MR MEHRA

Sorry! My phone is like Indigo Airlines' customer service number.

He fiddles with his phone, allowing the executives to continue the discussion.

SHRAVANI

So, how are the new releases doing?

EXECUTIVE 1

We recovered investment even before the film went to the shooting floors. Thanks to our stars.

SHRAVANI

How's that possible?

EXECUTIVE 2

Distribution advances. Now, we can't stop investors. So we want to diversify our slate, our portfolio, with strong story-driven star vehicles.

EXECUTIVE 1 nods. Now MR MEHRA closes his phone and joins the talk.

MR MEHRA

OK, guys. Here is Shravani Banerjee. Well-known documentary filmmaker and screenwriter. And as we have just come to know now (turning to Kavita), a very successful teacher. Shravani has an interesting story to pitch. Written on spec.

She takes out a dog-eared screenplay from her bag and puts it on the table as all of them look at her.

The Executives slowly lean back like judges. One of them hits a button on the intercom on the table.

EXECUTIVE 1

Coffee for 5. Water? (looking at Shravani who nods).

MR MEHRA

Let me tell you one thing Shravani. Money is never an issue. Never. People will say otherwise. (Digs deeper into himself) Take it from me. It's

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

5.

MR MEHRA (cont'd)  
 all about finding the right  
 project. The industry revolves  
 around stars but the truth is,  
 Script is King!

Suddenly there is a collective cheer in the whole office. Many people have assembled in front of the TV screen outside. They all step out of the cabin.

All eyes are around the TV which is now playing loudly. Onscreen, there are saffron flags everywhere.

MALE TV REPORTER  
 (on screen)  
 The BJP and its Prime Ministerial  
 candidate, Mr Narendra Modi, has  
 won by a landslide, with 353  
 seats in the Parliament, an  
 unprecedented 65% majority. BJP's  
 main opposition, the National  
 Congress, has now been reduced to  
 a minor party even in the  
 Opposition ...

There are loud cheers in the office, mostly by young boys and girls. Even the TEA-BOY, with a tray full of empty cups, rejoices with the rest of the crowd.

MR MEHRA is very excited. SHRAVANI and KAVITA huddle together in shock in one corner. He takes out a 2000 rupee note from his wallet. Taps the TEA-BOY on his shoulder.

MR MEHRA  
 Get sweets for the entire office.

The boy nods, leaving in a hurry.

MR MEHRA  
 (to Shravani)  
 It took this country 72 years to  
 find a leader like Modi. Look at  
 that 56-inch chest!

The festive mood carries on as SHRAVANI and KAVITA return to the silence of the cabin. From that isolated space, they look at the celebrations outside. Soon, MR MEHRA and the executives enter. She gets ready to tell her story. Sips water.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

2

SHRAVANI opens the door to her flat, exhausted. It is elegantly decorated with ethnic Indian handicrafts.

(CONTINUED)

A man in his mid-forties with French-cut beard and wearing shorts, is sweating heavily while walking on the in-house treadmill. A bottle of McDowell's whiskey lies on the table. This is KARAN, Shravani's partner.

He doesn't stop. Glances at the door.

Shravani throws in her bag on the sofa.

SHRAVANI

Hi! How are things?

KARAN

Stocks are down all day.

She shows little interest. Walks to the adjoining kitchen space and makes herself a cup of green tea.

KARAN

I buy shares in a rising stock, and next thing, it goes down.

SHRAVANI

What's new about that?

KARAN

Now with Modi, stocks will shoot up. Oh! How was your pitching?

SHRAVANI

Usual stuff. 'We love your story but who are the stars? Do you have a revenue model? We will get back to you.'

He gets down from the treadmill and dries himself with a towel.

KARAN

Actually, you know, they have a point. It's business dammit. Why the hell should anybody invest in your dream project? Ask your dad.

She is shocked by his apathy. Falls back on the sofa. Gets up, confiscates the whiskey-bottle and shoves it inside the fridge.

KARAN

Get out of your teenage idealism! Try an' make some money. Look at all our friends. Everybody's making so much.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

7.

SHRAVANI

Listen (raises her voice). A screenwriter does not go around with a business plan and distribution model. That's what producers are there for.

KARAN

That's why your scripts don't get made!

Karan continues on the treadmill, smiling mockingly.

KARAN

Writer! My foot! A writer without a business plan is like ... like whiskey without alcohol.

He giggles to himself. Shravani turns away.

SHRAVANI

Why don't you get a real job?

KARAN

Leave me to myself, ok? I'm fine.

SHRAVANI

Oh yes. Why should I carry the burden of running the house because you get kicked out of every job?

Walks away and slams the door behind her.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

3

SHRAVANI stands at the balcony in her apartment in the 10th floor of a building.

Down below is the city, teeming with lights, pulsating with life: endless line of cars, glittering advertising billboards, trains passing by and rows of highrises.

She is pensive.

Her mobile rings. It says, 'Kavita'.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - NIGHT 4

It is evening. Hardly any people in the office and most lights are out. SHRAVANI and KAVITA are back again, on the same side of the conference table.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

So nice to see you again.

SHRAVANI

Sorry I'm late. There is this huge Shiv Sena ruckus outside that created a traffic jam. Bloody thugs!

KAVITA

Tell me about it! (Hesitates, uncomfortable) See, right now, the company cannot ... They do think it's a beautiful, story. A woman's search for roots across two continents. Rarely do we come across a script like that! But they think it's a big-budget film. So we first need to get a major star on board to make it viable.

SHRAVANI rubs her left eye as if something is wrong with it.

KAVITA

I called you for something else.

SHRAVANI

(looking at her watch) I need to go...

She grabs her bag, as if to leave. KAVITA suddenly holds her arm. SHRAVANI notices her firm grip. Her fingers are subtly nail-polished. Settles down again.

KAVITA

(sincerely)  
Your film will happen, you know!  
It is just that the time is not right.

SHRAVANI

Right time? (exhales)

KAVITA

(shuffling through some papers) This is a writing assignment. There is this big male star. He wants to make a biopic he suggested Mr Mehra to develop. We are trying to get the screenplay written but it must be really fast. If the star likes the script, we have a real film on our hands. And then, (suggestively) you never know what may happen.

(CONTINUED)

Shravani remains unexpressive. Kavita's cell-phone keeps ringing but she keeps rejecting the calls.

KAVITA

I am still your student! I want to work with you and learn something. There are days when I feel like quitting it all and going back to studies.

SHRAVANI melts. KAVITA gets a call again. Looks at it and speeds up the conversation.

SHRAVANI

Anyway, whose biopic?

KAVITA

A Bengali guy. That's also why I thought of you. Someone called Suresh Biswas.

She shrugs. Doesn't ring any bell.

KAVITA

Nobody we talked to, seems to know. Not even Bengalis.

SHRAVANI

So how did your 'male star' come to know about him?

KAVITA

Ran into some wiki-page and got excited. A guy, originally from a remote village in Bengal. Like you.

SHRAVANI

Like me? (surprised)OK.  
From a 'remote' Bengal village.

KAVITA

This is around the mid-19th century. He became something like, the Colonel of the Brazilian Army. And a tiger-tamer, I think.

SHRAVANI looks bored and disinterested.

SHRAVANI

What have I got to do with a tiger-tamer?

KAVITA gestures with her fingers suggesting there's a lot of money in it. There is a playful exchange of glances between them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

10.

SHRAVANI's eyes brighten up. KAVITA nods.

They simultaneously start looking for 'Suresh Biswas' on their mobiles. Both get into the wikipedia page, linger over it.

[INSERT]

A series of Bengali cartoons about a guy in a forest with a tiger. There is also a white-skinned man in the picture whose arm bleeds while the brown man controls the tiger with a whip. [INSERT ENDS]

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY (FEW DAYS LATER)

5

A large reading room. There are some reading corners with table-lamps.

SHRAVANI has been waiting in the sitting area for a long time. Looks at her watch. Goes to the librarian's desk.

The LIBRARIAN is a man with high-powered glasses, in late fifties. On one side he has his computer. SHRAVANI tries to get the LIBRARIAN's attention.

SHRAVANI

Excuse me, this book that I ordered...

She shows the receipt of the pink requisition slip. The LIBRARIAN looks at it, then looks closely at the computer screen.

LIBRARIAN

Madam, this book is in the Old Books section. It takes time to access it.

She is about to turn away when a clerk hands over a book to the LIBRARIAN. He looks at the inside cover. Inspects the page with book-issue details. Smiles to himself, looks up at her.

LIBRARIAN (CONTD)

Last time this book was issued was in 1978. More than 40 years ago! This cannot be borrowed. It's very old. (opens it and sees the date) 1899! Photocopying not allowed. You have to read it here only.

SHRAVANI sighs. Sits down in a silent corner and opens up a dog-eared copy of the book that shows the title:

[INSERT]

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

11.

Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures/ H. C. Dutt

[INSERT ENDS]

She sits in a corner, under a table-lamp. Puts on her reading glasses.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1894)

6

SURESH BISWAS, 33, is writing a letter under a kerosene lamp, seated at a study-table while his wife and two-year old son sleep in the background.

He has receding hairline, much of which has turned white. He has deep-set eyes and a long moustache.

There is a bust of Buddha which rests prominently on one side of his writing desk. On the wall hangs a framed picture of the Brazilian version of São Jorge (St George and the Dragon).

He writes with a wooden pen, frequently dipping into a black inkwell. Writes in English:

Rio de Janeiro, January 10, 1894

He moves to Bengali script.

The VO-texts are spoken in Bengali but they appear onscreen in English subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

*Dear Uncle, Many people insist that I write an autobiography. It would take a long time to write. Several young men from Calcutta write to me. They all want to join the Brazilian Army.*

He stops and attends a wound in his leg.

An anguished voice continues as we see the details from close: a bottle of Lister's carbolic acid, the Buddha statue, São Jorge, the sleeping faces of his wife and child.

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

*Is my dear mother well, after all these years I have been away from home?*

We hear again the rustling sound of pen on paper.

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

*I have been bedridden for almost a year now.*

Now we see him writing the 'From' address on the envelope:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

12.

Suresh Biswas

In the 'To' section, he writes:

Kailash Nath Biswas

Village: Nathpur

District: Nadia, Bengal

British India

Sounds of a *Vaishnav* devotional song starts over his writing.

EXT. VILLAGE IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

7

There is lush greenery all around and a wide river flows in the distance. The village is a cluster of mud-huts and a few concrete houses, with their roofs covered with red tiles, some with straw.

A group of 7-8 men, all dressed in saffron-coloured robes and some of them with flower garlands around their necks, their foreheads smeared with U-shaped sandal-paste marks, are singing and dancing while they walk along the unpaved road.

They are all in a state of ardent devotion, dancing with their arms raised. Two of them are playing double-sided *mridanga* drums while two others clank cymbals bound by threads.

The lead *keertana* SINGER is singing a line in Bengali followed by a chorus.

SINGER

*(song starts)*

*Jaar mukhe hari katha nai/taar  
kachche tumi jeo naa/Jaar mukh  
dekhi bhule jaabe hari/taar  
mukhopaane cheo naa.*

**(SUPER) Stay away from those who  
do not voice Krishna's  
joys/ Look away from a face  
that does not evoke His grace  
(song ends)**

The chorus and drums reach an ecstatic crescendo.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

8

Abrupt silence. We are in the middle of a lush forest. A BOY, barefoot, around fourteen, is seen from behind, dwarfed by the gigantic trees.

He steps on to a muddy marshland surrounded by thick greenery. Only his legs are seen. His physique is slight.

With a stick, he separates the thick foliage obstructing his way. The wind blows through the forest but in the middle of the serenity, a long cobra snake is seen passing through the nearby branches of a tree. The blue water of a river glitters in the distance.

The boy's foot is bleeding but he continues walking as if nothing has happened until he stands in front of a tree where he sees a huge beehive.

He impulsively plunges a small knife into the beehive and starts collecting the honey that oozes out of it, licking it with his bare hands. Thousands of bees start buzzing around him and he struggles to save himself from them.

Suddenly he hears a gunshot from behind and immediately drops to the ground. Birds gather from all the trees and encircle in the sky above.

His eyes are intense and full of wonderment; his hair is ruffled, his face has mud stains; he wears a white *dhoti* but is bare-bodied. This is BOY SURESH. He quickly turns around at something in the distance.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

9

The Vaishnav procession is now seen through the window of a house.

A thin, middle-aged man dressed in white *dhoti* with a saffron silk shawl around him stands before the altar of a romantic statue of the divine lovers, Radha and blue-skinned Krishna, offering yellow and orange marigold flowers. This is GIRISH CHANDRA BISWAS, Suresh's FATHER.

The chorus is heard off-screen while GIRISH sings the song along with them. This is accompanied with female ululation (by unseen women inside the houses) and ecstatic drumbeats accompanied by cymbals outside.

FATHER

(in Bengali)

*Din gelo michcha kaaje/ratri gelo  
nidre/Na bhojinu  
radha-krishner/charano-brinde*

(SUPER) *Day wasted on drivel/*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FATHER (cont'd)  
*Night wasted in slumber/No time  
 to bewail/at Krishna's altar*

He gently throws two marigolds at Krishna's altar and continues singing with the passing chorus, marking a U-shaped line of sandalwood paste on his own forehead.

A woman, SURESH'S MOTHER, dressed in a cotton sari covering her head, stands at the doorstep holding water in a brass glass.

Dialogues in Bengali.

MOTHER  
*It's already 8. You're getting  
 late.*

He ignores her advice. He continues his rituals, ringing the hand-bell and serenading the idol.

As MOTHER walks away and enters the adjoining room where an younger man, UNCLE KAILASHNATH BISWAS is half-way through his meal, and is seated on the floor arrangement with food served in brass utensils.

She pauses for a few seconds in front of her altar and offers her brief prayer to the gods, murmuring something.

Her altar is a mixture of idols of all faiths - Shiva, Jesus, Buddha, Jain, Virgin Mary, Durga, Kali. There is also a green cloth of Islam. On her wrist, she wears two thin gold bangles and a white one.

GIRISH walks into the room, now dressed for office in a well-ironed *dhoti* and a striped full-sleeved shirt. MOTHER serves rice to both of them with a hand-fan in the other hand, driving away both the flies and the heat.

FATHER  
 (calls out  
 loudly) *Suresh!*

MOTHER  
*The boy is not at home.*

FATHER  
*Where does he go this early in  
 the morning?*

MOTHER  
*Stayed out last night.*

FATHER  
*What? And you didn't tell me?  
 (turning to his brother)  
 You knew this?*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

15.

UNCLE nods. He is suprised and gets angry.

FATHER

*This boy will die some day soon.  
Either of snake bite or... When  
does he go to school? Loitering  
around all the time! Rascal.  
Vagabond!*

He pushes aside the rice plate and gets up.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876) CONTINUOUS

10

BOY SURESH sees a white ENGLISH HUNTER sitting on a wooden platform on top of an elephant, dressed in formal hunting attire with high leather boots. Indian MAHOUT (elephant-keeper) sits on top.

A Royal Bengal tiger cub has come to the riverside to drink water. It turns around and inspects for a few moments and then goes back to drinking water.

The boy immediately hides himself behind the tree while the Englishman gets ready for the next shot, leading the elephant a little closer to the target.

Sitting on a low branch, the boy sees the man cocking his Enfield rifle and targeting the tiger again. This time too he misses the target.

The bullet hits the water and creates a huge splash. The tiger turns around and starts charging towards the Englishman.

The elephant trumpets loudly and turns around, throwing the leaning Englishman off its back. He slides on the ground, desperately trying to hold on to the elephant. Having fallen from a height, the man cannot get up. He remains transfixed on the ground. The gun drops from his hand even as the tiger keeps charging towards him.

The elephant and its MAHOUT have disappeared in the bushes, leaving the hunter alone.

The boy emerges from behind the tree and runs towards the English hunter. The tiger sees the boy, hesitates for a few seconds and then charges towards him.

As it roars and makes a gigantic leap, the screen turns dark, enveloped by the tiger's body.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT 11

Someone taps SHRAVANI on the shoulder.

She reacts with a jerk.

LIBRARIAN

It's 8pm. We are closing.

SHRAVANI

Sorry!

She looks at her watch. Surprised.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876) 12

BOY SURESH stands in front of his angry FATHER. He rests against a bamboo pillar in the verandah of the house with his hands behind him. He looks guilty with his head lowered and remains silent.

His MOTHER and UNCLE are behind him, with a proud but concerned look unlike the father.

He slaps SURESH. Dialogues are in Bengali.

FATHER

*You are alive only because of my prayers to Lord Krishna.*

UNCLE

*Are you not scared of your life, Suresh?*

SURESH remains quiet and unperturbed by the entire situation.

FATHER

*He is possessed. Possessed by evil spirits! Only a tantric priest can get rid of such devils.*

His mother tries to calm the situation.

MOTHER

(asking her husband)

*How many years have you worked with the Company? Did an Englishman ever invite you to his bungalow for dinner?*

FATHER gets further annoyed by MOTHER's insinuation.

(CONTINUED)

FATHER

*What for? To lick the boots of those savage indigo planters? That man should have been eaten by the tiger. Instead, your boy saved his life at the risk of his own. In return, he invites the boy to dinner. Shoo! Barbarians. Now he has lost his caste too, eating beef.*

SURESH shakes his head.

UNCLE

*Just think what could have happened! Lucky that you are alive.*

Mother hugs him, taking him inside the house to save him from FATHER's wrath.

The wild sound of a boar is heard on the soundtrack.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

13

[INSERT] A boar is being chased by a group of men on horses. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI pauses the video of a black-and-white film she is watching in a dark room. Picks up the DVD cover which screams the film's title and star.

[INSERT] Gregory Peck in

*The Lives of a Bengal Lancer.*

"An exotic Hollywood Adventure film from 1935" [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI starts the film again.

[INSERT OF DVD] Two Englishmen, dressed as hunters, are on horses. By 'mistake' they shoot down an Indian. He falls down from his horse and dies. The hunters corner another Indian with a spear. White-men-on-horses run fiercely.

Indian men in turbans are chased down and they fall on the wayside like animals. [INSERT HALTS]

SHRAVANI presses the fast-forward button.

[INSERT FROM DVD CONTD]

Two white-men-on-horses pause, talk heartily.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

18.

ACTOR 1

You know this is India. And you don't know who they are and you might ...

ACTOR 2

It may not be as funny as it sounds.

They start charging after a boar whom they continue to pierce with a spear. The boar runs with the spear stuck inside its body and the men chase it.

ACTOR 1

A wounded pig is a dangerous animal.

The wounded pig turns around and attacks one of them and escapes while ACTOR 1 finds himself in the mud, ambushed by the boar.

[INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI switches off the film and leans back, disgusted but thoughtful. Browses on her tab.

[INSERT] Rows and rows of dead tigers are seen at the feet of proud British hunters who pose in front of them.

[INSERT ENDS]

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

14

This is a variation of Scene 10 (imagined by SHRAVANI) but in black and white and from the ENGLISH HUNTER'S point-of-view unlike earlier where it was the BOY'S point-of-view.

The hunter of Sc 10 replaces the hunters in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. He is now riding a horse instead of an elephant.

He has reached a clearing in the jungle. Seems lost as he looks around in all directions. Suddenly, he is astounded by what he sees.

A tiger has come to drink water in the river.

ENGLISH HUNTER (POV) miscues his shot, his hands tremble. He falls off the horse even as the tiger charges towards him. There is no accompanying *mahout* in this version.

The same sequence of events are played out.

(CONTINUED)

ENGLISH HUNTER witnesses SURESH jumping in and fighting the tiger with only a knife in his hand. He rolls on the grass with the tiger, slightly going past the moment where the first scene had ended.

After a while, the tiger (actually a cub), is seen walking away as SURESH stands up, his thigh bleeding with the tiger's bite. The ENGLISH HUNTER too gets up. There is incredulity in his eyes.

FADE OUT

INT. SCHOLAR 1'S HOUSE - DAY

15

SHRAVANI is more focussed, talking to SCHOLAR 1, a middle-aged man. The room is full of books. He thinks hard if the name strikes any bell. He asks her more questions than she does.

SCHOLAR 1  
Suresh Biswas? Which year was he born?

SHRAVANI  
(offscreen)  
1861.

SCHOLAR 1  
So. Same year as Tagore. So, he was born in the middle of the Bengal Renaissance. A great moment in our history. Was he from a cultured Brahmo family like the figures of the Renaissance?

SHRAVANI  
(offscreen)  
Not at all. Orthodox Vaishnav family. Krishna devotees. In a village in Nadia. Biswas. Lower-middle class.

SCHOLAR 1  
Father was what? Farmer?

SHRAVANI  
A clerk of the British East India Company.

SCHOLAR 1  
So, the father worked in Calcutta but the family lived in the village. Quite common at that time.

SHRAVANI looks disappointed. Picks up her bag.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

16

KARAN and SHRAVANI are having morning tea in the balcony.

KARAN

(cynically)

A boy fighting a tiger? Give me a break! Remember, I went to Alaska and hugged a polar bear?

SHRAVANI is pensive, doesn't reply to KARAN who turns over the pages of the newspaper featuring images of Modi.

KARAN (CONT'D)

(without taking his eyes away from the paper)

You are getting paid, I know. After a long time. That too in a mainstream Bollywood film. Good for you. But you can't just make up things and say 'based on a true story' (mockingly).

SHRAVANI

Even if it was a rumour, it is something. That's how people remembered him.

KARAN

What if the guy was a fraud?

SHRAVANI snatches the newspaper and her tea and goes inside.

INT. SCHOLAR 2'S HOUSE. DAY

17

An elderly man, SCHOLAR 2, in high-powered glasses. Looks intellectual.

He too is surrounded by books.

Shakes his head.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

18

SHRAVANI meets SCHOLAR 3 at a popular coffee shop. She is an old woman with white hair but looks energetic.

There are several young boys and girls in the coffee shop. In the background, there is a TV screen that is playing on mute, a film on Bob Dylan, Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*.

SCHOLAR 3 doesn't recognise the name initially. Faintly remembers something.

(CONTINUED)

SCHOLAR 3

Bra..zil? Colonel Suresh Biswas?  
There was a street in Calcutta by  
that name. Close to (gestures to  
her right) where they built this  
new ... Quest Mall. Wonder if it  
is still there! Something ...  
tiger

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

Is it possible for a 14-year old  
to fight a tiger?

SCHOLAR 3

With a gun, why not? The British  
did it all the time.

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

No, no. Just fighting with his  
bare hands. Maybe a knife.

SCHOLAR 3

(laughing)

Maybe it was a tiger cub. Even  
then. If it was a Royal Bengal  
tiger, god bless you.

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

Could it have just run away?

SCHOLAR 3

Tell your story to an Englishman  
of the time and he would tell you  
- Bengali men are sissies  
(*emphatically*). Maybe he mistook  
a wild boar for a tiger! (*Laughs  
mockingly*) The Nadia area is  
where the Indigo Revolt happened.  
So there may have been many  
British indigo factory-owners.  
Those guys loved boar-hunting on  
weekends.

SHRAVANI does not want the conversation to drift.

Meanwhile, one of the young men in the background take the  
remote and change the TV channel. It moves to a news  
channel with demonstrations of people with placards  
demanding Ram's birthplace to be returned to Hindus.

SHRAVANI

If there is no evidence that  
Suresh fought a tiger, why did he  
appear in popular cartoons as the

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)  
 man who killed a tiger with his  
 bare hands? That myth continues  
 to this day.

She takes out a book out of her bag and shows her the  
 cover of the 1899 reprint of his biography in 2019.  
 SCHOLAR 3 looks at them, turns the pages and murmurs as if  
 thinking aloud.

SCHOLAR 3  
 Popular culture, public memory...  
 these are strange things. They do  
 not really need evidence. Many  
 things can come together to make  
 it a captivating story and that's  
 what stays in people's minds.  
 Maybe he actually fought a boar.  
 Then, he was also a tiger-tamer,  
 wasn't he? These two things come  
 together where the boar gets  
 replaced by the tiger.

SHRAVANI  
 Easy peasy. Boars are ugly.  
 Tigers on the other hand...

SCHOLAR 3  
 (recites emotionally)  
 Tyger Tyger burning  
 bright/ In the forests of  
 the night/ What immortal  
 hand or eye/ Dare frame thy  
 fearful symmetry?

SHRAVANI  
 (joins in)  
 Did He who made the Lamb make  
 thee?

There is a moment of joyful connection.

SCHOLAR 3  
 (sipping coffee)  
 If you ask me... I don't know  
 about Suresh Biswas ... but,  
 following Blake, it's easy to see  
 how the aesthetic beauty of the  
 tiger combines with its primal  
 ferocity. That is how the British  
 imagined 'India'. The men might  
 be sissies but the country was  
 like a tiger. Beautiful but  
 ferocious.

SHRAVANI instantly remembers something. Takes out her tab,  
 and quickly goes to some Punch cartoons she had saved.  
 Shows them to SCHOLAR 3 who looks at them closely.

(CONTINUED)

In all the cartoons, 'India' is written on the body of the tiger.

[INSERT] A hyper-masculine Queen Victoria plunges a dagger deep into the mouth of the tiger. [INSERT ENDS]

SCHOLAR 3

If Biswas could be imagined to kill a tiger, it could boost the low Bengali self-esteem.

SHRAVANI

How?

SCHOLAR 3

He would no longer be a Bengali sissy. The metaphor turned on its head. The British hunter is now the sissy, saved by a Bengali boy.

SHRAVANI now has an understanding smile.

INT. OFFICE BALCONY - DAY

19

KAVITA leads SHRAVANI out of the hustle of the office atmosphere, coffee-mugs in hand, on to a narrow balcony space which is private and overlooks the city down below.

SHRAVANI

Amazing, one hears so many languages in your office!

KAVITA

Mini-India. You can hear at least ten languages any moment.

Suddenly, the balcony opens up to a refreshing space. They look out in silence. Beyond the rows of skyscrapers, there is the sea. Their hair flutter in the wind.

KAVITA

So, all you can really count on are the six letters Biswas wrote to his uncle, right?

SHRAVANI

The six that have survived. Over the years, he must have written many more.

KAVITA

Reading others' letters is such a ... (searching) an intimate thing. I used to sneak peek into my sister's love letters.

(CONTINUED)

They share a naughty laugh.

KAVITA (CONTD)

I think I know more about her  
from her love letters than from  
real life.

SHRAVANI

(teasingly)

Which is the 'real' life?  
(wondering) What does a letter  
reveal?

KAVITA

Hmm hmm! How much?

SHRAVANI

Your generation, Kavita, never  
write letters. That's why you  
would not know. Yearning ...  
longing ... Waiting for months  
for a reply to arrive?

There are a few moments of silence; KAVITA smiles. Then  
SHRAVANI turns around to her affectionately.

SHRAVANI

(smiling)

We, the last generation that  
wrote love letters, know this...  
Every letter lit up a part of  
you. Not the whole 'you'. It all  
depended who you were writing  
to.

KAVITA gets restless with the drifting conversation.

KAVITA

OK, OK, before you get more  
emotional, listen. We need to get  
this done quickly. So, what else  
did you find?

SHRAVANI

There is an English biography and  
a Bengali one, published at the  
same time in 1899. Both are full  
of fluff and jingoistic stuff. No  
evidence of any kind.

KAVITA

You mean we have to take him on  
his word? There is ...

SHRAVANI

Nothing. That's what Indian  
historians complain all the time.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)  
Life is *maya*, you know, illusion!  
So why document it?

KAVITA  
But these biographers were there,  
no? (pauses) Benefit... of doubt?

SHRAVANI  
To this extent? It's the Uncle's  
romanticised version of Suresh  
Biswas' childhood. Anecdotes of  
him as a child.

KAVITA  
How can we know what really  
happened?

SHRAVANI  
After a point it just doesn't  
matter really.

KAVITA  
What matters?

SHRAVANI  
How and why we want to remember  
him.

KAVITA  
That is?

SHRAVANI  
I don't know. Not yet. Ask your  
secret star, no? He is the guy  
who wants to make this film.

KAVITA  
Ha, ha, if I had access! I think  
he wants it to be an adventure  
film.

SHRAVANI  
(thoughtfully)  
There's the rub. He has his  
reasons and I have mine. We are  
perhaps talking of two different  
stories. If the 'how' and 'why'  
are different, the stories will  
be different.

KAVITA ponders.

KAVITA  
You mean, things will blow up? He  
sees it as macho  
adventure.(mockingly)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI nods, with concern.

SHRAVANI

You have to get a macho writer then... (pensive) Lets assume, the facts are reliable. How does one write or shoot a film like this? 19th century Bengal village, Imperial Calcutta, Rangoon, Victorian England, 19th century Germany, Brazil, Argentina... what else, Timbuktu!

KAVITA acknowledges.

KAVITA

And seven languages, good Lord!

Both look seriously concerned.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - EVENING

20

SHRAVANI is reading intently. Now the Bengali biography is in front of her. Plenty of handwritten notes.

She is in a different dress from the earlier scene; sits in a different part of the library. She lifts her head and looks out of the window.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876)

21

SURESH, 15, is being taught by his UNCLE by the side of a kerosene lamp that casts long shadows on the wall. He sits on a bamboo mat on the ground, face to face with him in the verandah. Listens to him attentively.

UNCLE

(recites in Sanskrit)  
*In one of our Upanishads, it says: "Charanbai madhu vindati charantsvadu mudambaram..."*

SURESH

*OK, OK, in Bengali, please.*

Uncle lovingly caresses his hair. In Bengali:

UNCLE

*"Honey bees collect honey by moving around. Birds always keep moving to enjoy the taste of fruits. The sun shines by virtue of constant motion. Therefore, one should always be moving. Keep*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

27.

UNCLE (cont'd)  
*moving, keep moving on. Even the  
 Buddha used to conclude sermons  
 with the Hindu mantra:  
 Charaiveti, Charaiveti. Keep  
 moving, keep moving on.*

SURESH  
 (repeats in Sanskrit)  
*Charaiveti, Charaiveti.*

MOTHER now comes and sits beside them.

UNCLE  
*The world, the universe, are all  
 based on motion. We too must  
 follow that principle and keep  
 moving till our final breath.*

SURESH reaches out and opens a paper-map of the world,  
 stretching it out. He passes his hand over it.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

22

It is early morning and it is raining heavily with  
 occasional lightning.

From a distance, we see a jungle path through the lush  
 green forest and a small hut in one corner.

A man's silhouette is seen (Suresh's FATHER) who is  
 dragging a boy (SURESH) through the path in the rain.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876)

23

MOTHER's caressing hands pass through Suresh's forehead.  
 He is running high fever, writhing in pain. He is laid  
 out on a mattress on the floor.

His MOTHER holds him closely, puts straps of wet cloth on  
 his forehead. His body heaves with convulsions. He moans  
 in pain. UNCLE has his arms across the boy.

Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH  
*Oh maa, maa...*

MOTHER  
 (to Uncle)  
*I tried to stop his father from  
 taking him to the tantric. But he  
 was adamant. Someone told him  
 that the tantric priest can use  
 blackmagic to bring the boy under  
 control.*

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE

*They can also kill! They make  
strange concoctions in the name  
of divine knowledge. God knows  
what the tantric forced down  
Suri's throat.*

MOTHER

*And his father! Sitting in  
Calcutta. If he could now see  
what he has done to my boy!*

UNCLE helps him to get up when he collapses in the verandah on the way and vomits.

MOTHER cries, helplessly and knocks her own head at the multi-god altar.

EXT. BISWAS' HOUSE - DAY (1876, FEW DAYS LATER)

24

A crowd of village boys, girls and elderly people has gathered around the courtyard.

GIRISHCHANDRA stands at the centre of the courtyard with a cane in hand. He is wearing a saffron robe and a garland of beads, suggesting that he was in the middle of some religious ritual. He looks furious, panting.

SURESH stands in front of him, his head held down in shame. His shirt is already torn and reveals a Christian cross hanging from his neck.

His FATHER goes around him, beating him with the cane. Though there are many people, there is pin-drop silence.

No one attempts to intervene except UNCLE and MOTHER but to no avail. Even they are half-hearted in their protest.

Dialogues in Bengali.

FATHER

*Bloody beast! Shameless animal.  
You have become Christian! I will  
not allow any Christian to enter  
this Vaishnav abode.*

SURESH stands firm while his father keeps on thrashing him.

MOTHER

*How could you do this? (crying)*

FATHER

*I will not tolerate this any  
more. Go, wherever you want to  
go. Go and eat beef with those*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FATHER (cont'd)  
*barbarians. I took him to a  
tantric hoping it will make him  
sensible. Change his vagabond  
ways.*

He keeps on shouting in-between the lashings. Even UNCLE is very annoyed with him.

UNCLE  
*Who gave you this idea?  
Converting to Christianity? What  
disgrace for the Biswas family!  
(pointing to the people who have  
gathered)*

SURESH doesn't react to any of the beating. He is expressionless. MOTHER has now given up. She is choked; goes to one corner and collapses on the floor, crying helplessly.

FATHER  
*I do not want to see his face any  
more. Let him go wherever he  
wants.*

UNCLE  
*Now I see. That English hunter  
put Jesus Christ inside your  
head, right? Your father, every  
day, after work, cleans himself  
in the Ganges to wash away the  
sin of working with the British.  
Beef-eating Christians. And  
you?*

His FATHER stops beating him only when he is exhausted.

He tears the cross off his son's neck. Throws it on the ground. He returns to his room. The stick too lies on the ground. SURESH withstands it all without any reaction.

He stands in his torn shirt looking firmly at the ground. There are red marks of the beatings on his back. He picks up the necklace and puts it in his pocket. Starts walking away.

All the people gathered there, including his UNCLE and MOTHER watch helplessly.

SURESH walks away, resolutely, with long strides.

DISSOLVE

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

25

SURESH's agonised voice-over is heard as we see him walking away in the earlier scene, slowly merging into an image of SHRAVANI working in the light of a table lamp in an otherwise dark room. She is seen from behind.

SURESH's VO, after a point, becomes SHRAVANI's own voice.

The white soft-board in front of her desk is blank.

SURESH

(VO, in Bengali)

*I left home without a single penny in my pocket. I am alone in this world and will remain forever so.*

There is a pause.

SHRAVANI

(anguished too)

*True companionship and true love are not to be found in this world.*

Pauses. Lingers over the text. Repeats.

SHRAVANI (CONTD)

*That is why philosophers insist, if you want to find happiness in this world, you must create a world of your own.*

Music enters at this moment.

SHRAVANI gets up and stands near the window. There is only darkness outside. Suresh's voice comes back.

SURESH (VO)

*I have constructed my own world. And there I will meet her one day. The one who truly loved me. My mother.*

Dressed in a cotton sari, we see her only from behind. Her long hair, let loose, flutters in the wind.

She turns around, takes out a b/w photocopy of SURESH BISWAS and pins it on the white board.

She lingers on the photo as we move closer to his face and intense eyes. SURESH's face is seen in the pupil of SHRAVANI's eyes.

EXT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

26

SHRAVANI dials a number and starts walking. It is KAVITA on the other side.

KAVITA  
(overheard on phone)  
I was just thinking about you.

SHRAVANI  
Really? How are you doing?

KAVITA  
(overheard on phone)  
Deadlines and deadlines. Any  
headway?

She sits down on a bench nearby. Lights of tall buildings in the city loom in the background.

SHRAVANI  
Looks like there was a time in  
Bengal when he had become a hero  
to many people. And then his  
memory faded out.

KAVITA  
(on phone)  
Only in Bengal? Right? But to  
make it an all-India film, we  
have to take him beyond a Bengali  
obsession. Bengalis are what, 5%  
to 10% of the Indian population?

SHRAVANI sits up straight, forehead wrinkled. She did not consider this problem till now.

SHRAVANI  
No idea... but, ya, ya, you're  
right. (anxiously) It is  
impossible to put together a life  
from so few fragments. The  
letters from Brazil cover a  
ten-year period. The rest is  
hearsay.

KAVITA  
(on phone)  
You need to come over to pitch  
the script idea?

SHRAVANI  
So soon? Listen, I don't know  
what to pitch. (listens, alarmed)  
No! Don't tell me! Board meeting!

She puts the phone down. An ambulance passes by, with its emergency signal and flashing red light.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

27

It is the same conference room as before. MR MEHRA, and the two EXECUTIVES are on one side of the table. SHRAVANI is trying to hide her nervousness behind her smile and little courtesies. KAVITA is seated opposite her along beside MR MEHRA.

The pitching is presumably just over. Expecting reactions. Awkward moment. SHRAVANI looks with apprehension. Silence. KAVITA and the executives look at MR MEHRA who is checking messages, avoiding eye-contact. He soon puts it down.

MR MEHRA

Looks like we have a good story in our hands. Lots of action, lots of events. You seem to be working hard.

EXECUTIVE 1

Lots of special effects!

MR MEHRA

There are certain practical considerations though.

EXECUTIVE 2

Yes, sir. It's a very big-budget production. Too many locations across the globe.

MR MEHRA

We cannot have a film with so many languages. How many?

SHRAVANI

Seven. Biswas spoke many languages. It is an important part of the story.

The EXECUTIVES are now getting more vocal.

EXECUTIVE 2

Madam, we cannot find a distributor for a film with so many subtitles. We must convert everything into Hindi.

SHRAVANI

How can foreign characters speak Hindi?

EXECUTIVE 1

Personally, I would like to see more of his love affairs. And some song situations. At least you can plant a narrator who will

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

EXECUTIVE 1 (cont'd)  
summarise the foreign language  
parts into Hindi.

MR MEHRA

What we are trying to tell you,  
Shravani, is that, we need to  
find logistical, pragmatic  
solutions. A, location issues. B,  
language issues. We make our  
films in Hindi. English language  
films don't sell in this country.  
You saw *La Vie en Rose*? If a  
French biopic can happen in  
English and become a hit, why  
can't this be in Hindi? And C,  
star-image. Let's say, we can do  
the circus scenes and some  
foreign scenes in the studio. But  
I want to ask you a more basic  
question.

There is an awkward pause while he sips the coffee.

MR MEHRA

Why should we be interested in  
Suresh Biswas? Forget the star.  
These bloody stars, Bollywood,  
Hollywood, they are all crazy  
about doing biopics. Look at  
Leonardo diCaprio! How many ...

KAVITA

More than 10 biopics. Already.

MR MEHRA

But why should we be interested?

KAVITA

Maybe, we can think in terms of a  
broader appeal.

EXECUTIVE 1

Exactly. Nationalism is hot right  
now. I want to feel proud as an  
Indian at the end of the film.  
That an Indian did all this.

EXECUTIVE 2

Something like *Rang de Basanti*.  
Young people should come out of  
the hall singing the national  
anthem.

SHRAVANI

Listen, listen, listen, guys.  
Biswas was not a nationalist.

(CONTINUED)

MR MEHRA  
(confused)  
What do you mean?

SHRAVANI  
He was an adventurer. A cosmopolitan in the 19th century when few Indians travelled that far. That too, being from a poor, unprivileged village background.

MR MEHRA  
What you are saying is a matter of elite-appeal. Not mass-appeal.

SHRAVANI  
Sir, that's exactly what I am saying. The masses may be happy to see an ordinary guy travelling across the world. Not an upper-class privileged guy.

MR MEHRA  
OK. I get you. You mean like Mr Modi vs. Rahul Gandhi, the prince? The masses idolise Modi precisely because he was a tea-seller in a small railway station and now holds the Prime Minister's office!

SHRAVANI is uneasy; looks away. MR MEHRA senses it.

MR MEHRA  
Ok, think over it. Let's meet in three weeks' time and see where we are. I have to update the star and reserve his dates. For anything you need, just ask Kavita.

SHRAVANI  
I want to travel to Calcutta. To his village perhaps.

MR MEHRA  
(jokingly)  
You Bengalis just look for some excuse to go to Calcutta. Anyway, I think we have got a cracking film on our hands!

They all laugh and shake hands.

EXT. MODERN STEAMER ALONG THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY 28

Several small, almost primitive boats are plying through the heaving waves. In the middle of the river, a white modern-day steamer is drifting along.

Shravani stands on the deck, wearing sunglasses, and looks at the passing landscapes of cities, villages, temples and industrial towns that pass by, DISSOLVING into each other.

Soon, we see modern Calcutta, with the looming Howrah bridge across it. There is a huge Gothic Cathedral by the riverside.

EXT. VILLAGE BENGAL, RIVERSIDE - DAY (1876) 29

SURESH jumps into a long boat waiting by the riverside. He wears the torn shirt. The boat has a small circular shed made of bamboo. The boatman is calling out for passengers.

BOATMAN  
(in Bengali)  
*Kolkata, Kolkata, four pennies.  
Come quickly. The tide is coming.*

The boat glides through the vast river with about 4/5 other men and two women whose faces are covered with sari. There are two rowing boatmen at two ends. SURESH sits at the edge. He carries nothing with him. Stares into the distance.

As the boat moves into the wide river, the two boatmen start singing a mournful melody while rowing:

(Song in Bengali)

*Amae bhashaili re/ Amae dubaili  
re/ Akul dariyai bujhi kul nai  
re/ kul nai kinara nai naiko  
doriyar paari/tumi shabdhanete  
chalaiyo majhi/ amar bhanga tori  
re ...  
[(SUPER) You set me afloat/  
You drown me in the deep/  
Adrift mid-river, no shore to  
see/ No shore in sight, no  
river-bank/ Boatman dear, row  
with care/This battered  
boat.] (Song ends)*

Some ships are seen in the distance.

The boat floats perilously close to the water-level but SURESH is undeterred.

He glides his hand along the heaving waters when he sees the same Gothic Cathedral looming in the distance that SHRAVANI saw.

INT. CHURCH, CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

30

Beside the river stands St Paul's Cathedral, a magnificent, Gothic Anglican Protestant church with just a crucifix at the altar and surrounded by coloured glass paintings on arch-shaped windows.

The church is empty except a very kind-looking priest in white robes. This is FR ASHTON, a white man. SURESH kneels down to touch his feet according to Hindu custom but he stops him, holding his hands.

FR ASHTON

No, no. We do not do that here.

FR ASHTON walks SURESH through the aisle, reading a reference letter while the 15-year old boy is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Church.

FR ASHTON

You saved the life of an Englishman, my son. India needs brave boys like you. What can I do for you?

SURESH

No home.

FR ASHTON

I see.

SURESH

Father took me to tantric. Almost died.

FR ASHTON

The Hindoo is still walking amidst the thick darkness of a long, long night. Un-cheered by the twinkling of a single star. Bengal needs Jesus. Desperately.

SURESH listens attentively. ASHTON walks up to a cupboard, picks up a few books and gives them to SURESH.

FR ASHTON

These are for you.

The first is a Bengali *Bible*.

SURESH

Bible! In Bengali?

FR ASHTON

The Lord's Word must be heard in one's own tongue. So, Father William Carey taught himself

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FR ASHTON (cont'd)  
Sanskrit and Bengali, and brought  
His Word into your language.

SURESH sits down on one of the wooden benches with the books. He starts looking at the other ones. They are travel books with colour illustrations in them.

FR ASHTON  
They are for you.

SURESH takes the books like a hungry child. He forgets to say, 'thank you'.

FR ASHTON  
This one, is about the  
Antarctica. It lies to the south  
of New Zealand on one side, and  
Argentina on the other. ... And  
this one, about the Aurea  
Borealis, the mysterious  
night-lights of the North Pole.

SURESH turns the crisp pages of the books with excitement as FR ASHTON looks at him with satisfaction.

ASHTON leads him to a small library adjacent to the main hall of the church. It is surrounded by books in shelves with glass-covers and a few tables and chairs.

FR ASHTON  
The Bible says, 'By knowledge the  
rooms are filled with precious  
and pleasant riches. A wise man  
is full of strength.'

He takes him to a shelf which features collections of English poets where the names of Blake, Byron, Keats and Wordsworth are seen. He takes out a volume of Tennyson.

FR ASHTON  
Lord Alfred Tennyson. The Poet  
Laureate of Great Britain now.  
(passionately) 'To strive, to  
seek, to find, and not to yield.'  
Words of gold, Suresh.

SURESH's eyes brighten up in excitement. He opens the picture books and turns its pages.

There are images of faraway lands - Scottish Highlands, English countryside, German cities, London, 'Peoples of the World'.

Romantic Western music rises on the soundtrack.

FADE OUT

INT. SCHOLAR 3'S HOUSE - NIGHT

31

SHRAVANI is seated in a sofa, sipping red wine under a warm light, listening attentively to SCHOLAR 3 who is also drinking. The latter's book on 19th century Bengali elite and popular culture lies on the centre-table.

They have been talking for some time if the half-empty bottle and plates of fish cutlets are anything to go by.

SCHOLAR 3

Some Hindu boys, they converted out of a love for Western literature as with the great Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

SHRAVANI

Not for Suresh. Definitely not!

SCHOLAR 3

More often, it was just adolescent rebellion. Again, as with Michael Madhusudan. Against the Hindu orthodoxy of the fathers.

SHRAVANI

And the mothers?

SCHOLAR 3

With mothers, they were always in touch. At times, secretly...

SHRAVANI

Secretly?

SCHOLAR 3

For mothers, love was beyond Hinduism, Christianity, Conversion. For fathers, no. Remember, Michael Madhusudan's father ordered his son's poetry to be bound in pure gold even after kicking him out of the house?

SHRAVANI nods. Remembers. Suddenly there is a lump in her throat. There is a moment of silence between them. She puts down the wine glass and picks up her mobile.

SHRAVANI

Men, I tell you! They will break but will not bend.

SCHOLAR 3 smiles. Recalls the phrase in original Sanskrit.

(CONTINUED)

SCHOLAR 3

*Shushka kashthani murkhashcha/  
vidyante na namanticha.* The  
ill-educated are like dry  
wood. Will break but will not  
bend.

SHRAVANI finds the web-page.

[INSERT] Michael Madhusudan Dutt's wiki page shows his  
image, date of birth and date. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI

Suresh was 12 when Michael died.

SCHOLAR 3

Imagine! Here was a youth icon.  
Rebel. Poet. Initially wrote only  
in English. Rejected Bengali.  
Steeped in Sanskrit, Latin,  
Greek, Hebrew, Persian. Lived for  
a while in London, Versailles.  
Married a French woman!

SHRAVANI

Michael was from a very rich  
family though later ostracised.  
Not Suresh. Had to earn his own  
bread from the time he was 15. He  
was just an average villager who  
came to Calcutta.

SCHOLAR 3

Second City of the Empire after  
London!

EXT. RIVERSIDE, CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

32

SURESH is with a friend called UPEN, slightly older. A  
bright-looking boy of 18, dressed in a *dhoti* and an over  
sized long-sleeved striped shirt folded at the end. His  
hair is parted in the middle.

SURESH, still donning back-brushed hair, carries a book  
under his shoulder. Walks along the road by the riverside  
while a Hansom horse-carriage passes by.

Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH

*Fr Ashton let me stay in the  
guard's room. And, if you attend  
Mass, you get food.*

(CONTINUED)

From the opposite direction comes a hand-pulled rickshaw displaying a big cardboard poster of *Wilson's Great World Circus*. A man is seen sitting behind the poster and announcing through a papier-mache megaphone in Bengali.

ANNOUNCER

*Great World Circus. Come one.  
Come all. Special seating  
arrangement for women. (repeats)*

UPEN

*(looking at the circus  
announcer)  
Have you ever been to one?*

SURESH

*Upen, nothing happens in Nathpur.  
In that small village. Except the  
singing and dancing of Krishna  
devotees.*

They both laugh mockingly.

SURESH and UPEN squat on the grass by the river Ganges. In the distance, a ship is anchored at the harbour. Small fishing boats pass by in the distance.

In the background, there is a pit where some men in loincloth practice wrestling in the *kusti* style. A thin boy fights with a muscular guy while another bare-bodied man with oil all over him, gets massaged by a man who wears a folded *lungi* and stands on his back.

UPEN lies on the grass while SURESH sits up, curious. He watches the wrestling match from a distance, with amusement.

They notice a huge white ship in the distance. Steam billows out of its chimney.

SURESH

*That ship is so beautiful. Guess  
where it's going?*

UPEN

*London. Where else?*

SURESH

*You have no idea, how far they  
go. China, Japan, Europe,  
America.*

As they talk, a British woman walks past, dressed in her Sunday finery, in elaborate gown and hat, accompanied by two dark Indian maids in *sari* who carry her umbrella, etc.

(CONTINUED)

A palanquin also passes by, carried by four bare-bodied dark men making a rhythmic incantation. Through the window, a woman can be seen inside.

In the river, Brahmins perform their rituals and prayers, half-immersed in the water and looking up at the sun while children keep diving joyfully from a high point.

SURESH

*You tell me. How's Presidency  
College going?*

UPEN

*Bengal has woken up at last.  
Thanks to British education! Or  
those stupid Brahmin priests  
would still hold sway.*

SURESH nods.

UPEN

*Let's go to Michael Madhusudan's  
grave one day.*

SURESH

*Why should a genius like him live  
such a miserable life?*

They are silent for a few moments and just lie beside each other in the grass as people pass by.

UPEN

*Maybe, Fr Ashton can get you a  
job. Christian churches have so  
many connections.*

SURESH

*(sighing)  
The life I am living is not the  
life that wants to live in me.*

He is still looking at the ship as it moves away.

INT. SPENCE'S HOTEL, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

33

SURESH is 16. He breathes heavily, carrying two heavy leather suitcases on his head and a smaller one in his hand along a staircase. The board in the background announces it as "Spence's Hotel". He is in western attire, the hotel uniform.

There are multiple similar-looking clocks on the wall, all ticking away with names of different cities: Canton, London, Istanbul, New York, Paris, Cairo, Hong Kong.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

42.

Puts down the luggage. He is the only coloured person in a lobby full of Europeans. TRAVELLER 1 turns around and pays SURESH some coins for his service.

As he leaves, SURESH overhears two British men talking, one excitedly acting out his experience and the other listening keenly. SURESH listens with big-eyed wonder.

TRAVELLER 2

...the python and I looked at each other. I could feel the power pulsing through his coils like a fire hose under pressure.  
...

SURESH, who overhears indiscreetly with open-eyed wonder, is curtly gestured to get out of the way.

A YOUNG COUPLE about to check out, gestures to him.

TRAVELLER 3

Hey boy. To the carriage please.

SURESH obeys orders but continues to overhear the conversation between two men. There are three leather trunks with labels on them. He puts all three on his head.

TRAVELLER 2

By the time we get to London, it will be Christmas...

TRAVELLER 3

(passing by)  
My niece came here to find a suitable match.

SURESH is distracted by the atmosphere. He keeps turning around. The smaller bag on top of his head falls off on the ground.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

34

SHRAVANI plucks out a Bengali book from a bookshelf, *Hutum Penchar Naksha* (The Barn-Owl's Secret Capers, a 19th century satire).

Starts browsing it.

EXT. OUTSIDE SPENCE'S HOTEL, CALCUTTA - DAY (CONTD. 1877)  
35

SURESH is sitting at the back of a phaeton horse-carriage, guarding the luggage, and facing the retreating end of the street. The British YOUNG COUPLE is inside.

(CONTINUED)

Three Bengali boys of his age run after the carriage, teasing him and his outfit in satiric rhymed verse, while he tries hard to look away.

BOY 1

(rhyming in Bengali)

*Bilat theke elo gora/ mathar upor  
kurti pora/padobhare kape  
dhara...*

[SUPER] From England comes the  
native White/In plumed hat and  
tunic bright/The earth trembles  
as he walks...[ENDS]

BOY 2

*Pantaloon pore, phaeton chorche/  
Suresh ebar shaheb hochche*

[SUPER] Wearing pantaloon, riding  
phaetan/ Suresh is now a white  
man! [ENDS]

SURESH, embarrassed, gestures, threatening to beat them up.

BOY 3

(rhyming in Bengali)

*Vaishnab aaj, Krishtan  
kaal/ Jaate uthlo ingrejer  
dalaal.*

[SUPER] Vaishnav yesterday,  
Christian today/ Lower caste imp  
is now British pimp. [ENDS]

The boys keep on chasing the carriage.

After a while they give up the chase as the horse-carriage goes ahead of them.

EXT. OUTSIDE CHURCH, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

36

SURESH returns from work, exhausted. Still in hotel uniform. Outside the church, he is stunned by what he sees.

His UNCLE is standing outside the church, a bag hanging from his shoulder. As their eyes meet, both start running towards each other in joy and embrace ardently. Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH

*How are you here? How have you  
been? How is my mom?*

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE

*How long can I live without seeing you? Your mother is worried. We do not know how you are managing all on your own.*

SURESH

*How's she?*

He takes out from a bag several fruits and rotis and fried fishes wrapped in a banana leaf and gives them to him.

UNCLE

*She sent all this. She cries a lot for you. The way you went away. She wants you to return. Suri, I came to Calcutta for that.*

SURESH

*Tell her I am fine here. I work in the biggest hotel. Meet people from all parts of the world. I want to see the world.*

UNCLE notices his firmness and happiness. Doesn't insist any further.

UNCLE

*(murmurs in Sanskrit)  
Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam.*

SURESH

*What?*

UNCLE

*The world is one family. (after a pause) In Sanskrit, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam... Our family may have lost you. May you find your own. A bigger one.*

They hug each other warmly.

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (PRESENT DAY) 37

SHRAVANI is taking a leisurely walk through the riverfront.

There are many young couples hanging around and several old boats with solar panels soliciting tourists for a ride.

Close to her, beside the river, she sees two bare-bodied boys practicing wrestling (*kusti*).

As she watches, the image DISSOLVES TO

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877) 38

SURESH is wrestling. His bare body glistens with oil, entangled with that of another man, a big WRESTLER, around 23. Both wear loin-cloths, performing *kusti*.

They are seen in the backdrop of the Ganges. An INSTRUCTOR guides them. They are performing in a small clay-pit whose circular edges are marked by a small crowd of people who have gathered to see them.

SURESH is precariously balanced, with the older WRESTLER dominating him. However, he puts up a bold fight.

The INSTRUCTOR guides him (in Bengali).

INSTRUCTOR

*This is Indian style. Throw your shoulder... Strangle him with your elbows... Entangle neck with your arms...*

SURESH follows as instructed and finally grounds his formidable opponent. Breathes heavily while enjoying the applause of only some small boys.

SURESH helps his wrestling rival to get up. He hugs him; they run to the edge of the bank, and from a height, dive into the river together.

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (PRESENT) CONTD.  
39

SHRAVANI stands at a distance from the wrestlers.

Sees the same instructor of the past with the two men.

INSTRUCTOR

*Drag, drag his hips towards the ground. This way you can defeat any Western wrestler. They do not know our techniques.*

She takes out a notepad and writes notes.

EXT. OLD CEMETERY, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877) 40

SURESH walks along with UPEN through a Christian cemetery. On both sides lie ornate tombs of the British. They walk holding each other's shoulder, speaking in Bengali.

UPEN

*Coming all the way from England, to die in Calcutta!*

(CONTINUED)

SURESH

*Maybe, they did not want to be anchored to their birth-place. They wanted to go out and see the world.*

UPEN

*Some, maybe. Most came here on the call of duty. Or to make a quick buck.*

They walk in silence through the cemetery of Victorian tombs until they suddenly find themselves standing in front of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's grave.

The epitaph is written in Bengali. Michael's name is written below his marble bust.

UPEN recites, emotionally.

UPEN

Where man in all his truest glory  
lives/And nature's face is  
exquisitely sweet

SURESH continues.

SURESH

For those fair climes I heave  
impatient sigh/There let me live  
and there let me die.

He repeats to himself the last line.

SURESH

There let me live. There let me  
die.

FADE OUT

INT. SAILORS' HOME, CALCUTTA - DAY (1878)

41

[INSERT] An old photograph of the Sailors' Home. It gets covered with smoke.

[INSERT ENDS]

When the smoke clears, a blue ceramic tile in the doorway reveals: "Sailors' Home".

SURESH, 17 years, is among a group of FOUR SAILORS, all stoutly-built, sitting across a table playing cards.

There are four single wrought-iron beds in the room with crumpled white bedsheets and a table where three of them are playing cards, smoking and drinking.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

47.

SAILOR 4, is a serious man. He lies in bed, contemplating.

SURESH is warmly ensconced among them, particularly close to SAILOR 1. They talk in accents and smoke. The sound of ships at the harbour are heard at regular intervals.

SAILOR 1 has tattoos all over: swallows on both sides of the chest, pairs of dice, etc. SURESH looks at them with big-eyed wonder. He is persuading SAILOR 1 to take him onboard.

SURESH

I know how to cook. Ready to do anything you say.

SAILOR 1 does not respond. While playing cards, offers him a joint. SURESH takes it and puffs on it, heaving out a cloud of smoke. He starts coughing.

SAILOR 1

Easy, boy! Easy! Pure Patna opium.

SAILOR 2

The very best! I am carrying a shipload of that opium back to London. Laudanum, they now call it there.

SAILOR 1

When is she headed?

SAILOR 2

Me schooner? Leavin' 'morrow.

SURESH now goes and sits beside SAILOR 2, dragging his stool. He looks at his strange tatoos, that of a chicken and a pig.

SAILOR 2

This saves me. Terrible storm last week. Boatswain settin' up rigger fell from top mast. Drownded.

SURESH

London? Give me any work in ship. Anything!

SAILOR 2 too ignores his entreaty.

SAILOR 1 gets up, widely spreading his legs, balancing himself as if he is still on ship. He nudges SURESH.

SAILOR 1

Wanna come? Knob-knockin' in the nautchery?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

48.

SURESH's eyes are closing under the spell of opium. He struggles to understand what it means.

SAILOR 4, an older man, lying in bed alone, suddenly talks loud as if to dissipate the transgressions around him.

SAILOR 4

"They that go down to the ships,  
that do business in the great  
waters, those see the works of  
the Lord and his wonders in the  
Deep." Psalms 107, my boy. Verse  
23.

SAILOR 3, with a Hula girl tattoo, gestures SURESH to follow him to the corridor. Others do not notice it. SURESH, puzzled, follows him until they find a private corner.

SAILOR 3

(in a low voice, secretly)  
Two of my guys contracted malaria  
on land. I need help in the  
engine room to load coal. It's a  
cargo ship. You can stay in the  
fo'c'sle with the lascars. The  
Captain is Norwegian. For him,  
all brown guys look the same.

SURESH cannot believe this. He instantly jumps out of the opium-induced semi-wakefulness, frantically clearing the smoke with his hands.

SURESH

You will take me to London?

SAILOR 3

Only under this condition. No pay  
but free passage with food. I'm  
deck officer. They call it First  
Mate. If Captain finds out ...

SURESH cannot believe his luck. He hugs the sailor, trembling with joy.

SAILOR 3

She leaves in two days! HMS  
Lancaster. Travel as stowaway.  
Never come on deck. If Captain  
catches you, he will throw you  
offboard into the sea. You must  
hide at all times. Hide in the  
cargo, in the engine room, hide  
in the foc's'cle. When she gets  
close to the London port, jump  
ship and swim to shore.

(CONTINUED)

SURESH is undeterred, dazed between the charms of opium, debauchery, the Lord's Word and the promise of crossing the seas.

SURESH  
OK, OK. Don't worry.

EXT. OUTSIDE BISWAS' VILLAGE HOUSE - NIGHT (1878) 42

It is a full-moon night. SURESH sneaks into the family house through the backyard. One can hear the sound of howling jackals.

He tiptoes near the window where he sees his MOTHER nursing his sister on her lap near a kerosene lamp. There is no one else in the room. He calls out to her in a loud whisper (in Bengali).

SURESH  
*Mom!*

MOTHER reacts as if she has seen a ghost. She is shocked, almost screams in fear but controls herself by putting the edge of her sari on her mouth. She lays down the child on the mattress on the floor and runs inside.

Soon, his UNCLE comes out in the dark.

SURESH  
*I am going away.*

UNCLE  
*You already went away. Two years ago!*

SURESH  
*Leaving the country. In a ship. To London.*

UNCLE  
*What? London? Across the dark waters? Have you become lascar?*

SURESH  
*Lascar no. Not a seaman. What caste will I lose by crossing the seas? I have no caste. I am a Christian.*

UNCLE  
*Suresh, you are mad! Careful, your father is here.*

UNCLE goes inside while SURESH sees through the window that his MOTHER is talking to his UNCLE in anxiety and wiping her tears with the edge of her sari.

(CONTINUED)

They do something secretly - open a cupboard, check around to see if his father is coming. SURESH doesn't understand what's going on. MOTHER is pulling her own hand.

FATHER's Vaishnav chant can be heard, coming from the next room.

After some time, UNCLE stealthily comes out in the dark and gives him something wrapped in a soft, saffron cloth.

He opens it; finds it wrapped in another cloth and then, wrapped inside layers of paper is his mother's golden bangle.

UNCLE

*Your Mother sent this. 20 grams  
of gold. She took off her wedding  
bangle. Don't let any goldsmith  
cheat you for its worth.*

SURESH turns around to leave. UNCLE calls back. He takes out a rolled paper wrapped in the English-language version of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*. The date shows clearly as 1878. He opens it curiously.

It is a map of the world that he was seen touching in an earlier scene.

SURESH lingers over it, with emotion. UNCLE points out their place on earth.

UNCLE

*We are here (pointing to Calcutta  
on the map). And here is London.  
You will go like this (pointing  
the sea-route with his finger).  
Around Africa. Oh no, no. Now  
there is the Suez Canal here. A  
short-cut to Europe. You always  
loved this map.*

He touches his UNCLE's feet respectfully. In turn, he embraces him.

UNCLE

*Wherever you are, write me  
letters.*

SURESH nods. UNCLE quickly walks inside the house.

SURESH sees his MOTHER through the window. She now stands in front of the window, tightly holding the grill as if she is behind bars. Looks at her son.

SURESH holds the bangle between his palms like a prayer and raises it to her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

51.

She tries hard to hold back her tears. The child on the floor starts crying inconsolably.

His FATHER appears in the doorway and looks around.

SURESH slips into the darkness. We hear again the howl of the jackals.

Over the prolonged darkness, a horn is heard.

EXT. BHAU DAJI LAD MUSEUM, MUMBAI - DAY

43

The horn of a modern-day double-decker bus is heard from a distance.

SHRAVANI relaxes on the grass. It is a quiet corner in the city. In the background, the Museum's exterior has a distinctly Victorian architecture.

Among visitors passing by, there are more Europeans and Japanese tourists than Indians, giving it an international feel.

Her phone rings. It's 'KARAN'. She doesn't take the call. Looks disturbed.

She is reading a Bengali book, the Bengali biography (with Biswas' photo) lying on the grass. There is a notebook where she has scribbled notes.

At the edge of the museum grounds, there are a row of huge trees. The chirping of birds increases as it is evening time.

EXT. ONBOARD SHIP - NIGHT (1878)

44

SURESH hides in the anchor chain-locker area of the forecastle where all the reserve chains are stored. It is damp and dark except a hanging light that creaks at the slightest movement of the ship.

The ship's name is displayed on its side: BSN - British Steam Navigation.

From that dark space, Suresh hears the huge uproar onboard as the ship leaves harbour with the upsurge of high-tide, accompanied by a long horn. The rupture of the anchor from the shore throws him to one side.

He hears ecstatic sounds that become a blend of Sanskrit, Arabic and Latin prayers accompanied by the blowing of conch-shells and drums.

*(in Arabic)*

*Subhana-alladhi sakh-khara la-na  
hadha wa ma kunna la-hu muqrinin.*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

*Wa inna ila rabbi-na la  
munqalibun.*

(in Sanskrit)

*Om Triyambakam Yajamahe Sugandhim  
Pushtivardhanam Urvarukmiva  
Bandhanat Mrityurmukshiya  
Mamritat*

(in Latin)

*Sancte Michael Archangele,  
defende nos in proello, contra  
nequitiam, et insidias diaboli  
esto praesidium ...*

The light swings in wide arcs. Its pendulum-like movement ominously multiplies his own shadow on the walls.

Through a tiny opening, SURESH sees the phosphorescent foam left behind by the ship. It looks like a river of fire.

EXT. ONBOARD SHIP - NIGHT (1878) FEW DAYS LATER

45

SURESH is swinging in a hammock, trying hard to sleep and turning around as the roar of the ocean can be heard.

There are five more men sleeping in their hammocks in that cramped space.

He opens UNCLE's map to see his trajectory.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*Against the voice of experience  
and reason, I set out for the  
unknown. We left Calcutta, moved  
into the Bay of Bengal, into the  
Indian Ocean. Our first stop was  
Madras. Then, Ceylon.*

As he swings in his hammock in the darkness of the underdeck, he hears a faint but lilting Buddhist chant in Sanskrit when he says, Ceylon.

CHORUS (O.S.)

*Buddham Sharanam Gachchami/  
Dhammam Sharanam Gachchami/  
Sangham Sharanam Gachchami*

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

*When we crossed the Suez Canal  
and entered into the  
Mediterranean Sea, the Indian  
students said they had seen  
mermaids.*

INT. BHAU DAJI LAD MUSEUM, MUMBAI - DAY

46

SHRAVANI walks through the corridor of the Museum, with a colourful array of Victorian bric-à-brac which is nevertheless, an identifiable Indian pastiche with Islamic and Zoroastrian interiors.

Queen Victoria's imposing black marble statue is at the centre of it all. She stops in front of it.

Different details draw her attention. She turns up and looks at the ceiling. Sees an envelope lying open in one of the exhibits. Becomes inquisitive and goes closer.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1894)

47

SURESH's letter is lying on the table. We only see a hand, writing in Bengali script.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*Since the age of 14, no one ever did anything for me. I have been a gangster to a gangster, a gentleman to a gentleman, a soldier to a soldier, a scholar to a scholar.*

His wife and child are sleeping deeply.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

48

SHRAVANI is tossing around in bed. KARAN is sleeping beside her but away, distant and fast asleep.

She keeps staring at the ceiling. The streetlight comes through the window and partially lights up the room.

She gets up in her night dress, somewhat sleep-walking. Goes to the other room, her study, and switches on the study lamp. Her hair ruffled, she sits in front of her desk. The white pin-board in front of her is empty.

She scribbles on a notepad and puts up two notes on the pin-board and stares at them:

SURESH BISWAS (1861-1905); and

BENGAL VILLAGE -> CALCUTTA->  
LONDON

We see her from behind. Her hair covers the notes and we see an empty white board around her head.

EXT. STREET IN LONDON - DAY (1878)

49

It is a chilly morning in London. SURESH is slightly older, a 17-year old boy, selling newspapers in the streets. In the distance there is another boy of his age, BOZEN, who is also vending newspapers.

SURESH wears a shabby coat over a sweater and an equally shabby trouser and a yellow hat. He has a heap of newspapers wrapped around him with a yellow leather strap belt: *The Daily Mirror*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Illustrated Police News*.

The year shows as 1878 in one of the papers. However, the sound track is silent. He walks around trying to sell. Several English men and women pass by but no one buys anything.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*You all used to call me a wayward  
vagabond. The fact is, I love  
that word. This wandering life is  
sacred to me, my only truth.  
Otherwise, I remain alone in this  
world.*

The sounds of London are now heard.

He takes out the *Illustrated Police News* and reads out the paper theatrically in a heavy Indian accent. He waves at passersby, slightly lifting his hat at them, displaying a *Punch* cartoon that shows a man with a dagger in a dark background.

SURESH

(reading)

*Ghastly murder in London's East  
End! Dreadful mutilation of a  
woman.*

Takes out another newspaper and reads from it. He goes near an old woman and reads aloud, drawing her attention.

SURESH (CONT'D)

*The woman's body was completely  
ripped open and her entrails were  
wrapped round the woman's neck*

...

Alarmed, several people flock to buy his newspapers as horse-carriages pass by. He is excited to see just a few papers left while the other boy's stack of papers have not sold as much.

He, BOZEN, is a 18-year old British boy with curly ruffled hair and innocent eyes; he wears a cap. Looks at him in bewilderment.

EXT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

50

KAVITA calls SHRAVANI from her office, in the middle of the hustle. Several people walk around her.

KAVITA

Hi Shravani, how are things going?

SHRAVANI

(overheard)

OK. Not so good. I am stuck in London.

KAVITA

What do you mean?

SHRAVANI

I don't know how to imagine a scene that unfolds in a 19th century Victorian slum! So I am browsing these photographs online...

KAVITA

What about Dickens? Can that help in some way?

SHRAVANI

More than Dickens' novels. There is a book he wrote when he was 20 years old. *Sketches by Boz*. Amazing wealth of details.

Someone comes to KAVITA and demands her attention. She has to cut the line.

KAVITA

Listen, Sorry. I will call you later. OK? Stay cool!

EXT. LONDON EAST-END SLUMS - NIGHT (1878)

51

SLOW FADE IN. Cobble-stoned street at night. There is hardly anyone in the streets. It is a poor neighbourhood as is evident in the narrow lane, street garbage and run-down buildings.

By the side of a street-lamp, the young SURESH walks alone.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

17-year old Suresh is accosted by two gangsters in London's East-End.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

56.

The gangsters wear worn-out leather jackets and round felt hats.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)(CONT'D)

Long shadows are cast on the walls in film noir style.

The characters cast high-contrast shadows. One holds SURESH back putting a knife at his chin while the other drains off his pocket.

KAVITA (O.S.)

And the gangster says...

GANGSTER 1

Let's see what our dear blackie's got... 9 shillings, 7 pence.

They assault him, take away all his money. As they walk away with his money, SURESH pounces on them with the same knife he used before. They hold him down and slit his nose. He bleeds.

GANGSTER 2

Nigger get nose.

Suddenly, TWO POLICEMEN appear in blue uniform with a long line of buttons, a belt over the shirt and helmets with the royal coat of arms on them. They carry hand-lanterns in the dimly-lit street.

GANGSTER 1

(shouts out to his mate)

Backslang it!

The two gangsters disappear into the darkness as the POLICEMEN with lanterns pass by, ignoring the bleeding SURESH by the roadside. He crawls to the dark passage of a building.

A YOUNG WOMAN stands leaning against the wall at the entrance and on seeing SURESH walking down the dark passage, she goes out and shouts at the guy who is nowhere to be seen in the dark.

WOMAN

Hey Bill! Maffickin' bully.

KAVITA (O.S.)

(in whispers)

'Maffickin' bully'! (laughs) Where the hell did you get that from?

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

(also whispering)

Dictionary of Victorian Slang.  
London's East End meets  
Polanski's 'Chinatown'.

The YOUNG WOMAN is seen approaching SURESH in the dark.

INT. SURESH'S ROOM, LONDON EAST-END - NIGHT (A BIT LATER)  
52

The same YOUNG WOMAN walks through a long, dark corridor and knocks on a door. Enters the dingy room where SURESH is sitting on his bed. He is bleeding, trying to cover his nose. She carries a medical bottle with red liquid in it and attends SURESH's wounds.

She is LAURA, a woman in her early twenties, dressed in a tight-fitting laced bodice and two layers of long skirts, one a chemise.

She looks around the room. The decor has a sleazy ambience with erotic scribblings on the walls, an adult Cupid framed on the damp wall and broken furniture.

LAURA  
(looking around)  
'Tis a shoebox. It all comes o'  
bein' poor.

She carefully wipes away his blood and applies the red medicine to his nose. Looks concerned.

The silence between them is filled with verbal fights over money between a man and a woman next door though the actual conversation cannot be figured out.

A furniture is knocked down and then the noises suddenly stop.

LAURA  
(referring to the people  
next-door)  
Half-rats!

SURESH looks at her with confused silence.

LAURA  
Laura. Church-bell... Look how  
Bill batty-fanged you!

KAVITA (VO)  
Church-bell?

SHRAVANI (VO)  
A woman who talks too much.

KAVITA (VO)  
  
(laughs) Real  
Victoriana.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

58.

Still ruffled, SURESH allows himself to be treated by her. She tries her best to paste a tape on his nose but it keeps falling off. They laugh.

She hugs him by way of appreciation.

EXT. LONDON'S EAST-END - DAY (1878)

53

SURESH and BOZEN, are walking back after selling the newspapers. Today none of them have managed to sell many papers. Both have leather straps around them.

BOZEN has curly, ruffled hair and coarse clothes. He wears a vest-coat but without a hat. SURESH is counting his shillings.

BOZEN

Not much dough, chuckaboo!

Laughs. SURESH's expression shows disgust at the ambiance.

BOZEN (CONTD)

Welcome to Ole' Nichol- darkes'  
London. 'Tis a warkus.

SURESH

Warkus? Oh, work-house?

BOZEN

Warkus... roomin' house... coffee  
shop... whate'er you call it.  
'Tis the rookeries, Siresh. Lots  
o' kettledrums (he cups his chest  
to suggest breasts).

(INSERT) CU of SHRAVANI's hand (with her white bangle) opens Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. (INSERT ENDS)

SURESH and BOZEN go past a brick-layered arch of a building with crumbling walls and peeling paint.

(INSERT) A montage of B&W still photographs of Victorian slums. (INSERT ENDS)

Outside the building, a child carries a heavy load and small fishes are left to dry on a wooden tray standing between two wine barrels.

On a bench against the wall, two people are seated: a shabbily dressed woman with a head-scarf who feeds a baby and an old man in equally shabby clothes, who holds a metallic beer mug, smoking a pipe pompously.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

59.

(Turns to colour) SURESH passes through the dark corridor of the earlier scene and sees a kind-looking man coming out with a big knife in his hands. His apron is stained with blood.

Through an open door, he sees a woman pushing an automatic Singer sewing machine with a false wooden leg, a child sitting on the carpet and cutting leather pieces.

SURESH turns into a right corridor and sees women in laced underdress, leaning against the wall, cigarette in hand, and giving inviting looks.

He turns his key and opens the door to his room.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

54

Archival images of old London are seen on a laptop screen. SHRAVANI is watching a documentary about the underbelly of London in the 1880s.

We watch her watching the video as in a 'reaction-video'. A pile of books are on her table that deal with circus, Brazil or Victorian England.

We see an actual BBC documentary with historical photographs alternating with staged scenes of policemen gathered around Victorian gaslights and prostitutes walking the streets.

[INSERT] Excerpts from the documentary.

FILM NARRATOR (VO)

The East End of London came to be the focus of all our social anxieties. When women went out into the streets, they carried guns and knives. Gin was very cheap and drunkenness was so common that there could be fights any time of the day. There were 80,000 prostitutes in the streets of London...

[INSERT ENDS]

While the video is playing in the background, we see her gazing into one of the photos she has collected, that of a nude seated on tiger-skin.

INT. LAURA'S ROOM, LONDON - NIGHT (1878)

55

A framed photographic portrait hangs on the wall showing LAURA nude, posing on tiger skin.

It is a tidier room than SURESH's. The walls are covered with flowery wall-paper which is damp and coming off at different places.

On the other wall near the bed, there is a portrait of Saint George and the Dragon. The bed has a high back-rest on both sides. By its side there is a chest of drawers and an ornate dressing table, above which there is a big circular mirror with a laced border which frames her. A bottle of gin lies by the bedside.

LAURA sees SURESH looking at her photo portrait.

LAURA

10 hours as a dressmakers'  
needlewoman for 3 shilling a  
month. M' wages hardly get me  
food. For the res' I am obligated  
to go to the streets. Or pose for  
artists.

On the table, there are some cards on which something is printed. SURESH picks them up and browses them in-between gulping gin straight from the bottle.

SURESH

What are these?

LAURA

Escort cards. Guys give these to  
gals.

SURESH

(reads haltingly)  
Dear Miss, I'm just your size and  
complexion/ I'm going in your  
direction/ So, if you have no  
objection/ I'd like to be your  
protection.

LAURA

(reads another)  
See this. Your coral lips were  
made to kiss/ I stoutly will  
maintain/ And dare you say my  
lovely miss/ That aught was made  
in vain.

She laughs heartily but SURESH is nervous, not sure he got it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

61.

SURESH

Many cards?

LAURA nods, smiling.

She turns around making herself available, suggesting SURESH to disentangle the strings at the back of her corset.

He walks towards the circular mirror-frame, visibly nervous; messes up the strings. She does it herself. Then she starts rolling off her stockings and makes herself available for kissing. She gradually takes off layer by layer of her dress and puts them on the side of the bed.

LAURA

Like basket-makin'?

She weaves her fingers with his to suggest the meaning of 'basket-making'.

SURESH is nervous. Makes him lie down in the bed; acts playfully, getting on top of him.

LAURA

Easee dis way. Sain' George an'  
d' dragon! I'm Sain', you are  
dragon monster.

She talks and laughs while making love. Not SURESH.

LAURA

Dragon rears up from d' lake to  
tower over d' sain'. Sain'  
...tames d' wild dragon. Slays  
dragon an' rescues princess.

SURESH gradually peaks and she embraces him.

His face sweats. Their bare bodies are entangled. She wants to hold on to him but he tears away and leaves. LAURA lies in bed alone, disappointed.

EXT. STREET IN LONDON - DAY (1878)

56

SURESH is selling newspapers as usual in front of a Victorian building - King's Cross Station. It's slow.

It is a cold morning and there are very few people in the streets. He is wearing three layers of coats.

Looking around, SURESH's attention is drawn towards a boy who is a walking advert, hanging big framed photos across his neck - one at the front and the other behind. It says, *Pears Soap - The White Man's Burden*.

(CONTINUED)

When he turns around, SURESH sees it has the image of a black kid in a bathtub who becomes white after being washed with Pears soap.

SURESH smiles. Picks up a newspaper randomly and starts to read aloud from it by way of selling as he sees a gentleman walking by. He tries a fake British accent.

SURESH  
(aloud)  
Wombcats from Australia.  
Chimpanzees and giraffes from  
Kenya. Royal Bengal tigers from  
India. Polar bears from the  
Arctic. Penguins from the  
Antartic. All on sale at the  
Harrod's Supermarket.

The gentleman passes by without buying. Suddenly, SURESH sees something in the paper and sits down on a nearby bench. He reads it to himself.

SURESH  
Height of folly! It would be  
unwise for any visitors to Kent  
to leave without calling at the  
John O'Connor's 'Cosmopolitan  
Circus'.

It has images of a circus tent, horses, zebras, acrobats and trapeze dancers.

INT. SURESH'S ROOM IN LONDON EAST END - NIGHT (1879) 57

SURESH, 18, is packing his bags.

It comprises of a medium-sized cardboard suitcase which has been dented on top but manages to close with steel clips. We see him collecting and putting together all his belongings. They comprise of two pairs of trousers, a few shirts and a coat. He also keeps in the box the pen-knife he had in India, and takes special care in hiding his mother's golden bangle among his clothes. Someone knocks.

It is LAURA. She is surprised to see his room cleared up.

LAURA  
What you up to?

SURESH  
Going away.

LAURA  
Where?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

63.

SURESH

To see Kent.

LAURA

See Kent? Why?

He doesn't reply.

LAURA

What about me?

She stands leaning against the door.

He starts kissing her. She resists. Wants to talk. He insists. He lifts the two layers of her skirt and becomes sexually aggressive. He finishes himself while she stands there ruffled, emotionless.

He takes out the money from his pocket. Counts five shillings and gives it to her like a payment.

He promptly picks up his suitcase, closes the door behind them and walks away through the dark passage. LAURA keeps standing in the doorway of the empty passage with the money still in her extended hands.

She stands frozen with what has suddenly happened. Sees him walking away in long strides.

After he leaves, in the empty corridor, she crumbles on the floor, the money rolling away.

The same music that was heard when he had left his father's house, comes back here.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP, MUMBAI - DAY

58

KAVITA has a file with a few printed pages open on her lap while SHRAVANI sits beside her. Puts down the page, sighs. There are a few moments of awkward silence. Kavita is shaken.

KAVITA

Do you really want to show this side of Biswas?

SHRAVANI

Definitely.

KAVITA

Did this happen? I mean, you made this up? Why would you?

SHRAVANI

He claimed to have slept around with a lot of prostitutes.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)

Bragged about it but despised the women.

KAVITA

Bragged to his uncle? How odd!  
Back then? Sounds absurd.

SHRAVANI

Hmm. Complicated.

KAVITA

Who isn't?

SHRAVANI

He loved his mother so much and yet ...

KAVITA

Which star wants to be seen like that? Can you still make him a hero?

SHRAVANI

I don't really care about his heroism. I'm interested in something else.

KAVITA

Mr Mehra and the star, all they see is his heroism.

SHRAVANI

Look, you will always see what you want to see. Just as I do. OK, he was a tiger-tamer. Needs guts to do that. But I feel no admiration for those male values.

KAVITA

What has changed, in more than 100 years, if we are still saying the same thing? What do you see?

SHRAVANI

There were millions of Indian migrants in the 19th century to the Caribbean but there is no story to hold on to. It's not like now, when overseas travel is easy and everybody is going everywhere. I admire how Suresh found his way through the world, tactfully survived in hostile conditions.

(CONTINUED)

## KAVITA

Suresh survived. Tactfully. Shall  
we survive the telling of his  
tale? Tact!

The waiter comes and gives them the bill. Kavita takes it.

INT. JOHN O'CONNORS' CIRCUS, KENT - NIGHT (1879)

59

The circus tent has *John O'Connor's 'The Great Cosmopolitan Circus'* painted on it in golden letters on canvas cloth with red and white stripes. There are painted posters of flying trapeze gymnasts all over along with pictures of dressed-up animals: horses, chimpanzees and lions and also a lady without a head.

Several people have lined up, mostly parents with children. The show is about to start and there are powerful lanterns outside.

At the entrance to the tent, there is a narrow stage from which a male TALKER announces in a mock-poetic tone, megaphone in hand. Beside the TALKER, there is a WOMAN-DRESSED-AS-A-WHITE-HORSE who pretends to be galloping.

## TALKER

As sure a sign of spring as the  
greening of the willow trees or  
the whistle of the tree sparrows,  
The Great Cosmopolitan Circus  
begins a new season. For 10 pence  
only, ladies and gentlemen, you  
will see a bat big enough to kill  
a horse. Elephants walk on glass  
bottles. Fire-eaters,  
sword-swallowers, two-headed  
women. Believe it or not.

SURESH enters the tent. It is full and sparkling with gaslights and colourful drapery. There is a group of musicians in one corner who play joyful band music.

Two CLOWNS in harlequin pants and coats, roll around and do a series of backward somersaults. One bends while the other jumps over him. Then the EQUESTRIAN encircle the sawdust arena. He stands above one of the horses. Then departs.

Two ACROBATS arrive, one man, the other a young boy. They juggle with two knives at the same time. Then, the young boy stands against a board and the man throws several knives at him. Tension peaks before every throw. They all stick to the board around him. The audience sighs and applauds.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

66.

Then come two TRAPEZE DANCER GIRLS who swing from one end to another. Among them, there is a young girl, ELENA, 18, from whom SURESH cannot move his gaze, a blue-eyed blonde. She wears a glittering dress.

ELENA jumps from one swing to another, caught by the other girl, who throws her back into the next ring. Audiences gasp in excitement.

JOKER 1  
(looking around)  
Now, where is the bat you said  
that can kill a horse?

JOKER 2 brings out a cricket bat.

JOKER 1 goes after JOKER 2. He runs away.

JOKER 1  
Is that a bat?

JOKER 2  
A bat that can kill a horse!

They disappear backstage, chasing each other. There are loud offscreen sounds of thrashing accompanied by drums.

The audience laughs heartily as does SURESH, along with all the children.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - DAY (1879) NEXT DAY 60

It is morning. The circus looks dreary like an after-party scene. SURESH goes around the tent in search of an entry to the backlot.

There are four horse-carriages painted in bright red and yellow with pictures of circus and O'Connors' name on them in golden letters.

The four white horses have been unhinged and they are grazing in the distance. There is an elephant that stands swinging hay into its mouth, rocking back and forth, clanking the chain around its foot.

SURESH walks further into the living area and sees a cage-carriage where a lion is fast asleep.

There are several canvas tents. One of them is full with pots and pans where someone is cooking with coal-fire, white fumes come out of it. He goes past a girl playing the hoolahoop and a young man practising a juggling act, a muscular man lifting weights.

Smoke billows from a pile of wood.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

67.

Two dwarfs in ordinary attire are playing cards over a wooden crate. Another performer is trying his hand at the saxophone.

SURESH

Where do I find Mr O'Connor?

CLOWN 1 looks serious. He checks him out and reluctantly shows him the trawler. SURESH waits outside.

SURESH

Mr O'Connor?

JOHN O'CONNOR looks out of the window of the trawler.

He comes out of the trawler and gives a strange look at SURESH. He is a pleasant-looking man in his mid-fifties with all white hair, grey moustache, blue eyes and a sharp nose.

O'CONNOR

(displeased) How did you get into the backlot?

SURESH

Sorry, sir. I wanted to meet you sir. I will do anything you want.

O'CONNOR

I got my own men to do the work. Things are slow this season.

He closes the door of the trawler.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - EVENING (HOURS LATER)  
61

SURESH sits on a wooden crate outside the trawler. He tries in vain to make friends with people. Even the children turn away from him.

Sunlight has visibly dimmed. The lamps have started coming on. The performers are getting ready. SURESH keeps watching them. Everyone gives him cold stares.

Suddenly, the door of the trawler opens and O'CONNOR comes out. He is busy, walking straight ahead when SURESH runs after him, interrupting him.

O'CONNOR

(surprised)  
Still here?

SURESH

I will do anything! I once fought a Bengal Tiger.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

68.

O'CONNOR laughs mockingly and keeps walking. SURESH keeps running after him.

Suddenly SURESH lifts his trouser that reveals some deep bite-mark wounds on his thigh.

SURESH

Here, look.

O'CONNOR stops, looks at it from a distance. Then gets close to the bite-marks, moves his finger over it and then looks up at him with a strange expression.

A muscular WRESTLER is passing by. O'CONNOR gestures him to come towards him.

O'CONNOR

You see that guy? (pointing to the wrestler). He's no tiger. Wanna try him?

O'CONNOR leads them to a nearby spot and marks a circle with a stick.

The WRESTLER breathes deeply to display his heaving muscles. He is in tight shorts and wears a vest. He is significantly taller than SURESH, who now looks very nervous.

SURESH takes off his shirt and rolls his trouser.

O'CONNOR

Ready? Come on, go!

They go round and round, looking for an opportunity to strike. SURESH pauses to pick up some dust and rub it on his body. The WRESTLER is confused by his actions.

SURESH emulates the moves of a tiger and attacks the WRESTLER by the neck who is taken aback but retaliates strongly and SURESH falls on the ground, almost defeated. He somehow garners the strength to get up.

They fight in contrasting styles, the WRESTLER in western style and SURESH in Indian *kusti* style. He remembers the *kusti* INSTRUCTOR's exhortation by the Ganges (in Bengali).

[INSERT]

INSTRUCTOR

*Throw your shoulder... Strangle him with your elbows... entangle neck with your arms... drag his hips towards the ground.*

[INSERT ENDS]

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

69.

SURESH does accordingly while his Western opponent is confused by his style. At one point SURESH uses his elbow to hit the WRESTLER on his spine.

[INSERT] SURESH sees flashes of the tiger-fight.

[INSERT ENDS]

[INSERT] He remembers witnessing a David-Goliath wrestling match when he was with UPEN. [INSERT ENDS]

This fight in opposing styles continues till the WRESTLER changes direction and SURESH throws him down with a front headlock.

SURESH stands up, triumphant, while the WRESTLER walks off.

A crowd has gathered and all the circus people have been watching the fight. Among them, there is the beautiful TRAPEZE DANCER ELENA with whom he had been captivated the night before. O'CONNOR smiles in appreciation.

INT. INSIDE O'CONNOR'S TRAWLER - DAY (1879) NEXT DAY 62

SURESH sits at the edge of a chair. O'CONNOR's name is painted in gold on the sides.

It is a modified Pullman bus done up in red velvet and mahogany, complete with a sleeping berth, woodstove and armchairs. O'CONNOR is smoking a cigar. Pours whisky to SURESH.

O'CONNOR

We are honest people. Not like Barnum! Damn that fraud. Buys old negro woman for 40 bucks. Calls her the 161-year old mother of George Washington! Earns ten times that money in a month. We do more than half the things we promise. That's a lot in this business. What's the name...

SURESH

Suresh.

O'CONNOR

Sir-race? Sirrorace... There are two kinds of people in the world. The kind who stay are Town People. The kind who leave are Circus People. We are now in Ashford, due in a week in Lancashire; due in Norfolk week after.

(CONTINUED)

SURESH  
(romantically)  
Waking up in a different town  
every morning! Travelling with  
the show.

SURESH looks highly enthused.

O'CONNOR  
I want you to do the Hindoo  
snake-charmer. All the mudshows  
are doing it.

He searches for a positive answer.

SURESH  
I caught a cobra once. It  
attacked me when I climbed a  
tree. I killed it.

O'CONNOR  
Listen boy. You'll have a place  
to sleep. Costs too much to feed.  
People, animals. Work free for  
three months. Show me what you  
can do.

SURESH is just too excited with the offer. O'CONNOR stands  
up. Opens the door of the trawler.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - DAY (1879)LITTLE LATER  
63

O'CONNOR comes out of his trawler with SURESH. Now he is  
far more cordial with the boy.

O'CONNOR  
This is the craziest business  
there is. But we are family.

He walks him through the place, introducing him to the  
members.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)  
ANDRADA, gypsy from Romania.

She is doing the hoop.

ANDRADA  
(with a heavy accent)  
I read your past, your footure.  
For a shilling, I'll read your  
mind.

(CONTINUED)

SURESH

What about my present?

ANDRADA

There is no present. Only past  
and footure.

O'CONNOR

The acrobat girls ... from  
Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia.

SURESH is now greeted with warm smiles.

A black man is seen cleaning the wagon with soap and  
water.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

The Negro... is a former slave.  
Now we dress him up as African  
Royalty. People love it when he  
dances with the spear.

They all come and greet SURESH. Some of them give him a  
hug.

There is a man with a dark scar on one side of his face.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

Jose from Spain, Andalucia. Earns  
his keep eating fire. Petrol  
exploded inside his mouth. Needs  
to grow a beard to hide the  
scar.

He caresses JOSE's face like a loving father.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

(affectionately) Gymnasts,  
Natalya from Russia, Pierre from  
France. Don't be like this guy!  
Borrows money the day after  
salaries are paid. Any idea where  
it goes?

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

ELENA, the dancer. She is new  
here. Does the trapeze act.

There is a moment of spark between them as SURESH prolongs  
the handshaking. She is an overgrown child, 18 years old.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

64

KAVITA is in SHRAVANI's study where there is a small sofa.

She is browsing the books that are piled on SHRAVANI's desk. Most of these are books on the Victorian Circus, biographies and autobiographies of circus performers.

She looks at the notes that SHRAVANI has pinned on the board.

SHRAVANI walks in with two cups of coffee. Places it on the table.

KAVITA

Impressive! You are working really hard. Does all this help?

She refers to the books.

SHRAVANI

You never know who suddenly offers an insider's insight, a little detail that rings so true. Then I use that to imagine Biswas' life. Is there any other way?

KAVITA

Maybe, you are taking this a bit too seriously. Screenwriters don't research that much. They just write.

SHRAVANI

One life opens the door to another life in a way ...

KARAN drops in. Shakes hands with Kavita.

SHRAVANI

She is Kavita. This is Karan.

The coldness is evident.

KARAN

Heard a lot about you!

KAVITA

I am so lucky to reconnect with Shravani.

KARAN

So, how's the tiger-fighting superhero doing these days?

He is keen to hang around and chat with KAVITA.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

73.

SHRAVANI

We need to do some work, Karan.

She gets up and shows him out, closing the door. KAVITA looks uncomfortable.

KAVITA

So, where are we now? (thinks)  
OK, so Suresh joins O'Connor's  
circus.

Kavita picks up a book of circus publicity material and reads out randomly from a flyer.

EXT. JOHN O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - NIGHT (1879) FEW DAYS LATER  
65

'The Great Cosmopolitan Circus' banner reveals a TALKER making announcements. We see the Talker but hear Kavita's voice.

KAVITA (O.S.)

(dramatically)

Tonight, History is Mystery, the  
Czar of Bi-zarre. Jugglery by  
Hindoo acrobat.(pauses) Hindoo  
acrobat! The cataract of the  
Ganges. Wow! A congestion of  
amusement. A resonant tantara of  
merriment. (laughs out loud) Love  
it. Resonant tantara of  
merriment!

The WOMAN-DRESSED-AS-A-HORSE continues to gallop onstage while the fiddle plays in the background.

SURESH is dressed up exotically as a 'Hindoo acrobat'. He wears a turban with a green jewel on it, a shining red shirt and loose yellow Turkish trousers, with a tight green sash around his waist. He looks nervous as he enters the arena, particularly with the cheering crowds and blazing lanterns.

A rope has been strung high up above the arena. He climbs the height by using a rope ladder suspended from above until he reaches the part which is strung diagonally across the arena.

He does well for some time, though trembling, and then falls off the rope mid-way through, onto the safety net. Bounces off it and starts climbing the rope ladder again. The audience boos.

ELENA, the trapeze dancer, walks in to divert the attention. The lights shift to her even as Suresh struggles to get out of the safety net in the dark.

(CONTINUED)

ELENA starts performing gymnastics. SURESH now has to perform acro-yoga positions with her, going from simple to complex, holding her high with one of his legs as she rests on it and seems flying. She does it expertly but SURESH keeps failing. She can no longer cover them up. Even the children notice it and there are loud boos from the audience.

EXT. OUTSIDE CIRCUS TENT - DAY (1880)

66

O'CONNOR looks cranky and annoyed with SURESH whom he sees hanging around with ELENA in the distance, at the edge of the circus-grounds. The lions are raging in their cage. He calls SURESH.

O'CONNOR  
(shouting)

Hey.

Gestures SURESH to come but both of them start running towards him.

O'CONNOR  
Elena, get back to work.

He shows SURESH a tumbler with bloody raw meat in it.

O'CONNOR  
Take this to George and Debra.  
They are hungry.

SURESH is scared. He can hear the lions roaring.

O'CONNOR  
I am not here to feed them all  
the time. You got to do it.

ELENA too is scared. Before going away, she quickly whispers to him.

ELENA  
George killed the last trainer.

SURESH pauses for a while, afraid. Then, he walks slowly towards the tub of meat, picks it up with fear.

The lions' roar increases in intensity as he approaches their cage. O'CONNOR accompanies him and then stops; orders him to go forward.

O'CONNOR  
First you have to feed them  
before you tame them. Carry the  
meat. For two weeks. Then try to  
comb the lion's mane through the  
bars. If they are ok with that,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

75.

O'CONNOR (cont'd)  
 you can walk inside the cage with  
 the meat.

Suresh takes an iron rod and extends the meat to them  
 through the bars. One of them try to snatch it from  
 another.

When he withdraws the iron rod, he finds it bent.

EXT. FOREST IN ENGLAND - DAY (1880)

67

SURESH and ELENA wander in the forest. First they hold  
 hands and then, kiss. She inclines against a rock and  
 looks overwhelmed with emotion. She speaks with a heavy  
 German accent.

ELENA  
 Can I tell you something?  
 Promise, you will not tell  
 anybody.

SURESH  
 What is it?

SURESH gets anxious and curious.

ELENA  
 I ran away from home.

SURESH  
 Me too!

ELENA  
 My name is not Elena.

SURESH  
 No?

ELENA  
 Don't tell anybody.

SURESH  
 Why you ran away? From where?

ELENA  
 Bavaria. Germany. My family lives  
 in a big house in Regensburg.

She starts crying.

SURESH  
 How did you come here?

(CONTINUED)

ELENA

Don't want to be ballerina. Like a clock. (demonstrates some routine moves) The circus is so much fun! Here every day is sunshine. Never a cloud.

Now she starts crying inconsolably.

SURESH

I ran away from home when I was 15.

ELENA

You too?

SURESH

I had no one.

SURESH hugs her, trying to console her. She keeps sobbing.

SURESH

Want to go back home?

ELENA

No!

She shakes her head and wipes her tears as they sit together embracing each other in the woods.

SURESH

Are you sure?

ELENA

No!

While kissing, he holds her hands and finds that the soft flesh of both her palms is full of deep scratches where blood has dried up. Some of the scratches extend to the fingers. He is shocked.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT (CONTD)

68

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are still in conversation.

KAVITA

Is Elena real?

SHRAVANI

She is not there in the letters but very much there in the biographies. I just gave her a name.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

I thought you didn't like the biographies.

SHRAVANI

There must be some basis to it even if we cannot prove it. Lots of young people did run away to the circus.

KAVITA

Like they run away from small towns and come to Bombay to become actors! The film industry is a circus.

SHRAVANI

Both teenagers. Both runaways. So there may have been a connection.

KAVITA

Imagine Suresh going nuts over a blue-eyed blonde. Like, a creature from another planet.

INT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT (1880) DAYS LATER

69

The show starts amidst wild excitement and drumbeats. There are some aerial performances with red silky strands of fabric accompanied by dramatic music.

There is a fire-eater on the ground.

THE TALKER

And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, now comes *The Blonde Venus*, the Queen of the Trapeze.

The arena goes completely dark.

The spotlight falls on ELENA, who appears in a glittering red coat, her head crowned with golden hair. She is glowing.

She reaches the centre of the arena with the spotlight following her. Then, she makes a toe-ballet pose, throws away her red cloak and begins her slow, graceful ascent of the rope, 50 feet up, as the band plays a slow waltz.

SURESH is very tense, watching her from below. The arena lights up more and he is seen moving the thick rope suspended from the peak of the canopy. He moves it around in circles, Elena starts revolving around the rope, high up in the air. She holds the rope with her two hands and swirls around it until she creates a perfect circular, disc-like pattern.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

78.

Her palms have started bleeding.

The audience starts applauding. She moves higher until she catches a hanging swing and jumps onto it. She swings daringly at a great height, gliding effortlessly from one ring to another, performing somersaults.

And then suddenly, the swivel on the trapeze breaks even as she catches it.

Elena falls all the way, 50 feet below, in full public view, missing the safety net below, onto the bare boards of the stage with a deafening sound.

Everybody takes a few seconds to react until they see the dust settling and ELENA's body, face down, lying still on the ground. Blood oozes out of her blond hair.

The lights, the music, all the sounds, go off.

EXT. CIRCUS GROUNDS - DAY (1880)

70

The circus tent has come down.

The field is almost empty except for the litter.

KAVITA (O.S.)

God! You killed her so soon.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

One of the fatal deaths so common  
in the circus.

Most of the living tents are not there.

Smoke billows in the distance.

Even the animals are sleeping.

Only two horses can be seen grazing in the fields.

EXT. FOREST IN ENGLAND - DAY (1880)

71

SURESH is walking alone through the woods.

Stops where he had kissed ELENA.

He sees the rock where she had sat.

It starts raining but SURESH keeps walking until he disappears among the dense trees.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

72

SHRAVANI is in her study, writing furiously on her laptop. The pin-board in front of her is now full with notes and photographs.

She has Biswas's photograph in front of her.

She has also marked timelines of his life.

She ponders over them.

Picks out for a journal on the shelf: *Journal of Bengali Studies*. She opens on the bookmarked page. It is Maria Barrera Agarwal's paper on Suresh Biswas.

SHRAVANI reaches out for her mobile and exchanges texts with KAVITA. These are displayed on-screen.

[INSERT]

SHRAVANI: A scholar from Ecuador, Maria-Barrera Agarwal travelled the world for 5 years researching SB.

KAVITA: Wow! And?

SHRAVANI: Lots of evidence + new info.

KAVITA: R u serious? Just in time for us? How lucky!

SHRAVANI: Say, how strange! '*Apna time ayega*' (Hindi). ['My time has come!] I mean, SB's.

KAVITA: *Aap ka bhi. Apna time ayega* (Hindi). [Your too. Your time will come!] Which SB? Shravani Banerjee or Suresh Biswas?

SHRAVANI: Lol. Biswas, stupid. (Smiley) Let's catch up soon. Bye! [INSERTS END]

SHRAVANI reverts to the journal, turning the pages to where there is a B&W circus flyer of the 'World Fair in Islington'.

[INSERT]

A montage of archival images of the Agricultural World Fair at Islington: posters, handbills, photographs and news reports. An Irish folk-band plays in the background.

[INSERT ENDS]

SURESH is seen entering a lion's cage.

EXT. WORLD FAIR IN ISLINGTON, ENGLAND - EVENING (1881) 73

An ornate red-and-black billboard says:  
JOHN O'CONNOR'S

THE GREAT COSMOPOLITAN CIRCUS

Dec 24, 1881

It is the colour version of the flyer that Shravani had seen.

O'CONNOR is tense and excited, getting SURESH ready for the show. They are in the backstage area. A curtain separates them from the hub of the Fair.

O'CONNOR has a heap of clothes of different colours, from which he is trying out different ones for Suresh. He picks up a Persian shawl, then a Turkish cap and Alibaba trousers and tries them on SURESH. Wonders.

Throws them back into the pile. Draws a red line on his forehead with a red powder. Then wraps a Sikh turban on his head. Picks up a silk ribbon, wraps it around his waist. Tries tall leather boots on him. SURESH goes through it all patiently.

All along, the publicity announcements are heard along with the excited ambiance of the Fair.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Free Menagerie show! As the  
British Empire extends to the  
remote parts of the world, even  
the wild beasts of the jungle  
enjoy the fruits of British  
Civilisation.

A marching band adds to the cacophony, along with the roars of animals - elephants, lions, cows, bulls and different kind of birds.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

And now, ladies and gentlemen,  
the clever Hindoo lion-tamer, the  
master of the king of beasts,  
will enter the cage of the  
wildest animals on the planet.

At the mention of 'Hindoo lion-tamer', SURESH, 20, appears, whip in hand. He is in tall black boots, red pants, a blue jacket, a red sash across his waist and a blue turban. His moustache is thick and rolled downwards. His eyes are intense and focussed. There is a loud applause.

SURESH enters the cage to a sudden hushed silence. He makes a sound of the whip by beating it in the air.

(CONTINUED)

The steel trap-door opens, just high enough for the beasts. Out come two lions, snarling and roaring, leaping at each other and at him. They frantically roam around the cage. With the sound of his whip, they get frightened and withdraw to a corner.

SURESH takes centre-stage, pulls a stool and gestures the lion to sit on it. One lion obeys him and then follows the second.

SURESH makes them stand on two legs and swing their heads. It seems they are swinging to the rhythms of the band playing outside. There is tremendous applause.

He holds the whip at a height and asks the lions to jump over it. He then puts it higher and they obey him again. The audience explodes. Gradually the sounds fade away.

SURESH (VO)  
(in Bengali)  
*Uncle, no other life is worth  
living.*

EXT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, LONDON - DAY (1881)

74

SURESH is 20 years old. He stands in front of a big three-storied building with a wide board in green that says:

[INSERT] JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, EST. 1840 [ENDS]

It has several show-windows with pictures of birds and animals on them.

Suresh walks through the half-open dark green door and finds another sign board that says,

[INSERT] PROF. JAMRACH'S COLLEGE OF ANIMALS [ENDS]

As he follows the arrow, he hears all kinds of animal sounds, specially bird-calls.

There are huge crates all over the place.

A SMALL BOY with a heavy bucket, passes him by, without looking at SURESH. He notices an office with a glassdoor that says,

PROF. CHARLES JAMRACH

He cautiously knocks on the door.

JAMRACH  
Yes, come in.

It is a large room filled with stuffed animals. Deers, hyenas, life-size polar bears and tigers divert his gaze.

(CONTINUED)

At the far end, against the window, there is a stout gentleman who sits across the table. This is CHARLES JAMRACH.

He is around 50 years old, with his hair parted through the middle, dignified-looking and dressed formally, smoking a cigar. He has a long moustache and a trimmed beard.

SURESH

Sir, my name is Suresh. You called for me.

JAMRACH

Oh yes, the Hindoo lion-tamer. I did call you over, didn't I?

SURESH now sees a copy of the newspaper *The Era* of Dec 27, 1881 on his desk.

He picks up the paper and displays it.

SURESH

My honour, Professor Jamrach.

JAMRACH gets up. He is a tall man. A picture of authority.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

I capture animals from the wild and bring them over here. I hold nothing in the animal kingdom alien or outside my business. The animals are fed and trained and sold to zoos and museums around the world for exhibition.

He shows him around the room which is full of framed pictures of Jamrach himself in distant corners of the world.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Some are trained to perform in circuses. Some go as pets in private menageries. Sold in the supermarkets. Harrod's has an entire floor selling my animals. In fact, I received orders from an Indian maharajah who settled in Norfolk.

SURESH

Indian maharajahs? Buying Bengal tigers from England? Like buying from London, coals for Newcastle.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

83.

JAMRACH

Oh, no, no. They buy African specimens for their menageries.

Suresh looks supremely happy and overwhelmed as JAMRACH puts his hand on his shoulders.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1881) MOMENTS LATER. 75

JAMRACH takes SURESH on a tour of his menagerie. There are cages everywhere, stacked on top of each other. As he goes past the cages, he introduces the animals.

JAMRACH

Wombats from Australia...  
Woodchucks or groundhogs,  
whistlers, from Canada... Brahman  
bulls from Brazil... llamas from  
...

SURESH

Peru?

JAMRACH gives him an appreciative look. A rare smile.

SURESH

Saw them in picture books.

JAMRACH

These are tiny parakeets, often  
confused with love birds - little  
beauties. These ones are bred  
here but they came from  
Argentina. Here, a hen bird of  
paradise.

SURESH stands admiring its stunning plumage.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

They came from Papua New Guinea.  
This vulturine guinea fowl from  
Zanzibar goes for 150 pounds.

SURESH picks up a lovely brown spotted feather which lies on the ground, admires it.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Do you know what creatures are  
these?

There are some erect creatures, around 8 inches tall,  
swimming like fishes in an aquarium with horse-like heads.

SURESH

Sea horses! I thought they live  
only in fairy tales. Like  
mermaids.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

84.

JAMRACH

From East Timor. They are the only species in the universe where the male gives birth to the child.

He then takes him down a dark corridor. Nothing can be seen but the roar of animals becomes deafening. They reach an area where there are cages with classified animals on both sides.

JAMRACH

Get on to that ladder, my boy.

SURESH runs up the ladder.

JAMRACH

Now, what do you see?

He looks up. Doesn't see anything.

JAMRACH

Not up there. Down below... Look through the hole in the flooring.

SURESH

A rhinoceros!

A gigantic rhinoceros is standing in a pool surrounded by a high fence.

JAMRACH

(shouting out to him)

That's Begum, captured by elephant-hunting British officers in Burma, going for 300 pounds. Zebras 150 pounds, giraffes 40 pounds, ostriches 80 pounds.

A lion in its cage extends its paws towards JAMRACH as they pass by. He caresses the lion who reciprocates the affection.

INT. INSIDE JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1882)

76

SURESH, 21, sleeps on a mattress in the landing of a staircase. Beside it, there is a dented brown suitcase that he had been carrying all along. He uses the suitcase as his pillow.

He wakes up to the calling of birds and animals: a cacophony of parakeets, cockatoos, hyenas, bears and lions. He stays awake, smiles to himself, enjoying the animal sounds that feel like being in a forest.

Picks up a handful of soaked seeds kept in a tumbler on the shelves.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

85.

He goes to the bird cages and feeds the pet canaries, bluejays and magpies when he sees JAMRACH animatedly walking past, talking to a very elegantly dressed tall BRITISH WOMAN, about 45 years old.

She is visibly upper-class, dressed in a long striped luxurious tight-fitting white-velvet gown with a trail, a stole around her neck, long white ankle-gloves and a fancy white hat with flowers in it.

JAMRACH

... there are three lions right now and more are on their way from Kenya.

BRITISH WOMAN

Prof. Jamrach, I wish a lion-cub, not an adult. Someone born here would be a good pet. A lioness.

JAMRACH

African or Indian? It's the male that's more graceful. Unlike the human species.

BRITISH WOMAN

I want my lioness to breed and have a family. Could I perhaps bring her here, during the mating season?

JAMRACH

Sure, but not before she is four. By the way, Madam, lions mate around the year. Hmm...they are very... human.

SURESH sees them walk away.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

77

SHRAVANI and KAVITA sit close together, suggesting an intimacy. Going by the coffee mugs and empty plates, it seems that they have been around for a while.

KAVITA

It's like Walt Disney gone insane!

SHRAVANI

Other way around. Disney tried to recreate the world of Jamrach.

KAVITA

Our own 'Jungle Book' Mowgli!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

86.

SHRAVANI is writing notes on the margin of the screenplay printouts while KAVITA is fiddling with her tab. She passes it on to SHRAVANI to look at.

Two novels are on the table: 'Jamrach's Menagerie' by Carol Birch and 'Nights at the Circus' by Angela Carter. Shravani opens one and casually flips through it while Kavita browses on her laptop.

KAVITA

Two more weeks to complete...

She sees something on the tab and gets transfixed.

KAVITA (CONTD)

I can't believe this! I just typed Jamrach, tiger, and this came up.

SHRAVANI looks at her screen.

KAVITA

(reads from the screen)  
At Tobacco Dock in East London, commemorating the famous incident that happened at that spot in 1857. ... So, this really happened!

It is a bronze statue of a small boy standing in front of a tiger.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - NIGHT (1882)

78

JAMRACH wears a top-hat with wide edges and carries a walking stick that he swings menacingly.

As SURESH walks behind him, he sees several shabbily-dressed boys aged between 13 to 18, carrying buckets of raw meat, sweeping the floor, washing the cages, moving the boxes, feeding the birds and animals.

Jamrach leads Suresh as they go down the dark staircase. Nothing can be seen except an occasional streak of light.

JAMRACH

Wild beasts are quite gentle when they are in their dens. If they get a chance, they break loose. Their natural ferocity possesses them again. They forget all friendship.

They are now in front of a roaring tiger in a cage.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

87.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Knock them on the head at once.  
 Stun them. Show no mercy. That's  
 how I felled her with the blow of  
 a crowbar. She slipped out of her  
 cage during unloading from a ship  
 from Calcutta. Started strolling  
 down the street in East London.  
 Caught hold of a nine-year old  
 boy who thought it was just a big  
 cat.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

79

[INSERT] A cartoon shows JAMRACH riding a tiger, carrying  
 a crowbar. The tiger has a CHILD in it's mouth.

Photograph of bronze statue of the tiger and child.

[INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are lingering over these images. They  
 go back and forth between the images while we hear  
 JAMRACH's voice.

JAMRACH (O.S.)

(echoing)

I told the big scoundrel, if you  
 show any more of your tricks,  
 I'll knock your brains out. After  
 that, she became the most famous  
 tiger in the world. Thousands  
 paid big money just to see her.  
 But old age comes very quickly  
 upon them.

Shravani sighs deeply.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, LONDON - DAY (1882, CONTINUOUS)  
 80

SURESH stares at the tiger's eyes which have clearly  
 developed scales.

With iron bars separating them, the tiger looks at Suresh  
 sadly.

It is pleading, as it were, looking into his eyes  
 directly. After a while, the tiger squats on the floor  
 like a docile cat. Exhausted.

SURESH walks closer to him and holds the iron bars.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY (CONTINUOUS) 81

KAVITA and SHRAVANI are still in office, with pizza boxes around them and a bottle of Coke. Kavita talks without taking her eyes away from her mobile. They look relaxed.

SHRAVANI shows KAVITA a *Punch* cartoon on her laptop. For once, Kavita raises her head from her mobile.

[INSERT] A foppish British woman is trying to stave off a tiger in the wild with the edge of her delicate white umbrella. [INSERT ENDS]

KAVITA is fascinated.

KAVITA

Isn't it amazing how a cartoon can tell us more about a time than a historical document?

SHRAVANI

The cartoon is made up and the document is hard evidence!

KAVITA

So why should you have any qualms about making up things where there is no evidence?

SHRAVANI

For 'making up', we need a different kind of evidence. Like the *Punch* cartoon. It shows the British fear of India after the bloodbath of 1857!

KAVITA has gone back to student-mode. She leans and hugs SHRAVANI.

KAVITA

Last thing I know, Suresh Biswas was working with Jamrach.

SHRAVANI

He left Jamrach after six months or so. And joined his rival.

KAVITA

'Better offer' as we say.

SHRAVANI

Carl Hagenbeck. That guy was the mogul of the animal trade. Based in Hamburg. Hagenbeck Tierpark. It still exists.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

89.

KAVITA  
How did Ha..

SHRAVANI  
Hagenbeck.

KAVITA  
Get him?

SHRAVANI  
No one knows. There are so many  
gaps in the record. I can 'make  
up' something if you insist.

They both laugh.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

82

SHRAVANI opens an old, brown hardbound book.

[INSERT]

*BEASTS AND MEN* by

*CARL HAGENBECK* [INSERT ENDS]

She runs her fingers over it, as we read the subtitle:

[INSERT]

Being Carl Hagenbeck's  
Experiences For Half a Century  
Among Wild  
Animals [INSERT ENDS]

There are several photographs of 'exotic' Indians and  
other ethnicities.

EXT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE, HAMBURG - DAY (1883)

83

CARL HAGENBECK is a saintly-looking man in his fifties. He  
is tall, dressed formally in a suit with a bow tie,  
back-brushed hair and a small white beard.

It is a bright, sunny day. HAGENBECK leads SURESH to a  
tiger's den in the Hagenbeck Park.

It has artificial rocks and a fauna that simulates the  
natural habitat of the wild beasts, complete with trees  
offering shades, mountainous terrain, caves, pools and  
fountains.

SURESH is now dressed in uniform, wearing grey trousers, a  
blue shirt with long sleeves and a black cap. He struggles  
to keep up with HAGENBECK's brisk pace.

He is almost running, looking around at everything with  
amazement, carrying a bucket full of raw meat.

(CONTINUED)

HAGENBECK

(firmly)

No hitting, no violence! This is not bloody Jamrach's Menagerie! Do I ever carry a stick?

To make his point, HAGENBECK puts his hands on Suresh's shoulders while walking.

HAGENBECK

Tender them gently, my boy. They want to have fun, eat and play and be loved. Like us. Each one is different. You have to understand their characters and treat them accordingly. One is more lazy, another more agile, one loves to roll around on the floor, another keeps forgetting what has been taught. Note how each one reacts. It's all about patience and loyalty. Once you become their friend, they are no harder to handle than pet dogs.

Now they reach near the tigers' den.

HAGENBECK

That's my TIPU.

HAGENBECK looks at the tiger with tenderness. He calls out to the tiger.

HAGENBECK

(in German)

*Tipu Sultan, Tipu, my beloved...*

The tiger comes close to the gate of the cage like an obedient cat. Looks at him straight into his eyes.

HAGENBECK

(in German)

*Always talk to animals in German.  
English is too short and soft.  
German is easier for animals to understand.*

Tipu crouches down by the bars, licks his hands and wants to be caressed. HAGENBECK moves his fingers on its spine, alternately massaging and caressing its back.

The tiger makes groans of pleasure and extends its paw through the bar. He plays with it and kisses the tiger on its mouth, on the whiskers. He gestures Suresh to follow him with the bucket of meat.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

91.

HAGENBECK opens the gate. Together, they go inside the den. The tiger hugs him with its front paws and then immediately gorges on the meat.

SURESH follows HAGENBECK's instructions, stroking Tipu down the back, gradually working up to the head, which he begins to scratch, and the tiger, like a cat, begins to rub her head against his hand.

HAGENBECK  
(in German)  
*The way to their heart is through  
their stomach.*

After the tiger eats for some time, he gestures SURESH to take the bucket and leave the cage. Tipu, on seeing the bucket going away, rushes to the gate and roars at Suresh.

HAGENBECK diverts his attention by holding a board three feet above the ground.

HAGENBECK  
(in German)  
*Jump, Tipu, jump.*

Tipu jumps over it. Gradually the board is made higher and higher with Tipu successfully jumping it at every stage.

And then come the hoops, held on top of the board. To teach the tigress to jump over him, HAGENBECK stoops alongside the board.

Tipu clears one and he clears the other.

After repeating this several times, he makes Tipu lie down by flicking her over the back with a small tickle and at the same time pressing her down with one hand.

He puts one leg on top of the tiger and rewards Tipu with a big serving of meat. Calls SURESH inside again with the bucket of meat.

The tigress jumps onto it. SURESH looks at him with admiration. Now both of them leave the tiger alone and come out, watching the tiger eating.

HAGENBECK  
Patience, loyalty and rewards.  
Among animals, as among men, the  
good and the bad are mixed. The  
good will develop on its own. The  
bad needs to be suppressed.

SURESH looks at his master with tenderness and admiration.

FADE OUT

EXT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1883, MONTHS LATER) 84

SURESH, 22, is bathing an elephant in a small pool. They are like children sprinkling water at each other.

He gets on top of the animal to wash its back with a brush and then uses a bucket to wash off the dirt. The elephant too reciprocates the love by swinging its trunk. He throws a ball into the pool and the elephant picks it up with its trunk and returns it to him.

SURESH  
(in German, with difficulty)  
*Bosco, Good boy, Bosco... very  
good boy!*

BOSCO lies down in the pool. SURESH inserts green leaves into its mouth. It raises its trunk and entangles him with it.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY 85

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are working at the dining table.

KAVITA  
There we go again!

SHRAVANI  
Listen, your mind has been corrupted by Disney. Find a new pair of lenses. You have to read the testimonies of people who were into it to understand the amazing human-animal bond.

KAVITA  
You make Suresh kind of passive. How is it that a guy like him is quietly listening to whatever some white men are telling him to do? He is putting on the turban, tika, willingly playing the exotic Oriental!

SHRAVANI  
(annoyed)  
You think Suresh was a 21st century rebel? He never was. He could have no idea how he was playing the imperial game. Even when he converted, there was no love for Christianity. It was just a smart strategy, a way to move away from his father. Everywhere, he wanted to fit in. He chose to be showcased

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)

willingly as a 'Hindoo' because he wanted to conform. For his own benefit. Imposing PC politics of today on characters of the past is downright stupid.

KAVITA wasn't expecting this tirade.

KAVITA

I hope what you are doing goes well with what Mr Mehra wants. He asked for a meeting soon.

INT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1883, A MONTH LATER) 86

SURESH stands in front of a glass wall watching a snake swallowing a rat that is still alive. HAGENBECK comes and stands behind him, puts his hand on his shoulder.

HAGENBECK

That rattlesnake you see, is a gentleman. Before he bites, he gives you warning by sounding his rattle twice. You may safely touch him after one rattle but after rattling the second time, stand clear or you are a dead man. Seize them between finger and thumb and hold them fast. That's the only way ...

SURESH

That I know, sir.

They are about to move away when a beautiful red insect crosses the doorframe. HAGENBECK lovingly takes it on his palm and admires its beauty, showing it to SURESH almost with devotion.

HAGENBECK

He prayeth best, who loveth best/  
All things both great and small/  
For the dear God who loveth  
us/ He made and loveth all.

Suresh is trembling with emotion, his eyes moist.

FADE OUT

EXT. FAIR GROUND, LANCASHIRE, UK - NIGHT (LATE 1884) 87

[INSERT] A news clip in the Lancashire Daily: Hindoo lion-tamer mauled in public. Shravani's hand encircles it. [INSERT ENDS]

SURESH, 23, is performing at a fair with glittering lights. The billboard announces the location as BOLTON FAIR GROUND.

He commands the lion to roll over the floor with his hands (not whip). It does so reluctantly. The music rises. The lion crouches.

SURESH walks towards the audience at the edge of the cage to accept their applause.

Suddenly, in full public view, the lion jumps on him. It mauls his left arm and he starts bleeding profusely. It tears his clothes and keeps dragging him around.

The audience screams in panic and people start rushing out.

The tussle goes on relentlessly. Someone rushes in from backstage with a crowbar and hits the lion. It finally lets go of SURESH from his mouth and reluctantly retreats through the trap-door.

Children start crying.

SURESH falls on the sawdust, fainting, with blood all over the ground inside the cage.

He is carried out on a stretcher.

INT. HAGENBECK'S OFFICE - DAY (1885, SEVERAL WEEKS LATER)  
88

SURESH enters HAGENBECK's office through a glass-door with 'Prof. Carl Hagenbeck' written on it.

It is a large room with elegant mahogany furniture, stacked with files and folders. The curtains of the window are drawn and there are framed photographs of animals all over the office that feature HAGENBECK with them: in a den with several lions, with a rhinoceros, with tigers and so on.

Beside his large office table, there is a wooden instrument with an engraving that says:

*Telegraphen-Bauanstalt von Siemens & Halske.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

95.

It is a wooden box with some protruding keys and above it, there is an inverted rectangular mirror with five needles running diagonally across it. This is an electric telegraph.

SURESH's left arm is entirely covered in bandage. He is trying hard to hide his pain. He walks with a limp.

HAGENBECK

(concerned)

How are you now?

SURESH

Better Sir.

HAGENBECK

(gets up, walks around)

It is never, never, the fault of the beast. They never attack without a reason. Maahes and Sekhmet and Daniel are noble creatures. Why do you think Maahes attacked you?

SURESH

I wore a new costume he was not used to.

HAGENBECK

There you go! They do not like surprises.

SURESH

Sorry sir.

HAGENBECK

It's not just that. A lion always crouches three seconds before attacking. Why didn't you notice that?

SURESH does not reply. He puts his head down in shame.

HAGENBECK

You were enjoying the applauses with your back to him, didn't you? If you saw Maahes crouching, what should you have done?

SURESH

(meekly)

Let him know I can see him.

HAGENBECK is more heartbroken than angry.

(CONTINUED)

HAGENBECK

So it was a lapse on your part.  
Using that crowbar was a shame.  
Hideous shame. (Pauses) That's  
what that idiot Jamrach did. Did  
I not tell you the humane way to  
get a big cat off a person?

SURESH

Carbondioxide fire extinguisher.

SURESH stands rigidly with his head bowed down. There are a few seconds of awkward silence before HAGENBECK changes his tone.

HAGENBECK

Now, the reason I called. You  
trained Bosco quite well. He is  
one of my most talented pupils!  
The Carlo Brothers circus people  
in Argentina loved him and I sold  
Bosco to them. But now, there is  
some news here that leaves me  
very worried.

He hands over to him a telegraph message.

SURESH

(reads aloud)

"BOSCO NOT EATING STOP DYING STOP  
SEND TRAINER TO ARGENTINA STOP  
FEDERICO CARLO STOP"

HAGENBECK shows him the photograph of the elephant BOSCO being lifted in a huge crane in the port, suspended in mid-air, dangling its legs.

SURESH holds the photo in his hand. He is crestfallen.

HAGENBECK

It was sad to let go of such a  
dear friend. They loved how Bosco  
was trained. I pray to Almighty  
God so that the worst does not  
happen.

HAGENBECK's voice fades away. SURESH holds the telegram in despair. All he can see is the telegram.

HAGENBECK

I need you to go to Buenos Aires  
immediately.

SURESH is speechless. HAGENBECK turns around on his desk as he types into the telegraph printer:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

97.

HAGENBECK  
 (talking aloud while typing)  
 SENDING BOSCO TRAINER SURESH  
 BISWAS STOP LEAVING BY RMS  
 SERVIA SHIP TODAY STOP

He turns around, opens the drawer and hands over a piece of paper to SURESH. It is a ship-ticket.

[INSERT]

CUNARD LINE'S HMS SERVIA

HAMBURG to BUENOS AIRES

FEBRUARY 10, 1885

TRAVEL CLASS: STEERAGE

[INSERT ENDS]

Suresh Biswas' name is handwritten on it.

FADE OUT

EXT. ON THE ROAD, BUENOS AIRES - DAY (1885) MINUTES LATER  
 89

A horse-carriage with red wheels, driven by two white horses, goes through large fields, a landscape dotted with pretty *estancias* (ranches) that feature Tudor-style residential buildings, pools and vast fields.

SURESH, 24, is accompanied by a CIRCUS AGENT, a jovial man in his thirties, with a moustache. Two horses in a ranch run parallel to the carriage.

The AGENT talks to SURESH in Spanish, gesturing with his hands almost like a pantomime act. He replies in English.

CIRCUS AGENT  
 (in Spanish)  
*The elephant is not eating anything.*

SURESH looks disturbed.

CIRCUS AGENT  
*The doctor said elephants go through severe depression when separated from loved ones.*

SURESH  
 I have been with Bosco since he was one-year old. Every day.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

98.

The carriage stops in front of a farm where many horses are grazing and among them, an elephant sleeps below a tree where there is a visible turmoil in the way the land has been upturned.

Suresh drops his bag and runs towards BOSCO. He shouts.

SURESH

Bosco!!!

The elephant instantly recognises Suresh's voice and wakes up from sleep.

He trumpets loudly and starts running towards him like a little boy, albeit weakly.

When the two meet, BOSCO wraps SURESH tightly with his trunk and he puts his hand inside his mouth. He kisses and caresses the animal and lets BOSCO lick him all over with his trunk.

The AGENT comes running with a bucket full of cucumbers. SURESH feeds them to BOSCO and he delightfully devours them all in no time.

BOSCO swings its trunks and wags its small tail and soon starts drinking water from the tank, giving SURESH a shower with his trunk like before.

He too sprinkles water on the elephant.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

90

A production meeting is ongoing. MR MEHRA sits on one end of the conference table. SHRAVANI and KAVITA are the only other people in the room.

MR MEHRA is appreciative with SHRAVANI's work.

MR MEHRA

(going through printouts)

I am impressed with the effort you are putting in, with so much research. I have some early concerns though.

KAVITA and SHRAVANI listen attentively. MR MEHRA prolongs the pause.

MR MEHRA

For a film with so many foreign locations, scriptwriting has to be production conscious.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

That's true. But the story is such!

MR MEHRA

We have to see how much we can do in studios here. Try to bring in as many Indian scenes as you can. Imagine, we haven't come to Brazil yet.

SHRAVANI

I have also been concerned sir. That's why I wrote nearly 40 scenes in Calcutta. And then there are a few in 19th century London for which there are ready sets.

KAVITA

Where? In London?

SHRAVANI

Yes, they have maintained a model of 1880s slums.

MR MEHRA

Great! Anyway, keep an eye on that. It's spreading all over the place. Try to restrict scenes to studio situations. After all, everyone loves circus. We want to see some strong action scenes. Stars love them.

SHRAVANI

It's part of the story, Sir. Travel. People. Places. Countries. Cultures. Languages.

It all looks amiable.

INT. CARLO BROTHERS SHOW - NIGHT (1885) A MONTH LATER 91

The posters in Spanish announce the 'pantomime equestrian play', presented by "The Carlo Brothers' Equestrian Company and Zoological Marvels".

It is a glittering spectacle.

The poster shows the Caucasian *gaucho*, *Juan Moreira*, with a long beard and a hat riding on a highly decked-up horse with a sword in hand. Blood drips from the sword.

Beside the main poster there is another one. The black and white faded poster gradually becomes colourised.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

100.

THE CARLO BROTHERS PRESENT TODAY

THE COLOSSAL ELEPHANT BOSCO

AND HIS INDIAN TRAINER

SUEESH BESWASH.

AUGUST 15, 1885

The circus canvas tent is of red and white stripes and a joyful Argentine folk *milonga* is being played on an ensemble of instruments: accordeon, violin, guitar and flute.

On the canvas tent at the entrance, there are hand-painted pictures of a fire-eater, a sword-swallower, a talking doll, a woman cut-in-half, a clown called *El Pepino 88*, *El Payaso Inglés* [The English Clown].

There are several gorgeously draped white horses with black tails with men and women riding them in acrobatic positions. The tent is glittering with lanterns that are hanging from every corner.

The circus is full. The 'Oriental Dancing Girls' number is in progress. The music takes on an Arabian tone and the backdrops feature scenes from the Arabian Nights.

The eroticised dance is a curious amalgam of Egyptian belly-dancing, classical Indian dance poses and Sufi *darvish*. During the latter, the dancers go frenetically around in circles and the audience applause becomes deafening, almost drowning the music.

At the end of the performance, the woman standing at the furthest end, comes forward, puts a stick into her own mouth and spits out a huge flash of fire.

The DANCERS exit to applause and the stage becomes dark.

ANNOUNCER

(in Spanish)

*And now, friends, the act that we  
have been waiting for. The  
extremely talented elephant Bosco  
and his Hindu master, Su-es  
Bis-uas.*

The lights come on and from a distance we can see BOSCO walking into the stage.

There is a rumble in the audience which increases as the elephant comes nearer and we see BOSCO carrying SURESH on its trunk. He sits on it like a chair and then jumps out when he reaches the centre.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

101.

BOSCO's head is decked with a large *Hermanos Carlo* logo on an embroidered cloth hanging from its ears.

SURESH is dressed in a red turban, Western trousers and shirt that glitter in the light. He is carrying a bagful of carrots wrapped around his waist like a belt.

BOSCO's acts are played out one after another. He dances to the rhythmic *milonga*, first swinging its head and massive ears, then it raises one feet, then another, to the beat of the music.

SURESH puts a circular stool in front of him and BOSCO puts one feet on it, first the left, then the right and then the hindlegs. He stands up all four on the stool. Then goes round and round looking at audiences on all sides.

After every act, SURESH takes out a carrot from his back and inserts it inside the mouth of BOSCO, caressing its trunk. Then, BOSCO extends its trunk and his master puts one leg on the trunk and another on his tusks to get on top of the elephant.

It takes him around the arena, swinging its tails, flapping its ears and nodding its head.

SURESH jumps from the top and brings a chair. BOSCO sits on the chair like a human with all its four legs dangling in the air. SURESH now talks to audiences in Spanish.

SURESH  
(in Spanish, hiding a chip  
of paper)  
*Dear Friends, Bosco is very tired  
now. He needs to sleep. Do you'll  
think he should sleep?*

Audience responds with approval.

AUDIENCE CHORUS  
Yes!

SURESH goes up to BOSCO and asks him to sleep.

SURESH  
(in Spanish)  
*Everybody wants you to sleep,  
Bosco.*

BOSCO walks to the centre of the arena, folds his huge legs and lies down on the ground, to huge applause.

Then SURESH rides on top of him and sleeps on top of BOSCO. He pretends to fall asleep and slides down his body to the ground. BOSCO gets up and puts first his left leg and then his right on SURESH's head, only lightly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

102.

He takes out three carrots and puts them into BOSCO's mouth and the elephant entangles him with its trunk and lifts SURESH on its back. They walk out to huge applause.

The deafening noise fades out and Bengali is heard.

SURESH (VO)  
*You were right, Uncle.  
 Vasudhaiva kutumbakkam. The  
 World is indeed like a  
 family.*

He bows to the public.

EXT. ON THE ROAD, VARIOUS PLACES - NIGHT (1885-1886) 92

MONTAGE of different cities and countries. These are intercepted by still images of circus acts, seen as swish-pan shots.

[INSERT] Photographs of the Statue of Liberty, horse-drawn streetcars, Spanish colonial buildings, different US cities, images of Rio de Janeiro. [INSERT ENDS]

INT. SURESH'S TENT, RJ, BRAZIL - NIGHT (1885) 93

SURESH, 24, is in his tent after the show, takes off his make-up and his turban, his gloves, rings and talisman necklace in front of a mirror lit up by three candles.

He closes his eyes and prays for a moment in front of a picture of the Cross when he hears something.

Someone is lightly coughing outside to draw attention. He sees a young woman through the canvas-curtain of the tent.

She is about 18 years old, white; her eyes are dazzling with excitement but she hides them with her shyness.

She wears a bright green gown which is tight on top but spreads out from the waist into a wide skirt with yellow cloth-buttons covered with a lace. She carries a decorative yellow hand-fan.

SURESH is pleasantly surprised. He steps out. A lantern hangs at the entrance to the tent which now illuminates them in the middle of the darkness.

YOUNG WOMAN  
 (in Portuguese)  
*Excuse me.*

SURESH  
*Good evening!*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

103.

YOUNG WOMAN  
*Good evening! I loved the show.*

SURESH  
 (in Portuguese but  
 struggling)  
*Really?*

He has a proud and satisfied smile.

YOUNG WOMAN  
*Very, very much.*

SURESH  
*What's your name?*

YOUNG WOMAN  
*Maria Augusta Fernandes.*

SURESH  
*Maria Augusta! Nice name.*

He smiles to himself as he sees her hiding her face in a shy but playful way. They both laugh, searching for something to say. Awkward silence.

MARIA AUGUSTA  
*You, with the lion, are like  
 Saint George fighting the  
 Dragon... Good night.*

She blushes and then extends both her cheeks to be kissed goodbye.

She runs away into the darkness beyond which are the glittering lights of the circus tent. Suresh keeps staring at her even after she has disappeared.

The circus is playing a joyful music.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

94

Out of the printer rolls out a full-page photo of MARIA AUGUSTA.

SHRAVANI is working under the table lamp.

She puts it up on the board, beside SURESH's photo.

Imagines them together.

The sound of circus-music is heard.

INT. CARLO BROTHERS SHOW - NIGHT (1885)

95

There are dazzling lights all over. Suddenly the yellow light turns to red and the entire arena, encircled with high fence, is bathed in red filter. The ANNOUNCER is heard over an empty stage.

ANNOUNCER

(in Portuguese)

*The Impossible is Possible. You will now see before your eyes the Unimaginable. Carlo Brothers present, the Hindu Samson, Sureesh Beswash. With TIPU, the Bengal tiger that Brazil has never seen. Those weak in heart must keep their eyes closed.*

Suddenly, the drums start beating. The trap door opens and the sprightly tiger TIPU walks in gracefully, roaring.

Then, SURESH enters, in his characteristic red turban, white pantaloons, blue tunic and a red sash at his waist.

He instructs the tiger to roll over. It does so obediently. Then he makes it sit on a small stool. He asks him in Portuguese to raise its forelegs and stand up on two legs.

SURESH

*On your feet.*

The tiger refuses to stand up. He repeats in Portuguese, then Spanish, English, French and Dutch but the tiger remains non-responsive, looking away. Then he says the same in German. Loudly.

SURESH

*Stand up, Tipu.*

Suddenly the lion stands on its hindlegs and raises its forelegs in the air. The audience explodes.

Then, SURESH instructs TIPU to sit on a raised platform. He takes off his turban, strokes the tiger's neck.

SURESH makes the tiger's jaws wide open by pressing on two sides and inserts his head inside the mouth of the tiger.

He holds it there for ten seconds and then releases it. The tiger roars at the audience.

There is an overwhelming applause.

An old woman faints.

INT. SURESH'S TENT, RJ, BRAZIL. NIGHT (1885)

96

It is around 7pm. SURESH is returning to his tent after the show when he sees MARIA AUGUSTA waiting in the backlot. He is pleasantly surprised.

He embraces MARIA AUGUSTA FERNANDES warmly and welcomes her inside the tent. She is dressed in a long white skirt, with her curly hair held high up at the back. She is beaming with excitement. All dialogues are in Portuguese.

SURESH

*Boa noite! ...Maria Augusta!*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Boa noite! (laughing joyfully)*

SURESH

*So, return...?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*I love the way you pushed the tiger with your whip.*

SURESH smiles in pride. He sits in front of the mirror as before and starts taking off his make-up while speaking with her.

SURESH

*Came again?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*(shyly) Saw  
the show three times. Sat at the  
edge of my seat all along.*

SURESH

*You must pay half price! Because  
you sat on only half the seat.*

They both laugh heartily.

She starts inspecting the things on his make-up table.

He has rings on each of his fingers. She comes closer to see them. They all carry images of different animals. He lets her identify the animals.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*How beautiful!*

He shows her the rings.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Tiger... bear... lion.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

106.

The necklace draws her attention. A white hook hangs from a thread.

SURESH  
(holding up the necklace)  
*This is a ...*

Searching for the word in Portuguese, he points to his own nails.

MARIA AUGUSTA  
*Nail.*

SURESH  
*Nail. Nail of a lioness. A lion I loved and worked with. Died.*

He affectionately holds the lion-nail.

MARIA AUGUSTA  
*(shyly) My heart was beating during the show. I thought it was the stage that was trembling. But the next day it didn't stop beating. So, I returned to the Circus. Something more important...*

SURESH gets up and kisses her passionately. She embraces him firmly.

While kissing, her hands pass through a part of his back that has a deep wound. Her fingers hover over it.

MARIA AUGUSTA  
*What's this?*

SURESH  
*A wound. A tiger-attack. (Pauses) Every wound is a memory. Memories of attacks. Memories of cities.*

He proceeds to show her some of the wounds - on his arms and legs. They are all deep bite-marks.

SURESH (CONT'D)  
*Maybe, I should leave the circus and settle down.*

She looks at them with sympathy and concern, caressing the wounds.

MARIA AUGUSTA  
*How long will you be in Rio?*

(CONTINUED)

SURESH

*The Circus leaves in one week. We are always moving. After this contract ends in March, I will be a free man. But now, I have to go back to Hamburg.*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*And then?*

SURESH

*I'm a ship longing for the shore.*

She blushes.

MARIA AGUSTA

*Where are you from? Where is your hometown?*

SURESH

*The world is full of hometowns.*

They kiss again. Music rises.

SLOW FADE OUT

EXT. BOTANICAL GARDEN, RIO DE JANEIRO - DAY (1885) 97

SURESH and MARIA AUGUSTA are in the RJ Botanical Garden. There are huge trees from around the world. They go past the entrance, an ornate gate, that announces its establishment date as 1822.

She is dressed in a white gown, almost like a bride. They walk side by side, without talking too much. The road, straight ahead of them, shows the peak of Mount Corcovado.

Both of them pause casually to read the small notes that accompany each tree.

They find themselves in front of a huge tamarind tree. She reads the caption.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Tamarindo! Tama-rin-dus Indi-ca*  
(reads slowly). *It came to Brazil*  
*from India!* (teasing him) *Long*  
*before you!*

SURESH is suddenly touched. He walks around the tamarind tree, inspecting it, touching its trunk, excited like a child.

MARIA AUGUSTA looks up at the tree. It's branches are swinging merrily in the wind.

She leans against it.

INT. CALCUTTA AIRPORT - DAY

98

Modern-day Indian airport.

The display-board shows a long list of arrivals and departures:

New York, Amsterdam, London, Beijing, Dubai.

SHRAVANI is carrying a suitcase and looking at it.

She stands in front of the display to locate her flight:

KOLKATA to MUMBAI.

INT. MARINE DEPARTURE LOUNGE, HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) 99

There is a large display board announcing departures.

APRIL 6, 6.00AM: RED STAR LINE  
EMPRESS OF INDIA: HAMBURG TO  
CALCUTTA

APRIL 6, 10.00AM: *WHITE LINE*  
ABYSSINIA: HAMBURG TO NEW YORK

APRIL 6, 12.30PM: *CUNARD LINE*  
LISSABON. HAMBURG TO RIO DE  
JANEIRO

APRIL 7, 8.30AM: *P & O LINE*  
DEMARARA. HAMBURG TO LONDON

APRIL 7, 11.00AM: *ALLAN LINE*  
JURA. HAMBURG TO CANTON

APRIL 7, 4.00PM: *HAMBURG AMERICA*  
LINE KAISERIN. HAMBURG TO NEW  
YORK

A relaxed SURESH, 25, has been closely pondering over the departure schedule.

It is a large hall with circular glass windows.

His two leather suitcases are covered with shipping labels. Suresh walks towards a maritime check-in desk.

His gaze vacillates between two ships: one leaving for Calcutta and another for Rio de Janeiro.

He returns to one corner and sits. Opens a book, takes out a letter from its fold and reads it.

EXT. VILLAGE IN BENGAL - DAY (1886) 100

UNCLE is now older. He sits at a cemented seat beside the steps of a pond. Two children swim in the background.

On the side, there is a terracota Hindu temple. He sits by the steps of the pond, holding SURESH's letter. He folds it and starts writing on a piece of paper.

As village life passes by, we hear his voice as he writes in Bengali script.

UNCLE (VO)

(in Bengali)

*Suresh, many things are changing in India. Injustice and torture are increasing by the day. Your friend Upen had been to Japan, God knows why. Later, he criticised British rule in Amrita Bazar Patrika. They arrested him on charges of sedition. Upen is now in prison. The Police claimed they found foreign bombs and arms in his house.*

A woman comes to the pond to wash clothes, a priest performs rituals in the water, cows freely walk by, a palanquin carried by two people passes by.

FADE OUT

EXT. HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) AN HOUR LATER 101

SURESH is still waiting at the lounge, visibly distraught.

Gradually, the sounds of the port fade into the distance and the sounds of village festivity (drums) rise to a high level.

[INSERT] He remembers his MOTHER. She holds him in her embrace while he suffers from high fever.

His UNCLE teaches him in candle-light.

UPEN's bright eyes. They lie together by the river-side.

He loiters alone in the forests. [INSERT ENDS]

SURESH's anguished voice (in Bengali), languishing in one corner of the lounge, emerges.

SURESH (VO)

*At the end of the day, lions lose their teeth, tigers lose their vision. Always the vagabond, your*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

110.

SURESH (VO) (cont'd)  
*Suresh, Uncle, is again like a  
 roving elephant, no longer  
 chained to a circus. I am free to  
 go anywhere.*

[INSERT] He remembers kissing MARIA AGUSTA.

Images of Rio de Janeiro. The courtship in Botanical  
 Gardens.

MARIA AUGUSTA caresses his wounds. She smiles shyly.  
 [INSERT ENDS]

Her green-and-yellow gown cuts to the green-and-yellow  
 flag of Brazil flying on a ship's mast.

SURESH is still seated in the lounge, now with a smile.

EXT. HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) CONTINUOUS

102

A departing ship's loud horn wakes SURESH out of his  
 reverie. He approaches the ticket desk.

SURESH  
 (in German)  
*One lower-deck ticket to Rio de  
 Janeiro.*

TICKET-SELLER  
 (in German)  
*Today? 6th April. It's  
 'Lissabon'. She is leaving in six  
 hours.*

TICKET-SELLER issues the ticket and instructs him to fill  
 up the Immigration form.

Suresh quickly fills up the form and hands it over to him.

TICKET-SELLER  
 (in German)  
*Hamburg to Rio de Janeiro.*

He verifies his details, reading aloud.

TICKET-SELLER (CONTD)  
*Nationality- Indian. Age- 26  
 years. This place is blank.  
 Profession?*

Suresh takes the paper and promptly writes in bold German  
 letters: K Ü N S T L E R

The TICKET-SELLER gives him a surprised look. In German:

(CONTINUED)

TICKET-SELLER (CONTD)

*Artist?*

SURESH

*Performing Artist.*

SURESH picks up his two brown suitcases and walks away with long steps as the TICKET-SELLER watches him from behind. The ship's horn is heard at a closer range.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1887)

103

A Portuguese colonial-style red-tiled white house faces the sea. The windows are arch-shaped with full wooden shutters. The prosperity of the house is evident from the brass candle stands and rosewood furniture.

There is a framed painting on the walls, a Brazilian rendition of Rio's patron saint, St George and the Dragon.

On a table beside the bed there is a flower-vase with a bunch of purple flowers and a ceramic plate with tropical fruits like mangoes, bananas and guavas.

SURESH, 26, is in bed with MARIA AUGUSTA who is 19. Her wedding ring is engraved with greenstone. A white bedsheet covers them.

Now, SURESH speaks Portuguese better. Sounds worried.

SURESH

*What if I do not get a job when  
the child is born?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Rio is a city of immigrants. All  
kinds of people are here. With  
your experience...*

Now she too shows signs of worry.

SURESH

*They are all here to do business.  
What have I got...*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Why? There are so many who come  
here looking for jobs?*

SURESH

*Who will give a job to a lion-  
tamer?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*What about the zoo? They need  
people like you. It's a  
government job.*

(CONTINUED)

SURESH

(sighs)

*Enough!*

MARIA AUGUSTA

(kissing him)

*I want my man to do brave things.  
I want you to come home and tell  
me exciting stories. Like a brave  
soldier.*

Suresh is struck by the mention. Takes time to ponder over it. Sits up in bed.

SURESH

*Soldier? A foreigner in the  
Brazilian Army?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Dad can help!*

Suresh moves the curtains and looks out of the window.

For the first time, we see the vast sea, surrounded by mountains. The room becomes bathed in sunlight.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

104

SHRAVANI closes the curtain from which strong sunlight was coming. Hurries back to her laptop where she is on zoom. The room is now darker. We see the image of a Brazilian man on her laptop.

SHRAVANI

Thanks, Professor Gustavo for replying to my email.

PROF DA SILVA

My pleasure. I understand you are looking for an Indian man who was in the Brazilian Army from 1887 to 1905. Right?

SHRAVANI

Exactly. I wanted to know if there are many cases of foreigners in the Brazilian Army?

PROF DA SILVA

Seems to me, your guy was part of, what we called *Polícia Militar do Distrito Federal* or PMDF. It was not a regular police body, but a military corps with infantry and cavalry units, which was set up to protect the capital city.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

113.

The door opens. KARAN walks in. Sees her talking, picks up something and leaves after making a sly comment.

KARAN  
Who is this guy?

He leaves the door slightly ajar. In the background we see him monitoring her. Shravani gets up and closes the door.

SHRAVANI  
Was a foreigner allowed into  
PMDF?

PROF DA SILVA  
Depended on social connections.  
There were glass-ceilings. Limits  
to how high up a foreigner could  
go.

SHRAVANI  
What was the PMDF's role during  
those years?

PROF DA SILVA  
Based on the documents you sent,  
I can say, he served during a  
very turbulent political period  
in Brasil which saw the  
transition from Emperor Dom Pedro  
II to two military dictatorships.  
Back to back. There were frequent  
revolts. So, he did not...

The zoom connection gets interrupted.

SHRAVANI  
Shit!

It is not connecting any more.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1889)

105

[INSERT] B&W photos of the Brazilian Army [INSERT ENDS]

The board says *Hospital Militar*.

It is a makeshift hospital, not a regular one: an old white house with tall round pillars. There is a military canvas tent just outside the building.

From outside one can hear the cries of soldiers groaning in pain. The main hospital ward is a big hall with high ceiling. Light comes inside through windows which are at a height as in a church. Sunlight highlights a large network of spiderweb.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

114.

The floor is not clean at all. There are around 15 beds, all of them occupied by soldiers. The conditions are very basic. The beds have very thin mattresses with wrought-iron frames.

There is only one DOCTOR around, a large man in his late 50s, wearing glasses and heavily distressed. He wears a long white gown over white trousers with the PMDF logo and other military honors. His mouth is covered.

There are no nurses except just one male nurse, SURESH, 28. He also wears a white coat with the logo.

There are TWO BLACK MEN, not in uniform, who are carrying out menial work like carrying a bucket out and closing a curtain made out of bedsheet and picking up large lumps of cotton stained with blood.

While the DOCTOR attends one of the soldiers bleeding profusely and crying, SURESH is attending another soldier by bandaging his leg. The DOCTOR looks distressed as there are men calling him from all sides, in Portuguese.

SOLDIER 1

*Doctor, Doctor*

SOLDIER 2

*Doctor, help me, tell me, have I got the yellow fever!*

SOLDIER 3

*Doctor, I'll die. What'll happen to my wife, my kids, someone help me.*

There are some soldiers who are lying so still that they seem already dead.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1889)

106

A small room in the building has been converted to a makeshift surgery cell. A man is moaning lying in bed while the DOCTOR is treating his wounds.

SURESH is cleaning several surgical instruments. There are several medical solutions on the racks, a washbasin and several white towels.

SURESH closely watches the doctor sewing up the wound of a soldier. After he finishes, he goes to the washbasin to clean his hands.

DOCTOR

(in Portuguese)

*Clean him up. The way I showed you.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

115.

SURESH carefully dresses up the wound of the soldier.

DOCTOR comes back and inspects. He is impressed with his work but talks to him somewhat condescendingly.

DOCTOR (CONTD)

*Very good. I want you to learn  
some basic surgical operations.  
No doctor will work in these  
areas.*

SURESH stares at the DOCTOR walking away, nervous about the immensity of the task he is being assigned.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - NIGHT (1889) DAYS LATER 107

Some soldiers are seen standing in prayer in front of the bed of one of the soldiers who has presumably died. Even the crying patients are silent.

SURESH stands with his head bowed down. Two people take the dead away.

SURESH quickly goes back to the surgery room. The DOCTOR is nowhere to be seen. SURESH is running the place.

The table is systematically arranged with surgical instruments. His hands tremble even as he picks up the scissors.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RIO - NIGHT (5 YEARS LATER, 1894)  
108

SURESH, 34, is at his writing desk as wife and daughter sleep in the background. He is older and calmer. His hair has turned partly white. He is writing intensely, in Bengali script, a continuation of Sc 6.

The VO-texts are spoken in Bengali. They appear onscreen in English as subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

*I have moved from being an  
ordinary soldier to a squadron  
corporal to brigadier position in  
just 6 years. In September 1893,  
when our beautiful city of Rio  
de Janeiro came under attack from  
rebels in the Navy, I was asked  
to lead a garrison. Uncle, this  
life that we hold so dear to us,  
becomes so easily lost in the  
battle-field.*

Sound of cannon-fire is heard.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN-TOP GARRISON IN RJ - DAY (1893) 109

[INSERT] B&W archival images of the Naval Revolts [INSERT ENDS]

From the top of a mountain in Rio, we can see a long stretch of mountains intercepted by the sea. It is early morning. A white ship can be seen in the distance, from whose deck several people are firing. There is a thick smoke that gradually envelopes the entire space. The sound of bombardment echoes around the hills.

At the top of a hill facing the sea, we see a wall of sandbags which are used as barricade. There are about twenty soldiers, all of them black, dressed in red Army uniform with an embroidered vest and a decorative belt at the waist. Behind them, we can see an army canvas tent where rifles are used as scaffolding.

SURESH is leading the soldiers. He has a long sword hanging on his left. Through a hole in the sandbag-barricade, two cannons are protruding towards the sea, targeting the ship from which the attacks are being launched.

There are two gunners behind each of the two cannons and three on the side. A long wooden-rod with a black sponge is visible. Another carries a bucket of black liquid.

A soldier dips the sponge in the bucket and inserts it in the barrel of the cannon. He runs back and takes his position. Another soldier carries the round cannon-ball while yet another carries the gunpowder bag.

After ramming, the left gunner elevates the cannon and targets it towards the sea. As the soldiers load the two cannons, SURESH gives order excitedly, in Portuguese.

SURESH

*Quick, quick. The assholes are getting closer.*

The cannons are now ready to fire. There is frenetic activity around it.

SURESH

*Fire, Shoot!*

Tremendous sound and smoke accompanies the firing. The cannon lands in the sea where it explodes. The explosions continue for some time until there are more explosions at sea than the shots fired at the city.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT 110

SHRAVANI is writing furiously on the computer.

Stops for a moment and leans back. We see her from behind.

Her head is at the centre of the pin-board in front of her.

It is teeming with notes, photographs and index cards. Several books have piled up on her desk.

She picks up a folder containing the letters and her profusely handwritten markings. Turns the pages.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN PATH IN RIO - DAY (1893) 111

It is evening. Even the sea is tranquil now. Only the cannons remain on the mountain-top. No soldiers in sight. SURESH, still in military uniform, looks very tired and ruffled.

He walks down the mountain-path, the sword still hanging by his side. He carries a big circular key-chain with several keys in it. He inserts them in his trouser-pocket and keeps walking down-hill.

At the crossing of two paths he sees two men walking uphill. He is initially taken by surprise at seeing the men but soon realises from their dress - simple cotton white cloths around their body with a long walking stick in hand and a small backpack - that they are religious pilgrims.

They greet each other. The dialogues are in Portuguese.

SURESH

*Good afternoon.*

PILGRIMS

*Good afternoon. May God be with you.*

SURESH

*Thank you very much.*

He keeps walking further down-hill and goes past many bushes. Soon he sees a YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN running uphill.

She is white and quite well-dressed in a long skirt, suggesting an upper-class woman. He is concerned. She is crying. SURESH stops and goes ahead to attend her.

(CONTINUED)

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN  
*Sir! Please help me. Please.*

She keeps crying.

SURESH  
*Please tell me what's the matter.*

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN  
*They said my husband was captured  
by the Army. I just want to know  
if he is wounded. Please tell me!*

SURESH  
*(thinks over) How does he look?*

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN  
*Tall. White. With a beard that  
covers his face. Grey shirt.*

SURESH struggles hard to remember.

SURESH  
*11 rebels were captured. I locked  
them up in a room up there. Some  
of them are wounded, some may  
die.*

He hesitates for a moment. Then he takes out the key-ring from his pocket. She cries louder on hearing about dying.

SURESH (CONT'D)  
*Come with me. But he will still  
be in jail.*

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN  
*Thank you. I just want to see  
him.*

He makes a gesture to her to walk ahead of him.

Both of them keep walking up. There is only one path. After a while, they reach a point where the road has thick bush on both sides.

She stops as she is panting. He too stops for her.

Suddenly the YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN cries out loud.

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN  
*Kill the sonofabitch. Kill him.*

She drops her handkerchief and starts running downhill.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

119.

Suddenly, SURESH finds himself surrounded by four men who emerge from the bush. They seem to have been hiding strategically at different sides of the road. They take out their sword and jump towards SURESH to attack him, targeting his keys. It drops to the ground.

Realising that he has been ambushed by the woman, SURESH springs to defend himself.

He moves to one corner so that no one can get behind him. He takes out his sword and starts fighting with the FOUR REBELS.

The fight goes on for a long time. SURESH fights valiantly. Two of them run away into the bush but the other two keep fighting with him with their swords.

Ultimately, one of the men hit him on the knee. He starts bleeding from his calf. The other gives him such a strong blow that he falls down on a large piece of rock and faints.

The whole world becomes a blur. Over the screen that has gone out-of-focus, we hear the rebels taking away the key from the ground and running away.

Momentarily, we see the handkerchief on the ground.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1893, 5 DAYS LATER) 112

SURESH finds himself in his own hospital where he had treated other soldiers. Now he is in one of the beds. He opens his eyes slowly to see the same DOCTOR under whom he had worked.

DOCTOR

*How do you feel now?*

SURESH doesn't reply, just makes moans suggesting he is now no longer unconscious. The Doctor talks slowly.

DOCTOR

*You were unconscious for five days. A soldier found you today lying on a rock in the hill. Can you remember what happened?*

Now he sees that several of the soldiers are standing around him. From a distance, he sees MARIA AUGUSTA walking towards him. The soldiers give way to her. She sits on his bed, overwhelmed with joy. She wipes her tears.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Praise be to the Lord, my love.*

SURESH is too weak to reply. She hugs and kisses him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

120.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*We have very good news, my love.  
The Army made you Captain for  
defending Rio from the rebels.*

He extends his arm and lets her embrace him. The soldiers rejoice, including the doctor. They join in a chorus, clapping their hands.

VARIOUS

*Captain Suresh Biswas!*

SURESH

(mumbling)

*No longer a foreigner!*

He smiles with fulfillment as flowers are laid out.

FADE OUT

EXT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC LIBRARY, MUMBAI - EVENING

113

SHRAVANI is browsing news on her mobile on an English-language news channel. The 'Breaking News' shows:

[INSERT] "Citizenship Amendment Bill Passed: The End of Indian Democracy?" [INSERT ENDS]

She 'plays' the accompanying news-video. We see and hear the anchor.

[INSERT] "The Bill paves the way for the Hindu majority government to further sideline the Muslims in India. There are large-scale protests across various university campuses..." [INSERT ENDS]

There is a notification sound on her mobile.

Message from KAVITA.

[INSERT] Script-reading session scheduled next Friday. Best of luck. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI is seen from a distance. It is evening. She is sitting on a bench below a banyan tree.

After a pause, she texts back.

[INSERT] OK. Will be there. [INSERT ENDS]

The tree's aerial roots dangle over her head like tentacles. She is thoughtful. Disturbed.

EXT. CITY PARK, RIO DE JANEIRO - DAY (1905) 114

SURESH sits on a bench below a large banyan tree. Its long roots hover over his head. He is pensive.

He picks out a letter from his pocket. Starts reading it. We hear his UNCLE's tired voice in Bengali. The translation appears as subtitles.

UNCLE (VO)

*Dear Suresh, Your mother passed away without seeing you. So will I. The British have decided to partition Bengal into two: Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal. There is unrest everywhere. Your friend Upen has died in police custody. Some of your letters were published in Amrita Bazar Patrika, the same paper where Upen's article came out. Suresh, you are Bengal's pride. Keep moving on.*

It is evening. The streets are empty. SURESH still holds the letter in his hands.

EXT. CEMETERY, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877) 115

SURESH and UPEN are at Michael Madhusudan Dutt's grave. We only see UPEN at 18 (continuation of Sc 40).

Michael's bust stands on one side of the grave.

UPEN, the bright and firebrand young boy, stands proudly in front of the bust and recites in English with militant zeal.

UPEN

*... For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh/ There let me live and there let me die.*

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RIO - NIGHT (1905) 116

There is a Buddha statue on SURESH's writing desk.

He has now come to the end of his letter. He folds it, puts on the 1 reis snake-eye stamp, seals it, even as we hear his voice-over. His wife and child are asleep in the background. His VO is heard in Bengali with subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

*A tiger I trained to perform before audiences, suddenly one*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SURESH (VO) (cont'd)  
*day refused to perform. It had to be returned to its natural habitat. The soul, dear Uncle, is a wild animal. It wants to return where it can be truly happy. The life I am living is not the life that wants to live within me.*

He is putting together a small backpack, picking up some items from a brown leather-suitcase.

He finds the small pen-knife he had carried in the Bengal forests, looks at it tenderly and puts it in his backpack.

He finds his mother's golden bangle wrapped in a saffron cloth which he had never encashed.

[INSERT] He sees her from outside the window, pulling the bangle off from her wrist. [INSERT ENDS]

His eyes moist, he puts it in his bag, caressing it for a moment.

He finds the tattered map of the world given to him by his uncle. Spreads it out on a table. Traces his journeys with his fingers on the map.

His attention goes to the newspaper in which it is wrapped. He sees the masthead of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*.

SURESH digs deeper into the suitcase and finds a book on 'Peoples of the World' that Fr Ashton had gifted him.

He opens it. There is a section on Brazil that features the natural beauty of Rio de Janeiro.

He smiles to himself and puts it inside his backpack.

INT. CHURCH IN CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

117

SURESH is a boy of 15 years. He is reading in the Church's library. FR ASHTON sits opposite him and reads out *Ulysses* to him from a volume of Alfred Tennyson.

Instead of his usual white Christian robe, Fr Ashton is now dressed in a long white Indian kurta and pyjama which look like priestly attire.

FR ASHTON  
 ...All experience is an  
 arch wherethro' / Gleams that  
 untravell'd world whose margin  
 fades / For ever and forever when  
 I move. / How dull it is to pause,  
 to make an end / To rust

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FR ASHTON (cont'd)  
 unburnish'd, not to shine in  
 use!/ As tho' to breathe were  
 life! Life piled on life/ Were  
 all too little/ and of one to me  
 little remains...

EXT. FOREST ROAD IN BRAZIL - DAY (1905)

118

It is early morning. We see SURESH from behind. The morning fog is still there.

There is no one in the streets except a small group of religious pilgrims dressed in white robes and carrying long walking sticks, who are walking in a direction opposite to him. They sing an ardent devotional Yoruba (Afro-Brazilian) song as they walk.

Suresh is walking towards a dense forest. The trees are so huge that he is dwarfed by the landscape (as in the opening scene). He is wearing a simple white cotton trouser and a shirt and carries just a simple backpack.

He too carries a long walking stick like the pilgrims. He is limping. His right leg hurts. It is bandaged at the calf muscle. He walks slowly. He gradually gets enveloped by the fog.

CREDITS ROLL AND AFTER A WHILE, STOP.

EXT. PRODUCTION OFFICE COFFEE CORNER, MUMBAI - DAY

119

SHRAVANI is hanging out with KAVITA, holding coffee-cups. Several other people move around them.

SHRAVANI is formally dressed, holding the bound-script across her chest. KAVITA also has the script under her arms. While SHRAVANI looks tense, KAVITA tries to small-talk to relax her.

KAVITA  
 You know, my favourite character  
 in the script? Bosco. What  
 happened to him?

SHRAVANI  
 That's another story.

KAVITA  
 Tell me no...

SHRAVANI  
 Bosco refused to perform after a  
 while.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA  
Like that tiger?

SHRAVANI  
(nods)  
Like Suresh. Like *Monsieur  
Chocolat*. They all get tired  
after a point.

KAVITA nods.

SHRAVANI (CONTD)  
Bosco returned to Hamburg with  
Suresh. The elephant recognised  
Hagenbeck's voice as he stepped  
out of his horse carriage. He  
called Bosco his 'best friend'.  
Hagenbeck died of a snake bite,  
in his eighties.

KAVITA  
What, he did not heed the second  
signal?

EXECUTIVE 1 suddenly appears at the corridor leading to  
the coffee corner. There is a sense of urgency. He waves  
to KAVITA and SHRAVANI, calling them to the conference  
room immediately.

They leave their cups behind and rush along the corridor.  
SHRAVANI adjusts her sari. KAVITA leads her, confident.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, MUMBAI - DAY (AN HOUR LATER) 120

SHRAVANI has just completed her narration in the  
conference room. The bound screenplay is on the table in  
front of her. She looks emotionally exhausted and is  
looking forward to responses. There is an awkward silence.

There are several people. KAVITA sits on the side opposite  
her, beside MR MEHRA, and the TWO EXECUTIVES. It is a  
tense atmosphere.

MR MEHRA  
You have worked really hard.  
There are some good things in it.  
(pause) I have to update the Board  
about how the script has shaped  
up. Look, Shravani, we are  
talking here, of a major star.  
And, what are we really offering  
him?

SHRAVANI  
(taken aback)  
Why Sir? He is there in all  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)  
scenes. There is a lot of action.  
Lots of visual effects.

EXECUTIVE 1  
That's also the issue. It will  
raise the budget beyond recovery  
level. So many foreign locations,  
foreign actors.

EXECUTIVE 2  
This star has just had a big hit  
with a superhero film. I'm not  
sure it is the right kind of star  
vehicle.

MR MEHRA  
We like the script. But several  
things have to change to make  
this work. Are you open to  
bringing in other screenwriters  
to rework this, specially the  
dialogues? The star will also  
have his own views. So also the  
director.

SHRAVANI  
It is somebody's life we are  
talking about, Sir! We just can't  
change things like that. Besides,  
you said, stars love biopics.

MR MEHRA  
But the biopic has to suit their  
public image! (tempers are rising  
now) No one is interested in all  
the dry, pedantic stuff you have  
given us.

The EXECUTIVES nod their heads vehemently.

EXECUTIVE 2  
And where is humour?

MR MEHRA  
We want to see Suresh Biswas as  
an inspiring hero that India  
needs today. A rallying force for  
Indian Nationalism. The audience  
wants to see an Epic Indian Hero  
undertaking Epic Adventures  
across the world. Guts and glory!  
Blood and Soil!

KAVITA  
Sir, I think what Shravani is  
trying to do is humanising Suresh

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA (cont'd)

Biswas. He was a great guy but also a vulnerable man.

MR MEHRA

(turning to Kavita)

Who wants to see vulnerability in a tiger-tamer, dammit! You have completely missed the point. If he reads this script, he will throw it out of the window.

Animated, MR MEHRA gets up and goes near a cupboard and pulls out a book.

The whole atmosphere is tense. One can only hear the sound of him pacing across the room. The EXECUTIVES have retreated into total silence.

SHRAVANI is taken aback by the extreme response. KAVITA is clearly distraught.

MR MEHRA has a screenwriting manual in his hands: Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*.

He goes around to Shravani's side and slams the book on the table, in front of her.

MR MEHRA

Please rewrite the script, creating plot-points exactly in accordance with the 'hero's journey' explained here. I was under the impression that you were aware of these things. Kavita suggested your name and so I thought, ok ... (looking at his watch) Sorry, I have another meeting lined up. I need to go. Bye guys.

He walks off in a huff. The two EXECUTIVES follow soon thereafter.

SHRAVANI is crestfallen. She and KAVITA just sit there in silence for a few seconds.

Soon, they quietly collect their things and leave, closing the door behind them.

The conference room is empty but the lights are blazing.

Vogler's screenwriting manual lies abandoned on the table.

EXT. STREET, MUMBAI - DAY (MOMENTS LATER) 121

KAVITA and SHRAVANI are walking together in silence.

The street is teeming with people and cars, filling up the silence between them.

KAVITA  
Blood and soil!

SHRAVANI  
Modi's 56-inch chest! Like  
Mussolini's balls! This big!

She gestures with her hands to suggest an absurd size.

They are trying to cross a street in Marine Lines, with a row of Art Deco buildings. Cars are racing past.

They do not notice that a saffron brigade with a long line of young men in khaki shorts and saffron flags are marching down the road on the other side. Their slogans are drowned by the traffic noise.

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are busy talking between themselves.

KAVITA  
Planning to join a start-up.  
Let's meet some time soon and  
talk about that spec-script of  
yours. I loved it!

SHRAVANI  
This week I am busy setting up a  
new house. I left Karan. So,  
maybe, the week after...

They are crossing the street dangerously. As the cars approach, they run quickly to the other side of the street.

Without realising it, they end up in the middle of the saffron marching brigade.

Surrounded by men in uniform, they find themselves trapped inside a saffron blur that fills the screen.

FADE OUT

THE END