



**IN A
FUTURE
APRIL**

a novel

**PARAMITA
GHOSH**

RADICAL NOTES 9

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In a Future April

A Novel

Series Editors

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Other Titles Published in the series

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In a Future April
(A Novel)

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A movement in a sense is a struggle over the definition of reality—how reality is constituted. It is this struggle that builds the focus and targets of the movement, informing the praxes towards social transformation. Inherent in this struggle is the act of reclaiming—sense and sensibility, words and meaning...

The word “radical”, which in this post-Cold War phase of Global Capitalism or globaloney has been reduced to a general notion characterizing all kinds of extremism and deviance, is one such word that has been time and again reclaimed by the practitioners of social transformation. “Radical” derived from the Latin word, ‘radix’ meaning ‘root’ = ‘basic’ = ‘fundamental’ is a concept that aptly defines a transformatory practice as an endeavour to reveal and target the essence of what is given to us in appearance. Radicalism in this sense is nothing but fundamental transformation rather than politicking in appearances. Further, and foremost, it is the all-round critique of the status quo and its genealogies, rather than accepting the disciplinary divide/boundaries that the capitalist system perpetuates in order to control labour-power and labour, our efforts and their fruits.

Radical Notes is an endeavour to coordinate the radical voices around the globe, with special focus on South Asia. In our view such focus (which could have been anything) is not just for convenience, given the facilitators’ cultural and intellectual comfort, but is also needed to concretise any ‘radical’ pursuit. In our view South Asia provides us the opportunity to visualise the reproduction of ‘global’ capitalism and struggle against it in a regional setting. But we must remember such focus is always fluid with the ever-dynamic radical needs of the humanity.

Radical Notes booklets are contributions on social, cultural, political or economic issues from counter-hegemonic perspectives, which need not be confined to any established socialist and communist current of thought (though these approaches are most welcome).

Series Editors
Radical Notes

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This is Odessa

But the trouble began closer home. From the ballroom of The South Malacca, it spread to its kitchens spilling onto the tea cabins outside where The City's plumber, the ill-paid teacher, the harried postman, the lumbering boxer, the cross-eyed clerk, the hard-up trader, the ambiguous house servant, in fact all sorts of workers, were to be found passing this street as an excuse to rest their feet and flip over the day's scandals.

Any matter at The Malacca was a reason for local excitement, so totemic had been the shape of this hotel, its ambition, and its emergence in the middle of The City. Its bricks and its labour had come from The Frontier, and one morning it had begun to pile up skyward from the pavement till its presence became irrefutable and the rest of the businesses on the street had to control its chaos and re-arrange itself so as not to seem out of place. So make no mistake, this was personal.

So from this street, the cry was taken up by the next street, the next alley, the little shops under the staircase, the barber's boy under the banyan tree, right up to the open windows of every dining establishment on every street where cooks were taking or refusing their last orders, till every serving man and woman began to look around for a can of petrol so angry and vulnerable they felt as the news flew all around them. They had not acted before—why had they not acted before, they began to ask. They did not have a reason, it had not threatened their bread. As they did not have a pretext for their inaction or an outlet for their impotent rage, they began to blame external factors. The new conditions were creeping in on them, they said—a strange position to take since it would mean that they were happy about the changes they had been told Plebiscite

would bring and yet unsure if they had committed to change too soon.

Since the announcement of the Plebiscite the place had been on boil. Tongues were looser, hopes higher and routinely killed. A few of them, however, were taking a different line. They should stop howling about freedom—now. Let it take time. Let it come in a shape that was not a sham, when it would change their conditions and not turn out to be a ruse to bind them up in newer shackles, dry up their anger, divert their questions. To hurry it now because of the belief that any moment, every moment could bring a windfall, because those who were sure to benefit by it were in a hurry, would still mean having people at the bottom depending on leftovers from the top. Didn't they know what was happening in The Frontier? They have burnt our homes so that we flock to The City offering it our cheap labour, from clerks to scribes to masons, all of us. They have flattened our lands with their machines, impoverished our trees. They laugh at our lives and then give us a roof, throw us some food, take us in as servants. And so Brother Biran did the right thing, we will join our brother, they said. We will not join our voice to their lies. Are we fighting against the guns of the Fairlanders so as to live unprotestingly under those who would train the Lambda's guns at us? And for sure, old laws were being allowed to gather dust so that they could be dressed up with new names. The hounds were being washed and fed to run. And the guns, oh the guns were just changing hands.

Around five in the evening, Biran, a dishwasher at The Malacca, had entered the living quarters of Jaba, its nightingale. She had appeared at Kuberos's door some years ago and as she was discovered by one of his servants, the fool had turned her into one. Kuberos had seen the girl, tall as a shoot and dark as storm, as she emerged from behind the curtains one night after cleaning a window, and the sight had straightened his old bones. He would not bury her in a mansion, he told his friend Baba Lala. He would build a hotel, the Lambda's first hotel, a building taller than any other building shaped like a wedding candle, and she would queen over it. She would just sway and sing, sway and sing for him but would refuse no one a song. Paid for

by Kuber, Jaba had eventually learnt language and grace from a Fairlander governess in transit, and the floosiest repertoire from another of her patron's mistresses, an Armenian girl with a big heart, to become the woman he now arched over once a fortnight. Now Jaba stood before the mirror brushing her hair curling down her back.

She looked at Biran but kept her hands busy in the making of a bun. But where was her jewelled pin? The gold-leafed petals were traced to its drawer and she gave them to him to hold while she organised her hairpin to hold hair and vanity together. She then stuck the coil high on her head. Biran saw she was wearing that dress again. Scarlet straps criss-crossed her breasts like lashes. But Jaba would not look at him. With one hand she held up a card on which she had scribbled the songs she was about to sing. She began to hum, tapping her foot to the slow thump of the drums as the drummer warmed up in the ballroom, but he knew her well enough to know that if he began to speak, she would be listening. "You are not singing tonight," he said to her. "Their Empire, kicking up or dying down, what is it to you Jaba?"

"The master has approved the song list. The Inspector-General is dining tonight, I would say it's a good time to sing," she said patting his cheek with her brush. But Biran would not be placated.

"Go ahead, scrape and bow. Don't take a stand. It's all right. Now that we know, there will never be any expectations from our end. But if you want to be part of an organisation, it cannot be at your pleasure or just because being part of an organisation answers some need of yours."

"All I want is to earn my living, you understand?" she said, her eyes flashing. "Each time before a performance, you have to spoil it and make me raise my voice—why?"

"This is not a career. No career needs to have you looking like this. Or singing praises of empires—have you forgotten why you are here? What were the conditions that were responsible for you to leave home and knock at that door? Tell me under what law was your father victimised? Tell me why should we agree to be ruled by a people who make such laws?"

Will these laws go with the country's independence? You have forgotten, but your father was my friend. We have fought together. There will be a meeting tonight in his name. As his daughter, feel free to come."

"When will you leave for the meeting?"

"After the dishes are done," he said and was gone.

There was plenty of work left in the kitchen. But for the moment each eye was scaling up and down the gigantic square of ice in its middle as imposing as a cathedral. Pale white and greying, its edges had begun to smoke under the spicy vapours of the room. The boys who had begged off a day's work from their roadside eateries for a chance to hang around in the hotel's kitchens in the hope of a free meal on this grand occasion, were being made to pitch in. Even a free lunch has strings attached. They were shaving off thin shards of ice from the block. Another group was dropping them into huge vats to clot the cream for the soufflés. Little squares were plip-plopping into glasses of grape wine. In one corner, surrounded by at least twenty of the chef's underlings, stood William Hick, hands on his hips, the sailor of innumerable ships and the servant of none.

'Bhai William' to everyone, he arrived every summer, stories in one pocket and new recipes in the other, teaching them new words, cusswords, showing them photographs of new inventions, showing them the new cuts, sautés and fries. He worked in their midst thus earning his bread for the duration of his stay, which needless to say, he kept quite short. Sometimes you saw him at the beginning of a day and then saw him the next year. Hick was an enigma. The darling of The City's detectives, who tailed him relentlessly from the time his shadow fell across The Gates, his appearance meant they could take a break from writing reports on the reds and their impenetrable theorisations, and look forward to turning in good copy. His presence at The Malacca on the day of the Inspector-General's dinner, they were sure, was of significance. Usually attired in a combination of white and black, today he was all in blue. Around his neck he had knotted a navy scarf—to hide knife injuries or the wounds of libidinous nights no doubt—and his right hand was patting his left hip pocket too often. The stories

he was telling his admirers this very minute, their sources said—and their sources were good—were mundane. Their plots were picked up from the dime novels found selling on their own streets!

Far from it. In the Far East, said Hick, the people were rising up not just with slogans but understanding. “It began with a waiter called Chou. One day while waiting at the counter, he smelt a chicken gone bad and refused to serve it to a guest. The master threatened to take his job but he wouldn’t budge. As he was thrown out of the restaurant kicking and crying, the other waiters walked out and joined him outside. The cooks, took some persuading, being big bosses of the kitchen—not like our Gagan Bhai here,” he said as Gagan Sardar passed by pointing them the clock, “but join the rest of the workers they did.”

“Raise your voice, William, we can’t hear you in the din,” said a voice at the back. It was Biran.

“Hey, Biran, wash the dishes later. Listen. Yes, some secret abscess had been rubbed with the treatment meted out to Chou. The waiters at the next fancy restaurant where top official met other top officials for dinner, decided to bunker down with their agitating brothers in the neighbourhood. They flung back their tips. By the end of the day, fifty establishments had put up a notice for strike and closed down. They had learnt to say no.”

“We should do that too,” someone muttered.

“Yes! Why don’t you?” said Hick, “Say you don’t want any favours. Say you want more wages! Otherwise you will stop work and march—say that!”

March! What a thought! They had never marched but they began to think, was it a difficult thing to do? They could try. The road is the only place we can walk together, shout together. If we march we will see who all are with us, with what purpose, with what common cause, and for how long. A march is speaking power to power. If we all march together we can walk under the big buildings and our shouts will reach their ears and we will shout that we are not simply against them but we are with the people who can shake big buildings. Come down and join us on the street, they would say, and we will also fight for you and if we shout together, we will...

"...everybody tell everybody to come along. We still have a lot of fight to fight," Hick was saying, hands still on the hip, when Gagan Sardar came bustling into the kitchen to drop the bomb.

"Jaba will not sing! Jaba wants to give a speech! The master is furious. So stop yakking and get the dinner on the tables on the double. Ply them with food. Cold cod—the first to go. Now everybody move it!"

If Baba Lala had not stopped him, Kuberos would have shot the lot. Jaba and now the kitchen staff—what was the matter with everybody? He had even had Jaba checked for flu refusing to believe that she was behaving in this fashion in full command of her senses. Hadn't they created the Dong Party as a platform for protest? If they had issues, they could have placed them at the party's table. What else was it for? They who knew how to take care of their own problems were here to take care of others. Those who had no one, the party would be their voice, their eyes, their ears. Today, in fact, was the very day they had planned to throw it open to all in The City and announce it in the presence of the Inspector-General, the man who would oversee the Plebiscite and deliver the Lambda back to its people. He, Kuber, had made money but he had also built roads, he had built motels, he ran trusts, but the ungrateful louts wanted more. He hoped he was not in the wrong place for he was beginning to have doubts of being part of any future government, if one had to constantly be seen doing things. "In socialism you don't have to do big things. Like idiots, you just had to share," he croaked as he wept and fumed in the hotel tower while debating how to deal with the blow. The velvet curtains that covered the wide windows of this room that he would urge Jaba to fling aside whenever he came visiting her now stayed closed. The night was windy, the curtains stirred. He trembled. He had not wanted to....

The evening had not yet abandoned him it seemed. He thought he heard guns booming from the head of the street—but he could be mistaken. He was! They were returning fire from inside his hotel! He rushed to the window—fearing to look out. A slow-mounting clamour had spread all around—he saw

fires being lit at street corners, groups of men tugging then toppling electric poles, shadowy figures coming out of the gutters and then at a clap, the thud of a thousand boots approaching from a distance. Thin lines of the imperial police, who were big, who were blind and were boys dressed in black helmets and silvery bayonets, and were called the Murkys, were weaving their way through the lanes of The City. Crossing the bridge, they were now taking position on the entrances of the discreet bungalows of the Fairlanders' officers and The City's notables and moving towards the city centre, The Hollow. Their chief, Colonel Saunders—the only man in the regiment with eyes—disappeared in the office of *The Meat* for a good one hour which made the men fidgety. A few took aim at resting pigeons for practice but shot Kirit, a hawk, winding up the day's work in the boulevard. His wail, as he lay bleeding and alone in a street full of people and flash-fanatic photographers, crazed the Murkys. Without their chief around to give them exact directions where to shoot, they went berserk poking in their rifles through every open window, be they shops or government offices, and in the process massacred prized porcelain and engineers working late nights on stalled projects. It took five more hours to bring the situation under control. Meanwhile, The Malacca burnt. Refusing to return with his troops to the barracks, Saunders, when he finally appeared, led them at a quick trot towards Kuberos's hotel. He had set out with a thousand men; he lost fifty to open manholes. He lined up five hundred men, realigned the muzzles of their weapons, and positioned them at the head of the street. A row of twenty advanced in step towards the hotel dividing themselves up again to climb up the marble staircase and capture the lobby. In the lobby, they met Soli, the reporter from *The Meat*, dusting off an excess of ink from his pen.

Soli had express instructions from Aristu. He had been sent to cover the Dong conference and no more. He had arrived on dot to cover a routine story when he stumbled on the waiters' protest. By the time he had mustered up the courage to change his mind to cover the protest, the faces at its helm had changed. "That was Bhai William, this is Biran," a young boy helpfully

whispered back to him.

"Friends, let us test ourselves," Biran was saying. "Let us no longer make excuses for kings, queens, masters—from within the land or outside. As we say in *The Frontier*, let us say it here. It's not about individuals, it's a regime. There, there are factories, here we have the hotel. First we take control of the factory! Then we say it is our factory! Then say destroy the factory!"

"Fine then—what do we eat?" asked Gagan Sardar resentful at the turn of events. But that question was drowned out by a shout from outside. A few tea-stall owners from outside were waving at them madly from the window. The dust from the stomp of a thousand boots was beginning to blow into the kitchen. The roll of armoured cars, the banging down of shutters, the sounds of the street emptying and crowding back—something was happening! Every man and woman found themselves holding knives and pickaxes that were being distributed by unknown friends. Children from the neighbouring terraces were heard screaming.

"The guns! The police! The Murkys are coming!"

At just that moment Soli's pen gave away. He had rushed to the lobby to get one. "A pen? You want a pen, Sir?" asked the manager with a bright smile.

"No, was planning to write with my blood." He was about to rush back when the frozen look of an armed sergeant stopped him in his tracks. In his hand was a rifle and his elbows were raised. Had he stood around to figure whether he would be shot or not, he could have seen the Murky bring down the seven-tiered chandelier crashing to the floor.

"Someone had called Saunders saying the Inspector-General had been shot by a Red inside the hotel... The Inspector General. At least a thousand guests. Staff. Someone was willing to sacrifice them all. It was middle of the week, a dull day. The Dongs were to throw the membership open and there hadn't been too many takers. So they made sure there would be a Bloody Wednesday and hid behind its back," said Soli to Mir on an assignment to *The Frontier* a week later. Biran had made the introductions between the two. Aristu, Soli had realised had handpicked him for the assignment with purpose. He could

depend upon his disobedience to cover the revolt.

"They will now step up the effort to discredit us. Paint us as troublemakers," said Mir. "And Jaba. That silly girl—why? Did *you* give her the flag?"

Biran shook his head. He said she had got hold of it somehow. At the time they spread the lies about not wanting to sing, she was up on the tower rolling it down her window—but he did not want to think of Jaba now. If he began to think of Jaba he would begin to think of Holam the guard, a man who had never done anyone much harm and had never done anyone much good, because of what he did do in his final hours. He needed to find a safe house for Holam's wife in The City before they could take her to The Frontier. He had promised the man that. But if they were looking for him they were hunting for her. Biran saw Mir to the door and slipped on a shirt and started to walk north. It was eleven when he reached The Gates. A key was turned and he was let in. He shook a hand, embraced and sped ahead, his shadow touching the corners of the neatly laid squares even before he did. A cat mewling near the drain looked up at him. Biran picked it up and paused a while. His legs felt numb, he could go to sleep standing on his feet stroking the kitten when it jumped from his crook and hid behind a bin. Garbage lay spattered and unpicked in the back alleys of the grand mansions. It was a week since the revolt at The Malacca. The strike had spread throughout The City! On agitation for the last one year with various demands of dignity and a higher pay, the garbage workers had joined them it seemed. He hurried ahead with new energy. Just a hundred steps more and he would be in sight of *The Meat*.

The white columns of the building gleamed in the streetlight. A new moon appeared at its crown, then withdrew, leaving the corner in confusion. Biran stood before the gates but they were locked. There was not a soul around—he was not surprised. After eleven, the newspaper and the world outside mutually suspended their ties for a few hours. The phones in the newsroom rang less urgently, sleepy subs checking the wires stopped scanning the spilling paper, the low thrum of the printing press in the basement of the building could be heard—

if you were listening. Biran circled the building and stopped at its back. Since the incident at The Malacca, there were sentries watching every building of note but their backs were left unmanned. Propped up against the wall next to the library window on the second floor was a ladder. But Biran was feeling cold. His body wrecked by the long walk, was giving birth to Jaba through every open crevice of his being—an odd fear from his nostrils spoke her name, he thought he heard the sound of her feet turning the next street, his hands climbing the ladder were not his own—her dark arms were pushing him down. His feet missed a rung, if he wasn't careful he could break his neck. There would be plenty of time to think of Jaba—he had to reach the window.