The Lamps of Bakulpur Ghat



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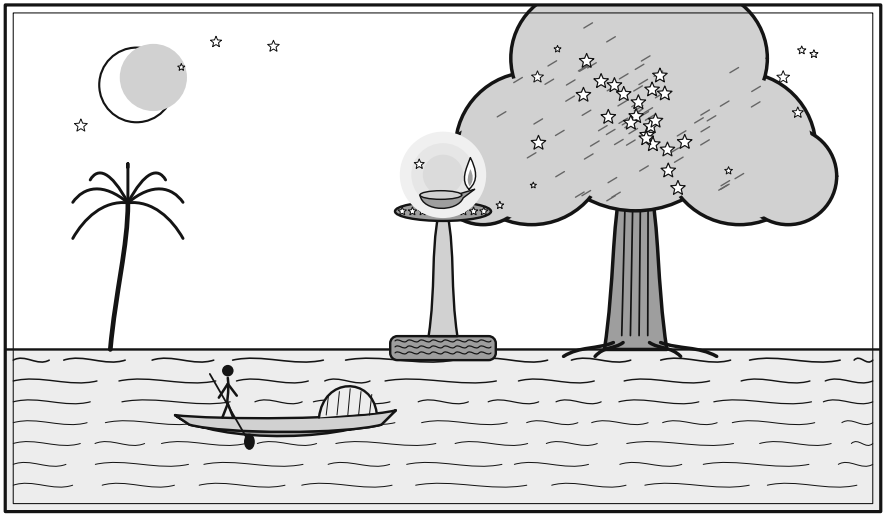

THE LAMPS OF BAKULPUR GHAT

A Novel

SUMAN BISWAS

Amazebazaar.com
Kolkata

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The Lamps of Bakulpur Ghat
A Novel
by Suman Biswas

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First edition, 2026.
Published by Amazebazaar.com
Kolkata, India

Genre: Literary Fiction / Romance / Drama
Language: English

Interior illustrations, map and charts: original vector artwork created for this edition.
Typeset in Crimson Text.

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. The village of Bakulpur, the river Chandrani, the hamlets of Shimultala and Notun Para, and every character in this book are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual families or local events, is entirely coincidental.

The novel is set against real historical events — the Midnapore cyclone of October 1942, the Bengal famine of 1943, the Calcutta riots of August 1946, the Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the great floods of the 1950s — and real places such as Calcutta, Krishnanagar and Santiniketan appear in it. These events and places are used as a backdrop only. The way any character experiences them, and every incident described, is invented. Where dates and public facts are mentioned, the author has tried to be accurate, but this book is not a work of history and should not be read as one.

This story is entirely original. It does not adapt, retell or borrow the plot, characters, scenes or dialogue of any other novel. It is written in grateful homage to the spirit of classic Bengali literature, with its rivers and villages and quiet griefs, and not as an imitation of any particular work.

Descriptions of medical treatment reflect practice in rural Bengal in the 1940s and 1950s and are not medical advice.

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For every girl who ever stood outside a window
and learned anyway.

And for the ferrymen —
who carry everyone across,
and are themselves carried across at last.

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"I eat the fruit of trees my grandfather planted. Shall I not plant for the grandchildren of strangers?"

— from the primer Ashalata learns to read on the ghat steps

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Preface



Every Bengali child grows up beside a river, even the ones who live in cities. The river is in the songs our grandmothers sang, in the stories our teachers read aloud, in the novels we wept over as teenagers without quite knowing why. It rises and falls. It eats one bank and gives the land to the other. It carries brides to their new homes and the dead to the burning ghat. It is patient, and it does not care, and we love it anyway.

I wanted to write a book that felt like those old novels — the ones with slow afternoons and monsoon evenings, with love that is never quite spoken and families that expect too much, with villages where everyone knows everyone's business and a single rumour can decide a life. But I wanted it to be a new story, with new people, and I wanted the person at its centre to be someone those old stories usually left at the edges: a ferryman's daughter who teaches herself to read in the wet sand of a riverbank, because no one will let her inside the school.

Ashalata Majhi is not a saint. She is stubborn, proud, sometimes sharp-tongued, and she makes mistakes. She loves a man who is not brave enough to love her back, and she is loved, for thirty years, by a man she cannot love in the same way. Around her the twentieth century happens to Bengal — storm, famine, riot, Partition, flood — and she does what ordinary people have always done in the face of history. She feeds whoever is in front of her. She teaches whoever comes to her door. She lights a lamp.

This is a book about unrequited love, but I hope it is also a book about what love becomes when it is not returned: not bitterness, necessarily, but strength. It is about the price of family expectation, and the walls of class and caste, and the strange grace of people who do the right thing

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late, or badly, or only once. It is about the difference between waiting and building. And it is about hope — which is, after all, what Asha's name means.

I have tried to be faithful to the times in which the story is set. Readers who know the history of Bengal in the 1940s will recognise the cyclone, the famine, the riots and the long walk of the refugees. I have not tried to explain these events fully; better books than mine have done that. I have only tried to imagine how they might have looked from one small ghat on one small river, to people whose names never appeared in any newspaper.

If you are reading this in a city, far from any river, I hope the Chandrani reaches you anyway. And if you have ever stood outside a window, listening, I hope you go in.

— Suman Biswas, Kolkata

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