

TO THE BOREWELL TAAL
(short story version)
By Prerna Bishnoi (2018)

The sun rose on Idgha Road, Varthur. She preferred to wake up at the crack of dawn. The temple song would start playing at 4am and by the time the sun was rising, it would be competing with the birds. She had just moved into Sai Aastha Apartments. Her mornings started with a cup of tea and while the milk boiled she would sit by herself in the balcony doing *kapaalbhati* – a deep breath in and then quick, short exhales followed by instantaneous inhales.

Her balcony overlooked a brown-green Varthur Lake, caked in water hyacinths, and the surrounding farmlands of Idgha Road. Twenty years ago, as the city of Bangalore expanded, with the Silicon Valley being grafted on to its lands (some land, newly converted from water) and the water in Varthur tank churned into the dark, metal mix that it is today, the farmers of Idgha road moved to more ornamental and economically viable plants. They grow Paper White, Daisy-blue and Aspara. Some grow Roses. In most fields, between crops – both spatially and temporally – they grow vegetables and herbs, like coriander. From her balcony, on the fifth floor, the farmlands looked divided but it was hard to say, quite definitively, who owned which plot of land. The distribution of bore wells sometimes helped indicate the land holdings.

Rising from the surface, she heard the rumble of pumps as the bore wells were being switched on, the *khan-khan* of *payals* (anklets) walking up and down from field to home and back along with the vrooming of bikes, cars, water tankers and school busses. Sometimes, if Kavya spotted her on her way to school, she would hear a “hi miss!” She had just started teaching dance to a group of girls in the neighbourhood, Kavya being one of them. She was a classically trained dancer; Odissi was her form.

One afternoon, after a walk through the fields on her way back home, she stopped to pluck some coriander. That’s when she heard it for the first time. She thought she was hearing a distant drumming sound: celebrations from Mr. Reddy’s grandson’s Coming of Age ceremony at the temple. She grounded her feet and became extremely still, extending her ears to identify the source of the sound. It was a rhythmic thumping.

Sometimes it sounded too close to be the temple. She found herself crouching; gravitating closer to a pipe popping up from the ground with a rotatory knob reading ‘on’ and ‘off’ in opposite directions. As she bent down, the sound got very loud and very clear – it was coming from the hollow of the PVC pipe; not water, but sound. She sat on the ground, her posture being guided by her ear as if on the other end of a phone.

She listened carefully. She would follow the rhythm intently and then stumble, only to find her 4/4 again. The sun scorched. Her skin burned. She was taking it all in as if listening with every orifice of her body – she was a dancer after all. Hours later, long after the sound had

stopped, blurry and burnt she walked back like a somnambulist, one step after the other, her upper body disobediently swaying from side to side, rhythmically to the bore well *taal*. Five floors up, she lay down on the cold floor and fell into a deep sleep.

The next time she heard it, she was at a juice shop in Koramanagala, opposite the police station. Sipping on her butter fruit juice, her fingers tapped rhythmically to that familiar sound. A water tanker stood parked in front of her. An orange pipe emerged from the narrow gap between the juice shop and the house next door, hung over the tree and coiled atop the tanker. That's where the sound was coming from – like a speaker directed at her. This time, the visibly distressed water tanker driver could hear it too. When she asked him where the sound was coming from, he said it was the bore well pump.

"Is it broken?" She asked.

"No madam. The pump is working perfectly. Overtime even," he laughed at his empathetic joke.

"Then?"

"There's no water."

"Where is there no water?"

"In the underground".

And then his phone rang leaving her confused and disturbed. Before she left, she heard him reassuring a customer that they were trying hard to find an alternative source of water. That day's water supply would be delayed indefinitely.

Over the next few days, weeks, months, the sound followed her along with sporadic news of depleting water supply. Wherever there were bore wells with open pipes, she heard it. And there were plenty around the city.

The sound had bored into her ears; rested in her veins, sparking finger-tapping, toe-tapping, knee-jiggling, pen-clicking – all to the beat of the borewell. During the next dance class with the girls, in preparation for their Friday prayers to Duggamma (the protectress of the lake), she was compelled to move to the sound, teaching the girls to do the same, in the hope that Duggamma devi would extend her jurisdiction to include the subterranean flows of water.

In the fields, she observed that the hands plucking the coriander or hacking away at the Paper White, the sound of the *payal*, even the drunken walking to and from the all-male leisurely "tree house", seemed to be to the borewell *taal*. Of course, one could say that the rhythm was quite generic, but it was unusually unpredictable. She had spent hours listening and being moved by it. The moments that sounded like stumbles or blabbers (the only onomatopoeia that seems to fit) she saw people and machines fumble, trip, slip, slide, breaking away from what they were doing but soon enough getting back into that rhythmic flow again. It surprised her that the sound of the struggling bore well pump, a sound that clearly meant that the subterranean pool under their feet had been drained dry, created an obedience to the rhythm, instead of alarm! She

wasn't delusional. Everyone had heard it – Roja, Shobha, Mr. Reddy, Suresh, Ponappa, Vishwanath, Karthik. In fact, everyone was in no doubt that the sound meant there was no water under the ground. And still, when asked what they imagined the underground to be like, they saw a sea, the deeper, the fresher, the cleaner – a perennial source.

She had had enough when one day she woke up on the floor of her balcony, with a bump on her head, her tongue caught between her teeth, the sour taste of blood in her mouth. She had collapsed doing *kapaalbhati* to the beat of the borewell pump gasping for water.

Looking to escape from this anxious rhythm, she went back to the fields. Laying there, curled-up under an umbrella, meditating to every beat and breath that pounded in her head, building empathy with the foot valve of the immersed pump, a voice rose up as she dove down through the pipe...

It feels like everything depends on hammering one nail and only that one nail...

And then the hammer breaks...

What if the wall disappears?

Then the heart pounds...

From one layer to the other – there are different textures, densities, roughness, granulations.

Behind that wall, still waters, very still.

There's no breeze.

Water continuously fills even the smallest cracks; constantly flowing downwards. Relentless.

A tickle of trickles echoes like a lullaby, bouncing off uneven surfaces – twice, thrice, quince, sice...

The cavity is large.

Damp.

But there's no water.

She woke up startled to the sound of Kavya's voice, "miss, wake up! Wake up, miss!" She was lying in the way of a man carrying a coconut that had unusually tilted 90-degrees perpendicular to the ground while balanced on the palm of his hand. Shyam Anna and his family stood behind him beaming. They had found the next site to drill a new borewell. They were preparing to dig deeper (into the future). They were still convinced that they were going to hit upon a sea.

As she walked away from the *bhoomi poojan* site, she saw the rain clouds gathering. An uplifting feeling rose from her stomach. The anxiety over the lack of water fluctuated. In the cool damp breeze she breathed in, calming herself. Relief washed over her (momentarily). Such was the nature of this anxiety – transitory but transformative.

THE END.