

# SOLDIERS OF CULTURE

and other short stories

Rhiddhis Chakravorty

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## *Dedication*

*My parents, teachers and mentors, friends, relatives, well wishers and even my haters because all of them have played a role in giving a shape to my thought process over the years. All of them have contributed to making of the person that I am today. A special mention of my friends Ratul Goswami, Noyon Jyoti Parasara and Pramathesh Borkotoki whose relentless pushing was needed to finish some of these stories.*

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A GHOST MISUNDERSTOOD

**D**ark rainy nights, with lightning and thunder, inside dense forests were something Polomaztac had always loved to dream about. But now, actually being in such a situation, he regretted ever dreaming like that. The canvass shoes soaked with water and smeared in thick layers of mud pulled down his wet feet. The rain above had added to his woes and the jacket completely drenched in rain had become a heavy burden. Yet he could not take it off considering the cold weather. The jungle was thick but the incessant rain and cold weather made it seem thicker and crueler. Polomaztac regretted his adventurism.

Two hours earlier he was sitting comfortably in an SUV with his friends Regox and Abhiyesto. It was a sunny day when they started their journey from the city. After several hours of driving they had reached the thick jungle when Polomaztac had the urge to spend the night there all alone. Regox and Abhiyesto, though aware of the whimsical nature of their writer friend, were shocked to hear this. They knew Polomaztac was capable of thinking and doing absolutely anything. But this was too much. The destination was about forty kilometers away and the jungle was totally uninhabited by people apart

from being dangerous. So they tried to dissuade him but he was unmoved as they had anticipated. Finally they left him there.

Within twenty minutes of walking into the forest after his friends left he felt light drizzles that turned into torrential downpour within no time. Walking across the unfamiliar terrain he had suddenly stepped on a slippery rock and lost his balance. Though he somehow managed to grab a tree, his bag that was hanging loosely by his shoulder fell and rolled down the hilly slope leaving no chance of being found again ever. The only thing left with him now was a powerful electric torch fastened to his belt by a chain. Polomaztac cursed himself and kept walking.

Now he was regretting his adventurism but there was no going back. He was getting more and more impatient with every passing moment. It was already dark but he kept walking with a wild hope of finding a shelter somewhere inside the jungle. His gut feeling was that there might be some place, some ancient ruins or some rudimentary hut made by someone somewhere in the jungle. After walking for quite some time he came across a rock. But it took him only a few seconds to realise that it was not an ordinary rock. It was a rock sculpture! He was excited. There might be some ruins somewhere near. He did not have to search for long. Just within a few minutes he was standing in front of an ancient structure. It was a temple-like monument carved out of rock. As he went near, the structure seemed to be a good place to spend the night. The walls were dilapidated but the roof was still intact. He tried to make out, with the help

## A Ghost Misunderstood

of his torch, what the inside was like. The inside seemed surprisingly clear of any weeds or snakes etc as if it was still inhabited by people.

Polomaztac cautiously entered the shelter and settled himself in a corner.

“So you are lost.”

A shrill voice startled Polomaztac. It seemed to have come slightly higher from where he was sitting.

“I am here. Look up.”

Polomaztac looked up. A dwarfish figure was sitting on top of a broken column. The roof over that column was missing and heavy rain was lashing the dwarf along with the column. Yet the fellow was unperturbed. Polomaztac wondered why the fellow was sitting in such an uncomfortable position.

“Why are you sitting there?”

“Did not your parents teach you some manners? I asked you a question and you have not answered yet. Moreover this is my place and I can sit anywhere. So, will you please seek my permission first to sit here?”

“Okay! Okay! I am lost. And I did not know the place belongs to you. Can I sit here?” Polomaztac was annoyed but tried not to show it.

“Well! I enjoy the way you human beings say things just opposite to what you think.” The dwarf sported a wide grin and jumped from the column. Polomaztac was amazed. It was such an effortless smooth jump that it seemed as if the dwarf had no weight at all.

“What do you mean by human beings... are you

not a human being?” Polomaztac did not try to hide the sarcasm in his tone this time.

“Are you actually such an idiot or you are just trying to entertain yourself by asking such questions? Have you ever seen a human being jump like that, you fool? I am a ghost.”

Polomaztac almost jumped out of his skin on hearing this but the ghost signaled him to sit tight.

“Why are you scared? Do you think I am going to harm you? I am not like you. You bloody human being! We ghosts do not harm people for no reason. We do not make people fight among themselves so that we can rule them.”

Polomaztac was not amused. He did not like to be lectured. He was, after all, an intellectual; A novelist who had a progressive opinion on everything from nuclear disarmament to cabbage plantations. He could not digest being lectured, that too by a ghost. So he blurted out his displeasure.

“Oh! So you hate human beings! As if you were never a human being! Were you born a ghost?”

And it did the work. The ghost, or the self proclaimed ghost immediately kept quite. He went into a sulking mood instantaneously. Now Polomaztac felt uneasy. He, it seemed, had offended the ghost. It was the ghost's turf after all and he badly needed to be there until the night was over. He regretted his action for the second time in the evening.

However, after a long pause the ghost spoke.



ONLY FOR THE CONNOISSEURS

**W**ith the first cup of tea in the morning I came out to sit in my veranda. There is the hill in front of my house with the big rock on top. This rock has always been an attraction for me. It has become a ritual of sort, every morning, for me to stare at the rock for some time. It looks beautiful. Climbing up the hill one day and to sit near or on top of the rock had been one of my fantasies for a long time. However, like many other random thoughts it had never been materialised till the other day.

I read about the great writers and their fixations. There were a lot of great writers who drew inspiration from a particular place, tree, bird, animal etc. It opened my mind to some new ideas. My fixation with the rock. Can it be turned into an inspiration to create a great piece of literature? What if I try to write something sitting near the rock, who knows, I might also get a literary prize.

So, without wasting time I fixed a date for my climb up to the rock. On the particular day I packed some edibles, grabbed a notebook and.... Whoa...I couldn't find my pen! Then I remembered that I had recently gifted my pen to someone as a birthday present.

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## SOLDIERS OF CULTURE

“Whoever poses a threat to our great cultural traditions will be taught a lesson. Hail Sanskriti Suraksha Manch.” The loudspeakers blared as Akhilesh Tiwari spoke.

“Hail Sanskriti Suraksha Manch.” A thousand voices shouted in unison.

It was a massive crowd. Tiwari was impressed. The boys have done a good job. At the time of planning the meeting Tiwari himself was not sure of the turnout. But the boys did it.

Sanskriti Suraksha Manch, claiming to protect traditional cultural values from alien influences, was the brainchild of Tiwari but the young volunteers had given life to it. These young men were from various backgrounds. Prior to joining the Manch they were hardly seen being involved with anything constructive. “I have shown them a new path” Tiwari would proudly say, “Earlier they would either be gossiping at the roadside pan shops or would be involved in street brawls.” Tiwari had shown them a new path indeed and he was proud of that. The boys were uncouth and they never read anything about culture or philosophy. So he gladly took upon himself the responsibility to do all the think-

ing on their behalf. They were his foot soldiers and they loved him and accepted him as the unquestioned general in the holy war against moral corruption. The much needed purpose in their purposeless lives was provided by Tiwari.

“Our culture is under threat.” Tiwari continued to address the gathering. “Our five thousand year old tradition and values are under attack. We are bombarded with alien influences and we have to protect ourselves against them.” He then took a few seconds of pause to let the thunderous rounds of applause die down. He saw Keshav, among others, standing behind the crowd with the alertness of a hyena keeping a vigil over the venue. Keshav was the sharpest and the most trusted commander he had. He was like a bull. He would do anything for the noble cause they had taken up.

Keshav’s blind loyalty had even resulted in a massive controversy when he led some of the boys to assault Dr. Pramath Shashtri. Shastri had criticised the ways of Sanskriti Suraksha Manch in one of his books. He wrote- “The Manch says it is their duty to protect our culture. But how? By becoming and encouraging people to become hooligans? Was it our culture to roam in the streets threatening people? Was it the lifestyle the ancient enlightened sages of our land envisioned for us? Culture makes a person or a nation refined and sophisticated. With wisdom a cultured person can influence or convince someone even to change one’s lifestyle. If we can’t do that then why do we need our culture? Why do we need culture if our aim is to behave like beasts? Our culture has withstood onslaughts from hostile forces for

several thousand years and yet it stands still like a rock despite all the misinterpretations or colonial propaganda because of its deep roots. Then why do we need superficial ways like a vigilante group to protect our culture now? Has it weakened over the centuries? Has it lost its glory? If it has, then there is something severely wrong with us.'

Keshav did not read the book but heard from someone that Shastri had written something against Indian culture. Besides he had criticised the Manch. Therefore he considered Shastri as his enemy. How could the Manch be wrong? Akhilesh Tiwari was also furious that Shastri had criticised them. Tiwari's anger was a vindication of Keshav's belief and therefore he volunteered to attack Shastri. Tiwari had read the article. He knew what to do. The particular line 'Why do we need culture if our aim is to behave like beasts' was picked up from the article to argue that Shastri discarded Indian culture.

With as much gusto as shown by the Taliban while destroying the Bamian Buddha, the Sanskriti Suraksha Manch started burning copies of the book on streets. Effigies were burnt, bookstores were vandalised and those who called for a debate on the issue were beaten up. Keshav and ten other boys organised some people to protest in front of Shastri's house and after half an hour of sloganeering the crowd ransacked his

### About the author

Rhiddhis Chakravorty is an Assamese journalist and author based in the historic city of Guwahati—the state capital of Assam in Northeastern India. He has spent over a decade working for various TV and digital media organizations in various capacities such as news anchor, reporter, producer and editor. Apart from travelling, reading books, appreciating movies and music, he is passionate about telling stories. This is his first published book. Currently he is working on two novels.

## The Yen Age