

# Beyond the Mist

Dibyarat  
Sinha



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Dibyaraj  
Sinha

Dibyraj  
Sinha

2019

# Prologue

"Rimbik is a village near the India-Nepal border in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal state, India. It is 56 km away from Darjeeling town. It is known for its scenery. Many trekkers take the jeep to Darjeeling town from here as its readily available. It also has some hotels.

There are places like Guffa, Jarayo Pokhari, Namla falls and Hospital Dara View Point for tourists to visit. Tuesday bazaar is an attraction there."

That's all what Wikipedia had to say about Rimbik. Sayak scrolled down and read all the other articles about Rimbik. Looked at the pictures. Went through a travel magazine. Just a faint idea about the place. That's what makes him unnerved. He picked up his phone and called Dipta.

What a nuisance this was turning out to be. The Assistant Commissioner of Police, the Old Dog, was missing for two weeks now. And that too at a place he's never heard of.

# 1

The small town of Rimbik suddenly filled up with the special forces of the West Bengal police. They searched everywhere. Special teams went off in several directions in search of the Assistant Commissioner. As the whole of Rimbik was searched again and again, the residents started to feel irritated. Even though the media did not get to know much of this, the visiting tourists grew alarmed at such unseen police overactivity. Finally, the special police forces called it a day. Wherever the Old Dog might be, he wasn't in Rimbik. They were sure of that.

But as two weeks went by and pressure increased on the police force, they finally decided to take the help of the CID. To take the help of the finest of them- Detective Sayak Banerjee, Special Crime Unit, West Bengal CID.

Inspector Dipta Roy yawned and looked down at his expensive watch. Time for a stroll if he had been in Alipore. He looked around. This idyllic place has made him so lazy. He listened to the monotonous pattering of the rain. After some time, the youngest Inspector of the Special Branch of Kolkata Police dozed off in his couch.

It was nine when Sub Inspector Brijesh Kumar knocked at his door. They went down to the restaurant and had a quiet dinner. Only when the constables came did he announce that Detective Sayak Banerjee has received his message and will turn up soon. He glanced at the Sub Inspector. Then they retired to their respective rooms, certain that the investigation would progress now that the man was coming.

Sayak made towards the parking lot of the Bagdogra International Airport at ten minutes past nine the next morning. Dipta walked to him and greeted.

The refreshing sunlit morning had changed nothing on the Inspector's grim unshaven face. Just a faint smile.

"No leads?" There was a sarcastic tone in Sayak's question.

"Not yet." Dipta's head hung down. "They are searching in Sikkim and Darjeeling. And waiting for the permit to travel to Nepal."

"Well, Dipta, let them do their job. Now that I have come, you don't need to worry anymore." Sayak remarked and laughed out loud. Dipta could just manage a feeble show of teeth.

"Well, Dipta, tell me more about Rimbik, please." Sayak took his seat opposite to him as Dipta waved and called the waiter.

They had reached Rimbik an hour ago. And Dipta could say that the detective was perplexed, absolutely perplexed by the beauty of Rimbik.

Dipta stammered. "Sir, this town is located in the Singalila National Park. It's at a height of about 2300 m. And.."

"Come on man, don't be a tourist guide. Tell me what you think of this mesmerising town," pat came the reply.

"Sir, obviously this town is home to mostly Indo-Nepali people. But there's a very astonishing thing about this. A patriarchal Bengali family has been living here for about three decades now."

Dipta could say that Sayak was really surprised by this.

"Why on earth, Dipta?"

"Sir the earning man of the family is Arun Chatterjee. He had a jewellery business in Kolkata. About thirty years back, this large jewellery shop was robbed. The police couldn't nab the culprits. And then the family shocked everyone, they shut down their lucrative business, sold off their Kolkata house and retreated to Rimbik."

"This is so odd."

"It is, sir. Besides this, what I learnt of Rimbik is that this town and rain go hand in hand, at least that has been the case for the last two weeks."

"I see. Nonetheless, Dipta, tell me about the Old Dog now."

"Sir, the Old Dog was paying a visit to Darjeeling. Three days into the tour, he suddenly decided to come and stay a night here. That night, after dinner, he went out to take a stroll. That was when he was last seen.

"And to inform you, the police have already found out that the ACP had received some private letter after which he decided to visit Rimbik. The police tried to locate the sender but failed. The post office did not even have an idea of any such letter."

"That's sad.. But the bodyguards? What were they doing, for God's sake!"

Dipta's head hung low. "They have been suspended Sir, though they kept saying that the ACP himself told them not to accompany him."



A jolly, fun loving man. A fish lover. A to the core Bengali person. That was ACP Ajay Verma. He had personally met Sayak and congratulated Sayak after the 2013 case that had made the detective famous. And this man, an ACP, comes to an idyllic mountain town, tells his bodyguards not to accompany him, goes out for a night stroll, and lo! Goes missing. The local citizens couldn't help guffawing at this whenever the topic came up. Such a careless man, an ACP? That's funny.

Sayak paid a visit to the guest house the Old Dog was staying in. Nothing caught his eye. He returned to his hotel and had lunch all alone. The policemen had gone to Darjeeling to attend a meeting.

It began to rain after he had just woken up from his afternoon siesta. He gazed out of his window. It was a

mesmerising sight. The half-dark alleys, the low shed shops that drooped onto the road from both sides and finally the ethereal mountains, not so far away, all getting wet in the drizzle. He decided to go out.

Small puddles had formed all around the alleys. The scent of moist soil was all around. As he walked on, he saw a beautiful house at a distance. Against a jaw-dropping Kangchenjunga backdrop and a picturesque garden in front, it looked like a perfect abode. He had no problem in understanding whose house it was. He walked towards it.

The drizzle had intensified. The mist was also gathering all around, obscuring the lights of the Rimbik Bazaar behind him. A lone road led up to the house with occasional rhododendrons encroaching on the stony path.

He stood and watched the house. It was so beautiful. He was gazing at the garden in front, which was replete with a multitude of colourful flowers, making the house behind it look even more craving. Suddenly, there was a movement. It was a lady. She came out of the house, picked up something from the letterbox, and went back in quickly, saving herself from the rain.

Sayak turned back. He returned slowly, raindrops drenching his shoes. That was the first time he saw the Abode of the Chatterjees.

## 2

¶ Tell me more about the Chatterjee family please."

Sayak requested Dipta as they, along with Brijesh, sat down to have their dinner.

"Arun has a son and a daughter. Arav and Aarushi.

Mandakini is the wife and Nalini is the mother. They all live together.

"And to let you know, Arav is mentally retarded.

Mandakini is deaf and mute. And Nalini apparently spends all the day worshipping in a huge room saturated with idols. Enough?" Dipta couldn't help showing his disgust.

Here he was, with pressure mounting on him day by day.

And here Sayak was, asking of more details about a family whose house they have already searched, even though it

was quite illegal as they had no right to search someone's house who has not a single strand of connection to the case.

Sayak laughed. "Calm down Dipta." He wiped his lips with a tissue. "The answer lies here, in Rimbik. I have a strong hunch about this."

Dipta almost shouted. " The ACP went missing on 3rd December. Today is the 18th. I have no clues. I have no sources to hang on to. And here you are, Sir, asking me to believe in your hunch?"

Forever calm, Sayak just smiled. "Can you accompany me? I wish to visit the Chatterjees."

Arun greeted them as soon as they reached the garden. "Good morning, Sirs! Please come in." He smiled profusely.

About sixty years old, golden rimmed glasses, clean shaved face. A black blazer and brown muffler, Arun was the perfect aristocratic gentleman.

Dipta went straight to a couch and sat.

Sayak gently nudged Arun. "Please, can you lead a tour of this lovely house?"

"Sure I can, Sir. But please have something first. Tea, Sirs?"  
A perfectly traditional Bengali host, a lively smile played across his face.

"Okay. Sure!" Sayak replied, and Dipta grew even more irritated.

Arun left the room and Dipta pleaded. " We are irritating a very generous family here which has some serious acquaintances in the police. Please, Sir.."

"It won't take much time..be patient."

Arun returned a few minutes later. Behind him came a lady carrying a tray. Sayak recognised her.

"This is Aarushi, as the Inspector already knows," Arun remarked.

Dipta smiled awkwardly as Sayak took his cup of steaming tea off the tray in Aarushi's hand.

She was about thirty-five, thought Sayak as he sipped the hot beverage. He laughed inwardly at Dipta's awkwardness. Clearly, the lady was enchanting. She smiled and retreated as Arun sat with them.

There was silence all along as they sipped tea. Then Arun led them into the house.

"I named this house the Abode of the Chatterjees." Arun smiled.

The first room was that of Arun. Packed with books, the room was a paradise for book lovers. A small window faced the garden.

The room on the other extreme was that of Arav. The door was locked from outside. Clearly Arav wasn't among the quieter group of the mentally ill. Arun got in and stood beside Arav, who was sitting on the edge of his unmade bed. Sayak noticed that there was no lock from the inside.

Arav stared at him and he returned the stare with a soft smile.

"You are police?" He asked, his right index finger pointing at Sayak's chest.

"No, Arav.. Do I look that silly?"

The finger turned to Dipta. "And you?"

"I am." Dipta sounded quite uneasy.

"Then you stay away from Aarushi," Arav snapped, a sudden ferocity in his voice.

Arun cut in. " Please please. No offence please, sir. You know his words have no value.."

Arav got up. Sayak clearly saw Dipta taking a step back. Arun requested them to leave the room as he held Arav down.

Sayak could see that Dipta was quite embarrassed. He smiled as Arun locked the door again. They followed Arun upstairs into the first room.

Three shelves full of old music CDs adorned one of the walls. A woman in her sixties stood in front of the window, gazing at the yellow peaks of the Kangchenjunga. The deaf and mute wife, Mandakini.

Sayak gestured to Arun that he didn't want to disturb her. "Do you like the view from these windows?" Arun beamed.

Sayak went ahead. Mandakini was completely oblivious to them. As he went to the window, she got startled and turned awkwardly to them. A strong woman, as Dipta had noticed on his first visit. Even in this heavenly place, a misfitting melancholy hung around her. There was something so pessimistic about her.

She stood still and looked straight at Sayak. He gazed out of the window unblinkingly, as if lost in a reverie. Finally, when Dipta cleared his throat, he turned.

"It's amazing! Wow!" He exclaimed in disbelief.

Arun smiled proudly. Dipta noticed that even Mandakini was smiling. They moved on to a smaller room.

"My mother's bedroom," helped Arun.

There wasn't anything significant about that room.

"It's sad that Samir Mistry died last week." Sayak abruptly remarked when they came out of the room.

"Beg your pardon?"

"The great old North Eastern singer. He died last week."

"Ohh." Arun played an embarrassed and confused smile.

Finally, they met Nalini. She was clearly on the latter half of the eighties. Clad in a milky white saree, she was the epitome of the traditional Bengali widow who was devoted to Gods and Goddesses of all kinds. She gained respect automatically.

There she sat. In front of so many huge idols, her hands folded, her eyes closed. Incense smoke filled the room. No one uttered a word.

Sayak stared at the idols in front. All the Gods and Goddesses he knew of were there. He was awestruck.

The scent of incense was suddenly overpowered by the scent of some perfume. Aarushi, clad in a similar white but red bordered saree, entered the room. She smiled at Dipta to which he turned red. And then she sat beside her grandmother, a basket full of fresh flowers in front of her.

"Aarushi gives company to her grandmother for some hours everyday," the smiling Arun said when they descended down the stairs.

They bade farewell. As they stepped out of the garden, Sayak couldn't help but look back. From the windows, a white and red bordered saree quickly moved out of sight.

# 3

¶ Heroine of a tragic play." The words of Brijesh stuck with Sayak. Mandakini was aptly described in those five words.

What secret did the Abode of the Chatterjees hold?  
Was there something behind the most generous Arun?  
Why is a lady like Aarushi here?

He was sure there was more to it than what meets the eye. But was this a wild goose chase? Sayak's eyes obviously fell on such a Bengali family as he knew the ACP closely. If he had come to Rimbik following someone's letter, he must

have come to meet someone. And here was a strange Bengali family.

That afternoon, Sayak returned to the Abode of the Chatterjees. He knocked and waited for about ten minutes before Aarushi came and opened the door.

"I am sorry but my father takes a nap in the afternoon," there was some alarm in her voice.

"It's okay. I am here to just take my umbrella. I forgot it in your grandmother's bedroom."

"Ohh..okay..please wait inside. I will bring it to you."

"No need to bother. I will do that myself." That calm smile followed Sayak's reply.

Aarushi was shocked as he went straight upstairs. He was coming out of the old woman's bedroom when Aarushi came up the stairs.

"I don't find it here. That's strange!"

"Then you haven't left it here Sir." She smiled.

"Yes yes. Must be that." Sayak left as abruptly as he had come.

Sayak opened his umbrella and stepped out onto the road. "You sure that they make good food?"

"Yes Sir!" Brijesh was emphatic that the detective had himself asked to take him to some good place for dinner.

The kebab was really delicious. They got out of the restaurant forty minutes later.

The drizzle continued as they walked back. Both were quiet for sometime, holding their umbrellas, walking silently. The Sub Inspector knew that Dipta won't be happy when he would know that they had not taken him along.

"You have family in Kolkata?"

"Yes Sir. My only son studies in class eight."

"So his mother looks after his studies?"

"That's so true Sir!" A large smile spread across his face, "She is always so concerned about his studies."

Sayak smiled. "Brijesh, what is your view about Aarushi?"

"Sir, she is a very nice lady. The way she gives company to her grandmother, that is really appreciating," he replied, a pinch of alarm suddenly coming to his voice.

"Well Dipta, I am sure that Arav has reasons to say that policemen should stay away from his sister. But only you

and Brijesh have met and talked with her. And no one of you two did anything to arouse that fear in Arav..Moreover, I have checked out Brijesh.". He told him about the dinner and the chat.

"But Sir. Give me a reason why are you after this family!"

"If ACP Sir had come here to meet someone, it has to be someone from this family. It has to be."

They became silent. It seemed that Sayak was making up his mind.

He finally spoke. "Tell me Dipta. Can your sources at Kolkata retrieve everything about this family when they lived in Kolkata?"

"Yes they can, sir."

"Then I promise. If we don't find a clue from that, I will leave this family in peace."

"Done. Sir." Dipta's eyes glowed for the first time.

Two nights later, the files arrived from Kolkata. They divided the files among them. Sayak took Arun. Dipta took Aarushi. Brijesh took Mandakini and Arav. There were no files on Nalini.

It took fourteen minutes for Dipta to shout out. "Didn't the Old Dog study at Presidency?"

"He did," replied Brijesh with the same enthusiasm.

"Aarushi also studied there."

The next night, they sat again, more information added to the files.

"Aarushi was studying UG at the Presidency when this madman of ours, driven by interest, went to do a Ph.D. course of six years on political sciences." Dipta read out from the sheet.

"He was a brilliant student," Sayak remarked softly.

"But there is nothing to suggest that ACP Sir did anything wrong with Aarushi! This can be just a coincidence!"

"Exactly. But we have a lead. We need to follow that," Sayak commented.

"I. Am. Not. Convinced." Dipta said, slowly but clearly.

Inspector Dipta Roy and Sub Inspector Brijesh Kumar flew back to Kolkata a day later. They went together to report to DCP Anish Dutta. They were snubbed and scolded for twenty minutes at a stretch. All they could do was promise bluntly that they would bring results within a week.

630 kms away, Detective Sayak's spirits began to sink as he studied the files again and again. Suddenly he stood up, the file in his hand trembling. How had they missed this?

# 4

Arun's face darkened.

"Answer him Mr. Chatterjee! " Dipta shouted.  
"Please please Dipta," Sayak's cool voice interjected.  
"Please Mr. Chatterjee, I want to know what happened to him. The file clearly states that Arav left his course at the Presidency University midway following a medical emergency. His mental illness, is it really congenital?"

"It is. He is mentally ill since his birth," came the calm reply.

"Come on Mister. You don't want me to arrest you, do you? Admit it. Your son became ill after this emergency! " Dipta was losing his cool.

"Leave him alone!" Aarushi had made her entrance. That sealed it. Dipta couldn't be stopped anymore. Arun Chatterjee was in police custody within three hours.

It was raining again. Sayak stared down from the window as puddles formed across the half dark alleys. The dark clouds and mist made it impossible to see beyond 50 yards. Dipta and Brijesh were still in Darjeeling, grilling Arun.

He took his umbrella and again started walking. Again towards the Abode of the Chatterjees. Dense mist hung all across the place. He tiptoed across the garden and went to the back of the house. There was a railing that demarcated the property of the Chatterjees. He stood at the railing, trying to make out the Kangchenjunga even in the dense mist.

Eventually, he looked up. Mandakini's windows were closed. He stared at the house for a long time.

The rain grew stronger. Gusts of wind blew the rain against the windows, making strange sounds. Mandakini

went to close the windows of her mother-in-law's room and stopped. Even though the windows were tiny in comparison to her's, they still faced the same side. She tried to make out the Kangchenjunga in the mist and when failed to do so, looked down. She noticed the tall man in black overalls and a black umbrella, staring at the house, unmoving, unblinking.



This was the cost of Sayak Banerjee's investigation. It always brought out dark truths. The police department, on much pestering, finally pulled out the files that had been locked away for about three decades now. Yes. ACP Ajay Verma had misbehaved with a junior student. And when the girl's brother had intercepted, a fight had broken out. The brother had to be hospitalised after that. Both brother and sister left the college after that.

Dipta had his face in his hands. What have they pulled out? A criminal offence against the ACP that was locked away for decades! Though Arun did not admit yet, it is now quite clear that he was the main clue in the case.

Inspector Dipta Roy had to find the ACP. It was becoming too late.

Aarushi stood behind her grandmother. Eyes closed, hands folded.

*Knock knock.*

She turned, alarmed. Sayak was standing at the open door, a wet umbrella in his hand.

Before she opened her mouth, he spoke. "The servant opened the door. I want to talk to your grandmother, please." He put his umbrella down.

Mandakini arrived. Here was the man who was staring at the house some ten minutes ago. She tried to say something, but her deformed tongue formed only a groan.

"She is worshipping. I can't disturb her," Aarushi retorted.  
"In that case." Sayak went ahead.

Aarushi first tried to stop him and then stopped in her tracks. He went and called the old woman.

She opened her eyes and looked up. Sayak smiled at her.  
"Please. Can you just get up?"

She got up slowly. Aarushi held her as she stood. All three women stood still, staring in disbelief as the detective went towards the idols.

Aarushi and Nalini cried out as he started moving the idol in front of him.

"Stay where you are," the calm voice ordered.

One by one, all the idols were moved back. Sayak wiped his forehead and smiled in satisfaction. The small door in front of him just waited to be opened.



The decomposed body of the ACP was sent to Darjeeling for postmortem.

Dipta, still enthralled, couldn't help asking, "How did you find out the room?"

Sayak smiled. "I stared at the house for a long time. And I couldn't help noticing that there was some part of the house in the back that no room accounted for. And the rest.." "

"Bravo!" Brijesh cried out as Sayak gave a shy smile.

Dipta was overwhelmed by Sayak's intelligence. Most of the idols, as Sayak had pointed out to the police, though coated by bronze, was gold on the inside. Gold worth crores of rupees were moulded into idols. The fake robbery of the jewellery shop. It was just a reason that the Chatterjees needed to move out of Kolkata.

"Sayak da is just awesome," he had told Brijesh.

The postmortem report came in a day later. A right-handed person's numerous stabs had been found all over the body.

"Such rage. The assailant didn't stop stabbing even after the ACP died..," the doctor had told Brijesh.

Both Sayak and Dipta were perturbed. Brijesh, clueless at why these two people were becoming restless even though the murderer had been identified, just stared helplessly at both of them.

# 5

**T**hey went one last time to the Chatterjees'. Sayak and Brijesh sat, looking down at the floor as Dipta spoke.

"From the first time I met Arun till yesterday when I spoke to him, I never believed that such a man can murder someone. And..I still believe that." He looked at the locked room and then smiled. "Arun can't murder someone."

Then he left, slowly.

"He can't be tried, being a mentally unstable person," Aarushi said after Dipta had gone, smiling weakly.

"Yes. But your father can be," Brijesh retorted angrily and then he too left, the sound of his boots echoing loudly.

Sayak also stood up.

"So the police is trying my father even though they know that he is not guilty..what a way to save their face!" Aarushi's voice was awash with taunt.

Sayak just smiled. Then he too went out.

# EPILOGUE

The rain was heavy today. Aarushi looked at her watch.  
"It's about time".

"It is." Sayak picked up his umbrella and stood up.  
He smiled softly at Mandakini. "Please, Madam. I know it.  
I saw your ancient music collection. And I confirmed that  
your husband is not a music lover. And obviously, deaf  
people don't listen to music."

Mandakini smiled. "Goodbye", she said clearly.  
Aarushi followed him to the garden.

"And Aarushi. The police aren't saving their face. Your  
father saved his family's face. And, to some extent, I also  
saved your family's face. Even Arav alone can't lend so  
many stabs on someone. The stabs are worth more than  
two people." Sayak looked up at the skies and opened his  
umbrella.

Now was Aarushi's turn to just smile. She gripped his arm  
as he lost his footing for a moment.

"Thanks for that," Sayak said. And off he went.

Aarushi smiled again. Who was to say thanks?

Sayak didn't dare turn back today. Though he knew, by that little red letterbox, Aarushi would be there. Like the first day when she, on spotting him from the window, had come down and acted like she picked something from the box.

He still remembered that day, so many years ago, when he and Aarushi had ran into the hospital, shouting at the nurses, his heart pounding in his chest. "Please! Please! It's an emergency!"

The nurse had enquired of the patient's name. He had screamed. "Arav! Arav Chatterjee! He is my classmate! Please call a doctor!"

There was no mist today. Even though it rained, the Kangchenjunga could be clearly seen.





# About the Author

Dibyaraj Sinha. He likes to read a lot but writes occasionally even though he has a lot of plots ready. Guess he is just lazy. Besides writing, Dibyaraj loves to cook and travel. He wants to become a chef someday. He is also a doctor.