

**CONTENTS**

**Editor's Note**

**ESSAYS**

**A Humble Scholar: Sisir Kumar Das**

R K Dasgupta

**Rethinking Comparative Literature**

Amiya Dev

**Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective**

Sisir Kumar Das

**Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions**

Swapn Majumdar

**TRANSLATIONS (ACCENT ON ORIYA LITERATURE)**

**The Hunter** (Short Story)

Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi

*Translated by Kishori Charan Das*

**Curfew** (Short Story)

Sanjukta Rout

*Translated by Priyadarshi Patnaik*

**Grass** (Short Story)

Raj Kishor Pattnaik

*Translated by Dharani Dhar Sahu*

**The World Within** (Extracts from a Novel)

Baishnab Charan Das

*Translated by Snehaprava Das*

**The Journey of Life: Extracts from an Autobiography**

Ramadevi Choudhuri

*Translated by Supriya Kar*

**A Leaf in the Storm: Extracts from an Autobiography**

Sridhar Das

*Translated by Mary Mohanty*

**Eight Poems**

Kuntala Kumari Sabat

*Translated by Snehaprava Das*

## Editor's Note

It is not so much with pride as with humility that we present the first issue of Sāhitya, the webjournal of the Comparative Literature Association of India. For, the very attempt to bring together texts relevant to Comparative Literature in India makes one palpably conscious once again of at least two things. One, of the awe-inspiring contribution some scholars have made to the development of the discipline in its Indian incarnation over the last several decades. And two, of how far we still have to go before the full potential and relevance of Comparative Literature in the context of a multilingual and multicultural country like India is realized.

One cannot help noting the irony of the fact that multicultural India, which one would have imagined could offer a natural hospitality to the practice of Comparative Literature, has remained relatively aloof to the potential of the same in its institutionalized form. Yet the success of Comparative Literature in India needs to be understood not just in terms of the number of departments of Comparative Literature that have come up in this country but rather perhaps also in terms of how it has so radically transformed pedagogical practices here and highlighted the importance of location in our literary and cultural studies. We hope that is one of the questions that will be thrown up by the four essays in this issue.

Sāhitya is to carry literary essays, translations of Indian literature and book reviews. This inaugural issue of the journal carries the texts of the first two Sisir Kumar Das Memorial lectures. The annual lecture was instituted in memory of Professor Sisir Kumar Das, doyen of Comparative Literature in India. The first Sisir Kumar Das Lecture, carried here as "A Humble Scholar: Sisir Kumar Das" was given by Professor R K Dasgupta; it offers a hauntingly personal account of the author's assessment of Sisir Kumar Das, the man and the scholar. The Second Sisir Kumar Das Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor Amiya Dev at the University of Hyderabad in 2009. In this lecture, called "Rethinking Comparative Literature", Dev reflects on Sisir Kumar Das' ideas in the context of the development of the discipline and reiterates the importance of a sense of location for Comparative Literature as he echoes Buddhadeva Bose and says, 'It is on our own ground that we should stand but with unimpaired vision.'

This issue of our webjournal also carries 'reprints' of two important essays relating to Indian Comparative Literature from the 1980s. The first is by Sisir Kumar Das; it tries to piece together a history of the development of Comparative Literature in India. This

essay was first published in *Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches*, edited by Chandra Mohan, and published by India Publishers and Distributors, 1989. The second, by Swapan Majumdar, is the introductory essay from his *Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions*, published by Papyrus in 1987. It is a work that again highlights the attempt on the part of Indian comparatists to locate their discipline and thereby make it more relevant to their context. We intend to continue 'reprinting' more such key essays in Indian Comparative Literature in future issues of Sāhitya.

The translation section of this first issue of Sāhitya is dedicated to Oriya literature. It features English translations of Oriya poetry, fiction and autobiography. We would like to profusely thank Professor Jatindra Kumar Nayak (Utkal University, Bhubaneswar), well-known translator and comparatist and member of the Executive Council of CLAI, who was instrumental in selecting these texts and making their translations available to us. We hope this section will highlight again the inherent relationship between Indian Comparative Literature and translation and remind us of how limited our access to each others' literatures in India still remains. And, of how we need to engage ourselves in extensive translation activity so that we have a credible archive of Indian literature in translation that Indian Comparative Literature can draw from. That is something that can only buttress the comparatist's claims to a sense of location in the Indian context. The "Translations" section in this issue carries poems by Kuntala Kumari Sabat, short stories by Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi, Sanjukta Rout and Raj Kishore Pattnaik, excerpts from what has been labelled the first Oriya psychological novel, written by Baishnab Charan Das, and excerpts from autobiographies by Ramadevi Choudhury, one of the best known women freedom fighters and social reformers of modern Orissa and Sridhar Das, educationist, lexicographer and translator.

Let me end by inviting our members to send in essays, translations and book reviews for the next issue of Sāhitya, which we expect to put up in six months' time. Contributions will be evaluated by referees before publication; please send in all contributions by e-mail to [claikolkata@gmail.com](mailto:claikolkata@gmail.com). I thank Aparajita Dutta, student of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, who has helped us with her computer skills.

---

---

**A Humble Scholar: Sisir Kumar Das**

R K Dasgupta

This is the text of the First Sisir Kumar Das Memorial Lecture; it was dictated from sick-bed by the author and was recorded by Swapan Majumdar, Vice-president, Comparative Literature Association of India.

When I was the Tagore Professor of Bengali, Sisir Kumar Das (1936-2000) was a Reader in the subject. I thought it should have been otherwise; he should have been the Tagore Professor in Bengali and I should have been at the utmost a Reader. I was a member of the selection committee which recommended Dr. Das for the Readership in the subject. When he joined the Department and I had occasion to talk to him, I realized the profundity of his scholarship which his temperamental humility could not conceal. It was indeed a pleasure and privilege to work with him. I had to leave Delhi University after my appointment as the Director of the National Library, Calcutta. Dr. Das became the Tagore Professor of Bengali and Head of the Modern Indian Languages at Delhi University.

Dr. Das was an excellent colleague. I was amazed by his learning. I recall many occasions when he represented our Department at various conferences and everywhere his presence and rearing were applauded by everyone who heard him speak. His ability and very pleasant manners endeared him to all who came across him. I remember an occasion when he wanted to visit a distant place to explore a tribal language. For this he needed one thousand rupees for his travelling expenses. I met our Vice-Chancellor, Dr. C. D. Desmukh, for a grant and he at once asked the University to pay him the amount. His investigations into the tribal language were reported in due course and his

monograph on Malto Language — the first of its kind — was published. Although he joined the University as a Reader, I organised an inaugural lecture which was very well attended and was later brought out as a pamphlet.

I confess, after Dr. Das joined the Department, most of my teaching load was taken over by him. Actually, it was Dr. Das who gave our Department its lustre. Soon, Dr. Desmukh realized that he was an acquisition of the Department and the University as a whole. It was Dr. Das who drew up our curriculum and it included topics on which he alone could speak. Our teaching programmes had subjects with which none other than he could speak with authority. He could deal with exceptional competence with most topics ranging from linguistics to literary history, criticism and theory, texts covering the early, medieval or modern Bengali literature. One day I discovered that he was learning Greek and within a short span of time he mastered the language. For Bengali there were only three teachers while our syllabus included topics covering diverse areas of development of Bengali language and literature. In fact, it was Dr. Das who took most of our tutorial classes and dealt with the topics with equal elan. Our Department soon came to be known for the quality of his teaching. What struck me was his humility. He was the soul of our Department, but he would never claim the distinction. I remember that the selection committee which recommended him for appointment included scholars like Sunti Kumar Chatterjee, Prabodh Chandra Sen and Sasibhushan Dasgupta. When Professor Sen remarked that he did not fulfil the eligibility condition of possessing a five-year teaching experience, our Vice-Chancellor turned to me and asked for my opinion. I told him that there was nothing about the subject that the candidate did not know. Dr. Desmukh ruled that in the capacity of Vice-Chancellor he would condone the non-fulfilment of the experience clause. I still remember I was relieved by the assurance.

Before long several other departments of literature realized the competence Dr. Das had in dealing with almost all aspects of Literature cutting across language barriers. Actually after the appointment of Dr. Das the Department developed a reputation as a centre of linguistic and literary scholarship. A professor of Cornell University visited our Department and he was so impressed by Dr. Das's conversations with him that he asked me if I could spare him for a term to enable him to appoint Dr. Das as a Visiting Professor at Cornell. When I visited that University later, its Head of Linguistics department told me that the faculty and the students were amazed by Dr. Das's erudition. The University of Delhi also realized before long that Dr. Das was an ornament of the institution. In fact it was Dr. Das's scholarship that encouraged me to establish an M. Phil programme in Comparative Indian Literature at Delhi. Soon our Department of Modern Indian Languages achieved a lustre and it was entirely due to the scholarly abilities of Dr. Sisir Kumar Das. His name spread far and wide. Scholars from the country and abroad came to meet him. He gained an enviable reputation and many universities valued his learning. His name was shortlisted for central universities more than once. But these did not attract him at all and he spurned the offers.

Sahitya Akademi also respected him for his learning and published two large volumes of his integrated A History of Indian Literature and one more posthumously. This was a commissioned work. For Sahitya Akademi he collected and edited three large volumes of the The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. More volumes were planned but they could not be completed because of his sudden and untimely demise. It is a pity that he passed away at the age of 67. He would have produced many more valuable works on our literature — its history and culture. I take pride that I had the privilege of having him as a colleague.

Amongst his many works are his Western Sailors: Eastern Seas, The Shadow of the Cross and Sahibs and Munshis. Most of Dr. Das's works are truly milestones in the history of our literary scholarship. I think it is he who first discovered our social history as a background to our literatures. He realized that our cultural history is cardinaly important for mapping out our literary history. He understood the necessity of exploring the nature and role of cultural contact in creating a new literature as a break away from the past while at the same time maintaining a continuity.

Dr. Das was a master of the English language and his erudition in his own language had many facets which scholars had ignored till he dealt with them. He gave a new depth to Bengali literary scholarship. Is it not striking that he earned Ph. D. degrees from two different universities? He became an authority on Comparative Literature. It was at his initiative that the first Comparative Literature association was established in India. Actually Dr. Das has the distinction of being a pioneer in creating a truly Indian idea of Comparative Literature.

Sisir Kumar Das achieved a reputation as a scholar but he was no less striking as a personality. He was soft-spoken (never too rigid in any matter.) Those who knew him or had anything to do with him discovered the quality of his mind. As I knew him as a colleague for many years, I respected his personality. In fact, he attracted everybody's respect even though he never showed off. His plays have been staged with success. This extended the range of his social contact. He became a revered leader of all who participated in staging his plays. I had no idea of his ability as a playwright. Now I see that he is an important figure in this field as well. I personally knew him as a scholar, an able teacher and a lovable social being, but now I find that his eminence in the scholarly field did not hinder his true self. His personal life was deeply devoted to his family. At Delhi he was my neighbour as well. Once I visited his house to be told by his wife that he

had gone to the post office to make the monthly remittance to his father. I knew he was then suffering from fever. When I enquired of his wife why he should himself go to the post office when he had been running temperature, I was told that he always insisted on doing so, irrespective of what befell him. He was as a family man extremely happy with two sons, a daughter and a caring wife. Since then, I began to value him not only as an excellent teacher and a fine scholar, but also as a responsible son, brother, husband and father. And this combination gave his personality a remarkable character.

I have worked in several universities, but it was only at Delhi that I had an outstanding scholar and an equally outstanding human being as my colleague. One of the felicities of my professional career was that I knew Dr. Das. I can hardly appreciate his profundity and his magnanimity; I can only admire him.

---

---

### **Rethinking Comparative Literature**

Amiya Dev

*This is the text of the Second Sisir Kumar Das Memorial Lecture. It was delivered by the author at the University of Hyderabad on 29 January, 2009.*

Sisir Kumar Das was a scholar of the purest waters. Sisir Kumar Das was a poet and playwright of distinction, a writer *extraordinaire*. Sisir Kumar Das was a warm human being. I am honoured to be giving this lecture in memory of him. He was my friend and

the least I can say is that I dearly miss him. We were once nicknamed 'Devdas' because of a volume we edited together. I propose to be true to that association and offer as it were a postscript to that volume. I shall rethink comparative literature. By rethink I do not mean raise doubts about it as such, but about what we have been doing with it, whether we have already made deadwood out of it, and if so, what resuscitation we should look for. By rethink I actually mean to reconfirm my faith in it.

There has often been an imbalance between the two components of the term comparative literature: more comparison or more literature? The by now classic tools set up by the early practitioners in the Euro-American academe that eventually took shape in the once famous Baldensperger-Friederich Bibliography, tended to tilt to the former. That was scientism of a positivist persuasion. Even the determinist persuasion that came later from the East European quarters under the influence of Veselovsky's Historical Poetics by way of Zhirmunsky et al was not much of an exception: you still *compare*, though outside the precincts of *rappports de fait*. We recall Henry Remak's 'Crossroads' essay ('Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy and Prognosis,' *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 9: 1960) that spoke of the dissent voiced by the younger Euro-Americans, especially, the two Renés of the 'crisis' fame (Étiemble, *Comparaison n'est pas raison: La Crise de la littérature comparée*, 1963 and Wellek, 'The Crisis of Comparative Literature,' *ICLA Proceedings II*, 1959). True, the Americans had been a little more eclectic than their West European counterparts not taking Paul Van Tieghem's *littérature générale* literally and broadening the scope of *littérature comparée* with such areas as literature and the other arts. Topoi studies too were coming in and studies in parallels, not far from what the East Europeans would confirm as affinity studies. Still the interest in literary texts as such was not substantial. When Goethe had made that historic pronouncement on *Weltliteratur* as opposed to *Nationalliteratur*, he was asking his fellow Germans, maybe his fellow Europeans too, to *read* other literatures, and obviously that had a bearing on his enthusiasm for translation. Tagore's distinction between *grāmya* and *viśva*, rustic and universal, in his lecture on 'Viśvasāhitya' too had literary value in mind. Has comparative literature only paid lip service to Goethe and Tagore?

There is no denying that it has been more inclined to literary history than literary theory. There is also perhaps no denying that literary history is more immediately involved with contours than substance. And reading, no matter how conscious of contours, is in the long run substance minded. Indeed, to read is to taste. If we stop at the door of texts being engaged in contour studying, we are bereft of that tasting (I am using a slightly strong word for scholarship often leaves us there). Now tasting is an

aesthetic act, no matter what system we invoke to steer us through, or if any one system throughout and not inlaid with any other. I would shy away from cultural relativism here and accept 'pleasure' as much as *rasa*, though not untouched by experience or knowledge garnered out of the virtual that is the literary text. This stress on the *reading* is not tantamount to abjuring the comparing we are called to do. How foggy I once was to substitute Étiemble's 'n'est pas raison' with 'c'est vrai raison'!

Some readers are bilingual, some not; but those who are not bilingual can have access to the second language through translation. Of course reading originals and reading translations are not the same, but only the staunchest purist would deny any value to the latter and not recognize that we live in a world where translation not only builds bridges but also subverts the power of dominant languages. Anyway, my cue at this point is not justifying translation, but stress bilingual or rather bicultural reading that may initiate comparison. Comparison is not its own answer, but an answer to issues pertaining to two or more literatures tasted or read even partially. I am not denying contour hunting altogether, but not until we have read enough to see the need for it. A text is first a cluster of words or a cluster of clusters of words that have meaning, whether direct or oblique or both; only then does it come under a genre which is itself a rationalization of textual structures; and only then is it likely to bear a theme or a complex of themes, theme being a probable human experience expressible in words. Genre relates it to other texts; theme relates it to other texts; but genology and thematology are not ready spaces to accommodate each and every text from each and every culture. Their being spelt in the singular is a pedagogic compromise, and that too not quite innocent, for there *are* genologies and thematologies, and the more we *read*—or read and hear and see, for texts are also *śravya* and *dṛśya*—the more authentic our excursions into comparison. Besides genres and themes, texts also belong to times, time now and time then, giving occasion to literary historiography which too is an item of comparison, but once again an item not impervious to the *power* latent in disciplinary leadership. This would be talking shop, but when in 1990s Earl Miner put forward his proposal for the ICLA research committee on intercultural studies, he meant an immediate emphasis away from the Euro-centric, evident for instance in the decades old multi-volume project on the history of literatures in European languages. I suspect Miner being a Japanologist in addition to his English literature scholarship helped matters, for there has been a relative Asian concern in the volumes so far achieved, the earliest being a history of East Asian literatures. Talking further shop, I am reminded of Étiemble's response to the 1967 issue of *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* that focused on Baudelaire and contained a long essay in Bengali by Manabendra

Bandyopadhyay, lamenting his lack of access to it and saying that a comparatist should be better equipped.

Of course Sisir Kumar Das' integrated history of Indian literature has a different scope, though no less comparative. Besides it has a unique historiography where the 'history' is arrived at from the data and not the other way round, data from a preconceived 'history', as might have been the case with a part of ICLA's history of literatures in European languages. That 'history' is not an absolute given but is also a product of literary freedom is often clouded by convenient categories. Besides the latter do not seem to cognize the potential longevity of texts in continuing to be tasted beyond their time. In fact, if you want me to define world literature I may say it is the sum total of texts available to me at this moment, translations included. And it is not imperative that we all have the same world literature. As they say in any lucrative offer, terms and conditions apply, here too politics obtain. We shall all be fools of time to say that world literature is one and the same everywhere. If it were so, there would be no need of comparative literature.

In comparative literature primers, priority is often given to influence and reception; genology, thematology and historiography come after. Influence and reception may look one the obverse of the other, but not quite. Influence might have been bloated because of the power attached to it, the power of the credit. If the giver were not there, the credit could not have been taken—this would be the analogical argument. And the prime instance would be colonial. But since influence does not show in the giver, but in the taker, the onus is on reception. In fact one may even argue, that as a category influence does not exist, that only reception exists. What matters is who takes, takes what, and what is done with what is taken. After all there is a language shift, and even in the most obvious kind of 'influence', imitation, that shift has a creative function. You are surely noticing that I am veering pretty close to translation, which, if I remember right, Robert Lowell called 'imitation' (and didn't Sudhindranath Datta in Bengali call it 'pratidhvani', echo?). Now, are we going to call translation 'influence', or 'reception'? Does translation add to the source or to the target? Is translation read by the reader of the original language or of the language of translation? We remember that Sisir Kumar Das too was a translator and did quite a bit of translation from classical Greek into Bengali. His volume of Greek lyrics done in Bengali is called *Bahu Yuger Opār Hote, From Across Many Ages*. I hope we will not call it Greek 'influence' on Sisir Kumar Das' poetry. Or, for that matter his translations of Greek tragedy Greek 'influence' on his drama. Perhaps we will rather call his translations part of the Greek 'reception' in Bengali. My late friend Jaidev once wrote a piece in *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* on

influence as intertextuality. He had specific cases in mind, but if we go by Julia Kristeva who had coined the term, there is little argument for influence, for texts by definition may be intertexts. I am not sure if she had North-South proximities in mind, but there too some interconnections via reception are not improbable. Apropos 'influence' versus 'reception' I am often reminded, a bit tangentially though, of some words spoken by Bankim in his characteristic style that I quoted elsewhere some years ago in my inept rendering:

... So let English get in as far as it is necessary, but we must not turn absolute Englishmen. The Bengalis can never become English. The English are many times more gifted than the Bengalis, many times happier; it would not have been bad if these three crores of Bengalis could suddenly turn English. But there is no such possibility; however much English may we read, speak and write, English will be only a piece of dead lion-skin for us. At the time of roaring we shall be found out. Three crores of sahibs will not materialize except some five or seven thousand fake Englishmen. Pure silver is better than gilt brass. ... Until the educated and learned Bengalis set down their views in Bengali, they have no hope of advancement. (János Riesz, Peter Boerner and Bernhard Scholz, eds., *Sensus Communis: 'Festschrift for Henry Remak'*, Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen, 1986, p. 229)

How much of this reception has 'survived' in Bengali or in any other Indian language (we can invoke Sisir Kumar Das' categories here of *prophane* and *metaphane* with regard to the 'Western Impact: Indian Response' in *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. VIII, 1991) is worthy of our research, but more from texts than hearsay. But speaking of 'survival' we have also to fathom an earlier reception, of no less import if not greater, I mean the Persian and Arabic. I would reiterate what I have said earlier about *Mahābhārata* the *iti-ha-āsa* being also called a 'namah' after its Persian translation (*Razm Namah*) along with the more recent though more familiar 'epic'.

2

I know I am going in circles and the issue of literature versus comparison is still unresolved. Maybe I should take a different path. Do comparatists have a milieu beside fellow comparatists? Or, how strong is their commitment to their first language literature or rather, to the literature they live amidst? Do they read the everyday writing? In other words, how thick is the wall between their intra- and extra-mural readings? Foreign language scholars are often seen to be living two lives. Are comparatists like them without linking the comparison with the literature around? True, they can be grammarians burrowing into their own acres, but unless from time to time they also breathe the air above, smell and touch the blooms that happen there, their

grammar will end up in dry roots. Not that the roots cannot be classified and stacked away for grammarians to come, but to what eventual purpose if not recycled into sprouting? Take Bishnu Dey's poem "Janmāṭamī" dedicated to Sudhindranath Datta who was his friend cum mentor at the time (Virgil to his Dante by his own admission a little while ago): it has an epigraph from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, 'O Freunde, nicht diese Töne'. What would be your first task? You might like to find out why this epigraph. The Ninth being the Choral Symphony you would look up the last movement and discover that 'O Freunde, nicht diese Töne' is the first of the three-line recitative followed by the bulk of Schiller's Ode to Joy ("An die Freude"). Perhaps before that, or during, you would also discover that Bishnu Dey then had an Eliot-like habit of conscious intertextuality. In an earlier poem he had those famous lines of Sappho's fragment on Pleiades, in Bengali, thrown in, almost as effectively as Eliot's Wagner quote (though in the original) from *Tristan und Isolde* in "The Burial of the Dead". And you would trace his interest in Eliot whom he had begun reading quite early, to persuading his senior Sudhindranath into writing on him which the latter cast as a more general statement on modernism, the first draft of his celebrated "Kāvyer Mukti" (Emancipation of Poetry) that was read out to a small audience. You might even look up, albeit incidentally, the whole extent of his, I mean Bishnu Dey's, Eliot reception including the translations, and those lines of banter on Eliot's knighthood, "Lord Eliot of the Wasteland". In the meantime you have been listening to the Ninth Symphony, especially its choral movement, again and again. Fine. But have you read the *poem* carefully, again and again? It seems to have so many turns, have you paid heed to them, as such, and to the logic of them gliding from one to the other? Does it have a leitmotiv, and is that by any chance *Freude*, 'ānanda', with the Beethoven epigraph justified, or does that at times go manqué? And you must make sure that you have got all its allusions, else it will be lost on you. Finally, and not quite finally though, for there is more to the poem by way of verbal construction including sudden intertexts, you have to tell us why it is called "Janmāṭamī". You have also to place it in Bishnu Dey's career justifying its being addressed to Sudhindranath who had written the foreword to his preceding book of poems. Besides, we would like to know in what ways it is a typical 'modern' Bengali poem.

Hope I have made my point. One has to *read* the poem first, better, *taste* it and try to get under its skin, and then gauge its Beethoven, Eliot or any other reception. It will surely be a piece of evidence if one writes a substantive essay on Eliot and Bishnu Dey (even though it is on record that when a younger Bengali poet told Eliot that Bishnu Dey had translated him, the elderly Eliot merely mused on the relative dearth of Brahma temples in India). The generic naming of the poem—a long short poem?—will come

along by reading it analytically beside similar as well as dissimilar poems in Bengali and/or in languages with which Bishnu Dey and his generation had been directly or indirectly familiar (but let us not overly insist on a given). That classic statement of Edgar Allan Poe's, 'A long poem is a flat contradiction in terms', may also come under the scanner. The poem's thematic matrix will involve us with a whole set of contemporary experiences including the American cinema hitting the Bengal theatres, the urban middle class of the Bengali variety often claiming social commitment though marked by not too rare self-love and escapism, the hollow socialites, and not far from them speculators counting dividends out of the economic depression, and a hint at the same time of a possible waking up of the working class. All this is inlaid with mythology, mixing tradition with modernity. As to the literary history this poem is part of, we shall have to take a close look at not only what precedes and what follows, but also at what goes along, keeping in mind that time cannot be cut up into neat period slices. Comparative literary historiographers of the more confident kind often hear imaginary bells announcing a ready succession of sensibilities over a whole region: obviously we shall have to approach afresh and from below, not above.

3

This has been quite belaboured. But it may serve us as a cue to Earl Miner's intercultural studies. I was fortunate enough to help him put together *The Renewal of Song: Renovation in Lyric Conception and Practice* (Seagull, 2000), to which Sisir Kumar Das and Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta too contributed. Along with Steven Shankman of Oregon University I am involved with another book originally thought up by him on higher narrative, awaiting publication under the title *Epic and Other Higher Narratives: Essays in Intercultural Studies* (Pearson Education). These two are genre oriented, an application as it were of Earl Miner's *Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* called *Comparative Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1990). His own *Naming Properties: Nominal Reference in Travel Writings by Bashō and Sora, Johnson and Boswell* (University of Michigan Press, 1996) too is genre based, though focusing a theme therein contained. He has inspired other books, one of which is Steven P. Sondrup and J. Scott Miller edited *The I of the Beholder: A Prolegomenon to the Intercultural Study of Self* (ICLA Intercultural Studies Committee, 2002). Well, one may say much comparative literature deals with more than one culture, what is so special then about Earl Miner's project? Judging by the two volumes I have been directly involved with, and the third to which I have contributed, my perception is that in the 'intercultural' there is as much value attached to the cultures themselves as to the logic of comparison to which too many cultural specificities may be a hindrance (a little abstraction is often taken for granted). A degree of relativism is in order here, but only a degree, for excessive

relativism is not only a denial of comparison but potentially jingoistic. For in a world of diverse cultures we need comparison. After suggesting ways of containing relativism rather than dismissing it, Earl Miner says, 'The great gain from intercultural comparative study is that it avoids taking the local for the universal, the momentary for the constant and, above all, the familiar for the inevitable.' (*Comparative Poetics*, p. 238) This applies to all cultures, small as well as big, and should come in the way of any onslaughts of cultural power. In other words, the intercultural should teach us humility. It may look like a cloister dream in the global economy today. Three years ago at a conference at Kottayam on globalization Jean Bessière spoke of a newly thought up European Union endorsed 'cultural exception' to the economic globalization. With the recent Tsunami-like behaviour of world economy that exception may look a little feeble, unless of course we interculturalists put fresh life into it.

Sisir Kumar Das sometimes wondered if it would not be better to rename comparative literature just 'literature' and take texts from familiar and unfamiliar languages including translations. It would save us the mechanical pursuit of 'comparison' fitting texts thereunto. He was not far from René Wellek's priority for literature as against the excessive concern for the 'kitchen' of its production. In the Summer 2008 issue of *Recherche Littéraire/Literary Research* I read an advance review of David Damrosch's then forthcoming *How To Read World Literature*, judging by which I dare say that David Damrosch would appreciate Sisir Kumar Das' musings. Those of us who have read Sisir Kumar Das' *Alaukik Samvāp* (Unworldly Dialogues) between characters from two classical literatures are not only witness to his imaginative vibrancy but also to the creative use he made of comparability. The dialogue of Sītā and Helen, for instance, can help understand much Vālmīki and Homer as well as the ethoi of the two cultures. Incidentally, David Damrosch has put *Oidipous* and *Śākuntala* together 'with reference to the generic expectations of drama' (I am quoting the review I read); he 'emphasizes that in some respects—the common stress on fate—Sophocles is "closer to Kalidasa than to many later dramatists in the West," and that even in their differences "there is again less contrast between Kalidasa and Sophocles than with later Western playwrights.'" (*RL/LR*, p. 111) This reminds me of an article Robert Antoine, S.J. had written years ago in *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, 18-19 on 'The Curse in *Oedipus Rex* and *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*' being the irreversible condition in the one and conditional punishment in the other. David Damrosch may have read it, for by placing the two plays together he shows an insight that Father Antoine would have appreciated. He may have also read Father Antoine's earlier and more general article in *JJCL*, 8 on 'Greek Tragedy and Sanskrit Drama' that was later included in Naresh Guha edited *Contribution to Comparative Literature: Germany and India* brought out by the Jadavpur

department in arrangement with Horst Erdmann Verlag, Tübingen and Basle in 1973. I haven't read Damrosch's book, but I am sure he is aware of the more familiar pairing of Kālidāsa and Shakespeare, occasion for those two classics of Bengali criticism, immemorial essays, Bankim's 'Śakuntalā, Miranda and Desdemona' and Tagore's Śakuntalā. Anyway, I find his reviewer's (Paulo Horta) hope well placed, 'Attention to textual affinities across civilizations is key ... possibly ... to the future of comparative literature as a scholarly discipline.' (pp. 111-112) If indeed that is so, and if affinities are not taken absolutely literally and if civilizations also include cultures, then I must not be apologetic that for years I taught Racine and Shakespeare as a contrastive pair of tragedians my specific illustrations being *Bérénice* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Buddhadeva Bose who had founded the department at Jadavpur and the discipline in the country, was not particularly concerned with the niceties of its methodology. He had a broad idea. He knew that the brown man's burden could in part be lifted by widening the horizon and at the same time celebrating the roots, traditional as well as modern. It is on our own ground that we should stand but with unimpaired vision. His birth centenary as a major Bengali writer after Rabindranath has just been celebrated: let us pay our homage to his memory. His late prose bore the mark of a comparatist, especially his last finished work *Mahābhārater Kathā* (translated as *The Book of Yudhisthir*) where not only Homer but a whole range of world literature is invoked. Let us also remember his successor Naresh Guha whose death we condoled yesterday\*—he gave the discipline its due expansion and put us on the world map.

I hope I am not being nostalgic of that past when texts mattered more than method. But perhaps comparative literature too needs to cast off its excess baggage from time to time. New texts are born every instant. It is our task to read them or read their translations. It is our task to relish their form and content. It is our task to relate them to the texts we have already gathered. These old texts too are thus reborn every instant. We are readers, but not idle readers whose mind cannot hold anything. We are informed readers, *rasika* of the active kind that put their readings together into possible patterns. It is out of these patterns that a system may emerge. And since the patterning is involved with more than one literature, the system may be called comparative literature. Thus comparative literature is the rationalization of a whole lot of activity the fulcrum of which is in texts.

My predecessor for this lecture was Professor Rabindra Kumar Dasgupta beside whom I am a mere apprentice. And in spite of my grey hair my *Lehrjahre* are still not over. Sisir Kumar Das' *Wanderjahre* had long begun when he was snatched away from us. And the

course he had taken had flowered into many blossoms. They are his gifts to us. Only by cherishing them and letting them sustain us can we pay homage to his memory.

\*Editor's Note: This lecture was presented at the Tenth Biennial International Conference of CLAI at the Central University of Hyderabad on 29 January, 2009. The participants had on the previous day condoled Professor Naresh Guha's demise.

---

---

### **Comparative Literature in India: A Historical Perspective**

Sisir Kumar Das

Long before comparative studies of literature emerged as a formal academic discipline, many scholars felt the inadequacy of the framework within which individual literatures were studied. Many of them realized that literatures did not evolve in isolation from one another and the study of a single literature more often than not obliged one to look beyond one's own language and literary tradition. The necessity for a wider perspective involving more than one language and one literary tradition was felt in different periods of history whenever two literatures came into contact. There had been many occasions in every civilized society when different cultures and different literary traditions came into close contact with one another, and all such occasions did pose a challenge to man's exclusiveness. One can think of the Romans coming in contact with Greek literature, the Medieval Christian Europe with the Pagan Europe, Persian with Arabic, Japanese with Chinese and Indians with the literatures of Europe. All these contacts have resulted in certain changes, at times marginal, and at times quite profound and pervasive, in the literary activities of the people involved, and have necessitated an enlargement of critical perspective. One realizes that diversities of literature do not necessarily prevent one from discovering deeper affinities between them. The necessity for the study of literatures in relation to one another, which is the basis of comparative

literature today, was felt very strongly only in the nineteenth century but some of its regulating concepts appeared even earlier though in their embryonic form.

We do not find anything comparable to the method of Sun crisis (*or comparative method*) so popular among the Romans, in Indian literary criticism, though Sanskrit and ancient Tamil, languages belonging to two different families, came into contact. Neither the ancient scholars of Sanskrit literature nor the scholars of ancient Tamil studied their literature in relation to one another. Nor did they raise the question of influence or impact of one literature on the other. The scholars of Sanskrit, however, studied Sanskrit along with Prakrit literatures. In classical Sanskrit plays several Prakrits have been used in the dialogues of different characters. The kings and the priests speak Sanskrit, the women the Sauraseni Prakrit, the people of the working class the Magadhi and the songs are invariably in Maharashtri. This reflects, no doubt, the multi-lingualism of the society and the functional hierarchy of these languages, but also of an idea of literature that could be written in more than one language. Some scholars have argued that the various Prakrits used in Sanskrit dramatic texts were actually mutually comprehensible class dialects, functionally similar to the role of dialects in modern plays and novels which add distinct socio-linguistic dimensions to the characters. The mutual comprehensibility between the Prakrits to a varying degree and Sanskrit notwithstanding, the separate status of the Prakrit languages, different in their sound system and grammar, and they belong to a different stage of linguistic history of the Sanskritic languages. That the ancient Indian writers could use more than one language within one text without qualms, and the ancient critics found that practice normal enough, is itself an evidence of a view of literature that extends beyond one language. The Buddhists and the Jains produced a literature in more than one language. But instead of dividing them in terms of the language employed in them, they viewed them as parts of one single literary corpus unified by one religious vision.

One must admit, however, that the early Indian scholars thought that the linguistic differences between Sanskrit and Prakrit only reflected two stages of evolution of the same language, they were otherwise linked by a common cultural heritage and their literatures were dominated by the same set of literary canons. In all probability, the Prakrit literature that flourished in Southern India maintained a close relation with the folk traditions as well as with the ancient Tamil literature. George L. Hart in his *The Relations between Tamil and Classical Sanskrit (1976)* has tried to argue that the *Gatha Sattasai*, an anthology of poems in the Maharashtri Prakrit, (compiled some time between 200 A.D. and 800 A.D.) has some connection with Tamil literature. Whatever

be the worth of such assumptions, the Indian scholars of the ancient period never tried to discover any relation between the Sanskrit and the Tamilian literary traditions.

In our medieval period, various literatures written in different languages came into close contact particularly those spoken in neighbouring areas. Most of these literatures shared a common Sanskrit heritage and were exposed to arabic and Persian influences in varying degrees. The medieval Indian scholar naturally studied his own literature with reference to Sanskrit but rarely thought about the inter-relationship between the Indian literatures produced in younger languages like Telegu or Malayalam, Marathi or Gujrati, Punjabi or Sindhi. Some of the popular sayings current in different parts of the country reflect the common reader's understanding of the relationship between texts written in different languages, or between poets separated by time and distance. For example, a saying in Andhra Pradesh—Vivamangal was reborn as Jayadeva, Jayadeva as Narayanatirtha, and Narayanatirtha as Ksettreya—speaks volumes about the common reader's attempt to discover connections between four poets of different regions and of different time. We are not certain about the date of Vilvamangal—tradition places him in the ninth century, though many scholars think him to be living in the twelfth. We are not absolutely sure whether he came after Jayadeva, a twelfth century poet, or not. But the similarities between *Srikrishna Karnamritam* of Vilvamangal and the *Gitagovindam* of Jayadev—both written in Sanskrit are indeed striking. Narayanatirtha and Ksettreya, both seventeenth century poets, wrote in Sanskrit as well as in Telugu. And both of them had remarkable similarities with Vilvamangal and Jayadeva in respect of the spirit of their poems and treatment of themes. Links between texts can be established by positive evidences, as similarities can be often mere coincidences. The comparatist tries to build a framework within which similarities can be studied and appreciated. The medieval Indian reader almost intuitively felt the existence of links between texts written in different languages and having a common theme or ideological backdrop, though he failed to construct any critical apparatus to establish them. The interactions between neighbouring literatures, however, continued throughout the medieval period resulting in the growth of new genres and themes and occasionally styles. One of the intersecting evidences of such interactions between two languages, to be found in the growth of a style known as *Manipravalam*. It was an attempt, a successful one, towards the creation of a hybrid style composed of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Such hybrid poetic language is found in Tamil and Telugu as well, but in Malayalam alone *Manipravalam* developed into a rich body of literature and critics had to take notice of this phenomenon created by the interaction between two languages belonging to two different linguistic families. The fourteenth century text, *Lilatilakam*, written in Sanskrit, deals with grammar and rhetorical devices of the *Manipravalam*. It is the first work in

Indian criticism which analyses a literary phenomenon which cannot be adequately understood without involving two languages and two literatures. Another artificial language, *Brajabuli*, extensively used in sixteenth century Bengali poetry, and to some extent in Assamese and Oriya, was a hybridization of Maithili, the language in which Vidyapati wrote, and Bengali/ Assamese/ Oriya. Such stylistic experiments went beyond the linguistic boundaries of any particular literature and called for a more flexible, critical framework.

With the introduction of Persian in Indian letters, its influence on various Indian literatures became more and more apparent. The influence of Persian began infiltrating into Sindhi and Panjabi and Bengali—through translations and adaptations of Persian texts – in respect of themes and forms and styles. A new language , Urdu, emerged out of the interaction between Persian and Khariboli, a form of Hindi , which grew into a supple and sophisticated instrument of literary expression by the end of the seventeenth century. Many great Urdu poets not only borrowed themes and motifs from Persian and grafted them into this new Indian language but imported a considerable number of poetic forms and metrical structures, some of them were also welcomed into other Indian literatures. An appreciation of Urdu literature and an understanding of its growth will remain incomplete without a reference to its intimate and fruitful relation with the great Perso-Arabic literary awareness. Had Indian literatures formed a regular part of the academic curriculum of the medieval period, this awareness would have certainly taken the shape of a critical framework insisting on the study of literatures cutting the barriers of languages and geography. In the nineteenth century when the literatures of modern India were finally thought to be proper subjects of study in our academic institutions, they were compartmentalized according to their linguistic affiliations and a false impression about their autonomy had percolated too deep in the minds of many individuals.

But the nineteenth century was also the period when a sense of inadequacy had begun to be felt about the insularity of literary studies not only in Europe, but also in India. The discovery of Sanskrit by the European scholar gave a tremendous impetus to the growth of comparative linguistic, and later comparative religion and mythology. Even eight years before Sir William Jones talked about the Sanskrit language bearing to both Greek and Latin a stranger affinity, in his famous inaugural speech at the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, his friend N.B. Halhed was astonished to find the similitude of Sanskrit with Persian and Arabic, and Greek and Latin. In his *A Code of Gentoo Law (1786)* Halhed talks of remarkable affinities between India and Europe at various levels. The initial excitement at the discovery of similarities between different languages and

body of myths, and religious thoughts made the orientalists think of certain universals, and they continued to look for archetypes in cultures with great enthusiasm and created a climate congenial for the growth of comparative literature as well.

Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of India, in his introduction of Charles Wilkin's translation of *Gita* (1785) into English pleaded for a comparative study of the Gita and European works of great merit. 'I should not fear' he wrote, 'to place, in opposition to the best French version of the most admired passages of *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, or the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the *Mahabharata*.' (1) Hardly any Indian of that time was aware of this statement but it certainly created an impact on those for whom it was written. In the College of Fort William, which was established in 1800 for the general education of the young civil servants, many British scholars were exposed to Oriental literatures, and some of them raised interesting questions relating to the problems of inter-literary relationship of divergent literary cultures. T. Macan, a student at the college, who proposed to translate the Persian poem, *Shahnamah*, observed that 'the laws of composition by which the poets of Europe have been generally guided since the works of Homer became generally known, have never been established or recognised in the Eastern world and consequently the rules of criticism founded upon these laws are wholly unapplicable to the writings of Firdoose. Of his merits indeed a fair estimate can be formed only by his countrymen or the inhabitants of those other Eastern narratives to whom the language, customs, and laws of the ancient Persians are comparatively familiar, and such it may be safely affirmed that he is admired, esteemed and venerated in a degree not unsurpassed by the most ardent lovers of Homer and Virgil.(2) The familiarity with Eastern literatures created certain critical problems for the Western readers particularly those believing in the infallibility of Western critical canons. They either dismissed oriental literatures as necessarily inferior or pleaded for a different set of canons for their evaluation. But there were some who felt the necessity for a new poetics that would accommodate works of art of diverse nature, rooted to different cultures. Lord Minto, commenting upon the English reading of the *Meghadutam* by the famous nineteenth century British Sanskritist H.H.Wilson wrote 'the work of Kaleedas unfolded now for the first time to such distant generations as our own displays this uniformity in the characters and genius of our race which seems to write at once the most remote of regions of time and space, and which always gratifies the human mind to discern through the superficial varieties in which some slight difference of external or even intellectual fashions may even disguise it. In Kaleedas we find poetical design, a poetical description of Nature in all her forms, moral and material, poetical imagery, poetical inventions, just and natural feeling, with all the finer and keener sensibilities of

the human heart. In these great and immutable features we recognize in Kaleedaa, the fellow and kinsman of the great masters of ancient and modern Poetry.’(3)

This is one of the most significant pronouncements on the universality of letters defending the study of literature as a manifestation of the unifying spirit of human creativity. This statement was made in 1806 long before Goethe thought of the possibility of a world literature. And one must remember that Saint-Beuve made a similar statement about fifty four years later when the term 'Comparative Literature' has been already coined by Mathew Arnold in English and French term *Literature Comparé* first used by Villemain in 1829 was fairly well- established. Saint-Beuve wrote, 'Homer, as always and everywhere should be first, like a god, but behind him like a procession of three wise kings of the East, would be seen the three great poets, the three Homers, so long ignored by us, who wrote epics for the use of the old people of Asia, the poets Valmiki, Vyasa of the Hindus, and Firdousi of the Persians, in the domain of taste; it is well to know that such men exist and not to divide the human race.' (4) An assumption of basic unity of the human race was certainly one of the main factors in the growth of comparative studies of religion and mythology and at time scholars in their anxiousness to vindicate the universality of spirit overlooked the importance of diversities and 'differntness' of cultures without any prejudice. The visitor at the college of Fort William in a lecture in 1806, for example, observed that the Bengali version of the *Aeneid*, translated by a student of that college, would 'set before the native scholars of these provinces present or to come, that model of epic genius and Augustan taste' and in future the Indian writers would choose between the Western model and the Oriental one. Indeed, knowledge of literatures, other than one's own, does present different models of literary works, and a new world of experience. The novelty of that world is as important as the realization of the unity of the human race.

With the spread of English education and with the growth of an English educated community in India also grew a new critical awareness which prompted the Indian scholars to evaluate the emerging literatures, and in some cases the ancient texts written in Sanskrit or Tamil, with reference to English literature in particular and European literature in general. The initiative came from European scholars, many of whom could not pronounce any critical judgment on Indian literature. Albrecht Weber, for example, talked of a possible influence of *Iliad* on the *Ramayana* as well of Greek influence on Sanskrit plays.(5) Similarly, G.U. Pope in the introduction to his English translation of the Tamil Classic *Kural* (1896), pointed out the resemblance between the Tamil couplets and the gnomic poetry of Greece, not only in respect of their epigrammatic wit and brevity, but also in their themes and sentiments. He is found in the style of *Kural*

‘something of the same kind’ that is found in Greek epigrams, in martial and the Latin elegaic verses. There is a beauty in the periodic character of the Tamil construction in many of these verses that reminds the reader of the happiest efforts of Propertius.”(6) In the preface to his celebrated edition of *Tiruvacakam* (1908) he pleaded the Tamil scholars to study the anthologies of religious verses available in English only to share his conviction that ‘no literature can stand alone.’

The belief that every literature is not only distinctive but should be studied in isolation persists with many. One of the problems that kept the Roman critics busy, soon after Latin came in contact with Greek, was that of *contamination*. The word is derived from the verb *contaminare* meaning to bring one thing in relation to another. This term was used to describe the practice of putting together scenes from original Greek, or sometime, of borrowing heavily from another play. This is linked up with various problems of imitation, adaptation and influence. Terence defended his right to contaminate literature and appealed to the examples set by Navius and Plautus. The conflict of ideals between Terence and his opponents was actually about the measure of freedom with which Greek originals should be handled.

But it has another dimension too: how ‘pure’ a literature can remain and how to keep literature free from the impact of other literatures. These questions were raised in India in mid- nineteenth century by the makers of modern Indian literature which drew heavily upon European literature. In 1858 Michael Madhusudan Dutta wrote to his friends, ‘Do you dislike Moor's poetry because it is full of orientalism? Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air, Carlyle's prose for its germanism?’ And in 1874 Bankim Chandra Chatterjee defended ‘imitation’ in literature citing instances from social and literary history. His spirited defence of imitation was not merely a justification of actions of the contemporary Bengali writers, but also the creative spirit that refused anything as alien in the process of expression. In the same way Michael Madhusudan Dutta's question actually pleaded for a new critical model and a new methodology as opposed to the model sustained by the idea of exclusiveness of national literatures.

While the Indian writers in the nineteenth century tore off the illusion of the exclusiveness of national literature, some of the critics tried to lay the foundation of comparative studies of literature. In his essay, “Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona” (1873), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee tried to evolve a new critical framework within literatures as distantly related as Sanskrit and English could be studied. The most significant outcome of this critical temper was the abolition of all nationalistic considerations in literary evaluation. The ‘father of Hindu nationalism’ had no hesitation

in placing Shakespeare above Kalidasa, and comparing Vedic hymns with the nature poems of Byron and Shelley. In another essay entitled 'Uttiracharita' he compares the play of Bhavabhuti with some of the works of Shakespeare and his comparison does not appear to be odious if only because of his insistence not on some accidental and superficial similarities, but on the generality of literary process and literary techniques involving borrowing and transcreation. Similarly, in another essay, he compares *Kumarsambhava* with *Paradise Lost* to consider the general treatment of the supernatural. Modern critics may have different opinions about the value of these essays, but what remains undisputed is the fact that Bankim Chandra wanted to give a new direction to our literary studies. He presented a new universe of literary discourse unfragmented by languages and nationalities. One can talk about a literary genre or a form of text in terms of distinctiveness with reference to other genres or forms or text, and finally can construct a poetics which will account for all diversities.

The first person to plead eloquently for a comparative study of literature and that too as an academic discipline in India was Rabindranath Tagore. The newly established National Council of Education or *Jatiya Siksa Parisad* (1906), formed by some of the leading men of that time to create a parallel system of education outside the University of Calcutta, invited Rabindranath in 1907 to speak on Comparative Literature. The title of Rabindranath's lecture in Bengali was *Visva-Sahitya* meaning world literature.(7) It is interesting that Tagore used the English expression 'comparative literature' to explain what he meant by 'world literature', a term immediately reminds one of *Weltliteratur* used by Goethe in 1827. This being the first pronouncement on comparative literature by an Indian writer an abridged summary of the essay made by Buddhadeva Bose is reproduced here: (8)

I have been called upon to discuss a subject to which you have given the English name Comparative Literature. Let me call it World Literature in Bengali.

If we want to understand man as revealed in action, his motivation and his aims, then we must pursue his intentions through the whole of history. To take isolated instances, such as the reign of Akbar or queen Elizabeth, to merely satisfy curiosity. He who knows the Akbar and Elizabeth are only pretexts or occasions; the man, throughout the world of history is incessantly at work to fulfill his deepest purposes, and to unite himself with the All – it is he, I, say, who will strive to see in history not the local and the individual, but the eternal and universal man. His pilgrimage will not end in observing other pilgrims, or he will behold the god whom all pilgrims are seeking.

Likewise, what really claims our attention in world literature is the way in which the soul of man expresses its joy through the written word and the forms which he chooses to give to his eternal being. Whether he portrays himself as a sick man or a voluptuary or an ascetic – the impulse is always the same, and that is his joy in uniting himself with the world. It is in order to realize the truth of relationship what we must enter the world of letters. It is absurd to think of literature as artificial; it is a world whose science no individual can ever master; as in the world of matter, its process of creation is perpetual, and yet in the heart of this ever-unfinished creation there is an ideal of stillness and completion...

What I am trying to say amounts to this. Just as this earth is not the sum of patches of land belonging to different people, and to know the earth as sheer rusticity, so literature is not mere total works composed by different hands. Most of us, however, think of literature in what I have called the manner of the rustic. From this narrow provincialism we must free ourselves; we must strive to see the work of each other as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature. Now is the time to do so.

When Tagore wrote this, comparative literature as an academic discipline was still in its infancy in Europe and America and its introduction in universities was vehemently opposed by many scholars of eminence. Even in the 20s of this century Lane Cooper described 'Comparative Literature' as a 'bogus term' that makes 'neither sense nor syntax'. Moreover none of the British universities, which acted as models for Indian academic centres in the colonial days, thought highly of Comparative Literature as a worthy subject to be included in their literary faculties. Therefore, although many scholars of Indian literature responded to Tagore's call to free ourselves from the 'narrow provincialism' of literary scholarship and some of them indeed made significant contribution towards the enlargement of our literary perspective, the first department of Comparative Literature came into existence in this country fifty years later in 1956 at Jadavpur University. It is indeed a pleasant coincidence that National Council of Education where Tagore delivered his lecture on comparative Literature, is the ancestor of Jadavpur University.

Tagore's equation of comparative literature with world literature is not accepted by many. But even if one intends to maintain a distinction between the two, these are, as

Buddhadeva Bose points out, 'large areas where two overlap, in intention if not scope.' The main point is that comparative literature, whatever be its scope, is expected to study several literatures together. The syllabus of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University concentrated on, to use the words of Buddhadeva Bose, the first professor of the department of that university, 'the most intense moments in Western Literature, from antiquity to the present times' along with 'the living literature and the classical tradition of the native soil.' This department has certainly presented a new model of teaching of literature and of literary scholarship in India but various socio- economic factions, in addition to general resistance from single literature disciplines have averted the spread of this discipline to any other university till today. However, a growing sense of inadequacies about the existing single-literature discipline prompted many Indian scholars to identify a new area of literary scholarship.

The search for a new area, however, began from the second decade of this century, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, at whose initiative the first department of modern Indian languages in this country was established in 1919, thought that courses exclusively devoted to any one Indian literature would be unwise and academically unsound. That very year in his presidential address to the Howrah Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan he wanted the Bengali scholars to look beyond Bengali and study other Indian literatures. 'We shall have to think of ways', he said, 'by means of which Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Gujarat, Rajputana, and Punjab can all be weaved into one garland, and can all be assembled on the same shore of the ocean of literature.' As his idea of Jatiya Sahitya (national literature) went beyond individual languages and literature, so did his plan of Indian language study in Indian universities. His idea of Jatiya Sahitya did not emerge merely from a political consciousness and nationalistic demand. It was only later that linguistic chauvinism and academic complacency narrowed the scope of the study of Indian literature and separate departments of Indian literatures without any relation to one another became the accepted features of the Indian universities. Almost about the same time when Sir Ashutosh was building up the department of Modern Indian Languages in the University of Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of articles entitled 'Indian Literature'.<sup>(9)</sup> This is perhaps the first attempt by an Indian scholar to view Indian literature as an expression of the Indian mind and the multiplicity of languages did not deter him from viewing Indian literature as one complete whole. Perhaps criticising the orientalist obsession for Sanskrit which prevented him to take a complete view of Indian literature, Sri Aurobindo continued, 'Nor is it in the Sanskrit tongue alone that the Indian mind has done high and beautiful and perfect things; though it couched in that language the large part of its most prominent and formative and grandest creations. It would be necessary for a complete estimate to take into

account as well as Buddhist literature in Pali and the poetic literature, here opulent, there more scanty in production, of about a dozen Sanskrit and Dravidian tongues. The whole has almost a continental effect and does not fall so far short in the quantity of its really lasting things and equals in its things of best excellence the work of ancient and medieval and modern Europe.'

The idea of an Indian literature was mooted by Sarojini Naidu in her presidential address at the first All India Writers' Conference organized by the Indian PEN in 1945. '... India is one and indivisible. While her children speak with many tongues', declared Sarojini Naidu, 'they can only speak with one undivided hear.' The very idea of unity of Indian literature was reiterated by S. Radhakrishnan—'Indian literature is one though written in many languages'. Several scholars, V.K. Gokak, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Nagendra, as well as the newly founded Sahitya Akademi (10) tried to present the view of the indivisibility of Indian literature and the basis of a common heritage, analysable in terms of themes and movements and ideas, of all the Indian languages. These efforts by many distinguished scholars and writers, however, did not have much impact on the literature programmes in our universities. The Bengali Department of Calcutta University did include courses on English Romantic poetry and selections of Sanskrit literature in its Bengali M.A. programme, and called them 'Comparative Literature', as early as 1958-59, but no one thought of a full-fledged programme of comparative literature or Indian literature. One of the recommendations on the seminar of Indian literature organized by the Indian Institute Of Advanced Study in 1970 was 'the acceptance of the reality' of the 'common denominator of Indian literature' which can give 'a wide base and healthy orientation to the study of various Indian languages and literatures'. Four years later the Department of Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi, under the leadership of Professor R.K. Dasgupta started a post M.A. course in Indian literature which came to be known as 'Comparative Indian Literature'. Since then the term Comparative Indian Literature has gained an all India currency and several language departments in different universities in this country have started courses on Comparative Indian Literature as a part of their literature programmes. Several seminars on Comparative Indian Literatures have been organized since 1976 and debates in all those seminars inevitably centred round the question of comparative literature as an academic discipline and its relation with the existing single literature departments. The debate is not a nomenclature, Comparative Literature or Comparative Indian Literature, but of the identification of the area of literary study. The Western scholars of comparative literature have made major European literatures as their area study even when they are aware of the existence of many great literatures outside the western world. Euro-centrism may not be the only explanation for it. It is a question of feasibility, a question

of limited competence. Comparative Literature provides a methodology, a wider perspective and a more catholic attitude to several literatures together. If the Indian scholar feels obliged to concentrate on the various literatures within the geographical limit or literatures bound by certain cultural affinities, it is not necessarily because of any political or cultural isolationism. He is free to make European or African literatures, or Asian literatures as a part of scholarly universe provided he has the competence and the facilities. Indian literatures provide the natural basis of a comparative study, if only because of its *own literature*: he understands it better than any other literature. Comparative Indian Literature is not merely a search for national literature counteracting the search for universal literature which is the professed aim of the study of Comparative Literature. Comparative Literature is not an exercise of discovering abstract universalities of literature. It must deal with literatures in their concreteness and hence the study of Indian literature together is but a part of comparative literary studies as an academic discipline. The future of comparative literature in this country will naturally be directed towards an intensive study of various Indian literatures in the main, but so long it realizes that its texts and contexts are Indian, its methodology comparative, but its main subject is literature, it will serve the cause of Comparative Literature.

### Notes

- (1) *The Bhagavat – geeta or Dialogues of Krishna and Arjuna* (London, 1785) p.10
- (2) Quoted in Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Munshis, An Account of the College of Fort William* (Delhi, 1978) p. 113
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 114
- (4) “What is Classic?”, English tr. by E. Lee, Harvard Classics, xxxii, 1938, p. 130.
- (5) *The History of Indian Literature* (London 1852), tr. J. Mann and T. Zacharie, 1882, p.207f.
- (6) *Kural*, (London, 1886) reprint 1958 ,p.xxii
- (7) Later included in his collection of essays, *Sahitya*, 1907.
- (8) See Buddhadeva Bose, “Comparative Literature in India”, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 8, 1959 also included in *Contribution to Comparative Literature Germany and India*, ed. Naresh Guha (Jadavpur 1979).
- (9) *Arya*, 1919. Later included in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo Library (New York, 1953); Indian edition, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1958, reproduced in *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Vol. XIV (Pondicherry 1971)
- (10) See V. K. Gokak (ed.), *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages*, (New Delhi, 1957); Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*, (Calcutta 1963); Nagendra (ed.), *Indian Literature*, Lakshmi Narain Agarwal (Agra, 1959); *Contemporary Indian Literature : A Symposium* (New Delhi, 1957, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1959).

(11) A. Podder (ed.), *Indian Literature*. (Simla, 1972).

*Republished with permission from Chandra Mohan ed., Aspects of Comparative Literature: Current Approaches, New Delhi: India Publishers and Distributors, 1987.*

---

---

### **Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions**

Swapan Majumdar

If a Bengali director making a film based on a Urdu story in Kanarese or a Tamil story made into a Hindi cinema by an Oriya director happens to be appreciated by the respective audience as a story of their own, why, one may legitimately exclaim, can't we equally enter the spirit of a literary work written in a language other than our own? One might readily retort: Taken the sibling relationship of literature to fine arts for granted, the plastic or the visual arts can cut across the linguistic barriers instantaneously, whereas the greatest deterrent to literary appreciation is the language limitation itself. And haven't we heard of 'a certain mode of phraseology' (1) unique of each linguistic pattern that often lie prostrate at the beguiling seduction of another language ever since the days of Dr. Johnson? Thanks to the challenges thrown by such delicate

problems that the discipline of Comparative Literature has been made a desideratum and finally a reality in a jet-set age.

Like most of the disciplines now included in the curricula of different Indian universities, CL, too, did not have its origin here in India. Majority of our stalwarts, therefore, had advocated for the adapting the methodology of CL to the study of Indian Literatures. The advocacy may sound prophetic to-day, but the question remains, would mere adaptation of a point of view especially one grown in an alien perspective ever blossom into a full blown concept on a different soil together? The underlying philosophies of drama and *Drśyakāvya*, of lyric and *Khandakāvya* or of the Novel on the one hand and the *Kathā* or *Akhyāyikā* on the other are certainly not identical. Measured by the either's yardsticks, most of the other's literary treasures would be found inadequate. As a matter of fact, our histories of literatures contain several examples of old masters being debunked and derogated with the early sweep of westernization. Moreover, it is a pity to note that western theorists have been hardly, if ever, aware of the very particular kind of literary experience of the Asiatic colonies. For obvious extra-literary reasons, however, the literatures of China, Japan, Korea or the Arab countries have drawn western man's attention at times in excess at places in academic circles. For the same implicit reasons, the languages and literatures of southeast Asia suffered a steady decline in student enrollment and consequently in faculty budget in the West. It is up to the Indian comparatists, therefore, to devise methods and tools for literary history and criticism themselves and let the Indian specimen of CL emanate from our own soil and clime, where rather than depending on second hand or reported sources, we can rely more on our immediate and first hand literary experiences. I am sure, any sensible gentleman would prefer the latter alternative. But it requires time for such an overall acclimatization.

We know that comparison as an idea may date back even to the Homeric epoch, but the application of its principles is a European phenomenon of the post- Napoleonic wars, when integration of the Continent was a much sought after ideal when the Metternich System was still being held in high esteem. The consolidation of CL as an academic discipline coincides strangely with another political brain wave in the wake of the FIRST WORLD WAR, viz., President Woodrow Wilson's vision of One World. In India, the emotional upsurge corresponding to the nationalist movement drove us beyond the narrow confines of one's regional literature and taught us to appreciate the beauty of our neighbouring literatures. I think it will not be out of place here to recount that it was in the hey-days of the anti-partition agitation, in 1907, that Tagore read his famous essay "World Literature" (2) at the National Council of Education, the parent body of

the now Jadavpur University which, again, brought into existence in 1956 the full-fledged CL department not only in India but in Asia as well.

This brief reference to the genetic perspectives of CL in India and the West is only to bring forth their salient features distinctive. In Europe, adherence to a comparative approach was but a matter of choice, in India it was a must, a necessity because of the multilingual state of confederacy. Despite common sources Greco- Roman culture and Christianity, the constituent nations Europe have definite political identities of their own. Their sovereign history has made one competitor of the other, almost continual spates of warfare hardly ever let them settle amicably that they could afford to exchange cultural notes mutually. Whereas in India, the long spell of foreign subjugation in a very passive way made room for a cultural reconciliation at its infrastructure. A sense of inferiority injected by the alien rulers and their subalterns among the native masses, inevitably resulted into an appetite for everything that went by the name of national.

In fact, history itself has endowed India with that kind of diversity which is the most congenial for the praxis of comparison, be that in that field of art literature philosophy or religion. Even her colonial experience for centuries lends dimensions to such application. And it is specifically in this respect that the western literary situation their theories as well—lacks in complexity and lustre inherent in the Indian context. For almost all the western countries, modernity did not pose any threat to their tradition , virtually one came as an extension of the other. But in India, the coming of modernity was synchronous with a deeper crisis—a confrontation of two Great Traditions, which ultimately led to an orthogenetic transformation. Thus the historic amelioration was at the same time an aesthetic exposure for the Indian culture, and modern Indian Literature emerged from a point of intersection between these two planes.

What Ezra Pound complained of CL in 1954 (3) was no less true of the Indian context till the other day. Indeed very little did we know, what we would like to mean by the term or how would we approach it with a considered, conscious method. Of course, efforts of the intervening years have not gone in vain. Our predecessors have diligently trekked along the diverse beds of its literary growth. What they achieved, we must not forget, they did single-handed and single-minded. Now arrived at this crossroad, solutions are to be worked out by us collectively. But as long as we are not aware of the specific problem areas and do not diagnose these, the growth of a truly Comparative Indian Literature would remain unaccomplished.

To begin with, we are stuck by the very structural pattern of Indian literature: is it singular or pluralistic? The national academy of letters in India, Sahitya Akademi, professes their motto as: Indian Literature is one though written in various languages. Yet strangely enough, the annual prizes are awarded separately for the best book in each scheduled language. On the political level, we can also recollect that the states of Republic Of India were recognized broadly on linguistic principles. The slogan, likewise, sounds more political than truly literary. The political identity, of course, hangs on. But can it be the sole determinant of a national literature? In fact, until quite recently, Indian Literature was considered by scholars here and abroad as a mere compendium of several regional literatures. Seen extraneously, one may very well fail to notice the distinctive characteristics of each literature developed on the matrices of its linguistic uniqueness. But how can a discerning student of Indian Literature ever gloss over such distinctions? If this basic premise be accepted, the Indian comparatist's approach is apt to be horizontal rather than vertical, be that thematic, genetic or formalistic.

True, there is something like an 'Indianness' which is more to be perceived than to be formulated in concrete terms. The national character may develop in a binary process at times operating on parallel levels, at others forming an asymptote. Whichever the kind may be, it has got to be personality stereos or cultural stereotypes. Siva, Vishnu, Krishna, Rama from the myths and the *Puranas* down to Gandhi should be excellent examples of the first cluster. But in a hetero-religious nation like India, such formulations often run the risk of projecting the national character quite monochromatic and hence parochial and incomplete. To the contrary, the culture stereotype is an organized whole of norms, values, beliefs, practices etc. For V K Gokak, a 'consubstantiation' of the two constitute the soul of 'Indianness'. (4) But appearances are often deceptive. Culture is seldom a monolithic pattern, it is acquired from multiple layers of living-- erudite and popular, aristocratic and pedestrian, sacred and profane at the same time. People are there who think that though itself an evil, casteism is one of the unifying factors of Indian culture. Would it then, some day when such practices would be done away with, melt away with the custom itself? In a country like India, where the move from rural to urban is yet to complete, the problem assumes greater proportions. But do the grounds for comparison consist in the national character alone or solely in its literary merit?

Assessment of the perspectives simultaneously on the national vis-à-vis cross-cultural comparative planes becomes all the more difficult. Can one over determine the exact proportion of Indianness and western elements in Tagore or that of Orientalism and Nordic qualities in Goethe? That is why rather than taking an a priori view of Indianness

we can proceed the other way round empirically. For example, sifting the evidences of variations, say, of the original Ramayanas from that of Valmiki, we can certainly form an idea, however hazy that might be to begin with, of the formation of Indianness. From what we have discussed so far, it becomes clear enough that even in the pursuit of comparative studies, the regional or for that matter the most close at hand literature should form the core of a comparative praxis. Unless one does not have roots in the first language- literature, one can amass a heap of facts but can hardly relate it profitably to a literary experience personally revealed. The Jadavpur curriculum fortunately has always laid stress on this aspect even if they were severally accused of prying into others' areas.

To project our aspiration for something on the ideational plane and to correlate the same with an applied field are different operations altogether. As regards the use of literary tools, the unequal development of the Indian Literatures stand on the way of a proper periodization our literary history too. Not to speak of the modern Indian Literatures where the break-off point was decidedly determined by their exposure to the western culture, even in the early stages of the growth of vernacular literatures temporal as well as qualitative unevenness did not exist to no lesser degree. Tamil, for example, had a more hoary antiquity than any of its near cousins, while some leaped into modernity with their maiden appearance on the scene. Such problems did not matter till the end of the middle ages, because literary growth was going on steadily in its natural course. Even when they borrowed foreign elements, these were assimilated in the main body itself; they did not fashion themselves after the foreign models. But westernization that served as an antidote both to Sanskritization and Islamization concurrently, was a ruthless leveller. With the English system of education, were inducted the English critical concepts, even if these did not tally with the indigenous ones, nor ever they got the broad spectrum of a movement at large. For example, after the advent of English, almost all the regional literatures are said to have passed through a Romantic upheaval. Now had there been an Enlightenment or a Neo-classical age round any corner of the Indian subcontinent? Certainly I do not mean to suggest that Indian Literature had never had a comparable experience. Perhaps as a sensibility, it had undergone a similar state long before the West did. But it is equally true that we did not have any such concerted move which might with the least justification be compared with a movement of the western magnitude. Yet as a habit of being spoonfed, we subscribed to the idea of establishing exact correspondences.

What I want to drive at is that, out of a motivation for marching in step with our rulers' culture, our predecessors often belied the spirit and/or overreached the natural

momentum of our development. Let me explain with a concrete example. Michael Madhusudan Dutt who claimed himself a disciple of the Puritan Milton, published his epic *Meghanādvadhkāvyā* (Fall of Meghnad) in 1861. By common acclaim, the book that marked the consolidation of the Romantic tradition in Bengal, I mean Tagore's *Mānasi* (The Desired She), was brought out in 1890. Now what English literature took nearly 230 years to traverse, Bengali literary experience tried to match only in 3 decades. Naturally enough, because of such mechanical inelasticity inherent in the growth pattern itself, Indian Literature is deficient till today in certain areas criticism being a major genre of it.

Another formulation almost goes unquestioned like an aphorism. In Indian Literature, westernization is frequently equated in all respects with the coming of modernity, the former is course, the two have some casual relations, but modernism as a process can never depend solely on a chance factor like westernization in India. Had not countries, where such coincidences did not occur, become modern in spite of it? Secondly, we know from history that the western coastal states of India and the upper provinces were exposed to western contacts long before Bengal came in touch with them. How did Bengali literature, then, catch up with modernity obtained from English literature first among the Indian Literatures? Or could it happen because Bengal had very little drag of the tradition that could withhold it from being influenced by the West? Whatever the reason be, I think, here too we are very easily swayed by western theories rather than developing our own.

The same sort of servility is reflected in labelling the middle ages that produced a host of luminaries like the Alvars, Nanak, Jnanadeva, Kabir, Tulsidasa, Mira or Surdas to name only a few—still continues to be called Dark Ages after the western model. I am ready to accept the concept partly so far as the then social conditions are concerned, but with regard to literature it certainly is one of the brightest of our heritage. Sandwiched as it were between the wondrous world of Sanskrit literature and the pampered modern Indian Literatures, the glory of our medieval literary heritage seems to pass unnoticed. I am apprehensive, however, that now with the recent trends of revaluations of the middle ages in the West, we too shall have second thoughts on the veracity of such judgments. But the disease is not weeded out. If so far we have relied on the capitalist western models for our literary theories has already started here in India. How it is adapted to the Indian scene is yet to be seen. But the point remains, would such borrowed plumage ever add lustre to our literary attitudes or even ease or else deter the shaping of it? Of course, I am not pleading for a one track development. But what I feel is that these appetites would contribute more meaningfully to our literary experience once we had formulated the basic assumptions ourselves. Creative writing

defies to be written after a prescription, but critical tools have got to be methodized in a principle, be that rigid or elastic.

It becomes all the more telling when we approach the problem of impact studies. I have already said that cultural mobility reached its height in medieval India. We can note from internal evidences of their compositions, that either they shared a belief the rhetorical sources of which were also common or that even if poets did seldom move, copies of manuscripts were carried and sung by minstrels and wandering scholars from one corner to the other. Absence of recorded reports and testimonials however make it difficult for a comparatist to apply the safer French methods and we are virtually left with no other alternative but to approach from a point of aesthetic and literary analogy.

Here again, followers of the Wellekian school refuse to accept comparison between two or more analogous concepts, trends or personalities within the frame of a single literature discipline as a valid area of study for a comparatist. It means, the ebb and the flow of Shakespeare's reputation in his own homeland is not within the purview of CL, but as soon as it crossed the Channel, it turns out to be a coveted area of comparatists. Or say, Kalidasa's impact on Jayadeva is not enough comparative but the latter's survival in modern Indian Literature is. Let us take for example, *Vālmiki Pratibhā* (The Genius of Valmiki) (1881), the famous operatta by Tagore. The story element is basically Valmiki's but that too is processed through and at least one sequence physically lifted from *Krittibasa*. The central belief is gleaned from popular tales, the attitude reminds us of Viharilal Chakravarti's moods, while the presentation is formally western. And finally taken in all, the experience is essentially modern in its complexity and bears the ineluctable stamp of Tagore. Now should a comparatist ever abstain from such a gala feast only on the plea that it does not transgress the linguistic barriers? How could we then justify the comparison between literature and other arts for that matter? After all, comparative methodology is not to provide us with a balance-sheet of borrowings and survival, but broadly speaking is a method of assessing the originality of an author or else of a literary work.

One can of course feel inclined to remind me here that in medieval India the arts and literatures stemmed from the same sources and had their roots in an identical milieu. Even then, though territorially it all took place within a single country, the concepts of fortune, survival, residue or even that of creative treason are the unavoidable tools of a medievalist-cum-comparatist, because, unlike our western counterparts, we are shorn of sufficient contact evidences. In the modern Indian situation too, barring a few cases of personal exchanges like those of Lakshimanath Bezbaroa and the Tagore family or

Bharatendu and the Bengali dramatists, reputation seems to be the sole criterion of literary scholarship. I am aware that around commercial or religious centres or capital cities of different states there had been and still is a greater contact and confluence. But these again constitute a very special kind of exchange. Except these, rapport between two Indian authors were so far mostly through the intermediation of cold prints. Relationship between Vidyasagar and Veersalingam, Bharati and Tagore are fitting examples of such reverential distancing. One might even venture to say, had Hazariprasad been able to persuade Premchand to shake off his coy inertia as well as resistance against the rich, contact between Tagore and Premchand, two contemporaries even though temperamentally disparate personalities, could, who knows, initiate a new phase of literary history in India.

It is only a post-Independence phenomenon that seminars, workshops and colloquiums are drawing creative artists and thinkers closer, and that, we may hope, would blossom some day in ushering a truly Indian literary scene. The critic also is to join the congregation with his tools. Indian poetics is at bottom comparative. When the Ālaṅkārika says:

UpamāāKālidāsyāāBhāraveṅ arthagauravam

Naiṅadhēēpadalāliyam Māghēēsanti trayoguṅāṅ

(Similes are the forte of Kalidasa, meaning is to Bharavi, delicacy of expression in Naisadha, [but] Magha excels in all these three qualities.)

Consciously he sets a proper scale of values in literary estimation by comparing the hallmarks of the said poets. An Indian comparatist's vocation, then, does not go against the traditional approach either, only it has to be revitalized in keeping with the changing times. It is high time, therefore, to set our minds in devising a fitting frame of reference valid both for the traditional and modern literatures of India.

### Notes

- (1) "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765). In D J Enright & Ernst de Chickera eds., *English Critical Texts* (London, 1962), p. 139.
- (2) "Visvasāhitya," *Sāhitya* (1907). Trans: "Universal Literature." In Sisirkumar Gosh ed., *Angel of Surplus* (Calcutta, 1978), pp. 94-104.
- (3) For details see: "Western Critical Premises & Indian Literary Practices" below.
- (4) *The Concept of Indian Literature*. (Delhi, 1979), p. 113.

*Republished with permission from Comparative Literature: Indian Dimensions, Kolkata: Papyrus, 1987.*

---

---

## TRANSLATIONS

### **The Hunter**

Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi

*Translated by Kishori Charan Das*

Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi (1908-1943) was part of the Progressive group of writers and is known for his 'realist' short stories. "Shikar," or "The Hunt" is a classic story of exploitation of the peasant by the landlord.

Ghinua was famous in that area as a hunter. His primary weapon was the arrow. He would lie flat on the ground, put his left foot to the bow, bring the arrow right up to his ears, and then send it off. From a mile or more he could hit his target thus. He had hunted down numerous deer, sambars, boars and bears with his arrow; and many panthers too. But only two Royal Bengal tigers. However, these two had brought him handsome rewards from the Deputy Commissioner.

That morning he arrived at the bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner to present him with an extraordinary game. The bow was slung on one of his shoulders, and on the

other an axe, while a couple of arrows rested in his hand. His appearance prompted the orderly to ask, 'Hey! What's the game you have brought today?'

He knew Ghinua pretty well. Had shared his rewards too. Ghinua answered him with a grin, baring a row of dirty teeth. There was no knowing if it was smile or a snarl. In fact, no one had ever seen a proper smile on his face. Just a baring of the teeth like this, once in a while.

The orderly repeated, 'I'm asking you, stupid— what's that game you have brought?' Ghinua showed him an object wrapped in his gamucha and told him that he had bagged a big game today.

'A tiger?' the orderly asked.

Ghinua shook his head.

'Well, what then? A panther...A bear...bear?'

Ghinua went on shaking his head in silence.

'What is it then, you idiot?'

The din provoked the Sahib to come out. Ghinua bowed to him respectfully and relapsed into his toothsome grin. He unwrapped the object, and placed it at the Sahib's feet— a human head, freshly chopped off. Startled, the Sahib stepped back a few paces. But Ghinua was quick to stretch out his palm and ask, 'Bakshis, Sahib?' The Sahib composed himself somehow, and gestured Ghinua to wait for his reward. And then he went inside to summon a contingent of armed police. That was the only way to overpower Ghinua. He had the strength of a demon in him, apart from the fact that he was armed with a bow and arrows and an axe too.

When Ghinua was brought to the jail in chains he just couldn't understand all. Why had they detained him like this? He made a few enquiries from the people around him, but couldn't get a satisfactory answer. Some said he was going to be hanged, while others hoped it would be Kala Pani. So he asked the Deputy Commissioner when he once came to inspect the jail. The Sahib replied that earlier Ghinua had got rewards for killing tigers, bears and all, but now that he had killed a man the amount of the reward had to be decided by several persons together. Ghinua was impressed.

I should get the reward today, Ghinua thought, on the day of the trial. Full of enthusiasm, he related his exploits to the judge. How he had to go through a lot of trouble in killing this Gobinda Sardar. Many others had tried to get him, but without success, as he was always moving about in a car. He was a devil, this man, who had amassed wealth by robbing others. You couldn't keep count of the number of persons he had killed, the number he made destitute, and the number of women he had molested. And that evening the fellow had tried even to molest his wife— what cheek! He tried to escape in his car the moment he saw Ghinua. As if he could ever escape from his clutches.

Ghinua punctured the tyres of the car with his arrows. And then it did not take him long to chop his head off with the axe, and run into the forest. He ran all through the night, thirty miles at one stretch, to present himself at the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow. Gobind Sardar was not an ordinary fellow, he stressed. He was always armed with a gun. People feared him more than the wild animals, for he was much more harmful. The courage and skill displayed by Ghinua was of no mean order. Just a few years back Sahib had rewarded Dora with five hundred rupees for having cut off the head of the trouble-maker Jhapat Singh. But Jhapat Singh was a good man, in a way. He had not violated the chastity of any woman, nor occupied the land of another forcibly. He had only raided a Government treasury and killed a few sepoy. Indeed, Gobind Sardar was far more dangerous, and Ghinua deserved a greater reward for having killed him.

There was an uproarious laughter in the court-room when he finished speaking. Even the judge joined in the mirth and said, 'Yes of course, you should get a proper reward.' The Government advocate added, 'That is why you have been brought here— don't you know?'

Ghinua could not see the joke. He was innocent of jokes, jest and banter, words which did not mean what they appeared to say, for he was a singularly humourless person. At last he heard the judgement— Execution. But he could not grasp its meaning. It was explained to him when he was brought back to the jail, that the day of the reward was at hand.

Ghinua could never really understand that he stood convicted of an offence, and so he was sentenced to death. How could he possibly follow the logic that the killing of Gobind Sardar was different from the killing of Jhapat Singh? That this was crime while

the other was an honourable act! The finer points of law were beyond him. He was a savage Santal, after all!

He told himself that if Dora could get five hundred rupees for killing Jhapat Singh, he would not accept his reward, unless it was for a larger sum. He would rather return it and say, 'Please don't give me anything. Sahib, but you should know that I deserve more.' He went on thinking along these lines in his dark, lonely cell. There was none he could talk to, nor was he anxious to communicate. He was anxious only to have his reward soon and go back home.

Then came the day he was to be hanged. He was asked to name his last wish, and he replied, 'My bakshish!' 'Very well, come and have your bakshish' he was told and led away. A black cloth was placed over his head. Ghinua thought he was being blindfolded because they were going to give him a handful of gold and silver as his reward. The Government does things in such great style, with such scrupulous care! Naturally they cannot give away, rewards just like that, he reasoned. He imagined how he would show the riches to his wife when he went back home, and how her eyes would light up with joy. And then they would build a nice home, plough the field and live happily ever after. There would be no Gobind Sardar to plague them any more.

Suddenly, he felt something strike him on the neck.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR: Kishori Charan Das (b. 1924) is a well-known Oriya writer. He has written in Oriya as well as in English and has translated extensively.

---

---

**Curfew**

Sanjukta Rout

*Translated by Priyadarshi Patnaik*

**Sanjukta Rout** (b. 1950) is a teacher of English and lives in Kendrapada, Orissa. Her publications include *Mukta Bihanga*, *Jeunthi Arambha Seithi Sesa*, *Nibuja Ghara*. She has received Ajikali Galpa Samman, Birupa

Sahitya Sanskruti Anusthan, and  
Rashtraduta Galpa Samman.

Again Nagma looked at the seven-month-old baby in her lap and burst into tears. The infant had been squirming for a long time, hungry, and now was pulling at the dry skin hanging from her chest with its new-sprouted infant teeth. No milk. But then as if there was some strange delight in nibbling, pulling, sucking at its mother's flesh—only momentarily. Then that piercing shriek again.

Inside, a flickering kerosene lamp. In its dirty dim light, a ghostly play of shadows within the small thatched hut. The pots and pans, the earthen vessels hanging from the thatch, the two kids Akhtar and Dulla leaning against the wall, Sattar sitting with his legs on the chicken coop and head on his knees, and even Nagma herself—all looked like shadows. Using the pillar in the centre as a support, Nagma sat still. Lying next to her outstretched hand was a wicker basket with a few handfuls of puffed rice. And Akhtar and Dulla sat quietly, glancing desperately at the rice-puffs. They could quickly snatch the basket away. But then Nagma had a very sharp tongue, and could really scold. In a moment she would drop the child, pounce on them, raining blows and slaps on their backs and screaming about why there had been a curfew in Cuttack town for the last five days and why Sattar was not going out to pull his rickshaw.

What else could Nagma do! This curfew had turned her to stone. Else which mother would not give a handful of puffed rice to her children? But this was all. For five days now there was a curfew in the city. It was different for the rich. Their houses were stocked with food. Even when a storm came, they could swing gaily on their high branches like weaver birds. But poor daily-wagers, labourers and rickshaw-pullers! At the slightest threat of a storm, like grasshoppers, house-sparrows, bats, their worlds were shattered.

At one corner of the house, the chicken coop. Small wooden doors. The hens were calling from inside. Once in a while, flapping their wings, they would move around their enclosure. Yesterday, Nagma had flung in a handful of puffed rice. But what was there today?

Sattar had been stretching his legs atop the coop and sitting quietly for a long time. He was ignoring the brief remarks that his wife would utter from time to time. He knew that if he took her words to heart, that with his rage and hunger, he would lose his mind, and beat his wife to death.

What a quarrelsome woman! Is she the only one raising a family? Throughout town, rickshaw-pullers were sitting quietly at home. There was no fire in anyone's kitchen. Everybody's kids were hungry. Who asked you scoundrels to be poor? Go and be born in rich houses. Bloody, even if there is a hundred-day curfew, you can have delicious dishes and sweets!

It was better not to talk about the slum. That one could live and survive in such a place was difficult to believe when you saw it. Along the main drain of the municipality in Cuttack was a long line of small huts that all looked alike. About fifty of them. All had dilapidated tin doors, the thatch in disarray. You could see torn baskets, mats and other odds and ends drying on top. Broken earthen pots and pebbles and, among them, in front of each house: a rickshaw. On some verandas, sewing machines. The locality had mostly poor people. Some pulled rickshaws, some worked as tailors. Sattar pulled a rickshaw. Before that he was a pickpocket. Gaffar, Abdul and then Sania, Panchu, Jagaa from the other street—they all used to pick pockets at the bus-stop or in the station. One day the police caught him and gave Sattar the thrashing of his life and he gave up picking pockets. Then he worked in a bakery for a few days. Now he had given that up and pulled the rickshaw owned by Mr. Panda, a lawyer.

At the corner of the slum stood Mr. Panda's house. Three storied. Next to the tiny houses of the Muslim slum, Mr. Panda's house looked somewhat incongruous. On occasion, Mr. Panda opened the window of his house and hollered, 'O Sattar, bring the rickshaw here!'

His wife was very nice. On hearing of Sattar's woes, she had called Nagma and given her work as a maid in the house. From time to time she would give Nagma puffed rice, flattened rice, dry *roti* and old clothes for the children. On the day of the riot, she had called out from her window, 'Sattar, be careful, there is a riot in the town.' Then she had called Nagma and given her some *roti* and rice. The curfew started a few hours later. Everyone shut their doors and waited inside quietly.

Outside, on the road, the police vehicle was on the lookout. Groups of policemen in khaki uniforms were scanning the locality with guns in hand. Yesterday, Gaffar Mia had been thoroughly thrashed. Since he was a ward member, he had disregarded the curfew and come out on the road. The police had beaten him black and blue.

Nagma suddenly said, 'I can hear the mob from around the corner. They must be setting fire to the garage.' Sattar replied, 'Whether it is the garage or our thatch, what can we do? This happens when bad times come. In this town of Cuttack for hundreds of years Hindus and Muslims had lived like brothers. My grandfather used to sew mattresses. He built this place. Father also did the same thing. But I couldn't do that kind of work. Under this thatch I will spend all my life. Then my son. Then his son. On this side, Panda babu's house. Next to it the teacher Mr. Patnaik's house. Next, Hamir Mian's tailor shop. Next, Mukunda babu's house. Next... Next... Hindu... Muslim... Hindu... Muslim. What happened suddenly? Bloody, these politicians have eaten up the country!'

Tears stood in Nagma's eyes. She said, 'Gaffar is the real scoundrel. And then Razak. Both were instigating others the day before the riot. I heard it. I had gone to the municipality pipe to get some water. Fatima said, "These Hindus are not to be trusted. They will drive us out of here. Kill all of us. Gaffar is making hand bombs. Razak has got petrol bombs from somewhere. If necessary he will wipe out the Hindu slum at night."'

There was pleading in the eyes of Akhtar and Dulla as they looked at their mother. God knows what went through her mind. She pushed the basket with the rice-puffs towards them and said, 'Go ahead, eat it up. Swallow everything. When it is gone what will you have? Your father has been sitting at home for five days now. When he was earning, half of it went on his liquor. Where was money to save for bad times?'

Sattar went mad. He jumped up from the chicken coop, rushed to Nagma and, with his face inches from hers, said, 'Let me not hear that again. I'll wring your neck. Whose money—yours or your father's? With whose money do I drink? It's my hard-earned money; I'll do what I want with it. Who are you to interfere, you bitch?'

Nagma felt furious. But then Sattar had hardly eaten anything the last three days. A few drops of rice starch, a dry piece of *roti*. Nagma knew people like Sattar could turn into monsters on a hungry belly. It was better to keep quiet.

She walked out to the veranda and looked out as far as she could see, all the way to the road. The road twisted and turned and spread across the entire town. On other days, thousands of people were on these roads. Children going to school. So many vehicles every day. But within moments all was transformed. The entire city was silent—a desert.

She failed to understand. These people lived so close—thatch touching thatch. Gave support to one another in times of need. Panda babu, Raghav babu, and from the other street Kusunia and Raghav—so much like a family!

Then how come so much hatred remains hidden inside the human heart?

In a moment everything turned topsy-turvy. No one could trust anyone. The day before the riot, some old people from the Muslim area had gone from door to door and then moved into the Hindu area. Sattar had gone along with them. He had promised. He would not allow any kind of rioting in the street. But the moment the curfew was imposed, word spread that Mukund babu had collected an arsenal of knives, swords, and other sharp instruments. Gathered a group of boys from the nearby village in his downstairs room. If necessary he would blow up the slum. And Nagma had rushed inside, frightened, and shut the door.

Akhtar and Dulla had eaten the puffs and now had dug a small hole on the ground and were playing with marbles in it. Sattar was smoking a bidi. Nagma looked at him and asked, 'Is there no starch-water in the pot? My empty stomach makes my head reel. I can't imagine how you manage!'

She forgot the quarrel of the last few minutes and said, 'Yesterday, the loudspeaker was announcing that the curfew would be over today. Why, nothing happened!' 'All of them are a bunch of scoundrels, out to cheat the public with lies. Even now every day one or two houses or shops go up in flames. The police see everything and yet are blind. The culprits go scot-free and the innocent are put in jail. How can the curfew end? Why, today, there is again some fight. Someone was stabbed in the belly.'

From the thatch hung pots, pans and baskets. In them Nagma had kept some titbits. When food became scarce, she used whatever was in those nooks. It was the house of a daily-wager. A day without work and one had to go on an empty stomach. How could the kids understand all this?

Maybe in another two years Akhtar would start working in a garage and earn his bread. Nagma started searching in those pots and baskets. But what was there in them? Why did people try to cheat themselves like this? She knew that the rice-puffs were the last of the lot. But then again that searching among pots....

She was suddenly reminded of her mistress, Mrs. Panda. She thought she would go quietly behind the houses. Mrs. Panda was so kind. Maybe some food. Sattar could never bear hunger.

Behind the houses, it was still quieter, absolutely lonely. Next to their house was Billu Uncle's house. Nagma held on to the thatch for support and looked at Mr. Panda's house. Till the day of curfew the house wore the look of normalcy. The kids were playing on the roof. Her mistress was talking to her from the balcony. But now all the open spaces and the balcony were covered with sheets and blankets. There was no way of knowing what was happening inside. Nagma softly moved nearer. Each of her footsteps was loud to her frightened ear. She finally reached the kitchen window and stood outside it. From inside, the sound of kitchen utensils. Was it the mistress or Bhaskar the cook?

Nagma again looked around carefully. She thought she would put her mouth next to the window and call softly—to Bhaskar or to Sabi, the maid? She peeped inside. No one. She tapped softly. 'Who is it?', she heard Bhaskar's voice. 'Nagma,' she said. Silence inside. She tapped again. No one responded. She said, 'It is me. Tell the mistress I have come. The kids have been hungry for days. Anything—a little rice or flour. Somehow I can manage today. Tomorrow, probably, the curfew will be over.'

Still, no one came. She rattled the shutter again. And again. And again....

Nagma could hear whispers from within. She listened carefully. The mistress was saying, 'Poor girl, please, let's give her some rice.'

But the master said, 'No. No use showing mercy to that lot. That scoundrel Sattar is hiding petrol bombs inside his house. He is a friend of Gaffar. Once the curfew is over, I will not let him have the rickshaw anymore.'

Nagma slowly retraced her steps. Standing outside her hut, she thought: was it really Allah who had created so much hatred and suspicion in human beings?

Sattar was pacing in the house, hands behind his back. Seeing Nagma, he said, 'In the prison I was in a room like this. Tied up. For seven days. Only, today I have no handcuffs. But there was food and I had faith that mother would definitely get me out of there. Then Mr. Panda, the lawyer, managed to get me out on bail. Somehow, now I have a feeling that this curfew will be endless and I will never be able to pull my rickshaw

again.' Nagma wanted to say something, but then couldn't. Mr. Panda would now search for a Hindu rickshaw puller.

Sattar looked at the quiet Nagma again and said, 'I am a poor illiterate and cannot speak words of wisdom. But after reading the *Namaaz*, I feel as if in the whole world all are alike. All children of one God. Only men have created these differences. Tell me, has God stopped the breeze that flows through this great carnage? This same air keeps the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian alive.

'Are you sad because the Mistress didn't give you a handful of rice? It is not her fault. Because I have a police record, the police still keep an eye on me. How can she believe in me?'

Then Sattar slowly removed the wooden planks that blocked the side of the chicken coop. White and black, grey and brown hens of all colours ruffled their feathers and spilled out into the hut making clucking noises, on to the veranda, digging the earth in search of food. Sattar could feel their rapid movements and their pecking all around him. Raising his hands above his head, roaring with laughter, he said, 'Go away. Nothing to worry. Roam freely. Peck on the roads, bushes, drains and garbage dumps—peck away and eat worms, and grains, eat your fill. What is the curfew to you? It is made by man for man. Religion is only an excuse here. You have neither religion nor caste nor language that police will shoot at you. Go, shoo, go away. I tell you, go away!'

\*\*\*

**ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:** Priyadarshi Patnaik, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, West Bengal, is a poet, painter and photographer. He has published two volumes of poems. His translations include Bidyut Prabha Devi's *Poems for Children* (Rupantar 2010). At present, he is engaged in editing an anthology of medieval Oriya poetry in English translation.

---

---

**Grass**

Raj Kishore Pattnaik

*Translated by Dharani Dhar Sahu*

It was an October evening; a slight nip in the air. As expected, three days after the full-moon, the first part of the night was dark. I came out of my office at the Mangalabag Police Station, and headed homework. The road was rather deserted but for a few pedestrians and cyclists. My attention was drawn to a lone boy standing near the crossroads. He was about four feet tall and wore a loin-cloth and dirty loose banian. As I walked past him he followed me. His steps were short, so he had to move fast to keep pace with me. Swinging his arms vigorously as he walked along, he tried to warm himself up. He was trying to cling to me.

Like a greedy child always wanting to find something to munch and to keep the mouth engaged, I felt a desire to prate. 'Where have you been, boy' I asked him, initiating the conversation.

'Where can I go?' The boy blurted out slightly startled by my voice? 'I've to go Neemasahi. Will you stay here? I thought he was afraid of something.'

'Are you afraid?' I asked him. He clung closer to me and mumbled, 'Yes, I'm afraid.' His small eyes peered into mine for support. I extended my hand towards him, and he held it a bit hesitantly, looking around.

'You live in this town, and yet you're so afraid of this place!'

'You perhaps don't know Sir,' He said haltingly, 'that burial ground we just crossed is a dangerous place. Someone lives there. He pelts stones at the passersby!'

'But I pass by this road often,' I said patting his back. 'And I have not felt any presence here, nor have I seen anyone.'

The boy protested: 'No Sir, he only attacks children. Once I was passing by this road alone. A stone fell on my leg. It was he who threw it. I have not crossed this road alone since. I always wait for someone at the crossroads, and cross that burial place with him.' It was not easy to allay that fear, much as it is impossible free people from superstitions which have become a part of their blood.

'What's your name?' I asked, patting his back.

'Linga,' he replied readily, and added, 'You might have known my father Jogi Maharana.' His facial expressions changed seeing my amusement and surprise. He resumed after a brief pause: 'My father is very good at singing chhandas. (ballads). He has no interest whatsoever in carpentry; always obsessed with his songs. Bana, the wrestler, always sends for him. Nobody can beat my father when it comes to singing chhaudas. He has won many cups.'

'How much does your father earn everyday,' I asked.

'Hi, Hi, wages!' Linga chuckled, and said: 'What wages? He never goes to work. I've been learning carpentry for the last six months. I have been receiving wages only for the last fifteen days. Seven paisas a day. Father refused to work. We could not thatch out hut this year. So, water seeped in and the walls crumpled.'

I was thinking about the boy's father. He was a poet, an artist. I'd have thought there would be no artists in a humble carpenter family. I also realised, a bit painfully too, that the poor family would soon perish, suffocated by the poetic whims of Jogi Maharana. All these poets and artists— whether they are born to riches or in poverty— ardently pursue their elusive calling, unmindful of the world around.

'Why have you preserved these cups? Why don't you sell them?' I suggested.

Linga shook his head. 'No Sir,' he said, 'Bana, the Body-Builder won't like it. He had given them to me as keepsakes. After all they are precious. They are made of silver. How

much do you think they would fetch if sold?' The boy seemed to be engrossed in his own talk. He continued, 'Now we've kept these cups in a wicker basket. White ants ate up their wooden stand. My father has made some new stands for them.' He spoke effortlessly with disarming innocence, and each word reflected his penury. 'When did you eat?' I enquired casually.

'In the morning,' he said. 'I gobbled up some rice and went to work. I have not eaten anything else so far. I am not sure if there will be anything to eat at him.' He has not eaten anything the whole day. It is unlikely there will be anything to eat when he gets back to his unthatched, rundown hut. Yet he is not troubled. He is so young! About half my age, and one and half feet shorter than me. He crosses his arms on his chest, perhaps to fight the cold.

I felt guilty as I walked beside him. I became keenly aware of my warm clothes and full stomach. Tormented by so many desires the great world appeared so small to my mind. And there was no peace even when these desires were fulfilled. But here was this boy! He had not taken a morsel throughout the day, nor had he clothes with which to cover himself on a winter evening. He was returning home after a hard day's labour, earning seven paise to feed his hungry parents who must be waiting for him. Shame overcame me. I threw away my half-burnt cigarette in self-disgust. My pride at being highly educated appeared to be so petty before the large-heartedness of this innocent boy. I felt utterly humbled.

I searched my pocket. I only had a one-rupee coin and nine paise. I wanted to give him one rupee, but later decided against it. I offered him a four-paise coin, an anna. 'Take this and have some fried rice', I said. He looked at me askance and accepted the coin. We were very close to Neemasahi, his lane. We had left his bete noire, the burial ground behind us. The road here was relatively crowded. Linga was no more afraid. He talked more freely and ambled on.

Linga's father, I thought, did not bother about his wages and his family problems so that he could excel as a ballad-singer. And here were our college dandies draining themselves to study. I was curious to see Jogi Maharana.

But his son was not willing to take me to his home. He was afraid I might tell his father about the money I had given him, and his father would snatch that anna away from him. He made several excuses to discourage me: 'Our house is at the fag-end of a narrow, dark lane,' 'Father may not be at home at this time', 'I am not going home now', etc.

I gave him five paise more and told him to give that to his father. He looked around nervously, lest someone should see him. I could guess that he would not tell about all this.

As we approached his house, he scampered away into the dark lane saying, 'Our house is in this lane, I'm going'.

I walked on— alone. A cow was grazing by the road-side, dotted with patches of green grass. The tender blades of this grass might have been nipped off by voracious bovines several times, been trampled upon and crushed by a thousand moving feet and hooves. But they had survived them all. They had not yet been exterminated. Then, why should the human race acknowledge defeat and perish? Why should this carpenter boy be knocked off? He is going ahead full of hope. Why should I be surprised to find such grass-like toughness in the boy? I was busy ordering my ideas which had gone haywire. I was trying to find an answer to my nagging question: What's true for grass, could that be true for man?

---

---

### **The World Within**

Baishnab Charan Das

*Translated by Snehaprava Das*

*Mane Mane* (The World Within), the first psychological novel in Oriya, was published in 1926. It breaks with the tradition of social realism in Oriya fiction exploring interior landscapes and dramatizing the fragile inner lives of its central characters. Baishnab Charan Das (1899-1958) was a police officer by profession. He distinguished himself as a

writer of fiction in Oriya, experimenting with new forms and themes.

I

That day Haribabu returned early from the collectorate. The sun was sinking in the western horizon when he reached home. Girls were busy decorating the cement platform of his courtyard, where the holy basil was planted, flowery patterns. It was the eve of Kumarpurnima. Haribabu looked in that direction and called, 'Kanaka'.

No one answered him.

He turned and stepped on the veranda. He waited for a while and fondly called again:

'Hay, Kanaka, why are you sitting here doing nothing? Aren't you taking part in the festivities today?' A smile lit up his tired face.

She mumbled something through sobs.

'Why are you crying?'

She gave no answer, and continued to sob. Haribabu laughed and bent down to touch the face of this dust-smearred ten year old girl. But she angrily turned her face towards the wall and started hitting it with her tiny shapely fists. Haribabu laughed aloud, and, as if he could read her mind, he took out a printed sari from inside his umbrella. He winked at the children who had gathered there to see the fun and said, raising his voice, 'Look at this sari, Kanaka; don't you like it?'

He put the sari into Kanaka's hands and was about to walk triumphantly into the house; but the girl did not even glance at the sari. She tossed it back at Haribabu and started sobbing hard. Haribabu was taken aback; he took the hands of the girl into his own and asked tenderly, 'What's the matter, my dear sister? I have got this beautiful sari for you and sweetmeats for the puja. Did your sister-in-law tell you off? Did one of these children beat you? Won't you tell me?'

'Why did Neelubhai call me 'ridge-gourd eater'? I will not fast, nor shall I wear the new sari.' She whined.

Haribabu suppressed his laughter seeing Kanaka's innocent tear-filled eyes fixed on his face. The glistening tears on his face seemed to touch his heart-strings, filling his heart with a sweet melody. He picked the girl up in his arms and went quietly into the house.

The day after was Kumarpurnima, a festival in which unmarried girls worshipped the full moon. It seemed as though tides of joy surged into every house. No matter whether one was rich or poor, all dressed up their children suitably for the occasion. The guileless children, innocence glimmering on their faces, offered worship to the moon.

Preparations to serve offerings on platters went on in full swing even before sunset. Not only children, elderly people also busily moved about and at one place young women, married and unmarried, sat in circles, and were busy grooming their hair. At another place, a few elderly women were busy gossiping. While they showered words of praise on their parental villages, they belittled the people of their in-laws' village, laughing at the customs and rituals and even the provisions that were available there. The young girls who belonged to this village could not stand such empty boasting, and taking advantage of their relationship with these women, which permitted jokes and a little loose talk, they retorted whenever they found an opportunity. But the elderly women simply nodded their heads in disagreement and this simple gesture, which bore the stamp of their maturity and experience, silenced the young girls.

An old woman busily dished out puja offerings, arranging them in the shape of crescent moons. Children pestered her to allow them to wear their new garments. Her daughters-in-law stood near her trying to force her to do her hair. But the old woman nonchalantly went about doing her work, placing on a large platter hundreds of crescent moons one after another. Now and then, she let out a stream of abuse to drive the children and the young brides away. The village priest was in a great hurry, for he wanted to offer puja before the moon would ride high into the sky. He had drawn the figure of the moon on the cement platform with ridge-gourd flowers before the sunset.

While preparations for the puja went on in this manner, Kanaka sat glumly at home. She was determined not to offer worship to the moon unless a moon-shaped offering was laid out on the platter in the name of Neelubhai. She would not wear her new sari or new bangles and would spoil the puja unless her wish was fulfilled. Haribabu's wife, Kanaka's sister-in-law, was no less stubborn. Neelu was no kinsman of theirs. Why

should they offer a puja on his behalf? Kanaka's friend called her again and again. But Kanaka would not budge. She kept sitting inside the house. When Haribabu came to know of this, he could not decide whom to support. He cast a glance at his better half who was busy at work and next at Kanaka who sat sulking inside the house. He was caught in a dilemma. The hard look in his wife's eyes struck him like lightning, but the thought of Kanaka, the orphaned little girl made Haribabu muster up courage to ignore his wife. The instinctive urge of a clerk working in a court helped him find out a middle path to satisfy both the parties. 'The poor orphan boy! Who will make puja offerings for him?' He said guardedly.

Neelu was a poor boy indeed. He had lost his parents when he was only seven and since was staying with his sister, who lived in that village. His sister, too, had left this world a year ago. His brother-in-law, Nitaibabu was a gentleman but he was not financially well off.

There were many children in the village, but Neelu stood out. He was not only good looking, but he also did well in his studies. He had excellent manners. Every family in the village looked upon him as a son. He was poor and so humble that not only the womenfolk of the village, but the kids, youngsters and even the group of older people felt sympathy for him. Children forgot to take food if Neelu fell ill even for a day, and the elderly kept worrying till he recovered.

On this evening of Kumarpurnima Neelu was very busy. A new dress had been brought for him but no one had put a little auspicious turmeric paste on it. No one had arranged puja offerings for him. But these things did not bother him at all, and he kept running about happily. Neelu ran to the place of puja and pulled at the carefully rolled top-knot of Kanaka. 'Hey, you have eaten dried fish and ridge-gourd. You can't take part in the puja. Listen all of you; drive this girl away.'

He teased and looked expectantly at Kanaka, perhaps waiting for retaliation. But Kanaka was otherwise occupied. Had it not been so, there would certainly have been a fight.

Neelu was very amiable and gentle in nature. But food seemed utterly tasteless to him unless he had a fight with Kanaka at least a couple of times a day. Once they were together, neither of them would want to leave the other until a third person intervened. Once they spent half of a day fighting and screaming, and they were continuing their battle in the next half, when Kanaka's sister-in-law came, a cane in hand, gave the two one blow each and pulled Kanaka back home. Nevertheless, Kanaka could not bear

being away from Neelubhai even for a moment. Never would she miss an opportunity to pinch or badger him. If Neelu objected to this, she would cry at the top of her voice. The art of weeping with one eye and laughing in the other had been mastered by Kanaka. Sometimes, while walking hand in hand with Neelu, she would suddenly get angry and fall behind him. Then she would follow him walking backwards. She would cry and scream if Neelu demanded an explanation for her absurd behaviour. But Neelu was a clever boy; he knew how to placate her. On certain occasions he had tried to protest against such behaviour by not going to her house. But he could not help going there and so the days on which he decided to protest, he would arrive a little earlier than his usual time in her house and perch himself on the branch of a Baula tree waiting for her to come out. The purpose was to teach her a lesson using different kinds of tricks and these never failed him. The fun that usually followed Kanaka's appearance on the scene was something to be watched.

\* \* \*

A conch began to blow. The priest lay down the conch, sprinkled water around the puja platters and started offering worship to the moon. The puja was over in no time. No one knew how far the moon god was pleased with the worship, but the hundreds of clay lamps that were lit on the platform shone like hundreds of moons. Perhaps the moon god accepted the offerings!

The ceremony was over. An elderly woman came and sang prayers in the name of the moon god. Children made their way out of the courtyard carrying their puja baskets. But Neelu stood there looking forlorn and unsure of himself. Kanaka walked in calling his name, two puja plates in her hands. She shouted from a distance, 'Neelubhai, see I have two plates. Where is yours? Shame! Shame!! This boy has nothing.'

When Neelu did not say anything, she came close to him and touched his forehead with her finger. Neelu stood motionless like a statue, hanging his head. Though it was autumn, sweat beads appeared on his face; no words issued from his lips. He rubbed his eyes quietly with the back of his hand. Kanaka looked at his clothes, 'Look Neelubhai, my new sari is smeared with turmeric; yours is not even washed.' She boasted. 'And why are you crying? Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?'

Neelu was wiping his tears and was trying to clear his throat. When he heard Kanaka, he burst into tears, and ran away from the place.

Kanaka had never seen Neelu so upset. It was a most unusual situation for her.

'Why did Neelubhai cry?' She asked herself. Unable to find any answer herself, she sank to the ground and began to weep uncontrollably. What else could the poor girl do? In utter distress she took both the moon-shaped offerings from the plates and crushed them. But this brought her little comfort. She pushed the plates away and decided to cry to her heart's content. She went on crying without a care for anything or anyone. It seemed as though her tears would never dry. Suddenly, a soft hand covered her beautiful eyes and a finger pressed her soft pink chin. Neelu's voice reached her, saying, 'Aye!' The girl tried to remove his hand.

Neelu took his hands off her eyes and jumped to her front. Pointing his finger at her, he teased her saying, 'Weren't you calling me a cry-baby?' Neelu's intention was to goad her into crying. But Kanaka's face grew serious, as if she had taken a vow not to cry any more. Neelu had not expected such a reaction. He looked at her in surprise. Kanaka's tear-washed face reddened; she said hastily, 'Neelubhai, take your plate of offerings.'

As if he had not heard, Neelu asked, 'Tell me, why aren't you crying any more?'

'I am not like you. Am I?'

'Then, how come you were crying before?' Neelu made a face at her.

'Who was crying? When? It was you who wept. Why should I?'

Neelu came forward and took both her hands into his own. His eyes glistened with tears, 'Well, Kanaka, tell me the truth. Why did you weep?' He asked.

'As if only you have the right to cry. And is there any rule saying that I should not? Now leave me alone or else I shall start weeping again.'

'Wait, wait.' Neelu gripped her hands, 'Tell me why did you cry or else I'll not let you go.'

'Tell me why you cried?'

'Am I crying any more? I'll not cry again. Right?'

'Very smart! I am also not crying anymore. Here, take the plate if you want to or I'll leave.'

Neelu could not play at being serious any longer and burst out laughing. Both of them got up carrying a plate each, and started eating. They walked silently side by side, their faces lit up with a smile. The moon-light seemed to have cast a sweet glow on these two little souls. The earth overflowed in that serene stream of light. Who knew to which destination, at the command of an inexorable fate, the gentle breeze wafted these two young hearts.

\*\*\*

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR: Snehaprava Das teaches English at Binayak Acharya College in Berhampur, Orissa. She has co-translated *Padmamali* (Grassroots 2005), the first novel in Oriya, into English. Her translations include Baishnab Charan Das' *The World Within* (Rupantar 2007) and *Bibasini: A Historical Romance* (Rupantar 2010).

---

---

**The Journey of Life**

Ramadevi Choudhury

*Translated by Supriya Kar*

Ramadevi Choudhury (1889-1985) is one of the best known women freedom fighters and social reformers of modern Orissa. Her autobiography, *Jeevan Pathe* (The Journey of Life) was published by Grantha Mandir (Cuttack), in 1984. The following extracts have been translated from the original Oriya and are from pages 21-26 and 37-40 of the original text.

**Marriage**

I got married on November 11, 1914. My father and my father-in-law had been friends since their school days. My father-in-law worked as a junior at my father's elder brother's chamber; our families had been on intimate terms and we used to visit each other frequently. My father's first wife and my mother-in-law were close friends; they fondly called each other 'Chanda'. So my grandma always looked upon my mother-in-law as a daughter and used to send her gifts on occasions such as Raja and Kumara Purnima. My mother-in-law used to invite my mother and my aunt (Mother's sister) to her house whenever they walked past her house on their way back from school and combed their hair and served them snacks. I heard both Mother and my aunt saying that they had never eaten anything as tasty as the fine, sundried *aru* rice they ate on

Mondays at Choudhurani's place. Those days, only a few aristocratic families lived in Cuttack. One of these was Sudama Nayak's family. He served in the princely states. One found costly ornaments, silk saris and other decorative pieces in his house that he had received as gifts from kings. One rarely came across a person as affectionate as Sudama babu. He had established a special relationship with my mother-in-law, who was his god-daughter. I heard from my mother-in-law and others that Sudama Babu's wife had also been deeply affectionate by nature. No one, who had come in contact with her even once, could ever forget her. Thus, the few aristocratic families in Cuttack used to live like a close-knit group, though not related to each other through ties of kinship.

On Father's birthday, Durga apa and I used to present new clothes to him. We also prepared rice cakes on this occasion. Tima apa had got married and moved to her in-laws' house. Durga apa (my father's sister) had died, so I was the only one left to make arrangements for Father's birthday celebration. Everyone in our family helped me in preparing cakes on this day, but they thought that the main responsibility rested on me. That year I did all that was necessary. I offered Father a new dhoti and a stole, I readied everything in the prayer room before offering food to our household deity as was customary on festive occasions. I put a mark of sandalwood paste on Father's forehead, and then both of us sat down to eat. We were half way through our meal when we heard someone shouting— 'Gopal, Gopal' at our front door. Father replied in a loud voice,

'Please be seated. I'm having my meal. I'll come as soon as I am finished.' He told Mother that it was Gokulananda. As soon as Father went into the sitting room, one could hear the voice of Gokulananda babu— 'You have been looking for a match for your daughter; why didn't you bother to talk to me about it?' I had no further idea of the discussion that followed. I came to know a few days later that I was going to marry Gokulananda babu's son. Everybody was very happy at the match. I was told that my eldest uncle (Father's elder brother) was the happiest of all. But one thing seemed to bother everyone— how would I adapt myself to the Choudhury household? Some of my mother's friends like Chandrabhaga aunt and Shrimukha aunt advised her to break off this alliance. But Mother would tell them placidly, 'If my daughter has any worth at all, she will certainly be able to manage things properly.' One day, Dhai came on a surprise visit to our house. Dhai was the concubine of my father-in-law's father. Her manners were very refined. Along with my mother and grandmother I had visited the Choudhury family quite often since I was a child. Hence, there was no question of their wanting to see me. Gradually, the wedding day drew near. We went to our village home a few days before the wedding. Another uncle of mine (Mother's second brother) fell ill at the time

and this prevented his wife from attending my wedding. The wedding took place on the day of the eighth moon of the month of Margashira. In the morning, Mother came and sat beside me. During the two days, before the wedding, my parents avoided looking me in the eyes, nor could I look into theirs. If ever our eyes met, we could not hold back our tears. On that morning, Mother could restrain herself with great difficulty and gave me some words of advice, all the while gently stroking my back with her palm— ‘Today, your childhood comes to an end,’ she said, ‘Those who were strangers to you till today would become your own kith and kin. How far you will be able to bring them closer to you depends solely on you. You will never experience any sorrow if you remember and do a few things. Have respect and affection for all in your husband’s family without ever trying to find out if anyone loved you more than another. You will have brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law and nephews. Take care of them as lovingly as you can. You should see to the comfort of everyone in the household. You will hear many harsh words. You should keep yourself calm and make sure that no harsh words ever escape your lips. You must not mind the way one may speak to you or behave with you. Your mother-in-law is a very strict person. We will feel happy when we hear her praising you.’ I mulled over these words all day long. Mother and my eldest aunt (Mother’s eldest brother’s wife) felt worried because of my second uncle’s illness. He used to say, ‘Gokulananda is very lucky to get such a daughter-in-law.’ My eldest uncle had told me that since he lived in Cuttack, he would keep in touch with me— ‘But I must not hear your being spoken ill of. Your mother-in-law is a hot-tempered person. You would lead a peaceful life if you won her heart. Then it will be possible for you to get on with all kinds of people.’ Everyone in our family felt apprehensive at the thought of my having to live with an ill-tempered mother-in-law. My mother’s friends used to express their anxious concern to her. I heard all this, but kept quiet. After a while, I stopped thinking about the matter. The wedding was solemnised with great pomp. Later, I heard those who had accompanied the bridegroom saying that they had never had such a grand feast in their lives before. My mother was particularly happy that the priests, the musicians, the palanquin bearers and the menials had eaten all delicacies like fish, payas and cakes to their heart’s content.

But I found it difficult to imagine my life away from Mother. On the day of Mangalapak (the day before the wedding) my grandmother and I went in a palanquin to the Chateshwar temple and had a darshan of lord Mahadev and goddess Parvati. The ten or twelve days preceding this were spent in attending parties given by friends and relatives to me, the prospective bride. Durga apa was there at the time of my elder sister’s wedding. She had died in the mean time and her absence made me sad. I set off for Kheras, the ancestral home of my husband riding a palanquin, early one morning and

arrived at night. One or two incidents filled my heart with anxiety. These had also been painful in a way. A number of old housemaids of my husband's family had come with the groom's party. One of them told my elders that once the wedding was over, the bride belonged to the husband's family and would have to follow its customs. She would have to wear her sari with a *kachha* (in a manner that was considered terribly old-fashioned) and tie her hair in a bun (also an outdated style, which no one followed in our family). The womenfolk in our family burst into tears on hearing this. All of them—my grandmother, mother and aunts became greatly worried, yet, as I now belonged to the other family, it was decided that I had no option but to adopt its ways. Dhai's demand was accepted. 'You will have to do many such things against your wish', Mother told me, 'but you will have to put up with these. You must not be angry on account of this. Don't ever say that you don't know how to do a thing or can't do something when you are asked to do it. Never complain about the food you may be given to eat. Eat cheerfully whatever is placed before you. You should wear whatever clothes or ornaments you are given to wear. Don't let them feel that you are wearing these against your wish. Try to do whatever work you are given to do even if you had never done it before.' I accepted the advice of Mother as binding on me as the teachings of the *Vedas*. But when, at the time of my departure, my hair was done in a bun, I could not restrain myself and burst into tears. No one in my family knew how to do a bun. Someone from the village must have done it. I remembered what Radhamani aunt had said to my mother. 'You have brought up Belu in your own way. Will she be able to bear with Choudhurani (my mother-in-law)?' She told my mother, 'When I first came to Cuttack, I had to live with Choudhurani. She was my guardian. It was very difficult to cope with her.' I don't remember the reply Mother had given her. The day after the wedding, Pitabasa uncle and Jagabandhu uncle came to see me and sat near me for sometime, saying that my aunts (their wives) had asked them to spend some time with me. When they took leave of me they went to grandma and asked her, 'How will this girl get on in the Choudhury household?'

While my family members and relatives were worrying about how I would adjust myself to the Choudhury family, those in my in-laws family wondered how a 'Christian' girl like me would fit into their house. When my father-in-law disclosed to his wife his decision to take me as a daughter-in-law, she had objected on two counts. One was that, since my mother did not have any son, I might have inherited this gene and might not bear a son. Secondly, I had lived with Madhu barrister (my eldest uncle), who had embraced Christianity, and I wore stockings and shoes even at home. Hence, would it be possible for a girl like me to fit into her household? Besides, all friends and relatives would be

critical of the first daughter-in-law chosen from a 'Christian' family! Father-in-law was able to persuade her after a great deal of arguments and made her give her consent to the marriage. But the apprehensions persisted among the family members. Almost everyone was anxiously waiting to see how a girl from a 'Christian' family would conduct herself in her husband's house, whether she would obey her mother-in-law, and so on and so forth. I could not set out for my husband's village the day after the wedding because it was a Thursday. I was sent there on the Friday morning. The palanquin-bearers walked very fast. My father walked beside the palanquin for a little distance and, then, stroking my hair, stayed back. Groups of people stood all along the road up to Bahukud, about three miles from our village, waiting to see me going to my in-laws' house. I sat for the whole day inside the palanquin; I did not even drink a glass of water on the way. I was completely worn out. At noon we stopped at Ayatpur to rest ourselves and to have some food. A housemaid of our family, Budhi, accompanied me. She walked fast and kept pace with the palanquin-bearers. She entreated me to take some food and drink a little water. But I refused. It was already night when the palanquin was finally placed in front of my husband's ancestral house at Kheras. I did not know what the time of the day was, but it must have been very late in the night. A large number of people had gathered and the place was full of noise and bustle. I could sense immediately that I was being watched intently by the elderly womenfolk of the family. As soon as the palanquin was laid on the ground, Dethi (My father-in-law's elder brother's wife), the senior-most lady of the family, cried out, 'I'll see the face of the bride before anyone else does.' She took a good look at me, and declared, 'Maguna's Mother (my mother-in-law) has chosen a good-looking daughter-in-law; I only wish she obeyed her!'

The next day, I came to know that a large number of women relatives had gathered there. These included my elder sisters-in-law (sisters and cousins of my husband), aunts-in-law (sisters and cousins of my father-in-law, enjoying a status similar to that of mother-in-law) and their daughters. All of them were apprehensive— How would this girl from a 'Christian' family behave herself? Would she accept our customs or would she want to live as she did at her parental home? I overheard them discuss this among themselves. There was no question of my speaking to anyone. I sat quietly wondering if I could ever make these people happy. A box full of cosmetics, trinkets etc had been sent with me. Mother-in-law asked everybody to come and have a look when she opened the box and gave to each whatever she liked. A new bride had to prepare sandalwood paste with which to make designs on small dishes meant to be presented to the elders of the family. The daughters of the house had to take these to the elders of the family when

they finished their bath. Maga apa— the eldest sister of my husband— took one elderly daughter of the family into her confidence and told her, ‘She has been brought up in an urban family. How could one expect her to know anything about this? Each one of us should prepare one set.’ So the older ones such as Rama and Chanchala made the paste and decorated the dishes and took them to give to the elders. My eldest aunt-in-law (wife of father-in-law’s younger brother) stopped them on the way and scrutinised the designs. After having a look at the designs supposedly made by me, she brought me some sandalwood paste and a thin stick and asked me to draw a line with it. As soon as I had done so, she said, ‘Now I know who has done those designs.’ ‘Aunt’, said Maga apa, ‘how would she know how to do this? All of us should help her adjust herself to the new environment. Should you go about saying such things?’ Though I failed in making designs with sandalwood paste, I received praise for making *paan* to her taste; connoisseurs of *paan* also lavished their praise on me. Nishamani apa was never impressed with the way anyone else prepared *paan* for her. But she asked me to roll *paans* for her as she liked those made by me. Every movement of mine— how I sat, how I got up, how I walked and the way I ate— was being carefully watched. I conducted myself very cautiously so that I would never be accused of lacking refinement and a sense of decorum. I remembered what Mother had told me on the morning of my wedding, ‘You should eat cheerfully whatever is given to you at your mother-in-law’s house.’ In this way, fifteen days passed. I had no one to talk to; I spent most of my time sitting quietly. I realised that acting on my mother’s advice was not so simple. I would have to give up my personal comforts and wishes if I were to satisfy all these people. The only task that would matter in my life would be to make them happy. The fortnight seemed to have added several years to my age. All my childlike thoughts disappeared. The only thought that bothered me was what I should do to please every one of them. I could not even know when my likes and dislikes about food, clothes etc. ceased to matter.

I found that a makeshift latrine, with a couple of bricks to sit on enclosed by palm leaf mats had been set up for me. ‘Dei’, said Budhi, ‘you should answer the call of nature once in the morning. You would not be able to go out at any other time of the day as there would be too many people around.’ Later, I learnt from Dhai that young brides were not supposed to leave their rooms. Dhai had accompanied many girls of my husband’s family to their in-laws’ family. She would use a wooden pot meant to keep turmeric paste as a urine collector for them. She would dispose of the urine quietly, avoiding others’ eyes. She did not have any other container for this except the turmeric paste holder. We came to Cuttack on the sixteenth day, which was celebrated as the

*sholamangala*. All of us travelled in palanquins. The palanquin that had carried me to my in-laws' was quite spacious. My niece, Bula sat in it by my side. She was seven or eight years old. She would open the palanquin door a crack, peep out and ask endless questions. But I had lost all appetite for small talk. A single thought kept me preoccupied— Now that I am finally on my way to Cuttack to live with my in-laws, I would have to conduct myself in such a way that no one would ever have any occasion to find fault with me.

### **The Plight of Mistresses**

I knew nothing at all about the plight of mistresses as long as I was with my parents. No one in my parent's family or in my maternal uncles' family ever had a mistress as far as I knew. When I came to my father-in-law's place, I came to know that Sadhabi Dhai, who was a member of the household, was the mistress of my father-in-law's father. She was only seven years old when somebody had brought her here. My father-in-law's mother, Kokila Devi, brought her up. Marrying her off was a problem when she came of age. No one was prepared to marry a girl of unknown caste and parentage. So my granher-in-law, Brajasundara Mangaraj decided to keep her as his mistress. In those days, married women looked upon it as an advantage if their husbands chose to have a mistress. The wife would lord it over her. The other woman would do all the menial work, and take care of the children while the wife would live an easy life.

Dhai used to tell us that Brajasundara babu was afraid of his wife's displeasure and would meet Sadhabi at all sorts of odd places like the cowshed or the shed where paddy was husked. In due course, she bore him a son. Since my grandfather-in-law had five sons, this child was named Bidura. He died when he was only twenty-two years old. After the death of my grandfather-in-law, it became the responsibility of Dhai to accompany newly-married daughters of the family to their in-laws' houses and help them to adjust themselves in their new families. Dhai was as intelligent as she was affectionate a person and attentive to others' needs. She had accompanied my mother-in-law when she had shifted to Cuttack.

In course of time, I had occasion to meet many more mistresses. My mother-in-law's grandfather had a mistress named Budhi. Her father had two mistresses, Mukuta and

Malil. They were all very good-looking and well-mannered. Whenever any one of them visited us, it was my duty to cook the dishes that she would like to have and prepare paan for her. Api, another mistress, used to come from my sister-in-law's place. She was quite ill-mannered. Here I found out about many things that I had never known before.

Dhai had a sore in her mouth that did not heal in spite of availing herself of the best treatment available in those days. She could not open her mouth wide nor could she eat hot food. She could take only soft pulpy food. I had to smuggle things for her sake. She loved *ladus*. Most often we had *ladus* in stock and I would give some to Dhai without my mother-in-law's knowledge. I would prepare some *halwa* for her or some vegetable curries of which she was fond. All these would be kept in pots hung from the ceiling in Dhai's room. Mother-in-law loved Dhai, but she disliked any special attention given to her. She would once in a while criticise me indirectly for giving her special attention. This hurt Dhai and she would ask me not to do anything special for her. But I did not pay any heed to her words. I had grown used to criticism from my mother-in-law in these matters, and I went my way. Nathia's mother lived in great misery. I used to give her some extra rice without anyone's knowledge. Mother-in-law loved Moti, but never cared to do anything about her needs. How could the poor woman get on without any help? Mother-in-law had no greed for wealth. She could have saved a lot of money if she had cared, but she did not. She did not make any ornaments for herself nor did she have a collection of fine clothes. She used to wear silver ornaments because it was customary in her family not to wear gold ornaments and she held the belief that changing the custom might bring harm to her children.

Now the question of Benga's marriage came up. Her marriage was arranged with Jagannath Mohanty, who was a brother-in-law of my mother's cousin. My mother-in-law wanted that I should shoulder all the responsibilities of the wedding ceremony. She desired that everything should be done in the way she would like it done, but she would not give a hint of what she wanted. I had to divine her thoughts and act accordingly. We could collect money owed by my father-in-law's clients. Debendra babu and Maga apa took charge of things and saw everything through. I learnt a lot from them, which stood me in good stead throughout my life. They were methodical in everything they did. The wedding was managed on a very low budget. It was decided that some of my ornaments, silk saris, bedstead and the palanquin and other things that I had brought with me would be given to her as dowry. This did not cause me the slightest worry as I

felt that all these things did not belong to me but to the family and that the family was free to dispose of these in any way it liked.

Benga's wedding was over, but my mother-in-law would not stop rambling about it. She could not accept her fatherless-daughter being married to a man who had lost both his parents. No one in the three generations of her family had married someone hailing from Patamundai. Nearly all the menfolk in the groom's family had been married more than once and she feared the same fate might befall her daughter! She complained that the girl had been got rid of because she did not have a father to care for her and so on. She continued grumbling till Jagannath babu rose to the rank of a district judge.

The daughter of my eldest uncle (Mother's brother) was given in marriage to Jagannath Das of Kantapari in 1920. He belonged to the family of a rich landlord and had an M.A. degree. On one occasion, my uncle said, 'I got a son-in-law who was an M.A., but none of my sons possessed an M.A. degree.' This hurt his sons but they could in no way fulfil their father's expectations. The wedding took place at their home in their village, Kumra Jaipur. They had invited even their distant relatives, and all had come to attend it. There I met many old and dear friends and relatives, and spent some time with them.

I saw the dire poverty that prevailed in villages in that area. One could never collect one's clothes, which were spread out in the sun to dry. The villagers simply took them away, either stealing them or begging for them. At mealtimes, children in large numbers, who were brought in by their parents, were made to sit in rows. When my uncle saw this, he instructed his manager to get all the paddy stocked in the granary husked and use it for feeding the hungry in the village as long as the stock lasted. The plantain and lotus leaves in the area, which were used as leaf plates, were exhausted long before the stock of rice ran out. Uncle did not have to arrange leaf plates. People used all sorts of bamboo baskets covered with cloth to take food. They ate even from cement floors washed clean. None of us brought back the spare clothes that we had taken with us. This was the condition of people in villages in Orissa at the end of the First World War. Those of our poor relations who had come to attend the wedding simply stayed on even after the ceremony was over. They left only when the stock of rice was exhausted.

\*\*\*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Ramadevi Choudhury is one of the best known women freedom fighters and social reformers of modern Orissa. She was born in 1889 in Cuttack. Daughter of Gopal Ballabha Das and niece of Madhusudan Das, the eminent Oriya nationalist, Ramadevi received no formal schooling. Married at the age of thirteen to Gopabandhu Choudhury, she soon plunged into the freedom struggle. After independence, inspired by Vinoba, she joined the Sarvodaya movement.

Her autobiography, *Jeevan Pathe* (The Journey of Life) was published in 1984. *Jeevan Pathe* offers a fascinating chronicle of Ramadevi's life and times. While illuminating aspects of her many-sided personality, it also provides an account of the key events of the freedom struggle in Orissa.

One may read it with nostalgia for the old days and curiosity about conditions prevailing then: how she enrolled Congress members, how she coped with her imperious mother-in-law, her family life, the efforts to promote women's literacy, social work in rural areas, and how Ramadevi worked, tactful and reserved, and got things done, mostly despite opposition. A life lived on the cutting edge of great public events has been narrated here with detachment and elegance.

The excerpts describe her marriage, and offer a glimpse into her immediate and extended families. The incidents which etch themselves in her memory have something to do with the glaring disparity between affluence and poverty. The degradation poverty brings about in human beings affected her deeply even when she was a young bride. She honestly describes a feudal society where women had but very few options. The excerpts bring out her broad and sympathetic outlook.

**ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:** Supriya Kar translates from Oriya into English. Her areas of interest include Women's Writing, Autobiography, and Translation. She has recently co-edited *One Step towards the Sun: Short Stories by Women from Orissa* (Rupantar 2010). She can be contacted at kar.sup@gmail.com.

***A Leaf in the Stream***

Sridhar Das

*Translated by Mary Mohanty*

**Sridhar Das** (1901-1988) was an eminent educationist, a noted lexicographer and a translator. In *A Leaf in the Stream*, he reminisces about his struggle for survival without bitterness, without regret. He continued to cherish certain principles and values even when the future became uncertain and dire poverty stared him in the face. He tells the story of his struggle with humour and humility, qualities that enable him to emerge as a sharply observant witness to an eventful era. His autobiography offers fascinating glimpses of the educational system in India under British rule, life in a feudatory state in Orissa and the world of Oriya publishing.

**My Literary Activities**

I always dreamt of becoming a poet when I was at school. I had written a few poems on the occasion of the Saraswati puja. These were published in the school magazine. I had even written a poem in Sanskrit and got it revised by Pundit Jagannath Rath. This too

got published. A few of my poems were published in the *Sahakara*, a monthly literary magazine. I translated Scott's *Lady of the Lake* into Oriya, and sent it to Sri Balakrushna Kar, the editor of the *Sahakara*. He published two cantos from this in his magazine. Later, when he learnt that another translation of that poem was about to be published, he did not publish the remaining cantos. Later, the other translation came to be published under the title, *Sarasundari*. In fact, *Sarasundari* was much better than the translation I had done. I had written a poem titled, 'Dust' which was published in the fifth issue of the *Sahakara* in 1929. I felt that my poems lacked poetic fervour. However, while living in Boud, I was compelled by circumstances to write a few poems to mark various occasions.

I took to writing prose. I wrote a few commentaries on and forewords to a few college textbooks and sent these to publishers. In this respect, I followed the example of Prof. Artaballabha Mohanty, the founder of *Prachi Samiti*, who was like a *guru* to me. Then I found that there were many educative books in English, which should be translated into Oriya. Of these, I first chose *Gulliver's Travels*, and then went on to render *Oliver Twist* into Oriya. The Government approved these two books as textbooks, and the publisher made huge profits out of them. I also received some money. I felt greatly encouraged by this and published translations of abridged versions of many English books and they became very popular. Even now, the publishing house, Grantha Mandir keeps bringing out these translated books as part of its 'World Literature Series'. Similarly, I translated into Oriya a few Sanskrit books like *Hitopadesh*, and *Panchatantra*. Of many such books I had written, a few came to be approved as textbooks. After textbooks got nationalised, the need to write such books no longer arose. So I compiled two dictionaries and edited two dictionaries, which had been published earlier.

Students' Store was compiling a few text-books. I gave two articles to them and received ten rupees by way of remuneration. Then I compiled for this publisher many other books. On the first year, I received more than eighty rupees as royalty for my book titled *Laghu Byakaran*. I received about one thousand rupees per year after my book *Sarbasara Byakarana* came to be published. The money I made by writing books exceeded what I received as my salary. This income from writing books was of great help when I built a house and purchased a plot of land at Banapur. But in 1948, the shareholders of Students' Store quarreled among themselves, parted ways and set up four or five separation bookstores. As a result, I no longer received any royalty from Students' Store. I received around one thousand rupees for an article from the Board of Secondary Education, Government of Orissa, when it took up publishing text-books. I devoted myself to translating books and made a little money. I also received remuneration as a question-setter and examiner from Utkal University. Had I not earned

money from these sources, the journey of my life would have become extremely difficult.

### **Life after Retirement**

I had started my career as a teacher and had tried my best to equip myself for this vocation. After working for twenty-four years as a school-teacher, I became a lecturer in a college. Of course, I was offered lectureship in Ravenshaw College, but I did not accept it for fear that I would not be able to support my family in Cuttack with a meagre income. Later, I joined Christ College and performed my duties without any difficulty. The first principal of the college, Sri Brajananda Mohanty, was an ideal person. A peaceful atmosphere prevailed in the college due to his able and just management of its affairs. After his retirement, all kinds of problems cropped up, which continue to affect the college. Those who succeeded Brajananda babu lacked his sincerity and his nobility of character. I retired from the college in June 1968. I did not get anything except the money I had got deposited in my provident fund. Around this time, my wife underwent a serious operation and was admitted to the hospital. So I thought better of protesting against the injustice and chose to keep quiet.

The rice, which I used to receive from the farmlands at Banapur every year, was enough for my small family. All my three sons were working at different places. At home, there were only three of us: I myself, my wife and a servant. I constructed a house with the money I got by selling my land in Banapur and from my provident fund. I decided to support my family somehow by letting out a part of the house after I got it constructed. I also made a little money by translating books. At least, I managed to escape abject poverty. In 1970, I borrowed a little money for the wedding of my second son, but I repaid the debt in a short time. Self-reliance was the source of my strength as well as my weakness. Though my sons earned quite a lot, I never asked them to help me. But I once went to the law court when a tenant did not pay the rent for three years and refused to vacate the house. I did not succeed in getting the rent arrears and I also had to pay my lawyer his fees. On that occasion, I had received help from my eldest son.

After retirement, I spent most of the time either writing or reading books. I read novels,

short stories and books on a variety of subjects. These not only helped me pass the time, they also enabled me to earn a little money by writing books. But, around 1978, my eyes started giving me trouble, and around 1980 my eyesight almost failed. It was not possible for me either to read or write. Medical tests revealed that one of my eyes was completely damaged and that the other one might improve slightly through surgery. But I was not in a position to afford the operation and I was not sure if my youngest son, who was staying with me could spare the time to look after me after the operation. On account of my eye problems, I was compelled to remain idle.

### Honours Received

I have already said that I always wanted to write books, even if I earned very little from writing. When the government nationalized textbook publication, I devoted myself to translating mainly English and Sanskrit texts into Oriya. I did not make much money out of this activity, either. But these translated books were educative and they touched the hearts of young students. But nobody regarded it as a significant contribution to children's literature. However, my work brought me recognition. .

The diamond jubilee of Utkal Sahitya Samaj was held in 1972, and, on this occasion, I, along with others, received a letter of appreciation. I remember that Pundit Banamber Acharya and Dr Radhacharan Panda, were among all those who had been felicitated on this occasion.

In 1974, while going through an article in the magazine, *The Soviet Land*, I came across an advertisement. I learnt from it, like every year, after the death of Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, this year, too, prizes would be given on behalf of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Society. The prize amounted to five thousand rupees. Ten special prizes each amounting to fifteen hundred rupees had also been instituted. Translation of Russian literature into an Indian language was also one of the categories for which a prize was to be given. By this time four of my translations from Russian literature-*Tolstoy's Stories- I*, *Tolstoy's Stories-II*, *Gorky's Stories*, and *Chekov's Stories* - had already been published. I wanted to submit these four books for the competition. Four copies of each book were to be despatched. I asked the publisher to supply me with four copies of each book. But he discouraged me and dissuaded me from sending books worth fifty rupees unnecessarily. For my part, I too was not optimistic. However, one of my friends brought me four copies of each title and I sent these. The prizes were awarded on 14 November, on the birthday of Jawaharlal Nehru. The awardees had been informed of the decision. One or

two day after 14 November, I came across the list of the names of the winners from the newspaper and the names of those who had received the prizes from the Vice-President. Immediately I wrote a letter to the secretary of the society saying that I should have been informed that I had won the prize. I received a reply telling me that a letter had been sent to me earlier, and a copy of that letter was also enclosed for my reference. I wrote to him requesting that the prize money be sent to me, but I received a letter saying that it would be given to me at Cuttack through the Calcutta branch of the Society. About two months later, an official of 'The Soviet Land' came to Cuttack from Calcutta. A meeting was held at ISCS office at Barabati stadium and I was presented with a certificate, a bronze medal and a cheque for one thousand and five hundred rupees. The details of this meeting with photographs were published in one of the issues of the *Soviet Land*.

Narayan Mohapatra was among the litterateurs who had been felicitated by Orissa Sahitya Academy in 1972. We had co-authored many grammar books and a book titled *Bibidha Kosha*. He had not written any other book on his own. Many wondered how Orissa Sahitya Academi felicitated him instead of me. May be for this reason, in 1978, I was felicitated and was presented with a shawl and a letter of appreciation by the Academy.

I retired from Christ College in the summer of 1968. The lecturers organised a small meeting to bid me farewell. After many years, perhaps, at the initiative of some lecturers of this college, the *Oriya Sahitya Samaj* (Oriya Literary Society) of the college held a meeting and felicitated me.

### **My Beliefs and Experiences**

I have always looked upon myself as a leaf floating down a stream. I never knew which direction my life would take. During the First World War, I tried to go to Mesopotamia, but failed on account of being underage. Although Lakshminaryan Sahu had got the famous Oriya businessman of Rangoon, G.S. Behera, to promise to send me to Japan to learn glass technology, the plan did not materialise for some reason. I tried to become a member of Servants of India Society. As I was not a graduate at the time, my application for membership was rejected. I have not kept count of the number of times I have met with failure in life. I succeeded only when I tried very hard to become a qualified

teacher. This job took me to many places. In the end, I have got stuck in Cuttack. What direction my floating life-leaf will take and who guides it, I don't know. Now, at the dusk of my life, I feel utterly helpless. At times, I feel I am the most helpless creature on earth. I have slept in a hut and also lived in *pucca* house made of bricks. I have endured biting cold unable to afford warm clothing, and I have also warmed myself under shawls worth hundreds of rupees. I have walked hundreds of miles on foot, and have also rode on horses, elephants and motor cars.

I have watched silent films and talkies. On television, I have watched man landing on the moon and bringing stones from there. I have eaten plain rice and also rice cooked in ghee. I do not know if I have become a poor man or a rich man. Rich and poor are relative terms after all. Someone, who seems rich compared with one person, may seem poor compared with another. Similarly, I cannot decide whether I am happy or unhappy. Many of my contemporaries have left for their heavenly abodes. I have looked upon some of them as happy; but it is hard to say if they were really happy when they were alive. I have often considered myself utterly unhappy. But I cannot say whether there are people who are not unhappier than me. Perhaps, like light and darkness, happiness and unhappiness complement, and co-exist with, each other.

I do not know if I am a sinner or a pious man. There are no yardsticks with the help of which virtue and vice could be measured. So, what seems pious from one point of view may appear sinful from another. To me, only what is approved by our own conscience is virtuous. From this point of view, I do not regard myself a grave sinner.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "A person who saves more wealth than what he needs is guilty of theft." But here the question arises as to how can one decide how much one needs? Fifty rupees might be enough for one person; even one lakh rupees may not suffice another. Thus, it is difficult to follow this advice. Bipinbehari Ray, our philosophy teacher, once said, "We survive by taking help from others in society. So we are morally indebted to our families and society. It is man's duty to repay this moral debt according to his capacity." I subscribe to this view. I have never tried to earn merit and I do not know how to earn it. Many people perform religious rites, but I never believe in these. I have always tried to do my duty and, whenever I have failed, I thought it was the will of God. There was a time when I was an atheist. But now I have come to rely on God: "Oh Lord Hrushikesh, who reside in my heart, I will follow the commands you give me.'

Perhaps this dependence on God has resulted from a feeling of helplessness.

### **A Leaf in the Stream**

The leaf of my life has drifted a long way down the stream of time. It has joined hundreds of other leaves on its way and it has drifted away from them. Some leaves have already sunk. One day, this leaf too will sink suddenly and disappear. Its existence will be blotted out. Who knows what would happen after that? I know my time is up. I do not know what lies beyond death, but one has to believe in the consequences of one's actions.

How am I going to face God? I have spent my life any other animal. So all I can do now is to ask for God's forgiveness and mercy.

\*\*\*

**ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:** Mary Mohanty teaches English at Government Women's College, Puri. She has translated Kuntala Kumari Sabat's novels from Oriya into English.

---

---

**Eight Poems**

Kuntala Kumari Sabat

*Translated by Snehaprava Das*

Kuntala Kumari Sabat, well-known novelist and poet from Orissa, was a dedicated feminist. Her writings display a commitment to a revolutionary change in the conservative attitude of society towards women. She was influenced by Gandhi, Marx and Lenin.

**I Have Never Seen Him****(Mun Ta Taku Keve)**

I have never seen Him  
But sensed his presence within  
My heart is ever drawn towards him

Though he sojourns in some far-off place  
Unknown and unseen.  
In the blossoms of the early spring  
And in the wind-waves  
That come gently swishing  
His presence is felt in everything.  
I find his name written on the leaves and creepers green  
My heart yearns always for him.  
He who owns the nights and the days  
But keeping beyond my finite existence  
Eludes me always.  
I have never called him to me  
He comes uninvited  
I find him in the anguish of my heart  
And the scalding tears my eyes shed,  
As across the dark rainy-sky  
Amidst the clouds the lightening  
Flashing before the eye for one split moment  
And in the next, vanishing.  
I look for him in each and every place  
In the cities and the deserts  
In the arbours and the wilderness.  
I have never won him through love  
He loves me instead  
By some force mysterious at his lotus feet  
Keeps my soul riveted  
I am enraptured in his love in the moon-blanching autumn nights  
He comes for just a moment  
Flooding my heart with light  
The shadow of hundreds of worries  
That hangs over my heart  
In his presence is miraculously dispelled  
In an instant.

\*\*\*

**In This Auspicious Fresh Morning**  
**(Naveena Pravatay)**

In this auspicious fresh morning  
 Who enchants me with such rapturous notes  
 And holds me in a trance  
 My soul is drowned in it at once  
 The mysterious melody of the music  
 Echoes in the bottom of my heart  
 Blushing inwardly I listen  
 Awakened with a start.  
 In this auspicious fresh morning  
 Who enchants me with such rapturous notes  
 Like the gentle breeze of the spring  
 Its ripples to my life a serene joy does bring  
 The enthralling, secret tunes  
 In the bottom of my heart ring.  
 In this auspicious fresh morning  
 Someone gently sounds a knock  
 Who could it be?  
 In a moment of tormenting eagerness  
 Consciousness seeps out of me  
 As if by a chain tied to my feet  
 I am pulled, that someone to meet.  
 In this auspicious fresh morning  
 A tune is played on some lyre  
 The rhapsody fills the sky and the air  
 Across the forests its echo rings  
 Who is it that conquering my heart in an instant  
 In an ecstatic tone sings?  
 In this auspicious fresh morning  
 The vision of my adored one  
 Has flashed before my eyes  
 Unbridled and restless  
 My heart after it flies  
 Wandering, aimless in a frenzied haste.  
 \*\*\*

**Spring Time**  
**(Basantey)**

I shall not speak of melancholic thoughts  
In these gay hours of spring  
Joining together the snapped cords of my heart  
A melodious tune shall I sing.  
The soft, cool breeze from the south now blows  
In the forests and groves  
The cuckoo's cadence echoes  
The air around is filled with  
The smell of the mango buds  
A fresh sun has come up in the east  
Dispelling the winter-sloth.  
I shall be happy and no more shed  
Silent tears in gloom  
Merry flowers on the tender fresh twigs  
Have now begun to bloom.  
Wherever the eyes turn a forest-  
-Of flowers they meet  
The atmosphere is thick with the scent  
The gay blossoms emit.  
The face of the earth glows with the  
Lovely smile of the flower-buds  
Carrying a basket of flowers she waits  
To worship what gods?  
No more shall I be glum and morose  
My face dark and pale  
A tale of new hopes, the bees in my ears  
Humming secretly tell.  
The lotus that has bloomed in the pond  
In a shining pink hue  
Has brightened the water that is sweet,  
Clear, and clean and blue.  
When the lotus trembles in the breeze  
Such fragrance floats in form of the pollen-grains  
Every heart is enchanted and forgets  
All sorrow, all penury and pain.  
To the tales of woe and the harsh words that hurt  
I shall no longer listen

Never shall I see tears of agony  
Trickling down the chin.  
Let the lyre of my heart  
Melodious tunes play  
And in the sacred duties my soul engrossed may  
Smiling like a flower I shall perform the duties  
That life demands from me  
Cheerfully I shall set out to work  
And never shall idle be.  
\*\*\*

**In The Summer**  
**(Kharadeeney)**

In the hot noon of summer  
The heart burns with thirst  
But when the shadow of the afternoon  
Spreads over the earth-  
At intervals, a cuckoo begins to sing  
And a wave of joy floods my whole being.  
The sweet music of the flute  
The cowherd boys play  
Comes floating from the forest far away.  
From what places, unknown and unseen  
Carried on the waves of the wind  
An exotic fragrance floats in.  
The tender blossoms of Sirisa and Patali  
And the lovely jasmines that bloom in the evening—  
A garland shall I string.  
To worship you, in a tray shall I carry it  
And offer, O Lord, at your holy feet.  
\*\*\*

**Like A Star**  
**(Tarati Paraye)**

Like a star you blinked at me lovingly  
From the distant sky  
The sins of my life were absolved instantly  
With just that one glance from your eye.  
My breath came out in quick gasps  
My eyes melted in ecstasy  
The hidden corners of my heart were stirred  
With a hitherto unfelt glee.  
The whole of my body began to throb  
When you flicked at me  
That one tender look of love.  
Like a star for an instant  
You hid from my eyes when the clouds  
Sailed over it  
In the maddening fear at the thoughts of parting  
My heart forgot to beat.  
\*\*\*

**Living In Hope**  
(*Aasha*)

I have been living in the hope  
That I shall tell you everything  
When I meet you—  
But you never show yourself  
And what pain, what agony, only for you  
I have to pass through!  
In expectation my days float by  
And the hope grows thinner by the day,  
While I wait my gaze fixed on your way  
Month after month, into years dissolve away.  
\*\*\*

**In The Early Hours Of Morning**  
**(Pahantaru Kiyee)**

(1)

In the early hours of morning  
Someone knocked at the door of my heart  
Though it is halfway through the day  
I keep my ears trained for that sound  
Come back it may;  
But never returned once that it went  
My heart is clouded with disappointment.

(2)

In the early hours of morning  
Someone softly spoke to me  
A mysterious whisper that  
Stirred the very bottom of my being.  
The voice was gentle and melodious  
Soaked in the dew of the dawn  
But I failed to make out what it said  
And hence feel restless and withdrawn.

\*\*\*

**'Ashadha' Ecstasy**  
**(Ashadha Nisha)**

Streaks of lightning dance  
Across the blanket of rain clouds  
In a shattering, startling flash;  
Drunk with the joy of Ashadha's heavy showers  
The jasmines bloom in a white-mass.  
The throe in someone's eyes in the sky far off  
As if melting has come flooding below,  
Carrying its smell of wetness  
The waves of thought flow;  
And the air is thick with the fragrance  
From the flowers that bloom in many a row.

\*\*\*

**He Comes****(Aashey)**

Riding the white-canopied chariot of the soft moonlight

He comes

Breathing life into the Shefali buds that send  
Scent-waves flooding through the bowers of night

He comes;

Does the gentle touch of the melodious breeze

Scatter dusts of scent?

For a glimpse of what image, like a bird my heart

Soars to the firmament?

He touches the air heavy with fragrance with quick, furtive lips

But as I turn to catch him, quickly flees out of my reach.

\*\*\*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Kuntala Kumari Sabat is an influential feminine voice of the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century that has strongly advocated the cause of women. A dedicated feminist, Kuntala Kumari had worked hard and with commitment to bring about a revolutionary change in the conservative attitude of the society relating to the status of women. Kuntala Kumari was greatly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence. She was considerably influenced by the ideologies and social philosophy of Marx and Lenin and believed that the progress of a nation is symbiotic with an economic growth that is uniform at all levels of the society and is not just confined to its upper segment.

A doctor by profession, Kuntala Kumari possessed a multi-dimensional literary talent. She was a novelist of the first order, a poet, and a journalist at the same time. While her novels like *Raghu Arakshit* depict the culture and the socio-economic picture of early twentieth century rural Orissa, novels like *Bhranti* and *Parashmani* are poignant tales of the sacrifice of women for their social commitment and moral responsibility. Kuntala Kumari was awarded the prestigious Utkal Bharathi Sammana (1925) at the young age of twenty-five for her literary achievements.

Besides being a novelist of top order, Kuntala Kumari was a poet of eminence. The hauntingly beautiful lyric and the arresting melody of her poems transport the readers to a world beyond. The eight poems translated here, have a subtle but discernible aura of the romantic-mystique that immediately brings poets like Blake and Wordsworth into mind. Kuntala Kumari, in her mystic moods, senses a presence in all objects of nature which though invisible, is all pervasive. She feels it in the gentle breeze of Spring and the cuckoo's song:

'In this auspicious fresh morning  
Who enchants me with such rapturous notes?  
In the gentle breeze of spring, its ripples to my heart  
A serene joy bring.'

(from "In this Auspicious Fresh Morning").

Lines such as these carry a faint but unmistakable echo of the famous "And I have felt a Presence that disturbs me with joy."

An ever-elusive, disturbing Presence haunts her and holds her heart under a magical spell. It 'touched the air thick with fragrance with quick, furtive lips; but as I turn to catch it, quickly flees out of my reach,' (from "He Comes"). Her heart constantly yearns to merge into that unseen 'presence' to which she is inseparably attached: 'I have been living in hope that I shall tell you everything when I meet you; but you never show yourself, and what pain, what agony only for you I have to go through.' (from "Living in Hope")

Translating Kuntala Kumari Sabat's poems has been a delightful and engaging experience for me. Translation, as we all know, is not just an act of transfiguring the original but a creative pursuit in itself. A translated text, to read like an original, demands effective handling of two major factors, loyalty to the original text and a smooth and unhindered readability. It is not always possible to manoeuvre the sheer musicality and lyricism of the poems into the English language-structure with absolute exactness. I have, therefore, taken a little liberty here and there to recast the originals in a new mould with all honesty and sincerity.

**ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:** Snehaprava Das has translated *Padmamali* (Umesh Chandra Sarkar), the first novel in Oriya, into English. Her other works include the English translation of Baishnaba Charan Das 's novel, *The World Within* and *Bibasini, A Historical Romance* (Ramsankar Ray). Several stories of prominent story writers in Oriya

translated into English by her have been published in *The Orissa Review*, *Indian Literature*, *The Little Magazine*, *Rock Pebbles*, *Celebrating Creativity* (Hyderabad, 2011) and other literary journals and magazines. She has translated a number of poems and excerpts from biographies and autobiographies. She also translates from English to Oriya. Her translations from English to Oriya, which include poems of Mary Brook, Elizabeth Jennings, P.B. Shelly and stories by Saki and Oscar Wilde, have been published in *Prativeshi*, *Anupam Bharat*, *Kahani* and several other magazines.

As a translator, she believes an honest and accurate transfer of the mood and the spirit of the original text into the translated work is the key to pure translation. A Ph.D in Translation Studies and Comparative Literature from Utkal University, she teaches English at Binayak Acharya Government College at Berhampur, Orissa.

---

---

*We thank Professor Jatindra Kumar Nayak for helping select and make accessible for publication on the webjournal these translations from Oriya.*

**Sāhitya**

**Journal of the Comparative Literature Association of India  
Number 1 (February, 2011)**

**Published from Delhi and Kolkata by the Comparative Literature Association of India**

*Copyright for essays published here rests with the contributors. Copyright for translations published here rest with the translators. No text published here may be reproduced anywhere else without the written permission of the copyright holders. If you need our help to contact them, please email us at [claikolkata@gmail.com](mailto:claikolkata@gmail.com).*