



## poems

### Monsoonal Song-Lyrics

by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Fakrul Alam

#### Megher Pore Megh

Clouds pile up on clouds; darkness descends.  
Why would you keep me sitting all alone, next to your portals?  
In the workaday world, I would move amidst multitudes,  
But this day I keep waiting, heartened by your promise.  
If you do not reveal yourself, or if you choose to ignore me,  
How will I spend this rain-filled day?  
I let my eyes roam; I keep on gazing at the gloomy sky.  
My soul cries out and wanders with the wayward wind.

#### Aj Kichute Jei Na

Nothing seems to take the load of my mind this day,  
The daysky is dark with clouds — alas,  
I was hoping he'd come, did he fail to find me?  
The thought of what he couldn't say makes me desolate.  
Through the moist wind again and again  
The entire sky calls out to him, but in vain.  
The deep sigh of a rainy day lets me know he won't return —  
Has he left, his heart full of disappointment, at a failed assignment?

#### Asharshondha

The Ashar evening sets in, the day is spent.  
The rampant rain pour down every now and then.  
Sitting alone in corner of the room, what is it that I keep thinking?  
Blowing across the jasmine forests, what does the moist wind keep saying?

My heart's sap is in spate; I can't seem to find the shore —  
The fragrance of wet wildflowers makes my soul cry.  
What tunes will help me fill the hours and pass this dark night?  
Anxiously, I wonder: what mazes must I wander into to forget everything?

#### Ashar, Kotha Hote

Ashar, from where have you been freed this day?  
Wait for a while in your dark attire at the edge of the fields.  
Your flag of victory stands unfurled over the heavens,  
From the east to which westward route must you fly?  
Rumbling like a kettle-drum, who would you arouse?  
The palmyra tree leaves seem drunk with the spirit of dancing.  
The sal forests sway with the wind as if on a high.  
Who is it that darts back and forth across the sky,  
Tumbles and tosses from the shades of the clouds —  
Who is it that stirs the waves of the overflowing rivers?

#### Bajromanik Diye Gantha

Ashar, how delicately thread is your garland of jewelled thunderbolts!  
Your dark beauty is set off by lighting in flashes.  
Your spells have the power to melt stones and sprout crops —  
On you winged feet you carry from sandy wastes a tray of flowers.  
On withered leaves you come in torrential and triumphant showers.  
Your clouds resound like tomtoms in such festive abandon.  
In your deluge of delicious green, revive the parched earth,  
But keep away your awesome, life-threatening floods.

#### Oi Je Jhorer Meghe

There-in the lap of the storm clouds — the rain comes,  
Its hair loosened, its sari's borders flying!  
Its songbeats flutter the mango, blackberry, sal and rain-trees,  
Making their leaves dance and murmuri in excitement.  
My eyes, moving in beat to its music,  
Wander in the falling rain, losing themselves amidst the sylvan shades.

Time and again, whose familiar voice is it calling me in the wet wind,  
Stirring a storm of anguish in my soul on this lonely day?

#### Badal-Meghe Madal Baje

The rain-clouds are tom-toms rumbling across the heavens.  
Their vibrant tones and reverberations flutter my heart.  
Their distinctive tunes make me forget myself.  
What was in the thicket of the soul as a hidden pain and a tucked away tune,  
Spreads everywhere this day in song after song,  
In the moist breeze, and in the shades of the cloud-coloured forests.

#### Ashrubhara Bedona

Tear-filled emotions stir everywhere.  
Whose desire is it that resounds in the dark clouds this day?  
They speed across' tempestuously,  
Whose lament can be heard in their rumbling?  
Who has devoted himself to such lonely and futile worship?

#### Amar Din Phuralo

My day ends in anticipation this rainy evening  
In the midst of dense clouds and thick showers.  
My soul fills up to the brim with the music  
Of rain cascading down the forest shades.  
From time to time vibrant sounds reverberate across the heavens  
As if a mridunga with its percussion sound is beating out a rhythm.  
Someone who lives a far has seemingly come close to me this day,  
And in the darkness keeps standing silently.  
On his chest lilt a garland woven of the pain of parting,  
Redolent of heavenly scents exuded from secret unions.  
I think I know the sound of his footsteps —  
I yield to the allure of his unfamiliar attire.

Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at Dhaka University

## musings

# The Greater Common Good

by Arundhati Roy

Continued from last week

In a few days a bulldozer arrived and flattened standing crops. The villagers were made to sign papers and were paid a sum of money, which they assumed was payment for their destroyed crops. When the helipad was ready, a helicopter landed on it, and out came Prime Minister Nehru. Most of the villagers couldn't see him because he was surrounded by policemen. Nehru made a speech. Then he pressed a button and there was an explosion on the other side of the river. After the explosion he flew away. That was the inauguration of the earliest avatar of the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Could Nehru have known when he pressed that button that he had unleashed an incubus?

After Nehru left, the government of Gujarat arrived in strength. It acquired 1,600 acres of land from 950 families from six villages. The people were Tadvi tribals, but because of their proximity to the city of Baroda, not entirely unversed in the ways of a market economy. They were sent notices and told that they would be paid cash compensations and given jobs on the dam site. Then the nightmare began. Trucks and bulldozers rolled in. Forests were felled, standing crops destroyed. Everything turned into a whirl of jeeps and engineers and cement and steel. Mohan Bhai Tadvi watched eight acres of his land with standing crops of jowar, toovar and cotton being levelled. Overnight he became a landless labourer. Three years later he received his cash compensation of Rs 250 an acre in three instalments.

Dersukh Bhai Vesa Bhai's father was given Rs 3,500 for his house and five acres of land with its standing crops and all the trees on it. He remembers walking all the way to Rajpipla (the district headquarters) as a little boy, holding his father's hand. He remembers how terrified they were when they were called into the Tehsildar's office. They were made to surrender their compensation notices and sign a receipt. They were illiterate, so they didn't know how much the receipt was made out for. Everybody had to go to Rajpipla but they were always summoned on different days, one by one. So they couldn't exchange information or compare amounts.

Gradually, out of the dust and bulldozers, an offensive, diffuse configuration emerged, Kevadia Colony. Row upon row of ugly cement flats, offices, guest houses, roads. All the graceless infrastructure of Big Dam construction. The villagers' houses were dismantled and moved to the periphery of the colony, where they remain today, squatters on their own land. Those that created trouble were intimidated by the police and the Construction Company. The villagers told me that in the Contractor's headquarters they have a 'lock-up' like a police lock-up, where recalcitrant villagers are incarcerated and beaten.

The people who were evicted to build Kevadia Colony do not qualify as 'Project-Affected' in Gujarat's Rehabilitation package. Some of them work as servants in the officers' bungalows and waiters in the guest house built on the land where their own houses once stood. Can anything be more poignant?

Those who had some land left, tried to cultivate it, but the Kevadia munic-

pality introduced a scheme in which they brought in pigs to eat uncollected refuse on the streets. The pigs stray into the villagers' fields and destroy their crops.

In 1992, after 30 years, each family has been offered a sum of Rs 12,000 per hectare, upto a maximum of Rs 36,000, provided they agree to leave their homes and go away! Yet 40 per cent of the land that was acquired is lying unused. The government refuses to return it. The 11 acres acquired from Deviben, who is a widow now, have been given over to the Swami Narayan Trust (a big religious sect). On a small portion of it, the Trust runs a little school. The rest it cultivates, while Deviben watches through

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the barbed wire fence. On the 200 acres acquired in the village of Gora, villagers were evicted and blocks of flats were built. They lay empty for years. Eventually the government hired it for a nominal fee to Jai Prakash Associates, the dam contractors, who, the villagers say, sub-let it privately for Rs 32,000 a month. (Jai Prakash Associates, the biggest dam contractors in the country, the real nation-builders, own the Sidharth Continental and the Vasant Continental in Delhi.)

On an area of about 30 acres there is an absurd cement pvd 'replica' of the ancient Shoolpaneshwar temple that was submerged in the reservoir. The same political formation that plunged a whole nation into a bloody, medieval nightmare because it insisted on destroying an old mosque to dig up a non-existent temple, thinks nothing of sub-

merging a hallowed pilgrimage route and hundreds of temples that have been worshipped in for centuries. It thinks nothing of destroying the sacred hills and groves, the places of worship, the ancient homes of the gods and demons of tribal people.

It thinks nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths and rock paintings, the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age.

What can one say?

In Kevadia Colony, the most barbaric joke of all is the wildlife museum. The Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre gives you a quick, comprehensive picture of the government's commitment to conservation.

The Sardar Sarovar reservoir, when the dam is at its full height, is going to submerge about 13,000 hectares of prime forest land. (In anticipation of submergence, the forest began to be felled many greedy years ago). Environmentalists and conservationists were quite rightly alarmed at the extent of loss of biodiversity and wildlife habitat that the submergence would cause. To mitigate this loss, the government decided to expand the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary that straddles the dam on the south side of the river. There is a hare-brained scheme that envisages drowning animals from the submerged forests swimming their way to 'wildlife corridors' that will be created for them, and setting up home in the New! Improved! Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary. Presumably wildlife and biodiversity can be protected and maintained only if human activity is restricted and traditional rights to use forest resources curtailed. About 40,000 tribal people from 101 villages within the boundaries of the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary depend on the forest for a livelihood. They will be 'persuaded' to leave. They are not included in the definition of Project Affected.

Where will they go? I imagine you know by now.

Whatever their troubles in the real world, in the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary Interpretation Centre (where an old stuffed leopard and a mouldy sloth bear have to make do with a shared corner) the tribal people have a whole room to themselves. On the walls there are clumsy wooden carvings-government approved tribal art, with signs that say 'Tribal Art'. In the centre, there is a life-sized thatched hut with the door open. The pot's on the fire, the dog is asleep on the floor and all's well with the world. Outside, to welcome you, are Mr and Mrs Tribal. A lumpy, papier mache couple, smiling.

Smiling. They're not even permitted the grace of rage. That's what I can't get over.

Oh, but have I got it wrong? What if they're smiling voluntarily, bursting with National Pride? Brimming with the joy of having sacrificed their lives to bring drinking water to thirsty millions in Gujarat?

For 20 years now, the people of Gujarat have waited for the water they believe the Wonder Canal will bring them. For years the government of Gujarat has invested 85 per cent of the state's irrigation budget into the Sardar Sarovar Projects. Every smaller,

quicker, local, more feasible scheme has been set aside for the sake of this. Election after election has been contested and won on the 'water ticket'. Everyone's hopes are pinned to the Wonder Canal. Will she fulfil Gujarat's dreams?

From the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the Narmada flows through 180 km of rich lowland, into the Arabian sea in Bharuch. What the Wonder Canal does, more or less, is to re-route most of the river, turning it almost 90 degrees northward. It's a pretty drastic thing to do to a river. The Narmada estuary in Bharuch is one of the last known breeding places of the Hilsa, probably the hottest contender for India's favourite fish. The Stanley Dam wiped out Hilsa from the Cauvery River in South India, and Pakistan's Ghulam Mohammed dam destroyed its spawning area on the Indus. Hilsa, like the salmon, is an anadromous fish-born in freshwater, migrating to the ocean as a smolt and returning to the river to spawn. The drastic reduction in water flow, the change in the chemistry of the water because of all the sediment trapped behind the dam, will radically alter the ecology of the estuary and modify the delicate balance of fresh water and sea water which is bound to affect the spawning. At present, the Narmada estuary produces 13,000 tonnes of Hilsa and freshwater prawn (which also breed in brackish water). About 10,000 fisher families depend on it for a living.

The Morse Committee was appalled to discover that no studies had been done of the downstream environment-no documentation of the riverine ecosystem, its seasonal changes, biological species or the pattern of how its resources are used. The dam builders had no idea what the impact of the dam would be on the people and the environment downstream, let alone any ideas on what steps to take to mitigate it.

The government simply says that it will alleviate the loss of Hilsa fisheries by stocking the reservoir with hatchery-bred fish. (Who'll control the reservoir? Who'll grant the commercial fishing to its favourite paying customers?) The only hitch is that so far, scientists have not managed to breed Hilsa artificially. The rearing of Hilsa depends on getting spawn from wild adults, which will, in all likelihood, be eliminated by the dam. Dams have either eliminated or endangered one-fifth of the world's freshwater fish.

So! Quiz question-where will the 40,000 fisherfolk go?

—mail your answers to the Government that Cares dot com.

At the risk of losing readers, (I've been warned several times-How can you write about irrigation? Who the hell is interested?) let me tell you what the Wonder Canal is-and what she's meant to achieve. Be interested, if you want to snatch your future back from the sweaty palms of the Iron Triangle.

Most rivers in India are monsoon-fed. 80-85 per cent of the flow takes place during the rainy months-usually between June and September. The purpose of a dam, an irrigation dam, is to store monsoon water in its reservoir and then use it judiciously for the rest of the year, distributing it across dry land through a system of canals. The area of land irrigated by the canal network is called the command area. How will the

command area, accustomed only to seasonal irrigation, its entire ecology designed for that single pulse of monsoon rain, react to being irrigated the whole year round? Perennial canal irrigation does to soil roughly what anabolic steroids do to the human body. Steroids can turn an ordinary athlete into an Olympic medal-winner, perennial irrigation can convert soil which produced only a single crop a year into soil that yields several crops a year. Lands on which farmers traditionally grew crops that don't need a great deal of water (maize, millet, barley, a whole range of pulses) suddenly yield water-guzzling cash crops-cotton, rice, soya bean, and the biggest guzzler of all (like those

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finned '50s cars), sugarcane. This completely alters traditional crop-patterns in the command area. People stop growing things they can afford to eat; start growing things they can only afford to sell. By linking themselves to the 'market' they lose control over their lives.

Unfortunately, ecologically, this is a poisonous payoff. Even if the markets hold out, the soil doesn't. Over time it becomes too poor to support the extra demands made on it. Gradually, in the way the steroid-using athlete becomes an invalid, the soil becomes depleted and degraded, the agricultural yields begin to wind down. In India, land irrigated by well water is now almost twice as productive as land irrigated by canals. Certain kinds of soil are less suitable for perennial irrigation than others. Perennial canal irrigation raises the level of the water-table. As the water moves up through the soil, it

absorbs salts. Saline water is drawn to the surface by capillary action, and the land becomes water-logged. The 'logged' water (to coin a phrase) is then breathed into the atmosphere by plants, causing an even greater concentration of salts in the soil. When the concentration of salts in the soil reaches one per cent, that soil becomes toxic to plant life. This is what's called salinisation.

A study by the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University says that one-fifth of the world's irrigated land is salt-affected.

By the mid-'80s, 25 million of the 37 million hectares under irrigation in Pakistan was estimated to be either salinised or water-logged or both. In India the estimates vary between 6 and 10 million hectares. According to 'secret' government studies, more than 52 per cent of the Sardar Sarovar command area is prone to water-logging and salinisation.

And that's not the end of the bad news.

The 460-km long, concrete-lined Sardar Sarovar Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network of branch canals and sub-branch canals is designed to irrigate a total of two million hectares of land spread over 12 districts. The districts of Kutch and Saurashtra (the billboards of Gujarat's Thirst campaign) are at the very tail end of this network.

The system of canals superimposes an arbitrary concrete grid on the existing pattern of natural drainage in the command area. It's a little like reorganising the pattern of reticulate veins on the surface of a leaf. When a canal cuts across the path of a natural drain, it blocks the natural flow of the seasonal water and leads to water-logging. The engineering solution to this is to map the pattern of natural drainage in the area and replace it with an alternate, artificial drainage system that is built in conjunction with the canals. The problem, as you can imagine, is that doing this is enormously expensive. The cost of drainage is not included as part of the Sardar Sarovar Projects. It usually isn't, in most irrigation projects. Here's why.

David Hopper, the World Bank vice-president for South Asia, has admitted that the Bank does not usually include the cost of drainage in its irrigation projects in South Asia because irrigation projects with adequate drainage are not economically viable. It costs five times as much to provide adequate drainage as it does to irrigate the same amount of land. The Bank's solution to the problem is to put in the irrigation system and wait for salinity and water-logging to set in. When all the money's spent, and the land is devastated, and the people are in despair, who should pop by? Why, the friendly neighbourhood Banker! And what's that bulge in his pocket? Could it be a loan for a Drainage Project?

In Pakistan the World Bank financed the Tarbela (1977) and Mangla Dam (1967) Projects on the Indus. The command areas are water-logged. Now the Bank has given Pakistan a \$785 million loan for a drainage project. In India, in Punjab and Haryana it's doing the same.

To be continued