

R A I N R A I N R A I N R A I N R A I N R A I N

To most Dhakaites it's a bucket of piss. Only to the Bengali bourgeoisie fed on a steady diet of Tagore does rain sprout those tender shoots of metaphor, all of which are hoary clichés by now: rain as this, rain as that, rain as life, rain as wife. To your more average citydweller waking up on a Tuesday morning, rain means a sodden wait at a busstop, the sad envy of looking at life's more fortunate ones gliding by safe and snug in their cars, of the misery of blocked drains, of stacked filth and garbage now overlaid with the smell of wet dog hide, of unmentionables floating in the gutters, of drowning busters looking unblinkingly straight at malaria, dengue and ague.

And yet, and yet, and yet even the poorest among us welcomes the cooling rain, even the most deprived of Bengalis enjoys the interludes between cloudbursts. What would Bengal be without rain? Monsoon clouds racing and wheeling across a brindled sky like a flock of startled pigeons, the heavens opening up, the sound and light show rocking at maximum amp. Or it can be something almost invisible, ilshiguri, lines of charcoal slanting very finely over paanshops, rooftops, windowsills, a thing of gauze like an Edwardian poem. Naked children in the streets; the light inside fish markets murkier than usual because the sun's been half-strangled, a slaphappy muck and mud everywhere. And inside our small homes the smell of wet clothes on clotheslines strung

inside green-latticed verandahs, all mixed in with the starchy smell of rice cooking. And if you venture outdoors:

Spish splash
I'm taking a bath...

And so any wonder that Bengalis have written, and continue to write, almost obsessively about rain. Here are these three translated poems by three quite different poets, two very famous, one far less so. I wish I could have printed Shaheed Quaderi's 'Brishti, Brishti' but that one proved to be a tough nut to crack (maybe one of these days!). These translations, of course, are nothing compared to the entrancingly onomatopoeic originals. Still, should you find yourself reading these poems in Dhaka on a rainy day, then why, all you have to do is lift your eyes from the page to the window and see it gently falling, or briskly beating down, or hammering on the sill with barely contained fury. And then all you have to do is return your eyes to the page and see yet more rain, a vivid downpour, with 'all of time lost in its dense fall.'



A Rainy Day

BUDDHADEVA BOSE
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Since morning it's been the rain's turn
On this sky-hiding, darkly-wrapped day,
As if today wet *Srabon's* promised.
To repay all of bright *Boishak's* debt,
Rim jhim sings the endless blind cascade
All of time lost in its dense fall.
As if the earth knew not days or nights,
Its inhabitants fused together in an incredible dream.

Smoke rises from the pavestones
Trees bow their heads in silence;
The day is dissolved matter, a liquid rush
Perhaps it is for the better, let everything vanish!
Still, it's now nine o'clock! I grab my umbrella
Sit in a tram for my *lete-a-lete* with the office
And through the bars caging a clerical life
Something very wet touches me tenderly.

On this lost, hidden, unearthly day
The whole city, busy-faced, at work
Men in a ratrace inside a cage,
Whose ravenous jaws are wide open even today,
And under whose steady, unrelenting pull
Innumerable umbrellas have blackened the lane,
From whose grasp not even the rich are free
As preoccupied, they zoom on the motorway.

I melt invisibly into the crowd
Walk singlemindedly, one of the faceless.
Someone has squeezed the marrow out of my bones
My frayed shoes slap on the sidewalk
And signalling my failed life:
A two-day stubble, my unlaundered clothes.
When this life-drowning rain descends
On this timeless, dreamladen day,
With lightning chasing away *Srabon*
A thousand sighs in a rudely bolted home
Tied in debt against tomorrow's loan.

The day comes to a close; a rain-ending trance
But the stilled clouds not yet spent,
A trace mix of yellow, green and gold
As a false twilight weighs the chances of more showers.
Ah, this beautiful world, this life!
A priceless gift given so freely,
My daily grind, a bitter poverty
Yet no matter the body's sorrows,
In the still, unsounded depths my soul is free.

Whenever the agony of a workday ends
Then *Srabon* wreathes my breast
With garlands stitched gold and brown.
How fortunate I am to be alive, to be alive!

Tired, free, wounded, eager,
I retrace my steps back to my humble fort
Never again shall I see this day
Its last traces still etched in the sky!
The lane is disgusting, slippery, winding,
Stone chips await the unwary,
And twisting up like an endless argument
Is the wet-coal smoke of a rainy day.
A silent melancholy fills my soul
Snatches my breath away
And wipes away the world from my mind
---Only for the spell to snap when I step through the door!

Sweetly holding the door partly ajar
She stands clad in her bright sari
Partly veiled,
Her face sideways, partly hidden in the shadows.
Ah, all is not lost.
There is the night, there is yet something left.
And in the hollow spaces of my mind
Fulfillment awakens along dreamlines
And the evening's promise glows
Like a lamp held in a slender, bare hand.

I think I know her, and yet I don't,
I don't understand all that I say
While through the million holes of poverty
An endless, restless, vast *Srabon* pours,
In that *kodombo*-blooming, blind alley.
I have nothing with which to gladden her heart,
No tuberose or jasmine or *ju*,
All I can do is stand and look at her
And touch her two black eyes with mine.
An invisible, all-too-familiar tryst
Having leapt over banal deceptions
Now whispers in my ear 'my promise,
I will not forget, never ever will I forget.'

Rain

AMIYA CHAKRABORTY
(translated by Buddhadev Bose)

Dark is this noon as it rains on the soil of my heart
On the dry fields it rains, on the long fields of sand,
On fields a thirst for far horizons;
Falls on the forest the rain, seeps through the veins of the earth,
Deep down in rapturous green, falls the rain on my heart.
On the soft earth of rice-fields, on the unpaved village path,
Falls the rain at noon in an endless monotone.
Drenched, I move in the grass, among the heavy leaves,
Through the still pond's water, in the folds of earth and sky.
Dark is this day as it rains in waterfalls.
Ceaseless in movements of dream and waking.
All through the clouds' commotion and the trembling earth's
response,

On brown stones and fields, on the top of billowy forests,
Back to the earth from my heart, and down within the sea---
It rains.

Harmonic hour of field and cloud---
In flames
In lightning
And whirlwind

Falls the rain on the darkness of creation.
Beyond this pictured rain: the blazing day, the distance,
Impassive fields and sky's muted chanting.

Rain-1

BY MASUD KHAN
(Translated by Fakrul Alam)

It's raining abroad now, in countries close by or far away.
Occasionally a cold wind from some other land blows this way
This summer evening brings with it sadness and beauty
Blowing this way from some distant land!

A cold, cold wind keeps blowing
Slowly stirring desire, fomenting longing
For alien rituals on such an evening.

In the distance, in a riverbank ruled by beauty
In another land, wonderfully wet in the rain,
Lightning flashes start, making
which is just around the corner.
Stirring desire for one's lover steadily
Inevitably, on such an evening!

Towards my homeland!
The cold wind keeps blowing
O my alien lover
Where could you be staying?

Rain-2

It's raining
Over distant lands
Over Brahma's world
Over Rangpur and Bogra's vast expanse
In alluvial plains,
The rain veils Burma's evening fields
And keeps streaming down.

And below these lightning flashes,
At the rain-formed night's third quarter
Radiant races
Spring up at home or abroad
Like hyperactive frogs leaping
Into the unknown.

Provoked by thunder and lightning's violent outbursts
Allured by their promises,
In the thick veil
And swirling stream,
In the darkness or the wet wind,
In the eastern expanse,
Underneath the sky
In vast and empty fields
Under the vast spread-out arum fields of the east
Incredibly, unformed new nations emerge
Innumerable unsteady chaotic nations,
Restless, perturbed, incapable of standing up,
Lending themselves to grotesque maps,
Forming unstable, quivering, permeable boundaries
Governed by ill-defined laws and impotent ombudsmen
And armies marching past unimpressively.
They spring for no good reason
And seem destined to be doomed.

The night draws to a close. The rain too appears spent,
When day's first light breaks out,
Those nations that would thrive and grow
And glow with innumerable rituals and fast-spreading religions
Feel their bodies disintegrating
And disappearing
Under the vast spread-out arum fields of the east.

Masud Khan is one of Bangladesh's younger poets. Fakrul Alam teaches English at Dhaka University.

TRAVEL WRITING

Ajit Baral braves narrow roads and puking women to go to Nepal's Maobaadi areas to teach himself about Janashikkahya.



Travel Ain't Fun

Seasonal Migrants

As land is scarce in hilly villages most of the villagers cannot live solely on their land; even those who have greater tracts of land cannot, for the cost of crop production is, more often than not, greater than the yield. No wonder that hordes of villagers travel down to the cities or the *tarai* in search of work during the dry season. But come summer these villagers start heading back to their villages to sow rice and corn, the staple foods.

It so happened that a group of 30-40 villagers working in brick factories in Bhaktapur, some 20 kilometer east of Kathmandu, were going back to their villages in Rolpa, the hotbed of the Maoist insurgency, in the same bus that I was in. The bus arrived a cool two hours late. And as it later turned out, the bus had gone to Bhaktapur to fetch those toiling migrants.

Puke

Some people get excited at the prospect of sitting beside a woman while travelling. I don't. On the contrary, I pray to God that a woman -- a rural woman at that -- is not plonked on the seat beside me. Why? Because the rural women usually don't get to travel much and, maybe for this reason, when they do they invariably start puking.

Loudly, comprehensively, with that loud *whoau* sound that can be common in Nepali buses trundling around the villages.

This time around there wasn't a woman beside me. Thank God. But...

Among this group of seasonal migrants more than two-thirds were women. And the moment the bus hurtled on the road these women began puking; sure enough, some of them let go with the *whoau* sound. Those who were lucky enough to find a window seat puked out of the window; and those who were not so lucky, puked on the aisle. In no time the bus floor became with puke what the streets of Kathmandu would be after a rainfall. The bus reeked with vomit. Only the wind zipping through the window gave some respite.

Would you want to eat after going through all these? No, surely. But not these women. When the bus stopped for dinner, some of them chewed the rotis they had brought along while others crunched dry noodles, only to start puking all over again. Their puking stopped when we were half way through with our 20 hours travel and, it seems, only when there wasn't anything left in their stomach to puke. My God, I had never seen so many people puking at the same time and for such a long

stretch of time!

Travel Ain't Fun

Travel isn't fun. Not when one is travelling to remote Nepali villages by bus.

While travelling to a remote district, one inevitably has to branch out of a highway and into an unpaved road. At Bhaluhang, which is on the Mahendra Highway, the bus took to the bumpy road going across Piuthan to Rolpa. Leaving Piuthan behind, the bus climbed up the road snaking around the hills of Rolpa. More passengers hopped in. The bus brimmed full. The bus grunted and sputtered. We got down from the bus and ran a 300-meter distance or so to enable it go past a steep climb. We reached the top of a hill and headed downward. Just when we thought that the road ahead was going to be easy the turnings seemed more dangerous: one front wheel off the edge and the bus would go hurtling down, and tomorrow's newspapers would say Bus Accident, All Dead.

We reached Libang, the head-quarter of Rolpa, perched on a small vale at the bottom. Trembling and dizzy with fear.

Developing villages

Villages have to be developed as

Nepal is a country of villages, so goes the cliché. But how? By linking the villages with roads. Which isn't easy in a hilly country like ours.

Many villages in Nepal have now been linked by a road. But

the roads are unpaved. Worse, these roads get swept away whenever the rains start, making hill slopes slide down. A small portion of the road we were taking too was swept away by the overnight rain and we had to fill the broken road

before we could roll ahead. Imagine what would happen to these roads in the summer, which is just around the corner. So much for developing the villages through road linkages.



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I had gone to Libang armed with the names of three persons stationed there who could provide links to the Maobaadis. Unfortunately the two of them were out and the third, a reporter with a national daily, had little to help me with as he had no cultivated relation with the Maoists.

Discussions with people there led me to believe that it

was not going to be easy to get permission to enter into the Maoist areas. Permission had to come from a top cadre and the top cadres are in the capital after the cease-fire. It could take days for such a permission to come, if it came at all. I asked a teacher, who taught at a school some three, four hours walk away from the place where the Maoists are practicing their *janashikkhya*, if the lower rung cadres could tell me something about *janashikkhya*. He told me that they couldn't tell me more than what he knew, as the Maoists now left in the jungles knew only a smattering of Maoist jargon and the gun talk and that I should find some one who is conceptually clear. I asked him what *janashikkhya* was like. In reply he said, 'It is nothing more than training in the Maoist jargon.'

My talks with people were too discouraging for me to want to go deeper into the Maoist areas and that too alone.

And that was that. I took the bus back to Kathmandu, this time thankfully without my puking comrades-in-travel!