SHORT STORY

AMRITA PRITAM (Translated from Punjabi by Raj Gill)

NGOORI was the new bride of the old servant of mv neighbour's neighbour. Every bride is new, for that matter; but she was new in a different way: the second wife of her husband who could not be called new because he had already drunk once at the conjugal well. As such, the prerogatives of being new went to Angoori only. This realization was further accentuated when one considered the five years that passed before they could consummate their union

About six years ago Prabhati had gone home to cremate his first wife. When this was done, Angoori's father approached him and took his wet towel, wringing it dry, a symbolic gesture of wiping away the tears of grief that had wet the towel. There never was a man, though, who cried enough to wet a yard-and-a-half of calico. It had got wet only after Prabhati's bath. The simple act of drying the tear-stained towel on the part of a person with a nubile daughter was as much as to say, 'I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who died. Don't cry anymore. I've even dried your wet towel'.

This is how Angoori married Prabhati. However, their union was postponed for five years, for two reasons: her tender age, and her mother's paralytic attack. When, at last, Prabhati was invited to take his bride away, it seemed he would not be able to, for his employer was reluctant to feed another mouth from his kitchen. But when Prabhati told him that his new wife could keep her own house, the employer agreed

At first, Angoori kept purdah from both men and women. But the veil soon started to shrink until it covered only her hair, as was becoming to an orthodox Hindu woman. She was a delight to both ear and eye. A laughter in the tinkling of her hundred ankle-bells, and a thousand bells in her laughter.

'What are you wearing, Angoori?'

'An anklet. Isn't it pretty?' 'And what's on your toe?'

'Arina.'

'And on your arm?'

'Abracelet.'

'What do they call what's on your forehead?' 'They call it aliband.'

'Nothing on your waist today, Angoori?'

'It's too heavy. Tomorrow I'll wear it. Today, no necklace either. See! The clasp is broken. Tomorrow I'll go to the city to get a new clasp... and buy a nose-pin. I had a big nose-ring. But my mother-inlaw kept it.'

Angoori was very proud of her silver jewellery, elated by the mere touch of her trinkets. Everything she did seemed to set them off to maximum effect.

The weather became hot with the turn of the season. Angoori too must have felt it in her hut where she passed a good part of the day, for now she stayed out more. There were a few huge *neem* trees in front of my house; underneath them an old well that nobody used except an occasional construction worker. The spilt water made several puddles, keeping the atmosphere around the well cool. She often sat near the well to relax.

'What are you reading, bibi?' Angoori asked me one day when I sat

The Weed

under a neem tree reading.

'Want to read it?' 'I don't know reading.'

'Want to learn?'

'Oh, no!'

'Why not? What's wrong with it?' 'It's a sin for women to read!'

'And what about men?' 'For them, it's not a sin'.

'Who told you this nonsense?'

'I just know it.' 'I read. I must be sinning.'

'For city women, it's no sin. It is for village women. We both laughed at this remark.

She had not learned to question all that she was told to believe. I thought that if she found peace in her convictions, who was I to question them?

Her body redeemed her dark complexion, an intense sense of ecstasy always radiating from it, a

resilient sweetness. They say a woman's body is like a lump of dough, some women have the looseness of under-kneaded dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely does a woman have a body that can be equated to rightly-kneaded dough, a baker's pride. Angoori's body belonged to this category, her rippling muscles impregnated with the metallic resilience of a coiled spring. I felt her face, arms, breasts, legs with my eyes and experienced a profound languor. I thought of Prabhati : old, short, loose-jawed, a man whose stature and angularity would be the death of Euclid. Suddenly a funny idea struck me: Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was her napkin, not her taster. I felt a laugh welling up inside me, but I checked it for fear that Angoori would sense what I was laughing about. I asked her how marriages are arranged where she came from

'A girl, when she's five or six, adores someone's feet. He is the husband.

'How does she know it?'

'Her father takes money and flowers and puts them at his feet.'

'That's the father adoring, not the girl.'

'He does it for the girl. So it's the girl herself.'

'But the girl has never seen him before!'

'Yes, girls don't see.'

'Not a single girl ever sees her future husband!'

'No...,' she hesitated. After a long, pensive pause, she added, Γhose in love..... they see them.'

'Do girls in your village have love-affairs?'

'Afew'.

'Those in love, they don't sin?' I remembered her observation egarding education for women

'They don't. See, what happens is that a man makes the girl eat the

weed and then she starts loving him.'

'Which weed?'

'The wild one.



'Doesn't the girl know that she has been given the weed?'

'No, he gives it to her in a paan.

After that, nothing satisfies her but to be with him, her man. I know. I've seen it with my own eyes.'

'Whom did you see?' 'A friend; she was older than

'And what happened?'

'She went crazy. Ran away with

him to the city.' 'How do you know it was

because of the weed? 'What else could it be? Why would she leave her parents. He brought her many things from the city: clothes, trinkets, sweets.

'In the sweets : otherwise how

'Where does this weed come

could she love him?' 'Love can come in other ways.

No other way here?'

'No other way. What her parents hated was that she was that way.' 'Have you seen the weed?'

'No, they bring it from a far country. My mother warned me not to take paan or sweets from anyone. Men put the weed in them.' 'You were very wise. How come your friend ate it?'

'To make herself suffer,' she said sternly. The next moment her face clouded, perhaps in remembering her friend. 'Crazy. She went crazy, the poor thing,' she said sadly. 'Never combed her hair, singing all

'What did she sing?'

'I don't know. They all sing when they eat the weed. Cry too.'

The conversation was becoming a little too much to take, so I retired.

I found her sitting under the neem tree one day in a profoundly abstracted mood. Usually one could hear Angoori coming to the well; her ankle-bells would announce her approach. They were silent that

'What's the matter, Angoori?'

She gave me a blank look and then, recovering a little, said, 'Teach me reading, bibi.

'What has happened?'

'Teach me to write my name.'

'Why do you want to write? To write letters? To whom?'

She did not answer, but was once again lost in her thoughts. 'Won't you be sinning?' I asked, trying to draw her out of her mood. She would not respond. I went in for an afternoon nap. When I came out again in the evening, she was still there singing sadly to herself. When she heard me approaching, she turned around and stopped abruptly. She sat with hunched shoulders because of the chill in the evening breeze.

'You sing well, Angoori'. I watched her great effort to turn back the tears and spread a pale smile across her lips.

of a breakdown.

We came across streams

that led to the river. The Tibet-

ans called these the hair of the

Brahmaputra. Undeterred, San

Geur proceeded to pile rocks

'I don't know singing'.

'But you do, Angoori!'

'This was the .. 'The song your friend used to sing.' I completed the sentence for

'I heard it from her.'

'Sing it for me. She started to recite the words. 'Oh, it's just about the time of year for change. Four months winter, four months summer, four months

'Not like that. Sing it for me,' I asked. She wouldn't, but continued

Four months of winter reign in my heart;

My heart shivers, O my love.

Four months of summer, wind shimmers in the sun. Four months come the rains; clouds tremble in the sky.

'Angoori!' I said loudly. She looked as if in a trance, as if she had eaten the weed. I felt like shaking her by the shoulders. Instead, I took her by the shoulders and asked if she had been eating regularly. She had not; she cooked for herself only, since Prabhati ate at his master's. 'Did you cook today?' I asked.

'Not yet.'

'Did you have tea in the morning?'

'Tea? No milk today.'

'Why no milk today?'

'I didn't get any. Ram Tara......

'Fetches the milk for you?' I added. She nodded.

Ram Tara was the night-watchman. Before Angoori married Prabhati, Ram Tara used to get a cup of tea at our place at the end of his watch before retiring on his cot near the well. After Angoori's arrival, he made his tea at Prabhati's. He, Angoori and Prabhati would all have tea together sitting around the fire. Three days ago Ram Tara went to his village for a visit.

'You haven't had tea for three days?' I asked. She nodded again. 'And you haven't eaten, I suppose?' She did not speak. Apparently, if she had been eating, it was as good as not eating at all.

I remembered Ram Tara: good-looking, quick-limbed, full of jokes. He had a way of talking with smiles trembling faintly at the corner of his lips

'Angoori?'

'Yes, bibi'.

'Could it be weed?'

Tears flowed down her face in two rivulets, gathering into two tiny puddles at the corners of her mouth.

'Curse on me!' she started in a voice trembling with tears, 'I never took sweets from him... not a betel even.... but tea ... 'She could not finish. Her words were drowned in a fast stream of tears.

Amrita Pritam is a leading writer in Punjabi and Hindi. A number of her works have been translated into English, including her autobiographical works Black Rose and Revenue Stamp.

Brahmaputra Diary: a journey to the source of Asia's greatest river

SHAHIDUL ALAM

T started from a longing to cross other boundaries. Reaching across boundaries of time, across boundaries of political space, across racial and cultural barriers of language, race and religion. To go back in time to how our environs were created. We searched for the answer in a river. Amazing as much for its physical grandeur as for the history hidden in its rocks and its exuberant flow The Brahmaputra. The son of

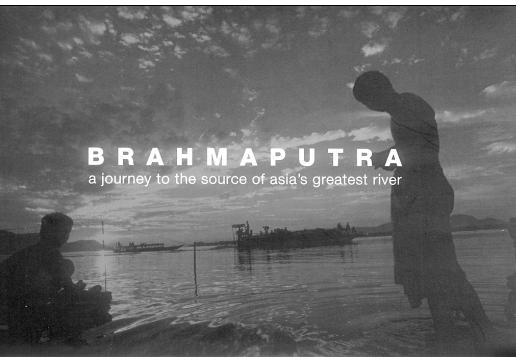
...Like a Hindu deity, the river has many incarnations, changing its name and nature as it flows along 1800-mile journey from its source near the holy mountains of Kailash through the icy glaciers in Tibet, the green mountains in India and through the fertile plains of Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. According to legend, Tamchok Khamabab, "the river coming out of the horse's mouth," spilled from a glacier in the Chemayungdung Mountains. The water was cold, the sands were composed of cat's eyes and emeralds, and those who drank from the newborn stream became as strong as horses.

...We planned furtively and began making plans for our first trip. From the glacial trickle at its source in western Tibet, where it is known as the Yarlung Tsang Po, we would travel east past Lhasa and the Everest, to the amazing 7000 feet 'drop' at Pei, work downwards into India, through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, turning south past the Garo Hills, into Bangladesh. Here we would travel across the flat plains where the river is called the Jamuna, and then join the Meghna estuary, before following the mighty river into the Bay of Bengal. We would record the lives of the Tibetan nomads in the Himalayas, follow the transition from Buddhism to Hinduism through to Islam and look at the

lifestyle, the songs and the literature of the changing communities who lived on the banks of this great river.

.. In search of the source, (we) spent our first days in Kathmandu, getting supplies. High altitude sleeping bags, mountain sickness pills, chocolate. We had tried to find maps to the source, but neither the Internet, nor any of the other sources we tried were of any use. Even the Chinese military didn't know where the source was. We were worried on day five. The only crossing on the

misty clouds, we had moved on to the barren rocks of the Himalayas and across the endless horizons of the Tibetan plateau. Flowers sprang from bare rock in these high climes, but we saw few people, and little wildlife. Except for the sheep, the yak and the occasional Tibetan dogs, there appeared to be little signs of life. It was as we approached the lake that we saw the first rabbits and mouse-like creatures. And then we saw the deer, and the hawks circling overhead. We knew we were near water. There were hunalistened in the distance, from emerald to turquoise to an iridescent blue. We stayed in the little village next to the lake where the Kailash pilgrims stay, but no one here knew of the source. We were ill, our reserves were low, and we were running short of time. The cloud cover never lifted sufficiently for us to see the peak of Kailash. Waiting by the lake as long as we reasonably could, we reluctantly headed back. On our way to the lake we had come across an old nomad, San Geur. He had heard about the river that



river has a hand-pulled ferry at Saga. The trip had been rough, and we had all been sick, and by the time we arrived, the ferry had gone. Luckily, we were able to send a messenger to the ferryman who, looking at our plight, agreed to bring the ferry back to take us across. The wind was bitingly cold, but we

did make it to Saga that night. We had gone though some amazing landscape. From the gushing waterfalls in Nepal, and dreds of shrines in the hilltop from which we first saw the lake. The multi-coloured silk prayer flags fluttered in the gusty wind. Our driver and our guide stopped to pray. As we drove through a stream that flowed from the lake, the driver stopped the jeep and honked the horn. He didn't want to accidentally kill any of the sacred fish.

The holy lake Manasarowar, the mythical source of the river, came out the horse's mouth, from his parents when he was a child. Ten years ago, while hunting, he had come across the source. It was exactly as his parents had described it. We weren't sure if, after ten years, he would still be able to locate the source, but he was our best chance. If everything went well, we would make it to the source and back in time. that was when the first disaster struck. The roughness of the terrain was too much even for our Range Rover and the clutch plate gave way, and we had no spare. Though it was dangerous in these rocky roads, we had no choice but to be towed by our supply truck. Eventually we abandoned our jeep, moved all essential supplies to the truck, and continued on an extremely bumpy ride to

but at least there, we would

come across people every few

hours. Here, there was no sign

of life, except for the odd wild

stare at this strange blue, four-

tered his territory. Sensing my

fear, San Geur would look at

dashboard, to tell me that his

truck was to be trusted, and

that he knew what he was do-

ing. I was scared, because I

was doing. We only had water

and food for two days. I didn't

fancy our chances in the event

knew too well, just what he

me and smile, and pat the

stallion that would curiously

wheeled animal that had en-

together to build a bridge, and drove his truck across! To-San Geur's tent. wards sunset, we began to see He greeted us with his the icy caps of the broad smile, but he hadn't Chemayungdung mountains. been able to get either horses There were no nomads to be or yaks. We were out of radio found. And that meant no or telephone contact, so we horse and no yaks. Eventually, camped near his tent and sent we came to the edge of the off our truck to get a replaceriver. It was thin stream, trickment jeep. In the meanwhile, ling down from the glacier San Geur was going to try and ahead, but the cold, fastget a truck that would take us flowing water was treacherous, to within horseback distance of and took many attempts before the source. A truck did eventu-San Geur made it across. I ally arrive, and packing was left on my own, and the enough supply for two days, chill was setting in. I pitched our tent next to the river, and we set off. The others were too weak to continue the journey, watched the setting sun light so I set off on my own, with up the snow on the mountain San Geur as the driver and the top. This was the source of the quide. We relied a lot on body river, where the water flowed language, and at one point, he from the rock that looked like a pointed southwards to mounhorse's mouth. The rock that tains on the right, across which San Geur's parents had told we would have to go. I saw no him about. But without horses signs of any road, and San or yaks, this was as far as we Geur, with his broad smile, simcould go. The Chinese were ply turned the truck and strict about visas and we had started climbing up the mounbarely enough time to make it tain. Petrified, I clung on to the back to the border. seat as we lurched through the We did find some nomads, jagged mountainside. The dirt but they had no horses, and tracks we had traveled on earthough we waited the next day lier were sparsely populated, for a group that had gone out

> speed as it churned its way through the Himalayas. Shahidul Alam is head of Drik Picture Li-

hunting, there were no more no-

mads or horses to be found,

and reluctantly we headed

at not having been able to

the source of the river

back. Heady with the knowl-

edge that we had finally found

Brahmaputra, but disappointed

touch the rock with the horse's

mouth. We headed down, back

through Saga with the river rap-

idly widening and gathering

brary, Dhaka

The Law of the Market-place SIBANI RAYCHAUDHURI

In the back street of the capital city,

stalls and shops stretch out on to the pavement. Passers-by stop to examine crates, baskets, sacks

and jars filled with colour and abundance. Fragrant rice

and freshwater fishfrom Bangladesh, cloves and cinnamon sticks

from Tangiers, marrows and chillies from East Africa stimulate

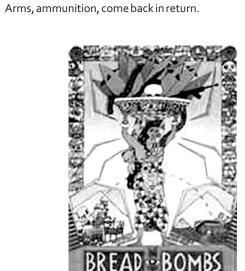
the palates of the rich and the exiled.

Surprise and curiosity of some-nostalgia for others who've left behind a piece of land

but don't taste them.

where golden hopes were planted. They till the land and harvest the crops

They pack them, load them on to ships to the West.



Sibani Raychaudhuri is an educationist and anti-war activist who lives in

NOTICE

Readers have started to send in English translations of Bengali poems and short stories in the mail. Which is all very good, but please note that no translation/s will be considered for publication unless accompanied by the original work.