

SHORT STORY

The Bull of Babulpur

MANOJ DAS

(translated from the Oriya by the author)

It was far from expected, but Boral, the well-known criminal lawyer, suddenly felt overwhelmed with melancholy on his way home from the court. And that happened at a time when he had every reason to feel jolly. He had just succeeded in securing acquittal for a notorious gang of interstate opium runners and had pocketed his heaviest fee of the year. The strange feeling came when a jeep speeding ahead of his car knocked down a goat that had strayed into the crowded street. This happened at 5.14 p.m. For a minute, as was his habit, Boral reflected on the legal aspect of the accident. But as his car went a little further and his eyes fell on the bewildered face of the goat, it suddenly appeared unusually familiar to him. The next moment the chauffeur had adjusted the rear-view mirror and Boral had a glimpse of his own face. He was always honest with himself. He instantly knew why the goat's face seemed so familiar. He also realized that the resemblance was more subtle than external. It was the goal-like seriousness on his face and the goat-like detachment in his eyes that made the most important contribution to his success by inspiring an immediate trust in his clients. And the judges perhaps tended to patronize him, unconsciously though.

Boral looked at the goat again. It was dying. Its closing eyes gave out an expression of a total disillusionment with the world. And it was then, at 5.15 p.m., that Boral felt within himself the birth of an ascetic. He too would one day be flattened--by a brutal and cynical knock from speeding time. An aging Boral decided to spend the rest of his life in peace and meditation, away from the crowd and the court, somewhere in solitude. His own village had of late become a bazaar. But Babulpur, the village of his late maternal grandfather whose house and property he had inherited, made an ideal retreat. The first bout of ascetic fever past, he realized that it might not be easy to break away from the profession all of a sudden. But he could certainly begin by spending his weekends in the village, passing the time in meaningful inaction, thereby bringing about a synthesis between his roaring practice and the newly grown detachment. It did not take long to repair and furnish the house, lying unused for years, through the good offices of an unemployed uncle. Then, one Saturday afternoon, Boral's car made its entry into the village.

Babulpur had never experienced the advent of a car. The raw, sandy road, luckily, was broad and relatively smooth. Children ran before and behind the car, celebrating the hair-raising event with ecstatic shouts. Folks gossiping and sharing a hookah on the middle of the road hurriedly cleared away, amazement writ large on their faces. Drowsy dogs stood up reluctantly and then realizing the seriousness of the situation, ran and barked furiously from yards away. The car advanced triumphantly, bellowing and honking. But that the path of ascetic meditation was not strewn with rose petals became evident only a furlong away from the destination. The chauffeur honked on, but in vain. The unemployed uncle who was racing with the car clapped his hands till his palms ached, and hissed till his tongue got tired, but again in vain. The big bull did not bother to open its eyes. It went on ruminating. Boral got down. 'You bull, get up, leave the road, I say!' he com-



artwork by apurba

manded with restraint and gravity. But since his words produced no effect, he picked up a tiny clod of earth and threw it at the bull's tail. 'Ha, ha! This monarch of bulls knows no fear, Sir, and would not care to obey even a Lieutenant Governor!' explained an elderly villager. 'What to speak of a car, can even a locomotive make it shift its tail unless it was its pleasure to do so?' commented another, while still sucking at his hookah. Boral felt extremely humiliated. But he did not show it. He told the uncle in a tone which sounded normal, 'Will you please ask the owner of the bull to drive it off the road immediately?' The uncle looked undone. 'But the owner is Lord Shiva, Sri Sri Babuleshwar, the presiding deity of the village,' he muttered apologetically. The statement engendered a strong resentment in Boral. If he had decided to come down to the village for peace and high thinking, that was his personal and private matter. So far as the villagers were concerned, they ought to feel honored to have him amidst them. He had taken it for granted that he was going to be looked upon by the villagers as their greatest single pride. He suddenly and rudely woke up to the fact that he had a formidable rival--Lord Shiva--and here lay His most arrogant viceroys. 'Let the Lord's bull do whatever it likes in the Lord's own compound. How can it block the public road?' he observed in a matter-of-fact tone, without giving vent to his wrath. He was sure that the legal point he raised was incontestable. But another old villager disarmed him quietly and in a most casual fashion, 'This whole universe is the Lord's compound, sonny.' Boral had no equal among his colleagues in the art of self-restraint. He would not allow the smoke of the burning he was experiencing within to come out. But at once he remembered an old tale his grandfather, also a lawyer, used to narrate. It was about a certain

Sultan's daughter, notorious for her rudeness, who was given in marriage to a youth of extreme gentle breed. The bridegroom, however, had a lot of common sense and an uncommon strength of mind. He knew that if he was to look forward to a tolerable married life, he must impress the bride, at their very first meeting, with his temper and personality. Upon entering the bride's chamber, he saw her pet cat sharing the nuptial bed. The bride paid no attention to him, but kept herself busy caressing the cat. The bridegroom paused for a moment. Then, in a flash, he unsheathed his sword and cut the cat into two. The awe which the bridegroom thus inspired in the bride's mind went a long way in molding the latter's attitude and conduct towards him--to his benefit--for all their years together. The incident soon became widely known through whispers. It inspired a henpecked nobleman

to carry a cat into his bedroom and cut it down in his wife's presence. 'My darling husband! if only you had cut the cat on our first night together!' said the wife, heaving a deep sigh. It is the first impression that lasts long. Boral realized that he could not afford to appear defeated in this crucial encounter. 'I understand that there is a police outpost that recently opened here. Where is that?' he asked in a calm voice. 'There! A dozen fingers were raised, giving him a wide choice of directions. Boral left his car and the chauffeur behind the bull and asked the perspiring uncle to lead him to the outpost. A number of villagers followed them. 'I am Priyanath Boral, Advocate!' he informed the two constables who offered him smart salutations. 'But, Sir, the sub-inspector sahib has gone to the weekly market to buy cabbage,' informed one of the constables. 'Cauliflower, sir,' corrected the other. 'I want my car to proceed along the public road without having to face any hindrance. I ask you to do whatever is necessary.' The uncle explained to the constables the nature of the hindrance the celebrated advocate's car was facing. Further, he confided to them how Boral was a dear friend not only of the superintendent of police, but also of the magistrate and the Judge sahib. The constables put on their red turbans, armed themselves with sticks, and went out with the complainants, with visibly uncertain steps, though. Others followed them. A crowd had collected around the bull and the car. The constable surveyed the situation in great earnestness. But before they could do or perhaps think of doing anything, the bull stood up and began walking. This sudden welcome change in the situation seemed to

give the constables a tremendous morale boost. After the ceremonial march from the station and with an expectant crowd watching them, they could not withdraw that abruptly. Hence, both walked majestically flanking the bull. It was not clear to the crowd whether the bull was obliged to keep pace with them or they with the bull. 'So, the bull is really arrested?' 'What else? Do you think the sipahi sahibs and their sticks and red turbans are mere jokes?' 'Well, law is law.' These brief observations were followed by many a sigh. The size of the crowd swelled, with more women joining. The people of Babulpur had never known such a queer, collective sensation. In their memory, the bull had been an intrinsic part of the geography of Babulpur. This bull, or its venerable sire who was no more, a bull had always been there, unchecked and unpredictable in its movements, verily the symbol of the free, immortal and invincible universal soul. The bull was approaching the end of the village when an old widow came rushing out of her lonely hut and put a garland of jasmine flowers around its horns and prostrated herself before it. Suddenly the people shouted, 'Jai Baba Babuleshwar!' And they repeated the slogan with increasing gusto. The bull took a turn. From another house came some sandalwood paste which a Brahmin smeared on the bull's forehead, and the bull showed commendable patience in letting him do it. From the next house came a pair of watermelons. Again, the bull displayed its understanding and munched them quietly. Meanwhile the constables had been provided with chillums of tobacco which they thankfully enjoyed before resuming their slow march with the bull. After an hour's stroll the bull returned to the very spot from which it had started. It then slowly lowered itself into a relaxed position and closed its eyes and began to ruminate. 'Jai Baba Babuleshwar!' 'Jai to the great bull of the great Lord!' Suddenly a voice with an unfamiliar accent was heard struggling to make itself prominent during the short intervals between the shouts raised by the crowd. People became curious. 'My brothers and sisters!' All became quiet. Boral had taken his position on a small mound. He extended his arms in the style of blessing the crowd. 'My brothers and sisters! Jai to the great Lord Babuleshwar!' 'Jai, jai!' 'And Jai to the great bull of the great Lord!' 'Jai, jai!' 'My brothers and sisters! This is a historic evening. This handsome, sacred bull is the glory of our village. Let us unite under the shadow of this bull and resolve to...' Boral kept the audience spell-bound for half an hour, for meanwhile his urge had reached a new phase. Earlier he had decided to combine asceticism with criminal law; now he saw the prospect of following a new formula, bringing even a third element into his lifestyle-politics. He planned to seek election to the State Legislature.

Manoj Das has written both in English and Oriya and has won many awards.

Book Reviews

From sickles and grass to automatic rifles



KHADEMUL ISLAM

Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy by Manjushree Thapa; Viking- Penguin Books India; 2005; 260 pp; Rs. 350.

Forget Kathmandu is an absorbing, despairing, passionate account of Nepalese writer Manjushree Thapa attempting to come to terms with the reality of her country's tenuous, tortured experiment with democracy. The last decade has been particularly brutal going, as the state has tried to meet the challenge of a powerful Maoist guerrilla movement. Almost 12,000 people have died since the insurgency began in 1996. King Gyanendra, who in October 2002 had dismissed the prime minister and his cabinet due to a constitutional crisis, in February of this year declared an emergency and assumed supreme power. All flights were grounded, phone/internet lines cut, opposition politicians and dissidents thrown into jails, and strict censorship imposed on the media. The king, whose writ at

certain times does not extend 30 miles outside Kathmandu, has also appropriated the current rhetoric about 'terrorism,' which has meant that guns are flowing freely to Nepal: 20,000 M-16 rifles from the US, 20,000 from India, military helicopters from Britain. The counter-insurgency launched by the Nepalese Royal Army has been scorched-earth: human rights activists in Kathmandu say that torture and extra-judicial killings of suspected Maoists is endemic. An Amnesty International report in July said that the civil war has witnessed a significant increase in violence against children, with murder, illegal detention and rape being used as weapons by both sides. The conflict has wrecked the tourist industry, brought international condemnation on Nepal, and reduced parts of Kathmandu city itself to a state of siege.

It is this state of affairs, a situation where there is 'no elected government, and no prospect of getting one back', with 'a king, a royal cabinet, an army and a bureaucracy all

operating in what amounts to a constitutional neverneverland,' that the author explores from the viewpoint of a Nepalese writer/journalist and Kathmandu resident. The book, therefore, is far more a personal account than an academic study (for that one might instead profitably opt for Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati's 2004 *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgency, 1996 to 2003*), an account that is, by the author's own admission, a 'mongrel of historiography, reportage, travel writing and journal writing.' This approach has made for an engaging, light style, one that makes the book eminently readable as the reader treks alongside Thapa in the Maoist-controlled areas, reads the newspapers she reads, sits in on conversations with her friends, shares her disillusionment, wakes up on Kathmandu mornings to coffee and the latest rounds of conspiracy theories.

The book, appropriately enough, begins with the most shocking event in the political history of modern Nepal: the royal massacre at Kathmandu's Narayanhiti Palace. On the night of June 1, 2001 Crown Prince Dipendra, outfitted in jungle fatigues, high on whiskey and hashish, opened up with assault rifles and pistols and killed his parents, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, a brother and sister, plus five other relatives before being shooting himself. Crowned king as he lay in a coma in the hospital, he died a couple of days later. An official investigation took place, and a report was written, but its net result has only been to deepen Kathmandu's perennial atmosphere of intrigue and secrecy.

From this beginning the books then works backwards historically, to the unification of Nepal from scattered hill states in the 18th century, to British imperial meddling and the perpetual political tug-of-war between Shahs and the Ranas for control of the throne, to the Panchayat system that was finally overthrown by the

'People's Movement' of 1990. The picture of Nepal that emerges is that of a semi-feudal, caste-ridden monarchial society, where in 1990 the democracy supposedly ushered in can be viewed today as less a revolution than a re-alignment of forces between the royalist oligarchy and an emergent urban middle class, the latter a by-product of the state's terribly skewed development strategies from the '70s onwards. And it is here that the stereotypical Western construction of Nepal as trekking Shangri-La (the backpacker's bible, *The Lonely Planet*, for example, begins its book on the country with 'Draped along the greatest heights of the Himalaya, Nepal is a land of sublime scenery, time-worn temples, and some of the best walking trails on earth'...) crumbles in the chronicling of the 12-year period of Nepalese multiparty 'democracy' as a time of endless political cabals, cliques, feuds, graft, profiteering, intrigue and theft of public money among the upper-caste men who controlled politics in Nepal. As Thapa writes, 'Corruption... (continued) briskly. With each new government, a new set of politicians got their turn at building houses, buying cars, opening businesses, starting up NGOs, junketeering, hobnobbing, schmoozing and carousing, and generally indulging their newfound wealth. And while the intellectuals allied to the parties could explain that democracy was difficult, and that the only solution to democracy was more democracy, they could not explain why people who had once given up all for democracy were now bent on quick, mindless profiteering.'

Sound familiar to you all Bangladeshi readers? Meanwhile, rural squalor and poverty deepened, where half of Nepal's inhabitants had no access to electricity, running water or sanitation, and there developed an abysmally systemic dependence on foreign aid. And it was in this scenario that on February 16, 1996 the Maoists, led by Pushpa Kamal

Dahal (known popularly as Prachanda), launched their 'People's War.' They have never looked back since. And which has led to the present situation, with King Gyanendra posing a choice (a choice that has signaled the demise of democracy in Nepal) to his countrymen: who will you have, me or the Maoists?

And this leads us to the last section of the book, a trek by Thapa and a friend through the Maoist-held countryside of western Nepal, through the 'war-torn districts of Dailekh, Kalikot and Jumla.' It is an engrossing, deftly written field report, a record of brutalities, mainly by the Nepalese army, inflicted on a rural, civilian population, where nobody has been left untouched by terror and violence. The Maoists she meets on her passage come off as what one would expect rural, undereducated revolutionaries to be: grimly humourless, zealous, rote-ridden and puritan. Maoism here seems less a liberation from the chains of exploitation and tradition than the last option of a people endlessly cheated and lied to, endlessly ground down. Till, that is, the very last pages, where Thapa meets a 16-year-old

Maoist girl and asks her what she did before she joined the party. "Nothing," she said. "I was at home, spending my days cutting grass... You see, before, there were only sickles in the hands of girls like me. Sickles and grass. And now there are automatic rifles." "All my irritation at the Maoists fell away with this. If I had grown up in one of these villages, and were young, uneducated, unqualified for employment of any kind, and as a female, denied basic equality with men--hell, I would have joined the Maoists, too. The other political parties had not offered better options, and neither had the government. Join the Maoists is what any spirited girl would do."

How the Nepalese story will end, how it'll wind before ending, is anybody's guess. But there is no doubt that whatever the outcome, it has deep implications for the countries and peoples in the rest of the region. This book is a must read for us all.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Daily Star literature page, on the occasion of the paper's fifteenth anniversary (in 2006), will publish an anthology of fiction, poetry, and related articles consisting of the best of what has been published in the page plus entirely new pieces. Bangladeshi writers/authors/poets/translators plus our readers are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Short stories/articles should be limited to 2000-2500 words, though this stricture can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Submissions should be sent electronically to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date of submission is October 15, 2005.

--The Literary Editor

Rhetoric

ABEER Y. HOQUE

I'm eating a mango standing by the sink so I don't drip on the red wood floor on my tight blue jeans You are more beautiful than ever I am as wanting I am reading a book with codes all over it (no, not that one) I find myself thinking in small mysteries, coy mazes the way Holden Caulfield laced my thoughts with obscenities Can I say a code is a metaphor? Will you enjoy this sort of talk? I would like to send you a photograph of myself, any photograph really because it's a photograph of you inside me You found me but not before the blue ink ran out So you know where I am I am more beautiful than ever You are as full It's as much as can be said.

Abeer Hoque lives in San Francisco.

Epiphany

RUBAIYAT KHAN

My best friend once said to me: "I'm not comfortable inhabiting my house". While warming milk for my mid-noon coffee, I remembered it.

We caught a butterfly with nets once in Mamma's tiny garden enclosure. Only, wires became tangled together. Ugly mesh, stifling oblivion.

I convinced myself it had turned into silken fairy dust. I would not look at remnants of this corpse. But he cradled it, cried, till I kicked him hard on his shin. I kicked him, till he stopped.

One dried butterfly drew etches on a chalkboard. That day, we knew. We were here on earth for a while.

Rubaiyat Khan is a new poet.