

The land of the dragon, and fiery rhododendrons



When I read Tagore's "Shesher Kobita" near the end of my school life, its main theme did not dawn on me. I was entranced. And fell in love with the character of Amit Ray, his manner of speech, poetry, recitation, and easy expressions were enough to impress a young Bengali girl in the '80s. And the poem with Amit and Labonno's love story impressed me so much, that I not only read the book, but memorized the entire poem.

*Poth bnedhe dilo bandhon-heen gronthi
Amra dujon cholti hawar ponthi
Rongeen nimesh dhular dulal
Poran e chhoray abir-gulal
Orna oray borshar meghe digangonar nrityo
Hothat alor jhol kani lege jholmol kore chitto*

*Nai amader kanak-chnapar kunjo
Bon-bithikay keerno bokul-punjo
Hothat kakhon shondha belay
Nam hara ful gandho elay
Probhhat belay hela bhore kore arun-kirone tuchchho
Uddhato jato shakhar shikhore rododendron-guchchho*

I read the book once more after a few years, and my love for Amit Ray faded. In fact, I took a dislike to the character. But my love for the poem remained, and has only increased since. It made me want to see the rhododendron flower. I wondered why the poet speaks of that particular flower? How does it look, when in bloom in the mountains? How in fact, was Shilong?

I first saw the "proud rhododendrons" from the poem read in my adolescence in Bhutan, at age 50. I realised, after seeing the rhododendron trees standing tall on high mountains, with their boughs full of thousands of fiery flowers in a plethora of shades of red, why the poet chose to call them the flowers bunched on top of proud branches. The poet saw them in the mountains of Shilong, but we could not find any. Because they don't bloom in winter.

Rhododendron is a bloom of the mountains, and spreads its petals near the end of spring. Its colour varies depending on altitude. The ones we saw were mostly fiery shades of red and orange. A bit on the lower hills, there were shades of lilac and pink. Apparently it's the national flower of Nepal. But to us, that is the Bengalis who read Tagore, rhododen-

dron can only mean "Shesher Kobita."

While still under the spell of the poem and the flower, we saw another such flower, of whose beauty and fragrance we had heard much, without ever seeing one in real life. To speak in the words of Jibanananda (Das), I walked for many years but finally saw this beauty of a bloom while travelling Bhutan, on we can easily call the most ancient of all flowers. For it has bloomed for thousands of years, well known as the goddess of love, with its amazing grace. Her name—Magnolia.

White, yellow, pink, and lilac magnolias were blooming all over the mountain in all their beauty and grace. There are said to be about 200 types of magnolias in the world. The colours carry different meanings. The white magnolia is the symbol of a lady's importance (mohima), purity and respect. The Victorians used this flower to bear their missives of pure love, men would tell their ladies through the flowers—“you are as precious and graceful as a beautiful magnolia.”

The White Magnolia was a symbol of a woman's beauty and (komoniyo) in China as well. The brides of the American South carried them on their wedding day. The yellow magnolia symbolised the sun, the pink a woman's love, and the lilac would show obedience (anugotto). And so the Romans kept them at the king's courts.

In mid-sixteenth century, a French botanist, Pierre Magnol, worked extensively on finding the Magnolia's secrets, and gave it his name. Even before that, the Chinese called it Hou Po, and made medicine out of its petals. It is today the national flower of North Korea.

We have seen magnolias too, if not in a garden, but in the pictures on the wrappers of many a soap. But this was the first real sighting. I was amazed to observe, that a fellow traveler had brought back some pictures of lilac flowers from the hill tracts. Were those magnolias too? I wonder...

The magnolias, in all its myriad shades of white, yellow, pink and lilac can be seen blooming on trees of all sizes in Bhutan, all over the countryside, on the mountains, personal yards, by the roadside. Perhaps there were even more varieties, which we did not recognise. It is said the magnolias will keep blooming even hundreds of years later, in all their magnificence.

If Bhutan were to be called the kingdom of flowers, it would not be unjustified. Flowers bloom in abundance here, all through the year except the four months of winter. The



number of flowers, in their sheer variety is unimaginable. As if nature took on the quest of adorning all the mountains in all her resplendent blooms. So many flowers, the vastness of the deep viridescent backdrop, the pure silence in the majestic mountains, the peacefully babbling brook and waterfalls—they are all a treat for the frayed nerves, a treat to the eyes. I want to conclude, in the words of the poet,

"Ami eto taratari kothao jete chai na

(I don't want to leave soon)

*Amar jibon ja chae, shekhane hete hete pouchbar shomoy
ache*

(I can slowly walk to where my life is taking me)

*Pouchey onek-khon boshe opekkha korar oboshor
ache*

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