

A Wind Kingdom

Excerpt from Aranyak by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhye

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR & NAUSHEEN EUSUF

Shrawan: the beginning of monsoon. For many days the rain clouds had dispersed their burden. From the vicinity of Nada or Lobtulia, or from the vantage point of Grant Sahib's banyan tree, one could look in any direction and see only a verdant sea of fledgling rice.

One day, I received a letter from Rajah Dobru Panna inviting me to attend the celebration of the Jhulon festival on the night of the full moon in *Shrawan*. Raju and Motuknath did not let the opportunity slip, and decided to go with me. Since they were going on foot, they started their journey ahead of me.

It was 1:30 in the afternoon by the time we crossed the river Michhi. Not wanting to be late, I left the others behind and raced ahead on horseback. The dark clouds began to congregate in the western sky and soon they let loose their torrens.

What a splendid scene I witnessed in the monsoon-soaked hinterlands! Along the horizon the distant mountains were tinged with blue, the sky was gravid with menacing storm-clouds. In the forest branches, the peacocks pranced with their tail feathers outspread. The peasant children frolicked in the mountain springs and caught fish with spears and traps fashioned from shal and bamboo. The slate-gray boulders acquired a darker hue, and the cowherds sat atop the boulders and smoked bidis between their small leaves. The bushy repose of that arcadian expanse: the dense woods, the meadows, the mountain springs, the hamlets nestled among the hills, the rich reddish-brown earth, and the occasional kadamb or pial tree.

I reached Rajah Dobru Panna's domain at dusk.

The thatched room I had seen before had been freshly coated and cleaned to welcome guests. The earthen walls had been painted with lotus plants and peacocks, and the wooden pillar in the center was adorned with flowers and vines. My bedding had not arrived yet,

but this presented no difficulty since the room was of a new rug and a couple of fresh bolsters.

Presently, the princess Bhanumoti entered the room with a bowl of milk and an arrangement of fresh fruits on a brass plate. Another girl of the same age followed, an attendant with whose betel nuts, betel leaves, and the requisite spices.

Bhanumoti was dressed in a berry-coloured saree that came down to her knees. She wore a necklace of red and green glass beads, and spider lilies in her hair. She had blossomed into a lissome young lady, and yet her eyes



retained the innocence of the young girl I had known before.

"Well, Bhanumoti, how have you been?" I asked.

"Oblivious to the etiquette of polite society, Bhanumoti smiled and said, "And you, babuji?" "I am fine."

"Here, eat something. You must be hungry; you were riding all day."

Without waiting for a reply, she sat down before me and took two pieces of papaya from the plate and offered them to me.

I greatly appreciated this unadorned gesture of goodwill. How sweet and unexpected it seemed to me, a visitor from Bengal—how charmingly unassuming! Could a Bengali girl of

similar years be so unselfconscious with a man who was not her kin? Our ideas about women are tangled and complicated; we cannot think about them without prejudice, nor can we mingle freely with them.

It dawned upon me that just as nature in this province was free and uninhibited, and the forests, skies and mountains unconstrained, so too was Bhanumoti. She was just as natural, open, and spontaneous. She conducted herself in my presence as one human being should with another. I remembered Monchi and Benketosh Prasad's wife who behaved in a very



similar manner. The forests and mountains had set their souls free; hence, their affection too was keen, generous, and unadorned.

And yet, I found Bhanumoti's behaviour to be unparalleled. For the first time I seemed to realize how cordial a woman could be when she is unsheltered by social prejudice. Such grace was like a door opening from heaven. The spirit of the eternal woman I saw in Bhanumoti was sadly subdued in women who are bound by the social norms and prejudices of polite society.

In fact, she was even more open and cordial than the last time we had met. Perhaps she sensed that this Bengali babu is a friend of their family, a well-

wisher; hence she treated me as if I were a close relative, as if I were my sister. This humble and artless offering somehow seemed far more sincere than the affectations of the most civilized conduct.

Rajah Dobru had been busy with preparations for the festive occasion. Finally, he came to meet me.

"Do you arrange Jhulon on a regular basis?" I asked.

Rajah Dobru said, "Celebrating Jhulon is a longstanding tradition in our family history. Our relatives travel from far and wide to take part in the Jhulon dance every year. In fact, about two and a half months of rice will have to be cooked tomorrow."

As a Brahmin, Motuknath had been hoping for a generous bequest from the royal family. He had wondered about the splendor of the royal palace. I could see from the expression on his face that he was rather disappointed. He probably thought that his schoolhouse was better than this king's palace.

Raju could not contain himself and exclaimed, "How is he a king, sir! He is merely a Shantal tribal leader. Even I own more buffalo than he does." Raju had already surveyed the Rajah's worldly assets. People in this region assess a man's wealth by size of his herd.

Deep into the night, the moonlight slipped through the branches of the ancient trees and wove an enchanted web of light and dark in the dooryards and village homes. Emerging from the king's household, a chorus of women's voices joined in an enigmatic song. The women, relatives and companions of the princess, were rehearsing for the following day's festivities. The melody of their voices and the music of the madal continued all through the night.

Eventually I fell asleep, but even my slumber was soaked in their music.

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Valediction

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

The day of our last parting, the rain refused to let up, petting the window pane in relentless waves. At least it was something we could look at.

Necessary, for the best, not really an end, I reasoned with dull anodynes. Your head angled away in defiant rage, you said nothing. The rain

poured in gray sheets on the buildings and billboards, blurring the contours of the known, all faith suddenly infirm. Your gaze fixed in the gray distance,

perhaps you saw something I couldn't. Perhaps, maybe, if only. The minutes stung like needles of rain. The clouds conferred, lightning struck the gavel, and the universe rumbled its verdict.

Nausheen Eusuf's poems have appeared in PN Review, Wasafiri, World Literature Today, and other journals.

Maach Khor

SABRINA BINTE MASUD

"That one is empty. The ribs are those giant bones on a full grown fish, shining with eggs", thought Gamcha Miya, staring at Harun's skeletal boy with a ballooned stomach. He fanned his printed *gamcha* more vigorously. The movement caused air to blow, although more on him and less on the neck of the imam. He was sitting right underneath the lit lamp. The bugs fell on him in silent trapezoids. His feet hurt and so did his bum. He tried to move a little to allow blood to flow from one cheek to the other. It would have been ideal to sit with one of his legs up. He was a skinny man. So were the rest of the six men with whom he shared the bench made out of a single plank. It was part of the circle that faced off the villagers on the damp mat on the ground. The *marubhis* sat in plastic chairs right in front of them. So he dared not raise his foot sitting behind the *panchayat*. Also, he carried the imam's *gamcha*. Proper etiquette was required of him. This was one of the lessons he had learned in between the barrage of canes and fists, endless prayer sessions, through the mists of incense, trance, in between waking and dreamless sleeping, memorizing and repetitions, repetitions and memorizing at the orphanage.

Ich, ich went his fingers on his elbow. The grass hopper had clawed up his half folded sleeve. The body of the bug got tangled in between finger nails and the stomach erupted to stain his grayish white sleeve with a tiny green patch. The sweat on his arm glistened against his dark skin making the sleeve look cruder. He suddenly noticed his sleeves were uneven and quickly unfolded them to hide his arms. A *musalli* always wears panjabi and *pajama*, or *lungi*, mindful that the cloth does not go below his ankles.

"I want you to listen to me carefully Gamcha Miya said a disembodied voice. He tipped his head to pay attention. There was a kind of urgency in the tone. He wanted to help if he could.

"I want you to think of a bunch of ants floating on a stream of water. Have you seen ants on water? They always hang on to each other whenever they are on water. And somehow they never drown. As if a secret bubble pushes them upwards. And they always hold on to each other. Why do you suppose ants do that? Well that is not important. I want you to think of a handful of ants floating on water, a very small number, like in a drain may be. Think of a stream of water with floating leaves and a

handful of ants in a sudden downpour. Can you see them?"

Gamcha Miya shook his head. He felt that if he said "yes" to the voice it would not listen to him. For he felt someone unknown to Gamcha Miya, for the voice wouldn't understand his language.

"So these ants are floating. And you are the one who can save them. What do you do? Do you save them?"

Gamcha Miya shook his head again. He didn't think about his answer. He just wanted to listen to the next part.

"Wrong! You do not save them. You try to. But you fail. You give them a leaf. So they try to get on the leaf. They think they just saved themselves. They climb on the leaf and breathe. I wonder Gamcha Miya, do you think you are god?"

Miya was listening intently till he was asked if he was god. The very word jolted him back to the circle. The evening was heating up. The imam was throwing his arms around a lot. The shadows rose and fell on the little space in between the villagers on the ground and the people of respect in the chair.

It was the middle of a heavy monsoon. The outer yard was littered with tiny holes made by very tiny occupants that were no doubt inside their dwellings in fear of the humans. Right next to each minuscule hole were tiny pyramids of mud balls, all in even shape and size, stacked on each other in neat piles. They had assembled at their usual place right outside the inner yard of the chairman's house. The *panchayats'* chairs huddled on one end to be part of the spot that was most protected against the whim of the rain under the ancient diameter of the tree. Their followers sat in a semicircle bench right behind them with their backs drenched with rogue gusts of wind and rain. On their right was the extension of the rest of the roots clawing the ground. As usual, yellow washes were plenty. They feared no one.

The gathering didn't count on the day to be gone so soon. It was also doubtful if the day was really gone or if the clouds had eaten up the sun. The morning came with a bloated sky, hot and heavy, sinking the sun before it got a chance to claim an inch of land. The canopy, made out of olive, mango, jackfruit, guava, banyan and other trees that stood guard over the tiny village, was the one who bore the news of the day or night. In between the balmy shadows and wet lullaby offered by

trickling green leaves, twilight claimed Gamcha Miya. The doleful movement of crystal clear water that had appeared in silence from an oozing paddy field nearby gathered over the yellowish mud on the corner of the courtyard, submerging only his toes. He felt sad for the sheepish presence of such clarity in between the newly bathed earth and the timeless liquid. They embraced without merging and remained visible in each other's sheen. The inch of water that was often tickled by the rogue wind held the flickering dim light of a deep wet sky overhead with green and orange leaves drifting aimlessly. Gamcha Miya didn't want to dip his toe into this tranquility of rain water. The disembodied voice spoke to him again.



"Gamcha Miya. The base of the tree will rot. Trees aren't meant to be submerged in water. The paddy will drown. The monsoon will take Moniruddin's field this year. Tell me Gamcha Miya, do you think Moniruddin had done something evil to lose his harvest to the rain? Do you think Moniruddin is like the ants? What is your god?"

And the gathering erupted in some unknown anguish. Excitement bubbled over. Someone seemed to have dragged someone down from somewhere and someone seemed to want to stamp on someone's neck and the ants? What was that night as well just as today. What was it? He walked through the bamboo thicket. It wasn't that difficult. The mud had a grip on his feet. The wet leaves in

The moon-like scales glittered in between the dexterous hand that tore the fish into neat pieces. The blood and guts oozed on the mud hungry, for the bath in gray and soot. Mustard seed oil erupted in an intense argument with the dark pan as the rekindled fire egged them on. Gamcha Miya was often possessed by the fish as he chewed on a straw while sitting on his bed; the crows chomped in their reorganized vomit next door. A fish tail would often find its way on his plate hidden under a stack of white rice and watery lentil accompanied by a fat green chili and half an onion. In monsoon days who knew who wanted to feed his bottomless stomach that never got to be as full as a bellow so that a plump tick could be popped against it. These were the nights the rain would seep

the bush scratched against his legs. The water had risen and the bamboo grove had turned into a shallow pond. The liquid tinkled with the ripples created by his movement. Why was everything so visible to him? Why wasn't everything submerged in darkness? Oh right. The moon was hanging over the yonder sky in full bloom. Come to think of it the rain was gone as well. And the disembodied voice said: "Oh Miya. If you don't remember your father's face or your mother's eyes, what does that mean up? Are you not empty enough to chew up bones and spit them out like a hungry hyena? I didn't mean to strip you off everything. Am I a god then as well? Is that a moon or a spotlight? What if I am about to write a masterpiece and you are the flat character that makes up the body of the crowd?"

"Expendable." The gathering had gone mute. Everyone was staring at Gamcha Miya. He suddenly noticed he was standing up. Slowly, he remembered he had said something. He had screamed something in the middle of the *panchayat*.

The silence kept on stretching as minutes passed by. The moment seemed to stick to him like the back of his wet Panjabi. What could Gamcha Miya say? If only he could remember what it was that he had screamed to interrupt the gathering. The voice spoke, "Tell them. Tell them you can hear me. Tell them I have spoken to you. Blame me. Say it. Say that Moniruddin is not a sinner. That it was unreasonable to think the river could vanish because his daughter had drowned herself in it. Tell them she was pitiful. She was merciful. She was as beautiful as the lily. Say it! One woman cannot eat a river. It takes a hunger bigger than any that you have ever felt for a river to disappear!"

Gamcha Miya hesitated. He then decided to speak. His words dropped like leaves that were fresh and green and that only fall in their prime in the gust of the monsoon.

The rain moved on. Gamcha Miya remained. Where could he go? Unlike the voice, he was tethered to the sleeping village that sat lamenting like a possessed one lying next to a sickly canal that no amount of monsoon could turn into a river.

Sabrina Binte Masud writes creatively in a number of genres and has won international awards for her plays.