

In Conversation

## In conversation with Anubhav Tulasi

Interviewed by Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati

Translated by **Krishna Dulal Barua**

**Anubhav Tulasi** is a contemporary major Assamese poet. In this interview he revisits his creative journey and, as a practicing poet, talks about the craft of poetry. The interview first appeared in *Purbakash*, a weekly supplement of *Asam Aditya*.



Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati : **In the preface to your latest collection of poems, *Banan Kori Porha Luitar Pani* (Spell and read — waters of the Luit), you've mentioned that the unconscious beginning of your poetry originated at the very household you were born in. Would you please elaborate.**

**Anubhav Tulasi:** In the collection of my poems, *Banan Kori Porha Luitar Pani*, a little has been said about my thoughts, sensibility and understanding on literature. Certain aspects about the preparatory phase of my poetic life have surfaced here. At times, the excessive lengths of the shadows of my outpourings have gone on to shroud certain relevant issues which I'd now like to unveil before you.

I can never forget the seventh standard of my school-life which was quite catalytic considering my first effort to step over the threshold.

The year was 1970. I was a student of class VII at the Madhabdev High School located right in front of our residence. During that very year I came across three significant incidents. First was the introduction with the writings of the universally-acclaimed litterateur, Count Leo Tolstoy ; second, school-assignment to write the summary of an Assamese poem by Ratnakanta Borkakati ; and third, expansion of the horizon through the radio-set that entered our house.

The opportunity of being acquainted with the writings of Tolstoy was provided by one of our school text-books. The Assamese adaptation of Tolstoy's stories by Surendramohan Das titled *Tolstoyar Sadhu* happened to be one of our rapid readers. The stories in the collection had a profound impact on my mind. Even after repeated readings of some of the stories, I couldn't quench my thirst fully. The Assamese translation of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia (Asiar Jyoti)*, which provided a distinctive lustre on the life of Gautama Buddha, was another text-book of ours. I couldn't understand much about the philosophy and religious tenets of Buddhism contained in the book, but I enjoyed going through the variegated phases of the life of the Buddha. One of the poems in our Assamese syllabus was 'Mahatma Tarpan' by Ratnakanta Borkakati. Once we were asked to write a detailed explanation of the poem by our revered teacher, Bhola Bhagawati Sir. Following two successive efforts in vain, even my third attempt was unable to satisfy Bhagawati Sir. This failure etched a deep imprint on my mind. Unknowingly, poetry too got yoked with this mental scar.

What hadn't our radio-set at home given us — fascination, ecstasy, thrill ! Along with the open sky, we had the sun, the moon and the stars ! The varied colourful programmes widened the horizons of our minds. Through Satyaprasad Baruah we were acquainted with the Greek tragedies, while through other programmes our ears were attuned, with or without comprehension, to varied languages, songs and tunes. The multifarious gifts of the radio included the folk music of Assam, particularly Assamese folk songs. One such song influenced me to the extent of prompting me to pen the first composition of my life that was quite folk-like in style — structurally it appeared to be poetic, but in essence, it was not poetry.

### **When did you discover the poetic entity within you?**

When did I discover the poetic entity within me ! This is a complex question but I'll try to give you the answer in as simplified a manner as possible. Not with any personal narratives but with examples of my reactions to Leo Tolstoy's stories. In my answer to the previous question, I'd mentioned about Surendramohan Das' translation of Tolstoy's stories into Assamese. The poor shoemaker's assistant in the story, 'What people live by', is actually an angel banished to earth by God for disobedience. The angel, in the form of a human being, has to live among people and learn three truths of human life — what dwells in men or women, what is not given to them, and what they live by. The angel smiles thrice at the points of his discovery of each truth — it is affection that dwells at the core of the human heart, the knowledge of one's own needs is not bestowed upon human beings, and people live by love which is the bridge of human relationship. The underlying meaning of this complex story was grasped not by my physical form studying in the seventh standard but by the ageless poetic entity within me. Likewise, the manner in which a branch of a half-burnt tree in the story 'Dharmaputra' was planted in the soil and restored to life by watering the cinder-like plant, day after day, tirelessly — that portion of the story got glued to my mind and the experience made me perceive about a semi-conscious poetic entity somewhere

within my mind. Now, if I continue to give you more such instances of learning through studies and experiences, this part of our conversation would get encumbered. I perceived the sprouting of this semi-conscious poetic entity in me through a quatrain that I'd composed around 1989 : I hadn't taken anything from those two hands/Don't misunderstand me/I was only searching for the place where you'd kept concealed/The thorns of a floral hand.

I had penned these lines quite unknowingly. I discovered in these four lines the 'Duende' or the state of being possessed as said by Lorca. My first poem was published in 1980. Earlier I had written a number of such fragmentary poems, but they were just expressions of an amalgamation of language and thought. I haven't included the aforesaid poem in any of my collections. Only a few of my classmates got sight of it at that time.

**Would you enlighten us a little about the people with whom you were intimately associated and the literary ambience you came across at the beginning of your poetic journey.**

It was 1977. I was then a student of English literature at Nowgong College. At that time I was an incompetent imitator of Eliot's poetry — my notebooks were loaded with my futile exercises — my enterprising mind was quite unaware about the needless wastage of paper. We had a branch of the Asom Sahitya Sabha at Tulasimukh named Puberun Kala Parishad (it is no longer existent). Jiban Das, the secretary of that branch, offered me an opportunity to recite a poem at one of their meetings. With my eyes and ears literally shut, I read out something somewhat Eliotesque in flavour. That was the first auspicious moment of my public appearance. However, I don't remember anything about the people's reactions or comments on my poem. An organization called 'Purbalok' of Nagaon used to bring out a trilingual journal by the same name. In one of its issues my poem, 'Jamunar Nila Pani' (The blue waters of the Yamuna) was published. The editor of the journal at that time was Subhash Das. It was at the insistence of one of my friends that I'd contributed the poem. The year was 1980. On 5th June 1990, on the birthday of Federico Garcia Lorca (coinciding with World Environment Day), this friend of mine entered my life through wedlock.

One fine afternoon in 1990, I accompanied my classmate and editor of our university wall-magazine, Ranjit Das to meet the distinguished poet, Nilmani Phookan at his Nilachalpur residence. As a student of Arya Vidyapith College earlier, Ranjit had a good rapport with Phookan Sir and was able to introduce me with the great personality with ease. Meanwhile, my preparation for bringing out 'Nazma' was going on and a few pages of the manuscript helped me to gain access into the poet's confidence that day. Phookan Sir's words of praise, however measured, seemed to lift me instantly to seventh heaven. After this, I became a frequent visitor to the poet's place. At times, Phookan Sir, too, visited me at my hostel room. Whenever Sir stepped into our room no. 14 of RCC 1 (Madhab Bezbaruah) Hostel, the place seemed to turn into a site of pilgrimage. Phookan Sir offered me every possible help in my debut venture of bringing out *Nazma*. I was blessed with the same helping hands at the time of publishing *Doron Phul*. Without informing me Ranjit Das had sent my manuscript of 'Nazma' to the bi-monthly magazine, *Prantik* where, too, it was published. Someone told me that our revered teacher, Bhaben Baruah was in charge of selection of poems for the *Prantik*. And our honourable Dr Hiren Gohain Sir braced my exposure with his invaluable foreword for *Nazma*. How can I ever forget the priceless contributions of these benevolent souls ?

**Please tell us about your pseudonym. Why has it become necessary?**

I took the pseudonym for writing ‘Nazma’. Later, somewhere I also found an occasion to mention that this pseudonym is my first written poem. There might have been some inspiration from Pablo Neruda and the Urdu poets. I hail from a place called Tulasimukh — for this reason some enjoy saying that ‘Tulasi’ (basil) has come ! At the time of framing the sobriquet, I hadn’t thought too deeply about it. A few years later the name was validated through the legal procedure. Now with this very name I’m an Indian citizen.

**Your first collection of poems – ‘Nazma’, published in 1985, comprised a hundred poems each made up of four lines. Harekrishna Deka Sir mentions about perceiving the compassion of Urdu poetry in your poems. From the perspective of thought and diction, they are similar to some extent with the Japanese ‘haiku’ and the Latin American ‘copla’. What actually was the inspiration behind these poems ?**

I can’t exactly say what prompted me to think about maintaining a uniform scheme in the poems of ‘Nazma’ with four lines of thirty-six letters, each line having nine letters. There is no such structural scheme in Urdu poetry, in the Japanese haikus with seventeen words, in Latin American lyric poetry called coplas, or in the Assamese *Bihugeets-Banghosas*. In a review on *Nazma*, Umakanta Sarma states about the metrical similarity of my poems with the ‘Brihati’ meter of the Upanishadas. With agrarian rusticity as materials of resource, the language of the poems is purely Assamese in essence. The tumultuous period of Assam history, during which the poems were composed, has infiltrated into two or three of the poems. It is basically the expression of engrossed consciousness. ‘Nazma’ was also brought out by Navakanta Barooah Sir in the journal, *Seeralu*. With me included among three poets of our generation who were regarded as ‘old’ right after birth. The poems are perhaps infused with the spirit of Urdu poetry — but what seems to have been more interactive in my mind were the models of the copla and the *Bihugeets-Banghosas*.

**In 1996, after a long interval of eleven years following the publication of *Nazma*, your second collection of poems titled *Doron Phul* came out. What was the cause of this extended break ?**

After 1985 it was only in 1996 that *Doron Phul*‘ came out. After being engaged with the composition of about four hundred ‘Nazma’s, it was perhaps not very easy to shift to poems completely with different forms. Nevertheless, I went on composing a few poems some of which were published at regular intervals in the *Prantik*. During that period, my manuscripts for *Doron Phul*, *Jalamagnar Drishyawali* and *Kavyapith* were getting ready for print. The manuscript of *Doron Phul* had been kept aside by the publisher for about three years. Within the twelve years, between 1985 and 1997, four collections of my poems were published. As I’d remained quite consistent in my creative efforts and experiments with poetry, the publication of three collections in two years became possible. I’ve almost forgotten to mention that even the poems for *Juisur*, published in 2007, were composed during this period. This manuscript had been in the hands of the publisher for some years and got misplaced ; I somehow managed to recover it later on and get it published.

**You've chosen imagism as the literary genre for your poetry. The thoughts and images culled from the variegated forms of nature and human life at your birthplace have contributed immensely in the enrichment of your poetry. Please tell us about your association with imagism.**

The imagery in my poetry has come from nature and human life. Human life along with the soil, water and nature of Assam happen to be my roots. Linguistically and geographically — from both perspectives I'm an Assamese. Thus have I been taught by poetry. Bestowing a universal dimension to the bucolic manifestation of life in Assam is the intense yearning of my heart. My simple understanding is that symbols restrain thoughts while images restrain the diction. Both have the same objective — to usher in the infinite into the periphery of frontiers and launch those within this periphery out to the wider expanse. Both seek the poetic diction to be restrained and measured, and suggestiveness to be infinitely resonant. Silence or the unuttered ought to be manifested through language — the unexpressed ought to pulsate in silence. It won't be possible to elaborate on this matter with examples in this conversation of ours. I've learnt about the aforesaid poetic modes and processes from tradition and heritage ; the ancient masters and our seniors have already paved a path which has considerably eased our task.

**The modernists always talk about taking the language of poetry nearer to spoken language. In Assam, poets like Ajit Baruah, Harekrishna Deka and a few others have been successful in this regard. You, too, have mentioned somewhere that a language ought to be 'latent with the passion and flush experienced while chewing betel-nuts ; a language should be like an unkempt kiss'. Since when have this consciousness on poetic diction taken seat in your mind?**

Poetry is the art of language. Hence, the language for poetry needs to be artistic ; there have always been a lot of discussions on this subject. As a result, the form of language has also undergone transformations according to its suitability in poetry. In the post-modern stage, our observation and creativity have been surging towards the neighbouring regions. Thus, regional languages and dialects have begun to gain importance. The old ideas of certain circles have grown shaky ; the necessity of new regional centres has begun to find precedence. 'You turn the keys here, the locks out there in their hands will open instantly.' A few days ago I'd read a poem by a poet from Bangladesh where the imagery of 'non-vegetarianism' has been used. The diction, too, has attained the existing art form. For the political undertone in my poetry (as stated by Ananda Bormudoi), I strive to build an extra edifice with the rural spoken language. I feel this form of language is quite effective for love poems too. The poet from Bangladesh, that I'd mentioned, is most probably Syed Zamal.

**In the cover blurb of *Anubhav Tulasir Srestha Kabita*, there's a significant line — "If there's anyone who has been able to detach Assamese poetry from the long influence of the European tone prevailing as a canon over India, nay the entire world, ever since the eighties, it's Anubhav Tulasi." We'd like to know about this endeavour of yours to remain free from the European influence. Surely, at first, the poetic diction would occupy precedence. Please go ahead.**

The words in the cover blurb of *Anubhav Tulasir Srestha Kabita* have come from a poet of the younger generation. As he says, occasionally we've long telephonic conversations. Well, it's not very easy to ignore the European canon. We can't help overlooking it too. The subaltern has provided us with a way to reject the European cultural hegemony and hierarchy. Why only Europe, even the Indian heartland has been contriving since ages to exercise a sort of cultural supremacy and suppression over the Assamese language. As poets we can surely think about thwarting this intimidation. Through poetry itself we've to find a way out. I've touched this issue in the writer's note of my collection, *Banan Kori Porha Luitar Pani*. Of late, in a write-up on my poetry, Dr. Bibhash Choudhury has mentioned about this aspect. The poems in my collection, *Matibhasha* are perhaps replete with this significant issue.

**You're also a cinephile, a connoisseur of international cinema, with a book on it, too, to your credit. On the other hand, the visual elements of cinema are conspicuous in many of your poems e.g. 'Chihnajstrar keitaman jalamagna drishya', 'Sharali', 'Boardot eta biyog anka' to name a few. Please tell us about your association with cinema.**

I'd the first experience of watching a movie when I was in the second standard. The youngest of my elder brothers, Chandra Saikia took me endearingly to a cinema hall. The moving and talking pictures filled me with wonder and amazement. At that time I even dreamt of becoming a film director. No wonder, till date that dream hasn't materialised. I've all along been a viewer but it's doubtful whether the term 'connoisseur of international cinema' is applicable to a person like me. I haven't been able to mould myself with the necessary mental and intellectual depth so vital for a serious movie-goer. I feel that poetry can acquire a great deal of nourishment from cinema, painting, sculpture, music and other art forms. Hence, I watch movies whenever I find the opportunity. I don't seem to be endowed with the intellectual efflorescence to delve into the multi-layered traits of the cinematic language. The concealed world of shots and sequences takes a lot of time to unveil itself before me — sometimes it remains veiled altogether. Poets are supposed to be endowed with the gift of visual imagination. This quality is perhaps reflected in some of my poems, in the poems too that you've just cited.

**In an interview published in *The Paris Review*, the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges says that a poet has, at most, five or six poems to write all throughout his or her lifetime. Not more than that. Even if the poet strives to rewrite these poems from different perspectives, perhaps with different backgrounds, time and characters, the poems inevitably remain the same internally. What would you say about this aspect from your own experience as a poet ?**

Perhaps Borges had continued to write poems relentlessly to perceive the truth about this fact that a poet has only about five poems to write during his lifetime. I've been going on with my composition of poems till this day and shall go on and on to find out whether I've written the first of the five poems. In the tone of Octavio Paz it may be said that poetry is mainly one — the rest are attachments to the main poem.

**Now let's come to the subject of poetic creativity. How does the embryonic stage of a poet dawn upon your mind — as some word, sentence or thought ?**

Well, which came first — the hen or the egg ? In the case of songs nowadays we get to hear about a tune or a music track being given to the lyricist for composition — the lyrics need to be framed according to the requirement of the given tune or pre-recorded track. A poet perhaps has some sort of a tune like that in mind according to which words or lines get inserted ! I don't understand much about the tune — in my case, words come first, not in a blank form but as a vehicle of thought. The words remain in my mind for quite some time. Upto the last line an unwritten text gets prepared. Sometimes that text dissolves within the mind. For being considered to be lacking in merit, that particular text doesn't transform into a written form. Many written texts, too, get consigned to the waste-paper basket. Perhaps the written text finally emerges from the texts, wriggling restlessly in the incipient and subconscious mind, through the process of deconstruction.

**When the embryo of a poem comes into being, does it bring along to the mind the idea of the form or style of expression in a definite shape?**

Words, thoughts and the form arrive in a cluster, not one ahead and another behind. This sequence may undergo alteration during the conscious phase of creativity.

**Some embryos of poetry may, at times, face untimely deaths prior to their blossoming. It's surely a painful experience for a creative writer if a thought writhing within the mind doesn't finally find expression in written form. How has been your experience in such situations?**

A poet has to be a witness to the untimely deaths of many an expression of language and thought. I, too, am no exception. Such immature deaths may cause a great deal of affliction and restlessness to the poet, but from amidst all such unpleasantness oozes out creativity anew. Those who can discern well the graveyard and the maternity ward, can see them both in the eyes and face of the poet.

**For you, is poetry a construction or a discovery?**

Construction — which goes on for a long time in the sub-consciousness. I believe about the workplace of the Grecian goldsmith in William Butler Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" that exists in the subconsciousness.

**While composing a poem, does the image of an empathic reader frequent your subconsciousness?**

While writing, there's no possibility of other thoughts straying into the mind. The long experience of being a reader of poetry obviously remains seeping into the incipient or subconscious mind as nectar. I can't deny the possibility of a role played by the nectar of experiences at the time of writing.

**Who, according to you, is the idealistic reader or empathic reader of poetry?**

You're asking about 'idealistic readers' of poetry. I, on my part, strongly wish to crush the very image of idealism. An idealistic reader would mould an image of poetry according to his or her individual bent of mind and refuse to accept a poem as a worthwhile literary work if it doesn't correspond to his or her ideal. A stagnation would thus be created and continue to linger on. We can't expect poetry to reap any benefits from an idealistic reader.

### **Has any period of sterility ever come to your creative life? What do you do in such situations?**

Sometimes a long span of time does pass with me doing nothing in the name of writing. Instead of regarding it to be a period of sterility, I'd like to call it a preparatory phase for subsequent writings. This preparation goes on through reading, listening to music, watching movies, travelling and so on.

### **How do you fix the titles of your poems ? Before or after composition?**

The title of a poem is given after a good deal of introspection — there's always an inner urge to find a name that's unusual and bears some charm to attract readers. However, this doesn't always materialise. A title may peep in during the time of writing and undergo alteration later on. This isn't the case only with poetry but with prose too. In prose-writing, until I've a suitable title in grasp, I can't move forth. Regarding prose-titles, readers have to perceive that it's the poet within the writer that prompts him or her to arrive at a title with something unique in it. Of course, I relish the notion that within the core of a prose-writer's heart, there's always a poet !

### **And how do you decide about the titles of your poetry-collections?**

The title for a collection of poems requires a lot of pondering. The name has to bring about a jolt, a spurt of thrill. The name has to be pleasant for being held on the lips. The name must be able to draw readers to the book, it has to bear an allurements for being instantly picked up by the readers' hands. This takes a long time, months — years. A lot of names come to the mind over which assessments are made on their odour, hue and flavour. The name ought to have a lasting appeal. Such are the phases that have to be undergone during the process of selection of the title — really quite strenuous!

### **It's a known fact that every writer revises his or her manuscript with a few or more alterations, additions and deletions. But the number of writers who indulge in rewriting the text is not many. Have you ever rewritten any of your poems ?**

A poem, after composition, obviously undergoes alterations, deletions and additions. Even after its publication in a journal or a book, this process remains alive — perhaps this is the manner in which a poem goes on to bloom with all its splendour. Many poets indulge in this process of reconstruction. However, there are many poets who are not in favour of such changes. They don't approve the idea of a poem having the influence of a conscious mind. Lyric poems are written with a single gush of enterprise. For some poets the pangs of creativity thrives for a considerable length of time. Hence, they can concentrate on a single poem for long durations. Yes, regarding myself, rewriting has been necessary for certain poems. For example, in the



poem, 'Pokha mela' from my collection, *Banan Kori Porha Luitar Pani*, there's no trace here of the first version of its text. Perhaps the present text is a metamorphosed form of the first text — just as a tree abandons its old leaves, in the same way the second version of the written text rejects the first version, abandons it, buries it.

**Here most of our creative literary output appears, at first, on the pages of papers and magazines. Only later on do they get published in book form. Have you ever given a retouch to any of your writings prior to their inclusion in a book?**

During the past few years, I've been uploading all the poems into my computer. I do the Assamese-typing myself and make the necessary alterations. Of course, this can't be done haphazardly. Words and lines are replaced or rearranged with a lot of introspection. Even after their initial appearance in a magazine, the phases of reassessment and modification remain — in the case of certain poems. One of my poems has been included in four collections. At this stage too, after repeated publications, the urge to develop the poem continued. I'm referring to the poem, 'Chaku' (Eyes) that has appeared in my latest collection. Hence, a foot-note had been added at the end of the poem.

**When do you generally write and what ambience do you find most inspiring Any stringent rule or condition?**

I don't have any fixed time for writing. I do it anywhere — at the beginning, after all, I only prepare the unwritten text of a poem. Therefore, I don't require any specific form of ambience, pen or paper. I've composed poems even while driving during journeys, while catnapping or dreaming. At times I've even recovered poems that had receded away from memory through absent-mindedness.

**Who's the first reader of your writings?**

This is quite an irritating question for me. The editors of magazines and journals happen to be the first readers of many of my poems. Respected Nilmani Phookan, Hiren Bhattacharya, too, have been the first readers of some of my poems. During the preparation of the manuscript of 'Nazma', my friend Ranjit Das had been the first reader and my constant source of inspiration. Many poems go on to unveil themselves for the first time only in the published collection.

**An oft-asked question to a writer — why do you write?**

According to neurology, the active state of certain cells in the parietal part of the brain enables us to be creatively involved in fine arts. From this perspective, writing, drawing, singing, film-making — all are organic forms of art-work. Our bodies and minds are endowed with this special ability and skill. In my brain these neurological cells are perhaps live and active as a result of which I write. This activity helps greatly in maintaining a relationship and communication with life and the world I live in. I dream, I can't ingest certain words and activities with ease — conflicts and revolts go on within my mind for the expression of which I write. There may be, known or unknown, other reasons too.

**Whom, do you think, should a poet be committed and honest to — the readers and the society or poetry?**

The development of such virtues in a poet depends on how conscientious he or she is as a human being — personally, I don't appreciate the self-contradiction between the two entities of poet and human being. Rabindranath said, "In life, necessarily or unnecessarily, I've resorted to lying many a time ; but in poetry, never." A poet is always conscientious to poetry. To explain about the social responsibility of poetry, T.S. Eliot wrote a long article in prose. In poetry, society exists along with the poet and the readers. With the narratives of human beings, poetry along with the poet's philosophy of life and the world view take formation.

**Do you go through the published reviews of your poems or poetry collections?**

Yes, I do — in fact, with a great deal of seriousness. However, I can't remain engrossed for long over them. This could be a lapse on my part. While penning poems, I try to keep them totally out of my mind.

**Do you skim through the pages of your books occasionally?**

During the preparation of my collection, *Anubhav Tulasir Shrestha Kabita*, I'd done the selection myself — so it became necessary for me to go through my earlier writings carefully. If such necessities don't arise, I never feel the urge to pore over my writings. 'Self attachment' is a sort of ailment which I'd always prefer to keep at bay.

**Would you name a few writers from our country and abroad who have influenced you ?  
Tell us about some of the books that you consider distinctive.**

I've mentioned earlier about the Russian writer, Tolstoy. With him I may add Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak — Shakespeare, Browning, Hopkins, Eliot, Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Neruda, Lorca, Paz, Borges and so many — the list will go on and on. Among the Indian writers, I can name Premchand, Kabir, Sankardev, Madhabdev, Ghalib, Rabindranath, Jibanananda, Navakanta Barooah, Ajit Baruah, Nilmani Phookan, Mahim Borah, Saurabh Kumar Chaliha and all my contemporaries.

**At last, I thank you whole-heartedly for offering us your valuable moments for this conversation.**

I, too, thank you for giving me the opportunity to express some of my feelings.

**Krishna Dulal Barua** is a prominent translator and writer based in Nagaon, Assam. He received the Katha Award for translation in 2005. He can be reached at [kd\\_barua2008@rediffmail.com](mailto:kd_barua2008@rediffmail.com)