

Poetry of Bijoy Sankar Barman

The translator's introduction

Nirendra Nath Thakuria



Bijoy Sankar Barman

Tug at the Gillnet is a collection of fifty-three translated poems of Bijoy Sankar Barman. As a leading Assamese poet, as well as a translator of the present generation, Bijoy has made his mark at the national level also. His poems have been translated into English and all major regional languages in India, and into foreign languages like Italian, French, Spanish, Estonian, and Mexican Spanish.

As a reader and translator, I am impressed by Bijoy's sincerity and single-minded devotion to poetry. From the very beginning, he has tried to find a poetic voice of his own and a poetic idiom that has roots in the regional dialect of his native place Rupaibathan, a village in the Nalbari district of Assam, (India), where he was born and brought up. In the very formative period of his creative life, Bijoy inherited and absorbed the local cultural elements. He seems to have defined his poetic mission and tried to accomplish it with a rare motivation. The rivulet Kanikhunda is a central motif in his poetry, which has acquired a symbolic significance for the landscape, ecology and cultural moorings of the locality. The Kanaikhunda runs through the poetic self of Bijoy (For example, "Riverine", "In the Yawning Fish Trap", "While Carrying my Grandpa's Bier", and "My Home"). In the relative freedom and openness of the rural life, the speaker in the poem "In the Yawning Fish Trap" broods over his predicament:

I'm like the fish
trapped

in the yawning fish trap

I'm in waters
still I'm
in the yawning fish trap

Bijoy Sankar Barman's poetry is dominated by the rural landscape and ambience memorably evoked by the carefully chosen images and metaphors. The poems "Riverine", "Kite", "Winter", "Transition", "Fear", "Fading from the Core", "Fire", "In the Yawning Fish Trap", "In the Open", "A Stretch of Mustard Plants in Bloom", "Your Sky Yonder Over the Sky", "While Carrying my Grandpa's Bier", and so on, form his core poetic landscape. "Screaming Tears of Ketetong", "First Excavation of Rangringkan", "Second Excavation of Rangringkan" and "Jatinga" are the further expansion of his inscape. In the poems "Mom", "Bapa, the Stone-Blind" and "*Sagun*", the reader comes across village folks with their sound common sense, concern and humour.

Bijoy creates the blind Bapa, a memorable and lovable character, who carries a kerosene lamp in his hand while walking along the village lane in the evening. Bapa's concern for other folks is so heart-warming:

Oh it is not for me
in this darkness
but for you people
("Bapa, the Stone-Blind").

The poems "Spook" and "Wail of the Ripe Leaves" give the reader a fleeting glimpse, with a creepy feeling too, of supernatural beings of Assamese folklore.

The god is awakened
by the splats of baank
crazy for raw fishes
("Wail of the Ripe Leaves").

Death is a major theme in Bijoy's poetry. In half a dozen poems, namely "While Carrying my Grandpa's Bier", "That Man", "One Day Death at the Radio Station", "I Know about a Woman", "Wail of the Ripe Leaves" and "The Death's Hive is Brimming with Honey", the poet expresses his feelings and attitude towards death. Death of a particular person (dear one or unacquainted ones) has occasioned the poems of varying sadness and poignancy. A sombre atmosphere for lurking death is created:

Death was lying still
under the wild ferns
in the shades of
the pipal and gulmohar trees
("One Day Death at the Radio Station").

Sometimes death holds no terror for the poet; it is like a bee-hive. ("The Death's Hive is Brimming with Honey"). This ironically romantic notion of delectable death contrasts with the speaker's deepest concern for his dead grandfather:

It comes to mind
in this makeshift bamboo bed
how can he sleep quiet and still
and
how will he sleep for ever
on the edge of the Kanaikhunda
in this house of the wind and water
with no wall loft door and window
("While Carrying my Grandpa's Bier").

Bijoy is always cautious about choosing his themes. He never plays to the gallery; his is not the poetry of declamation and verbal fireworks. His poetry springs from his intense personal feelings. In the poems "Pains", "Burning Sorrows", "The Dreaming Fingers" and "No Poem", he rises to the occasion on the issues of deep human concern like violence, child abuse and exploitation, the plight of a blind girl or the oil-well conflagration at Baghjan in Assam in 2020 (respectively).

The harrowing torture inflicted on the little housemaid Barsha (her back was burnt with a hot pressing iron) makes the poet shudder even in sleep:

Those injuries in your back
raw and patchy
at night
in dream I see
("Burning sorrows").

The plunder of natural resources in the name of commercialization, particularly the opencast mining resulting in massive landslides, has threatened the very existence of the indigenous tribal communities at Ledo and Margherita. The persona in the poem "First Excavation of Rangringkan" tellingly recalls such a catastrophic incident:

Reduced to debris
in a landslide
our hilly hamlet

Our uproar and cries
won't reverberate
again
The graves of our forefathers
have touched down the underworld

When the symbiotic relationship with nature is snapped for the sake of development, the pristine beauty of nature is lost forever:

Under the crusts of dust
of roads broadened
by cutting the hills
countless colours get crumbled
yelling at the excavators
("Kohima")

In the poem “Ashokastami” the speaker performs the sacred ritual – the immersion of the ashes with the *pinda daan* to his parent.

At Ashwaktanta
the votive immersion of the ashes
The pieces of the burnt out bones
were maya
washed back by waves
to the water edge

This philosophical speculation has roots in the concept of *Maya* in Hinduism. It is the key component of the doctrines of the Advaita school of Vedanta. The approximate translation of *Maya* is illusion, which deludes *jivas* (individual selves). Death reminds us the transience of human life – an illusion, a *maya*.

In another poem “At the Foothills of Panikhaiti”, the speaker evokes a scene of juvenile fun and frolics in a beautiful wood of *sal* and *chegun* on the full moon night. The very mention of the Vrindavan conjures up the amorous frolics of the dark god Krishna with Radha accompanied by the Gopinis. At the spiritual level, it signifies the longing of the souls to merge with God. But everybody is shadowy here. The scenic beauty of the wood is marred by the dark smoke belching out of the chimney of the distant refinery – symbolizing the industrial age and the concomitant squalor of modern life.

In the poem “My Home”, the mobile tower that scraps the sky stands for the progress and digitalization of communication, but itself a paradox of connectivity and alienation:

Voices are roaming in the ether
Nothing I have heard
 (“My Home”).

Bijoy has written a poem titled “Pains” (Dedicated to Navakanta Barua) that movingly expresses the poet’s deep angst about uncertainty and contemporary violent realities with the allusion to the Hindu myth of Aruni:

If with rags I could plug
the ducts of surging pains
or
as Aruni did
.....
.....
 (“Pains”)

In “To Nilmani Phookan”, another dedicatory poem, the poet acknowledges his indebtedness to Nilmani Phookan, a doyen of modern Assamese poetry.

Bijoy has mused over poetry for decades and composed a few poems on poetry and poet. He wants to absorb and enrich the cultural tradition of Assam in spite of his limitation as a poet:

Let us invite the roots

to grow fast
through our skin
our blood
our dark innards
("Roots, Grow Inwards").

After years of hard work, the poet stoically reconciles himself to the home truth:

If the poet's clone tells no lie
the poet is to live
among the thorns
yeah among the thorns
.....
.....
Having crawled under
the border fence of dream
the poet finds himself in the bed of thorns
("If the Poet's Clone Tells No Lie")

The poet's dedication to poetry is not only lifelong; it survives even after his death:

Even after my death
that unwritten poem
will keep scouring me
in burnt-out embers
("Poet").

Even after my death
poetry will grope around
for my body of flesh and blood
(ibid).

"Pigs do Not Look at the Sky" and "To Ganesh Gohain (a) Thought Architect (b) Release from Colours" are impressive among the poems dealing with other themes – the first one for its sarcastic tone and the second one for the poet's deep appreciation of the artist Ganesh Gohain.

The nature-and-pleasure loving people belonging to the (upper) middle class living in Guwahati hardly bother about any pollutions and the squalid life in the slums and shanties.

We the dolphin-loving people
do not think of pigs
The pigs in their entire life
do not look at the sky
even once
That too we do not know
("Pigs do Not Look at the Sky").

In the studio of Nirvana
with your two eyes
how have you managed to shape
the philosophy
of yours
("Release from Colours").

As a poet, Bijoy Sankar Barman’s achievements are significant: his meditative concentration, his mastery of the Assamese language, the economy of words, the use of sharp and striking images, and tantalizing suggestiveness that create a poetic ambience – all bear the stamp of his poetic talent. “Still”, “Stone Script”, “I Know about a Woman”, “Revival”, “Marine” “Granite Poem I”, “Granite Poem II” and “Leaving Moments” are worth mentioning for their bare diction and the pithy messages. “Kashmirnama” is unmistakable for its barest diction and the undercurrent of sadness suggestive of the prevailing political situation in Kashmir. Image is always central to Bijoy’s poetry. Poems like “Riverine”, “Kite”, “Fear”, “Fire” “Winter”, and “In the Yawning Fish Trap” stand out for their fascinating, even haunting, visual images.

Lulled by darkness
the hamlet on the hilltop
burns in my heart as a lamp

(“Fire”)

On a rotten piece of wood
drifting down from somewhere
perches a yellow bird
sad and lonely

On its wings
the noon weaves a net

(“Riverine”)

The will-o’-the- wisp
is now sweeping
under the feet of the living

(“No poem”)

Last night
After the rain I saw
a shadow lying at my head
on the floor

Was it mine

(“Winter”)

The poems in *Tug at the Gillnet* are arranged on somewhat thematic affinity. Nearly a score of original Assamese terms have been retained (in italics) because either they have no equivalents in English or their English equivalents cannot carry the subtle nuances of connotative meanings of the source language. Footnotes are given for the benefit of the readers who are not familiar with Assamese culture, folklore, ecology and some events mentioned in poems. We hope that the universal feelings and concerns of the poet will transcend the barriers and strike a chord with the perceptive readers of poetry.

Nirendra Nath Thakuria, retired Associate Professor of English, is a translator.