Nilmani Phookan
- poems -

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Nilmani Phookan (10 September 1933 -)

Nilmani Phookan (Nilamani Phookan) is an Indian poet in Assamese language and an academic. His work replete with symbolism, is inspired by French symbolism and is representative of the genre in Assamese poetry. His notable works include Surya Henu Nami Ahe Ei Nodiyedi, Gulapi Jamur Lagna, Kobita.

Nilmani Phookan is considered Assam’s most distinguished living poet. Born in the village of Dergaon in 1933, he started writing poetry in the early 1950s. Inspired by the example of his precursors, Hem Barua, Amulya Barua and Maheswar Neog, he and his other contemporaries, Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua, took to free verse, exploring and extending the possibilities of Assamese modernism. He has written thirteen volumes of poetry, and has won ten regional and national awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award for Poetry in 1981 and the Padmashri from the Government of India in 1990. He joined the Arya Vidyapeeth College in Guwahati as a lecturer in 1964 and worked there until his retirement in 1992.

Phookan has been described as a “sage-like presence” in Assamese literature. It is possible to see why. His canvas is vast, his imagination mythopoeic, his voice bardic, his concerns ranging from the political to the cosmic, from the contemporary to the primeval. The landscapes he evokes are epic and elemental: he speaks of fire and water, planet and star, forest and desert, man and rock, time and space, war and peace, life and death.

And yet, you find not merely a sage’s reflective detachment here, but urgency as well as anguish and a deep sense of loss. Most importantly, to my mind, the unapologetic preoccupation with the cosmic and existential does not lead to grandiosity or a resort to misty abstractions. For even while the poetry invokes generalities, it does not ignore the scorching particular that has always been such an integral part of the poet’s province. This is poetry that can speak of “the meaning of death/ and the vacuity of living” and “the mothers of five hundred million sick and starving children”, but it can also memorialise another more fragile moment: “the yellow butterflies with wings spread on barbed wires”.

In the accompanying interview, Phookan speaks lyrically of the Assamese countryside, of the rich heritage of tribal myth and folklore, the rhythms of village life, all of which have helped shape his sensibility as a poet. He reasserts the centrality of poetry in “helping man find his soul” – a role that takes on an altogether new urgency in a violent, trackless and progressively utilitarian world. Along with the impassioned defence of the poetic art, however, is the awareness
of its insignificance in the larger scheme of things: poetry eventually remains, he maintains, “Nothing more profound/ Than the chirping of the cricket”.
A Poem

For days I have heard
only one sound
day and night.
The burning tyre is stinking.

I have shed tears
And wiped them away
with one hand
with both hands.

In my tears
the stones have soaked,
the grass drenched in blood over there
has soaked in my tears.

The overblown surujkanti flowers have not
wilted though they are about to,
the Dichoi and Dibong have not
changed into ice though they are about to.

For days the moon has not
risen over Diroi Rangali.

You, with the wet lock of hair,
might have lit the earthen lamp
shedding bitter tears.

The burning of tyre is smelling still
I have heard that same sound again.

Will the sun appear
red or black
at tomorrow’s dawn?
you too do not know.

[Translated by Niren Thakuria]

Nilmani Phookan
Do Not Ask Me How I Have Been

Do not ask me how I have been
I haven't ask me either
down the Kolong flows
a young, female torso
What I was last night
king hermit farmer labour
lover rebel poet
a tiger looking for waterholes
after the kill
I forgot what I was

Do not ask me how I have been
After all I am not alone
for, even after the last supper
I have not bid adieu
nor could I take my leave
I have not laughed since Auschwitz
nor cried either

And where can I go
I forgot where I came from
the day clings on to life
vomiting blood
the bones and bits
trudge along the road
with wry laughter

Do not ask me how I have been
for dogs in coital ecstasy
in shop-front showcases
at the Bhutnath grounds
the blind Kaali fancies
a girdles of male genitals.

For everyone has the same fear
even the dead
to say or not to say
to do or not to do
to open the door or the window
for, this long wait since then
Fibs lies pretence deceit
Youth cruel kind

Do not ask me how I have been
because it’s darkness now
Now even it flickers
Now even it glimmers
adversity travail disaster
and in their wake
the banner of man’s blood

For in my trousers pockets I carry
two forbidden hands
a bullet reddens in flight
in my bosom
for, it is silence all around
the terrible din of peace

Do not ask me how I have been
down the Kolong flows
a young, female torso
because, for forty-two hours
my corps lay there
on the footpath of Guwahati.

For even now I have my eyes open
even my death stares open eyed
for, in pool and puddle
in creek and lake
fish in shoals glisten

O you, my ambling horseman.

[Translated by Pradip Acharya]

Nilmani Phookan
Don’t Ask Me How I Am

Don’t ask me how I am
Down the Kolong comes floating
A headless girl
For my corpse
Was lying for forty-two hours
On the pavement of Guwahati
For I’m open-eyed still
My death too has its eyes open
For in ditches—puddles rivers—lakes
Fish in shoals whisk about
Hey, ambling horsemen of mine.

Nilmani Phookan
I Am Going Down The Hill

I’m going down the hill
It’s getting dark
At my heels
are some rocks
horizontal vertical round
And in close embrace are
gods apsaras
male and female Kinnars
men and women
all carved
primordial nights.

A pomegranate plant comes up
an orange plant too
From the depths of silence
of thousands of years
emerge a pair of my forefather’s hands

The cries of a flock of cotton teals
quiver on the leaves of waterweeds

It’s getting dark
on the copper coin of my face
I am burning
On a red lotus
a pearl gleams.
I’m rock and man
I’m clay and man
As if standing at the centre
of a vast circle
I have observed
fire water air planets and stars

I am a horseman of the sun
Taking on a thousand lives
I have accumulated
in my body every sun
of seas of woods of deserts
in my rapt consciousness
every black sun of
every season

I am a naked man
Ageless

with my whole body
I have felt
some rocks
hidden under water and earth
some rocks
and a planet made of
human flesh and blood
My lips tongue
and innards have felt
some rocks
In the angular privacy
of my prolonged life
some rocks
horizontal vertical round:

Siva rock and man
Siva bull and rock
bull and man
the pulse of time
I am rock and man
I am a kiss
planted by men on a rock

Along the flight of stone slabs
the married women have gone up
the hill of rocks
the pristine wisdom of earth and dream

the lyrics of dreamy youth

The night has begun to fall
The moon has come up
through the antlers
of a barking deer
the voices of rocks
have gone up
spirally to the sky
Siva rock and man
Siva a burning tower of eternal fire
Into the body of Siva
Parvati has merged
Crying
Now it is dawn
in the womb of the earth.

[From: Nrityrata Prthivi; Publisher: Barua Book Agency, Guwahati, 1985]

Nilmani Phookan
I Passed The Tattooed Night Wide Awake

I passed the tattooed night wide awake
looking at myself in the mirror this morning I saw
my face was a piece of ice
a feeling of coldness ran through me

As if I awoke all of a sudden
from a dream that writhed in pain
wanting to write something
I could not find my right hand
my hand on which mushrooms grew.

I have not found the words
words I have been hearing night and day
in fire under water from palm leaves
on eternity's darkling roads
wearing a necklace of seven strings
amber-coloured low sounds of barren love
now hang from your neck
all over the bodies of
those who are gone who are coming who are ready to go

Hesitantly I look into your eyes
I go on till turning into a western star
I burn in the air to ash
turning into ash I come down on your face

I have to be wide awake tonight as well
perhaps for this night
I have been waiting all these days
carrying my heart in a sacred copper vessel

In your presence I try to hide my face
in the midst of rain stones trees children
I am now getting submerged
in the mossy nights' deep water

Looking at my face in the mirror tomorrow morning
perhaps I shall see
from the riverbank an old man
is angling all alone
looking at the evening torn into strips

The fish jumping on the water seem to be
jumping onto the bank
a kingfisher would swoop down
on the edge of the water.

[From: Alop Agote Ami Ki Katha Pati Ashilo; Publisher: Student's Store, Guwahati, 2003]

Nilmani Phookan
Mating Music

In the woods
deep in the woods
a crane calls

Open out both your arms
let a swarm of stars sink
into the aroma of your hair

In the pond teeming with lotuses
the wind soughs
deep inside your body
opens a red bud

The rain pours down
the opening palm frond
the blood of your breasts
rushes to your lips

Now you are awake
the face of darkness glows
the clouds rumble over the hill.

[From: Chandrabhaga No. 2; Publisher: Cuttack, 2000]

Nilmani Phookan
Poetry Is For Those Who Wouldn'T Read It

A poet had stated
poetry is for those who wouldn't read it
for the wounds in their hearts
for their fingers where thorns are embedded
for the anguish and the joy
of the living and the dead
for the outcry that trundles
down the road day and night
for the desert sun
for the meaning of death
and the vacuity of living
for the dark stones cursed by ruins
for the red patch between the lusty lips of maidens
for the yellow butterflies with wings spread on barbed wires
for the insects, the snails and the moss
for the bird flying lonely down the afternoon sky
for the anxiety in fire and water
for the mothers of five hundred million sick and starving children
for the fear of the moon turning red as blood
for each stilled moment
for the world that keeps turning
for one kiss from you
that man of dust will become dust again,
for that old saying.

Nilmani Phookan
That Day Was A Sunday

That day was a Sunday
A stream of fresh blood from the butcher’s
Rolled over the street to the ditch by its side
The tumultuous passers-by took no notice of
The stream of blood
A pair of inept dogs with folded tails
Were licking the uncongealed blood
The faces of these restless people
Were like skulls
The scream of the man who had risen from the morgue
Kept passing up and down through the telephone wire
Where a pair of sparrows was lazing

That day was a Sunday
The market was flooded with oranges
Before the sale was over
Another Sunday had begun.

[From: Alop Agote Ami Ki Katha Pati Ashilo; Publisher: Student’s Store, Guwahati, 2003]

Nilmani Phookan
We were two families sharing a single house
Time passing through the leaky roofs
Night passing water coming down in torrents
Sometimes a wagtail
Used to perch there in a dream

When you smile I weep
I smile when you weep
This is the way we exchange each other
Exchange our days our nights our sleeps our sleeplessness
Childhood and youth

Old age cravings consuming fire
What nightmare or what dream
Or a dream of nightmare
Dream continuous

What home shelter my country foreign dungeon
Open expanse of the field
Jungle bamboo-grove past present
Only the children
Wipe their tears
And light up evening’s fire-flies

Only a blooming flower
In its fragrance
Seeks heart’s expanse

Where have I come where have you gone
None of us know

They say Arjun has come back
What news of the dead child
Which gallery is displaying
The painting of Nandalal
Shiva drinking poison

We do not know none of us know
Whose boat did sink during a storm at Kurua
The shrill neigh of a mad horse
Galloping on the road

And yet would you not plant
A sapling of fragrant banana
In your garden

Sitting on the porch of sunset blooms
Grandfather used to stir up his memory
What he got what he gave to whom

The chill of the stone bridge the fire in the flint
A handful of water and mud from the river Nairanjana
A splash of blood in the grass
Copper silver gold diamond bell-metal bronze
Glass nickel lead

A big fish caught in a river of his native village
A full-blooded fish
With life-lustrous gems sparkling in the eyes
Tore the net to shreds and escaped
And the night did not end.

Roaring prayers leap up from monastic huts around the square
O this world is a serpent full of venom
And what have we been searching for
What pleasure what truth to be given to whom
What vain possession
Free expressed secret unfading
What meaning and meaninglessness
Of what scriptural paraphrase
A blind tantric worshipper

Crows and dogs in the solitary hutment
Many a thing is growing and diminishing
Man’s age man in particular man without distinction
Torn divided individual universal concrete abstract
Brittle hard dialectical unmoved intelligent kind
Cruel wicked deceitful lonely sad

Many things are growing and diminishing
Mishap lethal weapons suicide ennui
Humanist abortion books
Cancer agitation yogi comrade
Uncertainty hustle-bustle
Contract to transform life

Where is the end is this the end or beginning of what
Where is the beginning
Who will take measurement of whom
Whom do I ask what do I ask whom
If ever I wait somewhere
In the pristine darkness of a cave
On a pyre with fire extinguished

If ever I sleep somewhere
In a surgical ward of a hospital
Inside a transport vehicle
Standing naked on a cultivated field

If ever I wait somewhere
At the junction of three roads
In a resonant spring
In the sacred city of the Cosmic Dancer

Whom do I ask, whom do I ask what
Why only in darkness does germinate rice
Why does it rain
Why man is blessed with sperm and
Woman with breast milk

Where have I come where have you gone
None of us know none of us know
What time it is which month or which year
Did I ever see
The whole sky
The whole of the earth
All the faces of men dead or alive

Once at dawn
Waking up
Did I discover myself
In a battered face
Did I ever know An orange
Rosewood tree

What must be done
Are truth love and reality
Each in a flux
Pomegranate flowers burned in the teardrops
Compassion in that sacred chalice of blood
Pre-harvest moon over the cremation ground

We were two families sharing a single house
Time passing through leaky roofs
Night passing water coming down in torrents
Never say that you would never
Would never arrive there
No water in the river
No fire in water

Screaming atop her voice low and then
For what anguish what anger what joy
In her perpetual motion

Is the Earth in her magnificent dance.

Nilmani Phookan
The Sky Throbs

The sky throbs, I grope for the lamp
All of a sudden in full flesh and blood
My mother
The lamp in her eyes, blood all over her face—I shriek...

'Mother and Motherland'

Passing through the tree-leaves it sparkles upon the green
You’re my sun on the face of clouds
I see you arriving drenched in each shower
As if you come planting paddy seedlings somewhere sowing blood
A rainbow comes flying along with your glance...
Swaying in the autumnal fields
Endearing mother of mine
The raw-turmeric air of my heart

Nilmani Phookan
What Were We Talking About Just Now?

1

What were we talking about just now?
About stone being hard, water cold,
About fire burning
And peacocks spreading their plumes
About what the world's first dawn was like
And why a sweet fruit becomes bitter
The moment it is in the mouth

about the sky flaring up
Like a live ember
Just four minutes to midnight

About the earth slowly turning to sand
And the shadow of bamboo clumps
Turning to ash

2

No, I don’t remember anything at all now
Did you tell me a moment ago
That you love me?

The Love that is dedicated
Only to mankind
And only to destitute children
Or to what lies hidden
Amid the thirsty weeds
At the bottom of the sea
Or in a chunk of coal

Was that what you spoke of
On that midnight
As you shed silent tears?

3

In all these days
I couldn’t find a life
That I could call my own
Or a death that was all for myself

Who is it that nibbles to pieces
My days and nights?
How do I tide over this gory time?

4
Who is that having some celebration
So early in the evening?
And who among the dead
Will attend it?

How many times did
The calf skin moo?
And how many times did they return
Reddened with blood?

What did they see on their return
When they looked back?
And who did they not see
On that lonely labyrinthine path?

5
Like the wind
The horses are wheeling about the courtyard.
Listen to their neighing.

Last night, a poet like you
With a low voice
Passed away -

One who had realized
That there was nothing in his poetry
Nothing more profound
Than the chirping of the cricket

What we were talking about
Just a moment ago
About water being cold, stone being hard
And about peacocks spreading their plumes.
Nilmani Phookan