

‘No, O Hunter, No!’

by

Jay Goswami

[An abridged translation by Arnab Rai Choudhuri]

Recently the reputed Bengali magazine *Desh* brought out an issue on the nuclear debate. This issue of *Desh* contained a very powerful poem ‘Ma Nishada’ by Jay Goswami, the major new voice in modern Bengali poetry. The abridged translation of the poem is prepared by Arnab Rai Choudhuri, who is an associate professor of physics at the Indian Institute of Science.

According to Indian mythology, the art of poetry was discovered by the sage Valmiki, the composer of the great *Ramayana*. While taking a morning stroll on the bank of a river, Valmiki saw a pair of water birds mating. Suddenly a hunter’s arrow ended the life of the male bird. Valmiki was so deeply anguished by this terrible happening that a few moving words came out of his mouth spontaneously, begining with ‘Ma Nishada’ (No, oh, hunter, no). This was the world’s first poetry. Valmiki had discovered that words can have a special power when the heart is deeply moved!

Goswami’s poem is full of evocative images from Indian literature and culture, to make the point that Indian poets through the ages, starting from Valmiki, have always raised their voices against wanton aggressiveness. Some of the most beautiful stanzas of the poem allude to medieval Bengali poetry, which may not be known to readers outside Bengal. Hence, those portions have not been included in the translation.

The silence shatters, a pillar of dust
Pushes against the dome of sky,
Earth’s sphere rotates, the fire of hell
Leaps up to devour the sun.

No, not the sun, is it the moon of dark nights?
A black bird flies with the crescent moon in his beak;
A black arrow pierces that moon,
From the bow of the ancient hunter

The ancient hunter whose arrows and spears
Ended the mating of that fated bird couple.
Our first poet’s curse still visits on him.
The moon waxes and wanes ...

Struggles prehistoric—
Struggles to take away the food from the hungry mouth.
A tattered rag to cover a hollow body in winter nights,
The warmth of a morning sunshine on sandy beaches.

The dead and the wounded float in the sea water,
With broken chariots and dead horses.
Two men crawl in the green grass, weapons in hands—
Were they not neighbours once?

I want that land of my neighbour.
I want to rule my neighbour's village.
I want my neighbour king to pay me taxes.
I want my neighbour to fear my weapons.

Will you not mix poison
In my neighbour's wind, sunshine and water?
Intellect and Science crawl like serpents
To dig a hole under the ground.

The fire of hell leaps up in that hole,
A mushroom cloud in the sky, no place to escape.
A burnt house, heaps of bleached bones,
The cracked soil of a barren land.

Many men are dead, many more are born—
With crooked arms, with bodies of monstrous limbs,
Some with no tongues to utter the soul's anguish
Or no leg bones to stand erect.

Poison has entered the seed of man,
Poison has destroyed the fertility of woman and land.
Still we harvest the ripe paddy,
Still we sing the songs of Tulasi and Kabir.

I have seen Tulasi walk by our burnt village,
Kabir sings in the solitary river bank,
The Ramayana lies torn on the dusty road
Where a red-eyed Sadhu roams with a naked sword.

I hear homeless children cry in the footpaths
Through nights of hunger,
I see the owner of a cheap tea-stall
Beat a child labourer.

Let them carry on with their existence.
Even if they starve,
I have got my Weapon
In my mighty hand.

Weapon on the ground, Weapon in the sky,

The horizon is reddened with Weapon's glow,
The red Weapon reflects in the river water
Down which the Grantha Saheb floats . . .

Earth's sphere rotates,
The Jews turn into soil under our feet,
Paddy plants bloom in the killing fields . . .

The sun traverses the sky to rise
In my neighbour's land after mine.
A destitute Muslim offers his daily prayer,
With a white dove flying over his white cap.

A black bird flies with the crescent moon in his beak,
The moonlight shines on weapons of mass murder,
The ancient hunter waits with the raised bow,
The green earth will cease to be when he pushes the button!

Come, O Poet, say once more 'No, O Hunter, No!'
Let the anthills burst apart,
Let the sun and the moon stand on the two sides
And illuminate the paintings of ancient man on cave walls.

Behold the silent night settles on the Ganges,
Behold the solitary boatman rows his boat,
Behold how the whispers of ordinary men
Turn into immortal songs of a nation.

Behold the dust storm has stopped.
The dove of peace has come swimming across the white moonlight
To rest in our yard and pick up grains of wheat.
We work in the fields of wheat and corn.

Behold the silent night settles on the Jamuna,
Behold Krishna and Radha come holding their hands,
Don't you hear Mira singing of love
In the ruined temple?

Is it so easy to kill us all?
We have risen through the cycle of days and nights,
We have traversed the space of the Mahabharata . . .

O Hunter, let your Weapon burn our village
To ashes. I see
An innocent virgin
Rising through those ashes.

The sea waters lie calmly at her feet,
A distant thunder rumbles in clouds over her head.
She takes away the Weapon from your arm,

She throws it in the calm sea waters.
Behold the sun sets in the calm sea waters.
Centuries gyrate—the sun sets ...