



The Echoes of Tribal Times
Translations by Anup Singh Beniwal

Nirmala Putul's is a powerful subaltern voice. She etches the contours of Santhali topography – human and natural – in her poetry. Her poems capture the verve, verities and vicissitudes of *Adivasi* life in its lived variedness. As much experiential as activist, it is a voice of simultaneous caution, compassion, camaraderie and critique.

Following English approximations of her poems is an attempt to showcase some aspects of her creative oeuvre. The poems have been picked randomly from her first Hindi anthology – *Nagare Ke Tarah Bajte Hain Shabd* (Bhartiya Jnanpith, 2012) – itself a translation of her Santhali poems. I am fully aware of the fact that had Nirmala Putul written these poems in English originally, they would have been worded differently. Their idiomatic and thematic flavour and texture would have been different, authentic. I at best could only capture her voice through mediated approximation, not in its lived spontaneity. However, the sheer energy and potency of her voice has the capacity to resonate across languages and thus turn a translation effort into an empathic labour of love.

I

A Hill Woman

She –
Who is coming down the hill,
Balancing a bundle of fire-wood on her head –
A hill woman,
Would presently go to the market
And sell the entire lot
To quench the belly-fire of the entire family.

Lugging the sheet-wrapped child on her back
This paddy-sowing hill woman
Sows her mountain-like-grief
Hoping to reap a bumper crop of happiness

In Breaking rock, she breaks
Hilly restrictions and taboos

Weaving straw-mates on the hills
She confronts the hill-heavy day

In making brooms, she forges
Weapons to fight the dirt
Putting a flower in her bun
She pierces the heart of someone

Running after cows and goats
Her feet etch
Thousand primeval songs on this earth.

II.

A Door to My Solitude

It is not poetry
It is an entry to my silent self

It's here that I relax
Cushion my head on it
Burnt out by the business of living

Whenever I return to it
A door softly opens within
Entering which silently
I comb my seclusion

In here I am
That, to become which

I make no efforts

Cut off from the world
Here, I reconnect with my umbilical cord

My solitude has no Gods
Nor have I any prayers
for them

Only endless expanse of sand
Problems of life
Some dreams and
Ancient tales

And –
An obscure tune
Holding on to which in unique ways
Women transcend themselves
In their time and space

It is not poetry
But myself that I see
Being composed in words
Standing apart from my body
I see my becoming.

III

This is What I Want

I do not say
You consider it a poem
I don't want my name entered
In the list of poets
I don't want to stand
In that queue

Nor do I want
Anyone to dance to its tunes
I don't want it to be sung
Like a separation-song

I want my words
To sprout
Numerous Birsa Mundas
From their earth

I want to see
The lofty date and palm trees
That stand around me
transformed into Sido-Kanhu

I want to see
Tilak Maajhi
Rend open the mountain
And arise from his silent *samadhi*

I want to see my words
Whet the blunt-edge of the axe
And a sentence of mine
As an arrow drawn tight
On the bow string

I want that
Strung by a sentence of mine
The stone-cast Sido-Kanhu on the crossing
Once again come alive
And arrows start raining
From Tilka's taut bow

I want
My words to
Become the eyes of blind
Ere they are blind

Turn into the voice of those
Who mutely witness the spectacle
Despite their voice

I want
my words
to be the beats of the drum
And draw people out of their homes
On to the road

IV

Whatever I saw, heard, understood – I wrote

Whatever I saw, heard, understood – I wrote
without mincing words
Whether you hate it or like
Is for you to decide

Don't expect ostentatious language from me
Walking on rough roads of life
My language too has become rugged

I don't understand the definition of poetry
I have no knowledge of rhythm or rhyme
I claim mastery over languages and words

Managing the household
Fighting my fights
Whatever I saw and heard
Spoke and talked to the friend and kins in the neighbourhood
I scribbled down on the slate of time
In rough alphabets, some how

Whether to read or not
Erase it or even break the slate
Is your choice

But remember –
There would be someone
To script and speak yet again
All that one would see and hear
And experience in your midst

You have words, logic, intelligence
The entire system is in your control
You can turn the truth into falsehood by telling it repeatedly
And deny in a single sentence all that is mine

You can prove wrong
All that you actually witness
I know

But beware
Those who call truth a truth
And lie a lie with conviction
Have not been silenced fully yet.

V

Sugia

Your lips are
like parakeet's
– said the first

Sugia burst into laughter

You look very pretty
when you laugh, Sugia
Observing her teeth
like lightening flash through the clouds
– said the second

The third opined –

You sing very well
like a nightingale
Your dance is beyond compare –
The earth dances
When you dance

The fourth sang praises to her eyes –
Your big eyes
are very beautiful, Sugia
just like a doe
Come, sit by and
keep looking at me

The fifth, who was the closest
and silent
whispered in her ears –
will you befriend me Sugia
I will get you a chain of gold

Hearing it all
Sugia grew sad
Became silent
Forgot to laugh-sing-dance

From dawn to dust
caught in back breaking daily labour
Sugia would often reflect –
Why every fifth man here
talks to her in the language of flesh?

Alas! Someone would say that –
You are very diligent Sugia
Very innocent and honest
Alas, someone would say this!

VI

Gradually

Gradually the things would clear up
Breaking free from the fog of time

Like seedling sprouting forth from the layers of earth
The discontent within us would burst forth
And the fires would flare up

The fire would slowly spread into the human forest
And the silent still trees would burn down
Even the silently meditating banyan tree
Won't be spared the wrath of the flames

These children playing in the lanes of our hutments
Shall grow up someday
And some at least would have in them
The speed to best the pace of time
Competing against the winds of time

The usually silent man
Would speak with his head held high someday
He would break free from silence slowly someday
His resolve would slowly firm up
As raised fists in the sky against the system
While inventing with his being many a deadly arm

Arraigned against superstitions
And fighting them continuously
Our resolve will firm up gradually

Gathering entire energy of the earth
The being that lies collapsed
would slowly arise from the earth
And measuring the distance with its unstable legs
Would reach there

Where others like him are subject of discussion
Slowly all doors will open
Beyond the limits of our untiring endeavours

Slowly the final curtain would be undrawn
And one-day everything would be crystal clear
The play behind the play
And the real faces of the actors

Nothing happens at once
Like a child growing up in the womb
Before its actual birth
Everything is growing up in the womb of time!

VII

Come, Let's Save it

Our settlements
From stripping
From the climes of the town

Save the entire settlement
From drowning
In *hadia*

On our faces
The earthiness of Santhal division
The *Jharkhandiness* of our speech

Also, the warmth of life
In the coldness of our routines
The fecundity of mind
The innocence of hearts
The arrogance, the persistence too
The fire within
The string of the bow

The sharpness of the arrow
The edge of the axe
The fresh air of the forest
The purity of rivers
The silence of the mountains
The melody of the songs
The earthiness of soil
The swaying of crops

An open courtyard to dance
A song to sing
A little laughter to laugh
And a fistful of solitude to weep

Playfield for children
Pastures for the cattle
Peace of the mountains for the elderly

And in these times of disbelief
A little belief
A little hope
And some dreams

Let's save these together
For there is have still much left
For us to protect in these times

VIII

To Little Brethren Around (Based on a Folk Tale)

Babu, do you remember
When you were small
You used to play in the lanes
With bow, arrows and catapults

Once during those days, you had saved me
From the claws of a wicked tiger

My idiotic father had surrendered me to him
That villain too had taken advantage of my father's simple
nature
Had bartered for me
In lieu of a small favour

When my father, with hoe tied to his own waist
Was calling for someone to help him find the same
So that he could plough the fields

That villain had taken advantage of the moment
And my simple father had given his word
And sent me to fetch water from the fall
Under some pretext

It was a sheer coincidence to run into you while you were
playing
You insisted on accompanying me
It was good that I too relented
And took you along

Remember, how that villain was hiding behind the bush
Near the fall, waiting to attack
A stroke on the lookout for a fish!

Thank you
You had seen through his intensions
And with a single arrow had pierced his eyes
He was dead
Otherwise, he would have torn me to pieces
And gobbled me up
It was in gratitude to your bravery
That I had gotten you a sturdy bull in my marriage
But dear brother

Today hundreds of wicked tigers pierce me
With their greedy eyes
Looking for an opportunity to tear me up

Alas! You are busy hunting down birds and fowls
Busy killing innocent deer and rabbits

Can't you see the stare of the wicked tigers
Lurking near the house
Waiting in ambush to pounce on me?

IX

To *Pilchu Bhudi*

Pilchu Bhudi,
Tell me truly!
Was your pal Pilchu Haram
Really under your sway?

I have heard that he would keep beholding you admiringly
Would weave a wreath for a kiss
And deck with flowers your braid and every limb

Rouging your cheek with the flowers of *palash*
He would dance for hours to please you.

Granny used to say –
You were the lady of the entire earth then
And he, your enchanted slave, simply adored you!

Did granny speak the truth, *Pilchu Bhudi*?

If yes, then how can I believe
These brainless people are your descendants
Who dump the first for the second, and abandon the second to
pick up the third

And put them in their abodes
Just to service their lust till bored

It is simply unbelievable
That these brainless people are your descendants, *Pilchu Bhudi*
Simply unbelievable

(*Pilchu Bhudi*, according to a *Santhali* myth was the first
women of the world)

X

A Hill Child

In hill lap
Like hill-lets
Plays the hill-child

Climbing the hill with wobbly steps
He plants his feet in the hilly land
To sprout with full force
In hilly ambience
Like a hill

Hill child
contains the entire hill within
And running and frolicking in hill lap
The child becomes the hill child

A hill child sees
The plane flying over the hill
And asks his father
About that new bird

XI

Hill Man

Hilly body
Hilly chest
Hilly complexion

The geography of the hill
Is seen on the face of hill man
That sits silently on the hill
The history of the hill
Is ensconced silently within

When fire breaks out on the hill
The plaint of the hill
Erupts though his lute

When a hill crumbles anywhere
His hilly chest
Is shaken, convulsed

Speaking to the hill in hill-language
He talks of his happiness and sorrows
Sings hill songs perched on the hills
In hill script, writes H for the hill.

Sharpening his axe-edge on the hill
He is sharpening
The bluntness within!

XII

The Sorrow of the Old Earth

Have you ever heard
The scream of the trees
Terrified by the nightmare of the flashing axes?

Have you ever seen
In the swaying branches of the trees
A thousand hands appealing for protection
From the onslaught of the axe?

Does something happen within
When a felled tree falls on the earth?

Have you ever heard
The way rivers weep
With their faces covered
In the silence of night?

Have you ever thought
Bathing and washing cattle and clothes
On this bank
That some thirsty person on that bank
Maybe quenching his thirst
Or some woman offering her worship to some god?

Have you ever felt
The shudder in mountain's chest
Deep in silent meditation
When any rock shattered by explosion is scattered?
Have you ever hear in the sun scorching noon
The cry of the stone splinters under the onslaught of hammer?

Have you ever seen the air
Vomiting blood, in your backyard?

Do you ever snatch a moment from your time
To talk to the never complaining, silent old earth
About her agony?

If not, then pardon me
I doubt your being human!

XIII

Santhal Division

Santhal division
Is not Santhal division anymore!
Only a few remain here –
The people of the language and attire

The scramble for the market
Has turned everything haywire
The giant-old trees are uprooted
And our identities have vanished
Amidst expanding jungles of concrete

It's being is mutating –
Bow-arrows, drum, kettle-drum and flute
Everything is collected for the folk museum
Carried on the hearse of the time

In the name of betterment
The fast-mushrooming institutes
Are crowded by the so-called social activists
Officers, sycophants, contractors and middlemen
And all of them
With open tinted bottles in their hand
Are making the roundtable schemes

The inebriation brews in the bottles
And in their intoxication float
Many a full-bodied *Adivasi* damsels

Adivasi maids too have dreams
And unfulfilled desires in their dreams

There is hunger
Starving expanse of rugged land

On this land dark denuded hills
On hills, desolation . . .

Just that!!
What else is left in Santhal division?

Even 'that' much is not intact
In Santhal division
It only survives
In its culture tales!

XIV

Adivasi Women

Their world is circumscribed
By the limits of their sight
The world outside contains within it
Many worlds like theirs

They don't understand
How their goods reach Delhi
The tracks that run through their world
fizzle out well before the highway
They don't understand
Why the rivers dry up
Before they reach their world
How their photographs reach the megapolis

They don't understand! No, they don't understand!

XV

In Search of Home

Gathering the whole household within me
I am scattered all over it

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Yet it is not my home

The children playing in the veranda are mine
The nameplate outside the house is my husband's

I am no earth; the whole earth is in me
But it is not for me

I have no home anywhere
Yet I myself am a home
Where people live unattached
From womb to the bed
In varied forms . . .

From this to that end of the earth
With a fistful of questions, I
Run breathless, race
Searching since centuries
For earth, a home of my own
The meaning of my being!