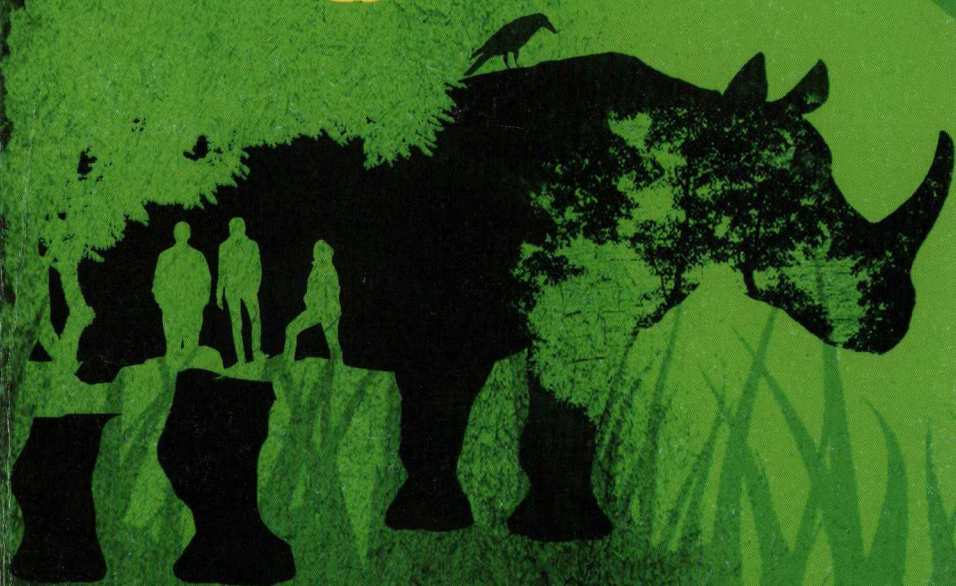


BALLAD *of* KAZIRANGA



DILEEP CHANDAN

Translated from Assamese by
PARBINA RASHID

BALLAD
of
KAZIRANGA


Padmaja Phatak

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It was evening. The bright moonlight had flooded the dense jungle and its surroundings. The moon, which looked like a huge, round, white plate, floated in the sky. Far away, a village, lit up with the serene moonlight and dotted with mysterious bamboo groves, looked mesmerising. The pucca road that ran through the national park was generally quiet, except for one or two odd cars that ran at breakneck speed, making a hissing sound.

There is a speed limit for vehicles on this highway. However, the speed of the cars goes up as they hit this free road. Many animals trying to cross the road from one range to the other, often get hit because of this.

In fact, many animals die their premature death during the floods when they come out of the forest in hordes looking for some dry landmass. Sometimes, the media creates a hue and cry about it. The forest department employees stop those cars; they even arrest some of the drivers. The local residents and wildlife organisations stop the traffic in protest, but only for a few hours. Slowly, the abnormal situation eases itself out. Normalcy returns. This is how life in Kaziranga has been going on, in a sombre manner.

There were only a few vehicles plying today. Probably because of the government-declared holiday on Lakshmi Puja, the pace of life had halted for a while. Only a few big trucks were moving on the highway. Forget the highway, even the jungle seemed to be quiet. The continuous screeching sound of crickets gave an eerie feel to the surrounding. Far away in the village, some stray dogs were barking. Probably they were hungry or they must have spotted some suspicious characters. They often did so when they saw poachers who sneaked into the jungle in search of rhino horns. Who knows? This year saw the maximum number of rhino killings. Many a time, the forest guards on spotting a bleeding rhino after the horn was severed, tried in vain to save its life. It would eventually die from excessive bleeding.

Kaziranga's history is quite recent, Arunabh recalled. In 1904, Mary Curzon, the wife of Viceroy Lord Curzon, came to Kaziranga to see the world-famous one-horned rhino. Despite spending several days, she could not find a single rhino. Disappointed, she pestered her husband to preserve the one-horned rhino by declaring Kaziranga a reserved forest. After a few months, on 5 June 1905, steps were taken to preserve this 232-square km of forest area as a reserved sanctuary. It is an amazing story. Thanks to his career as a journalist, Arunabh had the opportunity to travel to several dense forests the world over, including the tropical forests in Africa. But his mind kept coming back to Kaziranga, its trees, the animals, the villages and the rain. For him, Kaziranga was unparalleled. Nothing compared to the sunny days and moonlit nights in Kaziranga.

Only a few days ago, Kaziranga was opened to the public. It allowed tourists only for a few months in a year. So, when Amal da asked Arunabh to accompany him on this trip to Kaziranga,

he just hopped into his new car and reached Kaziranga. Amal da was his first cousin and lived next door in Guwahati. Amal da seemed to have had enough of his construction career. The famous contractor of Assam, his affair with cement and stones seemed to have hit a low point.

Amal wanted to start something new. Actually, he had made enough money. Of late, he had been getting restless. He couldn't stick to one place for long. He would forcibly take Arunabh to the interiors of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland for no other reason than to enjoy nature. Arunabh's sources in those places would often help them in organising those trips.

In the beginning, this looked odd to Arunabh. Did his cousin have a hidden motive? No. It didn't take him long to read his cousin's mind. After all, they grew up together playing on the river bank in Uzan Bazaar.

Actually, Amal da was getting lonely. His wife, on the pretext of educating their two sons, remained mostly in Delhi. Though Amal da frequented Delhi, he couldn't stay away from Guwahati for long. He was attached to his parents, who lived with him. This simple, social guy, even in this ultra-modern, detached city life, couldn't do without his old friends. But most of his friends, neck deep in their family responsibilities, could barely spare time for him. So, a kind of loneliness and sadness filled his life.

Amal da's friend, Hridayananda Saikia, who was a forest officer in Kaziranga, had booked a room in the official lodge, Aranya, for them. They had spent the night there. But this morning, they vacated the lodge and came to Rishi's hut. Rishi, Arunabh's friend, had left Guwahati a couple of months back to stay at Pamua. The village was about three kilometres from the Kohora Range, close to the highway. The village had about

60 families. One of Rishi's distant uncles lived at the far end of the village. After the death of his aunt, his uncle who had no children, left for Haridwar on a pilgrimage. Actually, he wanted to stay back in Haridwar. On his request, Rishi settled down in Pamua, at least temporarily, to look after his uncle's property. Rishi had opened a music school in Golaghat, 20 kilometres from the village. He had quite a fan following there. He took classes thrice a week. On other days, he played the violin and grew vegetables. Sometimes, he played football and carom with the village boys. He also went fishing, and sometimes, loitered in the local market.

The sound of the drumbeats still lingered in the air. The *namghar* was situated in the middle of the village. It had a huge courtyard. Every evening, the villagers sang together in praise of Lord Krishna. One would find mostly the elderly of the village at this place in the evening. But today was an exception. Probably because it was Lakshmi Puja. The daughters and daughters-in-law of each family were busy welcoming Goddess Lakshmi. Nobody wanted to leave anything to chance with the Goddess of Wealth.

This evening, Rishi's house was quiet. He had left for Bokakhat. Amal da and Yashodhar had also gone to visit his friend in a tea garden that shared its boundary with Kaziranga. The manager of the tea garden was Amal da's friend.

This time, Amal da brought Yashodhar with him. Yashodhar was a middle-aged blind man who played the flute on the busy streets of Panbazar. His melodious tune never failed to attract people. He survived on their love and the 10- or 20-rupee notes which they gave him. The owners of the restaurants in that area made sure Yashodhar ate one hearty meal in the evening. At night, he slept on the verandah of the Baptist Church. There was

no summer or winter for Yashodhar. The melancholy tunes of old Hindi songs reverberated in the bylanes of the dry city. His ever-smiling face bore a humble expression.

Amal da knew Yashodhar since his childhood. Sometimes, he took Yashodhar home. His parents also enjoyed Yasho's music. If Amal da had to go somewhere for a day or two, he would take Yashodhar along. This time, Amal told him, 'Let's go! Let's play music for the rhinos and elephants,' and brought him here. This was another whim of the eccentric Amal da.

Actually, Amal da wanted to open a resort at Kaziranga. One of his friends owned three bighas of land here. But as he couldn't do much with the plot, he wanted to sell it off to Amal da. The plot also shared its boundary with Pamua village.

Someone rang the cycle bell near the gate. Arunabh, who was sitting in the front yard, trying to shoo away the mosquitoes hovering around him, wondered who it could be at that hour.

'Are you home, Rishi dada?' The voice belonged to a young boy.

Arunabh got up from the bamboo *muda* and walked up to the gate. 'Rishi is not home, Bhaiti. I am his guest, his friend.'

Arunabh, in the darkness, could make out that the boys were feeling a little awkward in front of him. Hesitantly, one of them came forward.

'This is prasad from Lakshmi Puja.' He held out a small packet neatly tied with a *gamosa*.

'All right. I will give it to Rishi. But who do I say it is from?' Arunabh asked.

'Tell him it is from Lakhimi's home.' They both chorused. 'My sister's name is Lakhimi,' one of them explained.

After handing over the bundle to Arunabh, the boys rushed back the way they came. It was a sandy lane which was half lit up

with the moonlight and half shadowed by the trees. They kept persistently ringing the bell as they rode.

Arunabh marvelled at how Rishi, a boy who grew up in Guwahati and worked in Mumbai for many years, could leave everything to settle down in a place like Kaziranga. He had no adjustment problems. Though he moved in here just a couple of months back, he was already a popular figure in the village.

But then who was Lakhimi, Arunabh wondered. The boys didn't take their father's or mother's name, but only their sister's name. Was there a romantic angle to their relationship? It will be clear in a day or two, he told himself.

He desperately needed a cup of tea. But there was no gas connection at Rishi's house. Rishi used a kerosene stove instead. And if there was no kerosene, then he used an earthen hearth which was in one corner of his backyard. There was wood piled up next to the hearth. Arunabh didn't feel like pumping the stove for a cup of tea. He was known for his lack of domestic skills. He thought of an alternative. There was this boy who ran a tea stall near the point where the main road of the village met the highway. But today being Lakshmi Puja, the possibility of finding the boy there was slim.

But then he decided to try out his luck rather than sitting there all by himself. God knows when Amal da or Rishi would be back.

Lighting up a cigarette, he secured the door with a piece of bamboo. He slowly walked towards his destination.

It was indeed a beautiful place.

Though he was surrounded by dense forest, Arunabh felt safe as he wandered around in that quiet village. In fact, this jungle, a World Heritage Site, was home to two-thirds of the entire one-horn rhino population of the world. It also had the highest density

of tigers compared to all the tiger reserves in the world. In 2006, Kaziranga was declared a tiger reserve. Kaziranga, which completed 100 years as the reserved park, was one of the most attractive national parks in India. No wonder it attracted poachers as well. If the media reports were anything to go by, it was those poachings and the chases between the forest guards and the poachers that were making Kaziranga famous, or rather, infamous.

The road that ran across the village was a wide one. Rishi's house was in one corner of the village, a little isolated. There was a stream that ran behind his house. It originated somewhere in the hills which demarcated the boundary of the village. The sparkling clear water of the stream was used by most of the villagers for their daily needs. There was also a well in the village.

The road was covered with dry leaves. The moonlight meandered through the branches of the tall trees to reach the ground. It was enough to light up the surroundings. Arunabh kept walking slowly, almost like a sick person. He was still half a kilometre away from the highway.

The houses that sparsely dotted the road still bore signs of celebration. There was a lingering fragrance of some flower in the air; maybe sotiyona. It's said if one took in the smell of sotiyona flowers for long, it caused sneezing and cold. But its fragrance was irresistible.

Wild animals raided the village quite frequently. Rishi had warned them about it. From east to west, the jungle stretched 80 kilometres from Kaliabar in Nagaon district to Bokakhat of Golaghat district. North to south, it was only a 13-kilometre stretch. But it had a portion of Sonitpur district and also the disputed boundary of Karbi Anglong district. But did animals bother about man-made boundaries?

Pamua village was established in 1959. Some 23 families of Moriahola, from the southern bank of Brahmaputra, unable to withstand the fury of floods, relocated to this area. Actually, in 1958, those flood victims gathered at the *namghar*. Collecting a rupee from each family, they sent a representation to the local MLA Naren Sharma. The generous MLA felt obliged to help them out. Looking at their valid documents, he allotted this piece of land to them. Gradually, it grew in size and got the status of a village in 1962. There were about 60 families now living in that village. There were quite a few such villages in the middle of Kaziranga. None of them could progress though. There were no civic amenities. They didn't even have land for cultivation, let alone other infrastructure.

The main highway wore a deserted look. Arunabh could see the tea stall. It was visible from far because of the lantern that hung from its bamboo wall. Arunabh started walking towards the rickety stall.

The shopkeeper was winding up. Seeing Arunabh, the short, fat boy politely asked him what he wanted.

The wood had almost burnt out at the hearth.

'Can I have a cup of tea, Bhaiti?'

With a courteous, 'wait for a while, I am making it', the boy stopped what he was doing and started boiling the water. Sitting on the bamboo bench in front of the shop, Arunabh struck a conversation with the boy.

The shopkeeper, Bipul, stayed with his uncle in the village. He originally belonged to Majuli. But two years back, his family lost everything in the flood. First, their paddy fields and then, their village. So, leaving his parents at someone else's house, Bipul came to Pamua to work with his uncle. He did all the household

chores and now that his uncle was growing old, he took charge of farming too. In the free time, he sat in the shop to earn some pocket money. He sold tea, biscuits and a few other grocery items.

The boy was short and heavy, but he had a charming face. Bipul placed a piping hot glass of tea in front of him. Arunabh started sipping it. With a finger, he indicated to Bipul that one glass was not enough. He wanted another.

As he was starting his second glass of tea, Amal da's black car screeched to a halt in front of the stall. Parking it at a distance, Amal da stepped out. In the dim light, his face looked sad and worried.

'Arunabh, just ask him if he can make me a cup too.' As he said it, Amal da walked up to the car and opened the passenger door. 'Come out, Yasho!' Amal da sounded almost rude.

Yashodhar was walking unsteadily, holding Amal da's hand. The blind man still had the same fixed smile on his face. The face, however, wore the expression of innocence and bewilderedness.

It was only then that Arunabh noticed the bandage on Yashodhar's head.

'What happened to him, Amal da?' Arunabh was concerned.

'Don't ask. He fell in the drain in Jiaur's bungalow and fractured his head.'

'How on earth...'

'He wanted to walk around without a stick. Didn't listen to me. He said he wanted to smell the freshly plucked tea leaves. As he went out to do that, the idiot fell into the ditch. Jiaur informed the compounder. Thank God he came and bandaged his head. He really has become irresponsible these days.'

Arunabh felt really bad for him. Though Yashodhar was old, his brain worked like a young boy. He would often forget that

he was visually challenged. He had dreams. He wanted to do so many things like other people...

Amal da and Yashodhar started sipping tea. Yashodhar made a slurping sound as he drank from his glass.

Bipul finally started closing his shop. Paying for the tea, Arunabh started walking leisurely. There was a slight nip in the air. Autumn was fast approaching. The subtle breeze blew from the west to the east over the vast stretch of Kaziranga. Arunabh took a deep breath. Towns and cities on one hand and this naturally endowed Kaziranga on the other. There was so much of difference...

Arunabh stopped all of a sudden. He trained his ears.

From somewhere, a melodious note came dancing out of a flute and spread around like a young stream flowing through a series of rapids. An Indo-Western fusion tune that had the softness of a symphony, yet was hauntingly piercing. Starting on a low key, it went up on the octave and trembled as it got echoed around. It was a heart-rending note. It was mesmerising. Turning back, he saw Yasho, seated on the bamboo bench in front of Bipul's shop, breathing life into his flute. The smile was still glued to his face, a shy kind of a smile. As if the Little Krishna was playing his flute in the gardens of Vrindaban. The music was absorbed by each element of the jungle around them.

Amal da forgot about the cigarette which he was about to light. He remained stupefied, just staring at Yasho's face. Arunabh walked two steps forward. Even Bipul forgot to close down his shop. The moon, all of a sudden, looked a lot brighter.