

This Land, This People (Rajbanshi Poems in translation)

Translated by Pradip Acharya & Jyotirmoy Prodhani,

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Bondita Baruah

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0105-0731>

North Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, India

The spoken tongue of Rajbanshi has existed for centuries used in utterance by the clan called Koch Rajbanshis and spread over the KamrupKamata kingdom since antiquity comprising of Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara districts of Northeast India, few districts of West Bengal including Cooch Bihar, Jalpaiguri and extending upto Rangpur in Bangladesh. The Rajbanshi language is one all comprehensive in itself. However, as a stature shared by all dialectal languages, the people speaking it as well as the majoritarian population speaking the lingua franca language, Assamese, considered the former as only a dialect without a substantial stronghold and one that lay on the fringes/ margins.

Like all oral traditions, including the ones of the West like the Anglo Saxon, earlier Rajbanshi language too dealt with the realities of life of the common people, their agrarian customs, struggles and hardships, songs sung during festivities or times of mourning or other ritualistic practices. With the passage of time, the subject matter of Rajbanshi poetry experienced alterations with expansion in enumerative styles. With time there was also an urgency, almost revolutionary that was felt to revive and uplift the language. Modern Rajbanshi poetry began to flourish in

various parts of Assam, Bengal, Nepal and also Bihar where there are substantial presence of the Rajbanshi speaking people. *This Land, This People*, translated by renowned translators Pradip Acharya and Jyotirmoy Prodhani that features the translated poetry of more than seventy poets belonging to this vast geographical location including former Cooch Bihar state now in North Bengal, Assam, Eastern Bihar, Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts of Southern Nepal and also Rangpur in Bangladesh. Such diversity in this collection itself speaks of the modes through which the language is enriched because of the territorial expanse that exposes the poets to the ‘locale’ of their geography with demographic variations, modes of living, sustainability, crisis with water—draughts or floods, agrarian life and so on.

The geospatial ‘locale’ of the Koch Rajbanshis has sustained through centuries—while there is a looming sense of fading nostalgia for the past, there are also poems where poets have hinged on the new with a pinch of skepticism. As if glory days are over, as exemplified in JatinBarma’s “The Coochbehar Palace” that “stares vacantly like an abandoned orphan” and where nature intrudes when all things left hollow like “the parades of pebul roots and a zoo of insects, Flurry of parrot nests”. Dwijendranath Bhakat’s “Gauripur Madhupur” and “Gauripur” dwell on similar ruminations of loss and vestiges of the grandeur of Gauripur.

However, the Rajbanshi spirit of solidarity to rise in the face of adversity is reflected in poems like Basanta Kumar Das’ “Song to Rise”, Nikhilesh Ray’s “The Anthem to Wake Us Up”, Nirmala Ray Bhakat’s “We are Rajbanshis”, Ramola Sarkar’s “As We Search for Our Roots” and others. While some of the poems are revolutionary and offer a radical possibility in tone, invoking the spirit of brotherhood to rise in unity against oppression, others are simple reminders of collective to which all Rajbanshis belong.

In a majority of poems in the collection, there is a spectacularity of the old, a matured generation that is gaping at the past standing in the middle of the road while the path unwinds the changes of time. Time in most poems has been depicted as one that has already been lived, the time that has passed. The subject matter of many poems is the exploitation of the peasantry at the hands of the company agents who later came to be recognized as Company's men. Ratiram Das in the poem "Jag Gaan" talks about Debi Singh's lavish lifestyle at the cost of atrocities committed upon the poor in the name of the Company. Aggrieved farmers march to plunder and crash his house to rubbles. Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma in "Menacing Mother" illustrates how the anger of a mother can be expressed beyond "brandishing the pestle". Poverty, deprivation, fussing at one's own helpless situation, sense of loss and yearning for the past are recurring themes. Few poems relate to the cynical reservations of the common people during electoral campaigning where candidates make a big farce with false promises to secure votes.

Nature is an essential component to be found in abundance in the collection. In all its grandeur and furor, nature has deeper associations to the life of people. Besides the sun, moon, winds, storms, trees, paddy fields, local fruits and nuts, birds and animals, the presence of water bodies like ponds and rivers find manifestation in many poems. Kamalesh Sarkar's "The River Balashi's Bank", Ramkanta Ray's "The River of Wishes", Amar Chakraborty's "River Time Fancy", Sameer Chattopadhyay's "Awakening", Dipak Kumar Roy's "I am Teesta", Sujan Barman's "River's Brooding Bank Breaks My Heart", Gauri Mohan Ray's "The Familiar River of My Forebears", Preetinicha Barman Prodhani's "The Old River Teesta" are poems invoking the lure of different rivers in the socio-cultural dimension of life of the people. Dipak Kumar Roy in his poem mentions,

Carrying along many a home and hearth

In my heart's crazy spate

I am Teesta,

I am full of waves. (130)

Although there are rhythmic variations amongst the older and new poems, this collection translated by Pradip Acharya and Jyotirmoy Prodhani is modern in approach. The poems have been lucidly translated in their simple structural formation that resonates the ethnic consciousness of the Rajbanshis. The translations have been proceeded with precision, immaculate use of words and control to not go overboard with any exaggerations. Rather than being ambivalent, the translators have expressed the poets' clarity of intentions in the poems. Although many of the themes are recurrent, the translators have accurately transformed into language every individual poem's core essence into paper. The simple truths and elegies—mysteries engulfing old Bhawaiya folksongs, devotional songs of prayer, the hardships in the modest life of a farmer, landlessness and exploitation, loss of love, ambivalences of one's own emotions are well communicated aspects in the collection. Professor Prodhani's elaborate essay "Resonance of Liminal Identity in Rajbanshi Poetry" in the postscript provides valuable insights into the historiography of Rajbanshis for new readers and enthusiasts of the language. This is very significant contribution to take Rajbanshi poetry to a greater audience.

Bionote:

Bondita Baruah is presently pursuing her PhD research on the stories of Saadat Hasan Manto from the Department of English, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Apart from her academic work, she is a freelance writer, translator and editor. She has worked on translation projects for authors in Assam and has worked with papers like The New York Times, The Third Pole and Stories Asia. She can be reached at baruah3107@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0105-0731>

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