

Sanglap Translation

Editorial Comments

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The present issue of *Sanglap* is housing the translation of the Odia short story “The Bamboo Queen” by Abani Kumar Baral, an academic and creative writer from Odissa with a Marxist orientation. The story deals with the complex question of caste, class, gender, and the crisis of subaltern women belonging to the community of nomadic acrobats, performing feats on the streets and roaming from place to place. The women playing on bamboo sticks and swinging freely above the ground, as represented in the story, suggest the ambiguous spatial relationship they share with mainstream society and their precarious existence. The game is supposedly a surviving trace of performative cultures that predates literacy and connects with other nomadic communities of the world, like the gypsies who roam from place to place and lack a permanent foothold in the mainstream sedentary society. The homelessness of this community in the story takes a more complex turn when we see the predicament of women from this community. Women, as such, are always and already loosely connected to their home and society in a patriarchal culture, and in the story, we find the three sisters, Jhampa, Labanga, and Sita, being forced to perform their feats before the male gaze for the livelihood of their parents. Their loose attachment is evident from the language in which the protagonist of the story, the middle daughter Labanga is described as performing balance on the Bamboo stick – “she sits with swinging legs, singing as if she is the daughter of the sky.” Her scene of unbelonging and unstable relationship with the earth is evident. Incidentally, the act of balancing is also significant since a woman is forced to strike a fine balance in society for survival; like the sisters had to bear with men trying to touch their bodies and still perform in a smiling face, they had to perform for the livelihood of their parents without much complaining. The natural state of unbelonging of this nomadic community described in the story as living “in tents in mango groves, under big trees or verandas of small schools” gets doubled when it comes to women who cannot even belong fully in a personal relationship. The objectification of Labanga is manifold. Not only do the outsiders who watch her performance subject her to their sexualised male gaze, but she is also used as a source of income by her own father by showing her body in tight clothes while performing, thus relying upon her physical charm. In the story, we see that she cannot have faith in any man on earth and have a stable relationship. Even her romantic relationship with the orphan drum player boy (Dinu) of her performance team is ambiguous and unstable as a sense of impermanence pervades her vision as she cannot rely on any men. She remains the queen of the Bamboo, on which she dances with the chanciness of falling and swings in a dangerous way. The language of the story is, at the same time, realistic and symbolic and suggests a sense of pervasive instability for Labanga. The wandering boy Dinu who lacks a fixed religious or caste identity, fails to be a dependable companion for her. The sense of a subaltern woman dazed by her double marginalisation of the outside mainstream community that objectifies and sexualises them and the patriarchy within her own community in intimate spaces and relationships makes her permanently groundless and precarious. The wandering community performing on bamboo sticks is found across India, and this story, in translation, can find similar resonances across the different regions of the country. The translation can

also be a general commentary on subaltern women in India and their nature of alienation in mainstream society as well as within their own families and community.

The Bamboo Queen

By

Abani Kumar Baral

(Translated by Anjali Tripathi)



(Source:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/60/Indian_tightrope_girl_performing_folk_art_Baunsa_Rani.jpg)

“Is the game over, daughter?”

“Yes, papa.”

“How much is left?”

“Much of it.”

The sound of the dhol can be heard. Labanga climbs the smooth, yellow, and straight bamboo like a monkey, following the beat. On top of it, she sits with swinging legs, singing as if she is the daughter of the sky – the bamboo queen Labanga. Sita, her younger sister, rises to the same beat as her. She sits on the opposite side.

Then both the sisters start swinging on the rope. Labanga remains in the swinging position. Her younger sister stands, balancing her legs and shoulders, keeping her hands suspended in the air. The watching eyes widen in wonder, the heads of the onlookers whirl, and the flower from the Brahmin's ear falls while beholding the scene. The village street resounds with applause. Sita comes down. Now on the disk on the bamboo, Labanga lies with her face, heavy breast, and legs down and moves round and round with great speed. Her plaits open and look like two thin bamboo sticks. She keeps moving without taking the support of her hands and legs. She could view people coming below and giving money, uncooked rice (carried in their dirty clothes), and full bowls of cooked rice in appreciation of her performance.

Labanga and her family keep moving from village to village and street to street with all their belongings – rice and dals of all types mixed together, oil, salt, and pot – everything. Today they are here, and tomorrow they will be elsewhere. The drum beats in the show of the bamboo queen. People listen to its sound and assemble; the bamboo rises to the sky, and with it rises the bamboo queen Labanga.

Labanga is the middle daughter of Mania Kela; Jhampa is the eldest daughter, and Sita is the youngest. They live in tents in mango groves, under big trees, or verandas of small schools. Mania sets out in the morning with Sita, Labanga Jhampa, and the drum beater, the young man Dinua, to show the game to earn his livelihood. The old woman is left behind to cook.

Labanga is a strong girl. She may be twenty-two or twenty-three. Her dark body has pillar-like thighs. She wears thick kajol in the eyes and black kumkum on the forehead. Wearing a tight blouse makes it convenient for her to show the game. She laughs a hearty laugh when people joke at her. She throws her saree and climbs the smooth straight bamboo. Like the circus girls, she wears tight pants inside to cover her thighs. The greedy eyes of the hunters survey her strong, "desirable" body, just like the tiger approaching its prey. Knowingly, she blinks her eye at some, inciting their desire. Some people wait in expectation. Standing on the high rope, Labanga starts singing loud, "Yesterday I went to bring water..." She looks at Dinua, smiles, and sings again.

Now it is Sita's turn. She will complete thirteen soon, and the bony places of her chest are turning fleshy. Shyly, she also opens her cloth. The hungry eyes around her close and then open. She is wearing silk pants and a blouse. Perhaps, someone has gifted. Sita climbs the bamboo, and the game continues. Staying on the ground, Jhampa shows performances of different types. She may be thirty or thirty-five. She has started developing rough features. Despite having kajol in her eyes, a bun of oiled black hair, and high breasts, she looks wild. The softness of features has abandoned her.

With self-satisfaction, old Mania glances at his daughters once, then at the scattered money on the *gamcha* (towel). He wipes his moustache and starts showing tricks with iron balls. Earlier, he used to beat the drum. Dinua joined them two or two and a half years ago. It was perhaps in 1973. He doesn't know the name of the village. Mania had gone for a show with his troop. Orphan, unsheltered Dinua, came to him. Dinua had roamed around many towns and had worked at several places. He had even worked in a band party and knew how to play the drum, trumpet, mahuri, and many other musical instruments. Nobody in that village knew about his caste or family; people called him Dinu, Dilu, Dilbar, etc. Some thought him a Muslim; others assumed him an outcaste.

Dinua had come to watch the game. Labanga gave him a coquettish glance. Dinua returned the look. After that, Labanga wanted to look at him again and again. But Dinua could not look at her eyes. Routinely, Labanga smilingly came close to people asking for money after the performance. But she could not raise her eyes when she stood near Dinua. Dinua gave all the money he had in Labanga's hand that day.

“Do you want to starve baboo?”

Dinua replied with a smile only.

In the evening, a well-dressed young man came to Mania and pleaded with him, “Sardar! Will you take me with you? I can play the drum and many other instruments. I will follow you wherever you go.”

The bamboo king Mania had never dreamt of keeping another person to assist him in playing the drum, but he agreed. “I don’t have any money,” he said.

Dinua said, “I don’t need money. I will eat with you. Give me some pocket money only. If you had a son, won’t he do it?”

Mania thought of his three daughters and wife. How long could he continue like this? At this ripe age, it would be a great support to have a man with him. From that day, wearing a lungi with a dhol on his shoulders, Dinua has been wandering with them from village to village, from town to town. Every evening lying in the shade of the tree playing a flute, he waits for the call of the old woman to eat his meal. On some nights, the old woman says, “We will break the group and get the girls married.” They have been thinking like this for long, and in the meantime, Jhampa has become thirty-five, Labanga has grown, and Sita is growing. No, they will not be given in marriage. Mania often says, “Let them go wherever they want to after I die. I have nothing to say.” Mania once heard Jhampa and Labanga talking, “How long shall we provide for our old parents by showing our bodies? We get more money for wearing tight pants and a blouse than for the performance on the rope.” Initially, Jhampa tried to forbid Labanga from doing that, “Why don’t you cover your body with that cloth?” Mania sharply said, “Why? Will people swallow you?” Now they don’t feel ashamed. Exhibiting the body is a routine of Labanga; winking the eyes is her profession. Her father has taught her this. When people lay their hands on her cheek or back or press her hands, she does not react. Jhampa *apa* (elder sister) has told her that people did that to her too. The same thing will happen to Sita. Her father has taught her to take it easy.

“Nobody comes to see our performance. They come to see our body.” Jhampa has told her. Labanga has seen Jhampa crying sometimes at night. Jagua, whom they met at Manpur, was chasing her. Jhampa was laughing with him and was happy in his company. Labanga has seen them embracing each other tightly in the groves an evening. Jagua was kissing Jhampa, and she was looking at him happily. She doesn’t know what happened after that, but one day, father beat Jhampa. Jagua stopped seeing her. Mania waited for him with a sharp axe. He no longer comes in secret also. Dinua may meet the same end. But Mania likes him very much. Labanga understands it all but pretends ignorance. She muses on Jhampa *apa*’s mistakes but fails to find any. She just wanted to hug Jagua tightly and become one with him. What is the mistake?

Labanga thought, “Why should I earn money by showing my body? If I run away, this show business will slow down. Sita has to act like her for the next four or five years. *Apa* can’t do it anymore. Her body has lost its charm. People no longer pay attention to her and leave when she performs on the bamboo. She has seen her wiping tears in secret.

It’s evening now. The last flicker of fire is lurking beneath the ash in the oven. Mania goes to sleep. On the other side of the grove, in the shade of a tree, Dinua rests his head on a bundle of clothes and softly plays the flute. With stealthy steps, Labanga approaches him, puts her head on his lap, and starts narrating endless tales. Dinua showers her with kisses, but Labanga never gives herself away.

Now, Labanga does not enjoy the jokes of the audience during her performance. She thinks, will she live her whole life by showing her body to others this way? How long will she play with fire and remain away from it? The fire is burning her. She wishes to become ash. The other day Jhampa advised her, “Labanga, go with Dinua to a far-off place. You will be happy,

even if you starve. Also, Dinua can play the drum and you play the bamboo queen to earn your livelihood. Go soon; else you will have my fate. When you grow older, nobody will look at you. So, go wherever your eyes direct.” Labanga could not sleep the whole night thinking of it. An unknown excitement grips her. Lost in a tender, beautiful dream world, she smiles and laughs unconsciously. The peaceful mango groves and the shady sky transport her into a world where she finds only Dinua, and there is no sign of her father. Dinua is walking in front with the dhol on his shoulders, and the bamboo in his hand, and she is following him, carrying other things in a bundle of cloth. After that... sleep... night... happy life.

With her head on Dinua’s chest, Labanga ponders how to relate to him what is in her mind. How will she persuade him to elope with her? Dinua plays another tune while caressing her head. Labanga asks, “How was the show today?”

“Good.”

“You liked it. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t like watching the same act every day. I watch only because you play.”

After each short exchange, Labanga thinks about how to propose. Will she elope with this outsider, leaving behind the wet eyes of Sita, Jhampa, her father, and her mother? The confusion and hesitation in her mind start mounting. It is already dark. The gekkering of the foxes is heard from a distance. On the village road, a few people are seen returning home.

Suddenly, she finds Dinua unfamiliar. Labanga thinks that, like everybody else, he looks at her with fondness and winks his eyes. Why will he take her burden? He is no different from others. Tonight will pass. The darkness is thickening in the mango groves. Labanga feels that she is sleeping on the chest of a ghost. There is no beating of the heart. She is clinging to a corpse. After all, she is the bamboo queen. She cannot belong to one person.

From a distance, is heard Mania’s voice... Labanga... Dinua...

Labanga leaves Dinua and starts running. Dinua is staring at the invisible road. He has to tell the bamboo queen many things, and wants to listen to her response. But from the dark groves emerges only a sliding sound, and the night releases an agonising sigh.

(‘The Bamboo Queen’ is the English translation of Abani Kumar Baral’s Odia short story “Baunsa Rani.”¹)

Note:

¹ “Baunsa Rani” means “The Bamboo Queen,” which is an old Indian art form in which young girls walk on tight ropes barefoot. They also often perform a variety of acrobatic positions on the rope. This dance style is extremely risky and demands extensive training.

Bio of the Author: Prof. Abani Kumar Baral (1935-2013) was an eminent educationist, columnist, author, and socialist leader from Odisha. He has authored over twenty books, including biographies, travelogues, and novels. His Odia novels *Premar Aneswanare Gotia Taruni* (*A Woman in Search of Love*) and *Aparahnara Chhai* (*Shadow of the Evening*) are highly acclaimed creations.

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