

Classic Poetry Series

**Nilmani Phookan**  
**- poems -**

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## Nilmani Phookan(10 September 1933 -)

Nilmani Phookan (Nilamani Phookan) is an Indian poet in Assamese language and an academic. His work replete with symbolism, is inspired by French symbolism and is representative of the genre in Assamese poetry. His notable works include Surya Henu Nami Ahe Ei Nodiyedi, Gulapi Jamur Lagna, Kobita.

Nilmani Phookan is considered Assam's most distinguished living poet. Born in the village of Dergaon in 1933, he started writing poetry in the early 1950s. Inspired by the example of his precursors, Hem Barua, Amulya Barua and Maheswar Neog, he and his other contemporaries, Navakanta Barua and Ajit Barua, took to free verse, exploring and extending the possibilities of Assamese modernism. He has written thirteen volumes of poetry, and has won ten regional and national awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award for Poetry in 1981 and the Padmashri from the Government of India in 1990. He joined the Arya Vidyapeeth College in Guwahati as a lecturer in 1964 and worked there until his retirement in 1992.

Phookan has been described as a "sage-like presence" in Assamese literature. It is possible to see why. His canvas is vast, his imagination mythopoeic, his voice bardic, his concerns ranging from the political to the cosmic, from the contemporary to the primeval. The landscapes he evokes are epic and elemental: he speaks of fire and water, planet and star, forest and desert, man and rock, time and space, war and peace, life and death.

And yet, you find not merely a sage's reflective detachment here, but urgency as well as anguish and a deep sense of loss. Most importantly, to my mind, the unapologetic preoccupation with the cosmic and existential does not lead to grandiosity or a resort to misty abstractions. For even while the poetry invokes generalities, it does not ignore the scorching particular that has always been such an integral part of the poet's province. This is poetry that can speak of "the meaning of death/ and the vacuity of living" and "the mothers of five hundred million sick and starving children", but it can also memorialise another more fragile moment: "the yellow butterflies with wings spread on barbed wires".

In the accompanying interview, Phookan speaks lyrically of the Assamese countryside, of the rich heritage of tribal myth and folklore, the rhythms of village life, all of which have helped shape his sensibility as a poet. He reasserts the centrality of poetry in "helping man find his soul" – a role that takes on an altogether new urgency in a violent, trackless and progressively utilitarian world. Along with the impassioned defence of the poetic art, however, is the awareness

of its insignificance in the larger scheme of things: poetry eventually remains, he maintains, "Nothing more profound/ Than the chirping of the cricket".

# A Poem

For days I have heard  
only one sound  
day and night.  
The burning tyre is stinking.

I have shed tears  
And wiped them away  
with one hand  
with both hands.

In my tears  
the stones have soaked,  
the grass drenched in blood over there  
has soaked in my tears.

The overblown surujkanti flowers have not  
wilted though they are about to,  
the Dichoi and Dibong have not  
changed into ice though they are about to.

For days the moon has not  
risen over Diroi Rangali.

You, with the wet lock of hair,  
might have lit the earthen lamp  
shedding bitter tears.

The burning of tyre is smelling still  
I have heard that same sound again.

Will the sun appear  
red or black  
at tomorrow's dawn?  
you too do not know.

[Translated by Niren Thakuria]

Nilmani Phookan

# Do Not Ask Me How I Have Been

Do not ask me how I have been  
I haven't ask me either  
down the Kolong flows  
a young, female torso  
What I was last night  
king hermit farmer labour  
lover rebel poet  
a tiger looking for waterholes  
after the kill  
I forgot what I was

Do not ask me how I have been  
After all I am not alone  
for, even after the last supper  
I have not bid adieu  
nor could I take my leave  
I have not laughed since Auschwitz  
nor cried either

And where can I go  
I forgot where I came from  
the day clings on to life  
vomiting blood  
the bones and bits  
trudge along the road  
with wry laughter

Do not ask me how I have been  
for dogs in coital ecstasy  
in shop-front showcases  
at the Bhutnath grounds  
the blind Kaali fancies  
a girdles of male genitals.

For everyone has the same fear  
even the dead  
to say or not to say  
to do or not to do  
to open the door or the window

for, this long wait since then  
Fibs lies pretence deceit  
Youth cruel kind

Do not ask me how I have been  
because it's darkness now  
Now even it flickers  
Now even it glimmers  
adversity travail disaster  
and in their wake  
the banner of man's blood

For in my trousers pockets I carry  
two forbidden hands  
a bullet reddens in flight  
in my bosom  
for, it is silence all around  
the terrible din of peace

Do not ask me how I have been  
down the Kolong flows  
a young, female torso  
because, for forty-two hours  
my corps lay there  
on the footpath of Guwahati.

For even now I have my eyes open  
even my death stares open eyed  
for, in pool and puddle  
in creek and lake  
fish in shoals glisten

O you, my ambling horseman.

[Translated by Pradip Acharya]

Nilmani Phookan

# Don't Ask Me How I Am

Don't ask me how I am  
Down the Kolong comes floating  
A headless girl  
For my corpse  
Was lying for forty-two hours  
On the pavement of Guwahati  
For I'm open-eyed still  
My death too has its eyes open  
For in ditches—puddles rivers—lakes  
Fish in shoals whisk about  
Hey, ambling horsemen of mine.

Nilmani Phookan

# I Am Going Down The Hill

I'm going down the hill  
It's getting dark  
At my heels  
are some rocks  
horizontal vertical round  
And in close embrace are  
gods apsaras  
male and female Kinnars  
men and women  
all carved  
primordial nights.

A pomegranate plant comes up  
an orange plant too  
From the depths of silence  
of thousands of years  
emerge a pair of my forefather's hands

The cries of a flock of cotton teals  
quiver on the leaves of waterweeds

It's getting dark  
on the copper coin of my face  
I am burning  
On a red lotus  
a pearl gleams.  
I'm rock and man  
I'm clay and man  
As if standing at the centre  
of a vast circle  
I have observed  
fire water air planets and stars

I am a horseman of the sun  
Taking on a thousand lives  
I have accumulated  
in my body every sun  
of seas of woods of deserts  
in my rapt consciousness

every black sun of  
every season

I am a naked man  
Ageless

with my whole body  
I have felt  
some rocks  
hidden under water and earth  
some rocks  
and a planet made of  
human flesh and blood  
My lips tongue  
and innards have felt  
some rocks  
In the angular privacy  
of my prolonged life  
some rocks  
horizontal vertical round:

Siva rock and man  
Siva bull and rock  
bull and man  
the pulse of time  
I am rock and man  
I am a kiss  
planted by men on a rock

Along the flight of stone slabs  
the married women have gone up  
the hill of rocks  
the pristine wisdom of earth and dream

the lyrics of dreamy youth

The night has begun to fall  
The moon has come up  
through the antlers  
of a barking deer  
the voices of rocks  
have gone up

spirally to the sky

Siva rock and man

Siva a burning tower of eternal fire

Into the body of Siva

Parvati has merged

Crying

Now it is dawn

in the womb of the earth.

[From: Nriyurata Prthivi; Publisher: Barua Book Agency, Guwahati, 1985]

Nilmani Phookan

# I Passed The Tattooed Night Wide Awake

I passed the tattooed night wide awake  
looking at myself in the mirror this morning I saw  
my face was a piece of ice  
a feeling of coldness ran through me

As if I awoke all of a sudden  
from a dream that writhed in pain  
wanting to write something  
I could not find my right hand  
my hand on which mushrooms grew.

I have not found the words  
words I have been hearing night and day  
in fire under water from palm leaves  
on eternity's darkling roads  
wearing a necklace of seven strings  
amber-coloured low sounds of barren love  
now hang from your neck  
all over the bodies of  
those who are gone who are coming who are ready to go

Hesitantly I look into your eyes  
I go on till turning into a western star  
I burn in the air to ash  
turning into ash I come down on your face

I have to be wide awake tonight as well  
perhaps for this night  
I have been waiting all these days  
carrying my heart in a sacred copper vessel

In your presence I try to hide my face  
in the midst of rain stones trees children  
I am now getting submerged  
in the mossy nights' deep water

Looking at my face in the mirror tomorrow morning  
perhaps I shall see  
from the riverbank an old man

is angling all alone  
looking at the evening torn into strips

The fish jumping on the water seem to be  
jumping onto the bank  
a kingfisher would swoop down  
on the edge of the water.

[From: Alop Agote Ami Ki Katha Pati Ashilo; Publisher: Student's Store,  
Guwahati, 2003]

Nilmani Phookan

# Mating Music

In the woods  
deep in the woods  
a crane calls

Open out both your arms  
let a swarm of stars sink  
into the aroma of your hair

In the pond teeming with lotuses  
the wind sighs  
deep inside your body  
opens a red bud

The rain pours down  
the opening palm frond  
the blood of your breasts  
rushes to your lips

Now you are awake  
the face of darkness glows  
the clouds rumble over the hill.

[From: Chandrabhaga No. 2; Publisher: Cuttack, 2000]

Nilmani Phookan

# Poetry Is For Those Who Wouldn'T Read It

A poet had stated  
poetry is for those who wouldn't read it  
for the wounds in their hearts  
for their fingers where thorns are embedded  
for the anguish and the joy  
of the living and the dead  
for the outcry that trundles  
down the road day and night  
for the desert sun  
for the meaning of death  
and the vacuity of living  
for the dark stones cursed by ruins  
for the red patch between the lusty lips of maidens  
for the yellow butterflies with wings spread on barbed wires  
for the insects, the snails and the moss  
for the bird flying lonely down the afternoon sky  
for the anxiety in fire and water  
for the mothers of five hundred million sick and starving children  
for the fear of the moon turning red as blood  
for each stilled moment  
for the world that keeps turning  
for one kiss from you  
that man of dust will become dust again,  
for that old saying.

Nilmani Phookan

# That Day Was A Sunday

That day was a Sunday  
A stream of fresh blood from the butcher's  
Rolled over the street to the ditch by its side  
The tumultuous passers-by took no notice of  
The stream of blood  
A pair of inept dogs with folded tails  
Were licking the uncongealed blood  
The faces of these restless people  
Were like skulls  
The scream of the man who had risen from the morgue  
Kept passing up and down through the telephone wire  
Where a pair of sparrows was lazing

That day was a Sunday  
The market was flooded with oranges  
Before the sale was over  
Another Sunday had begun.

[From: Alop Agote *Ami Ki Katha Pati Ashilo*; Publisher: Student's Store,  
Guwahati, 2003]

Nilmani Phookan

# The Earth In Her Magnificent Dance

We were two families sharing a single house  
Time passing through the leaky roofs  
Night passing water coming down in torrents  
Sometimes a wagtail  
Used to perch there in a dream

When you smile I weep  
I smile when you weep  
This is the way we exchange each other  
Exchange our days our nights our sleeps our sleeplessness  
Childhood and youth

Old age cravings consuming fire  
What nightmare or what dream  
Or a dream of nightmare  
Dream continuous

What home shelter my country foreign dungeon  
Open expanse of the field  
Jungle bamboo-grove past present  
Only the children  
Wipe their tears  
And light up evening's fire-flies

Only a blooming flower  
In its fragrance  
Seeks heart's expanse

Where have I come where have you gone  
None of us know

They say Arjun has come back  
What news of the dead child  
Which gallery is displaying  
The painting of Nandalal  
Shiva drinking poison

We do not know none of us know  
Whose boat did sink during a storm at Kurua

The shrill neigh of a mad horse  
Gallop on the road

And yet would you not plant  
A sapling of fragrant banana  
In your garden

Sitting on the porch of sunset blooms  
Grandfather used to stir up his memory  
What he got what he gave to whom

The chill of the stone bridge the fire in the flint  
A handful of water and mud from the river Nairanjana  
A splash of blood in the grass  
Copper silver gold diamond bell-metal bronze  
Glass nickel lead

A big fish caught in a river of his native village  
A full-blooded fish  
With life-lustrous gems sparkling in the eyes  
Tore the net to shreds and escaped  
And the night did not end.

Roaring prayers leap up from monastic huts around the square  
O this world is a serpent full of venom  
And what have we been searching for  
What pleasure what truth to be given to whom  
What vain possession  
Free expressed secret unfading  
What meaning and meaninglessness  
Of what scriptural paraphrase  
A blind tantric worshipper

Crows and dogs in the solitary hutment  
Many a thing is growing and diminishing  
Man's age man in particular man without distinction  
Torn divided individual universal concrete abstract  
Brittle hard dialectical unmoved intelligent kind  
Cruel wicked deceitful lonely sad

Many things are growing and diminishing  
Mishap lethal weapons suicide ennui

Humanist abortion books  
Cancer agitation yogi comrade  
Uncertainty hustle-bustle  
Contract to transform life

Where is the end is this the end or beginning of what  
Where is the beginning  
Who will take measurement of whom  
Whom do I ask what do I ask whom  
If ever I wait somewhere  
In the pristine darkness of a cave  
On a pyre with fire extinguished

If ever I sleep somewhere  
In a surgical ward of a hospital  
Inside a transport vehicle  
Standing naked on a cultivated field

If ever I wait somewhere  
At the junction of three roads  
In a resonant spring  
In the sacred city of the Cosmic Dancer

Whom do I ask, whom do I ask what  
Why only in darkness does germinate rice  
Why does it rain  
Why man is blessed with sperm and  
Woman with breast milk

Where have I come where have you gone  
None of us know none of us know  
What time it is which month or which year  
Did I ever see  
The whole sky  
The whole of the earth  
All the faces of men dead or alive

Once at dawn  
Waking up  
Did I discover myself  
In a battered face  
Did I ever know An orange

Rosewood tree

What must be done  
Are truth love and reality  
Each in a flux  
Pomegranate flowers burned in the teardrops  
Compassion in that sacred chalice of blood  
Pre-harvest moon over the cremation ground

We were two families sharing a single house  
Time passing through leaky roofs  
Night passing water coming down in torrents  
Never say that you would never  
Would never arrive there  
No water in the river  
No fire in water

Screaming atop her voice low and then  
For what anguish what anger what joy  
In her perpetual motion

Is the Earth in her magnificent dance.

Nilmani Phookan

# The Sky Throbs

The sky throbs, I grope for the lamp  
All of a sudden in full flesh and blood  
My mother  
The lamp in her eyes, blood all over her face—I shriek...

'Mother and Motherland'

Passing through the tree-leaves it sparkles upon the green  
You're my sun on the face of clouds  
I see you arriving drenched in each shower  
As if you come planting paddy seedlings somewhere sowing blood  
A rainbow comes flying along with your glance...  
Swaying in the autumnal fields  
Endearing mother of mine  
The raw-turmeric air of my heart

Nilmani Phookan

# What Were We Talking About Just Now?

1

What were we talking about just now?  
About stone being hard, water cold,  
About fire burning  
And peacocks spreading their plumes  
About what the world's first dawn was like  
And why a sweet fruit becomes bitter  
The moment it is in the mouth

about the sky flaring up  
Like a live ember  
Just four minutes to midnight

About the earth slowly turning to sand  
And the shadow of bamboo clumps  
Turning to ash

2

No, I don't remember anything at all now  
Did you tell me a moment ago  
That you love me?

The Love that is dedicated  
Only to mankind  
And only to destitute children  
Or to what lies hidden  
Amid the thirsty weeds  
At the bottom of the sea  
Or in a chunk of coal

Was that what you spoke of  
On that midnight  
As you shed silent tears?

3

In all these days  
I couldn't find a life

That I could call my own  
Or a death that was all for myself

Who is it that nibbles to pieces  
My days and nights?  
How do I tide over this gory time?

4  
Who is that having some celebration  
So early in the evening?  
And who among the dead  
Will attend it?

How many times did  
The calf skin moo?  
And how many times did they return  
Reddened with blood?

What did they see on their return  
When they looked back?  
And who did they not see  
On that lonely labyrinthine path?

5  
Like the wind  
The horses are wheeling about the courtyard.  
Listen to their neighing.

Last night, a poet like you  
With a low voice  
Passed away -

One who had realized  
That there was nothing in his poetry  
Nothing more profound  
Than the chirping of the cricket

What we were talking about  
Just a moment ago  
About water being cold, stone being hard  
And about peacocks spreading their plumes.

[From: Alop Agote Ami Ki Katha Pati Ashilo; Publisher: Student's Store,  
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