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Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

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Author: Rabindranath Tagore

Translation(s): Debmalya Das

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TRANSLATIONS OF SHORT STORIES

The Utterances of the Grand Road¹

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

I am the grand road. Like Ahalya², who being cursed by a hermit had remained petrified, I also, as if due to someone's curse, like a perpetually sleeping extremely large python through forests and mountains, beside the shade of the row of trees, upon the breast of the expansive field, surrounding disparate countries have been lying in this inert bed for many days. Sprawled on the dust, I am waiting for the curse to end with limitless patience. I am eternally fixed and unperturbed; perpetually lying in the same manner, but still do not have respite even for a moment: not even the repose to sprout only one tender leaf of green grass on this hard dry bed of mine; neither the time to make a tiny blue wild flower bloom near my head. I cannot talk, yet I feel everything blindly. The sound of footsteps all the day and night; only footsteps. In this deep insensate sleep of mine all the time revolves the sound of countless feet like a nightmare. I can read hearts by the touch of feet. I can make out who returns homeward, who is bound for the foreign land, who is on the way to work, who goes to take rest, who is to attend a festival, and who is going to the *shmashan*³. The one who has a family of bliss and the shade of affection goes on painting the picture of happiness at every step. At every step he goes on sowing the seed of expectation and it appears that the places where his feet have been laid, within a moment would there germinate blossoming creepers one by one. The one, who has neither a home nor a shelter, has no hope, no meaning in his



footsteps; his strolling does not have a right or a left; his foot, as it were, says: why at all do I move and pause? My dry dust gets drier by his treading.

I do not get to listen to any story of the world completely. For hundreds of years I have been listening to the clamorous laughter and the diverse song of the multitude; but I get to hear only some part of them. When I strain my ears to listen to the rest of their talk, I find that the persons have left. Can anybody know how many fragments of talk and broken melodies have crushed into dust with my dust for years and whirl about with it? Listen, somebody sings, “The words I wished to say have remained unsaid.” O passer-by, wait a moment, finish the song. Let me hear the whole of it. No, he will not stop. The end is never heard as he departs singing the song. That single sentence will be reverberating in my ears through half the night. I shall ask myself: who is the passerby? Where is he going? I wonder. Is he again going to speak the unspoken? When they meet next on their way and the other confronts him face-to-face, what if the wished words remain unexpressed again? Perhaps, turning his face away with a bent head while coming back very slowly, he might sing once more “The words I wished to say have remained unsaid.”

There might be finality and permanence in some places, but I cannot see them. I cannot even preserve one foot-mark for long. Footprints are made continuously, and one foot erases the marks made by others. One, who leaves, does not at all leave anything behind. If something falls from the burden on his head, it is trampled under a thousand feet continually and soon mingles with the dust. Yet sometimes I have also seen such immortal seeds drop on the dust from the load of *punya*⁴ of a few great men, which did sprout, grow and are still giving shade to the new pedestrians standing beside me permanently.



I am not the end for anyone, but the means for all. I am not the home of anyone, rather I take them to their homes. My daily sorrow is that no one rests his feet on me; nobody wants to stand on me. The people, whose homes are in distant places, curse none but me. Do I get any gratitude in return for taking them home with my immense patience? At home there is repose; there is joy; there is happy reunion, but on my part falls only the weight of exhaustion, only the reluctant labour, only separation. Will the trails of sweet laughter spreading their wings come out of the windows of the home into sunlight forever only from afar, and evaporate suddenly into vacuum as soon as they come near me? Shall I never enjoy only a drop of the joy of domestic life?

Although at times I get that too. Children giggling and clamouring come near me to play. They bring with them the joy of their homes on the road. Their father's blessing and mother's affection coming out of the home create, as it were, a home even on the road. They leave their affection on my dust. They pile my dust into a heap and with their tiny palms pat it gently with their deep love to put it to sleep. Sitting with their unblemished heart they talk to it. Oh, Alas! It cannot even respond despite getting such ample affection!

When their soft little feet pass over me, I feel myself to be very harsh; I feel to have hurt them. I yearn to be as delicate as a petal. Radhika has said—

Where ever his glowing feet goes on,

Earth becomes my body and lies down.⁵

Why do these glowing feet tread on such hard ground? But if they didn't, perhaps green grass would never have grown anywhere.



I know those people closely who walk over me everyday regularly. They do not know that I wait for them eagerly. In my mind I have imagined their shapes. It has been a long time since such a person, who used to come with her soft feet everyday in the afternoon from afar, has come. The two small anklets used to tinkle in her legs that sounded like relentless crying. Her lips were not meant for speaking, as it were, and her two large eyes as if like the evening sky looked at one's face with an air of immense gloom. Where to the left of the brick bound banyan tree a branch of mine has turned towards the village, she would come and stand quietly under the tree. And after finishing the day's labour somebody would come, and singing unmindfully would go in the direction of the village during that time. He probably never used to cast his glance on any side, neither did he stop anywhere—perhaps he looked at the stars in the sky, and finished singing *purabi*⁶ at the door of his home. He having gone, the girl used to return back with her wearied feet in the same way she came. When the girl used to return, I knew that it was getting dark. All over my body I felt the icy cold touch of the dark evening. At that time the cawing of the crows would stop completely, and not many pedestrians passed by. In the evening breeze the bamboo-grove made a rustling sound every now and again. Thus day after day, for several days on end, she would come slowly and go back slowly. One day towards the end of *phalgun*⁷, when abundant mango-blossoms were falling in the breeze, the other one did not come. That day the young girl went for her home very late at night. As the dry leaves fell from the trees at times, so did a drop of tear or two splash on my dry hot dust and mingle with it. Again the next day in the afternoon the young girl stood at the same place, under the same tree, but that day too none came. Yet again in the night she walked homewards, but after a few steps she could walk no more and rolled down on my dust. Covering the face with two hands she wailed her heart out. Who are you *maa*⁸?



Is it possible that anyone should seek refuge even in my breast on this desolate night? Is the man from whom you⁹ have turned back sterner than me? Is he who gave no response to your call, more mute than me? Is he blinder than me whom you saw into the face?

The girl dragged herself up, stood on her feet, wiped her eyes, and leaving the road went into the woods alongside. Perhaps she went back home, perhaps even now she does her household works wearing a placid face, perhaps she never utters a word of sorrow to anybody. Only in some moonlit evenings she sits in the courtyard with her feet outstretched, and as soon as anybody calls her, she goes into the room with a start. But since that day to this, I never felt the touch of her feet again.

How many footsteps have thus become silent! Can I remember them all? Only the mournful tinkling of her anklets comes to my mind at times. But do I have a moment's repose to grieve? For whom should I grieve? So many come like this, so many go.

How severely hot the sun is! Uhoo-hoo-hu¹⁰! With each breath I exhale hot dust that flies upwards darkening the blue sky. Rich and poor, happy and sad, senility and youth, smiles and tears, birth and death— all are passing over me in one breath like the wave of dust. That is why the road has neither a smile, nor a tear. It is the home which mourns the past, gets anxious for the present, and looks forward to the future. But the road is only occupied with the numerous new guests of every single moment of the present. Who would have faith in one's own high rank in life, and stepping forward haughtily endeavour to leave one's everlasting footprints on such a place? Will the sighs that you leave into this air, remain behind and lament for you when you are gone? Will



they draw tears from the eyes of new guests? Does air have any permanence upon air? No, no, a futile effort it is. I let nothing last— neither tears nor laughter. Only I remain unaltered forever.

*Agrahayana*¹¹ 1291

Notes

1. The title of the original story in Bengali is *Rajpathar Katha* first published in the periodical *Nabajiban* in *Agrahayana* 1291 (B. S.), and as Tapobrata Ghosh finds, was later anthologized simultaneously as the first title and as the “preface” in Rabindranath’s first collection of short stories *Chhoto Galpa* in 1300 (B. S.). Interestingly, in 1314 (B. S.) Rabindranath himself included this story as an essay in his collection of essays *Bichitra Prabandha* (literally meaning “diverse essays”) in a slightly abridged form titled *Rajpath*. Even in the first reprint of *Bichitra Prabandha* in 1324 (B. S.) *Rajpath* had the designation of an essay. In 1333 (B. S.) Visva-Bharati published the first volume of *Galpaguchchha* that included the text as a story. In the second edition of *Bichitra Prabandha* in 1342 *Rajpath* was excluded. Thus the text having two slightly different versions shares a generic interface of the short story and the essay.
2. In Hindu mythology Ahalya, the most beautiful woman on earth, was created by lord Brahma. She was married to Gautam Maharishi who was much older than her. Interpretations differ as to whether Indra, the king of gods seduced or raped her and whether she voluntarily or unwillingly yielded to his advances. Cursed by her husband for



infidelity, according to popular belief she was turned into a stone and was later liberated from the curse by Rama (the avatar of lord Vishnu, and the protagonist in the epic *Ramayana*).

3. Crematorium where the dead bodies of Hindus are burnt.
4. Roughly translated as “merit” in Hinduism it is a quality of one’s personality which is acquired and accumulated generally through good deeds, acts and thoughts. It holds a perpetual relevance throughout a person’s life and is carried over to the subsequent rebirths of a soul. Such merit contributes to the spiritual salvation of a person.
5. These two lines are quoted by Rabindranath from a poem written by Gobindadas (from the early sixteenth to the early seventeenth century), one of the leading poets of the Vaishnava literary and cultural movement in Bengal that took place during fourteenth to seventeenth century. Written in Brajabuli, the literary language of Vaishnava poetry, it is quoted in Rabindranath’s story like this: “*jaha jaha aruna-charana chali jata./taha taha dharani haiye majhu gata.*” Rabindranath along with Shrishchandra Majumdar Compiled and edited one anthology of Vaishnava Poetry titled *Padaratnabali* in 1292 (B. S.), where the poem from which the quote is taken appeared with slight variation (e. g. in place of the word “aruna” there was the word “pahu”, the meaning of the latter word being “lord”).
6. Traditionally ascertained to be sung at the time of sunset, it is a raga in North Indian classical music. It articulates the sense of separation and desolation that are usually associated with the dusk in an emotive manner.
7. The eleventh month in Bengali calendar (from the middle of February to the middle of



March.) marking the advent of spring.

8. Literally meaning “mother” in Bengali culture it is a common way of addressing a woman who can even be younger than the addressor. Thus when addressed as “*maa*”, the filial relation of the addressee to the addressor is established in an emotive way.

Interestingly, as Tapobrata Ghosh finds, the original address in *Bichitra Prabandha* was “*ke go maa*”, where the word “*go*” functions as an ornamental interjection in colloquial Bengali. In the later versions of the text “*go*” was replaced by “*ga*”. The latter being further more unsophisticated/rustic in terms of expression, aptly articulates the natural emotional attachment that road has with the young girl.

9. The pronoun “you” generally has three different expressions in Bengali that are “*apni*”, “*tumi*”, and “*tui*”. The degree of informality/ intimacy in the relationship between the addressor and the addressee increases from the first to the third one. Here the road addresses the girl as “*tui*”.

10. This onomatopoeic expression articulates the sound of the unbearable heat-wave that blows during summer and the sense of barrenness that pervades the atmosphere.

Tapobrata Ghosh holds that the stretching and the shortening of syllables indicate the way in which waves of dust surge and gradually get dissolved on the road.

11. The eighth month in Bengali calendar (from the middle of November to the middle of December).

Translated by Debmalya Das, PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal.