

mahanadi

the tale of a river

Anita Agnihotri

Translated from Bengali by
NIVEDITA SEN

THORNBIRD

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*For
Lauren and Anustubh*

Translator's Note

A socially conscious writer with a relentlessly dissident voice, Anita Agnihotri's writing explores struggles in the lives of marginalized communities that are oppressed by underhand politics, social privilege and economic disparity. Though she was a member of the Indian Civil Service, she has maintained an anti-establishment stance throughout her writing career spanning four decades. In this novel, her non-compliance exposes the irony of Nehru's urging those dispossessed by the building of the Hirakud dam to accept their suffering in the larger interest of the nation. She critiques the police turned into mercenaries by the state when they passively stand by during a violent attack on a social activist because they are paid to do just that. But she also elicits commensurate outrage at two policemen having to confront and succumb to senseless Maoist violence. The novel depicts how a cotton mill falls apart due to squandering of money and corruption in higher places and also how an upcoming steel factory with international collaboration threatens the livelihood of betel-leaf farmers. Her characters with enhanced sensibilities are haunted by the blatant social and economic inequality they witness all around. Yet Tanmay's research on the abysmal living conditions in the slum clusters of Cuttack cannot resolve their problems. Arup, a field officer,

goes out of his way to alleviate the mind-numbing poverty around him, not subscribing to the prevalent politics without conscience, but is held in contempt. Simanta, disillusioned with the government's sham Public Distribution System, undertakes a mission to rehabilitate people reeling under the combined ferocity of cyclone and flood within a co-operative enterprise of crafting and selling terracotta pottery and sculpture, but has to counter an irate mob that obstructs his cause.

The chapters of *Mahanadi* have different names, so I initially read them as individual stories. Despite being self-contained, they do not follow linear trajectories in the lives of the characters therein. Their summer and winter, agonies and ecstasies, devastation and rebuilding are all subsumed within the grand narrative of the eponymous river that documents their intertwining lives within an intricately friendly and hostile interplay with nature. Mahanadi, not an inert, geographical signpost but 'an unattached, beautiful enchantress' (...) in a boatman's household, therefore, is the protagonist all along. Involved as we might get with the so-called 'characters' in the novel, we have to leave them behind and move on with the river. New characters like Tanmay, Asavari and Shambhu Mahakud take up the reins from Banasri, Ashu and Haradhan Bhoi midway through chapters to reshape the storyline, while Upamanyu Patra, Simanta and Parvati reappear in subsequent chapters to sustain a thread of continuity in a consciously open-ended novel with virtually no plot. I even wondered if I should drop the article 'the' before Mahanadi, not just because it superimposes a grammatical requirement of an alien language, however enmeshed it may be within our linguistic register, but

also because the river is the principal character, and we do not prefix proper names with 'the'. But I chose not to violate the grammar of English with its Latin roots for it to ring true, akin to the syntax of Bangla that is encoded within classical Sanskrit.

The river is predictable, vibrant and life-sustaining in its benign manifestations but unresponsive to human misery in its destructive incarnations of drought or flood, and resists man-made endeavours to tame it. All these universally acknowledged traits of mighty rivers perhaps come through but bereft of the poetry of the original. Other linguistic challenges were the understated significance of the web of Mahanadi's *upanadis* (tributaries), the legendary associations of the *dahas* (whirlpools) and the nuances of colloquial words like *kata* and *mura* for water bodies that address the basic need for water in particularly arid topographical terrains. Among the various soil textures and *pathars* or *kuds* (rocks) that have spawned individualized names and histories, my text retains some of the explanations that augment their dry and inanimate existence, like those of *khaliya* mud and Baghmarakud. On the changing canvas of the bountiful river, cyclones that have 'imprinted [their] paws' (...) and wreaked havoc, jeopardizing lives and livelihood, link the chapters as an antagonist or adversary. When an orphan child is named *Jhanjha* (storm) because she was born during the Great Cyclone, I could hardly express and underline the trauma or metaphorical cyclone she has undergone through a language in which names hardly ever personify abstract ideas. Vast and ageless geological formations like the ancient hills and forests, in all their solitude and awe-inspiring aspects, also impact human beings personally, for instance, in Sumana's epiphanic

realization that her encounter with them has severed her bonding with her urban roots. The forest backdrop ranges from being suffused with the light and scents of spring to being dark, dense and primordial, and translation, I hope, has conserved some of its harmonious, intelligible attributes mingled with its unfathomable and opaque aspects.

Apart from these mammoth, elemental creations, the rural, agricultural, riverine and forested locales are replete with diverse flora and fauna. Mostly, I could not use English terms for the innumerable flowers, plants, trees and vegetables that appear in the book because there are no literal counterparts. It would be inappropriate to call a *mankochu* by the species of 'arum', a *kandamul* by the generic name 'radish,' or *ketaki* by the phonetically and culturally incongruous term 'screwpine'. I have, however, translated *sheem* as broad bean because it is an English equivalent. Dominating the centre of the *Jhantanua* (new *sheem*) festival in a village where vegetables are sparse, the English translation will facilitate associative clarity despite stripping the *sheem* of its evocative connotations. Likewise, among numerous birds, animals, snakes and fish in the text, in order to make the reader in English feel at home, I have used a few familiar western names like kingfisher, pangolin or prawns (the author herself provides a few) amidst creatures native to the subcontinental tropics of South Asia, like *jalpipi*, *chhinchal*, *kutura* or *chanajhuri*.

The rich and complex chronicle of the *Mahanadi* charts physical and territorial geographies while elaborating local histories of the Chola rulers, the Som dynasty and feudal fiefdoms, pertaining to specific districts in Odisha, within their contextual

co-ordinates. In the process, it unfolds parallel and overlapping sagas about common people in interaction with rajas, politicians, entrepreneurs and crusaders. History, mythology and folklore are intermingled in the minds of people living at the fringes of so-called modern and civilized India, as when the renowned poet Vidyapati is inextricably merged within Ashu's mythological narrations. History is interwoven with the evolution of local culture in a way that does not solicit translatory interpolation. The sense of belonging to a homegrown culture is perceptible, for instance, in the account of the forced eviction of the people of Kutherpali due to the building of the Hirakud dam. I have tried to recreate the sense of nostalgia and loss in the self-sufficient community of people whose domestic felicity signified by their *tulsi manchas*, *chandi mandaps* and *alpanas* is snatched from them when they are relocated to an alien and barren soil. Heterogeneous ethnic features of congregations formed by caste, occupation and location, elucidated in Bangla, demands a phraseology in the target language that resonates with the original. Their discrete diurnal rhythms, seasonal calendars and regimens of farming are determined by solar movements, while the lunar cycle governs their festivals, feasts and fasts. From the *Maghi Purnima* festival at the Rajivlochan temple, the *Jhantanua* at Paragalpur and the *Baliyatra* in Cuttack, to the more ubiquitous and ceremonious *Rathjatra*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Charak Mela* and *Vishwakarma Puja*, I sensitized myself to and accentuated without mediating the carnivalesque colours and flavours of these rustic jublations that are embedded within the faith of the people. A widespread festival is that of the syncretic god *Budharaja*, a Buddha surrogate who is worshipped alike across religions and

communities. *Mahanadi* penetrates the seamless interface of Adivasi traditions, tantric practices, Buddhist rituals and Hindu superstitions. Translation has required attention not only to culture-specific lores uncovered in community festivals but also to personalized details like Harmu Jaani's unquestioned faith in his legacy of oral fables, the emaciated Shambhu Mahakud's fantasy of acting as the corpulent king Kansa in the *Dhanujatra*, Sanatan Pradhan's pride in his narrative prowess during the performance of *Danda*, Indranath's wistful invocation of his long-lost beloved to initiate his onward voyage during *Balijatra*, and the author's reinvention of Asavari as the legendary tigress-goddess Bauri Thakurani, known for zealously guarding her young. All of these concurrently 'remain like water colour paintings on the back cover of the story of Mahanadi's journey.' (...)

Mahanadi is punctuated by descriptions of local food in the everyday lives of its rural characters, poorest of the poor, as well as the more socially advantaged, stationed precariously in the middle class or above. The city-bred, well-to-do Ranga and Sumana feel cheated in partaking of the poor man's platter of rice and basic local concoctions with brinjal, papaya or drumsticks while holidaying at the Satkosia wildlife reserve, where the rich and the poor cross paths. Sumana's pronouncement that the meanest of the local organic produce there – the unfamiliar *tunga*, *maasiya mul* and *orguna* – is not food for human beings is followed by resigning herself to tea and biscuits as a royal spread. Subal and Karnakumar, too, live within such an economy of subsistence and make do with little spices and hardly any staples like *beuli dal*. For dearth of cooking oil, they barely boil pumpkin, bitter gourds and leafy greens. Rice, freshly boiled or preserved and fermented

as *panta*, is usually sufficiently available for the impoverished, but even a meal of local fish cooked in chillies and spices with rice is a luxury that Neelkantha craves for. Snacks are limited to *chire* and *gur*, and the occasional dal fritters. The translator's test here has been to communicate the privation represented by such a measly repertoire of victuals. Middle-class households like those of Tularam, Kuber and Ramesh Meher, however, provide a more varied fare that includes plenty of fish, pickles, chutneys, barley sherbet and buttermilk. Indranath's hospitality showcases the culinary culture of Odisha at its sumptuous best. It has *dalma*, which the text itself glosses as lentils cooked with vegetables, fried *boris* or dumplings of dried lentils, fish, prawns and chicken. *Pithe*, a festive sweetmeat during the harvest season, is part of the menu in Asavari, Upamanyu and Indranath's homes, and its varieties are described in the special meal offered by Indranath to his guest. Tanmay calls the menu 'as long as a goods train', and despite bottlenecks in translation, any reader would be conversant with being overfed by a host as a traditional, pan-Indian gastronomical experience in well-to-do households.

The bank of the Mahanadi is teeming with people whose professions are determined by their caste. The Kaibartas or Keots are fisher folk who also deploy their skill with boats to ferry people for some money. The etymology of the *huli donga* boat is explained in the text, but the assorted fishing nets could only be retained as they are. The connotations of their specific functions in the local dialect, unless clarified in-text, were lost in translation. At Subarnapur, the Goddess Lankeshwari supposedly protects the livelihood of fishermen, but no deity can save them from being murdered cold-bloodedly, or even being barred from

certain areas demarcated as illegal for fishing. What needed to come across is the underlying sense that despite the river's odd betrayal, this community feels like fish out of water on land. Another indigenous profession governed by caste (the Bhuliyas, Mehers, Gaudiya Patras and Ranginis) is that of the weavers and dyers who work on *tant*, ikat and *bandha*. Minutiae concerning the rhythmic cycle of *taani* (warp) and *bharani* (weft) while working on the loom, the finished sartorial items of silk woven for the gods in the Jagannath temple, the saris interlaced with images drawn from life, literature, nature and worship and the significance of the different organic colours used in the painstaking process of tying and dyeing graphically portray the dynamism of a talent whose monetary remuneration is chiefly redeemed by middlemen. Meanwhile, artists who slave tirelessly have no spectacles when their aging vision cannot focus on close objects, are compelled to use the same pans for both cooking and mixing dyes and cannot afford to buy or wear the beautiful saris they weave themselves. For weavers and fishermen, the very ingredients and infrastructure that constitute their lifeline also aid and abet suicide (for Karnakumar by swallowing a chemical dye) and murder (for Sitanath by setting afloat a fishing boat with Neelkantha's corpse). Elsewhere, the backbreaking work of bell metal craftsmen, like Ashu of the Kanshar/ brazier caste, or *dhokra* metal sculptors, like Jhana of the Shitulia caste underscores their pain apart from the skill, dedication and care involved in their craft. Farmers, who belong to the Kulta caste, are greatly at the mercy of the river that sporadically dries up or spills over. Kuber and Haradhan are two among them who rebel and earn a steady living by teaching. But Simanta is quite exceptional in initiating

an effort to better the lot of the people by getting them to learn a new craft, irrespective of their caste. The narrative culminates with the transcending of the vocational barriers of caste by his trainees and workers at Mrittika.

In transposing the trials and tribulations in the lives of these people, expansively inscribed in the source text, to English, if I can also enable the reader to mentally etch the course of the Mahanadi as a live entity from Chhattisgarh to the Bay of Bengal via Odisha, I believe I have conveyed an inclusive sense of their culture.

Nivedita Sen

Prologue

Mahanadi is a uniquely long and copious Indian river. It originates from the foothills of the Sihaoa hills in the Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh, flows through Chhattisgarh and then enters Odisha. In 1955, a dam was built on the Mahanadi in Sambalpur in Orissa, which created the huge reservoir of Hirakud. After Sambalpur, it flows through Subarnapur and the Boudh district and reaches the deep, forested gorge in Tikarpada. From here, it traverses through Nayagarh, then goes through the Cuttack district and meets the Bay of Bengal at Jagatsinghpur. In its long journey, there are mountainous plateaus at some places, uninhabited forests at others, habitations elsewhere and a desolate emptiness in still other places. At the source of the Mahanadi, there are remains of the Paleolithic Age. Various ballads and medieval panegyrics in verse have been composed around this river. Attracted by the dynamism of its waters, farmers, weavers and various craftsmen have settled down at its banks. On the other hand, sundry villages sank due to the ceremonious building of dams on the river. People who have got uprooted from their homes have left in tears to look for new shelters.

This novel is the narrative of a dynamic, live entity that has got entwined with the accounts of the lives of people living at its source, the middle portion and the river basin. The river is the