

of 2003 to show how Rizu was caught. Herein Rizu is seen explaining that camping in Bhutan came with its own price—displacing the Lhotsampas or Nepalese from Bhutan. Exclusivist nationalism has its own pitfalls and when Indian government launched Operation All Clear, they found support in the Lhotsampa villagers.

As a surrendered militant, Rizu tries to subvert the state mechanism from within. His share in smuggling, his involvement in extortions and killings exposed the hollow nature of counter-terrorism state politics. While Rizu's story showed the fall-out of brute suppression by state power, Rana Choudhury's experience showed that nobody is insulated from a politics of hate and exclusion. The dangers of majoritarianism are reiterated when Samar revisits Guwahati and is witness to the prejudice against Muslims.

Assamese literature has adequate accounts of how Assam has changed because of migration. Rita Choudhury's *Ei Xomoy, Xei Xomoy* questions the Assam Movement and its fall-out. While books like Arupa Patangia's *Felanee*, critical of Assamese exclusivist nationalism have also been written, the views of the 'other' are still largely missing. Not much literary work is there on the experience of Hindu and Muslim migrants from Bangladesh. The bogey of an illegal Bangladeshi is so stigmatized that very few literary works have engaged with it. Some works of fiction and non-fiction like *Rupaborir Polosh* by Syed Abdul Malik, *Kahibunor Malita* by Rudraanee Sarmah and *No Land's People* by Abhishek Saha have addressed the stigmatization of Muslims of East Bengal origin, while the Bangladeshi Hindu voice is largely missing. Batabyal's work addresses this crucial gap. This is crucial because the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has left out a large number of Bengali Hindus. But rather than pitting it against the voice of *Miya* Muslims, Batabyal's book gives a nuanced reading of the entire situation. There can be no zero-sum game when it comes to victims of persecution. The humane portrayal of the Nellie massacre, the predicament of Muslims working in Guwahati shows Batabyal's intense treatment of intersectionality.

The book has parallel storylines and a very broad canvas. While it gives us a larger picture of Assam's predicament, it becomes a bit difficult to follow every storyline. Through the lives of the three friends, the author has tried to touch upon many events that jolted India—starting from the counter-insurgency programmes to the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. While the author has managed to weave these myriad stories seamlessly, at times the transition does not feel very smooth. Nonetheless, the book rightly reiterates the dangers of narrow nationalism which is exclusivist. At the same time, it also ends on a note of hope and resilience amidst a saga of loss.

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## A Malayan Variation of the Mahabharata

Pradip Bhattacharya

### HIKAYAT PANDAVA LIMA: A MALAY MAHABHARATA

Translated from the original Malay by Harry Aveling  
Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2024, pp. 309, ₹ 1200.00

Professor Aveling has complemented his translation of *Hikayat Seri Rama*, the Malay Ramayana (2020) by translating into English a Malay Pandava Chronicle, one of the many versions of the Mahabharata in Southeast Asia, drawing upon the old Javanese *Bharatayuddha* (1157-59 CE), *Ghatokachasraya* and *Hariwangsa*. Dated vaguely 1350-1700, the anonymous *Hikayat Pandava Lima* was meant for recitation in the royal court. *Hikayat Pandava Lima*, suggests Aveling, is a collection of scripts for staging with actors or puppets. The heroic episodes are peppered with erotica and clowning, e.g., Rajuna (Arjuna) having fun at the expense of his attendants Semar and Chemura, as in Wayang theatre.

Claiming to relate in Malay the Javanese story of their ancestors, the Indian source is obvious. Mantras are in Javanese. Islamic influence is apparent in Darmawangsa's (Yudhishtira's) infallible weapon *kalima sada* (*kalima shahadah*, declaration of faith), and in scribal notes that resurrection and rebirth are untrue. Pandavas have talismanic weapons: Rajuna's *pasupati* arrow (not the Gandiva bow) and Bima's (Bhima's) *panchanaka*, his long sharp nail to pierce fatally, besides a massive mace. The influence of Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam folktales is clear in several episodes. Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Ulupi and Chitrangada do not feature.

Aveling seeks to convey the Malayan syntax by replacing the word *maka*, which acts as a bridge between sentences, with the double forward slash (//) hoping 'to show the self-contained lines of prose that the word marks off...allow(ing) the reader to track the progress of the text in a slow and aesthetic manner'. Otherwise, it would become a series of staccato sentences.

Aveling splits *Hikayat Pandava Lima* into three parts: 'Games of Love and Chance', 'The Great War' and 'After the War'. Beginning *in media res* with the dice game, the chronicle's last part is the most novel, dealing with Rajuna's obsession with Duryudana's (Duryodhana's) widow Banuwati (Bhanumati) and his duel with his thousand-handed namesake Rajuna Sarabahu. Part one draws heavily upon the Telugu tale of Bimanyu's (Abhimanyu's) love for Sasirekha (Satya Sundari) depicted in shadow puppetry (*Tholu bommalata*), *Yakshagana* and *Kuchipudi*.

There are significant departures from the Mahabharata. Rajuna has two wives: Draupadi and Serikandi (Shikhandi) who fights for the Pandavas. Rajuna becomes an inveterate philanderer. On Duryudana's command Sangkuni (Shakuni) transforms into dice and Arya Manggala becomes the gambling table. After losing the dice-game, Darmawangsa sends Draupadi back to Inderpasta (Indraprastha) where she remains till the Pandavas return from exile. Darmawangsa has to groom horses. Bima is the gatekeeper who never opens the gate so that people, unable to access the river, relieve themselves inside filling Duryudana's palace with stink. Rajuna is the gardener seducing all of Duryudana's concubines and his wife Banuwati. Duryudana, furious, turns to Drona who advises that the Pandavas be ordered to dive into the river to recover an arrow. A dragon living there swallows them, but Bima rips open its belly, and they proceed to the city of Merchunegara ruled by Wurgadewa. The entire forest-exile is omitted. Draupadi and Kichaka are absent. The Pandavas are disguised as the king's priest, chief butcher, female dress-maker and grooms respectively. The cross-dressing Rajuna seduces the queens, the wives and daughters of all ministers, ignoring Darmawangsa's disapproval. None of the queens are willing to be with Wurgadewa thereafter! The sharing of betel quid is a major step in seduction. Elaborate descriptions of beautiful heroines compared to a variety of flowers abound.

Bimanyu's lovesickness for Krishna's daughter Satya Sundari is an elaborate episode filled with romantic descriptions of nature, the beauty of both protagonists and Bimanyu virtually going mad in love. While following the Telugu tale it introduces a horrific, gigantic goddess Durga seated on a golden throne surrounded with skulls, blood and goblins, recalling the *Bheel Bharata*, who appoints Gatotkacha to fulfil Bimanyu's desire. Later, Bimanyu falls madly in love with Dewi Utari (Uttara), the daughter of Maharaja Mangaspati of Wirata, enraging Satya Sundari, reminding us of Draupadi's anger when Subhadra arrives as Arjuna's new bride. She gets reconciled after Bimanyu recites an obscene spell taught by Rajuna. Krishna has no objection, as he himself has twenty wives!

After thirteen years, ordered by Indera (Indra) to return to Inderpasta, the Pandavas arrive and find that Karna has taken Kunti to Astinapura (Hastinapura). Setyaki (Satyaki) is Kunti's brother here. The Korawas are 107 brothers. Kunti bids Duryudana give Astinapura to the Pandavas as it is their inheritance, but he refuses.

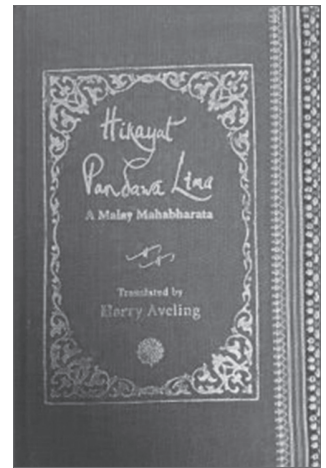
The Great War is preceded by another that is unique. Wurgadewa demands that Darmawangsa hands over Utari and Satya Sundari to him as they are reincarnations of his late wife. A battle occurs in which Krishna, Baladewa and Gatotkacha join the Pandavas. Rajuna kills Wurgadewa. Commanded by Betara Guru (Brahma),

the Pandavas agree to the slain being resurrected by the sprinkling of *Sempayang Merta Jiwa* water (*mritasanjivani*). Similar innovations occur in the apocryphal *Dandi Parva* (the Pandavas and Kauravas jointly fight Krishna over Urvashi transformed into a mare); Kavi Sanjay's 15th century Bengali Mahabharata (Draupadi and the Yadava women rout the Kauravas after the killing of Abhimanyu); and Tamil tales of Arjuna's philandering helped by Krishna.

The Kurukshetra war mostly follows the Mahabharata, omitting the Gita and Krishna's cosmic form. That occurs only when Duryudana tries to capture him during his peace embassy. The fallen Bisma bids Rajuna provide a mat, rejecting Duryudana's golden five-layered mat. Rajuna spreads out arrows on which Bisma gladly lies. When Bahgadata (Bhagadatta) kills Rajuna, Krishna revives him with his *wijaya kusama* (victory flower). Karna breaks Bimanyu's bow and weeps over his corpse. After Gatotkacha's death, his mother Arimbi (Hidimba) weeps with Kunti and Draupadi and then plunges into his pyre.

Moving romantic interludes are introduced featuring Karna and his wife Sinta Kunti, Salya and his queen Satyavati before their deaths. Karna's chariot is destroyed instead of getting bogged down. Salya tells Sakula (Nakula) how Darmawangsa can kill him. Battle-descriptions are formulaic and become tedious, with elaborate accounts of chariots, horses, flags, weapons, blood, gore and heroes running amok. Those victorious are always presented a full set of clothes and ornaments by the king. The mass-mourning of the *Stri Parva* is replaced by Satyavati's lament, who commits suicide over Salya's corpse, followed by her maid Skanda. Unable to bear the pain of his shattered thighs, Duryudana begs the Pandavas to kill him but Bima's club-blows fail because the deities decree that death will come only after the Pandavas have been beheaded. This occurs after Bambang Sutomo (Ashvatthama) brings him the head of Panji Kumara, son of Darmawangsa. Bima skins Sutomo alive.

Sangkuni (Shakuni) resurrects after Bima kills him by virtue of his magical *panji suata*. With the remaining Kaurava troops he builds a fortress in Inderaguna forest. Krishna bids his son Parjaman to kill Sangkuni but he is afraid, whereupon the Pandavas give him their talismans. Sangkuni transforms into a second Mount Imaguna, is attacked by the Pandavas and mortally wounds Darmawangsa by piercing his shadow (in a Malayalam tale Duryodhana does this to the Pandavas). Sadewa kills Sangkuni and drops his ashes into the sea so that he



cannot resurrect.

The post-war portion is filled with unique tales. Bima kills Dursana, Bhagadatta and Karna's widows but Rajuna saves Banumati and marries her. The Pandavas return to Mertawangsa while Rajuna settles in Astinapura with Banumati. Here Duryudana's spirit possesses him and he fights against his brothers. Darmawangsa exorcises the spirit whereupon reconciliation occurs, but he curses Rajuna with leprosy. With Banumati he lives in a hut in Inderaguna forest. Krishna seeks him out but Rajuna refuses to return as he is grieving for his wife Serikandi. Krishna advises him to take Ratnawati, wife of hundred-headed Rajuna Sasrabahu (Arjuna Sahasrabahu), who is like Serikandi. In an elaborate battle, Sasrabahu is killed only when Rajuna severs a tiny head hidden behind his left ear. This has a parallel in the folk tradition of one of Ravana's heads being that of a donkey's. Ratnawati kills Rajuna but Krishna resurrects him with a *wijayamala* flower. To stop the fleeing Ratnawati, Rajuna shoots off her garments and captures her. Sasrabahu is resurrected by Narada on orders of Begawan Guru so that he can complete worshipping him. Krishna takes Rajuna and Banumati back to Mertawangsa where Darmawangsa forgives and cures him.

The massacre of Yadavas is changed into a celebration on the sea-beach by them and the Pandavas during which Krishna and Rajuna dry up the seabed to provide a playfield for wives. Enraged, Singabiraja, king of ghosts and rakshasas living in mid-ocean, kidnaps Parikasti (Parikshit). Rajuna beheads him and rescues his grandson. After crowning Parikasti, the Pandavas are told by Narada that Begawan Guru and Indera have summoned them to heaven. For that Darmawangsa stabs himself with the weapon *bajrima*. Bima tells Narada to kill him by hitting under his ear. Instead, he breaks Bima's limbs with his club as he had hurt so many and only then kills him. Rajuna is stabbed by the *pasupati*; Sakula and Sadewa stab themselves. Draupadi, Subadra, Banuwati and Ratnawati plunge into the pyre. Parikasti places the urns containing the ashes in a temple. The chronicle concludes with the exhortation to omit whatever offends and expand whatever pleases. 'I have done what I could,' says the chronicler.

Chock-full of adventures and romance, the flavour is much like the *Kathasaritsagara* (c. 11th century) and *Dashakumaracharita* (c. 8th century). Aveling's introduction provides a valuable framework for reading the chronicle. The publisher Ananda Lal's list of original Sanskrit names of major characters is extremely helpful in navigating through the plethora of persona peopling the chronicle. Gold-embossed lettering and the binding in handloom cloth make this production worth having.

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## Enduring Tales

Kavi Yaga

### THE BEST POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE: STORIES

By Nishanth Injam

HarperCollins, 2023, pp. 224, ₹ 499.00

With tender, flowing prose and a sharp eye, Nishanth Injam renders to life rich worlds and layered characters in his acclaimed debut collection, *The Best Possible Experience*. Writing from specific experiences mainly of middle-class Telugus like himself, Injam evokes universal themes of love, longing, and loss.

As the poet Vemana observes, strength comes not just from the self, but also from place. The enfeebling loss of displacement experienced by Indian migrants in America forms the backdrop in five of the eleven stories in this collection. These migrants must learn to extinguish their former selves to walk in the landscapes of their adopted land. In an interview with the Telugu channel NTV, Injam quotes Ukrainian poet Ilya Kaminsky: 'What you call immigration, I call suicide.'

The aptly, if not imaginatively, titled 'The Immigrant' is a semi-autobiographical story. Young graduate student, Adithya, has landed in the US with \$600 in his pocket earmarked for his apartment leaving nothing for food. He reveals, 'The plan was simple. He'd get a Master's degree as quickly as possible from whichever place took him, find a well-paying tech job, and send money home.' But plans are rarely so simple. With haunting language and imagery, Injam skilfully paints Adithya's unbearable longing for home and the small humiliations in an alien land which threaten to crush him.

By writing this book, Injam has kept a piece of India with him. That piece of India along with the many pleasures of Injam's stories will stay with readers long after they've finished the book.