

## Singing a Springsong

by Rashmi Narzary

When old Ojhai played his siphong,<sup>1</sup> rivers stopped to listen, wounded hearts healed, orchids bloomed and birds sang a symphony. Such was the magic that Ojhai and his siphong created.

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That year, though, spring was to be parched, lonely and songless in the village of Madlagami. The rains hadn't arrived, and the pandemic strangled springsong. So Ojhai sat forlorn, missing the gaiety of *bwisagu*.<sup>2</sup>

During one such lonesome moment, Ojhai chanced upon the little Santhal boy in the yard across his. He had seen him before but never really noticed him. Tiny and malnourished, he lay on a charpoy in the shades of the tamarind tree in their small, unfenced yard, patting a goat that suckled her kids. A dog lay with its chin on his feet. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the house, which was a paltry shed of a storm-bent tin sheet over reed walls. A few hens clucked about, pecking at ants on the dry, sun-baked ground. It surprised Ojhai that he saw this place every day but had never really noticed it, until then.

When the boy saw Ojhai, he sat up and grinned. He was wearing only a small loincloth around his waist and a holed vest too large for him. Ojhai grinned back. His heart went out to the boy.

"Had your meal, son?" Ojhai shouted.

The boy shook his head.

"Not hungry?"

The boy nodded.

Ojhai asked no further.

“What’s the name?” Ojhai shouted instead.

“Jugnu!” The boy replied.

He then held up the dog and shouted, “Batloo!”

Jugnu’s liveliness made Ojhai smile. The boy went into the house and, bringing out a banana, shared it with the goat.

“Where’s your mother?” Ojhai asked.

“Gone, to bring rice.”

“You didn’t go?”

“It’s far, at Khiden’s school.”

Their conversation was a blend of Bodo and Santhal, which made Ojhai fondly recollect those times long ago when there was harmony between the Bodos and Santhals. But since the Bodo-Santhal riots, the two communities had swiftly and sadly drifted apart. Ojhai lost many friends in that mayhem, Jugnu’s grandfather Marcus being one. Now as Jugnu spoke in fragmented Bodo and Santhal, Ojhai gathered that Tara had gone to the Haldibari Primary School to collect a relief package.

“And your school?” Ojhai asked.

“I don’t go to school.”

The boy, Ojhai noticed, was big enough to go to school. Seven maybe. Or eight.

“Why?”

Jugnu flapped the edge of the loincloth he was wearing. “I don’t want to go in this. I’ll go when mai manages to get me a pair of pants.”

Ojhai swallowed a lump in his throat.

The sun was scorching and it was past midday. Ojhai's daughter-in-law, Bibari, was weaving gamsas<sup>3</sup> in her loom. She got up, put two eggs and a few rice-cakes laced with coconut, which she prepared for bwisagu, into a bag and walked to the fence, beckoning Jugnu. He ran towards her as she held out the bag. "Eat, ok child?"

As he took it and looked in, his eyes lit up with joy like fireflies. Jugnu. Maybe that's why Tara named him Jugnu.

How Bibari longed to hold him long and tight to her bosom! But the health-workers had advised 'social distancing.' She didn't understand how loving a child could pose a threat.

As Jugnu ate, Ojhai began whistling into his siphong, letting a soothing lethargy cascade out into Madlagami's heat and dust. What magic those notes had! The heat began to mellow and the dust, to settle! While Ojhai played on, Jugnu slowly slid down on the charpoy and laid his head on Batloo's back, letting one arm hang down to feel the mother goat near him. He licked up the last morsels of the rice-cake from his fingers. Ojhai played on softly, lulling the child to sleep. Even Batloo did not pull away from under Jugnu's head. The goat hunched on her knees, watching from under the charpoy. They all let the sleeping child be.

"No wonder," Ojhai thought, "Tara didn't think she had left her child alone."

Soon Tara appeared in the distance, a heavy sack on her head, but her steps brisk on her chafed feet. She didn't look like she had managed a pair of pants for Jugnu. Her saree was draped like a skirt and topped with a man's faded shirt. Maybe the saree was torn halfway, which was why she had wrapped it that way. It pained Ojhai that it took a pandemic for him to notice this adorable little child and his weather-beaten young mother, in a yard full of life, yet in dearth.

Gradually, it became a routine for Ojhai and Jugnu to be in each other's company, each from his own yard. The rains hadn't yet arrived, nor was the disease retreating. How Ojhai missed ushering in bwisagu! On afternoons when he felt too melancholic to even play his siphong, Jugnu would stand up on his charpoy and

shout, “Hoi siphong! Not playing today?” He had so much life in him, so much to give, despite having so little. Ojhai could never refuse him. So he took the siphong to his lips and Jugnu would listen and play around in his own yard. Then when he slowed down and came with Batloo to sit on the charpoy, Ojhai knew it was time to switch tunes, to a lullaby. And the child would gently drop his head on Batloo and fall asleep. While all over the world people searched for ways to battle the pandemic, Ojhai realized he had so much to garner in his own backyard.



Illustration: Samia Singh

Once when Ojhai didn't see Jugnu and didn't hear his voice either, he began to panic. *Might Jugnu have fallen sick?* Just then, Jugnu emerged from behind their house, his tiny hand held lovingly by Tara. Relief swept through Ojhai. He just realized how beautiful a bond had grown between him and Jugnu, age notwithstanding.

"What's it now?" Ojhai shouted.

"Corn!" Jugnu answered, running towards the fence. "Mai had sown some corn. But with no rain, they won't sprout." He climbed the charpoy, helped Batloo up with him and said, "Mai was digging up for yam roots."

"Found any?"

Jugnu shook his head. "Fresh tender curls of *dhenkia* too won't grow without the rains. How I love to eat them! Even the wild taro and arum are fast getting exhausted. Mai says if the rains don't arrive soon, I'll get to eat only rice and salt."

Tara no longer found daily-wage work because of the lockdown. Some shops did have a measly stock of groceries, but Tara had no money to buy them.

"Had your meal today?" Ojhai asked.

Jugnu nodded, but added, "Mai hasn't."

"Why?"

"There was enough only for one. Batloo or her."

In the shade of the hut, Ojhai saw Batloo eating from a leaf.

Bibari had just then put in some rice and potatoes in a bag and put it across the fence.

"Jugnu!" she called, "carry this to your mai."

The boy immediately skipped to the fence, followed by an entourage of pets, picked the bag and ran into the house, calling his mother. When he came out, he had something in his hands, which he held above his head for Ojhai to see. "Why! Now isn't that a serja!<sup>4</sup>" Ojhai exclaimed.

Ojhai's heart pounded. He knew whose that was.

“Mai says my grandfather used to play this.”

Notes of the broken serja resonated through the corridors of Ojhai’s memory. So many bwisagus he and Marcus had danced the bagurumba<sup>5</sup> together. And then the riots happened. Like the pandemic, the riots too had throttled the gaiety of bwisagu many years ago, driving a wedge between two beautiful people. Those too were bwisagus when people stayed indoors for fear of their lives. Ojhai’s reverie broke with Jugnu’s call.

“Mai said she kept it carefully so that I may play it someday. She said it held memories, that it was the only thing in the house for me to connect with my father and grandfather.” He paused and asked Ojhai, “You understand connect?”

“Now what is connect?” Ojhai asked, amused.

“Connect,” Jugnu explained, taking his right palm with the left and placing it gently above his heart, “is this!”

“Connect, yes!”

While the little boy touched his heart in his yard, it filled Ojhai’s to the brim back in his own yard across the path. “Your father played that for you?”

“I don’t remember him, mai says I was still suckling at her breast when the spirits took him away.” He looked down at the serja, “Can you mend this? Then maybe you and I can play together, abou?” he asked enthusiastically, “You, the siphong and I, the serja?”

That day, for the first time, Jugnu addressed Ojhai thus. Abou. Grandfather.

“Why not!” Ojhai’s voice quivered, “That will be the happiest bwisagu ever!”

“Yes!” Jugnu laughed, jumping down the charpoy. And holding the broken serja aloft, he began cavorting in glee with Batloo, singing a bwisagu song. He paused to shout, “Abou! Whistle your siphong!”

“Righto!” Ojhai shouted back, dancing into the courtyard. Seeing Ojhai’s zest, his son brought out the drum and began playing with gusto. As an angry sun’s last rays sank, Ojhai changed his siphong’s tune to cajole the skies to quench the parched earth’s thirst. So soulful was the tune that it evoked the full-throated song of a cuckoo pleading with the skies in harmony with Ojhai’s siphong, to show mercy and let down the rains. Pleading for Tara and Jugnu. And for all those for whom each full meal was a festival in itself, so much more looked forward to than bwisagu.

The combined passion of the booming drumbeat, the siphong and the cuckoo set such a racing pulse through the whole of Madlagami and the skies above that even the heavens began to tremble. Soon, roaring drumbeats began to vibrate from all around the village. Suddenly, Ojhai heard the roar of something other than drums. He thought he heard the heavens shudder. The sound was approaching from afar. The rumbling got louder as it kept nearing and then, a deafening boom clapped above them!

Ojhai jumped with joy. "Thunder!"

Without realizing, Ojhai began playing a tune of deep gratitude, in anticipation of his pleas being heard. So moving was the melody that it tore through the stubbornness of the skies and at last made them weep. And heaven's tears fell on the scorched earth to quench her thirst. That same instant, bwisagu arrived at Madlagami!

"Rain! Rain!" Jugnu jumped with delight.

Bibari ran out into the courtyard. Large drops of rain fell on her face and trickled down her lips. She parted them, to taste the first showers of spring. Strains of *bagurumba* rose from separate courtyards all over Madlagami and came together to unite under one sky, to fill the air as one voice, singing the same ode. To spring! Every family remained in its own courtyard but their spirits embraced to celebrate the New Year, singing and dancing as one, though apart.

Wild with joy, Jugnu's voice rose above the clatter of rain and drum, singing bwisagu songs with the Bodos.

*"Bagurumba, hai bagurumba!"*

For the first time since Ojhai had begun noticing Jugnu and Tara, he saw her happy. Swirling with Jugnu, she cried tears of joy. Her corn would now sprout. The *dhenkia* would sprout tender curls and there'd be new stalks of arum and taro. Bibari danced in her courtyard, Tara danced in hers. Two people, in two yards, but the song they danced to was the same. Of spring! Of rejuvenation! The little boy they both loved was the same, as was the rain that soaked them.

Ojhai knew, among the voices that floated through the rain singing a springsong, his friends had theirs too. From their own yards. Bibari had finished weaving the

gamsas, she would gift one each to her husband and Ojhai. And a special, small one to Jugnu.

And springsong filled the air, defeating desolation!

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<sup>1</sup>**Siphoong**: Flute, in Bodo

<sup>2</sup>**Bwisagu**: Bodo New Year

<sup>3</sup>**Gamsa**: knee-length costume Bodo men wrap around the waist

<sup>4</sup>**Serja**: four-stringed musical instrument

<sup>4</sup>**Bagurumba**: traditional bwisagu folksong of Bodos.

