

CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

Impact of COVID-19 and the New Normal

Satha Vivekananthan

It's been almost five months since we have been forced to change our lifestyles to a different rhythm. This shift has had major changes in all societies in terms of economic development and more importantly, human connections. COVID-19 has uncompromisingly urged us all to adapt to the new normal.

What is this new normal?

The new normal varies from person to person and country to country. However, there are a few lifestyle changes that are being adapted in common, by most of the countries to combat COVID-19. The common measures taken so far are social distancing, wearing masks and lock down measures to reduce the risk of infection. Apart from these changes, we have to be grateful and thankful to those frontline workers, specially doctors, nurses and food delivery drivers who have been risking their own lives to save ours and fulfill our day to day needs.

COVID -19 has made us to rethink and recreate different ways to live and connect with one another. It has changed our routines and made us re-think our wants and needs. Adapting to sudden changes and practicing new life skills have created new stresses too.

Human connections are part of healthy growing but when the governing authorities decided to implement strict social distancing measures, we were put in a state that required us to adapt so much so quickly, inevitably causing significant impact on our lives even though these new measures have saved thousands of lives. The lockdown measures have also caused a downfall, not only on the economy but also on the mental and emotional wellbeing of people. From the

perspectives of a Psychotherapist like me, the impact of lockdown measures on people's emotional well-being has no limits, in parallel with COVID-19 that doesn't have any limits either, in many ways.

Untimely school closures have caused significant emotional impact on children in many ways. Children are no longer able to congregate and play with their friends, they have had to adapt to new ways of learning and to improvise on being occupied. School is the second home for many children or even first home and safe haven for a few. Children often develop anxiety and fear which

In some cases, parents, guardians, and caregivers too are dealing with their own trauma as they are spending more time at home due to the lockdown. Many parents are staying at home because, either they are laid off from their jobs or working from home due to social distancing rules. This sudden transition too has created negative impacts on many families. Parental anxiety can stem from many factors such as providing food for their children, keeping them engaged and trying to find ways to explain COVID-19 to their young ones.



As we all heard from the media, elderly population has had the most difficult time in managing their lives during this crisis. Many people have lost their elderly parents, aunts, uncles or friends. Many children could not even perform their last rights and say goodbye to their parents who brought them to this world. Many of them are feeling guilt about it and will continue to do so for quite some time. I have heard many sad stories from grieving friends and acquaintances and one in particular said, "my hands wanted to hold my dad's hand, but he has gone, I couldn't even say goodbye to him. I am unable to sleep at nights". This type of stories has

become common in all communities throughout the world and it is a shared pain many of us are experiencing.

We deal with crisis in different ways. Even though COVID-19 has created so much misery in our lives, it has also created happiness. For many families, lockdown has created a rare opportunity to spend some time together. Every single opportunity to be happy is to be enjoyed and appreciated.

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Editorially speaking

This time our August issue is coming out later than expected and I thank all our readers and writers for being patient with us for the last few weeks, while we were compiling this issue under various constraints. This issue, like our previous issues is coming up with some interesting contents from our existing as well as some new writers who all have done an excellent job.

In the recent days, we are receiving increasing number of review articles and poems from our contributors rather than other forms of literary work. Even though we would like to give more space for these genres, considering the overall quality of the magazine we will be restricting the number of reviews and poems per issue. Confluence is a literary magazine for a general readership, so we would like to ask our contributors to submit their work making sure it is suitable for general readership. As you all know, we are proud of introducing new writers regularly. In this issue too we have introduced a few new writers, and I hope our readers will find their articles, stories, or poems interesting.

The pandemic has changed our day to day life very much within a short period of time. Even though it has brought about untold misery to many families and individuals, it has also proved that how fast we are able to adapt to new routine, as mentioned in our front-page article. Let us all hope and pray that this pandemic will soon be over, and life will return to normal again.

Even though this issue has been delayed, we will soon accept your submissions for our November issue so please send your writings by first week of October so we will have enough time to compile the issue. May I again remind all our writers to stick to the limit of 1000 words and send us high quality pictures only. Please send your submissions to confluenceuk@yahoo.com and not to any other email addresses so it will be easier for us to track them. Many of our writers are now members of an interactive Facebook group called 'Confluence writers' and I would welcome new members to the group at any time so you will be part of a bigger family of writers and be the first to hear about anything new that we discuss.

Enjoy the August issue and I look forward to hearing your feedback on this issue soon.

Vijay Anand

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How do we cope with the stress, anxiety and fears?

Feelings of stress, anxiety and fear are normal during the time of crisis. However, our well-being depends on how we cope and deal with such emotions.

It is a common instinct of humans and animals to fight, flight or freeze to combat when faced with a danger. The emotional impact of current crisis could be controlled by different measures but there are a few measures, we should be especially mindful of.

Pause and listen to your body

We have to remember to pause and listen to the sensation of our own body to understand our own feelings. We have to carefully observe what changes are taking place within us physically as well as emotionally. We should analyse to determine why we feel what we feel. We should ask ourselves, what should I do to me and others to do positive things at this time of stress and crisis? Have I had similar thoughts and feelings in different stages of my life? How did I manage them in the past?

You can also collect your constructive thoughts to derive solutions that render positive answers that meet your goals. Thoughts, feelings and actions are ours; they are in our control and we can change and manage them. We need to be calm and listen to our body and mind.

Lack of communication is another cause for mental stress. However, with the help of modern technology such as television and internet, people are able to overcome their isolation and stress. There are however, people who are not familiar with these technologies. One way of releasing their stress is to help them stay connected to any available media or encouraging them to learn social media. Self-care is another form of stress and anxiety management. Self-care techniques have been practiced from ancient days and we can practice simple self-care techniques such as meditation, positive thinking, indoor exercise and eating healthy without draining our wallets.

COVID-19 has brought a lot of stress on us; however, it has also made us to learn new skills that we can all benefit from as we navigate through these challenging times.



Satha Vivekananthan, M.A., RP is a Registered Psychotherapist practicing in Toronto, Canada. Satha was born in Sri Lanka and she has worked in Sri Lanka and other countries for International Aid Agencies and Bilateral Organizations. Her experience in the developmental arena has taught her to be patient and calm and to believe that everything happens in life has a purpose.

SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER

Racism and police brutality

by Devi Rajab



In 2008 I wrote in this column when Barack Obama was fighting for a place in the Presidential stakes as the first black man ever to get to lead a country in which slavery was as old as the nation itself. I asked: Is it time to pull out the race card in the US? And when he finally made it, I quietly sobbed alongside my husband, who couldn't stop his tears from flowing copiously. Why? Our link was to a common bondage of marginality. When a black man made it to the top so did we and all other people who felt a moral conscience about justice.

Now more than a decade later, the beast of racism has raised its head once more and George Floyd's name is the latest in a long list of African Americans to die as a result of racism and police brutality pervasive and endemic to that society. The persecution of black people has its history in slavery and their woes have been recorded in the early Negro spirituals and the so called Blues which told the story of great pain and unfulfilled dreams. The songs, emphasized the slave's hope for freedom and expressed a yearning for a better life : *"The sun is going to shine in my back door someday"* And another soothing spiritual which is still sung today to bring peace to struggling souls in a hostile world *"There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; There is a balm in Gilead, To heal the sin-sick soul."*

The one I recall that was sung during the dark days of apartheid when races were institutionally divided in a hierarchy of acceptance was a catchy one : *If you're white, you're alright; if you're brown, stick around but if you're black Get back! Get back!* Brute racism has always been there, and it still hovers in black enclaves throughout

the country, lurking to stamp the black man down. In turn what this has created is a self-fulfilling prophesy of learned helplessness and powerlessness. George Floyd's brother speaks to his people through a hailer asking them to engage in peaceful protests and to arm themselves with an education in order to beat a system that has excluded black people for centuries. But while black people may be relinquished to the bottom of the heap, how are other minorities being viewed in a highly diversified society?

After three and four generations one wonders who is really an American. Ronald Takaki, an eminent authority on multiculturalism and ethnic studies, in his book, 'A Different Mirror', tells of an incident where he was riding in a taxi. "The rear-view mirror reflected a white man in his forties.

"How long have you been in this country?" he asked. "All my life, I replied wincing. "I was born in the United States". With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: "I was wondering because your English is excellent!"

Then, as I had many times before, I explained: "My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880's. My family has been here in America, for over a hundred years". He glanced at me in the rear view mirror. Somehow I did not look American to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign. Suddenly we both became uncomfortably conscious of a racial divide separating us."

Questions like the one this taxi driver asked may be fine for foreigners visiting the country but may be jarring to American nationals who have a desire to enter the melting pot dream that America was famous for. I recall as a student always being asked where did I come from with such a fine English accent. When I said, 'Africa' the answer would invariably be; "But you don't look African". When I wore a sari I would get a certain reception; when I wore European clothes I would get another reaction. Identity in America is a wavering concept indeed. But generally most Americans like the taxi driver have a narrow but widely shared sense of the past- a history that has viewed American as European in ancestry. "Race" says Toni Morrison, the award winning black American writer, has functioned as a metaphor. In the creation of our national identity, American has been defined as "white".

Teaching a course on racism in the 70s I exposed my students to an amazing video entitled "The Colour of Fear" in which eight American males of diverse racial backgrounds (Chinese, Black, White, Spanish, Mexican) with the help of an analyst spend a weekend in search of their identities as true Americans. Everyone felt marginalized as ethnic Americans except the white participants who could not seem to understand the anger that the ethnic groups felt towards them. The discourse was frightfully candid and rough and electric bringing forth tears and anger in grown men who after generations couldn't find their place in the American dream. The black person's anger was so visceral that it left one with a hollow feeling of deep shame for man's inhumanity against man. James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is face." Talking about racism now, is an essential part of living since a little virus warns us that the world is one and we are a global family of nations.

Dr Devi Rajab is an award-winning journalist and the author of several books. Now she is the Chairperson of Democracy Development Program. She is also the former Dean of Student Development at UKZN.

Education

Teaching south Asian languages in Britain

By Muralee Tharan

We are fortunate to speak a global language such as English, but benefits of learning a new language are enormous. It helps people to engage more meaningfully with other cultures, and to appreciate different heritages and civilisations. Enabling lifelong language learning is one of the key recommendations of an inquiry by the Nuffield Foundation in 2000*. Accordingly, every child should be given the opportunity to learn a language from the age of four and a second language from the age of eight or nine, and young people should be encouraged to learn cultures from around the world, which in turn can become a gateway to admire other languages.

Nuffield inquiry further stresses,

- The need for an accreditation system that recognises the continuity of foreign language learning and the achievements, in a lifelong manner.
- The importance of all four skills - Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking are given the same priority.

The inquiry also proposed a unified national standards framework for languages, based on the Council of Europe model. Growing acceptance of the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency, presented in the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) for Languages means public bodies, examination boards, language schools and university departments concerned with the teaching and testing of languages are all now trying to adjust their curricula to the Common Reference Levels. Reference framework gives positive value to all language competences, from the most basic to the most fluent. It is based on six levels within three broader bands relating to specialist, functional and foundation language skills.

Recently, concerns have been raised over the teaching of 'less widely spoken languages' and the availability of qualifications for those who wish to learn them. However, the languages such as Arabic, Modern Greek, Gujarati, Bengali, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Biblical Hebrew, Panjabi, Polish, Portuguese, Turkish and Urdu are continued to be taught at GCSE and Advanced Level.

'Tamil Studies' has a long history, dating back to over 75 years at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), a wing of University of London. However, Tamil is no longer taught

here due to the cuts in government funding. In 2017, Dr. Navtej Purewal, the Deputy Director of SOAS solicited the support of High Commission of India in London for the wider campaign to reinstate the defunct Tamil Department at SOAS in order to address the growing demand for Tamil Studies. Since then, a learned society widely known as 'Tamil Studies UK' was established with the aim of reinstating the century old Tamil Department at SOAS.



Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar statue at SOAS

Subsequently, a campaign has been launched by 'Tamil Studies UK' in collaboration with SOAS to re-establish the Tamil department at their institute. Overall objectives of Tamil studies UK are to,

- ensure Tamil is taught and is accessible for all university students, to a standard that provides credits for their degree, irrespective of their institution,
- support Tamil language study and accreditation in schools and the community
- invigorate Tamil Studies at SOAS enabling students and scholars to study and research Tamil culture beyond degree level and
- award scholarships to study Tamil at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, ensuring academic excellence as the only criteria for applicants.

A long-term endowment of 10 million pounds is required to reinstate the Tamil department and sustain it for the lifetime of the University; 6 million pounds allocated for academic positions and the rest to be used for scholarships.

It is noteworthy that a £10m of additional funding for Mandarin Excellence Programme was announced in September 2015, by the then Chancellor of Exchequer. This programme is currently delivered by the UCL Institute of Education in partnership with the British Council. Though Tamil was dropped from national curriculum, more than 50 community funded independent Tamil schools are still delivering excellent Tamil and cultural education programmes, through continued support of parents and well-wishers. However, the governors of these schools are still to engage with the Common Reference Levels of language proficiency presented in the CEFR to reinstate Tamil within the national curriculum. It is also an aim of the 'Tamil studies UK' to provide recognition for those pupils who take up Tamil in Key-stages and beyond.

In order to create a sustainable Tamil programme similar to Mandarin Excellence Programme, a fund raising campaign has been initiated by 'Tamil studies UK' through public appeal and events like "Tamils Scholars meet up (சான்றோர் சந்திப்பு)", a weekly online event to create a wider awareness internationally. One of those recent events featured Mr R Narayanasami, editor of the prestigious Tamil monthly magazine Kalaimagal (கலைமகன்). The subject of the conversation was Tamil scholar and researcher U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, who was instrumental in bringing many long-forgotten works of classical Tamil literature to light. More information about the weekly lectures, fund-raising initiatives and how to make a donation are available at www.tamilstudies.org

**Languages: the next generation; The final report and recommendations of The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, The Nuffield Foundation*



Muralee Tharan BSc, MEng, CEng is an Engineer, living in a small village in Mid Wales. He worked closely with OCR Asset examinations board for the introduction of Tamil within the National Curriculum. Both of his children, now professionals studied Tamil in a Welsh rural village school, Llanidloes High school.

Travelogue

A visit to a Historical Site

By Gomathy Venkateswar

There is surely in everyone's life one particular moment or incident that changes the course of events thereafter!

I am about to write of one such episode that took place many many moons ago. It is about a visit to Mahabalipuram, a World Heritage Site on the Eastern coast of India some 30 kms from Chennai (formerly Madras) the capital of Tamil Nadu.

It was the summer of 1980 I had taken 'leave of absence' from my husband and three grownup children to go to my parents' home in Chennai to study and prepare for my M.A. exams in Ancient Indian History and Culture at Kolkata University, with my subject being Ancient Indian History and Culture, a feat I was going to accomplish after a pretty long gap since my last brush with academics and studies.

I had been with my parents for a week and with just another few days left before I returned, I made plans to take the public transport to the historical site one morning after breakfast and with my packed lunch and water bottle, my Reference to me and handy notebook and a scarf round my head, I was all set as I mingled with the crowd in the bus for the one hour ride along the scenic East coast road with the wide expanse of the sea and the sandy beaches.

There was a strong feeling of excitement and expectations as I got off the bus and made my way as if drawn by a magnet to the large rock face sculpture called 'Arjuna's Penance'. What magic



hands had carved this intricate panel or fresco, of details of animals, such as monkeys' mischievous pranks, elephants in single file, fine emotions on human faces along with sly humour all caught in stone?

My professor at Calcutta University had emphasized to me when hearing that I might visit Mahabalipuram to study every aspect of this panel which in Art History is considered truly a masterpiece, the high water mark of Pallava art even for the early period of 650 AD, and the high priestess of Art History, Stella Kramrisch had described the fresco as "poetry in stone".

I was truly carried away and felt that I had seen it all as it was happening, like as if I had carried food and water to the 'Sthapatis' (as the stone sculptors were called) as they worked tirelessly under the merciless sun.

Where was I? I looked around and walked along with the tourists and their guide to the other cluster of monuments known as the Pancha Pandava temples. This has remained an enigma to most historians as the group of constructions remain just separate pieces of dwarf temples without any deity within, cut out separately from single gigantic rock. These were actually those distant stone masons' first experiments with the structure of a temple. The temples of South India to this day still remain utterly beautiful and it all began in Mahabalipuram.

It was well past noon by now and all of a sudden, the sky suddenly grew dark, as rolls of thunder and lightning streaked across the sky. People around me ran shelter shelter as the sky opened up to let down the rain in torrents.

I remained calm and instinctively as if I knew my way around, I walked towards an opening behind the rocks. There were already a few people at the mouth of the cave taking shelter, all looking up at the dark skies for any respite from the rain. I walked further into the cave and though dark found my way in front of a niche where vaguely I could see the outlines of some figures cut into the rock. There was a loud peal of thunder and a streak of lightning that illuminated the cave for a second and I saw the king and his two Queen consorts. I seemed to know them as they appeared familiar. Their royal stance was dignified and yet simple with a smiling humility as their hands gave the symbol of benediction. I moved away seeking another panel on the wall.

It was at the furthest end of the cave and sure enough this was what I was seeking, the stone carving of Durga, the first ever representation of Mahishasura Mardhini. The fluidity of movement of the goddess riding the lion as she pierces the heart of the Asura was caught for eternity in this one compact stone carving.

I felt a surge of triumph and joy that our country's history, tradition and culture had continued for millennia without a break, that our country's uniqueness lay in this one single piece of evidence, this unity of thought and concept wherein year after year the clay craftsmen of Kumartuli in West

Bengal bring to life this very image carved for the first time in this corner of South India at the edge of the sea, 1400 years ago, and every detail here is repeated in all its intricate details with the essential tranquillity and beauty when the Goddess Durga visits Bengal for the 10 days in the month of Ashvin, enthraling men, women and children to pray to her for all her Grace and



Blessings.

I too bowed my head and prayed to this early Durga to give me all success in my forthcoming Exams. Then as suddenly as the thunderstorm came, it passed away too and soon enough I was home safe and comfortable with my parents but I was tired. My mother advised me to take early dinner and retire to bed.

The week of the Master's Exams passed quickly enough and three months later the results were being announced at the university. I made my way nervously to College Street's Senate building of Calcutta University to check out my results personally. There was a crowd around all the Notice Boards which carried the results of all the University Departments Exams.

Finally seeing a break in the crowd I peered into the board and scanned the roll numbers up and down, but could not find it at all then somebody called out loudly my name and asked me to look at the top of the Notice Board and there under First Class First was my name in bold letters and next to my roll Number was the announcement of my winning the top prize of Calcutta University....The gold medal.

The goddess Durga smiled at me.



Gomathy Venkateswar has been an educator for the last 35 years and has been the principal of several prestigious private schools in India as well as in Nepal. She was a Fellow of the Fulbright Studies Program at the University of Minnesota in 1987. Now retired from active work she enjoys working with a few NGOs both local and International for promoting literacy for women and children in the slum dwellings in her locality, and empowering the status of women.

Short story

Just Another Day By Benedict Thomas

Arulanandam and his wife of 50 years, Gnanamma (Arul and Gnanam in short) woke up as usual on a bright August morning in their Seniors' Home apartment in Scarborough, Canada. However, this day was different; it is their Golden Anniversary, celebrating 50 years of happy married life. Arul did not want to remind anyone of this date and expected his children to remember it.

Their daily routine was generally the same. However, on this particular day it has to be somewhat different. Arul was sure that all his children who live in Toronto would visit them in the evening with their families. Gnanam must prepare a special dinner. He asked her what she wanted to cook. She replied that there was goat meat in the freezer which she would cook. She would also make yellow rice, cutlets from canned tuna, fried eggplant curry and a salad. She asked Arul whether he could go out and fetch some fried chicken from a KFC outlet for their grandchildren.

Like many Sri Lankan Tamils, Arul and Gnanam moved to Canada, sponsored by their eldest son Rajan who had immigrated to Canada many years earlier with his family. Their second son Shanthan and their daughter Aruni also lived in Toronto with their families. Before moving to the present apartment provided by the Ontario Provincial Government for a nominal rent, Arul and Gnanam lived in the basement apartments of their children which they did not relish. They now live independently with the social security payments provided by the Canadian Government. They also receive free medical treatment provided to the Seniors by the Government of Ontario, which is a great blessing.

After moving to their present residence, they did not see their children very much. During the harsh winter months when they cannot move out on their own, Aruni would bring some food items and take them out wherever needed to go. Their third son Yogan, married to an English woman lived in the UK. They haven't seen Yogan's family since moving to Canada. They have one more son Vasanthan in Sri Lanka who did not move out as his wife wanted to be with her aged parents. Living conditions in Sri Lanka have become awry and as Vasanthan was finding it difficult to manage with his income, Arul and Gnanam were

helping him regularly from the Government pension they receive in Sri Lanka. Arul was a Railway Station Master and Gnanam, a trained teacher.

The telephone rang and it was from Nanthini, Vasanthan's wife. She called to wish her parents-in law on their Golden Anniversary. Arul and Gnanam had a very long delightful chat with Vasanthan, Nanthini and their two children.

After a hearty breakfast of bread, butter, jam and eggs; Arul began cleaning and cutting meat and vegetables so that Gnanam could complete the final phase of cooking for that day's special feast.

Gnanam, who normally relaxes with telephone chats with her friends, avoided taking calls and looked very impatient. She just reminded Arul that they had attended three 'Golden Anniversaries' that year celebrated by the children of the jubilarians. Invitees had even come from Australia and Sri Lanka. She wondered what their children would do that day.

At lunch time, Arul said with a bit of disappointment "I will have some rice with fish and a cutlet". Gnanam said she would eat later after a bath. After lunch, Arul had a good nap.

When he awoke he found Gnanam also fast asleep. She has had a busy day, cooking. He dressed up walked up to the nearby mall slowly and bought a packet of fried chicken from KFC and a packet each of chicken nuggets and fries from McDonalds.

Later on, Gnanam helped Arul to arrange the table. The crockery and cutlery which their daughter had gifted at the time of their shifting to the seniors' apartment were taken out of the cupboard and laid out on the table. Arul also pulled out a bottle of Cognac and one of Scotch. He used to take an occasional drink, but since of late has not touched it. Both of them got dressed and were ready to receive their children and their families. They switched on the TV to watch the Tamil Teledramas which they normally do in the evenings, but this day their thoughts were elsewhere, waiting for their loved ones. Don't you think that our children have changed a lot since coming to Canada?" Gnanam asked Arul.

"Yes, Gnanam, I could see that very well. They have begun to lead luxury lives in large ultra modern houses with at least two cars for each family, social network that involves frequent partying, dining in expensive restaurants,

shopping at fashion centers etc. They have forgotten their roots. They do not seem to have

any time even to call us and ask how we are faring, leave alone, visiting us. Their children have their own circle of friends and will soon forget us. Never mind, they can lead their own lives, but what pains me is that they are ignoring us", Arul concluded with a sigh.

The clock was moving hour after hour. They waited and waited. No one came and no one called either.

It was around 11.00 p.m. when Arul decided to go to bed foregoing his dinner. With tears in his eyes, he hugged Gnanam and gave her a kiss which he had not done for years.

"Why don't you take some milk? You have to take your cholesterol tablet too" Gnanam told Arul.

"I don't want anything" Arul replied curtly and lay down to sleep. All he wanted at that time was sleep.

Gnanam was brave enough to contain her sorrow. She stayed behind to transfer the cooked meals into containers and shove them into the refrigerator. "We can manage with them for a day or two and I don't need to cook again", she said to herself. She too did not eat any food but drank some milk and went to her bed.

For Arul and Gnanam this had been just another day.

Benedict Thomas (Benny) held executive positions in the Financial and Administrative Service Sectors in Sri Lanka and in the Middle East. He is now retired and living in Canada with his wife and daughter. E:bennyt55@hotmail.com



Book review

Channa Wickremesekera's 'The BOGANS'

Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

The Bogans is the sixth novel from Channa Wickremesekera. His trademark wit and sleight of hand are evident in his latest book. He deftly turns stereotypes and expectations on their head as he leads the reader through the Australian suburbs and into the lives of the residents of Park Court. His representation of the suburbs of multicultural Australia, is superbly crafted. It clearly demonstrates how utopian aspiration and illusion of inclusion are in fact another set of parameters with which to define one another.

The Bogans begins with an Australian flag being raised by a family who have moved into the neighbourhood in the middle of the night. After raising hackles among neighbours, the Bogan family appear to have raised a symbol of ownership. Eyebrows are raised when the neighbours realise the flag is flying upside down. Is it a warning or a distress signal?

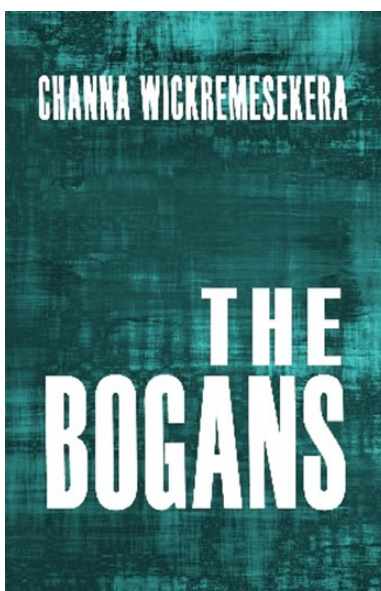
The narrative then backtracks, to cover the ground between the residents discovering the Bogan family's presence one morning which set the rumour mill in full flow, until discovery of the inverted Australian flag flying above the Bogan's house.

Eric nodded proudly. 'Mum got me to put up our own flag on the roof'. Kumar was confused. Own flag? 'You mean the flag of Malaysia?' ... 'No idiot we also raised the Aussie flag. Mum said we must show them we are Aussie too!'...Kumar was now worried. This was not a very good beginning...'Father Bogan came out with a ladder, climbed the roof, and removed his flag.' 'Oh that is good! So your mum won,' Kumar said, relieved. 'Oh, no!' Eric said, 'He put it back the right way up.'

The Bogan family disrupts the fragile rhythm of life in this multicultural neighbourhood. Tensions mount over their menacing presence. Neighbourhood alliances are realigned to deal with this common enemy. The local park becomes the centre of a battle for supremacy. This manifests in rival football team loyalties displayed by each side wearing their team's colours, which reinforces their difference. Not willing to give up their right to the park,

three local high school boys Rohan, Mahmoud and Eric who have formed their own alliance challenge the Bogan Boys in a tense fight over airspace.

The Bogan Boys came out and were watching them from the steps...BB1 went inside and returned with the footy. Then all three boys came down the steps and into the park ... wearing Collingwood guernseys... The plane flew and so did the footy...BB1 was not only tall and strong, but he also had a vicious aim which was far better than Eric's skill with the remote.



Things become much worse when Mahmoud's father Ahmed discovers a hate symbol drawn on the pavement outside his house. Long-suffering Kumar, Rohan's father, and peacemaker of the neighbourhood is reluctantly drawn into a surreal argument based on ignorance and misrepresented symbolism. 'Everyone waited breathlessly for Ahmed's explosion but it did not come.' His son Mahmoud, however, withdraws and raises a borrowed Pakistani flag on his rooftop to show the Bogans that he is proud to be Muslim. His extreme reaction concerns his friends and neighbours – a metaphorical red flag that heralds yet another bizarre twist that highlights the bandwagon effect and perceptual distortion.

As minor disputes and mindless gossip blow up into a major confrontation, the stakes are raised further. Wickremesekera ups the ante after Ahmed enters the Bogan family's house with a parcel. Vivienne certainly knew how to spread the news – and the neighbours gather to give their opinions, while expecting the worst. No one is privy to Ahmed's intentions. When a posse of police cars turn up, and the police appear with guns drawn, the result is farcical.

Wickremesekera has a remarkable talent for irony, satire, and parody without malice which permeates the pages. He creates credible and memorable characters that defy expectation. Other engaging characters include Mahmoud's sister Hala and her 'orphan fund'; Vivienne who needs to know the ins and outs of everybody's business; Challiah the neighbour who has an 'expert' opinion on all and sundry; Cynthia the activist; and the Rabula family. Undercurrents, crosscurrents, and misunderstandings between the characters rapidly lead to a torrent of repercussions that are Shakespearean in their twists and turns.

I noticed a few errors in typesetting which was minor distraction. However, in his latest novel The Bogans, Wickremesekera with clarity and wit brings to the forefront the complexity of cognitive bias and the pitfalls of judging others too quickly. The unexpected denouement is a master stroke.

[Bogan - Noun - Australian/New Zealand derogatory. Plural: Bogans]

An uncouth or unsophisticated person regarded as being of low social status.]



Dr Sharon Rundle is co-editor for a series of Indo-Australian anthologies of short fiction, the latest 'Glass Walls' is published by Orient BlackSwan, India. Her stories, essays, articles and reviews have been published widely. www.sharonrundle.com



Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

Steven O'Brien Explores Dangerous Glamour of Faith



My first article under this column appreciated Reginald Massey's poem. At some point, I drifted to reviewing new important books by our diaspora poets. However, a lure to write about the unravelling of a poem never left me. The extensive reading, I enjoy means I must visit some poets and poems we all can cherish. Poetry has no boundaries. Recently, I read Steven O'Brien's *Scrying Stones*. Strongly drawn to his poem *Driftwood*, which resonates with me on the waves of my own drifting from country to country, none exclusively becoming my home, I am beguiled by these lines:

*I am driftwood,
A moaning post
For the wind to rub against,
As it stumbles in from the sea.*

That is how I have stumbled into countries! Sadly, *Driftwood's* image becomes a fixed post. Nevertheless, will winds leave it alone? Our identities are in flux. The concept sits with my identity as an African Indian British now firmly dug into London. Not forgetting a constant wild wind of prejudices, patronising, hatred, and rejection that tries to knock it down still. There is a sea of it out there! However, Steven O'Brien would not have had this in his mind. He is Irish, feels at odds with the English culture, and has his own drama of this *Driftwood* to express.

Prophet above, without a context of a quote from James I, on its own, at its first reading, leaves open a wider poetic appreciation. The poem warns against the misguided fire and the chaos it can ignite as O'Brien explains to me how this poem came about, "The poem is part of a cycle I wrote post 9/11 and during the War on Terror. I was inspired by the dangerous glamour of jihadis and later ISIS figures. However, the poem is universal in that there will always be murderous figures who take their inspiration from scripture. The line at the beginning about 'gentler tortures' is a quotation of James I and his orders for the interrogation of Guy Fawkes.

There are many Steven O'Briens, but for me, he will always be a poet with a very incisive and lyrical use of the English language. If you read his recent book *Britannic Myths*, stories retold by him, you would wish you could write in the rhythmic language as he does, casting precise words with phrased sound playing a song in your ears, from caesura to caesura. Not incarcerated by any rambling and an unbound emotional deluge, his poems skilfully hide their powerful message through a tight economy of words. Also, images do not overload his poems to be any burden. His poems do not submit to the vanity of any style. Despite his vast knowledge and intellect, O'Brien's poems are unimposing, thriving in music, and often living in the space of a poem's apostrophe, camouflaged meanings. It means that the poem hints at them with no panoply of cluttered images. What remains is pure poetic experience and beauty. The prophet is O'Brien's one such poem that on its first reading – with no context – may not offer its secrets. It impresses deceptively in its

PROPHET

Steven O'Brien

The gentler tortures are to be used first...and so by degrees to the worst.

- James I

This ragged man
Who has entered our gates
From the empty sands.

He has dried his body to kindling
For the flames he carries
In the chalice of his skull.

His lips are scalded
From the bitter oasis
Where the water sours

And certainty tangles like blood on his tongue

That our fountains babble
And moisten our lisping voices
With lavish blasphemies.

You must not admonish this man.
You cannot scourge him.
Do not lay him on the rack.

Let him pass,
Or you will light the fuse of his truth.



["The Prophet Elijah" by Lawrence](#)
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proposal. There is a tone of seduction by faith in the above poem as has been portrayed in D. H. Lawrence's poem *The Prophet*:

*Ah, my darling, when over the purple horizon shall loom
The shrouded mother of a new idea, men hide their faces,
Cry out and fend her off, as she seeks her procreant groom,*

O'Brien's prophet is also a rogue Prometheus who stole fire from heaven, but here the fire is no longer related to God. Devil's have advocates, but here the devil plays God and sends a prophet. The word *blasphemy* appears deliberately in this poem. The impression is how religious terrorists in recent years have called those in disagreement infidels. These three lines are from a viewpoint of such phony prophet:

*That our fountains babble
And moisten our lisping voices
With lavish blasphemies.*

The poet warns you to let this rogue prophet pass. Else, you too will burn in his fire that is unkind and unharnessed. It is not the fire in Aeschylus' these lines

*And fire has proved
For men a teacher in every art, their grand resource.*

(Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*)

but the gore in O'Brien's lines that is distinct

*He has dried his body to kindling
For the flames he carries
In the chalice of his skull.*

The unleashed social media are shaping many humans to be barbaric in their raucous expressions. They help twist rationales and make the sickness of mind entrenched in twisted faiths contagious. The poet tells us; beware of prophets!

In the Queen's New Year Honours List 2020, Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature. He runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote SA diaspora literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the Freedom of the City of London.

Resurgence by Meenakshi Mohan



Resurgence by Meenakshi Mohan (16 X 12, mixed media in 2D)

Inspired by the picture of an unknown source

"Skin is a terrain," said Toyin Ojih Odutola, a Nigerian American artist about one of his paintings on black life. Then, why is there such a disparate for skin colors? Charles De Arman said, "The image we have how a man or woman should look is down from the culture in which we live. The black image has not been created by blacks themselves; their image has been created by white society." Trevor Noah on June 1st on *The Daily Show* said, "... while the country is still dealing with COVID 19 Black Americans are not only dealing with the virus but also racism at the same time."

George Floyd's death on Memorial Day has reignited the call for equality, not only in America but all over the world. George Floyd's brutal death was a cruel reminder that Black people in this country continue to be "crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chain of discrimination," as Martin Luther King stated in his speech, *I Have a Dream*.

I wrote these two poems, *A Cry in Vain* and *Let There be no Black or White*, in reaction to the call for *Equality* movement of this year.

A Cry in Vain

"Mamma"

A last, despair, heart-quenching sound,
As the soul escaped the helpless, strangled body,
Yes, "Perry, my child" a mother from heaven felt his pain --
The pain of a helpless forty-six-year-old son,
The pain of a father of two young children,
The pain of many oppressed.
All for a fake twenty-dollar bill?

Was that even my twenty-dollar?
I had no time to think of what crime—
They pulled me out of my van, handcuffed, pushed me on ground
Their booted legs on my back,
An excruciating pain,
A large mass compressed my neck –
I pleaded, "I can't breathe!"
I writhed in anguish,
"I can't breathe."
My limbs stoic,
My ears ringing,
My lungs hyperinflating,
I was getting enveloped by darkness,
And I cried, over and over again,
"I can't breathe," "I can't breathe," "I can't breathe!"
You were there, "Did you hear me?"
Or ignored –
I Was Black!

Those crucial eight-minutes
George Floyd, "Perry" for his mother and aunt
Made history
Ignited the flame –
EQUALITY

Let There be no Black or White

Life is sketched in black or white,
A story is penned –
Birth to the last breath,
With ink on white,
Colors fill the in-between spaces –
They smear and erase,
Footprints remain,
Let there be no black or white!



Meenakshi Mohan is an educator, writer and an artist. She has published widely in UK and USA. Currently, she is serving on the editorial committee of *Inquiry in Education*, a peer reviewed journal for National Louis University in Chicago.

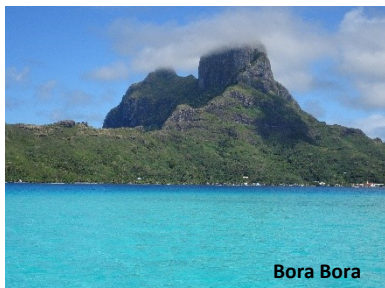
Travelogue

BRIEF REFLECTIONS OF A TRAVEL CENTURION

Dr G. VENKAT RAMAN

Travelling is one of life's great joys and is also a privilege. I have been a travel-addict all my life. I firmly believe it is one of the potential tools for making the world a better place. You only have to look at history to witness the melding of civilizations, the massive movements of culture and language. The perceived diversity is what creates the excitement of travel – to savour and appreciate the vast variations in landscape, flora and fauna, people's ways of life and last but by no means least, cuisine. Assimilating all the diversity into a spirit of enhancement of one's own life is what makes travel doubly rewarding. Along with that comes the third aspect of travel, embracing foreign philosophies and cultures to the extent of promoting world peace and tolerance. I believe that travelling is one of the best (and most pleasurable) means to ameliorate the corrosive divisions that afflict mankind. Tourism is a major source of livelihood for hundreds of millions of people around the world, and travelling ensures their survival. So all in all, what could be better than travelling?

Sadly, it is not all good and increasingly, travel constitutes a potential threat to our environment. Progressively increasing affluence created by democratic capitalism over the last 40 years has



Bora Bora

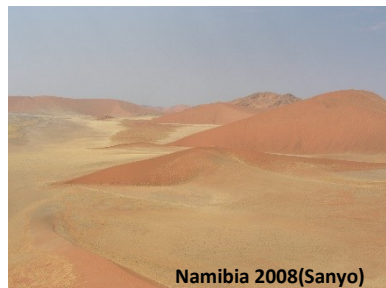
seen an enormous increase in travel affordability. While this has to be seen as a good thing overall, it is perhaps time to address the harsh realities of the ecological damage that confronts beloved planet. Eco-tourism should be the new paradigm.

Enough of philosophy! I have now travelled over 100 countries over the last 40 years. Having been born into middle-class India, for the first 27 years of my life, I had neither left the country, nor even taken a flight. Within India I had travelled quite a bit by the ubiquitous train, which I adored with an enduring passion, despite the often dire conditions of the rolling stock and overcrowded situations. It was in 1979 that I took my first flight from Delhi to London, and have not looked back since.

Starting life in the UK was a great adventure for my wife and I. We started driving out at weekends, very soon travelling from northern England to Scotland, and being overwhelmed by Edinburgh. And then of course that city to beat all cities, London! Suffice it to say we are still discovering our capital. In 1980 we started our international travels, starting with Europe. We have driven or flown to different parts of the little continent,

concentrating on each country, so as to absorb the phenomenal variety of experiences, history and architecture, cuisine and culture. We have visited 43 countries in Europe so far, not including Russia and Turkey, both of which are predominantly in Asia. What makes Europe so special is that so many of the small nations have their own unique history, language, culture and cuisine. Several of the countries we have visited more than once, and some (France, Spain, Italy) several times over the years. The other aspects which appeal in Europe include the excellent transport and infrastructure, the high levels of personal security, law and order, cleanliness and hygiene, and healthcare (abbreviated as SLOCH).

Asia, that largest of continents, is far more diverse than Europe, and many of its constituents boast history, culture, language and sights that go way beyond. You only have to think of China and India, the two behemoths that are home to a third of the world's population, and have cultures and languages going back 5000. Their enormous physical land masses contain physical wonders that are incomparable, starting with the Himalayas. We have travelled to 18 Asian countries, many more than once. There is just so much diversity that it is



Namibia 2008(Sanyo)

impossible to generalise about Asia. Overall, travellers face more of a challenge due to patchy facilities, poor levels of SLOCH. The variation is huge, with Japan and Singapore comparable to Europe and North America. Most of the Asian countries are manic and unruly, unkempt and dusty. The sights are magnificent, as are the vastly different cuisines.

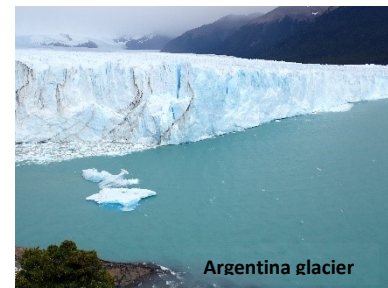
Africa is our favourite continent, largely to do with its unspoiled natural beauty. There is an atmosphere of calm serenity, underlying which is the ferocity of its wild life. The combination is heady! We have travelled to 12 countries in Africa. There is nothing more thrilling than being out in the bush, on the trail of wild life, from lion to elephant. The sparsity of population makes the continent that much more enjoyable for travel. However it shares with Asia, suboptimal standards of SLOCH.

South America is a delight to travel to. There is a certain degree of homogeneity of the language and culture, related to their colonisation. The cuisine is varied and excellent, largely meat-based, although they do have a superb array of supporting vegetables and fruit. Their history is largely

confined to the last 300 odd years related to the colonisation by Spain and Portugal. Having said that, there are physical ruins of ancient indigenous peoples (Mayans, Incas) going back thousands of years. We have managed to travel to 7 of the countries, everyone a great experience.

North America is by far the most homogeneous, dominated by the USA, although Canada is physically bigger. The natural beauty is stunning and highly varied, the size and scale is awesome. Apart from a few cities, like New York, most are often nondescript, mapped onto a grid. Standards of SLOCH are peerless and make travel a real pleasure. History only goes back about 250 years to the arrival of the Europeans, with little evidence of the ancient Indian culture.

Australia and New Zealand are wonderful places to visit. The natural beauty of these islands is outstanding, not to mention the high standards of SLOCH they achieve. Central America contains 7 countries, which are real gems. The Caribbean, which includes several tropical islands characterised by fabulous beaches and sea-life. The Pacific islands are outstanding in their beauty and remoteness.



Argentina glacier

All our trips are planned and executed entirely by myself, after considerable research. The planning is just as enjoyable as the trip itself! We travel to India at least once a year, and we make it a point to visit at least one location we have not seen before. I consider it a travesty to travel to a place purely in order to tick the box.

To conclude, travelling offers unparalleled pleasure, and I can think no better way of spending my time (and money). I have come to love and cherish so many 'alien' cultures and foods, not to mention the extraordinary and breath-taking sights. It has made me realize that most people are honest, hospitable, warm and generous. Our differences are superficial, our similarities deep, and our diversity is a genuine gift, to be celebrated, not exploited.

Dr G.Venkat Raman is a Consultant Nephrologist and Physician, based near Portsmouth, England. Apart from being a passionate traveller, he is also an avid reader, amateur writer, investor and fitness enthusiast. Other pastimes include cooking, golf, sailing and photography.

Book Review

Memorials of James Chapman Sydney Xavier

Memorials of James Chapman DD (1799-1879) - 236 pages - 12 Chapters and an Appendix - Facsimile edition by Vijitha Yapa, Sri Lanka 2018. (ISBN 978-955-665-363-2) Original edition in 1892 by Skeffington & Son, Piccadilly, London. Republished by St Thomas College Warden Rev Marc Billimoria to mark the centenary celebrations of the college.

I was very grateful to a friend from Mt Lavinia, Sri Lanka for sending me this book. It's exciting to read about an Etonian Anglican man who was sent to Ceylon as a Bishop in charge of the newly formed See of Ceylon. He forewent his opportunity to go to New Zealand as an Assistant Bishop and instead his choice was to go to Ceylon. The narrative of his early life reveals that he was born in November 1799 in Wandsworth, London and received a high-class education at Eton College and he later attended Kings's College, Cambridge.

He departed from Portsmouth on 21 July 1845, with his wife Frances, on the sailing vessel *Malabar* to Colombo, where he arrived on 1 Nov 1845. Suez Canal had not yet opened and thus it took him over 3 months. On board, he took advantage of the time to learn some Sinhala. Dr Chapman was a contemporary of John Henry Newman (now a Saint). The impact of the Oxford Movement (attributed to Newman) on Chapman's parish work in Essex resulted in the revival of Anglican teachings and practice which he brought to Ceylon.

Governor Sir Colin Campbell was very helpful to the new bishop and in fact gave a free hand to the newcomer to Ceylon. A consequence of that freedom was that there were no problems with Letters Patent or the preparation of working drawings for church buildings. It appears that British garrison engineers were helpful to him with the church constructions. As he put it "Romanists and Baptists" didn't meet him on his arrival in Colombo but others welcomed him. Among his many important missionary works were the creation of St Thomas College (name appears to come from an Eton college feast of St Thomas), the Anglican Cathedral and other churches.

In Chapter 5 Dr Chapman describes his visits to the Northern and Eastern Provinces. As land transport was difficult, he sailed from Colombo to Pt Pedro via the Pamban pass which

had deeper draughts for vessels, avoiding the other side of Mannar as

Adam's Bridge was impassable due to its numerous sand banks. Then from Pt Pedro to Batticaloa also by boat. Native ministers and catechesis were active to prepare the ground works for his Confirmations and Ordinations. Congregations were Tamil and Portuguese speakers and, hence, he had to rely on translators for his episcopal duties. Many new churches were built and schools opened in rural areas including the Kandyan Kingdom before its fall to the British in 1815. On his behalf, his wife Frances worked hard to start the Bishopsgate School, which later became Bishop's College for the education of girls. She saw it was not right to leave out daughters, when sons were getting a good education at St Thomas College. Thus the mission accomplished.



James Chapman was fortunate that a See with full Metropolitan status was created for him in Ceylon as a detachment from the Diocese of Madras which had been looking after Ceylon. High Anglicanism was the order of the day. He was fond of his Greek Testament and may have pushed forward the Book of Common Prayer, Catechism, Communion and Evensong etc.

Other chapters tell his story of retiring back to England in 1861 and finally passing away on the evening of Sunday 19th October 1879. It was observed on page 124 that 'his voice was heard joining, with its wonted fervour,

with his daughter's in singing one of his favourite hymns, "Abide with me"'.

The book has an appendix of his sermons and various addresses given during his ministry in Sri Lanka. In the 1846 address on the occasion of the laying of the corner-

stone of Trinity Church, Colombo, he said " With temples of idolatry and superstition on every side, of Mahomet

not far away, of Vishnu just below, of Buddhism everywhere, let there be no long delay before the Cross of Christ is raised above all, as the symbol of Christian's faith and hope". I think this was the reflection of an exceptional missionary zeal pouring out of this evangelistic Anglican Bishop in the Crown Colonial environment of Ceylon at that time.

Rev Marc Billimoria has done splendid thing by republishing this book with Vijitha Yapa Publications in Sri Lanka for the benefit of his students of the centenary year 2018 and other readers to get 'a glimpse of the socio-political situation the island during those turbulent days of British Rule. It gives an interesting insight into the minds and work of missionary pioneers such as Bishop Chapman, who were far more enlightened than modern critics would perhaps believe'. The book also has two endorsement messages, printed on the facsimile book's jacket cover. These are from Rt Rev Dhiloraj R. Canagasabey, Bishop of Colombo, Chairman of the St Thomas' College Board of Governors, Visitor to the College and Shamila Gunatilleke, Principal of Bishop's College.

The original book was first published in 1892 in London with a prefatory letter from the Rt Rev Richard Durnford, Lord Bishop of Chichester. Rev Marc Billimoria has also updated another manuscript prepared by an anonymous author about all the Bishops of Colombo, Wardens, Sub Wardens, Heads of Sections and the various buildings of St Thomas College and titled '100 years at Mount 1918-2018'. These are also excellent books to have on your shelf to read about how the High Anglicans laboured in Sri Lanka to compare notes with other Christian missionaries who had come a bit earlier like Roman Catholics, Methodist Wesleyans, American Presbyterians and Baptists. Little wonder that later Anagarika Dharmapala became a strong national activist to re-charge the traditional Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.



Sydney Xavier is a retired civil engineer and civil servant from Surrey, UK. He was born and raised in Sri Lanka and had his university education in England and Scotland.

Short story

FACEUP Happiness By Subhash Chandra

Jayshilan Iyer, my school and college chum and his wife Sumathi, proved to be a blessing for us. One of his relatives was moving to their ancestral house in Chennai after retirement and Jay got us this decent, fully furnished flat with fine woodwork for a song, considering the prevailing property prices in Delhi. For two days he brought food from his home.

"How will Akka cook amidst this chaos," he had said pointing to the many cartons and bundles lying around.

They lived nearby and Jay visited us once a week, at least. During the last two visits he looked morose. He'd keep staring at the floor, sip his coffee in silence and leave without a word.

"Something serious is bothering him," Mithila said.

"The problem is he doesn't open up."

Mithila rang up Sumathi.

"You know he's stingy with words. I've stopped asking him, because he gets irritated. I've been praying to Lord Ayappa and fasting twice a week," she said in a doleful voice.

#

Next time he came, I lost patience, "Why don't you speak up, man? What has happened?"

"Nothing."

"What does nothing mean?"

"Don't you know the meaning of nothing? You play with words in your profession and fool people into buying spurious stuff through crafty ads?"

"Then why are your lights switched off?"

"Nothing happens in my life. No variation. No surprise. No excitement. My life has become a stagnant pool, moss-covered... stinking! I would welcome a setback even, just for a change.

I was stunned.

"The damned universe has forgotten about me. I don't exist."

"Don't be an idiot. There's so much pain and suffering in the world ...sometimes it becomes unendurable and people commit suicide."

He looked daggers at me. "May I ask how you are suffering?"

I had no answer. My life was a melody. Mithila was a compatible partner -- intellectually, emotionally and sexually. She taught in a college and I had a well-paid, challenging job.

"Come on, Koushik, let's switch places," he went on bitterly. "You crunch figures all day in office. Come home in the evening to find your wife doing *japam* for one hour, then heading to the temple and after that, rushing to the kitchen to cook the dinner."

I forgot to blink.

"All this because she is desperate for a child. We hardly exchange any words other than, 'What shall I cook for lunch or dinner?'"

"How lucky! If I make a suggestion, that thing is ruled out from the menu," I laughed.

My flippancy upset him more and he left in a huff.

#

He came after a month. "Jay, you don't have many friends. So get on to the social media, FACEUP. You can re-kindle your passion for Anthropology. You'll find many people interested in the subject. You can also join some Groups with similar interests and interact with the members. It'd be exciting."

He became reflective.

"Somebody would hack my account and post porn in my name."

"Not to worry. Just make a tough password that nobody can crack."

#

I wrote up his Profile, mentioning his consistently brilliant record at school and college... gold Medal in Masters in Stats, Deputy Director in CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) ... and selected one of the best photos from his album in which he was not glowering.

He came over after a month. "Thank you, Koushik."

"Most welcome, Jay."

We hosted a celebration of sorts with Sumathi and him. Mithila prepared goodies like onion and cauliflower *pakor*as (fried salty snack) and *chhaina kheer* (cottage cheese dessert) which both of them relished.

#

And then I lost him to the FACEUP world. He stopped visiting us. Sometimes, when I phoned him, he crisply said he would call back, but never did.

After a couple of months, he came on a Sunday and appeared woebegone.

"Now what?" I asked.

"None of my posts gets more than ten Likes; sometimes they end up with two or three."

"So what? You *have* social media presence."

Then he said something utterly uncharacteristic of him.

"In my next birth, I want to be born a girl... with a pretty face and Khajuraho figure."

I held back my smile with difficulty.

"Why?"

"I'd change my Profile pic every now and then, with my long hair cascading down, eyes

naughtily peeping out through the jet black tresses. There would be an avalanche of Likes, and reactions of Love, Wow and *Ooohs* and *Aahs!*"

#

He again vanished for about three months. One day I visited his Timeline and was shocked. His Status Updates had been collecting more than a hundred Likes and comments.

"Down with Viral," or 'Admitted to hospital for Dengue'; 'Platelet count dangerously low'; 'Lost my mother, feeling in the dumps. I'm an orphan now,' some of them read.

His mother had died ten years ago.

And then one day an Update pic showed him on a chair with a leg in plaster. 'Met with a serious accident. Narrowly escaped death!'

I called his office. No accident or fracture.

His Timeline was flooded with sad Emojis and 'Sorry,' and 'Get well soon' comments.

I had known him for ages and couldn't believe he was capable of such blatant lies. Then he did something that stunned Mithila and me.

"Life is so uncertain! No junk food, balanced diet, daily exercise. Yet I have fallen prey to ... the dreaded disease." At the end of the post there were two 'Sad' emojis.

Was he faking this too? Could well be. But both of us got worried and visited them. His wife served us filtered coffee with *Thattai* and *Murraku* (South Indian snacks). He looked fit as a fiddle. And happy as a clam!

"You have gone mad, Jay!" I said angrily while leaving.

#

After a couple of months, one evening, Sumathi came over looking devastated.

"What is it Sumathi," Mithila asked.

She burst into uncontrollable, racking sobs.

Mithila put a consoling arm around her shoulders. "Tell me what's it? We'll help."

Between sobs she managed to say, "He ... has got ... Cancer!"



Dr Subhash Chandra, former Professor of English, Delhi University, has published two short stories collections,

Not Just Another Story, and Beyond the Canopy of Icicles, about sixty short stories in journals, four books of criticism and several research articles.

Book Review

Anisur Rahman's *Earthenware: Sixty Poems*

Rubric Publishing, Noida. UP. Published 2018. Pages 65. Price Rs.200

By Malashri Lal

Something fascinatingly mystical about Anisur Rahman's poems. I've been reflecting on the aptness of the title *Earthenware*—reminding the reader of the soil and water skillfully moulded into the shape of language by the turning wheel of creativity. Fortunately Rahman does not explain this but leaves a trail of clues in beautiful evocations of learning from natural objects and the contact with birds and animals. The trajectory of childhood captures the storytelling *nani/grandmother*, the intuitive and loving *Ammi/mother*, the strict *maulvi/teacher*, and the gently commanding father. The scenes in the village are poetic and vivid—the horse drawn *tonga* carriage, the elephant rides, the speaking parrot, the howling jackal. Learning was a group activity then, not digital isolation and online classes! The roster of numbers was recited backwards to show competence, alphabets were chalked on a wooden board to avoid wasting paper and precious pencils. Anisur Rahman's images derive from the generic experience of those who were fortunate enough to grow up in the 1950s, yet there's an acute personalization in the nuanced vignettes in his poems. Here is a favourite:

When we touched the butterfly's wings
and rubbed that touch with our fingers
we got colours and colours
out of colours

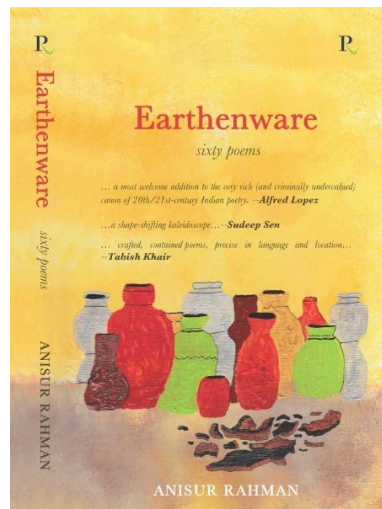
We wondered how
colours mixed and matched
to change colours and colours
out of colours

We wondered how
colours begot colours
tints tones textures
We just wondered (31)

The later poems in *Earthenware*, of the adult in a changed and depersonalized world, are touching for their honesty and forbearance. Alfred Lopez's "Foreword" perceptively says, "These latter poems...eschew specificity of place for a more generalized sense of loss, the courage required to live with it, and the exhaustion of having to constantly summon that courage." I would, however, also draw attention to the sophisticated rendering of the gaps between desire and the actual delivery from reality. The child retains his sense of order and wonder from the earlier poems but has added reticence and acceptance to his vocabulary of living.

The earth continues to serve as the metaphor for malleability but now in another context:

Earth is love
it also contains
hatred fright terror
hoping to contain
hatred fright terror (49)



Weaving through the real and surreal experiences of a troubled world, the poet attempts redefinitions of love and hate, peace and war, city and village, being aware all the time that we dwell on a precarious cusp even though we dream of a secured fixity. A strong contemporary note here:

How far can hatred travel?

A nautical mile or more?
a whole continent?
a whole mindscape?

Is there a mile beyond the last mile?
a continent after all continents?
a mindscape past all mindscapes?

Can hatred travel even beyond hatred?
this is no answer but only a guess
hatred can travel but only beyond hatred. (40)

If the external world has crumbled through political chaos, has the vital sociality of family structures also undergone a critical change? I find this an underlying question in the references that come up to love, parental relations, death, memory---the textured clutter of a lifetime. The imagery is both tangible and transcendental, as in these brilliant lines:

I opened your chest of drawers
when you left
and found your trove of metaphors

There was a magnetic hand lying there
that pulled my hand to shake
I feared the handshake

A thicket of white beard next to that
grew on my cheeks
I feared my cheeks

Scared of them
I dared not see any more
I feared them all

I could only guess
there lay the wrinkles of your forehead
wrapped in silver

I knew your peering eyes
were kept in crystal and
your teeth smiled in a bowl

You left me with
your footfalls in my memory
and your body twirling in mine (52)

The juxtaposing of childhood and ageing in a small collection of sixty poems brings piquant focus to the quandaries of interpreting the journey. The poems are short and impeccably crafted—yet they add up to a curated gallery of exhibits shaped from the crucible of a fertile imagination. Since Anisur Rahman has written extensively about the Urdu Ghazal, I wonder if his style is inflected with the sharp eloquence of the form—specially in the sequence called 'Missing' from which I choose this:

A kingdom shrivelled into a cup
a Delhi shrunk into a ladle
a fort turned into a garrison
a haveli tucked into margins

Missing is Ghalib's lost desire. (p.59)
Prof. Anisur Rahman's scholarship, creativity and translator's acumen seem to have flowed into this artistic 'Earthenware', filling it to the brim with potent and meaningful words. This is a book of poems to savour, an important addition in form and style to the corpus of Indian Writing in English.



Malashri Lal is a writer and academic who retired as Professor in the Dept. of English at the University of Delhi. She has sixteen books to her credit, mainly on literature and gender.

Musical Play

OFF- THE- HOOK

by Anju Makhija

The following is an excerpt from the play which is about a fish (Toochy), who with an evolutionary leap--reincarnates into a virile young man and is rescued by a frustrated middle-age lady, Sheila. Like any immigrant to Mumbai, he must sharpen his survival skills to confront this city, steeped in purgatorial desires and pursuits.

The progress of the narrative is tied to a rather odd handicap—a very 'fishy' one that threatens Toochoy's very survival. To help others get used to his fishy smell, Toochoy launches a special fragrance. He gives a mask to those who are unable to get accustomed to the smelly aroma.

In the following scene, at a lavish party, the product is launched. Both absurd and comic, the play reflects our contemporary society in a unique way.

MASK, ANYONE?

I

TOOCHY (SINGS):

The Scent of the Season is me!
The Scent of the Season is Toochoy!

I'll escape this captivity
with determination and skill,
creativity and will.

Move over Calvin Klein,
your fragile fragrances
are not for our times.

Lavenders and blossoms
are for cute babies,
not for brash ladies.

These nifty celebs
need something strong,
to turn their senses on!

An exclusive fragrance
to tantalize their brains
in times of terror and pain.

Toochoy perfume is feisty,
amazingly resilient,
created for the decadent.

From our studios in Patee,
watch out for something fishy,
here comes Toochoy!

The Scent of the Season is me!
The Scent of the Season is me!

II

Restaurant. A lavish party for a new product launch. Music plays, drinks flow. The flamboyant host talks a mile-a-minute.

HOST: Welcome esteemed guests, welcome to a never before event. A never-imagined event! Mr. Toochoy introduced you to the gourmet delight, Fugu. Thanks to you, we have a chain of exclusive Puffer restaurants. Now, Mr. Toochoy is all set to diversify and take your senses by storm! The ultimate culinary experience, nothing less than a Tsunami.

(The guests cheer nervously)

HOST: Life is an adventure. You, the *crème de crème* of our society, have demonstrated your love for thrills. You love them, live for them, die for them!

Tonight, the ultimate sensory experience. No, we are not asking you to hang from a Himalayan cliff or dive deep into the Arabian sea to get the adrenaline rush. That's for weak souls. We're committed to challenging your discerning senses in unique ways. For taste, you have Puffer and other specialties. For your aromatic pleasure—forget Chanel. Too mild for our times of terror. We have an altogether different perfume, a one-of-a-kind contemporary masterpiece!

(An over-sized bottle, with a fish top, is rolled in majestically. Guests applaud hesitatingly.)

HOST: The scent of the season is Toochoy! Who needs Gucci? Scintillate your senses, scale new heights. Nothing like it has been made in any perfume laboratory, anywhere in the world. In collaboration with Stylon of Paris, we proudly present the new Toochoy perfume!

(The guests move forward eagerly to see it.)

HOST: To add to its exclusiveness, Toochoy perfume comes with a nose mask. Yes, a designer nose mask for those who want to train their senses to this most exciting scent ever!

(Hushed whispers fill the restaurant. Very stylish masks are distributed.)

GUEST-1: Nose masks are used for pollution and to keep harmful virus away, aren't they?

GUEST-2: I've never worn a nose mask. This colour matches my dress.

GUEST-3: Very, very chic, *mon chérie*. Who's the designer? Rohit Bahl?

HOST:*(speaks quickly.)* You chose danger, you chose Fugu, a gastronomic delight called Fengui Fuja Shashmi in Japanese. 500 times more potent than cyanide! It has toxins in its liver, ovaries and intestine. If not fully cleaned, the poison can be fatal. That's what life is about—risk!

This perfume is truly magnificent—one that exposes your nose buds to more than just rose buds. Get ready for the most enticing

fragrance ever! Put on your nose masks. Get set: 1, 2, 3, go!

(Tension escalates. The host demonstrates, guests put on their masks carefully.)

HOST: Hold your breath, folks. I now present to you the creator of this perfume. A rare appearance by the one and only, Mr. Toochoy!

(Toochoy walks in, formally dressed. Applause follows.)

HOST: This masterpiece will be officially released by our special guest from Paris. I present to you Ms. Francine of Stylon Perfumes.

(She enters with much fanfare.)

HOST: There'll be a bit of magic tonight too. The scent may fill the air without Ms. Francine opening the bottle!

(Toochoy moves forward. A fishy smell slowly starts filling the room. The guests turn away at first, then following the host's instructions, they tighten their nose masks. The audience also reacts to the smell.)

HOST:*(hastily)* By pure magic, Toochoy perfume has taken off! Now, we present the formal unveiling. Ms. Francine, please will you do the honour?

(She comes forward. Toochoy, ecstatic, kisses her on the cheek. The smell escalates. She practically collapses and hurriedly puts on her nose mask. Some guests, feeling faint, run out. Chaos prevails.)

HOST:*(speaking rapidly.)* Friends, I suggest you use this perfume everyday and tell yourself: 'Mild lilies are for babies, Toochoy perfume is stronger than chillies'. *(He repeats several times.)* Gift it to others, specially your enemies! Ha-ha, just a joke. In stressful times, we need tough solutions—this perfume will make you robust! That's our guarantee to you, a life-long guarantee.

GUEST-1:*(weakly)* A robust perfume?

GUEST-2: Life-long guarantee?

HOST: *(repeat after me.)* "Mild lilies are for babies, Toochoy perfume is stronger than chillies".



(The guests, confused, repeat hesitatingly. Music plays...)

Anju Makhija is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet, playwright and translator based in Mumbai. She has written books about Sufism, partition, poetry and theatre. Her plays have been staged in India and abroad. Her new book for youth, 'Poems Grow With You' has just been published.
www.facebook.com/anjumakhijawrites

Two poems by Ananya Guha

Abyss of History

Remember, times change
and the slope of these hills
are changing slowly into a void;
I rest my hands on the window
to see how appearances change,
curve and the hills at night seem
demonic. Recalcitrant images heap
themselves in cross currents of change.

I hear sounds the trade of bartering
the hills of a soul mine, but trepidation
of leaving them faceless continues
a withering of time. sanguinary chaos
of what these hills in a timeless town
mean, like the abyss of history, mnemonic.

Granules of dust

They fade, they are a speck
I wipe the dust off my feet
dragging my feet into a time
that never knows
when it is to again come or go
repositories are many images
of the past, the jagged lines draw
me to a town I live, but still knowing
as the arch of stooping hills
are wonderment. The many signs
of life, the many pauses are only
arcane voices swept by memories
then death. I rekindle old songs
New enigmas. Granules of dust.



Ananya S Guha has been born and brought up in Shillong, Meghalaya INDIA. His poems have been published in various journals, magazines, ezines in India and abroad such as: Gloom Cupboard, Asia Writes, Glasgow Review, New Asian Writing, Up The Staircase, othervoicespoetry.org, Indian Literature, Five Poetry Journal, Decades Review, Malaysian Poetic Chronicles. Currently he is Regional Director Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Breathe?

A poem by Anita Nahal

She stood at the banks of the railings knowing she could breathe. Skyscrapers seemed hold able. She knew she could breathe. Maybe even pick some up, slide into pockets, and still breathe. Was a bit nippy and city lights seemed welcoming yet far enough not to smother. Most knew they could still breathe. Few joined her for the dawn spectacular views. These anonymous knew they could still breathe. As she stretched her Namaste hands high above her head, her clothes raged in the tough wind, still, she knew she could breathe. She was a tree, an airplane, and a boat, extending and firming in yogic meditation. She knew she could breathe. She saw bias, hate and cruelty, twisting from side to side. Still some anonymous knew they and she were allowed to breathe.

Untimely and unfair deaths screamed in the belly of the water and sky. A haunting hymn sprung upwards like a tornado in reverse...

*Who can breathe?
Can breathe?
Oh Lord, tell us, can we breathe?
Lord, tell us, can we breathe?
Who can breathe?
Can breathe?
Calm our soul, Lord, tell us, can we breathe
We don't want not to breathe
Don't want not to breathe
Yes Lord, we want to breathe
Yes, Lord, we want to breathe
Protect our souls, Lord
We want to breathe
Oh Lord, please, tell us, can we breathe?*



Anita Nahal is a poet, short storywriter, flash fictionist, children's books author, professor and D&I consultant. She teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, DC. More on Nahal at: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>

Arijit Roy's In the Hour of Sky Reviewed by Subhash Chandra

Collection of Poems published by Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2018, pp: 12

'An artist, I firmly believe, must not only aim to create but must also aim to constantly recreate himself/herself during the process of creation'. (Preface)

This profound insight seems to be from a classical writer, mature in years and rich in experiences. But no. it comes from a young sensitive poet -- all of 18 years -- with a felicitous pen and receptive-assimilative mind. Arijit Roy now in his buoyant twenties, pursuing Masters in English at Delhi University, has emerged as an impactful voice on the contemporary literary horizon. His debut collection *In the Hour of Sky* contains a treasure trove of splendid verses, reflecting on life's complexities, uncertainties, mysteries.

Varied emotions of love, sadness, and compassion are at work in the rich fare the collection offers. The poetic treat spans experiences, memories, triumphs, heartbreaks, losses and much more.

The sheet anchor of life is 'hope' and in several poems we find hope sparkling in the enveloping darkness and dissipating the gloom. For example, Roy knows, he is 'lost/amidst the echoes and the frost,' but still hopes 'to have died' in his beloved's arms. ("The Golden Deer": 15). "Tomorrow," is an extraordinary poem in which the poet, though separated from his beloved, is sure, 'we will meet again/tomorrow, as your world sleeps...' (18).

When one feels on the brink, and thinks it is time to give up on everything, even life, a squeaky little voice insistently whispers, "Is it time?" And this, almost inaudible voice, unambiguously asserts, 'No, not yet.'

In poet's words:

Just then I am pulled out,

Pulled out from the waters, (25)

("Meditation").

Growing up is painful, but it brings in its wake mature thinking. You have to confront intractable, thwarting challenges life tosses at you. One realises that pain is an inalienable part of 'living.'

'... growing up

It meant living with the pain,

and realising that there was nothing that could be done. ("Once I Grow Up": 26)

In yet another poem, the mind, now mature, becomes aware

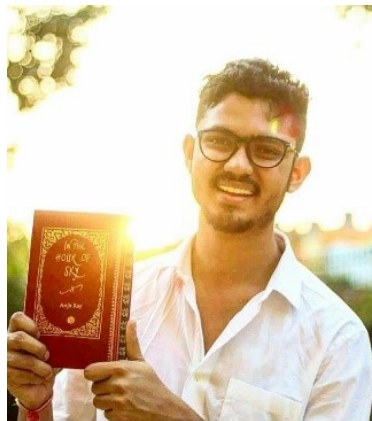
'that all battles cannot be fought,

... ..

For sometimes, moving away

Is the wisest possible way. ("AWAY": 85).

In such situations you need to skirt the insurmountable hurdles, and never forget that 'Life has aliases, compromise, adjustment, endurance.'



Here, we find the resonance of the Taoist hoary wisdom; Lau Tzu suggests:

'Flow with the river. The best way to live is to be like water.

The softest things of the world overcome the hardest

things of the world.'

Chaos is admittedly disruptive, even destructive. But the poet valorises and prefers chaos to bolster his creativity, because out of it is born art, beauty, and poetry. Forced order would yield repetitive, dead progress and an inevitable sterile end. And hence he sings "An Ode to Chaos:" (19).

Dreams are as intrinsic to life as breathing. As a mere child of seven, Roy was seized by the dream of becoming an acclaimed footballer and the fervour of the passion lasted through adolescence. I can do no better than to quote from "The Journey" to convey his fervid yearning:

'That I gave it [dream] my everything, my heart,

my soul, my spirit, my time,

... ..

Until the dream became me

And I became the world.' (90)

His passion was pristine and intense, but life's trajectories often swerve and shift course whimsically.

Even as he found himself amidst the swirling ashes of his dream, '...all of a sudden 'time' came and whispered 'I have other plans.' ("A New Beginning": 92). And then was born a talented poet who is a gift to the literary world.

That Roy has brought out his first collection of poems composed only in a span of one and half years (Preface) is testimony to his poetic genius and intensity of his new-found passion.

Poetry is often subjected to sharp criticism which has its genesis in Plato's proposition that "all art [including poetry] is three steps away from reality.' That was the reason he gave for banishing poets from the 'ideal city'. Roy contests Plato and his followers and believes that the distance from reality, in fact, enables poetry to apprehend and critique reality by offering fresh insights and perspectives on what has hitherto seemed familiar.

Love and romance cut across gender, age, caste or race. It is inevitable, therefore, for a poet to revel in the sweet, replenishing love. In "For the lady," the poet is troubled by the doubts expressed by his lady-love about its authenticity. The poet's words are apt:

'But still how can I be sure,

Is that all you ask?"

Well, Love is a proud creature, lady,

It never hides behind a mask. (79).

If poetry is the music of the soul, then *In the Hour of Sky* will serenade to countless kindred souls.

It is not possible to do justice to a collection, which hardly leaves any facet of life untouched. All possible emotions, impulses, relationship tangles, and more form the thematic spectrum of the poems.

The cover is artistically designed by the publishers, Writers Workshop. The calligraphic lettering in gold set against maroon makes it a visual delight.

I'm certain, lovers of poetry will be amply rewarded, if they get hold of a copy and retire to a solitary corner in their homes.

Book review

HEROES, ZEROES AND NEROS***Kuldip Nayar's On Leaders and Icons from Jinnah to Modi*****Reviewed by Anjana Basu**

Journalist Kuldip Nayar finished this book just before he put down his pen for the last time. The profiles he describes include some of the most iconic figures in Indian politics, men and women whom he interacted with and exchanged opinions with, like Gandhi, Nehru, Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Mujibur Rahman. Leaders from pre and post-Independence from both sides of the border

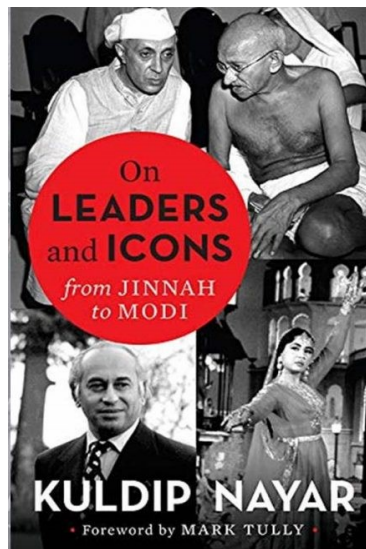
Nayar was one of those who experienced Partition and understood the pain and anguish it caused since he himself came to India from Sialkot. He felt that if Gandhi and Jinnah had lived longer, the situation could have been better managed. Instead today Indian Muslims are still suffering from the post Partition pangs of hatred. Not that his opinions of Jinnah's liberalism is new – many are of the opinion that Jinnah envisaged Pakistan differently and his early death put a spanner in the works.

His position gave Nayar an insider's viewpoint in many cases - there is Nehru's unspoken wish to hand the reins of power to his daughter that Nayar was acutely aware of- even though Nehru never expressed it publicly. Whether he disapproved of Nehru's dynastic viewpoint or not is not mentioned, though Nayar's admiration is clear.

Like many journalists he did suffer from his sources – breaking the news that Morarji Desai was making moves on the Prime Ministership before Nehru's ashes were cold. This indirectly led to Shastri's coming to power and Desai never forgave Nayar for

it, blocking his appointment as Indian ambassador to Italy.

Nayar also had several encounters with Lal Bahadur Shastri including, famously, the final one at Tashkent when he was one of the first into Shastri's room after his death. He does not enter into controversy about the death despite Lalitha Shastri's assertion that her husband had been poisoned but notes that the PM had had two previous heart attacks. Instead, Nayar dwells on the



fact that he had forebodings about the peace talks and was convinced that there was a possibility of Shastri's untimely death. His premonition was realised by a dramatic knock on the door at midnight and an agitated Russian woman's voice calling out, "Your Prime Minister is dying."

However, Nayar's dream of India went well beyond politics despite the fact that he was possibly one of the best political journalists of his time. He writes about his encounter with the frugal Faiz Ahmed Faiz in the

Kremlin who spoke of Pakistan as Lal Islam since he was a die-hard communist. He talks about the singer Noor Jehan and Meena Kumari the actress in a chapter. There are nuggets like Indira Gandhi asking for his opinion after she shortened her hair. His response 'even more beautiful'.

Nayar never got to meet Narendra Modi despite writing critical pieces on him, but he does dedicate a chapter to Modi wondering whether Hindutva would truly be good for the country. Jinnah to Modi is a telling combination of figureheads. Nayar asked Jinnah what would happen if India and Pakistan were attacked by a common third power and Jinnah replied that Pakistani soldiers would fight 'shoulder to shoulder' with their Indian counterparts because blood was thicker than water, a statement that is unthinkable in a subcontinent divided by surgical strikes. This is a world which has changed radically in the years following Partition and Nayar's essays and stories document those changes through his clear-headed narrative.

In a sense the book is about his relationship with the people he interviewed - Nayar had the ability to get on with everyone - but he keeps himself very much in the background and allows the stories of the people he met to come through without being judgmental.



Anjana Basu has to date published 7 novels and 2 books of poetry. She has BBC broadcast one of her short stories. Her byline has appeared in Vogue India, Conde Nast Traveller, Outlook and Hindu Blink.

Interview

In Conversation with Anita Nahal on her book *Hey . . . Spilt milk is spilt, nothing else . . .*

By Meenakshi Mohan

Initially, I came to know Anita Nahal through our writings in Confluence UK. but, recently, I came to know her better, not only through her written works, which speak volumes of her skills as a writer but also for her vision, leadership, and multidimensional talents. Her father, called her, "Mother of all humanity!" *Spilt milk is spilt . . . nothing else* is her second collection of poems. It is an emotional journey -- touches on many issues such as age, love, fear, jealousy, dying, divorce, motherhood, homelessness, cross-cultural surprises, and many others. Her poems are thought-provoking, and pencil line images add visual dimensions to her poetry.

MM: Anita, it is great to know you, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading your second collection of poems. There is so much depth in your writing. Your book is like a novella of your life. The title of the book is quite intriguing. It is as if you are urging people to listen to your story. Can you please tell us why you chose the title and which of your poems reflect most on that message?

AN: Hello, Meenakshi! Thank you so much for this interview and that too by an educator, writer and painter herself! I am honored. The title is my life's main philosophy. We all make mistakes but after crying or feeling bad, guilty, etc., we have no choice but to learn from the experiences, try to become a better person, and move on. Oh, gosh...which poems... *Fresh start, Hope, Single immigrant mom, Son, Blessed and blah, Avinash, I'm a new aging woman*, and *Spilt milk* among others.

MM: The structure of your verses goes beyond the conventional style of writing poetry. Some poems are free verses, some in prose forms, and some in haiku. Please tell us

which writing style do you prefer, and what does poetry mean to you?

AN: Poetry is me...and I am poetry...my feelings, thoughts, experiences, tears, smiles. It's a place I can escape to, and if I can express in a poem, I feel I can make sense of many things happening around the world. I approach writing, like my life, as a humanist. And I write in many styles as I believe not only are humans diverse, each one of us is multi-dimensional. I prefer prose poetry and haiku.

MM: As I read your poems, I find some similarities in your moods and thoughts with some other poets I had read before, for example, in your poems: *Migratory birds* and *An immigrant mother sings*, I found the same

unconsciously seep into our writings even though when I write, I don't read!

MM: *Teenage Pregnancy, Son, and Divorced Indian wife* touched my heart. Who are the speakers of these poems?

AN: Thank you! Teenage mothers are the speakers in the first one and I, and many others in the latter.

MM: Your pencil sketch images add another dimension to your poems; however, some are comprehensible, yet some quite vague -- were they done purposely?

AN: Thank you! Yes, indeed, the artist in you noticed! I didn't want to show the complete face or have the images very clear. So, I dimmed

the clarity in some, wanting the reader to try to visually immerse themselves in the message as well as the experience of the poet.

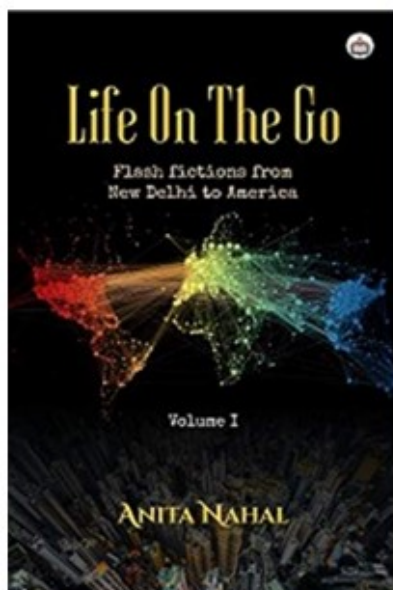
MM: Lastly, your son peeks through most of your poems -- would you like to say a few words on that?

AN: My son is my biggest blessing. He's my friend, my confidant and my companion in all the journeys of life. Had it not been for my son, I would not have been smiling and peaceful today. He has lifted me

out of the depths of my sadness. He is a true gift from God to me.

MM: Thank you, Anita! I just want to say; your poems filled me with different emotions, sometimes with a lump in my throat and occasionally a smile. I agreed with Gwendolyn Bethea when she said, "I am walking with an International poet laureate." I would like to have my copy of this book signed.

AN: Thank you so much, Meenakshi...I can't tell you how much you and your words have meant for me. I deeply appreciate this interview and show casing my poetry.



anguish and apprehension as in Phyllis Wheatley's poetry when she was crossing borders from Africa to America. In the same light, I can almost associate Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Maya Angelou in some of your poems. Do the writings of some poets influence you?

AN: Wow...I feel so blessed to be compared to such giants in poetry whom I have read and admired! Thank you! Yes, indeed women's lives, regardless of their history, ethnicity, color, nationality or religion go through almost similar travails and tribulations, and these

Morris dancing

A folk art unappreciated in its own land

By Kevin Eames

One of the ways in which the English are peculiar is in their attitude to their own traditional folk arts. Force-fed on a diet of music, TV and film from the USA, the English regard traditional arts such as Morris dancing with, at best, amused contempt. The sort of thing I mean is illustrated below, in Image 1, an internet depiction of Morris dancing. There are so many stereotypical details here that show how little is known about Morris dancing in its own country. There's the mimsy prancing that is supposed to represent Morris dancing; the bells that are attached to trousers rather than to bell pads; the dancers who only have one handkerchief each, and the squeezebox providing the music looks nothing like either the melodeon which usually accompanies Morris, or the concertina or piano accordion that are sometimes used. I can't help but contrast this with how folk art is regarded in other countries – in Ireland, for example. I think of the three young men we saw in a pub in Clifden, Galway, who spoke to us in English, spoke among themselves in Gaelic, and spent a lot of time on their mobile phones. They played fiddle, button accordion and guitar, and when I asked them how they had learnt the instruments, they said they'd learnt at school, as the government had provided funding for the instruments and for the teaching of traditional music.



In this article, therefore, I'd like to introduce a more realistic account of Morris dancing, to set the record straight. In fact, there are a number of different types of dancing, these days, that can be called 'Morris'. Probably the best known and the original is Cotswold Morris. As its name suggests, it's the style of dancing found in the South Midlands, in particular in Oxfordshire. Each village would have had its own Morris side, with its characteristic patterns of dancing, usually in a 'verse and chorus' sort of structure. Here's a picture (Image 2) of Bathampton Morris Men performing a dance from Headington, Oxford. The writer is second dancer from the left of the picture, and in the background you can see the musicians. One is playing a piano accordion, and the other is playing a melodeon, which is a

squeezebox with buttons. It's a good instrument for dances and for Morris as the sound is loud, although its size is compact. The men dance in a set of six, wearing bells, hats and baldricks. The baldricks have a rosette in the middle, a badge which identifies which Cotswold side a dancer is from.

Cotswold Morris dancing survived into the C20th, and some villages, such as Bampton, in Oxfordshire, kept the traditions going without a break. However, the art would probably have died out if Cecil Sharp, the folk music collector, had not seen (quite by chance when visiting a friend) the men of Headington Quarry dancing on Boxing Day in 1899. Sharp was so inspired by the music and the dancing that he devoted much of his life to discussing with Morris dancers the music and the patterns of the dances – and we owe much of our present knowledge of Morris dance and music to Sharp, as well as to other collectors such as Percy Grainger, George Butterworth, or Ralph Vaughan Williams.



Another ancient form of Morris dancing which survived in its local area is Longsword Morris, which tends to be concentrated in Yorkshire. Image 3 shows a Longsword side holding up their swords in the 'lock' which is the result of their intricate dance figures. Note the knee-breeches they are dressed in, with no crossed baldricks and no hats. Sword dances are probably of great antiquity, taking place at Christmas or thereabouts and were reported in many accounts during the first half of the C19th, falling into decline after that, before being revived by the efforts of folk music collectors in the Victorian and Edwardian eras.



As a sub-grouping of sword dancing, we have rapper dancing, which is mainly located in the North East of England, in Durham and Northumberland, although rapper sides can often be found further South. The 'swords' are blunt blades, very flexible, with a handle at each end. A rapper side will have five dancers, dressed in breeches and white shirts, with hard-soled shoes. The dances are swift, rhythmic and often athletic, as Image 4 illustrates, and often end with a 'lock' of swords, held up by the foremost dancer. The dances take up little space and are often performed inside, in pubs. Too athletic for the present writer, it's a style of dance suitable for younger men and women.



Another traditional style of Morris which survived is North West Clog (Image 5). The name suggests its provenance, from the mills of Lancashire and Cheshire, and you can hear the rhythmic clatter of the machinery in the sound of the dancers' clogs. NW Clog may be danced as a procession in long lines, with the Conductor of the side often signalling the next move by blowing a whistle. In the early industrial period, the dances were performed annually by large numbers of young men in the rushcart ceremonies which collected and strewed rushes in the local church – an example of the association of Morris dancing with the 'Old Religion' from pre-Reformation times. For these dances, according to the Morris Ring (one of the organising bodies of Morris dancing) the side will be a multiple of four, and the dancers will often carry sticks or slings (a semi-flexible handkerchief or rope) in each hand.



The final two types of Morris dancing are re-imaginings of regional dances that had died out. The first, Molly dancing, is an East Anglian style (Image 6) which has been revived through research. According to the Morris Ring, dances were performed in January, as part of the Plough Monday celebrations. It was the custom for local farmhands to take a plough around the local villages and, if payment (including beer and food) was not forthcoming, they would cut a furrow across the householder's front lawn. The figures of the dances were based upon the local country dances, and are performed in vigorous style. Molly dances involve a 'Molly', a man dressed in women's clothes, with the dancers dressed as agricultural labourers – no bells, but with boots, trousers tied with twine and white shirts. It will be noted that as well as a 'Molly', some of the dancers are women dressed as women. Also, the dancers are wearing 'blackface' makeup – a point of contention among the Morris community which will be addressed in a later article.



Border Morris, the final style of dancing (Image 7) is also a revival, reconstructed from old photographs of dancers in the 'Marches' area at the borders of England and Wales. The music and the dance figures were often reconstructed from interviews with those who remembered the dances, or were written as new dances. Blackface makeup was also characteristic of the Border style, as are the 'tatters' of the 'rag coat', the top hats with feathers, the predominance of stick dances, and the wild whooping with which dancers accompany their figures.



This brief introduction to the different regional styles of Morris dancing has provided, I hope, a sketch of a traditional folk art which still survives, even in a land which is more and more dominated by the commercial imperatives of transatlantic culture. Long may it flourish!

'Kevin Eames is a retired teacher and academic. Originally from the Midlands, he lives 'quietly and unfashionably' in Wiltshire. He loves to travel in Europe and the British Isles, particularly in Ireland, as he is now the proud possessor of an Irish passport. Kevin is married with two daughters and four granddaughters.'

After Years I turn to Ink

By Amrita Sharma

Prologue

*It has been a decade
Since I last wrote a song
Or heard a voice that could pierce
This hauntingly silent calm.*

Each time he paints a word-full note,
Each time he weaves a latent line,
Each time he carves an unknown site,
Each time he despairs the lonely tides.
Each time he breaks the silent storms
Each time he questions the unheard call,
Each time he vows for the unseen ties,
Each time he answers that unexpected sigh
Each time he travels to those un-inhabited lands,
Each time he drowns in those flowing streams,
Each time he lights a darkened lamp,
Each time he turns to distant dreams.
Each time he turns his thoughts to words,
Each time he types from right to left,
Each time he speaks in that foreign tongue,
The words are lost but echoes heard.

He takes me back to those unlocked doors
That I never dared to wander past
But now my verses turn to life, and
After years I turn to ink.



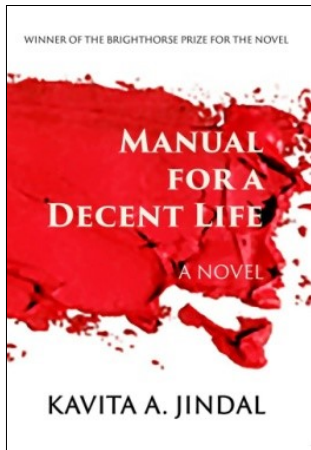
Amrita Sharma is a Lucknow-based writer, currently pursuing her Ph. D. in English from the University of Lucknow. Her works have previously been published in Café Dissensus Everyday, Muse India, New Academia, GNOSIS, Dialogue, The Criterion, Episteme and Ashvamegh.



Book review

Decent Life gets its Manual

Jason A. Reading



A winner of the Brighthorse Prize, Kavita A. Jindal's debut novel builds slowly at first; the mood is tense, both pace and complexity rise steadily to an almost rabid crescendo. Jindal's rich prose seduces you into northern India: Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and rural Theog — the sights, sounds, people, and places. The dialogue is crisp and convincing. The patina of domestic settings and familial relationships is believable.

The key players are Waheeda: Muslim, single mother (separated from her artist husband), and Monish: Hindu, playboy, eldest son of a business tycoon. We see an India of the late twentieth century from Waheeda and Monish's very different perspectives, but at times the novel feels more of an ensemble piece, so convincingly rendered are the other characters — family, friends, enemies — many of whom may be more than one of these.

Even on first reading, the book drips with symbolism and portent. The expectation of tragedy builds from the outset with the presence of a single magpie, for what bird better heralds evil? Is Waheeda's *adaab* to the gardener really a salute to ward off the sorrow on the drive? The evocative opening foreshadows the most horrific - and unexpected - moments to come.

Juxtapositions between Monish's playboy lifestyle, and Waheeda's more precipitous life, create the axis of the driving narrative, but it is far from the only point of contention. Waheeda's India is a dangerous

place, and not just for women. The loss of her brothers, a mere six months prior, is

mentioned almost in passing. By choosing not to dwell on the harrowing nature of

those deaths, Jindal heightens the surrounding suspicions and the malice that lurks unseen for Waheeda.

Waheeda is undoubtedly brave: standing for the Nulkazim Peace Forum and entering a dangerous sexual liaison, these are not the actions of a timid woman. Whilst Waheeda can be reckless, her upbringing — knowing that *tahzeeb*, cultivated manners, are important — both restrain her and perhaps enable her to navigate the complex situations she now faces.

The heat and discomfort of the campaign trail are brought vividly to life on the NPF bus. No relationship, no action nor glance, is beyond question or reproach. Who can she trust, who can she rely on? What are people thinking?

Manual for a Decent Life draws its strengths from questioning the essential truths. How much is in the hands of fate? Is it a coincidence that 'chit', the word for the origami triangles, which ultimately hold Waheeda's fate, also means 'an impudent or arrogant young woman'?

Despite the prevailingly ominous undertones, in places the mood is vibrant. Interactions with family and friends are convincing: food, cooking and music bring detail to the prose. And yet even here we have contradictions, not every taste is good: Waheeda's stomach-turning dislike of goat's milk, and more abstractly, the lingering bitter distaste of her father's electoral defeat add a constant gritty realism.

The book inhabits a deftly rendered collision of place, religion, class, person, culture, and politics. No convenient lines are drawn between these things, and yet it is at the boundaries between them that the heart of the novel's growing tension lies. Nothing is ever simple. As Monish observes, 'no one even properly understands the precepts of their own religion'. In a world ever more obsessed with identity politics, Jindal's work reminds us that in real life there are rarely, if ever, convenient delineations between such things.

Waheeda's first encounter with Monish Selvani is purely physical, as she '[...] stepped out hurriedly into the dark and into something.' Not some *one*, but some *thing* in the dark, before 'she was forced to bump into someone's chest again.

This playful take on what can be seen, and what one chooses to see, recurs: 'Blinkered

horses always seem terrified, flinching at the surrounding clamour,' thinks Waheeda. And yet, if she mentioned this to Monish, 'he'd offer to procure a pair of blinkers so that the two of them could properly experience blinkered vision.

Blinkered to what? Their differences, or to the danger they are courting? The frequently sensuous encounters at Monish's Delhi pad take place with the blinds and curtains drawn at Waheeda's behest. The chemistry between them is as palpable as it is irresistible: 'nothing I do here will be dignified [Ch. 7. p97],' she realises, her fingers splayed on Monish's chest.

Later, no longer blinkered but metaphorically blind, Waheeda tours the polling booths of Dhoonpur ruminating that '[she is] a dark horse in the race, a blind dark horse

These bleak thoughts pertaining to political ambition echo her insecurities regarding one of Monish's previous, tempestuous and paler-skinned lovers.

For all this, it is the book's underlying narrative that drives the reader on. Texture and complexity are never at the expense of readability and relatability.

The judicious use of Hindi enriches the flavour of the work, and much of its use is explained with a light touch in the text but, for me at least, a glossary would have proved useful. Simple details pertaining to food, music, and even items of clothing had me reaching for *Google translate*. Occasionally this revealed nuances that I would have otherwise missed.

There is depth to this book, and layers I suspect that will only reveal themselves upon revisiting. There will be things that my male, western eye has not seen, and others I have seen that are, perhaps, not consciously intended. The overall effect is captivating; the themes disquieting and uneasy. It is a work that will live with me for a long time. There is undoubtedly scope for a sequel.



Jason Reading has an MA in Creative Writing from Kingston University. After a career as a technical architect in the City, he is now working on a contemporary horror-fantasy novel. He lives in South London with his wife. When not writing he snowboards, practices traditional Chinese martial arts, and drinks real ale.

Book page

Reginald Massey's Book Page

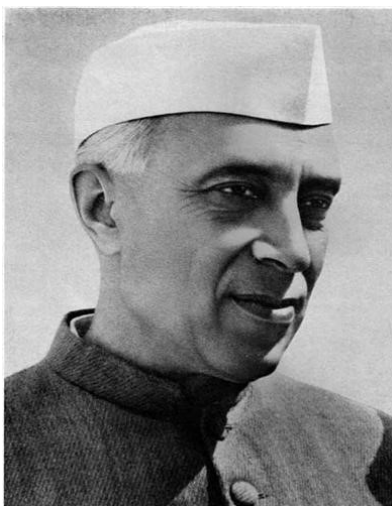
It is unfortunate that the present generation of Indians know little or nothing about Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. For people of my generation he was a hero. His background, his education, his handsome bearing and his achievements marked him out as one of the leading statesmen of the world.

In fact it was he who laid the foundations of a new India. He abolished the age old zamindari system whereby landowners owned vast estates and the peasants who worked for them lived in dire poverty. Dams, hydro-electric power plants, steel mills and fertiliser factories were constructed. He told the people of India that these were the new temples of a new India. He was a true secularist who treated all Indians as equals. It was he who got Ambedkar, an 'Untouchable', to write the Constitution of the Indian republic.

When India became independent he delivered the following speech which is widely regarded as one of history's great speeches: "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take a pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity... It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity... We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell."

He came from a family of Kashmiri Brahmins who had gained eminence as Sanskrit and Persian scholars. The head of the family Raj Kaul had attracted the attention of the Mughal emperor Farrukhsiar and probably at the emperor's instance migrated to Delhi, the imperial capital,

about the year 1716. A house situated on the banks of a canal was granted to Kaul. 'Nehru' (from Nahar, a canal) came to be attached to his name and this changed to Nehru in later years. Jawaharlal's grandfather became Delhi's head of police and then, after the Revolt of 1857, the family moved to Allahabad where Jawaharlal's father Motilal became a highly successful lawyer. Motilal was a larger than life character. In his autobiography Jawaharlal writes about his father: "He had a feeling that his own countrymen had



fallen low and almost deserved what they had got." Being an admirer of the English, Motilal decided that his son would go to England to be educated. And so Jawaharlal was admitted to Harrow, a public school near London. The school had produced many British Prime Ministers as well as the poet Lord Byron.

Jawaharlal was surprised that his fellow students were more interested in cricket and football than in academic work. When his class was asked to name members of the new Liberal government in Britain he was the only one who could name every single minister in the cabinet. He was very keen on the school songs such as 'Jerry, You Duffer and Duncie', and 'When Grandpapa's Grandpapa was in the Lower First'. In 1952, while in London to attend the Commonwealth Conference, he attended the Old Harrovian dinner and took an

impish delight in singing 'Forty Years On' in the company of another Old Harrovian, also a Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Ten years had passed since Churchill's government had sent him to jail. Churchill was surprised that Nehru was so friendly and forgiving.

After leaving Harrow he went to Trinity College, Cambridge and chose the Natural Science Tripos, his subjects being chemistry, geology and botany. He got a second-class honours degree. He then went to London and joined the Inner Temple to study law. He says that he passed his law examinations with neither glory nor ignominy. In the autumn of 1912 after a stay of over seven years in England he returned to India. He writes that when he landed in Bombay he was "a bit of a prig with little to commend me."

Jawaharlal Nehru confessed that he was a strange mixture of East and West. It was thanks to Mahatma Gandhi that he discovered India and his classic book *Discovery of India* was the result. It is, in fact, essential reading for anyone who wants a true understanding of Indian culture.

He died a tragic figure. The Nonaligned group of nations that he started fell apart and his relationship with China and Pakistan deteriorated. He was always fond of poetry and when he died his daughter Indira found a pad by his bed on which he had written lines by the American poet Robert Frost. There were lines about the man who stopped by woods on a snowy evening, but could not stay to enjoy the scene since he had promises to keep and miles to go before he could sleep.



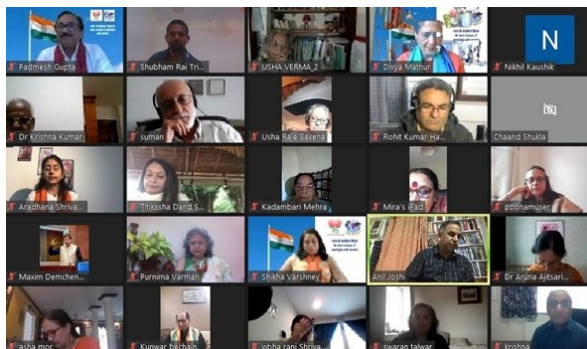
In September 2015 one of Reginald Massey's poems was awarded the first prize in the all-British Forward Poetry competition. He has been writing a regular Book Page for CONFLUENCE for years. Most of his books are available from Amazon UK.

Indian Independence Day

Celebrated by 15 Poets from 15 Countries

A report by Divya Mathur

London, 15 August, Vatayan-UK, Hindi Samiti YK and Vaishvik celebrated the Indian Independence Day on Zoom by inviting 15 poets from 15 countries including UK, India, US, Canada, Norway, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, China, Singapore, Kenya-Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad Tobago and UAE. The atmosphere buzzed with great enthusiasm in spite of the time difference around the world. The programme was chaired by the eminent Indian poet Dr Kunwar Bechain and compered by Dr Padmesh Gupta (Managing Director of Oxford Business College). The participants included Dr Pushpita Awasthi (Netherlands), Purnima Varman (UAE), Dr Makseem Demchesco (Russia), Dr Mauna Kaushik (Bulgaria), Dr Anita Sharma (China), Rohit Kumar Happy (New Zealand), Dr Shailja Saxena (Canada), Chand Shukla Hyderabad (Denmark), Rekha Rajvanshi (Australia), Asha Mor (Trinidad & Tobago), Aradhna Shrivastav (Singapore), Manisha Kanthalia (Kenya), Raj Hiran (Mauritius), Anil Sharma Joshi (India), and Dr Nikhil Kaushik (UK). The two-hour long event only proved the love and respect the Indians hold in their hearts wherever they may live.



As soon as the Lockdown was announced, Vatayan has strived for diverse literary associations from across the globe, holding exclusive virtual sessions on every Saturday at 4 pm with international writers, conversing and interacting on their life and achievements. Our first programme was held on 4 April with the Wales-based poet Dr Nikhil Kaushik followed by the Bath-based Mystic poet Mohan Rana, Shail Agrawal and Dr Ajay Tripathi (Birmingham), Jai Varma (Nottingham), Tithi Dani, Bhartendu Vimal, Kadambari Mehra, KK Tandon, Shikha Varshney, Tarun Kumar, Arun Sabharwal, Antareepa Mukherjee Thakur, Richa Jain (London).



Our In-Conversation series begins with Dr Asghar Vajhat in Conversation with Dr Mária Négyesi from Bulgaria on 18 July followed by Nasira Sharma with Dr Archana Painuly on 8 August, Chitra Mudgal with Achala Sharma on 29 August and Dr Mamta Kalia with Shailja Saxena on 18 July.

Future events will feature Dr Mamta Kalia to be interviewed by Dr Shailja Saxena on 12 September, discussion on Usha Verma's novel: Mum, Dad & I on 19 September and Dr Ashok Chakradhar to be interviewed by Anoop Bhargav on 26 September.

Poems by Keki Daruwalla

Migrant's Daughter talks to Mother

Where's that planet Ma, the one you speak of?

Is it Buddha, Sukra, or Mangala?

Where we need to walk just twenty

miles a day to get to our hut, fata fut?

Daughter, please sleep, I am tired.

That planet ma, where it's cloudy even at noon

So our heads won't burn soon,

where roads are so smooth you said

no feet ever bled

Where we may even find a dukaan

and I could get sandals, hey Bhagwan!

Beti, I am tired, sleep.

How many more miles Ma in these wilds?

Four hundred forty three child!

Is that more than what we've done till now?

Child we walked just four hundred, and how!

Dawn

Beti, thank the mantris we are in a truck

We won't get stuck

I know the crush won't make you gush

Still thank the mantris they take such care of us.

CRASH !! That was an accident daughter.

Who are these Ma, they don't move

They traveled with us, now they are dead.

We are twenty miles nearer our hearth.

Have we reached a planet Ma?

Child, we are on our planet, Prithvi, Earth.



Keki N. Daruwalla is an Indian poet and short story writer in English. He is also a former Indian Police Service officer. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, in 1984 for his poetry collection, *The Keeper of the Dead*, by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.