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An Unprecedented Election for Unprecedented Times. What Now?

by Kavita Mohan

On Saturday, November 7, 2020, Joe Biden was pronounced the winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The election was unprecedented for multiple reasons. More Americans voted in 2020 than in any election in U.S. history. As a result of the pandemic, more votes were cast by mail than in any previous election, and it was due to those mail-in ballots that tallying votes also took longer than in previous elections. Biden received more votes than any President in history. Kamala Harris' victory as Biden's running mate is even more extraordinary, as she will become the first female, the first Black, and the first South Asian-American Vice President of the United States.

Contesting Election Results

So, what happens next? The first issue that Americans will have to contend with is an outgoing President who is unwilling to concede the election results, and who has mounted legal challenges in multiple states.

While there is no legal requirement that an outgoing President formally concede, doing so certainly helps to set the tone for a peaceful transfer of power – a hallmark of American democracy. The late Republican Senator John McCain's famous concession speech following the 2008 election, which he lost to President Barack Obama, provides a striking contrast to Trump's unwillingness to accept defeat. McCain stated "The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly" and he urged all Americans to join him in "offering our next president our goodwill and earnest effort to find ways to come together, to find the necessary compromises, to bridge our differences and help restore our prosperity, defend our security in a dangerous world, and leave our children and grandchildren a stronger, better country than we inherited."

That President Trump contested the election results is unsurprising, as he had been setting the stage by making allegations of voter fraud for months before the first ballots were even

cast. The allegations are baseless; indeed, a joint statement issued by federal election infrastructure officials noted that "there is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised." In his typical fashion, Trump reacted to the issuance of this statement by promptly firing the head of the agency that issued it. Although legal challenges are now pending in several states, the challenges are not expected to have any impact on the outcome of the election results. However, America's global standing as a beacon of democracy has been weakened as a result of Trump's actions.



A President for All Americans?

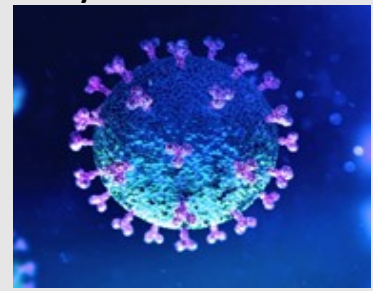
Among Biden's foremost challenges as President will be governing a deeply divided country. Biden's win was decisive. As of the writing of this article, Biden has received 5 million more popular votes than Trump and 306 electoral votes, as compared to Trump's 232 electoral votes. However, Trump still received over 72 million votes. Nonetheless, Biden pledged in his victory speech, "to be a President who seeks not to divide, but to unify. Who doesn't see Red and Blue states, but a United States. And who will work with all my heart to win the confidence of the whole people."

Biden has an ambitious agenda for his first hundred days in office, on issues ranging from handling the pandemic, economic recovery, addressing racial equity, climate change, and immigration. Americans can expect that his presidency will be defined by trying to undo many of the actions taken by his predecessor. However, Biden's ability to implement meaningful change will in large part be decided by whether

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COVID-19: Fact, Fiction and Future

By G. Venkat Raman



COVID-19 has laid our world low in spectacular fashion, within a mere six months. It has reduced our way of living to one of deprivation, lock down, isolation and economic hardship. It is important to concentrate on the facts and allay fears, whilst at the same time planning for the future. There was probably a missed opportunity during the early stages of the COVID assault on the UK (March 2020) when an earlier lockdown could have prevented a substantial number of cases and the associated deaths. After three months of stability, we now are in the grip of an ominous second wave.

It is impossible to accurately establish the actual number of infections, because a large proportion of young people infected with the virus will have escaped with few or minor symptoms, would never have been tested and therefore will never have been identified. The mortality, if calculated by the number of deaths against the number recovered (both confirmed COVID positive), approximates 4%. Corrected for age however, the mortality becomes much more concerning, with a significant rise from age 60, going on to a steep and exponential increase with each decade of life. Apart from age, mortality is compounded by aggravating factors like ethnicity (South Asian or Afro-Caribbean) and concomitant chronic medical conditions like diabetes, obesity, chronic heart, lung or kidney disease.

COVID-19 is spread mainly by direct droplets, spray and aerosol generation, and less so by physical contact (surfaces, fomites, etc.).

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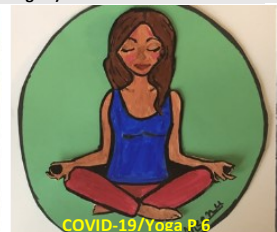
SP Balasubrahmanyam P5



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Editorially speaking

I am writing this editorial with a big sigh of relief and a sense of optimism. Things are starting to change, and the world is looking forward to return to normal again with the news that a lifesaving vaccine against COVID-19 will be available soon. Also, the news that a new leadership will soon be at the helm in America has been greeted with joy from many corners of the world. We very much hope the new administration will adapt an open and inclusive approach to rebuild the trust in political leadership of major countries. We have covered these two new developments in our front page written by two eminent people. Even though it comes later than expected, this is truly a feature packed issue coming with rather greater number of articles, poems, stories and reviews and I am sure our readers will take time to read all of them and give their feedback. This time we received a large number of poems, some were from well-known poets but, we are able to publish only a small number of poems that are of high literary value. I am proud to say that this time too we have introduced some new writers and poets and hope our readers would welcome them to the ever-growing Confluence family. One thing I must mention here is about the number of submissions coming late and our difficulties in screening and editing them and to publish the magazine on time. Since our resources are limited and publishing a magazine like this need a lot of patience and skilful collaboration, we would urge our contributors to send their submissions at least a month before the magazine is due.

I am also happy to share with you that an organisation working with South Asian Diaspora writers in UK has expressed an interest in archiving some of the past volumes of Confluence, to recognise the work of diaspora writers of South East Asian origin who have settled in the UK, subject to them mustering enough funds to meet the cost of this project. However, Confluence would like to have its own archive to cover the work of all our contributors, no matter where they live, if the cost can be met. We are hoping to revamp our online magazine with a new look website with additional features so our presence in the literary world will be more visible and recognised. And I would like to thank those people who have helped Confluence recently through their financial contributions. Every little counts.

Please write us back as we always welcome your valuable feedback. We wish all a happy holiday season and a New Year that brings lasting health and peace of mind.

Vijay Anand

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Republicans will continue to control the Senate. Currently, Republicans have 50 seats and Democrats have 48. In January, Georgia will hold two "run-off" elections that will decide if Democrats get two more seats for a 50-50 split. If this were to happen, the Vice President would cast tie-breaking votes, giving de facto control to her party. On the other hand, if Democrats do not gain control of the Senate, a Senate led by majority leader Mitch McConnell would be expected to obstruct many of Biden's key priorities.

A Return to Science

Trump's presidency has been marked by a strong anti-science agenda, as evidenced by his handling of the pandemic, holding "super-spreader" rallies and events, denigrating the country's leading scientists, withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Agreement on climate change and the World Health Organization (in the midst of a global pandemic), to name just a few examples. In contrast, Biden has promised a return to science-based policy making, and on November 9, announced the members of his coronavirus task force, made up entirely of doctors and health experts. Biden has also already announced a multi-pronged plan to control the pandemic that includes, among other things, increasing access to testing; employing the Defense Production Act to ramp up the production of personal protective equipment; and implementing nationwide mask mandates.

Welcome to America

Biden has an aggressive immigration agenda, largely aimed at undoing policies

implemented by the Trump administration. One such policy that will require immediate rectification is to reunite families that were separated at the U.S.-Mexican border as a result of the Trump administration's "no toleration" migration policy. Court filings have demonstrated that the parents of several hundreds of children still cannot be found, and Biden has pledged to establish a task force on Day 1 of his presidency to reunite children and parents separated at the border. Biden also plans to end Trump's executive order banning travellers from certain Muslim-majority countries, and to create a pathway to citizenship for 11 million migrants as well as DREAMers (immigrants who were brought as children to the United States without documentation, who are part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program).

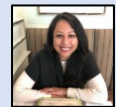
What About India?

While Trump has capitalized on Prime Minister Modi's popularity among Indian-Americans in the United States, as Parag Parikh explains in his comprehensive and well-cited article entitled "FACT CHECK: Biden Presidency Better for India than Trump," (August 10, 2020) (<https://www.myparagative.com/>), Trump actually took several actions adverse to the U.S.-Indian relationship, including revoking India's special trade partner status under the Generalized System of Preferences program, levying tariffs on Indian imports, cutting visas to Indian immigrants, and blaming India for his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, among other things. In contrast, the Obama-Biden administration took multiple steps to strengthen the relationship with India, such as committing to increasing two way

trade to up to \$500 billion, improving immigration policies for Indians and Indian-Americans, encouraging and executing the Paris climate agreement with India, endorsing India to have a permanent seat on the United Nations' Security Council, and entering into a historic nuclear deal with India. Thus, any perceptions that Biden will be "bad" for India are unsubstantiated. Indeed, Prime Minister Modi was among the many world leaders to congratulate Biden and Harris on their historic win – stating on Twitter: "Congratulations @JoeBiden on your spectacular victory! As the VP, your contribution to strengthening Indo-US relations was critical and invaluable. I look forward to working closely together once again to take India-US relations to greater heights." Prime Minister Modi also had a special message for Harris, "Heartiest congratulations @KamalaHarris! Your success is pathbreaking, and a matter of immense pride not just for your chittis, but also for all Indian-Americans. I am confident that the vibrant India-US ties will get even stronger with your support and leadership."

There is no doubt that grave challenges lie ahead, and that Biden will face political obstacles as he attempts to – as he promised in his victory speech – "restore the soul of America." However, Biden's long political career and reputation for reaching across the aisle may serve him, and the country, well for what is to come.

Kavita Mohan is an international trade attorney based in Washington D.C., where she lives with her husband and daughter. Any opinions expressed in this article are hers alone.

**Continuation from page 1**

It rapidly gets into the respiratory system through the nose, the mouth or the eyes. It causes no symptoms during the next 'incubation period', which ranges from 2-14 days, with a median of 5-6 days. Though silent, the virus is potentially transmissible to non-infected persons. Only after this phase do the symptoms appear, the most prominent of which are, a troublesome dry cough, high fever, extreme exhaustion and loss of smell and taste. The virus exerts its deleterious effects in two ways, the first being its direct lethal effect on cells, and the second being the indirect effect on activating the patient's own immune system. It is the latter, unpredictable phenomenon, which can lead to hyper-stimulation of the immune system, thereby causing the so-called 'cytokine storm', which often proves lethal.

The pathological processes that this virus activates include a panoply of events which are primarily focused in the lungs, but also affect the brain and the kidneys. The cause of death by and large is linked to the failure of the lungs to maintain adequate oxygen transfer. Of those who have survived, a substantial number suffer systemic effects which are proving to be chronic and debilitating.

The search is on for a cure. Three drugs are currently used and partially effective - Dexamethasone, Remdesivir and beta-interferon. There are potential benefits touted for a number of other drugs, but no validated proof. The hunt for a vaccine seems to have been highly successful, with three promising vaccines to date. Prevention remains by far the most sensible approach, including social distancing of two metres, frequent hand-washing, thorough

sanitizing of surfaces and fomites, avoiding crowded venues and using a face mask.

There is a massive amount of misinformation on social media regarding this disease. You will find everything from high dose vitamins to herbs etc. presented as cures for COVID infection. Youngsters who flout the rules because they are most unlikely to come to harm, should realize the perils of carrying the disease to vulnerable older people, including their own parents or grandparents. It behoves us all to think of the greater good and respond in a manner that parallels what we might do in a war situation.

What of the future? Is this infection ever going to leave us? Most experts seem to be of the opinion that COVID-19 is here to stay and our best hopes of combating it lie in three possible solutions. The first and by far the best would be the development of a really effective vaccine. This now seems a very real possibility in the near future. The second best option would be the discovery of a highly effective and non-toxic drug that is able to kill the virus, but this is highly optimistic. The third option is that in the course of the coming months and years, the world's population develops what is known as herd immunity, whereby a substantial proportion of the population achieve immunity through infection, akin to the situation with influenza (which even now claims half a million lives a year, worldwide). In this context, it is highly advisable for vulnerable groups to have the 'flu' vaccine right now.

The pandemic has caused huge damage. In the healthcare sector, so much activity has been lost since March, that we have stored up a deluge of

problems to be dealt with in future, and sadly, it may be too late for some. In particular, the areas which concern us most are cancer and cardiovascular diseases. One curious positive side effect that is likely to come out of this is our ability to deal with medical problems through virtual clinics and consultations. It is now standard practice for doctors to conduct remote consultations, through the medium of the telephone, or visual platforms like Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc. There will be a massive increase in this modality, with benefits for patients, healthcare workers and the NHS overall.

Moving on from the health sector to the broader economy, experts seem to be of the view that it is likely to take two to three years for the world economy to recover. One of the potential positive side effects of the pandemic is the development of remote working, which can deliver huge benefits to the public and the employers in terms of maintaining productivity at lower cost.

And finally, what of the long-term survival benefits? Could there be a possibility that human beings as a whole learn to reboot the world we are living in, and reset our life parameters? It may just be possible that the lessons of the pandemic result in major alterations in lifestyle and behaviour, such that people embrace a more eco-friendly and less material approach to life. These are challenges which cannot be underestimated, but the pandemic may, ironically, save the planet.

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 and golf.

Lit-Fest

Melting Boundaries: Creating Bridges with Words

by Shivangi Malviya

Over history, humanity has often endured the adversities of several pandemics. Be it the Spanish Influenza, bubonic plague or the current COVID 19 outbreak, these pandemics have resulted in huge loss to the humankind. However, one thing that has always held people together during such difficult times is the influence of arts and literature. Be it Shakespeare or Newton, such personalities have always viewed it as an opportunity to work towards their magnum opus.

Words have the ability to bring people together, despite their differences and distances, in the celebration of life. Today, because of the ongoing pandemic, physical distancing is the new normal. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that words have the ability to always bridge distances.

Knowing this, 'Shabd Shilp', an India based literary group has recently organised a two days Virtual Literature Festival, 'Melting Boundaries: Creating Bridges with Words', which was held on 19th and 20th September 2020. It has proven that these unprecedented times cannot hold back literature enthusiasts to come together and celebrate their love for arts and literature. The festival was held on a virtual meeting platform, Zoom and also went live on Facebook. It ensured free flow of conversation between the speakers and the moderators giving chance to the participants to ask their questions in the chat box.

With the motto of promoting reading and writing especially among youngsters and give them a platform to artistic expression, Shabd Shilp, founded by Dr. Deepa Vanjani, is an Indore based literary group. It brings together the lovers of arts and literature to express their love through words. This year, the group has marked its ninth year of successful running and throughout the last eight years, it has been thoroughly active. The group had various workshops, discussions, open mics, launched several newsletters and an anthology. The members have wholeheartedly taken forward all the activities of the group and even in these hard times, they did not step back from introducing many virtual workshops, sessions and literature festivals.

This festival, 'Melting Boundaries', was adorned by the presence of esteemed personalities from around the world, who discussed various topics of importance, showcasing their unique talents and made the event livelier and a huge success. The event provided a platform in the form of an open mic for many aspiring poets and writers to have their voices heard on the topic 'Happiness', which the participants interpreted in several ways. The festival started on a high note and maintained the same throughout the two days. Just like every other Indian function starts with remembering the Lord Ganesha, this event too started with a virtual dance performance by an Indian classical dancer in tribute to the lord, followed by a melodious welcome song. From the start itself, the Indian culture and tradition were beautifully portrayed by the group members.

On September 19th, the first day of the festival, renowned Hindi writer Mr. Ashok Aatreya shared his thoughts on the evolution and importance of the 'word'. He proceeds to share about how word refers to 'Brahma', the creator of the universe according to the Hindu mythology, and has evolved since the very beginning of life. He discussed the book he was currently reading, The Innocent Anarchist, and commented on the oxymoron that the book offers. His thoughts were refreshing which he expressed eloquently.

touched the hearts of the audience and eventually became the highlight of the day.

The second day of the festival, September 20th was just as magnificent as the first one. It was filled with storytelling, poetry and arts. Mr. Swaroop Ghosh, a young entrepreneur with a wealth of experience in the fields of media and broadcast industry talked about the art of storytelling and how it is an important skill in the field of advertising. He had prepared a presentation and he went bit by bit defining the power of stories, their importance in holding people's attention and as an essential tool in the fields of media and advertising.

He was followed by the extremely talented Mr. Shakti Singh, a Rajasthani folk storyteller, who mesmerised the hearts of the audience by his brilliant delivery of the Rajasthani folktale, 'Ruthi Rani', that translates into 'The Upset Queen', in his typical way that left the audience spellbound. His story included themes of self-respect, dignity and determination.



London based filmmaker and founder-director of South Asian Cinema Foundation, Mr. Lalit Mohan Joshi threw light on the confluence of cinema and literature. He discussed various masterpieces of the Indian Cinema and the role of filmmakers in adapting them from several literary works by significant authors. He infused the young minds listening to him with curiosity about the cinematic liberty of the filmmakers, the role of literature and why there is a need to be adapted into cinema. Mr Joshi's talk was also supported with many questions from the audience and screening of a few important scenes from some of the great literary adaptations in Indian cinema.



To add glory to the programme, Indian artist Syed Sahil Agha presented an extremely fascinating virtual performance of 'Dastangoi', a traditional Urdu oral storytelling art form that involves creating and narrating stories that define the history, culture, traditions, and morality of the people of South Asia. Dastangoi is a unique and ancient art form that captivates the audience as if they are a part of the story. His performance

The last speaker of the event, one of the remarkable Indian woman artists, Dr. Vimmie Manoj shared her definitions of art in association with poetry. She believes that art, poetry and nature are like meditation to her and comes naturally. In conversation with Dr. Rashmi Sahi from Hong Kong, she shared her poetry and the art that she created inspired by those and gave the audience meaningful insights on how to view art without any predefined notion. Her talk portrayed her love for both literature and arts so freely, one could almost feel the need to indulge in the same almost immediately.

Melting Boundaries also gave a special platform to all those aspiring poets, writers or storytellers in its open mic, 'Potpourri', where they could come up with their written work and share it with like-minded people. It was delightful to listen to all the talented participants and their distinct interpretation of a simple theme 'Happiness', and what it meant to them. All the performances were exceptional and that became a herculean task for the judges to rank. This competition was judged by various judges from around the world, who evaluated the participants on the basis of content, theme and their oral presentation of their own works.

Shabd Shilp has emerged as one of the firsts of its kind to organise such an event virtually, which is indeed a great step towards the new normal. The two days event has proved that no matter how far we are from each other today, words can always bring us together. It shows how literature and arts are a tool to happiness that one must embrace and inculcate in their lives.

Shivangi Malviya is a final year Electronic Media and Creative Writing student from India. She is an avid reader and is immensely passionate about arts, history and literature.



AUTOGRAPH OF THE SOUL

Legendary Singer S. P. Balasubrahmanyam (1946 – 2020) by Innamburan

I heard the sad news from the BBC. My daughter in law posted a message. An anxious westerner-friend from Australia rang up - all within one minute. A Larger than Life figure, Bala had charmed diverse streams of people by his ingrained bounty of goodwill. A singer, *non pareil*, he wore many hats as to manner born. He was the music director for 46 films in four languages. A popular TV judge, he encouraged talent and nurtured his discoveries like Usha, Kousalya, Gopika Poornima etc. In his words, his ability to emote well with voice was only an extension of his emoting very well physically. It is, thus, he played supporting roles with ease in 72 movies. He set a Guinness record for singing the highest number of songs in his lifetime - 45,000 songs in 16 languages (Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, English, Bengali, Oriya, Punjabi, Tulu, Sanskrit, Assamese, Konkani, Badaga and Gondi) in 55 years. I recall his feat of rendering 49 songs on a single day in 1981. Bala's last song was in Rajinikanth's 'Annathe'.

The following clip received 44 million hits. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyGuTM6eLQg> We see Bala, the Original. The stage had been set, serendipitously though. It illuminates his inborn musical genius and his instinctive magnanimity. Teenager Yumna Ajin had drenched herself into the pathos of "Dama Dam Mast Qalandar", the 13th century Sufi prayer attributed to Amir Khusrów, the 'parrot of India'. Bala, from distant shores in Time and Space, merges himself with this haunting strain of qawwali (a form of Sufi spiritual) and bestows saintly benediction on Yumna.

He worked closely with another legend- Ilaiyaraaja - even before the latter came to the cine field. Maestro Rahman also made full use of his range. Pronouncedly unlike each other, Kollywood (Tamil filmworld) icons like M.G. Ramachandran, Sivaji Ganesan and Gemini Ganesan were a challenge to playback singers. All the three, Kamal Hassan and Rajinikanth asked for Bala. They recognized that he was 'at once the singer, the lover, the actor... creating a vibe, building an ambience and telling a story', as Meera Srinivasan cited it in the Hindu. Veteran female singers like P. Susheela, S. Janaki comfortably recorded duets with him. But, you must listen to Latha Mangeshkar extolling his virtuosity while singing a duet with him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyGuTM6eLQg>

Awards came his way not only for singing, but also for music direction, acting, dubbing and producing. Bala won six National Awards - three for rendering



Sripathi Panditaradhyula
Balasubrahmanyam Courtesy: ispbofficial

songs in Telugu and one each for Tamil, Hindi, and Kannada. The Filmfare Award for Best Male Playback Singer (for Salman Khan) for the song *Dil Deewana in Maine Pyar Kiya* in 1989 marks a turning point in his career. He became the "romantic singing voice" on the soundtracks of Khan's films during the following decade. As the all-India Lead in playback singing, he contributed



SPB with his family. Photo: Shivram Vinjamuri. Courtesy: Telangana Today

to box-office triumphs. His duet with Lata Mangeshkar, "*Didi Tera Devar Deewana*" is still talked about for the sheer excellence achieved. He is the only playback singer in India to have won National Film Awards across four languages. He reached the threshold of global filmhood by dubbing for Ben Kingsley in the Telugu version of Attenborough's *Gandhi*. People used to wait for the elegance of his persuasive utterances at the end of a concert, like asking you to follow traffic rules, with a tinge of humour.

He never forgot his humble roots in Konetammampeta, a nondescript village near Nellore, Andhra Pradesh and kept up his friendship with his teenage peer groups till the last. He got the

infrastructure of that village fortified by building toilets for the school and by installing an RO Plant for the village. He donated his ancestral home where he was born on June 4, 1946, to Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Math. It is worth crores of rupees.

A word about his engineering background. A bout of typhoid disrupted his engineering studies at Anantapur and he resumed it at Chennai only to fall under the spell of music director S. P. Kodandapani, who awarded him the first prize in a music competition and became his mentor. He shed Engineering and began his Pilgrimage of Music in 1964. His mentor launched him in film music two years later.

Bala tested positive for COVID-19 early in August this year and was hospitalised promptly. He did show signs of recovery; but we lost him on September 25, 2020. His fans, in hordes, attended his funeral, despite the pandemic. Bala leaves behind, his wife Savithri, daughter Pallavi, son S.P.B.Charan and a host of his fans. He was laid to rest with State honours.

Did he have a premonition? During his stay in the hospital, he became the toast of the nursing fraternity, doctors and the paramedical staff by just being himself - sending thank you notes, making anxious and solicitous queries about their health and safety and so on. Barely four months earlier, he had crooned a song on humanity titled "*Bharath Bhoomi*" - a tribute to exactly those, who have been significantly working amid COVID-19 pandemic. You can hear it in both Tamil and Hindi language in Ilaiyaraaja's official YouTube account.

As Madhuri Dixit put it, his loss was the End of an era.

May his soul rest in

peace.

Srinivasan Soundararajan (Innamburan) is a Tamil scholar with degrees in Economics, Applied Sociology and Tamil Literature. He has long retired from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service in which he served as Additional Deputy Comptroller & Auditor General of India.



COVID Humour

COVID-19, Yoga/Meditation and Me

by Meenakshi Mohan

When I was young, my mother told me a story of Raktabij (blood-seed), a demon who terrorized the world by creating havoc. He was not quickly destroyable because he formed more demons with more destructive power with every drop of his blood. All gods decided to work together and combine all their shakti and divine energy to produce one superpower in the form of Kali. Kali, in her fierce way, swallowed all the demons created by Raktabij. She stretched her tongue and devoured all the blood before Raktabij's blood spilled on the ground. She destroyed Raktabij forever from the face of the earth. COVID 19 is no less than this Raktabij with its many mutating fangs -- we don't know-- who, when, and how it may attack? Researchers and scientists are putting their combined energies to create the Kali, the superpower in the form of some miracle drug. We are waiting! In the meanwhile, this dangerous potentate has its ball terrorizing the whole world.

Last December, I was on a Princess Cruise to Australia / New Zealand -- I thank my stars that I safely crossed the Australian / New Zealand waters to touch the grounds of American soil -- my home. The same Princess Cruise a few months later, with some COVID 19 passengers on board, was stuck in the middle of the ocean near Australia -- I can imagine those passengers' helpless feelings.

The other day, I crossed the intersection of River Road and Wisconsin Avenue in Washington DC.; the once heavily populated street with restaurants, shops, and movie hall was deserted. A handful of homo-sapiens were purposefully running their most essential errands wearing all kinds of gears on their faces, some matching their outfits, and some with plastic hoods on top.

Going to movies, restaurants, or even meeting friends as we used to have all become memories of the past. Occasionally, we would meet friends outside on the patio, deck, or garden, keeping a distance of six feet, sometimes even carrying our food and drinks, so others do not touch them.

We do not know who created COVID 19 and how it entered our lives; all we know that this virus has stolen peace of our mind and impacted our lives in unforeseen ways. A little sniff, a slight cough -- "Oh

my God, I hope it is not COVID-19" -- this is the kind of scare it has given us. It made us prisoners within our walls. Sometimes people may end up paying hefty prices at the cost of their health if they overrule the boundaries of this Lakshman Rekha.

So, what can we do to relieve us of this constant fear with which we live besides praying, ringing bells, or lighting candles? A friend of mine who is the epitome of spirituality suggested that I do yoga and meditation. I, desperately in need of peace, decided to follow her advice. She told me about

While still in my semi-drowsy state, I listened to all the instructions. I promised myself that beginning that day, I would give it a try for my serenity.

My well-wisher, the concerned friend, called to check on me. She cited her example in saying how it made such a big difference in her physical and mental conditions -- even if these differences were not yet visible to mortal eyes.

Anyway, who does not want to be healthy and happy? So, later that day, I sat in the lotus position, breathed in-and-out, and chanted, "Om!" But my

mind was a sieve with worldly issues coming into my mental faculty. The more I tried to focus on Om; the more my brain was invaded by a hoard of responsibilities and worries -- some consequential and some not so significant: "What to cook" or "I must take care of my laundry as it is piling up." This cacophony of concerns filled my mind instead of peace and harmony. My brain had become the "House of Commons" of England with opposing sides, each raising its voice louder and louder, "Here, here, here listen to me." My Om was shouting, "Order, order, order," to no avail.

COVID-19, don't laugh at my first failed attempt at inner peace. This was just a test before I can advance to a higher state of consciousness.

Whoever you are or wherever you came from, you will not be dancing at your whims very long. That day is not too far when we would successfully create the Kali power to break and destroy your many tentacles and resume peace and harmony in the world again. Meanwhile, my friends, there is no harm in following my spiritual friend's advice -- take a dose of meditation

and yoga daily to maintain sanity during these difficult times!

Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti! May peace be with all!

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.



the yoga channel on TV and said it is all demonstrated and easy to follow. So, before going to bed, I set up my TV timer on the yoga channel.

At 6:30 am, the next morning, the alarm went off. I, blindly in a half-suspended state of consciousness, searched for my iPhone to turn it off. The morning sun, filtering through the blinds of my East facing window, was falling directly on my eyes, urging me to wake up. The pre-programmed timer switched the TV to a yoga/meditation channel.

"Sit in a lotus position. Breathe in from one nostril and breathe out from the other while concentrating on Om. Don't let other thoughts come into your mind," it preached.

Short fiction

Sonset? by Subhash Chandra

First day:

Rita Gulwani safely delivered a baby boy at the swanky Nursing Home, The Moon. Champak Gulwani had objected to the choice of The Moon as it was crazily expensive. But she had snubbed him, "You don't need to lose sleep over it. I will manage."

Champak knew how and that cut him to the quick. But he was reconciled to being an appendage of his domineering wife who would bully him into acquiescing to her decisions. He was a short, mild and self-effacing man from Indore and worked as an Accounts Assistant in a private company. His colleague, Manik who was related to Rita had brought the proposal. She was Secretary to the Director of an MNC. Manik arranged a meeting between the two. After a cup of Mocha coffee, she had coyly nodded. Manik did not tell him, Rita was an inveterate flirt and her parents could not find a match for her in the Sindhi community in Delhi.

#

"When are you bringing my baby for feed?" Rita Gulwani asked the nurse with a frown. It's already five hours."

"The doctor said you should wait, Ma'am."

"What the deuce is going on here?"

The nurse kept mum.

"Call the doctor," Rita said peremptorily.

"She's in the OT, performing a Caesarean C Section."

"Huh! ...When will she come out?"

"Don't know, Ma'am."

"Stupid!"

The nurses and doctors at The Moon were trained to take a lot of crap from the patients. When the doctor came, Rita burst out, "What is this? Why am I not being allowed to feed my baby?"

The doctor smiled genially, "You've had excessively heavy postpartum bleeding and, therefore, you are anaemic. It'll not be good for your health. We'll put you on iron injections and nourishing diet for a week and then you can start feeding him."

Mrs. Gulwani was not assuaged. "Excuse me doctor. This is my second baby. At the time of my daughter's delivery also it was the same condition but I fed her soon after delivery. No complications for me or her," she said haughtily.

Soon, a nurse handed her a fluffy bundle. Before putting the baby to her breast, Rita cooed to him, "Oh my cuteeeee pie!"

Second day:

Champak had taken leave from office on the first day, and then started visiting The Moon in the evenings after office. He would tiptoe into the room; sit in a corner quiet and unobtrusive, hardly moving a limb.

"Can't you come a little early? Don't you have spine to tell the Boss, your wife is in hospital?"

Third day:

Champak had dissolved into his self-effacing chair, as usual.

"Hi, Rita," Nina said in a sonorous voice, as she breezed into the room, scenting the air with her expensive perfume. Nina Mansukhani was Rita's third youngest sister.

"Hello Nina," Champak greeted her from his corner.

"Oh, you are here," she said dismissively. She had always resented his marrying her pretty sister.

"Oh, Hi Nina. Good to see you. You're all over the media after you won the Miss India Crown."

"Thanks, dear."

"What's happening?"

"Lots. A ramp show coming up, shooting for two TV ads for perfumes and ..."

"... And trapping a wealthy bloke to marry," Rita winked.

"Sis, I consider it a sin to be poor."

Rita pressed a bell and asked the nurse to bring the baby."

"My, my! Isn't he a cute guy!"

She opened the baby's fist, which closed around her index finger. I tell you Rita, I've given him his long, tapering fingers.

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll push off."

"A date?"

"Don't be naughty," sang Nina, and sailed out of the room.

Champak was seething inside at Nina's contempt for him. The whole clan comprised phoneys.

Fourth day:

After a knock on the door, Lina, Rita's second sister's daughter, a smart girl of about nineteen, walked into the room.

"Oh, Maassi, (mother's sister) a bucketful of congrats!"

The baby was lying by Rita's side. Lina bent over and examined him closely.

"Lovely fella! Maasi, look at his forehead. That is just like mine -- broad and proportionate."

"You're right, Sweetie!"

"Uncle must be very happy. Where is he?"

Champak spoke from his corner, "Hello Lina, how're you?"

"I'm good, Uncle. Sorry, didn't notice. You're a proud father of a son now!"

He nodded. How're your parents?"

"They're good too."

"I'm soooooo happy, I've a brother to tie Rakhi now," Lina gushed and stood up.

"Maassi, remember, I will name him."

Fifth day:

Rita was talking on phone with her second sister.

"Yeah, life is super. The Boss is fond of me. He picks me up on his way to office and drops me home in the evening. Every now and then he takes me out for dinner or a movie. Folks at the office are dying of jealousy!"

It was around 6:00 PM. The nurse brought the baby for feed. She smiled at the baby and began her baby-talk with him before feeding.

"You're Mama's boy, no? I'm delighted you have got your looks from me. Your lips are just like mine."

Champak got up slowly, came near to the bed and picked him up.

"Thank God!" said Rita. "At last you thought of cradling our baby."

He scrutinized the baby for a while.

Slowly, the expression on his face turned inscrutable. Rita began to feel uneasy.

"Who has given you the hazel eyes?... Eh?...Who?"

"Champak, what nonsense are you spouting?" He trained his scorching gaze at her and hissed,

"Nobody in your family has hazel eyes."

Rita grew apprehensive. "Have you gone mad, Champak?"

"It's that bastard, your Boss!"

Icicles ran down Rita's spine, as Champak's face turned diabolical. She wanted to scream but her voice got stuck in the throat.

Champak was slowly moving the baby towards his chest, with clear intention.

Suddenly, the baby smiled.

He went on looking at the baby till the smile lingered. Then lowered him onto the bed and walked out.



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.

South African Newsletter

Women in Solitary

Devi Rajab



The involvement of women in the liberation struggle has largely been viewed as marginal to that of men, who were invariably cast as heroes; whilst the role of women has traditionally been relegated to a supportive

one as mothers or sisters says Raymond Suttner in *Women in SA History*. In shining the spotlight on *Women in Solitary*, Shanthini Naidoo has forced us to relook at "herstory" in a more objective and nuanced light.

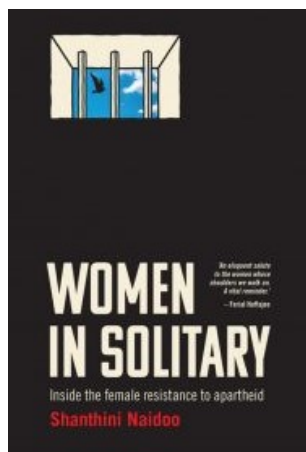
Women in Solitary is a benign title that belies a weighty subject. The cover of the book compels one to dare to enter through that small prison window into the prison cells that kept 4 women locked in a dark damp cold coffin-like cell for 365 days or more. Claustrophobia that many of us are currently complaining about during this time of the Corona outbreak is like a breezy holiday in comparison. Unlike the corpse that knows its state, these women were constantly challenged to meet their fate at the whim and fancy of their imprisoners. Their interrogators, mocked, belittled, tortured and threatened their wards in an attempt to break down their morale. But these were strong women of deep character who resisted unbeknown to each other and in the process forged a bond of womanhood that negated the stereotype of the weaker sex.

What makes a freedom fighter? What drives women to abandon their children and families to fight for an ideological battle when they are merely foot soldiers? Is it the era, the context or the sheer character of a person that goes into making a freedom fighter? Are people born fighters against oppression or are they merely forced by circumstance to fight back? These are themes that run through the narratives of *Women in Solitary*

Shanthini Naidoo records the story of a most disturbing period in SA history through the lives of 4 women whom she interviewed in great depth. These were Joyce Sikhakhane-Rankin; Shanthie Naidoo; Rita Ndzanga and Nondwe Mankahla. She does this against the background of Winnie Mandela's account of her life in detention. In doing so she opens a door to a broader canvas of women's oppression outside of these 4 cases. Thus for example in the constitutional Court hangs the famous blue dress, a symbolic gift by artist Judith Mason to Phila Ndwanke who was stripped naked and shot dead by apartheid's security police for not speaking up against her comrades. In the end she made a plastic bag panty to cover herself as her final act of self-respect.

Many South Africans understandably are oblivious of the background to this story on account of the deep racial and political divide of Apartheid. On the 14th of October 1969 twenty two accused men and women were brought before the Supreme Court on 21 charges under the Suppression of Communism Act. Of these, 7 were women.

The author tracks the lives of the 4 surviving women who were a part of the trial of 22. In doing so she gives a voice to these otherwise invisible women who have been largely ignored and forgotten in the afterglow of freedom and democracy. In this compelling book Shanthini Naidoo skilfully presents the stories of these women in their own words without the imposition of social, political or personal insights. She does



not however offer a historical context of the involvement of women in the larger political struggle prior to the banning of the ANC.

In this respect this book is a stand-alone commentary on 4 women's prison experiences and how they have coped over the years in a post-apartheid democracy. Accordingly, the writer has maintained her journalistic integrity in presenting the reader with an unadulterated account of the lived experiences of these women.

Emotively strong, some images are so humanly cruel that the reader is left with a sense of shared trauma. When menstruating women are told to cup their "fat hands" to gather their own body fluids with no help from sanitary pads is found particularly disturbing. Dark cold cement floors, dirty blankets, food with bird droppings, rotten vegetables cooked into mealie pap on a daily basis makes one realise that the oppressors were not only the interrogators but also the warders, the cooks and cleaners as well. At every level these prisoners were dehumanized and traumatised.

All four women their 80s share their memories of their experiences in stark, icy cold, windowless cells where they were allocated a potty a thin felt mat and dirty blankets in icy cold prison. Shanthi recalls "Adrift in solitary confinement with no communication, no sunshine, no exercise, indeed no human contact (so that one even seeks the company of ants and cockroaches and even little friendship of one's guards) one's thoughts grow into frightening images. I kept myself sane with religious songs for company. They were repeated over and over."

The question arises how have these women fared psychologically decades later? Has solitary

confinement left its enduring emotional scars? The residual memories lying latent for many years cannot easily be summoned forth without deep emotional pain.

Joyce Sikhakhane Rankin testifying at the TRC hearings in 1995 describing her prolonged mental anguish said "26 years have passed since I was among a group of seven women subjected to torture by mind-breaking by the apartheid Security Police and yet I often find myself back in the dungeons of solitary confinement, ready to take away my life for no explicable reason. This all happens without any conscious thought on my part. I hate it when my mind brings those terrifying memories, but my mind just does it for me. It was orchestrated to destroy me"

Research findings on the psychological effects of solitary confinement have been strikingly consistent since the early nineteenth century. Studies have identified a wide range of frequently occurring adverse psychological reactions that commonly affect prisoners in isolation units. The prevalence of psychological distress is extremely high coupled with perceptual distortions, hallucinations, derealisation experiences, free floating anxiety, motor restlessness and fear of people. The effects of Solitary Confinement depend largely on the duration and intensity of the incarceration period. Some people make it out, and if they're fortunate enough to get into a warm and caring environment outside of solitary confinement, they manage to begin to regain their social skills. Even then people have been known to carry emotional wounds for years to come. Solitary confinement as a form of extreme punishment has been decried internationally following the release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years of imprisonment. The UN has promulgated the so called Mandela Rules banning the use of solitary confinement for longer than 15 days. The US psychiatric association have further requested that no mentally ill prisoners should be subjected to solitary confinement.

Shanthini Naidoo has deftly raised a hitherto hidden subject to the forefront of our attention and that of the world. This book captures the intersectionality of race, gender and politics against the horror of the long dark days of SA's battle for freedom. It is also a story of hope and victory and spurs us in contemporary SA to adopt the morality of these women who gave their lives without asking for any returns, favours, positions or compensations. Their lives are a statement of what we once proudly had as a people. "We must never forget our past urges Madikesele Mandela. "It is what roots us and reminds us that what happened to us as a people must never happen again."

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.

Essay

Green Thoughts in a Green Shade

By Tapati Gupta

It had grown quite imperceptibly, till gradually it reached my window, started greening my mind and the environment, breathed into my home and became my morning serenade, afternoon shade giver and sang a lullaby as it glistened and glid into my dreams during the night. I wondered what it communicated to the squirrels that gambolled in its foliage, breakfasting on the leaves and snuggling to rest on their favourite branches. I had never seen a squirrel sleeping before, and so overfull with its meagre diet. That was because I had never before had the chance of seeing one so near my window and at eye level. They were so amazingly punctual in their daily routine.

The tree seemed to be organized into apartments at different levels, branches near my window, branches a little below it and even a little above; branches crosshatched into the intricate geometry of nature's architecture. The décor of the drapery of leaves was multihued and new-dressed with different colours in different seasons: a fresh lush sap green in the rainy season nuanced with herbal fragrance, with diamonds and emeralds, turquoise and topaz glistening on the leaves and pearls of rainwater dripping down from them, heady with the cocktail of sunlight and water; in the autumn they were choreographed in russet, brown, yellow ochre and pale green with clearly visible veins; dust-tinted in winter with the branches exposing their stark anatomy. And then came spring with its boon of velvety freshness echoing cuckoo calls from the neighboring trees in dynamic morning melodies, moonlight sonatas and soothing nocturnes. I wondered where they found their inexhaustible source of energy. One sleepless night I had to fight the temptation of firing an air gun at these invisible singers so irked was I at this tumult. They had been so quiet the whole of that day but so vocal at night. Had they been commissioned for a nightlong concert? So maybe they were resting during the day? Well, we humans must sometimes let nature have its way and adjust our moods to suit theirs. I gave up the attempt to sleep and spent the night reading and watching the leaves throwing intricate shadows across the ceiling, playing with the breeze and the light from the streetlamp. I got out my Nikkon to capture this mystic dance. But sadly, I am no Raghu Rai.

I never discovered the name or pedigree of this tree. For the last twenty years it had just been

"my Tree". It bore some strange flowers which the squirrels loved to munch. Dry-looking and fragile. Sometimes I confess I hurt my Tree by pulling at the branches that came up to my window. I used to tug and break the tufts of flowers and confine them in a vase. But they would not keep for more than a day. Ultimately, I left them alone to enjoy their free green life and whisper messages of peace. More violence had been planned. So voluptuous was its growth that its overarching shade curtailed off the sunlight from my east facing rooms. I wrote to the municipality to prune its branches but they dillydallied and the tree shot past the height of the roof of our five storey apartment block. It also blocked the view of the sky, the distant mango groves and the clouds into which larger birds flew about gracefully. I loved watching the birds flying and aspiring to reach up to the clouds, stroke by

The mother crow started sitting in it with father taking brief turns when mother needed a break and exercise. One fine day three or four wee mouths with pink interiors popped up and the parents fed the kids with bits of baby bird food. This went on for some days when suddenly one day I found the nest empty. Of course, I never had the opportunity to watch the kids training to fly. The dishevelled nest remained and next year other crows would come and sit on its brink inspecting it. A crow couple soon started renovating it and then the whole process started, laying and attempting to hatch the eggs. Then one day I had to watch what appeared as the realization of tragedy. Both parents happened to be absent for some time. Eventually one of them came back, sat on the brink, looked down, looked up at the sky, looked down again and let out a heartrending crow -moan, so different from the habitual rough croaking. Never had I heard such bird-moan before, such lamentation. What had happened to the eggs? The crow sat still for a while bewildered, and then flew off, never to return. The nest remained there for years with no more new occupants though many crow-citizens came to inspect it. A ghost nest, a cursed nest.

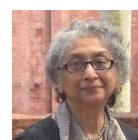
In May this year there came the terrible rogue cyclone, Amphan. After its fury abated, I opened my window and found a gaping space where my Tree had been. Nonplussed I cried, "O where have you gone?" I had heard a big thud while the storm raged but had not imagined this disaster. Next morning, I went down to examine the extent of the damage. It was lying on its side, irreparably uprooted, branches resting partly on the boundary wall and our gate, but not damaging any structure. After lying there for some days, it was unceremoniously cut to pieces and trawled away. Now my sky, my clouds and my sunrise are visible as gifts from my Tree.



Painting by Tapati Gupta

stroke, spiraling, sailing, floating. The municipality and we too for that matter did not approve of cutting down trees, but I knew that pruning was only temporary violation since it would foster more growth.

My sky watching however was compensated by watching how the avian species chose their abode and got into the habit of perching on particular branches of their choice. Parrots found their space, little blue breasted bird couple found theirs, frisky crows though few, and usually couples, found theirs. The birds became quite meditative on these branches, it was like their personal abode of rest. One spring day, two crows started collecting twigs and storing them in a suitable branch-buttressed niche of the Tree. The nest took shape, rather untidy, quite a secure bowl that did not tumble down even when wind-tossed.



Tapati Gupta is a retired Professor of the Department of English, University of Calcutta and former Head of the Department. A theatre scholar, art critic, translator and painter and an enthusiastic photographer who loves travelling. Her published works include research papers on theatre and literature in numerous national and international publications.

Book review

Reginald Massey's Book Page

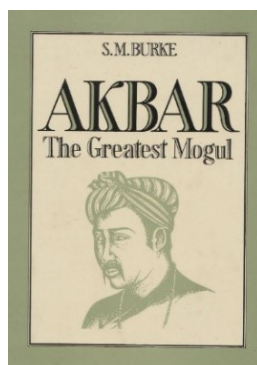
One of the most remarkable rulers who ever lived was Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the Emperor of Hindustan, who was born in 1542 and died in 1605. Samuel Martin Burke's lucidly written *Akbar, The Greatest Mogul* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi) is based on the accounts left behind by those who knew the emperor. Burke has demonstrated that Akbar's religious outlook guided all his other activities and that, to make an intelligent review of his policies as a ruler, it is necessary to comprehend this aspect of his complex personality.

Though he was born a Sunni Muslim, Akbar's subjects were largely Hindus of various castes and he being a fair minded man realised that his prime duty was to serve them. This attitude offended many Muslims. However, a striking feature of the time was a popularity which the two mystic movements, one Hindu (Bhakti) and the other Muslim (Sufism) had attained. They owed their origin to mankind's eternal quest for true knowledge of the Creator and attracted persons who had despaired of finding salvation through the conflicting and confusing guidance provided by theologians.

The Bhakts as well as the Sufis sought union with God with the help of love, not reason, and chose asceticism and devotion, not rituals, as the means of reaching the desired goal. Akbar was attracted to this Hindu-Muslim alliance but went a step further. He invited Jesuit missionaries from Goa and treated them

warmly and respectfully heard what they had to say.

Today not many people are aware that, in the sixteenth century, when bloody religious persecution was the order of the day in the rest of the world, Akbar openly declared that



in his kingdom everyone was free to follow the religion of his or her own choice; that it was Akbar, not the British, who first adopted measures against the practice of suttee in India; that Akbar had decreed that for a marriage to be contracted not only the permission of the parents but also the consent of the bride and bridegroom was necessary, that Akbar had forbidden marriage before age of puberty; that, having inherited a shaky throne at the age of thirteen, Akbar made himself master of the most powerful empire in the world and became by far the richest king on the face of the globe; that the salient features of Akbar's administration were adopted by the British in India and are still alive in the

independent states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; and that the forces that have delineated the present-day political map of South Asia can be traced back to the policies and achievements of Akbar.

The historian W.H. Sleeman has written: "Considering all the circumstances of time and place, Akbar has always appeared to me among sovereigns, what Shakespeare was among poets; and, feeling as a citizen of the world, I revered the marble slab that covered his bones, more perhaps than I should that over any other sovereign with whose history I am acquainted."

Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy, made the following significant statement on August 14, 1947: "May I remind you that, at the time when the East India Company received its Charter, nearly four centuries ago, your great Emperor Akbar was on the throne, whose reign was marked by perhaps as great a degree of political and religious tolerance, as has been known before or since. It was an example by which, I honestly believe, generations of our public men and administrators have been influenced. Akbar's tradition has not always been consistently followed, by British or Indians, but I pray, for the world's sake, that we will hold fast, in the years to come, to the principles that this great ruler taught us".

Reginald Massey, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and Freeman of the City of London, has authored many books on South Asian subjects which are available from Amazon UK.

Shattering Imaginary and Real Walls of Unconscious Bias

GLASS WALLS

(Edited by Meenakshi Bharat and Sharon Rundle)

Reviewed by Anita Nahal

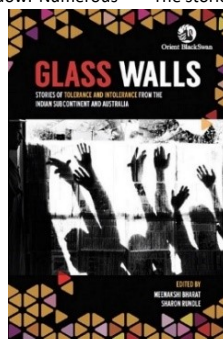
Glass Walls (Orient Blackswan, 2019) is a poignant, thoughtful collection of short stories woven around the theme of unconscious bias that lurks in our mind and heart's blind spots. Quite like the blind spots on the sides of a car, sometimes folks are not aware of their own or another's. We all carry strains of unconscious bias in us whether we recognize and accept it or not. Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham described in 1955 the notion of blind spots in what came to be known as the Johari window. Numerous other writers have drawn attention to this as well.

I shall avoid any unconscious bias towards specific writers or stories in this anthology by not singling out any one for specific remarks. Instead, I'll focus upon the overall splendid mission of this carefully assembled anthology. I would like to congratulate all the writers who have in some manner or the other, artistically covered the spectrum of the central theme of the anthology. Huge accolades also to the editors of the book, Meenakshi Bharat and Sharon Rundle. Coming from two different continents, India and Australia, however, with somewhat similar backgrounds with their love for learning, teaching and writing, they showed great judiciousness in the selection of the stories.

Divided into six sections very appropriately titled... race, religion, gender and sexuality, neighbors, family and over the brink... the anthology highlights the prejudices, and grudges people carry for long, often ruining their lives and those of others. There is a clear trajectory from the beginning to the end, in all the stories, to speak about intolerance that unconscious bias can bring through words, nuances, gestures and actions by the characters in the stories.

Also, sprinkled around are nuggets of suggested tolerance and understanding mothers, fathers, strangers, siblings, other relations, professionals, priests, jailers, guards, students, parliamentarians, and myriad other relationships seep into the stories in this anthology to clearly, specifically and deeply hone on the unconscious bias that is churning, sometimes without even as much as a nudge to the reader. These sneak up upon us leaving us with a-ha moments!

The stories are intriguing, gripping and hit the nail on the head, so to say, and remind us the world is not simple or uncomplicated. However, they also emphasize, that hope will carry us through.



Glass Walls is Meenakshi Bharat and Sharon Rundle's fourth anthology together, and it is very impressive that they have focused upon major issues of global concern in each one of them. *Fear Factor* (2010) was on terrorism, *Alien Shores* (2012) focused upon refugees and asylum seekers and *Connect* (2014) was on technology. *Glass Walls* is a superb, very readable collection of short stories that tug at your heart, that keep you on the edge and that urge one to ponder. Which glass walls? Whose glass walls? Who is breaking them? Who is hiding inside? Who is abusing someone within and out? Who decides who will roam freely outside those glass walls?

The raised hands on the cover, the black and white shades with other colours surrounding, or splattered here and there, remind us that diversity is the natural configuration of this world and bias in any imaginary or real walls can be shattered.

(See page 22 for more about Anita Nahal)

Through the Poetic Lens



Yogesh Patel

Fiona Sampson tries to make snow touch the world



Photo by Ekaterina Voskresenskaya

Apart from its layout, concrete poetry has nothing to do with being concrete, if so, it will not be a poem! Poetry thrives in allegory. When nothing that is obvious transcends to uncharted evocations, a universe of poem sings revealing some of its secrets - secrets that may not even have been envisaged by a poet. Therefore, when I embark on writing about a poem, I try to seek a poet's take. If it is forthcoming, I include it in my prism of reflections. Here, I will take you to my joyride of allegory without poet's take.

Noumenon

Fiona Sampson

Snow falls and fills a valley
and under its white roof
a sleeper dreams snow is falling
secretly for her alone
on and on in darkness
it falls like something speaking
noiselessly into silence
something that's all alone
in silence can't hear
itself can't feel grass or stones
or the small branches it conceals
even in the sleeper's dreams
falling snow cannot feel
the world it longs to touch
and misses falling through its own
cold embrace on and on
in the dark the sleeper dreams
snow is falling on her pillow
as wide wet words the night
speaks about itself snow
speaking the words for night

from being two forms: snow and water. What is liquid becomes more solid. In Islam, dreaming of snow can mean a cure for illness. Therefore, it is possible that the poet also hints to that.



Come Down, Corsair, ISBN-13: 978147215515

'Come Down' captures changes in the poet's life. As immigrants, we know that to belong is not a simple thing to do. You seek to connect, which allows you to belong to your context. The loneliness found in this process also filters through in this poem. Soul often speaks in silence. Nevertheless, if animated, you still won't have the sensations, sins, and rhapsody of the flesh.

Fiona Sampson has published twenty-nine books and been published in thirty-seven languages. Her recent collection of poems *Come Down* unfortunately missed out its launch due to the lockdown. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, she has received an MBE for services to literature. She now lives in an old farm in a valley on the Welsh borders and *Come Down*, her latest collection from which this poem is, draws from it, assimilating the chemistry of change.

Fiona Sampson often writes against the trends in contemporary English poetry. Once Michael Schmidt complained to me, my poems had no punctuation. Saleem Peeradina told me once that to miss punctuation is laziness. Like grammar czars, I think they miss a point that grammar itself moves in a flux, but the poets use all tools, even the dismantling of punctuation. Poetic expression is the king. So, rightly, I am glad that Fiona Sampson quotes W. S. Merwin: "punctuation staples a poem on the page". She has been moving away from the punctuations and you see that in this poem. The poem takes us to a musical flow that runs without barriers. And why not? Fiona Sampson is a trained violinist who knows exactly how the sound works! I would like to go even further and say that in poet's hands tools should not be the landmines stifling imagination. A mixture of renunciation and embrace, two simultaneous caesuras of punctuations, should secure the best expression. What Fiona Sampson achieves is the sincerity to her expression with no chains.

Apart from that, what is that I like about *Noumenon*?

Many pages of Bible cite snow. It symbolises purity. It also depicts transformation. As soon as we read 'snow is falling/secretly for her alone', we know this is not an ordinary snowfall. It is personal. In 'it falls like something speaking/ noiselessly into silence/ something that's all alone' snow is not also a magical whisper, but it is alone (notice that this is a human conception), mirroring poet's solitude. Could this be a lullaby? Perhaps a sign of an invoked impression of light-footed motherhood sneaking in? The phrase 'snowflake mum' about the IVF treatment reminds us of babies known as snowflakes, not forgetting the 'snowflake generation'.

Dreaming of snow is associated with the possible fresh start. Snow embodies a transition. One stage is over; another one begins. It comes

Hence, the poet is quick to tell us about 'can't feel grass or stones'. In the allegory of 'snow is falling on her pillow/ as wide wet words' we see tears. The coldness that has brought about this change turning it into snow 'misses falling through its own/ cold embrace on and on'. The 'on and on' is a relentless infliction at play. It makes it a long night of its own insistence as 'the night/ speaks about itself'. Just when words start losing any meaning, snow brings a relief with actual words night should speak, gently, like snow, to allow us to drift away in dreams: 'snow/ speaking the words for night'

In Shankara's scriptures for Advaita Vedanta philosophy, there are two worlds. Maya (aka phenomenon, as suggested by Kant) is the illusory reality we perceive, and Brahman is the transcendent, unchanging reality (aka noumenon). Poet here takes us through this tug of realities with night and snow. In Robert Frost's famous poem, 'Dust of Snow' (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44262/dust-of-snow>), snow dusts Frost with optimism, here also snow wants to be a fairy and turn night's words into gentle beckoning to the soul.

If you are wondering what happens in phenomenon against noumenon, the collection *Come Down* also includes a poem under the heading *Phenomenon*. It also begins with the same first line but in this reality, it arrives with light. 'Snow falls and fills a valley/till the house fills with snow light/ more clear more exact'.

In nearly the same midpoint against the grass and stones of *Noumenon*, in *Phenomenon*, we get a mundane chair and a crooked table with no gentleness in the air! They are crooked and polished with human touch and neglect made obvious as all unnatural realities. Poem declares 'there is no myth' to solve. We are made to face the stark contrast with the line 'it's an old story but we/live in it you and I'.

With Sampson's poem, we are left in expectations as her poems are the moments we share with her. They are a phase...

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.

Flash fiction

In the dream/real cities

By Sunil Sharma

It is a blue country swirling about in the soft light---surreal!

Between waking and dreaming is located a light realm; an ethereal region where past is in present, present in future imperfect. You time-travel in this land, picking up memories the way prancing children pick up the dancing daffodils on a sunlit meadow. Faces met in the crowded trains, subways, malls or offices stare fixedly, in a state of stasis. The scenes shift dramatically fast and intercut. I see crowds, then empty expanses rolling down. The winding alleys and arching bridges remind of a picture- postcard German town or a well-preserved European tourist town of the early 1930s, radiating a sense of peace and serenity. Then, the future is foretold by arresting visuals. There are sub-conscious messages in the grammar of dreams. I see changing landscapes...

Right now, I am travelling in this vast blue territory. The skyscrapers suggest I am in NYC.

The iconic New York City beckons the hordes across the world through the Statue of Liberty.

Everybody wants to be there. Its sexy appeal gets transmitted fast through the nether regions of mind and I feel its power. Spires shine in the blue haze. Tall and thin/ tall and squat perpendicular buildings, viewed from a low-angle, stand as symbols of affluence, power and domination.

You feel the magnetic pull.

The NYC, although never personally visited, is familiar through the Hollywood iconography. I see the familiar buildings in the Times Square. The Fifth Avenue.

And I see the lone drummer.

The Reggae beats!

The black man is creating heavy notes out of odd objects: buckets, pans and refrigerator cabinets, while sitting painfully hunched on the plastic bucket upside-down on the pavement, in the cold December air. It is a strange symphony. He is producing loud beats out of the discarded household items. The destitute musician is using sticks in both his hands and producing sounds that are rhythmical and sweet. Music in most unlikely places, out of most unlikely instruments, yet divine. He is a great composer---unknown, poor and homeless, finding cadence and harmony in the most hopeless urban situation.

Another vagabond sleepwalks, while men in hoods drift nearby, the ghosts of the dream-city, perhaps part of some street gangs.

The focussed street-performer goes on drumming feverishly; the notes float in the air thick with the scent of dollars. He is completely concentrating on his orchestral pieces. Everyday appliances and drab items, in his strong hands, get transformed into excellent musical instruments. It is a spectacular feat for the vagrant composer. The crowd largely ignores this artist. Some linger on. He stops his livewire performance and stares blankly, sweat dripping down his broad forehead. The corner of the Fifth Avenue ceases to be an open-air music studio and reverts to its desolate character: lonely, vulnerable, insecure and accessible public spot watched by the cops and haunted in the nights by the thugs, hookers and addicts. A young pony-tailed guy drops few coins in the mug, while the gifted nameless composer looks on, exhausted and indifferent, a picture of abject poverty amid affluence and glitter. The automatic crowds move on. "Folks like the 50 Cent earns more, while talents like this unnamed guy sit and die unknown here on the mean streets," says a business suit to his slender and tall companion. "Art, street art, unless packaged and marketed properly, has no future. Where are the patrons? Who cares to stop and appreciate this live performance? Create hype. Bring TV journalists, turn it into a commodity and you have a cult performer selling millions of records worldwide. Publicity is an art that can turn kitsch into top-selling artistic commodity," says she. The anonymous performer sits rigid, alone, abandoned amid his pans and buckets that he makes them sing so beautifully. His sad impoverished form melts suddenly and becomes part of his accumulated junk on the street. Without his music, he is nothing, a guy nobody notices on the busy day in New York City of million self-fuelled power dreams. The destitute is excluded from the society formed for the rich and the privileged only. His watery eyes see, yet see nothing. He is in NYC, yet light years away, a drifting cast-away...

...Raining heavily in Mumbai. The cities---Asian and American--- getting merged into an identical City. Urban decay. The homeless sitting on the wet pavements, in rainwear, the rain whipping them sideways and from the top, water dripping down the caps of the mackintoshes. Brown muddles. The plastic sheets precariously protect the

battered families in cramped space of few feet. I see faceless figures. There is filth and mud and garbage and broken pavements; packed trains and buses and crowded beaches. Nightmarish Asian city now. Western city now with its own vagrants and homeless hungry folks huddled under the grey whipping rain, driving snow and grey smog. Automobiles choked streets and toxic fumes...

It is unreal city of defied film stars and pavement-dwellers. The film posters are everywhere. The houses are filled with costly furniture. No residents, only furniture. The houses are all empty of human forms. I see only the gliding zombies...

Suddenly, I see the City invaded...by the Godzillas, lions, hippos, monkeys, foxes, wolves and bears---all the fanged/horned creatures unleashed from a big zoo. Elephants are marching on, trumpeting, chimps follow. They overturn cars, smash buses, attack the bins....

In my office, colleagues turning into predators, fanged animals baring their sharp teeth, behind their cultivated smiles and three-piece suits and clipped English. Neighbourhoods turn into a battleground fierce and bloody...

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down.

I see a bunch of elephants chasing me in the urban jungle. I am trying to flee. They are catching me. Finally catch up with me and about to attack me...

And the blue haze continues to swirl around. There are no humans left, only the walking shadows. An unreal city.

Or, is it the real one?



Sunil Sharma, a senior academic and author-critic-poet--freelance journalist, is from suburban Mumbai, India. He has published 22 books so far, some solo and some joint, on prose, poetry and criticism. He edits the monthly, bilingual Setu: <http://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>

For more details of publications, please visit the link below:

<http://www.dr.sunilsharma.blogspot.in/>

Three Poems by Pramila Venkateswaran

Olive

I emerge at night. Moon and starlight
guide me into the shimmering ocean
where I feast on jelly fish and shrimp.
It is a wonder I've survived the jaws
of big fish. On days when I bask on a rock
and feed on algae, I watch out for hunters.
I love Chennai beaches. I nest there
a few times. Some of my friends have
lost limbs. One fisherman dragged my friend
in his boat and lopped off the forelegs. Why
would humans do such a cruel thing?
I wish my last name was not Ridley.
They'd better not get rid of me!

Burning Sky

Deep ochre noon
Freezing air
Red dragons rage

Arid banks of a stream
Where are the animals?
Fish struggling below

Taste shock's texture:
Bushes stiffen
Nightmare advances

In Paradise, some perish
Some fled from skies
Reflecting pyres

Astrologer's Report When the Redwoods Burned

Pluto is up to his wily ways.
He's partnered with Jupiter. No, Mars.
Mercury, too. Shucks!

A fiery union. Not romantic,
a pity. Try not to argue
with the planets. Stay glued.

A new suit, a trip. Wait it out.
Venus, that 900-degree love
dome will arrive. Voila, in 40 years
you'll travel to Venus
if Aquarius happens to visit
your 6th house of joy rides.

Pramila Venkateswaran, poet laureate of Suffolk County, Long Island (2013-15) and co-director of Matwaala: South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival, is the author of *Thirtha* (Yuganta Press, 2002), *Behind Dark Waters* (Plain View Press, 2008), *Draw Me Inmost* (Stockport Flats, 2009), *Trace* (Finishing Line Press, 2011), *Thirteen Days to Let Go* (Aldrich Press, 2015), *Slow Ripening* (Local Gems, 2016), and *The Singer of Alleppey* (Shanti Arts, 2018). Author of numerous essays on poetics as well as creative non-fiction, she is also the 2011 Walt Whitman Birthplace Association Long Island Poet of the Year. She is a founding member of Women Included, a transnational feminist association.

Four Poems by Shruti Mishra

The Age of Experience

I stepped in utter innocence
There I stumbled with mere arrogance
I sighed at my presence
I was unaware of reverence

I learned these peculiarities with experience
I gained this knowledge of enhancement
World has become disillusioned of emotions
There I stance with a strong mind of performance

Uncertainties

My eyes dream throughout night
Unaware of the uncertainties lurking behind
The mornings are filled with vigour and grace
But evenings fade through uncertain trace

These desires take too long to unfold
Those dreamy eyes look for comfort when they
close
The uncertain winds try to shudder my being

But the flame in my heart refuses to douse my dreams

Chaos of Silence

Silence, the stillness of the moment
Not as calm as it appears
Peace is merely on the periphery
The centre is as chaotic as ever

There is no unnecessary noise
Neither arguments nor aside
The only monologue I have is with my personal
being
Where I find myself standing alone in crowd

Your Callousness

I feel disturbed and annoyed
When I sense that callousness
My love feels betrayed
And my assurance ashamed

I trust you with all my being
But your callousness supersedes adhere
I drown myself in the ocean of innocence
Where your callousness refuses to hold my hand

A portrait of Shruti Mishra, a woman with dark hair, wearing a red and black sari, looking directly at the camera.

Shruti Mishra is a scholar at the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow. Her first love is composing and reading poetry. Her works have previously got published in various anthologies together with many online journals and newspapers both in English as well as in Hindi. shrutim9628@gmail.com

BOOK REVIEW

Harishsha D.V's
MERCILESS DARK The Mystery of the Eclipse Island
 Reviewed by Leonard Dabydeen

Selfishness and arrogance – twin conspirators in the survival of all living things

There is a phenomenal approbation of co-existence in the life of all living things. Animals among animals. Humans among humans. And between them both, there is a carte blanche of plots and counterplots that beset their consciousness to survive in each other's domain. Out of a cosmos primeval generative power, humans and animals turned against each other to fathom who must be the ruler on Earth. Both led a fantasy trail.

This book, *The Mystery of the Eclipse Island* by author Harishsha D.V., written in Telugu and translated in English by acclaimed Indian Master Wordsmith, U. Atreya Sarma, brings this primeval human-animal conflict fantasy theme as the first part of the multi-volume saga, titled: *Merciless Dark*. In 292 pages, and a confluence of 10 mind-boggling chapters, Atreya has painted an enriched fantasy canvass in the eyes of the author. Author Harishsha developed a seminal idea of this fictional odyssey through wisdom enthused by Lord Venkateswara and Lord Shiva.

The Prologue says that in this first volume:

...the story unfolds in the background of a great war that had taken place twenty years before, between the animal and human races. In that war, the humans destroyed every animal, but an order of them called Morantuses managed to escape and survive.

The escapee Morantuses holed up in a secretive place called Death Hollow. Here they continued their greed and strife to exterminate the human clan. And the humans made their best deliberations on an expedition to exterminate the animals, engaging on nuances of *The Mystery of the Eclipse Island*.

Stalwart, as leading warrior and tactician of the human race, set out on this expedition on a ship across raging ocean, with a strong contingent of Firestorm warriors. They headed for Death Hollow where some of the venomous Morantuses believed to be still alive:

"What we are going to do against the Death Hollow, is not a revolt or an attack or a war. It is a sacred rite of sacrifice...." (4)

Death Hollow was also the security warehouse of dead bodies from the war past. Security support for hosting of dead bodies was enhanced by a group of animal beasts, which included a five-hooded serpent of the ophidian race, named Bronx Cheer, and Asura, a jaguar and animal leader. Deliberations with the beasts and Bronx Cheer made the Morantuses at ease. In order for the dead bodies to become alive, they had to be taken to the Eclipse Island before the upcoming Blue Moon.



Vicarious truths and half-truths at Crostonfield and Hardwood, where human clans lived, slated memories of conflict and confrontation with animal groups. They focused on the birth of twins by Wynfleath, wife of Stalwart, adding depth to the body of the story. Then there were decision-making strategies by Roisin and Merrell, including Gerardo. Roisin shared an expose of incredible truths in astrological prophesying to Wynfleath about the birth of twins.

Eventually, the animals had to discover a way to revive the dead bodies in the Death Hollow hide-out. Their only decision was to reach the Eclipse Island.

What was significant about the Eclipse Island was the encapsulated liquid, Vitone. This liquid had the magic potent of resuscitating animals and snakes.

With the help of the blue moonbeams, Vitone would also render the souls of the dead, visible to one's eye. (178)

Virgin Nature's creation of the Eclipse Island as an uncanny, invisible place, was that ...

it did not stand on the surface of the earth, but lay in the womb of the ocean. It nestled under the confluence of the Carcass flowing from the south and the Millon flowing from the north. (176)

And more to the Eclipse Island mystery ...

On the day of the solar eclipse, the Eclipse Island would emerge over the surface of the ocean at the confluence of the two seas, with a view to

absorbing and tasting the blue moonbeams. (176)

Bronx Cheer and the beasts were successful in reviving dead bodies of the Morantuses before the Eclipse Island receded in the depth of the sea. And they made their return journey to rescue the envenomed Morantuses.

At long last, Stalwart and his power warriors arrived at Death Hollow, before Asura and Bronx Cheer were able to step foot in its mysterious surroundings. They destroyed the Morantuses. And set sail on their return voyage to Crostonfield.

In a sad finale, Bronx Cheer and Asura arrived at Death Hollow just a little too late. It was the plan that went right. What happened next will be reeled in the upcoming Volume Two of *Merciless Dark*.

This episodic epic *The Mystery of the Eclipse Island*, comes to the reader with infinite concatenation, emboldened by English translator, U Atreya Sarma. The dialogues are superb. The imaging of the Eclipse Island is fantastic. The deliberations and decisions by the humans and animals are evocative, with logical symbiosis for suzerainty on Earth.

Each chapter in the book leaves you with a reticent itch to read the next. And Atreya Sarma brings the pages with quick turn over with language that is simple to reach young adults and fiction-fantasy lovers. The tone and texture of the book underscore the vocabulary and assertive quality that drive the internal coherence of the fiction-fantasy canvas.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Atreya Sarma is a poet, free-lance editor, critic and reviewer besides being a translator from Telugu into English, and occasionally from English to Telugu. His writing experience spans more than twenty three years. He is Chief Editor of Muse India e-journal.



Leonard Dabydeen, Guyanese-Canadian poet and member of The Society of Classical Poets 2019 (USA). Free-lance writer and book reviewer; author of *Watching You, A Collection of Tetractys Poems* (2012), and *Searching For You, A Collection of Tetractys and Fibonacci Poems* (2015).

A Recall of Lockdown Memories by Girija Madhavan

Kukkarahalli Kere [lake] in Mysuru, a favoured spot for walkers, joggers and bird watchers, is now closed for Covid 19. High above the water is a pathway called the "Bund", R.K. Narayan's favourite walk when he lived in Mysuru.

The Bund overlooks the opposite shore where painted storks, pelicans, ibises, and other migratory birds come from afar to nest and form a rookery. Rain trees on the Bund have stone benches under their shade, some with a metal lattice surround; bougainvillea bushes form a bower over them. Shoots, once entwined in the lattice, are now thick, gnarled branches, the force of the living creeper twisting the metal. Tulip trees with coral red blooms and jade green leaves, glow in the sunlight. Reeds rustle at the water's edge. Fishing was permitted and "coracles" [shallow, basin shaped boats of cane] would ply the lake; a man, upright, poling the coracle along while a seated woman or child deftly let out the nets.



At the end of the Bund is a brick-built tower with an ornamental grill all around and an oriental cupola, the old Observation Tower. The lake is a man made one, created in 1864 by Maharaja Mumtaz Ali Wodeyar [1794-1868] to supply drinking water to the city and for irrigation. Now the feeder canals have dried up and sewage let into the lake is ruining the ecology.

There is a darker side to the lake too. In its fluid past, people have committed suicide in its blue-green water. A fluorescent green fence has now been built along the Bund ostensibly to deter would-be suicides. My own grim memories are seeing a body, floating spread-eagled, face down in the water and the wet body of a middle-aged man laid out on a bench awaiting a hearse for his final journey.

Tales about crocodiles in the lake were usually dismissed as myths. But morning walkers were startled to find a full-grown crocodile laying eggs in the sandy shallows. Coracle fishing and grass cutting were banned, metal signs with warnings put up. Nobody knows how long crocodiles have been living in the lake. Maybe they came through a feeder canal; or heavy rain may have flooded a nearby illegal hatchery, the reptiles escaping into the lake.

Kukkarahalli Kere is a unique water body for nature lovers. Like Nature, it too reflects life in its annual rhythms, its savagery and its beauty. Maybe the lake creatures will now reclaim the paths and woods in the ominous Covid silence.



Girija Madhavan was born in Mysuru, Karnataka, India. Married to Indian career diplomat, A. Madhavan, she has lived in many countries. In retirement, she now lives in her home town, Mysuru. She learnt Hindustani vocal music in her younger years and also to paint. During a posting in Tokyo, Japan, she learnt ink painting and continues to enjoy it.

E-Book Review

Sachintha Pilapitiya's **Farren The Wanderer**

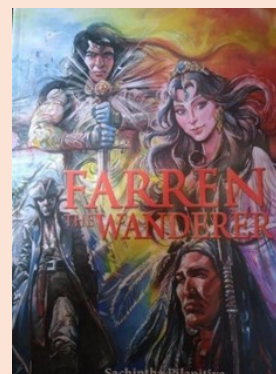
A review by Sydney Xavier

This book was announced in a recent online version of The Messenger and on facebook before publication. I am very grateful to the author for an e-copy sent to me in London for a review.

The Messenger informed the readers that the author was a young man from St Thomas College, Mt Lavinia and currently studying at the New York University campus in Abu Dhabi.

ISBN 978-624-5200-52-8,
www.neptunepublications.com
LK Rs 680.00 USD, \$5.26 or UK
£3.57.

It appears the author had this book in mind for about three years prior to his A/L studies and wrote it with hand drawn illustrations by Udaya Gamachchi, all within an year after his A/L studies.



It is an interesting story telling style with a fascinating imagination which took him through what appears to be a medieval times of warring kingdoms, swords and arrows, black magic and witches, human sacrifice, castles and wide rivers, snowy mountains, caves and strange Maya spiritual powers of soldiers in war and pirates of the sea but not the man-of-war ships type of the 16th to 19th centuries with canon balls. Not to be confused with the Pirates of the Caribbean or Lord of the Rings type of stories and movies elsewhere.

Names such as Princesses Zayana and Amelia and their homeland kingdoms with their Kings and Queens don't give anything away of the medieval period until accidentally I saw the name of Mary - the daughter of baker in one of the towns. This may indicate that Christianity had touched this story. Is this probably his Christian upbringing or education at St Thomas College?

The story telling is in three parts - The Untold Tale, The Journey and The Final Battle. The hero is Prince Farren of the land of Esra he meets not one but the two heroines Zayana and Amelia on his paths through their parental lands and Kings and Queens who had fallen apart and for the warring purposes relied on mercenaries from another kingdom near by to help in war.

Huge landmass with seas thus the pirates ships and horses and giant dog like beasts helping in snowy mountain journeys. The author captures the drama and vividly describes bloody battles with large human loses and some cases of real butchery and killing by the swords. What less can you expect in wars before the invention of gunpowder and cannon balls?

Without giving away the plot, it is for the reader to find out the intrigues, twists and turns of the triad type of story and the final ending. There is romance and pretty intimate relationships carefully crafted for relishing including Farren's first kiss.

Sachintha Pilapitiya should be very proud of this great and successful novel. And this should be model for fellow A/L students to ponder and write their own stories from 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.

Book Review

Onkar Sharma's 'Songs of Suicide'

A review by U Atreya Sarma

Songs of Suicide | Poetry Collection | Onkar Sharma
Hawakal Publishers. July 2020 | ISBN: 978-81-945273-1-2 |
PB | pp 48 | ₹ 200 / US \$ 8.00

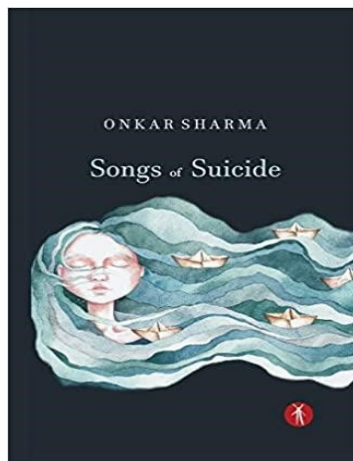
One would certainly be taken aback on seeing the title of this poetry collection, *Songs of Suicide*. Unless there is a very strong reason, a poet wouldn't focus on such an unsettling theme. And yes, Onkar Sharma, the poet, does have his grounds in grounding this poetic work.

In the illuminating Introduction, he says that his mother, a patient of Acute Psychotic Disorder (APD) had attempted suicide several times, but luckily, she turned around. She is otherwise "progressive, forward-looking, foresighted, caring and sprightly," he adds, underlining thereby that any person with suicidal tendencies, has a brighter side too. And this brighter side needs to be encouraged and fortified by people concerned so as to turn the potential self-killers away from their fatal despair. Whenever a trace of autophonomania is noticed, the people in the immediate family or friends circle, should try to empathize with the subjects and speak to them with an affectionate ardour so that they can "express their hearts out" and "talk openly" and the impending danger of felo-de-se can be nipped in the bud. Onkar Sharma observes that the ghost of suicide is much more fatal than the current Covid-19, for the world is a witness to a hopping eight lacs of suicides every year.

Suicidal proclivities are apparently paradoxical and it takes cowardice as well as courage to commit suicide. Cowardice is the inability to face the life boldly and carry one with grit; and courage is a reckless, impulsive and daredevilry readiness to end one's life.

While the Introduction talks of Onkar's mother, the equally insightful Postscript talks about his own suicidal inclinations at a time when he was a cynosure of every censorial and nit-picking eye and his self-esteem hit an all-time low at a very impressionable stage of his life. Luckily, however, wiser counsels prevailed on him for he says, "I realised that I was perhaps overreacting to the situation by overburdening myself with unnecessary fears and wretched thoughts... I noticed that self-imposed curfew was futile and worthless." After all, our life should be in our own control but not turn into a toy in the hands of others, especially when they don't have any stakes in our progress or life.

If the subject of the poems has been dexterously handled with an optimal blend of the content and emotions with rhyme, rhythm and melody, the credit goes to the exposure and experience of Onkar Sharma, for he is after all the editor cum manager of a literary e-journal, Literary Yard.com, before which he was editor of Dataquest (DQIndia.com), India's leading IT magazine, and Voice & Data (voicendata.com), India's leading telecom magazine. He is also a senior business technology journalist.



Our physical body is made up of five elements and when we pass away, it disintegrates back into those primal elements. Maybe with this in view, the opening poem is the 5-part 'Panchatatva – The five elements,' each part dedicated to a particular element – water, wind, earth, sky and fire.

The nature of provocations for suicide could be manifold – disgrace, insults, family quarrels, financial stress, getting cheated, physical or mental agony, failure of love, miscarriage of lust mistaken for love, loss of public recognition, clinching exposure of one's criminality etc. There are people who don't hesitate to kill all their family members, including kids, before taking their own life. If the killed kids could only speak, they would perhaps say –

Why did you kill us? | [You] Killed us like we aren't your blood | | But, we'll chase you even in death | Until you tell why you stopped our breath.

(Suicide Pact: Killed Children Demand Answers)

Some of the children who can't meet the vicarious aspirations of their parents, tend to be suicidal (32). How agonising the feelings of one such child, as in 'Good Bye, Mom!' –

I'm the cactus of your life's desert. | Even if my thorns have hurt you | I am the only greenery you've seen. | | I cannot lug the weight | Of your hopes and my failures | Beyond this point. | Good Bye, mom!

While the incidence of crimes against womankind is incessant and atrocious, there are men who are victims too, due to the wily ways of femmes fatales who revel in threatening and blackmailing their gullible victims. See the wailing threnody of one such victim –

More than the prison bars, your lie incinerates me. | | What stirred you to call my fondness an act of rape? | | I didn't know our love story had an entirely altered script | But I promise to return thy courtesy, but with my slit wrist.

(Live-In No More)

The poet says that this book "is a tribute to the troubled souls and, therefore, an effort to develop an understanding for the poor men and women whom we might have seen or heard of attempting to kill themselves" (Introduction).

When our birth is not our own making, death also shouldn't be either. Each of us is created with a specific mission for us to discharge and we don't have a right to abort that ordainment. Let's not try to crack or wreck the links in the web of creation, whatever be our problems, troubles or sufferings. After all, God gives us only those sufferings which we are capable of handling and bearing. Let's remember that nobody's life is a bed of thorn-less roses. So life is there to live, not to kill others or ourselves.

U Atreya Sarma is the Chief Editor of Muse India. ISSN. 0975-1815

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VishvaRang-Vatayan Arts & Literature Festival-UK; 6-9 November 2020

The International 3-Day Festival of Literature & Art 'VishvaRang-2020' was organized by the Tagore University-Bhopal in 16 countries of the world; Vatayan-UK represented Britain, in collaboration with the UK Hindi Samiti and the Vaishvik Hindi Parivar-UK. The eminent author and founder of Vatayan-UK, Divya Mathur, FRSA, chairperson, Mira Mishra-Kaushik, OBE, and Dr Padmesh Gupta, Director of Oxford Business College/Vishva-Rang-UK, conducted this grand virtual program, which included music and dance performances, poetry recitations, story-telling, discussions, documentary films by the British and British-Indian authors, professors, art connoisseurs and artists. The event was witnessed by audiences all over the world.

The event began with a tribute to the Noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore at the Shakespeare's residence at Stratford-upon-Avon by Dr Padmesh Gupta followed by the lighting of the auspicious lamp by Dr Santosh Chobey, the source of inspiration for 'VishvaRang'. Dr Chobey explained in detail about the background of the festival and conveyed good wishes to the organizers and members of Vatayan. In the inaugural session, Shri Virendra Sharma, MP and Dr Nanda Kumar, Director of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan-London, boosted the morale of the organizers in their messages.

Book Review

Leesa Gazi's Hellfire (Translated from the Bangla by Shabnam Nadiya) Eka, Westland Publications, 2020 by Malashri Lal

Set in a middle class family in Dhaka, Bangladesh, at the turn of the millennium, Leesa Gazi creates a gripping story of two sisters whose mother doesn't allow them to ever leave the home—not even for schooling and certainly not to be married. The novel picks up one extraordinary day, November 16, 2007 to be precise, when the older one, Lovely, on her fortieth birthday is permitted to go out alone and wander around the city for a few hours. Of course there are misadventures, such that reveal the complex mind of a lonely woman. She has a “man speaking in her head”. This inner man mocks her, cajoles her, dares her... and in one scene, she is persuaded by this persistent voice to buy a sharp kitchen knife. What does this “inner male” represent?

That's just one of the several teasing questions in this novel which is primarily about the psychological warping caused by incarceration. The other sister, Beauty, is obsessed with skincare routines—face-packs of lentils. These maybe aspects of female frustration but the “jailor”, their mother, Farida Khanam, is just as troubled by her compulsions, “Every hour on the hour, she enumerated all her reasons for not allowing her daughters to be married.” Gazi describes the minutiae of a Bengali household in terms of food—the hilsa pulao and the labra—, and the mother's insistence on locking the doors to the street, the roof and the bedrooms of the daughters. What is she afraid of? That's a second teaser.

And the father, the wimp whom the wife disparagingly describes as “half-dead” slinks around the house, observing nothing, saying nothing, a prisoner too of his own silence. The few other characters in this sparsely peopled story are almost cameos with vivid markers, eg, the “Red-Muffler guy” whose name we never know and two domestic workers. Others, absent from the scene, are the substance of memory. A terse suspense keeps the pages turning and the reader wonders about this self-isolating family's back story. Is it violence?

Leesa Gazi, born in 1969, was growing up in the years when Bangladesh was a new nation. The wounds of the 1971 War and the violence that accompanied the rupture from Pakistan remain fresh in the minds of this generation. Among Gazi's works is *Birangona: Women of War* a play about the true stories of female survivors of the Bangladesh Liberation War during which over 200,000 women were raped and tortured. The portrait in *Hellfire* of a self-interned family may be linked to this. In an

interview with me Leesa Gazi spoke of the echoes in *Hellfire* of the memories of the war's aftermath....the annihilation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family, and warnings such as “You might be remanded into custody. You might even be finished off in crossfire.”



In a memorable scene in *Hellfire*, Beauty finds her mother on the rooftop, flaying her arms like a madwoman and shooting away a flock of crows as they raucously called out ‘caw-caw’ and hovered. What has caused this disarray in a woman who keeps a tight restraint over herself and others? Crows are a bad omen, and even the traditional romance of rainclouds over the Bay of Bengal is overwritten by the rhetoric of war:



Clouds had been massing for a long time above House No. 115/3, Monipuripara. ... it was clear that they were riding here on the black velvet bodies of the crows. Like armed soldiers dismounting from trucks, they dropped off one by one when they reached the house. (148)

Speaking from a feminist viewpoint, the novel seems to be claiming space for women yet showing up that power hierarchies exist

beyond the gender differential. The women characters are strong and vivid. Comparatively speaking, the men are weak and cowardly. The Red Muffler guy who propositions Lovely in Ramna Park can easily be rejected, even the insidious “man in the head”, an alter ego who tries to bully Lovely uses the language of reconciliation: “Apumoni, my sweet sister, apni emon keno bolen toh? Why are you like this? Come on, just buy some fabric, fast, and then let's go pass the time by the Buriganga river. Just you and me.” But the women's world is coercive and the novel gives a ravaging critique of motherhood. One is reminded at times of the classic Spanish play by Lorca, *The House of Bernarda Alba* in which the mother wields total control over her five daughters. That was written in 1936 during the Spanish Civil war, and *Hellfire* flows from the history of the War of Liberation in Bangladesh.

Lisa Gazi's original Bangla novel *Rouroob* was published in 2010. Shabnam Nadiya's English translation *Hellfire* appeared recently in September 2020 and has gathered much acclaim. The locale is Bangladesh, the writer is an expatriate in London, the translator lives in California: *Hellfire* is a fine example of global collaboration by which South Asian fiction can be rendered appropriately for international readers. Vividly capturing the ethos of the household, Nadiya retains some Bangla expressions to which she provides a quick English equivalent: “Namaj nai, kalam nai—shudhu ghoom ... No praying, no reading the holy book—all she ever does is sleep.” This is a helpful strategy for aiding bilingual audiences and reminding readers of the translation process.

In summary, it is unusual to find a novelist-translator duo with such a smooth understanding of a shared culture. The novel works with the outer cityscape of Dhaka—Gausia, New Market, Ramna Park etc—and the inner landscape of women's troubled minds. There is a remarkable flow of action, sentiments and emotions. *Hellfire* paves the way for more such novels with insights into Bangladesh where fiction is rich in Bangla but not easily available in English.

The review is based on a conversation at the JLF digital platform. 15th October 2020: Hellfire. Leesa Gazi and Shabnam Nadiya in conversation with Malashri Lal. An academic, editor and writer with fifteen books to her credit, Malashri Lal retired as Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi. Her specialisation is in Literature and Gender. She is currently Member, English Advisory Board, Sahitya Akademi.

Book review

Agathokakological Aussie Summer Stories

by Sharon Rundle

"From little things, big things grow" is a line from a popular Australian ballad written and recorded by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody. The ballad tells the story of the Gurindji strike led by Vincent Lingiari for justice, and the subsequent return of land rights to Indigenous Australians.

While this story does not have the immense significance of the event in that song, big things did grow from a little idea to share stories during the COVID 19 pandemic. The idea that if writers couldn't share each other's company, at least we could share our stories online. The result is an online interactive mosaic of stories with an Indian-Australian connection.

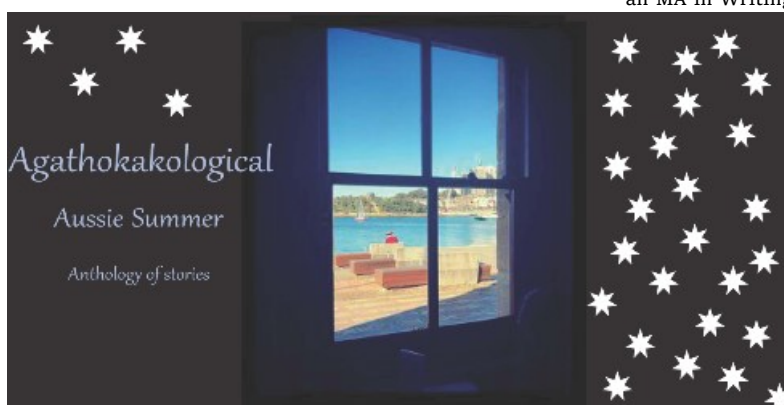
Agathokakological Aussie Summer is a selection of stories some memoir based, others purely fiction from Australia, India and around the world that fit our theme of connecting Indians and Australians, with the added element of an Australian summer. The Australian High Commissioner to India, the Honourable Barry O'Farrell AO wrote the impressive foreword to this collection of stories and will launch the story mosaic online on 2 December 2020. The Introduction to the stories was written by the Consul-General, India, in Sydney Mr Manish Gupta who will attend the launch. Other Distinguished guests include the Deputy Consul General of Australia to India in Kolkata Mr Daniel Sim; Mr Ramanand Garge, Director of the Consulate's Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre, Sydney, Australia; Mr Amit Dasgupta, author, Inaugural India Country Director for the University of New South Wales, and former diplomat; Susanne Gervay OAM, multi-award winning author and ambassador for social justice.

The Honourable Barry O'Farrell comments that "This compelling anthology traverses Australian summers in ways that will surprise and delight readers" and that "This anthology captures diaspora and *dosti* (friendship) with vibrancy and enthusiasm ... I firmly believe that the more we share our stories, the greater

the understanding and friendships we can build".

The warm and generous support from so many have made it exciting to produce this mosaic of illustrated stories of birth, death, marriage, ageing, relationships, friendship, food, polo, dangerous beaches, lost souls, and living through a pandemic – and of course, cricket – what Indian-Australian collaboration could ignore stories about cricket?

Look out for the launch <https://www.facebook.com/events/671739043733063> His Excellency The



High Commissioner of India to Australia The Honourable Mr A. Gitesh Sarma while unable to attend conveyed his good wishes for the success of the event

This project was possible because of my involvement with online storytelling and story mosaics which began about fifteen years ago

while working with Helen Whitehead at the cutting edge trAce Online Writing Centre of the Nottingham Trent University in the UK. After the trAce project ended, Helen and I ran an online writing course together, titled 'Season of Inspiration'. Writers enrolled from around the globe and we created an online story mosaic.

Indranil Halder enquired about compiling an anthology of stories with an Indian-Australian connection. Due to the restrictions during the Covid19 pandemic, publishing opportunities are limited. An online mosaic of stories seemed a viable alternative. Helen agreed to design and create the website for the collection

Indranil from Sydney, Australia, is a writer, a corporate consultant, global heritage tourist and former Ambassador

of Fabrics of Multicultural Australia, with a degree in Biomedical Science and an MBA. Sharon Rundle from the Hunter region of NSW, Australia, is a writer, book editor, teacher and mentor with twenty-five years' experience and a doctorate in creative arts from the University of Technology Sydney. Helen Whitehead in Nottingham, UK, has been working with online media for over twenty-five years. Her expertise is in the innovative and appropriate use of digital tools for narrative, creative writing, learning and teaching. She holds a BSc in Biochemistry from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and an MA in Writing from the Nottingham

Trent University. She is particularly interested in the multi-dimensional structures of digital texts and narratives, in making digital texts accessible to new readers and learners, and in facilitating online communities. We collaborated to create *Agathokakological Aussie Summer*, a stellar collection of

stories and a gift to you from the writing community during this difficult time of pandemic. It will be free to access to all with internet and browser. The weblink URL will be revealed at the launch.

Each author has their own star. Simply click on the stars to discover diverse and compelling stories.

#aaussiesummer



Dr Sharon Rundle is a book editor and mentor. Her latest book co-edited with Dr Meenakshi Bharat, *Glass Walls: Stories of Tolerance and Intolerance*

from the Indian Subcontinent and Australia was published by Orient BlackSwan in 2019—and reviewed in *Confluence UK*, August 2020 issue. The *Agathokakological Aussie Summer* story mosaic is her latest online publishing venture with Helen Whitehead and Indranil Halder.

Memoir

SHAKESPEARE & CO by Cyril Dabydeen

Shakespeare he quotes with ease, this large-built man with his sometimes growly manner, but with aplomb; and oh, the great bard he keeps near him, or with him. Soliloquizing, yes. A retired federal government civil servant, he's bent on finding his true voice, his inner being, he says. *Who am I?* A glance back, then a look around, because of origins and what we seem aligned to. Suddenly like old acquaintances, we are. "Oh, you," he says.

"Yes, me."

A smile creases his mouth, with a veiled cognizance in his eyes.

More familiarity, with rivers crossed. A far ocean with waves marking our coming and going because of where I might have *immigrated* from. Does he really know? But Stratford-upon-Avon, no other place is in his mind's eye, even as we're solidly here in Canada.

His gregariousness, I presume to know. Then, about how he'd stopped smoking years ago. How many years to be exact? "Twenty years; but I've started again." He sucks in air, like a fish on dry land. "I smoke a pipe now." He looks at me awry. Then, "But I shouldn't really"—like a revelation. "See, I enjoy it," he adds, this retiree who likes his *aloneness*, I must know. He never married, see.

Why not?

"It's something in me, that I have to work on," he hums. Meaning not his finding a life-partner? Another Shakespeare quote is on his lips, as he looks at me searchingly. *Now where do I come from?* An exotic place in the making—like what I expect to hear from him.

I dilly-dally, voicing literariness with my own dramatized flair. Macbeth's tragedy with shape and form—about life being a walking shadow, a poor player, and how we fret and strut on the stage. *A real-life stage*. Indeed a tale told by an

idiot ...signifying nothing, let it be known. A dark and elegiac tone, indeed.

See, I am *catching on* to him. But where do I come from, if my forbears he seems to want to know

about. Ancestry tied to propinquity—not just my physiognomy. *How really long ago?*

"What do you write about?" he asks about my own literary instinct or drive, observing me closely. Ah, he has read novelist V.S. Naipaul, not his novels but his travel books that are better than fictional fantasy—known as gonzo journalism by those in the trade. "A complex man with a complex background Naipaul is," this government man tells me; and indeed, more he knows about the world literature. *Wither Shakespeare?*

A soliloquy is yet on his lips. But V.S. Naipaul?

I am anxious to know more what he thinks about Naipaul's Indian ancestral self, Trinidadian-born but turned-English. Images of India flit back and forth, it seems. What's more familiar with narrative being always compelling. But really, it's Naipaul's travel books he reads, that he's really familiar with. No fictional Mr Biswas for him, nor a bend in the river somewhere in Africa, no Bogart nor Salim. But this government man is not one-dimensional, never has been.

We talk desultorily about place and identity, and geography being destiny, see. Not just Madame Chiang Kai-shek's axiom about ethnicity being destiny. Tropes follow us around, and what's existentially tied to origins. Trinidad, India, Africa, Middle East, England, America—places to go and to come from. *Believe me*.

And my place of birth—is it unlike Naipaul's? I mutter something about my Indian forebears with my own self-awareness, what I acknowledge without finesse beyond metaphor. "Ah, you too are complex," he declares. But I quickly deny complexity, only adroitness linked to my now Canadian self—my indeed *becoming*.

More rivers and oceans crossed. "You too are complex," I try parlaying with him. "No, I'm not," he demurs. "I'm just a simple Canadian." What I do not see, as I imagine more places with narrative ongoing, and thinking we're all outsiders, but wanting to be insiders. Places embedded in us, and a distant horizon at bay.

Clouds forming, like an indigenous Cree's or Ojibway's shaman contriving a bear in the sky I conjure up. My own double self now, it seems, or the many selves that I carry. *Shakespeare, where are you?*

This man quotes Hamlet—"To be, or not to be". Ontology, the nature of our being, forgetting and remembering at the same time. The sky wavering. Cirrus clouds forming. A solid tree... as I aim to establish roots in a foreign country. Sure, I know boundaries—my real or destined place. He looks at me... still soliloquizing.

What he will really say next, not what he wants to deny about himself, but what I must acknowledge about my own self? No striking metaphor comes to mind. "See, you're smoking again," I try with the mundane, or commonplace.

"It's something deep in me, what I'm missing in my life," he finally tells me. And maybe about my mythologizing places, and the ground we walk upon—as I invoke poet W.H. Auden.

But it's the Elizabethan bard's Macbeth again with more than rhetorical form and style. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." Intuition-turned-recitation with past and present combined, and destiny of north and south, east and west.

He waves to me, like from a far distance with time being the essence. An audience's applause, now like our actually being at the Elizabethan Globe Theatre—nowhere else, being ourselves no more or less.



Cyril Dabydeen's books include *My Brahmin Days* (2000), *North of the Equator* (2001), *Play a Song Somebody: New and Selected Short Stories* (2003), and *Drums of My Flesh*—a novel. Recent poetry appeared in *Poetry* (Chicago), *Canadian Literature*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

A Poem

Tell Her by Prithvijeet Sinha

Hold me dearly
even when your heart is filled to the very end of the brimming zeitgeist,
with grief and hate for the skin that shows up to be savaged by millenniums.
The pickets and batons can never shield us from the rain of tear gas,
and the strain that comes with turning from brown to black to purple
within mere seconds,
is a deluge that fills the heart first and then blows up our eye sockets.
As the levee breaks forth,
the pressure of identity is screened for filling up empty forms,
empty shells and haunted cells.
But promises break,
a mother breaks,
losing one eye to the mob
and the other to the foreseeable spokes of this revolution.
The golden jubilee of the Alabama walk is rehearsed,
in front of her daughter
and the spirit howls and breaks into umpteenth solo dreams,
amongst the same faces she grew up with.



Prithvijeet Sinha has always been an ardent reader and writer since his earliest years and has pursued an Honors degree, a Masters degree and also an M.Phil in English literature. He hails from the culturally resonant Indian city of Lucknow.

NUNAVILOOR K.WIJAYARATNAM

A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

By Benedict Thomas (Benny)

Through the columns of "CONFLUENCE", I wish to pay a tribute to my friend Mr.K.Wijayaratham, who passed away on 7th October 2017 in U.K. He was a colleague of mine in the Auditor General's Department in Sri Lanka and retired from service in 1996 after a successful career as an executive there. After retirement he migrated to U.K with his family and devoted his time and energy to pursue his lifelong desire to the study and propagation of ancient Tamil literature, also known as the Sangam Literature.

Since Mr.Wijayaratham had evinced such a great interest in Tamil literature of the Sangam period, it will be appropriate if I give some background information about Tamil Sangam. Sangam means an assembly of Tamil poets and scholars. These assemblies flourished under the benevolent patronage of the Pandian kings. It is stated that there were three such assemblies, known as Mudhal Sangam, Idai Sangam and Kadai Sangam and according to legends the first two assemblies that were held in cities close to sea had been "taken by the sea" while the third was held in the city of Madurai. Each assembly is believed to have lasted several thousands of years although most scholars have not accepted these legends. According to them, the Sangam period had spanned from 300 BC to 300 AD-around 600 years. Towards the end of the 3rd century AD, the Sangam period, hailed as the golden era of Tamil literature faded following the invasion of the Pandian kingdom by a tribe called Kalabhras from Kannada region. Pandyan kings regained their kingdom at the end of 6th century AD. Due to these disruptions, the Sangam literature too fell into oblivion for several centuries resulting in the loss of much of that era's literature. However, some of them had been preserved in the Hindu monasteries and rediscovered by scholars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among these scholars, the most outstanding and resourceful was Dr.U.V.Swaminatha Aiyar (1855 – 1942), who was credited with the rediscovery of major collection of the Sangam literature. The available Sangam literature includes:

Thol Kappiyam.

Edduthokai (consists of 8 works of anthologies of which Aha Nanooru and Pura Nanooru are parts)

Patthupattu (consists 10 works of idylls)

Pathinenkeezh kanakku (consists 18 literary works, part of which is Thiru Valluvar's Kural).

Silappathigaram (epic)

Manimegalai (epic)



Out of the above, Thol Kappiyam is perhaps the earliest, compiled around the 3rd century BCE, and the last two epics the latest, written around 2nd century AD. Thol Kappiyam is hailed as the greatest grammatical treatise and scholars believe that for such a monumental work to be compiled, many Tamil literary works should have existed in earlier times. Further, all the above literature had been written in poetic form using a genre that had since gone extinct. It needs a scholarly level of learning to read and comprehend the treasure trove of knowledge embedded in these texts. Mr.Wijayaratham however, being a retired public servant and without any formal training in literary research, decided to embark on the chosen onerous task, relying on self-study. He proceeded to India and bought numerous books, commentaries and research works written by other scholars, to aid in his self-study. Like a pearl-diver, he dived into the vast ocean of ancient Tamil literature and assembled many precious literary pearls which he happily shared with others. He was a prolific writer and regularly contributed to several journals and literary magazines. Many of his contributions have been published in the website journal "PATHIVUKAL". As a matter of fact, he functioned as a member of the Advisory Board of "PATHIVUKAL" along with eminent people like : Prof. N.Subramanian (Canada), Prof. Thurai Kandan (Tamil Nadu), Prof. Mahadeva (U.K) and writer Mr.L. Murugapopathy (Australia).

Many of his articles he had contributed to various journals were also published as books with appropriate titles. The following are a few :

Thol Kappiya Then Thuligal (Honey Drops from Thol Kappiyam) – Published in 2008

Pandai Thamilaram Samuthaya Seerkedum (Ancient Tamils and Social Degeneration . An award winning book) - Published in 2010

Ilakkiya Ariviyal Nugarvugal (Experience of Literary Knowledge) Published in 2012

Kalathai Wenra Kaviya Magalir (Women Of The Epics Who Outlasted Their times. An Award winning book.) Published in 2015.

Sanga Kala Thamilar Valviyal (Living Codes of Sangam Era Tamils) Published in 2016

Of these books, special mention must be made of the book, Kalathai Venra Kaviya Magalir (Women of the Epics who outlasted their times). In this book, the author has selected women from eight 'Epics', Mahabharatham, Kampa Ramayanam, Silapathikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaka Chinthamani, Valaiyapathy, Kundalakesi and Thokapiyam and brought out their characteristics, noble and ignoble, in an exemplary manner. A nutshell of each 'Epic' is also given to aid readers who have not read them earlier. In all, the characteristics of 70 women have been brought out.

In the same book, the author has also highlighted the works of 17 eminent Tamil Poetesses including the greatest of them all, Avvaiyar. In all, these poetesses had authored 130 poetic works, 60 of which came from Avvaiyaer herself.

Apart from the above Tamil books on literature, Mr.Wijayaratham had also written on general topics and had published the following four books – the first three in Tamil and the last one in English :

Kaniniyai Minjum Manitha Moolai (Human Brain Which Supersedes the Computer) Published in 2005

Viyakka Waikkum Prapanjam (Wondrous Universe) Published in 2013

Palveru Payan Tharum Panaimaram (Diverse Benefits of Palmyra Palm) Published in 2014

Essential English Grammar – Published in 2007.

For his contribution to the enrichment of Tamil literature, Mr. Wijayaratham had been honoured with several awards by the London Tamil Literary Association as well as by the Sri Lanka Tamil Literary Association.

Mr.Wijayaratham has rendered a noble and illustrious service to the propagation of Tamil literature and he needs to be commended. His demise is an irreparable loss to the Tamil Community.



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

Two prose poems by Anita Nahal

Expressing the pain and anguish over the relentless cases of rape in India, many being gang rapes. The first poem directly emotes the brutal act and the second one is about Phoolan Devi, popularly known as the Bandit Queen, who in her personal life went through trauma with multiple rapes and ultimately became a dacoit, then gave up arms and became a parliamentary leader.

Rape

It's my body, not yours. It's my body, not yours. You pilfer Mother Earth when you pilfer me. You pilfer the country when you pilfer me. You pilfer yourself. Your future. Your karma. Your mother, sister, wife and daughter...when you pilfer, violate, pillage, rape me.

When you pilfer me, you pilfer all the female goddesses you pray for wealth, safety, learning and good fortune. And then you carry the hypocrisy of your worship on your weak, scheming, dishonest, unmanly shoulders to the alley, the dark alley, or to the dark buses, or trains, or fields, or even entering homes in the dark, where you hunt, grab, muffle, force. And then you walk away from a cold, naked, bloodied dead soul that refuses to leave, sits outside the body, weeping, ashamed, broken, empty, angry.

Nirbhaya, Unnao, Kathua, Shakti Mills, Hathras, Balrampur, Hyderabad. Remember. Remember the names. Thousands more countless, faceless. It you don't remember the names, remember a woman's body raped and dumped like it was not life. A young girl's body killed as it was not life. A female child's body mutilated, as if it was not life.

They say they are deprived. The ones that commit the crime. They say they aren't reared well. The ones that commit the crime. Broken homes. Poor homes. No sex education. Mystification of a woman's body in Bollywood movies. Excuses, excuses and excuses. Why do parents not teach their sons that another human body is as important and sacred as theirs? Period. Full stop. You shall not touch by force. Not touch without consent. Not touch when repelled. Not touch when your weak, sick manly ego is bruised.

She cried. She cried. She cried. She cried. She cried. She cried.

She ran. She ran. She ran. She ran. She ran. She ran.

She kicked. She kicked. She kicked. She kicked. She kicked. She kicked.

He raped. They raped. And then the maniac in them multiplied, and slashed, and killed. Even demons in hell will not take their dirty, dirty souls.

Nirbhaya, Unnao, Kathua, Shakti Mills, Hathras, Balrampur, Hyderabad: Fictitious names given to women or real names of places where horrific rapes have occurred in recent times in India.

Anita Nahal is a poet, professor, short story writer, children's writer. She has two books of poetry, one book of flash fictions, three children's books and one edited poetry anthology to her credit. She teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington DC. More on her at: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>

Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi (1963-2001)

Phoolan Devi was a woman of a lower caste from a small village in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

While I was growing up safe, she was being incessantly abused. I did not know her, but her tales carried far. On a train journey through the Chambal ravines where she and her dacoit gang hid, I could sense her tortured yet fighter soul. The ravines seemed like skin that had never been moisturized. And her voice was the last drop of water in the well yelling to keep scrapping.

It was horrific. It was horrific when a girl child of mere eleven years was married off to a man three times her age. It was brutal when he abused her. Brutal when she was rejected by her parents. Brutal when she had to return to her husband. Brutal when she decided to become a bandit. Brutal when she was raped multiple times. Brutal when she chose revenge and killed many in return. Brutal when the men she loved were killed too. Brutal when she spent many years in jail. Brutal when she was assassinated after rebuilding her life.

What is the value of a human life? Is a woman's life still considered inhuman? A commodity? Has the change of centuries, flow of time and times, modernization or new learning, changed mindsets? When antiquated customs, ignorant thoughts, uneducated minds with hearts bound to meanness, with souls shunned off from even the underworld return to occupy human bodies mingling among those yearning for normalcy, brutality breeds. And so Phoolan Devi became brutal too when the smoke rising was so high her eyes could only see her bloodied thighs, bruised hands, cut cheeks and ripped clothes. Is it possible for a woman not to become brutal after this?

But then she pulled back. Paid back.

Penanced.

Atoned.

Sought a new life, a new symbol, a parliamentarian, a woman leader.

Strength of a woman can be underrated like bamboo sticks that hold immense weight in muddy backwater canal hutments. Or it can be blown out of proportions like tsunamis unable to comprehend they are best thriving in deep water rocks. Phoolan Devi was a mix of the two as the never resting phoenix molded herself into a positive paradigm and showed her middle finger to brutality.



Interview

“We Break Prison Walls”

Jaydeep Sarangi and Bidisha Pal speak to Kalyani Thakur

Kalyani Thakur Charal is a cyclonic Bengali Dalit feminist writer and activist. Her works mainly talk about Dalit women, their positions, conditions, dreams, and aspirations. Her autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* has been published in 2016 from Chaturtha Duniya. She edits a cultural magazine called *Nir* (which means ‘nest’). Apart from being the member of Association of Bengali Dalit Literature (Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha), a literary organization founded in 1992 she has been included as a member in the upcoming Dalit Sahitya Academy (Academy of Dalit Literature). In this current interview, the interviewer(s) have tried to draw out several aspects of Thakur’s life, world views, positions and works.

Q. How did writing come to you?

A. In childhood, I started drafting poems. My first poem was a romantic one. Love was the core theme, an adolescent girl’s dream for an ideal. It came to me naturally. I just continued this in me.

Q. When did you read Ambedkar? How did he influence you?

A. I read Ambedkar long ago. Ambedkar’s books are not so easily available in this country, especially in a regional language. I faced difficulties in obtaining his books. I have not been able to collect all of them yet. There are 36-37 parts of Ambedkar’s works, in total. I have both Bengali and English versions of his books. That would sum up to 10 to 12 parts. Unfortunately, I have not managed to read all yet. He is a social icon for all of us. Without Ambedkar Indian society would have been fifty years behind the present time. We break prison walls with forces streaming from Ambedkar.

Q. Why did you start a cultural magazine *Nir*?

A. *Nir* came out in the year 1993-94 in written or book format. Before that, it was only a wall magazine. The formats of *Nir* were published as special editions. Notable contents including hotel boarders, the folk culture of hundred years, folk play, refugee issues, reservation system, disaster, loneliness, water crisis, short stories of aboriginal and indigenous languages such as Santhali, Oraon, Kamtapuri, Rarh, Dapno, etc, stories of the Dalit women of later period, short essays, critical discussions on Ambedkar, abridged autobiographies and autobiographical writings have been the recurrent themes of *Nir*. Besides, there is one particular edition which contains writings of Dalit women of other regional languages of India apart from Bengali. It is published from Chaturtha Duniya fortnightly.

Q. How many poetry collections have you published so far?

A. There are four poetry collections which I have published so far:

- i) Dhorlei Juddho Sunischit
- ii) Je Meye Adhar Gone
- iii) Chandalinir Kabita
- iv) Chandalini Bhone

Q. What are the predominant themes your poems talk about?

A. There are diversified themes. The prime themes of my poems are love, nature, society, feminism and issues of women, social issues, and most importantly Dalit lives.

Q. Please reflect on the thoughts behind *Chandalinir Bibriti*?

A. There is a history behind the title of the book *Chandalinir Bibriti*. Earlier one prominent poet Sabyasachi Deb (who teaches at the Presidency University at present) critically commented on *Chandalinir Bibriti* in the magazine *Chetana Lahar*.

He wrote at the end that it was not a poem; rather it has taken a form of a statement. I published an anthology of essays the very next year and entitled it as *Chandalinir Bibriti* in response to his comments. The essay, moreover, contains several speeches delivered at different places.

Q. Why is the poetry anthology *Chandalinir Kabita* entitled such?

A. There is not any such particular reason for the entitlement of *Chandalinir Kabita*. The name owes its origin in the word *Chandal*. I have used the title ‘*Chandalini*’ in many of my writings, especially in the titles of my essays. Poems in this collection are rebellious by temper.

Q. Can poetry take a fair share of a social movement?

A. Poetry has that innate power to revamp the social structures for good. It is a platform for propagating democracy and social justice in society. That’s why poetry is always a powerful medium.



Q. Are you writing anything now?

A. Yes. This lockdown gave me some space to write. It’s a precarious situation. Writing poems and essays. I cannot escape from the social issues.

Q. Are you satisfied with the translation of your works?

A. My works have been translated in a scattered way. This includes some poems and some short stories. Some people have taken the remaining books for translation; but, they have not yet been able to complete the process. Among the people there are professors and lecturers of different colleges and universities. I have finished my autobiography; however, it has not been given to any publisher yet. It is now a part of the translation project of Delhi University. Let’s see. Glad to see that Jaydeep babu and Zinia Mitra are trying to translate my poems for a good collection.

Q. Can you mention some key contemporary Bengali Dalit female writers?

A. Yes, there are good writers like Smritikana Howladar, Lily Halder, Manju Bala, Kanan Boral, Alokanda Roy, Pallabi Mondal, Pranita Roy, Sanju Sikder, Meruna Murmu, Lakshmi Mandi, Ayesha Khatun, Juthika Pandey, Pushpa Bairagya, and so on.

Q. What would you like to call yourself? A Dalit feminist or a Dalit womanist?

A. I would like to call myself a Dalit womanist. It’s a powerful phrase. I’m happy and comfortable with this tag. We need to break prison walls at different levels.

Q. Please share with a poem that represents you as a poet....

A. You know, my poems are my ways of social resistance. I remember a poem you translated from *Chandalinir Kabita*,

Poem number: 33

My grandfather was prohibited
From stepping into the tol premises.
My father became literate
Using palm leaf and ink of charcoal
After a long struggle.

My mother visited Durga bari
With cowdung on her left hand
To paste the place where she was standing.

Oh! God! Cowdung is holier
Than the touch of a dalit!

My genteel colleagues enjoy
Using abusive terms—
Chamar, Charal and dom—daily!

They have forgotten
That these terms are names
of different castes and communities.

With all these
I’ll have to remember
There is no dalit in Bengal!
Dalits are everywhere in the world
NOT HERE!
Caste discrimination exists everywhere
NOT HERE!

They throttle our throat,
Train us to say--
We are all equal, no caste stratification here.

By trickery
They are taking away
Provision s for reservation after one generation.

They force us and say,
“If you claim reservations in the private sector
We shall erase your father’s name from your
memory.

Repeat
We need no more.
We’ve got everything.”

—Kalyani Thakur

Translated from Bangla by Jaydeep Sarangi

This poem is taken from Thakur’s collection, *Chandalinir Kabita* (2011).

Glossary:

tol : Sanskrit primary school

Durga bari: A house where an idol of Goddess Durga is installed.

Chamar, Charal and dom : Three professions considered outcasts in different parts of India.

(Note: A version in parts of this interview appeared in *Writers in Conversation*)

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I RAISE MY EYES TO THE HILLS

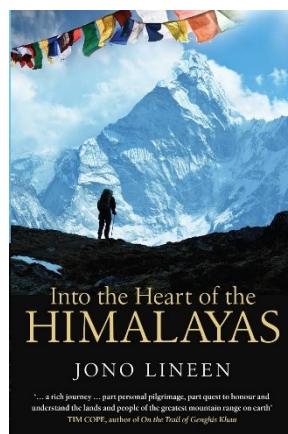
Jono Lineen's Into the Heart of the Himalayas

Reviewed by Anjana Basu

This is the story of a walk undertaken to forget a death – a very long walk in this case. Jono Lineen lost his younger brother Gareth to a freak rowing accident in Canada's Elk Lake. Gareth was only 19 and the incident haunted him. In order to cope with it, he decided to revisit the Himalayas. Lineen was familiar with what the Himalayas stood for in terms of spirituality, so he chose the time honoured method of isolation from the rest of the world to get in touch with his inner being. However, his was not a static spirituality – he chose a 2,700 km trek, which took four months to complete – moving through trails lined with fluttering prayer flags and age old rocks. His was the route of forgetting through solitude, moving through his inner being and exploring life and death. There have been other walkers, like Thomas Coryate who walked from England to India in the seventeenth century and more relevantly, the wandering Sufis, mystics with interior obsessions that drove on them solitary roads.

Lineen's walk began in what he refers to as the Muslim Himalayas, in northern Pakistan. From there he moved east through what he termed the Buddhist Himalayas which included Ladakh and Zaskar ultimately winding up in Uttarkhand – the Hindu Himalayas. He talks about the people he encountered along the way, the monks and villagers that form an integral part of these remote areas. He did the

expected things, visiting stupas, dwelling on spirituality, taking a dip into the Ganges, meditating at the Jageshwar Temple and travelling back and forth in time between Gareth's death and his present travels.



There are parallels – the Chandratat reminds him of Elk Lake where Gareth died, the mummified remains of a lama recalls his brother to mind. Since death walks with him the forests and bears too stir memories – though occasionally it does seem as if the Gareth reminiscences have been retro fitted,

The rugged terrain challenged him to forget and he was charmed by the lives of the villagers who inhabited some of the world's most inhospitable terrain. He met some of the usual suspects and some unusual ones like a gorgeous marijuana harvester in Manali who lives on her own or a group of jawans on the China border whose camp he blundered into with a doctored line permit - but luckily was not found out because he wasn't Indian. Of course foreigners on the loose in India are always drawn into conversations whether good or bad and occasionally Lineen does put his foot in his mouth.

The author's feelings are very much to the fore though his humour too comes through lightening the book. Sincerity and spirituality walk hand in hand with Lineen's delving into his researches and musing on the concepts behind many of the monasteries that he visits. He balances the natural and human worlds with occasional repetition of metaphors like the coral and turquoise that streak the sky and water and which are the Tibetan colours of protection and the guesthouses which are usually concrete blocks. However, the memoir is a pleasant vivid travelogue to go through with commentaries on the underlying border politics in Siachen, Kargil and Zaskar. Respect for the mountains and the environment he says is vital, to survive and to grow in spirituality.

Poems by Devika Khanna Narula

STARRY NIGHT

(Inspired by the painting Starry Night by Vincent Van Gough)

As Time draws its finger
Across the canvas of Life,
I flow in the swirls and whorls,
Undulating and palpitating,
Caught in a vortex of emotions.

The translucent blue of the ether
Glow in the background
And the Stars shine as
Daubs of white strewn against it,
Lustrous, magnetic, unfathomable...
Till I plunge out of the blue
Dropping down,

down,
down...

Coming out into the Hall,
Standing at the far end,

'Starry Night' comes back into
focus...

It fills me with wonder as I gaze at it
--

A vision of love and continuity
That informs all Creation.

CACTUS

Yes, I spread like the Cactus
My prickly points around me
But have you seen the deep core
That the thorns protect?
That soft fleshy part
Full of the juice of love
From where blossoms
A beautiful flower

Once in many years
Is the authentic me

The vulnerable self,
Exposed in its tender beauty.
The thorns are necessary
To ward off all threats
To protect the inner core.



Dr. Devika Khanna Narula is Associate Professor, retired, University of Delhi. Her area of specialization is postcolonial, gender and cultural studies. She has presented papers extensively in national/international seminars/conferences in India and abroad.

The Hindu Wedding

By Malathy Sitaram

Vibrant colour, a melee of noise and odours, hectic confusion, these are the characteristics of Indian weddings. This is the time for women to garb themselves in the myriad hues of the rainbow. All the family jewellery is out adorning mothers and daughters in a gorgeous ostentatious display. All Hindu weddings which observe Vedic rites are more or less similar with a few variations in costs and ceremonies.

In South India, the wedding season, a season of laughter and tears, is between January 15 and July 15. North Indian prefer the period between September 15 and December 15. Generally, the period between December 15 and January 15 is considered inauspicious.

Up to the end of the nineteenth century child marriages were the custom. A girl of five would be married to a boy in his early teens. However, the girl stayed with her parents till she reached puberty. At the age of thirteen she would go to live with her husband in his parental house. Husband and wife seldom set up house on their own. The joint family system is still the way of life in villages, but much less in towns and cities.

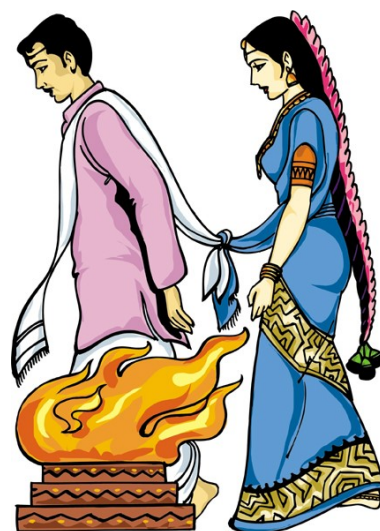
With a few exceptions, India is still the stronghold of the arranged marriage. Generally, the parents of a girl take the initiative. They approach a likely boy's family. A third party may conduct 'negotiations' – I say negotiations because the bride brings a dowry and the terms of this have to be settled to everyone's satisfaction. Horoscopes are exchanged. If they agree, then a very important hurdle is crossed. Plan can be made for an early wedding.



The wedding date has finally been fixed. Usually for a day, a month or two later. The bride's home is already a bustle of activity. Usually it is the bride's parents who bear all the expenses of the wedding. The bride's trousseau consists of clothes, jewellery and all or nearly all the requirements for her new house. The more affluent her family,

the more items in her trousseau. The dowry may include items like a refrigerator, a radio or even a car. The cost of the hall engaged for the ceremonies and the reception are to be borne by the girl's parents.

One can imagine the plight of the head of a family who has several daughters to be married off. All his life he struggles to provide a respectable dowry for each of them. After each one is married, he is probably ruined financially. The saying goes that even a maharajah will become a beggar if he has five daughters! And married off they must be for an unmarried grownup daughter in the house is a disgrace to the family.



Upto the early part of this century, Hindu weddings would last for five or six days. The first two or three days would consist of quaint ceremonies that were intended to allow the bride and groom to get to know each other. A swing which consists of a very large wooden seat (commodious enough for six) suspended by four iron chains plays an important part. The couple sit on it whilst the ladies of the family sing songs. The bride is a picture of shy modesty. Her eyes are demurely directed and her lap and she rarely responds to any sallies made by the groom though sometimes one might perceive a sly smile playing round her lips. Surrounding her and giving her moral support, is a bevy of young girls – school mates – who make pert innuendoes directed at the bridal pair and who appear to be enjoying themselves hugely.

Another ceremony which recalls the days of the child marriage is what is apparently a game. The couple pass a silver ball from one to the other. Each one tries to grab hold of it, while the other tries to pry it loose. The

bride is all blushing confusion at her mate's audacity.

Modern living has outdated the five-day



wedding. It lasts two days now or perhaps even just one. It used to be illegal to feed more than fifty guests at a time, during the recurring periods of acute shortage of food-grain supply. Relatives start arriving from all parts of India about a week before the wedding. Their accommodation and their comfort are the prime concern of the bride's parents lest they leave disgruntled with unkind remarks about the wedding. Close relatives are given gifts of silk saris and dhotis. They have to be fed varied food day and night.

Some religious ceremonies take place at the bride's place about four or five days before the wedding. The first ceremony consists of prayers to propitiate the spirits of ancestors. Priests, usually Brahmins, are summoned to conduct the entire ritual. They come in a group. Their sonorous chanting of Sanskrit verse is pleasant to hear. The next day, there is another short ceremony. The bride-to-be gets the gift of a beautiful sari and gold bangles from her family.

In North India, for the week preceding the wedding there is continuous music – songs are sung by the women in the family as well as by professional singers. In the South, there is an important ceremony on the eve of the wedding. The bridegroom and party would have arrived in the morning. In the evening, he is escorted by a large procession to the temple. Usually he rides in a florally decorated car. (The North Indian bridegroom usually rides a horse). A band precedes the procession. At the temple, he is presented with a suit of clothes, a watch and a ring by his father in law to be after a religious ceremony. **(To be continued)**

Malathy Sitaram was the first Asian to teach English in Wiltshire Schools and simultaneously, the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace. Now retired, she is just as busy.

