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Current affairs

Vaccines are here: A shot of Hope

by Anya Sitaram

On December 8, when 90-year-old Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to have the licenced Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19, there was a nationwide sigh of relief that there may a way out of the pandemic. Nurse May Parsons who administered the jab said there was light at the end of the tunnel. So poignant was the television footage, that Health Secretary Matt Hancock appeared tearful live on television. By middle of February, UK has met the milestone of vaccinating over 15 million people. As the second wave of the virus grips the UK vaccines are hailed as our only hope.

After years of making documentaries on deadly diseases in the developing world in which vaccines are the life-saving holy grail,

it felt surreal to witness scenes of celebration here in England at the roll out of an injection. So successful are vaccines that the diseases which they protect against have mostly disappeared. It brought to mind a documentary I produced a few years ago called "Meningitis: A Shot of Hope". Telling the story of MenAfrivac, a vaccine tailor-made for African meningitis, I recall debating with colleagues the title of the film. Often the last step in the documentary making process, titles are one of the most important and difficult decisions to make. Little did I know that the name we came up with in 2014, which seemed fitting to a tale of scientific endeavour, philanthropy and global collaboration would resonate here in the UK several years later.

Meningococcal Meningitis is highly contagious and kills about one in ten people who get it. Even with treatment, as many as a quarter of survivors suffer hearing loss, intellectual disability, or epilepsy. Meningitis A had caused repeated epidemics in sub-Saharan Africa—in a region known as "the meningitis belt" which stretches from Senegal to Ethiopia.

In 2007 we sent a film crew to Burkina Faso to tell the story of the search for a vaccine against Meningitis A. Our camera crew arrived in the middle of an epidemic that was to kill 4,000 people in Burkina Faso that year. We filmed health centres so overwhelmed by the sick and dying that patients were camped outside. A young woman lying on the ground outside one rural health centre told us how she was stricken with vomiting and a terrible headache. Worse still, her daughter who had also contracted the disease had died. There were desperate scenes of panic as people jostled to get emergency vaccinations, the only tool available to combat the disease. But the existing vaccine only gave protection for two or three years and did not work on children under the age of one.

However, there was a glimmer of hope. Across the border in Mali at the Centre for Vaccine Development in Bamako, a clinical trial for a new vaccine against Meningitis was under way. We filmed a two-year-old boy called Samba Coulibaly, one of the first children to receive the jab and the charismatic scientist leading the research Professor Samba Sow.

In 2014 I went to Mali to see the fruits of the vaccine research. The results of the latest trials showed that the new vaccine was safe and effective in children aged 9 months. Accompanied by Dr Marie-Pierre Preziosi, then director of the Meningitis Vaccine Project, our first port of call was at the home of little Samba, the toddler we had filmed seven years before. Now aged ten he and

his three older siblings had all had the MenAfrivac inoculation in 2011 as part of a mass vaccination campaign.

Dr Preziosi told me: "In those days way back 7 years ago we had absolutely no idea what would be the results and now only 7 years down the line we have more than 200 million people have received the vaccine across the entire meningitis belt".

It had been 7 years since vaccine trials had begun, but the efforts to find a vaccine had begun back in 1996 after Africa's worst meningitis epidemic in which 25,000 people died. African leaders called on the World Health Organization to urgently introduce a more effective and affordable vaccine. With little prospect of profit to interest Western pharmaceutical companies, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, set up the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP) a partnership between the World health Organization and the not-for-profit health organisation PATH. MVP partnered with the Indian vaccine manufacturer Serum Institute. With the technology for the vaccine given at virtually no cost by the US National Institutes of Health, the partnership was able produce vaccines at less than 50 cents a dose.

Cost was not the only obstacle to introducing the new vaccine. Just like the vaccine hesitancy swirling around COVID vaccines, rumours against MenAfrivac were rife. A champion for the cause was the diminutive figure of little Samba's mother. Having lost a sister to meningitis in a previous epidemic, she was a stalwart advocate for a vaccine.

At a community meeting in Mali's capital Bamako she was not afraid to tell the crowd: My child was vaccinated by Dr Sow's team.

Continued on page 3



Soumitra Chatterjee P4



Our Cappucino Kathal P5



Two Vaccines P10



Hindu Wedding P22

Editorially speaking Thanks to all our readers and contributors for making it possible to publish this issue with its interesting content. I specially thank all our contributors who have sent their submissions on time, which Malathy, the sub-editor, has been doing the sterling job of editing. Things have been changing very fast in the last few months and there is light at the end of the long dark tunnel. In the UK alone, more than fifteen million people have been given the vaccine already. In the rest of the world too vaccination programs have been of great success, despite many hurdles in obtaining the batches of vaccines and giving them to people rapidly. In this context we should all commend and congratulate the medical and scientific community who have been working on the massive vaccine projects tirelessly over the past year and bringing their vaccines to the market at record speed. Even though many people were sceptical about the vaccines for various reasons now we can see that the proportion of people who come forward to take the vaccine is rising and the rate of new infections are rapidly falling. Let’s hope that we will be able to reclaim our normal life soon by patiently waiting for that to happen gradually. As mentioned in the front-page article by our new contributor Anya Sitaram, one thing I would like to emphasise in this context is that these vaccines should reach poorer countries too as soon as possible rather than keeping it as a privilege for the richer countries alone, so the whole world will see the benefit of it and prevent the emergence of ferocious new variants that could infiltrate our lives once again. As many of you have known, it is a real challenge for us to run this magazine without much financial support. Our cost of acquiring and maintaining resources required to run the magazine is steadily increasing, so I would like to appeal to our readers and writers once again to help us by financially supporting us through long term sponsorships. As you may have noticed we are now receiving submissions from many younger generation writers and some of them are the children of our existing writers too. In this issue, you will find articles from Anya Sitaram who is our sub editor Malathy’s daughter and Kavita Mohan who is the daughter of our long-standing contributor Meenakshi Mohan. If this trend continues, it is a good sign that we are breaking generation barriers and becoming a magazine that welcomes writers from all generations. Please write to us as we always welcome your valuable feedback. Keep safe, stay well. Vijay Anand CONFLUENCE SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ISSN: 2633-4704 23 Cray Avenue, Orpington BR5 4AA United Kingdom Telephone: 01689 836 394 / 07801 569 640 MANAGING EDITOR Dr. Vijay Anand PhD, MRSC SUB-EDITOR Malathy Sitaram FOUNDER EDITOR Late Joe Nathan Editorial: confluenceuk@yahoo.com Design: Confluence Publishing Ltd The views expressed by interviewees or contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect Confluence editorial policy. No part of this publication or part of the contents thereof may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form without the express permission of the publisher in writing. © Copyright, Confluence Publishing 2021	Contents		
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New Dawn in the United States

The Inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris

by Kavita Mohan

*We will rebuild, reconcile and recover
and every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will
emerge,
battered and beautiful
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
if only we're brave enough to be it*

- Excerpted from "The Hill We Climb" by Amanda Gorman, Inaugural Poem, January 20, 2021

Amanda Gorman's healing words rang clear and true across a fractured nation on a bright, blustery winter day, resonating with millions of Americans who felt that they could at last take a collective breath of relief as President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were sworn into the White House. To paraphrase from Ronald Reagan's frequently quoted inaugural address of 40 years earlier, Inauguration Day in America is a day that is both a miracle and mundane. Mundane because it is a ceremony that occurs every four years, and a miracle because the routine, peaceful transfer of power is a foundational bedrock of American democracy that should never be taken for granted. The "miracle" of Inauguration Day 2021 was particularly hard earned, coming as it did on the heels of a violent and unprecedented insurrection on January 6 that was carried out by mobs of Trump supporters who had been fed a steady diet of disinformation concerning the outcome of the 2020 elections by none other than the 45th President himself.

The day had a preternatural calm. Twitter had banned Trump's account shortly after the insurrection and the nation had been spared the unrelenting cacophony of his tweets for several days. Amanda Gorman's exquisite recitation of her poem, "The Hill We Climb," was the clear winner of

the day. Biden's call for unity was poignant and sincere. The swearing in of Kamala Harris as Vice President by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was an extraordinary and historic moment for the entire country; a signal to young girls everywhere that there are no limits to their dreams or ambitions. However, the celebrations were somber, not only because of the recently attempted coup, but also because the specter of 400,000 dead Americans hung heavy over the day. Biden's inaugural ceremonies started on January 19 with a nationwide tribute to those who died due to the pandemic. The inauguration itself was not followed by an evening full of glitzy inaugural balls, with their closed guest lists and exclusive tickets. Rather, a nationwide televised celebration honored every day American heroes, such as teachers and those fighting the pandemic at the frontline.

The day was also orchestrated to set the tone for how Americans should expect the incoming administration to behave. Press Secretary Jen Psaki, in her first White House press briefing, emphasized a focus on "truth and transparency" to "rebuild trust with the American people." President Biden also signed a combination of 17 executive orders, memoranda, directives, and letters within hours of taking office, a swift and immediate repudiation of the prior administration, and a signal to the world that his administration would focus on science and evidence-based policy making and seek to restore America's place among its global allies. These actions were intended to begin addressing what the administration has called the "four overlapping and compounding crises" – the pandemic, the economy, climate, and racial justice – and included actions such as ending the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, revoking the permit for the Keystone pipeline, reversing the travel ban targeting primarily Muslim-majority countries, stopping the construction of the border wall at the U.S.-Mexican border, and taking steps towards creating a coordinated and effective federal response to COVID-19, among others.

As of the writing of this article, Biden

has enacted more than three dozen executive actions, with multiple orders relating to the federal response on COVID-19, providing economic relief, addressing the climate crisis, reversing Trump-era immigration policies, revoking the Pentagon's ban on transgendered people serving in the military, and taking steps on racial equity, among others. Biden has also created a task force to reunite families that American authorities under the Trump administration separated, one of this country's most shameful and inhumane policies in recent years. And while many of Biden's key priorities have been to reverse Trump-era policies, Biden has been noticeably silent with regard to the former president himself, even as Trump has been impeached for a second time due to his role inciting the insurrection on January 6. Meanwhile, Biden has continued to push lawmakers to move forward on his economic stimulus plan, which includes a direct payment of 1400 dollars to most Americans.

There is still much work to be done to ensure that the country continues on a path towards progress and in order to control the pandemic. There will be no perfect solutions. Conservatives, of course, will find the policies of this administration leaning too far to the left, while progressives will say Biden has not gone far enough. However, the administration has, in these early days, acted with purpose and conviction to steer this country on a better course. In the words of Amanda Gorman,

*And yes we are far from polished.
Far from pristine.
But that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect.
We are striving to forge a union with
purpose,
to compose a country committed to all
cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man.*



Kavita Mohan is an 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

Vaccines are here – A shot of hope

"Many people said we were selling our kids' blood; others said that we were sterilizing our children. My kid is ten years old now with no problems."

Overcoming the suspicion of the community was vital to ensure the widespread acceptance of the vaccination. Dr Samba Sow realised the importance of gaining the trust of women, Imams and village elders.

"Every time you talk about introducing a new vaccine, you are talking about training vaccinators, training the field workers, and training families, parents, on what is the vaccine and what is the importance of the vaccination."

The fact that meningitis A no longer threatens lives is testament to the project's success. The vaccine has since been introduced in several routine immunisation programmes to ensure long term elimination of the disease.

Dr Samba Sow who cannot forget the fear and deaths from repeated epidemics said:

"I'm starting to see the end of the tunnel, I'm starting to see the sun, because I have seen children dying from meningitis in this country, not a long time ago and I know that this vaccine is a good vaccine. We made it, we did this let's celebrate this."

As countries start to inoculate and the NHS rolls out the biggest vaccination programme in its history, developed countries must ensure that vaccines reach the poorest regions. Leaving them out could risk the development of new strains that could undermine the effectiveness of our vaccines and diminish our Shot of Hope.



Anya Sitaram is a former ITN Health and Science Correspondent, BBC Tomorrow's World presenter and BBC World news anchor. She now runs award winning production company Rockhopper Media.

Obituary

4

Remembering Soumitra Chatterjee, an unforgettable actor

by Sunayana Panda

Soumitra Chatterjee was 85 years old, so his fans knew that his chances of coming out of the hospital alive were quite slim. He was already not in perfect health when he tested positive for Covid-19 and was admitted to the hospital, but everyone hoped against hope. And yet, in spite of knowing all this, the news of his death was a blow to Bengalis all over the world. All his fans, whether Bengali or not, felt as if it was a personal loss, as if someone they knew very well, almost a family member, had died.

Soumitra was a very good actor who had the good fortune to be cast by Satyajit Ray and he brought to life roles which have become immortal.

But that was not the only identity he had. He had acted in 300 films and in later years he was cast in many ordinary films in very stereotyped roles too. The majority of films in which he acted in the

1960s and 70s were ones where he played the role of a middle-class man who has an aspiration to be in a better position. On screen he was a hero in the true sense, a man who had some strong values, an idealism and human qualities which placed him above the general mass.

By playing roles where Soumitra Chatterjee projected before the common man how he could rise above himself socially and psychologically, he became a part of the psyche of the common man. Fortunately for us, many of his old films are now on Youtube and one can see them at one's leisure. These films which were once playing in cinema halls on large screens are now available to us in the comforts of our homes.

Soumitra started off his film career with Satyajit Ray but his real commercial success came with his second film which was an adaptation of Tagore's story "Kshudita Pashan" (Hungry Stones). Directed by Tapan Sinha, that film was a huge box-office success and it catapulted the actor to the position of a star. After this he started getting offers to act in films which were then considered as commercial films but which would look like art films today. He acted with several good directors such as Tapan Sinha, Mrinal

Sen, Ajoy Kar and his performance in these films were of a very high order.

Ajoy Kar's "Saat Pake Bandha" and "Parineeta" show Soumitra as a very capable actor. The stories were beautiful and they were also well filmed. In "Saat Pake Bandha" he was paired with Suchitra Sen, the then reigning queen of Bengali cinema and in "Parineeta" with the then up coming Moushumi Chatterjee. A third film directed by Ajoy Kar was "Atal Jaler Ahwan" where the well-known actress Chhaya Debi played a mother-like figure to Soumitra's character and this film was also a success.

Even though many know him as a romantic hero, for several generations of

slipping into Alzheimer's while his son, played by Prosenjit, cannot do anything for him. This film too was very well received by critics as well as the public. Another very interesting film is "Punascha", where he plays a celebrity writer.

Soumitra has admitted in many interviews that he had to work to earn a living even in his old age because Bengali cinema could not pay the kind of money that other actors earn in Mumbai. Apparently, he himself did not want to ask producers for more money because he felt that they would not have been able to afford to pay him more than they did. Aparna Sen said

in a conversation with a news channel that she scolded him for this because she felt he should have been paid what he deserved.

Soumitra Chatterjee was given a state funeral and his body was displayed so that the general public could come and pay their respects.

They turned up in

large numbers and there was extensive media coverage. It was very touching to see how his body was followed by thousands of admirers to the cremation ground, in a peaceful procession with people carrying placards with his photos and singing his songs.

This mass outpouring of grief shows us that cinema has become a part of our collective consciousness. In our collective minds we share the experience of watching those stories of which he was a part, so in the actor's death we experience that collective grief. Through his films which we loved we are connected to each other. This is the true role of the arts: to connect people through the common enjoyment of a piece of artistic work.

Soumitra Chatterjee had a very full life. He acted in cinema and theatre, he wrote poetry and he edited a magazine for 20 years. Let us celebrate his wonderful life and see what we can learn from it instead of being in caught in grief and nostalgia.



Sunayana Panda is a writer and an actress. She divides her time between London and Pondicherry in India.



Bengalis Soumitra will always be "Felu-da" the detective. Satyajit Ray wrote detective stories and when he made them into films he cast Soumitra in the main role. Sandip Ray, Satyajit Ray's son, made films based on his father's detective novels and cast other actors because Soumitra was too old to play that role by then. But Soumitra's Felu-da remains unforgettable as the original Felu-da.

He was a rare actor who had a career which lasted for 6 decades. His career was so long that one can easily divide his acting life into three distinct phases: the young Soumitra, the middle-aged Soumitra and the old Soumitra, as if we were looking at three different actors. In his old age he acted in some noteworthy films, the most popular being "Belaseshe". It is the story of an old man who decides to divorce his wife after 50 years of marriage because he wants to feel free. He is asked to spend some time with his wife so that a reconciliation is possible. The couple goes for a holiday but with all their children and their spouses. At the end they realise how much a part of each other's lives they have been and the divorce is called off.

After this Soumitra acted in a film called "Mayurakshi" where he is an old man

J. Jayamohan's *Oru Cappuccino Kadhal* - short movie An appreciation by Nesa Arumugam

Some films say it as it is. ***Oru Cappuccino Kadhal*** by Dr J. Jayamohan is one of them. Without flourishes and frills, the film is beautiful in the simplicity of its message.

This is the story of two young people, Akilan and Meera, in Sydney, Australia, lovingly badgered by their mothers to meet each other with the prospect of it ending in matrimony. Reluctantly respectful, they meet for a Cappuccino and Green Juice. Second generation migrant children face conflict of their new peer environment of independent thinking with their own ingrained conservative values of customary deference to parents and elders.

These two young people manage to manoeuvre through this conflict through their own strength of character and adherence to the truth about themselves and to each other. The first meeting of Akilan and Meera is

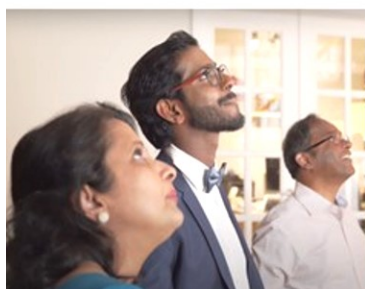
with the oh-so-modern reason of "we grew apart". Akilan is a Kambaramayanam-proud, "I am a proud Tamilian", yet without the rigid preconception of what is 'right' and 'wrong'. The story of their natural gravitation towards each other is so telling of this second generation of young Tamils. They are prepared to listen to their parents up to a point. Being bold without brashness is good thing.

The unconscious physical moving towards each other was introduced beautifully by Meera showing Akilan her weekend Food Stylist pictures. It just was so natural of two modern young people. Janarthan Kumarakuruparan and Dhamayanthi Sritharan are delightful in their roles. And the later romantic meetings collage was done with stylish restraint (though the saree-wearing for walks in the park was a little over the top). The marriage proposal

the safe-distance anxiety of Devayani Pasupati as Meera's mother.

Oru Cappuccino Kadhal by Dr Jayamohan, already a known-name in Tamil theatre in Australia, is a simple, feel-good movie. Its message of "give old-fashioned arranged meetings" a chance to the young and "give young people a chance to build their own values" to parents is a timely one.

The short film like the short story, is a demanding genre. It requires deft handling to ring true. Without the luxury of time to develop a theme in all its nuances, short- film makers have to cultivate the art of pithy brevity to get their message across, without compromising elegance in the telling. ***Oru Cappuccino Kadhal*** meets this challenge creditably.



refreshing in its slight awkwardness of conversation – each trying to be casual in their mutual "bowing to the parents' wish" agreement, under duress, to this arranged coffee meeting. Meera, honest re her unconventional 4 year free relationship with a boyfriend (with whom, horror of horrors, she went to "Italy" and so is not marriage material in the Maami Market for Arranged Marriage Alliances), lays her cards on the table, giving him first option to refuse. That relationship had ended

scene was played out to perfection by Meera and Akilan, with Meera showing that no girl is too 'modern' to be completely disarmed by a proposal of marriage with love, and Akilan doing the norm of going on his knees to propose, a la Western mode.

The script lines and acting kudos go to Sharmini Storer as the mother of Akilan. A natural. She is the iconic "Ceylonese maami" that many can relate to. In the same way most children would relate to



Nesa Arumugam is a writer of over 10 books, has produced a number of stage productions over the last 45 years: public speaker on Indian culture and dance, lover of movies. She lives in Melbourne and continues to write.

AFRICAN & ASIAN CELEBRITIES IN 'VANITY FAIR' IN VICTORIAN & EDWARDIAN ENGLAND

By Kusum Pant Joshi

In early December 2019, South Asian Cinema Foundation (SACF), a London-based voluntary charity dedicated to film education and building bridges between diverse communities to promote community cohesion and wellbeing, started work on an exciting new project funded by UK's Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Titled: "Selective Inclusion: African & Asian celebrities in London's 'Vanity Fair' magazine (1868-1914)", it is a heritage project on personalities from Africa & Asia featured in 'Vanity Fair' in the Victorian and early Edwardian era.

Today, 'Vanity Fair' is an American magazine, but in the period undertaken by SACF in its ongoing project, it was a purely English weekly published from London. Started by Thomas Gibson Bowles, it was an elite weekly focused on the vanities of Victorian and early Edwardian England with articles and reviews on social, political and literary themes as well as puzzles and games. Its attraction increased when, a year down the line, Bowles started presenting a full-page caricature in colour of an important public figure in his 'Vanity Fair' every week. Most celebrities caricatured were members of the royal family, statesmen, diplomats, writers or artists from Britain and Europe for which Bowles commissioned celebrated artists such as Pellegrini from Italy and Leslie Ward or 'Spy' from Britain. Each caricature was accompanied by a catchy biography and soon it began to be considered an honour to be caricatured in 'Vanity Fair'. Moreover, these caricatures became very popular collector's items and were hung as framed decorative pieces in homes not only in Britain but across the globe.

The HLF grant to SACF is to enable the organisation to take the lead in running a community project that aims to focus on and highlight, not the British and European celebrities in 'Vanity Fair', but the far less known African and Asian celebrities featured within its covers during the period specified in the project title.

Based on research at the British Library and published works, SACF has prepared a complete list of 28 celebrities. Within this number, the largest chunk of 13 dignitaries is from India, followed by 7 celebrities from various parts of Africa. Out of the remaining 8 celebrities, 3 are from China, 2 from Thailand and 1 each from Japan Korea and Malaysia respectively. These celebrities were mostly either royals or ex-royals, or were connected with ruling families as diplomats

and administrators or they were royals as well as distinguished sports personalities. SACF's first task was to recruit at least 15 adult community volunteers. They were selected from various age groups ranging from secondary school pupils to young and older adults from diverse backgrounds, fields and interests. They were then introduced to the British Library and provided opportunities to gain practical experience on how to locate, access and collate research

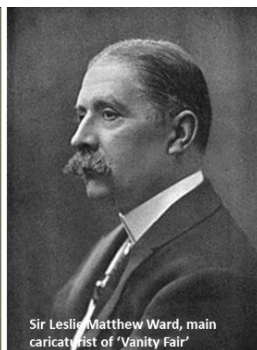


material and resources relevant to their heritage project.

SACF had barely completed their volunteers' training at the Library, when Covid arrived and threw a spanner in the works by placing severe restrictions on free public movement. But, thanks to technological development, SACF managed to forge ahead despite this



Thomas Gibson Bowles
Founder, 'Vanity Fair'



Sir Leslie Matthew Ward, main
caricaturist of 'Vanity Fair'



First non-European celebrity,
Nawab Mansur Ali Khan
featured in 'Vanity Fair' in 1870

scourge. Instead of holding training events in external venues, SACF ran them with equal success via Zoom from the safety of the homes of the organisers, trainers and participants.

Moreover, by rapidly embracing innovation technology, SACF enabled itself to cast its volunteers' net wider than ever before. They were able to stretch out and include volunteers from all over the globe. As volunteers from countries as widely scattered as Britain, India, Hong Kong, Thailand and USA were drawn to the project, SACF received volunteer input in different ways and from various places. These include portraits of celebrities excluded from the project from a UK artist-cum-GP, drawings produced by secondary school pupils from Bangkok, Thailand, a research-based biography on one of our project celebrities from an American volunteer, and regular critical appraisal/ constructive comments on

our project biographies from two volunteers in India. Recently, a film expert from Bangalore, India has volunteered to interview Indian experts and descendants of two listed in our project.

SACF has also interviewed descendants and experts on some prominent celebrities listed in the project. They include descendants of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, Prof Lyn Innes, a direct descendant of Mansur Ali Khan,

Nawab Nizam of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa, Narisa Chakrabongse, a descendant from the royal family of Thailand and eminent writer and human rights campaigner, Zerbano Gifford who has studied the life of London-based Parsi barrister and MP, Sir M. M. Bhowmaggree (1851-1933).

Besides training volunteers and empowering them through relevant training, SACF worked innovatively with London primary school pupils. After familiarising a batch of about 100 pupils with the basics of the heritage project, SACF worked collaboratively with some school teachers to run two highly successful interactive workshops for the pupils on cartoon making by a professional from London's Cartoon Museum.

SACF has a busy schedule in the months ahead. Some of the main outcomes due for completion include: a documentary film on the project findings; public exhibitions of all 28 'Vanity Fair' caricatures and biographies to highlight project findings; organising a pageant by primary school pupils; and producing a book on the 28 celebrities in the project.

How and when SACF will be carry out the remaining work, depends on how Covid pans out in the coming months. If Science triumphs and brings this virulent virus under control, SACF will be able to rapidly share the findings of its enthusiastic team of volunteers with the wider public in the months ahead. If victory is delayed, SACF will again be challenged to find new ways to complete its work of throwing light on some forgotten, but significant snippets of Britain's shared heritage with parts of Africa, India, China, Japan, Malaysia, Korea and Thailand.

Dr. Kusum Pant Joshi is a Social Historian, Researcher and Writer. Kusum was Project Manager for Publications & Digital Media in London's Central Office of Information (COI). She is presently Chief Researcher in a Heritage Project awarded to the South Asian Cinema Foundation in Dec 2019 by UK's Heritage Lottery Fund.



OPEN THE GATE

Lakshmi Kannan

'It's just a viral fever,' said the doctor. 'He should be fine in about two days,' he added, glancing at his patrician patient whose eyes were firmly closed like he was asleep.

"Really?" he said suddenly, eyes still closed.

'But of course, Mr. Subramanian! Who can keep a tough civil engineer like you in bed for long? We'll see you soon, walking in Lal Bagh and may be playing golf,' laughed the genial doctor

Subramanian nodded. The doctor picked up his bag and waved his hand as he went out of the outer door.

Matangi and their son Ganesh saw him off at the portico, waiting till his car drove over the length of the long driveway, past the huge wrought iron gate to turn into the main road. Their personal guard closed the gate and went towards the eastern side of the garden. Matangi felt Ganesh's arm on her shoulder. She patted his hand and smiled, 'Come Gani, your Appa will be fine.'

Ponni tiptoed to his room.

'Ponni,' Subramanian called out softly.

'Thatha* How did you know it's me?' she said, surprised. 'Your eyes are closed!' He smiled, whispering 'I can tell by your footfalls, my darling little girl. I'll recognise them from a mile.'

She went near his bedside and asked, 'Shall I massage your head, Thatha?' He nodded. Very gently, she massaged his brow, his temples, next his cheeks before she focussed on his head. She softly rotated her forefingers over his scalp. It felt so sticky. Has grandma oiled his hair? No, it wasn't oily. Thatha was perspiring. But why? This is Bangalore in November, with a cool breeze blowing around everywhere. She gently patted his head dry with a soft towel.

'Thatha?'

'Yes kanna?'

'Are you feeling hot?'

'No. It always feels so good when you massage my head, aah...'

Matangi came in holding a tray with two flasks. She kept it on the bedside table. 'Will you have some warm milk, just a sip?' she asked, bending down.

Subramanian moved his head sideways, eyes closed.

'All right. Perhaps a little later', she said, watching Ponni massaging his head assiduously. 'Like the massage?'

He nodded. 'Ponni works her magic with her hands,' he said. 'Listen Matangi.'

'Tell me.'

'Ask the guard to open the outer iron gate.'

'Do you know it's seven in the evening now?' said Matangi, gently holding his hand. 'People may prowl in, along with

stray cattle and we won't even get to know. I had to send the guard home tonight because he has some work. Want some soup?'

He shook his head sideways again.

Ponni made a silent sign to say that she wanted to talk to her, signalling that they should go out for a moment. Matangi followed Ponni out of the room.

'Pattimma,** Thatha's scalp is so sticky! Looks like he is perspiring, even in this cool weather. Shouldn't you tell the doctor?' she asked in hushed tone.

'Really? Let me check' said Matangi, rushing into the room. His head was perspiring a lot. Strange. Matangi wiped his head with a soft towel. 'What did you say?' she asked, seeing his lips move. She bent low, her ear almost brushing his lips.

'You're singing!' she exclaimed, very surprised.

He nodded. Gradually, she could make out the sounds, '*Endaro Mahanubhavulu...*' In the silence of the room, they heard the faint notes of this Tyagaraja Pancharatna Krithi floating out of the bed. Matangi knew her husband's passion for music, but why sing now, when he has fever, with perspiration flowing down from his scalp.

'That's very nice,' she said, 'but you mustn't strain yourself now. Sing tomorrow, when you feel a bit strong,' she urged.

The song continued, albeit falteringly. Then it stopped.

'Matangi,' he whispered, turning towards her with his eyes closed. 'Ask Krishnan to open the iron gate.'

'I told you it's past seven in the evening. It's not...'

'Just open the gate. It's obstructing me. I want to go...'

'What!'

Matangi exchanged a scared look with Ponni. She got out of the room and returned with Ganesh.

'Appa,' he said, bending down to talk. 'I've asked Krishnan to open the gate.'

It seems you were singing! See, just like the doctor said, you're getting better, hmm?' He stroked his father's hands.

Subramanian nodded, a faint smile playing on his face. He resumed his singing as his family watched, not knowing if they should let him sing. After a while he stopped, looking tired. Grabbing the moment, Matangi asked, 'Will you have some soup?' He took a few sips.

'All right Appa. Get some sleep,' said Ganesh. He opened the outer door and closed it quietly behind him. From the portico he saw Krishnan standing outside in the garden and signalled him to close the gate. Ganesh went inside the house from the front door, and returned to his

father's room from an inner door, noiselessly.

'Gani?' Ganesh looked surprised. How could his father tell that he was back in his room?

'Yes Appa?'

'Krishnan is disobedient! He has again closed the gate. Sack him the first thing in the morning!' he whispered.

They stared at the supine figure, aghast. The gate was a good five hundred meters away from the driveway of house. Even they couldn't hear a thing from that distance. Then how could Appa, behind the closed doors of this room, and behind his closed eyes...?

'Appa...'

'No, no! Do as I ask you to. Get the gate opened instantly. Also open the outer door of this room. It's suffocating. I want to go,' said Subramanian. 'I don't want any obstructions.'

Gani got up and opened the outer door of the room. The night was pitch dark now. He went out and walked the entire length of the long driveway and opened the heavy iron gate. When he returned, he saw the scared look on his mother's face. They relaxed on hearing the soft sounds of singing again, in a rasping voice.

'Aah, it's nice that you've opened the gate now,' he remarked, behind his closed eyes.

The family watched, stunned with disbelief. The room had taken on an eerie atmosphere. Subramanian's singing went on in a low voice. And then stopped. They waited for him to continue with his singing. It was a long wait.

Ponni looked at the still, motionless figure on the bed. She hurried near the bed, brought her lips close to his ears. 'Thatha? This is me, Ponni. Ponni. Please say something Thatha,' she said. Her voice broke. Ganesh gathered her in his arms and led her out of the room.

*Thatha: Grandfather

**Pattimma: Grandmother



Lakshmi Kannan, also known by her Tamil pen name 'Kaaveri' has published twenty-five books till date that include poems, novels, short stories and translations. She was a Resident Writer at the International Writing Program, Iowa, USA; a Charles Wallace Trust Fellow at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and a Sahitya Akademi Writer-in-Residence attached to the English Department of Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

The Carnatic Conundrum

by Parthiban Manoharan

What is the purpose of Art? There are two opposing views where one side argues that art is purely aesthetic in its purpose, , it is an experience that allows both the performer and the audience member to step into an experience mostly termed as “spiritual” in nature. The other views art as a reflection of the society; The art and the society coexists where one drives the change of the other and that the beauty of the art is realized in this evolutionary process; else the art is irrelevant or sets itself for irrelevance eventually. While the degrees in which these views apply can vary from one art form to another, the reality as always lays somewhere in between, in the grey, which is where I find myself. I am of the view that art being a product of evolution itself, needs to balance the beauty of its form with the reflection it can be of the society. Else, how does art advance? Aesthetics cannot kindle progress, it amplifies it provides convenience in reaching the receiver. With this lens I want to argue that Carnatic music, a South Indian “classical” form, has lost its touch with reality and it’s about time that the industry as a whole awakens, self-evaluates and identifies ways in which it needs to be inclusive if it seeks relevance within this day and in the future.

So what is my issue with Carnatic music? Simply put, it has become an art form that is operative under a bubble. And what bubble you may ask, and that is projecting itself as an art form that is purely aesthetic and spiritual in nature. This spirituality is rooted in the Saivaite and Vaishnavait concept of “Bhakti”, devotion to the supreme, and “Saranagathi”, total surrender, requiring the practitioner to adhere to this overall movement and subscribe to the sense of “purity” that requires to fulfill this ultimate goal. Compositions chosen for a Carnatic concert are primarily by the “Trinity”, Tyagarajah, Mutthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri, whose works are in addition to its melodic and rhythmic exuberance ooze with lyrical delight focussed on a particular deity that the song focusses upon. It is also important to note that the Trinity, even though lived most of their lives in the town of Tiruvarur, Tamil Nadu, the Tamil language speaking State of India, their compositions are predominantly in Telugu, owing to their origin from Andhra Pradesh,

and also in Sanskrit, part and parcel of learning the Vedas as part of their upbringing being born into the Brahmin, priestly class/caste. Given that many of the contemporary musicians come from the Guru-Shishya parampara, teacher-student traditions, of the Trinity, Telugu became the language and the compositions of the Trinity dominating the Carnatic stage.

Around the late 80’s a movement began,

Carnatic music has lost its touch with reality and it’s about time that the industry as a whole awakens, self-evaluates and identifies ways in which it needs to be inclusive if it seeks relevance within this day and in the future.

which still continues till this date, to advocate for the representation of

compositions in Tamil on the stage given that the home base of Carnatic music is in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. There is a famous scene from the movie Sindhu Bhairavi by the legendary director K Balchander, where the main protagonist JKB, being a Carnatic musician is challenged during his concert by an audience member, the fellow protagonist Sindhu, that singing compositions in Telugu alienates a vast majority of the general population, and that the success of the art is ultimately its ability to reach the ears of the laymen. As the movie progresses, JKB understand the power of language and sings a composition by the celebrated Tamil poet

Bharathi at the shores of the Arabian Sea. Mesmerized by this, a fisherman gifts him a conch, the ultimate validation that an artist can receive. Even though Tamil compositions have adorned the Carnatic stage more frequently in recent time, they tend to be fillers or crowd pleasers than given the extensive treatment that a composition by a Trinity would get.

Make no mistake that Carnatic music compositions are not limited to the Trinity. The Devadasi – Nattuvanars, and the Nadaswaram players, collectively a ritualistic ensemble consisting of vocalists, instrumentalist and dancers of a form called Sadir, performing at temples, rituals and royal courts, produced many compositions specifically in the themes of love, eroticism and anguish called Javalis. In fact Devadasis were highly regarded for their expertise and wealth of a variety of compositions. So were the Nadaswaram, long wind instrument, players who themselves provided a unique dimension to art of improvisation, Raga alapana. Kindled by pre-independence Nationalist movements that used art as a tool to propagate a National identity that is “pure” and “sacred”, traditional music and Sadir underwent a transformation where Bhakti became the forefront and all other aspects sidelined. Sadir was appropriated into Bharathanatyam while Traditional music transformed into Carnatic music, upheld by the compositions of the Trinity. While the expertise and skills of the Devadasi – Nattuvanars, and the Nadaswaram players were derived, the artists themselves were sidelined and eventually completely removed from what became a “sacred” concert space. In the next edition I will explore how these factors continue to impact how the music is presented today and prevents it from evolving to the needs of the time it exists in.

Parthiban Manoharan is a Capital Markets Professional from Canada interested in exploring the arts, culture and technology and it's impact on marginalized communities.



Ideal Couple

by Subhash Chandra

They were envied by friends and admired by neighbours. Nobody in the Housing Complex had ever heard a fractious sound emanating from their ground floor flat – not even the immediate neighbours. Not that they did not have arguments, but they never raised voices, nor allowed tempers to reach the tipping point. While resolving an issue, if the tone of one got edgy, the other would concede the point. And then they touched their ring fingers – a private code signifying all well. For Lavanya and Manav home was a warm, relaxing space. Thanks to the Covenant they had entered into which they practised in letter and spirit.

Manav had become a marriage-counsellor of sorts among friends and colleagues in the Ministry of Commerce office. One day one of his close friends, Puneet, asked Manav to meet him at Café Coffee Day in Connaught Place on his way back home from office. As the two settled at a table, Manav observed his friend’s face was careworn. “My life is a veritable hell,” Puneet said. “Why?” “Every time Kirti and I have a minor argument, it turns into a rancorous battle. She’s always on a short fuse and flies off the handle over non-issues. I don’t really know what to do.” “Ignore.” “What?” “Yes. You yourself said they are non-issues. Then why should you get exercised over them?” “That’s easier said than done. She hurls at me rapier barbs that bruise and cut.” “Puneet, remember this, always: most of the time women don’t know what they gabble. Never take them seriously and ...” Puneet took his first sip of Mocha gone cold and asked Manav to complete the sentence he had left hanging in the air. “and ...” Manav resumed, lowering his voice conspiratorially, “*Entre nous, women are dense. Treat them as such.*” A puckish smile cavorted in Manav’s eyes. Puneet’s admiration for Manav had soared. They shook hands and parted. “Thanks a ton, Buddy,” said Puneet.

#

One day Lavanya hosted lunch for her close friends when Manav was away to Indore to meet his parents. In the post-

lunch chat, her friends gushed over Lavanya’s married life. “You are so lucky!” “Yes, three of us here, I included, are divorced.” “Yours is a fairy tale marriage.” “Both of you should jointly author a book on ‘How to Make Marriage Work.’” “Good idea.” “It will be a runaway success!”

Then Corona Virus struck the world. After a couple of months, Lavanya’s mother – on the cusp of ninety -- who lived alone looked after by a full-time maid, caught the Virus. It was Sunday and both Lavanya and Manav were at home. “Manav, we have to be with her. Shall we leave after lunch?” He did not respond. “Hey Manav, I’m waiting.” “But the maid is there.” “She has got it too.” “Oh...then both of us will also get it” Lavanya looked at him incredulously. “Do you mean we leave her to die without medical care? She’s my mother for heaven’s sake.” “We can arrange Online admission for her in a private hospital.” Lavanya flared up. How can you be so callous?” A troubled silence sprawled between them. Then Lavanya burst out, “You go to hell. I am going alone.” The Covenant went flying through the window. She packed a bag, called for an Uber taxi and left.

Having debated in his mind for two days, Manav drove to his Mother-in-law’s house in Vasant Kunj. He started climbing the stairs.

First floor: He paused and reflected. *Whatever happened to my practical sense? I’ve co-morbidity of diabetes. And to make it worse, my haemoglobin is low. That makes me extra vulnerable.* But he continued the climb.

Second floor: He stopped and turned over the situation in his mind. *If I don’t join Lavanya, the consequences will be fraught. And all that I have done for*

the old woman over the years will be wiped off.

Third floor: He stood in front of the door. *Inside looms death. Should I go in? Once I catch the Virus, I am done for. I will not be able to pull through it for sure.* He came down the stairs with soft but hurried steps and reached the ground floor. A whirlwind of chaos raged in his mind. The marriage counsellor was at a loss what to do! After a while, he went up again. Standing in front of the door, he reflected. *I have looked after all the affairs of the old woman over the years and she treats me like her son. Her two sons, settled in the States have not visited her even once in seven years. To assuage their guilt they have been loading her with money and she has about ten million in fixed deposits. If I am not by her side at this time, I will lose Lavanya, for she will certainly walk out on me. And, I will lose the huge pile of money the old woman has decided to leave to me.*

He extended his hand to ring the bell, but quickly drew it back, as if he had touched a live wire.

The fool that I am ... The fool Do I want to commit suicide? Is ten million the price I have put on my life? What use will the money be to my corpse lying on the floor, ears and nostrils stuffed with cotton wool? As for Lavanya ... it will not matter.

He turned swiftly and started going down. He was on the second step when the door flung open and on the threshold stood Lavanya. “Don’t come up a third time. Don’t ever come here,” she hissed -- her face livid and eyes cinders – and slammed the door.

One of the sons had got CCTV system installed for the security of their mother by paying an Indian company Online, but not informed Lavanya.



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, 4 books of criticism and several research articles.

A Tale of Two Vaccines

by Suresh Subrahmanyam

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

A few days ago, we were greeted with the news that India had launched two vaccines to combat the dreaded Covid19. We have been living with CV19 for almost a year now and the virus seems almost like one of the family pets. Just when we were beginning to think no power on earth is going to shift this stubborn pestilence from our lives, along comes this dramatic announcement at the dawn of 2021. The present dispensation in New Delhi have an uncanny sense of timing and what better time to unveil these two 'magic bullets.'

That was the way the script should have read. Only, it didn't. One of the two vaccines, Covishield, produced in collaboration with UK's Oxford-AstraZeneca had ticked all the right boxes. The problem was with the other vaccine, Covaxin, produced in India. This vaccine is still in the trial stage and it was premature to announce its state of readiness. Naturally, a flaming row erupted. The Opposition went into overdrive criticizing the Government for its alleged unseemly haste. The Government retaliated and the head of the beleaguered vaccine company went on national television, in righteous indignation, castigating all those who dared throw stones at the company that was doing yeoman's service with no thought of pelf.

What ought to have been a rah-rah moment for the Indian medical profession turned out to be a PR nightmare. The Government's medical arm was scrambling around offering involved explanations which complicated matters further. This could have been handled with finesse, instead of making needless announcements which left more questions unanswered. Everything could still turn out well, and we may be on our way to getting the vaccines out to our citizens. After all, the world has been patting India on the back for its overall handling of the pandemic. And we are reputed to be the vaccine makers to the world. I then decided I should talk to my personal physician and get the lowdown on what he felt about *l'affaire vaccine*. We connected with each other on Zoom and I proceeded to pepper him with inconvenient questions.

'Good morning Doc,' I commenced cheerily. What is it with patients that when they face their doctors, invariably they become overly familiar. I continued, 'You

must be very busy, but thanks for giving me this appointment.' At this point he interrupted me.

'What seems to be the trouble? I did not get an advance briefing from my Secretary on your complaint.' He sounded a bit peeved, unless I was vastly mistaken.



'Unless I am vastly mistaken, you sound a bit peeved Doc. Are you feeling all right?' I injected just the right amount of caring concern in my voice. Since we were on Zoom, I affected a worried frown.

'It's just that I have many patients waiting, so we should get straight to the heart of the matter.' The Doc sounded quite curt.

'Heart of the matter, eh? Tell you what, Doc. The old ticker seems to be in perfect working order. BP, pulse, oxygenation, all pretty much up to scratch. I have already jabbed myself with all the other normal flu vaccines. I've got arms like pin cushions, as Tony Hancock so memorably put it. Since you keep tapping your pencil restlessly on your front teeth, let me get straight to the point. What is your take on the relative merits of these two vaccines? Come on Doc, out with it.' I put him on the spot.

'Is this what you fixed an appointment for? And who the hell is Tony Hancock? No wonder I didn't get your file. Look, I've got patients who are genuinely suffering from all manner of ailments. And you want to chat with me about Covid vaccines? All you have to do is watch the news channels. The finest doctors speaking in flawless Oxbridge accents, You can get all the dope from them, free of charge. Why waste your time and money?' He was really beside himself.

I rushed in before he disconnected. 'Hang on, Doc. You are missing the point. Very shortly, I will be lining up to get a shot of one of these two vaccines. Is it unreasonable to ask my personal physician which one I should opt for? As for Tony

Hancock, just Google his name and *Blood Donor*. Brilliant British comedian of the '50s and '60s. Ah, I see your tea has arrived. Take a sip or two and simmer

down. Careful you don't spill any on your lovely, silk hand-woven tie.'

My Doc visibly calmed down. 'Sorry, old chap. I've been under a lot of stress lately. Look, about these vaccines. Your guess is as good as mine. How the blazes do I know which one is better? The newspapers seem to know much more. They keep printing detailed, comparative analyses of the drugs. Bloody confusing, pardon my French.'

'That's why I came to you, Doc,' I said. By now, I was feeling quite sorry for him. 'Listen, my old medicine man with the stethoscope. Let me give you a tip or two, because I have been cramming up on many of these press reports. Pencil and paper ready? Good.'

I then sat back and let fly from all that I have been reading and watching. My Doc was taking all this down furiously. 'That's it, Doc. I realize you don't have the time to watch TV or read the papers, but these observations of mine will help you.'

'Just a quick question before we close. What if both the vaccine brands appear equally good on all parameters? What then?' My Doc was now transformed.

'I guess you'll just have to toss for it,' I replied. Adding for good measure, 'Price equations may come into play, but you can worry about that later. One thing, though. When the vaccine is ready to roll out, I insist on getting the first jab from you, Doc.'

'*Jab we met*, eh?' He laughed raucously at this Bollywood-inspired, overworked, stale in-joke. 'Thanks pal. You've been a great help. Taken a load off my mind. Please treat this consultation as *pro bono*.'

'No, no. Think nothing of it. *Pro bono*? Wouldn't dream of it.' I signed off. As I did so, I saw my Doc looking thoughtfully at two empty vials (marked Covishield and Covaxin) on his table and muttering to himself, his pencil pointing this way and that, 'Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe.'

Suresh Subrahmanyam is an advertising and brand communications consultant with close to 40 years' experience in the field. A regular columnist in various Indian publications, his forte is humour and satire. Unsurprisingly, his favourite author is P.G. Wodehouse.



In Conversation with Nadia Hashimi On Her Book, *'Sparks Like Stars'*

by Meenakshi Mohan

Every person has a map in one's heart of their own country; one never forgets that – Alexander McCall Smith's words seem so appropriate for Nadia Hashimi. Most of her books have presented a different dimension of Afghanistan, her country that she hardly visited. I met Nadia at the launch of her first best-selling debut book, *Pearl that broke its shell*. I was impressed with her for her profound knowledge and understanding of Afghanistan. *Sparks Like Stars* is her latest book. This sixty-one-chapter book kept me enthralled for two days as I found myself on the same roller coaster journey with Sitara. The book is a first-person story of Sitara, who had to adopt her dead sister's name Aryana. Ten-year-old Sitara, the daughter of a prominent family, had a privileged life. Suddenly, her world is shattered when communists stage a coup assassinating her entire family before her eyes. She is the only survivor.

MM: Nadia, you were born and grew up in America. What intrigues you to write about Afghanistan?

NH: While I didn't grow up in Afghanistan, I grew up immersed in Afghan culture. My parents emigrated from their homeland in the 1970s. Without the physical connection to the country, I feel the spiritual connection. It is heartbroken to see the bloodshed, the misogyny, and the corruption in Afghanistan. But tragedy and triumph go hand in hand. After 9/11, the fates of Americans and Afghans became intertwined. I hope these stories will serve as some sort of bridge.

MM: I learn so much about the history and culture of Afghanistan from your writings. You have quoted Rumi, "You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the entire ocean in a drop." – I consider this book as an epic. How do you describe this quote about your book? How much of this is fact or fiction?

NH: Rumi's distillations find their way into my stories. His words have been translated and shared around a fire, in a meme, or a novel for generations, so it's no stretch to imagine Sitara's father whispering these lines to her. I created Sitara to witness what I believe to be a critical moment in Afghanistan's history, the 1978 coup. The Cold War tensions, the siege of the embassy, the archaeological excavations of the ancient city of Ai Khanoum, and the discovery of the bodies killed in the palace that fateful night – all of these are real. I have stayed close to the facts in describing

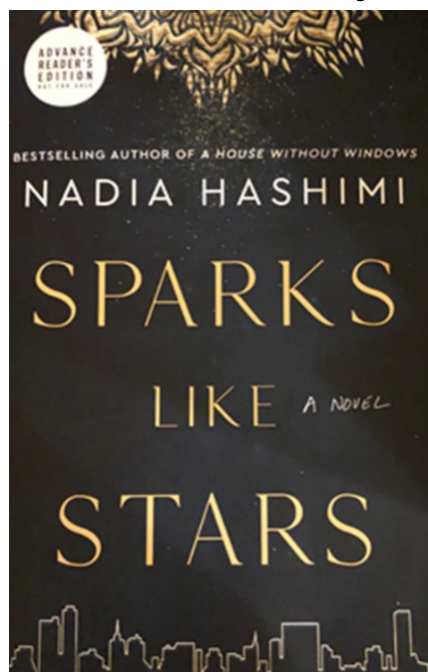
these historical events because part of my intent was to explore the spark that set Afghanistan's story aflame.

MM: Sitara had to adopt her dead sister's name Aryana to flee Afghanistan. Aryana says, "I have carved the life I have out of stone, and stones are not easily carved." – What is Aryana trying to say?

NH: This is a story of survivorship, a hard-fought status. Aryana has had to struggle to fulfill the destiny she wanted for herself, or perhaps the future her father envisioned for her. She is acknowledging her effort and her refusal to feel defeated by her circumstances.

MM: Aryana says, "Silence is a heavy coat, and I find myself desperate to shed the weight." – Why does she feel uncomfortable to shed this weight?

NH: Aryana does not know what awaits her on the other side to shed this weight. She



could be inviting a painful revisiting of her past and might not achieve any closure or relief from it. Aryana and I share the mindset of a physician. We weigh the benefit of any intervention against the risks it carries. For Aryana, relentless and gritty as she is, her decision to step out of the shadows is an act of personal bravery.

MM: Please tell us why she feels obsessed with the story of Anastasia Romanov, the daughter of the last Russian tsar, Nicholas II?

NH: We all, in small ways, look for answers to our personal stories in the stories of others. Our eyes and hearts are in search of mirrors. I believe Aryana felt lonely in her experiences. She had no community of survivors. I think zeroing in on the story of Anastasia made her think less exceptional in her trauma and inspired her to persist.

MM: Nadia, as I read this book, and also your other writings, I find the resonance of Khaled Hosseini's anguish, redemption, revenge, loss, forgiveness as the theme of your books. Then I also see Jhumpa Lahiri's loneliness and hope, and Lisa See's love of her country and value of friendship – Do the writings of some writers influence you?

NH: It's impossible to pick a favorite, but I can say that those who find permanent residence on my bookshelves have influenced me consciously and subconsciously. I love writers who speak of truth, tenderness, and wisdom. I marvel at storytellers who can elicit a laugh on one page and a tear on another and those who can craft characters who linger long after the final page.

MM: *Sparks Like Stars* is an intriguing title – How does the book's title reflect the story's theme in this book?

NH: I title my books after the final chapter. *Sparks Like Stars* comes from a poem by Nadia Anjuman, a published writer who was tragically murdered by her husband. The line speaks of her profound distress and pain. It is hard not to think of the pain some survivors carry in their hearts.

*From a bright cloud falls such pure light—
there is no need for my crying
Sparks pour from my sighs like stars*

MM: There are many substories in this book; what kind of research is involved? Do you write poetry also as you have used so many poetic quotes?

NH: I have an inspiration board with interesting factoids of historical events that sometimes blossom into substories. This story was inspired by a news article about discovering the bodies of those assassinated in Kabul's palace in April 1978. For *Sparks Like Stars*, I dug into archived interviews with American foreign service officers posted to Kabul during that time, and CIA redacted documents. I read diary entries of western wanderers traveling the famed Hippie trail. I interviewed family members who witnessed

tanks roll down their streets. I research and share with readers through a link on my website (nadiashimibooks.com). As for poetry, Afghan culture loves and breathes and sings poetry. My great-grandfather wrote volumes of verses, some of which I incorporated into my previous book *When the Moon Is Low*.

MM: Thank you so much, Nadia! I just want to say that I love all your writings. They fill me

with different emotions: helplessness, anger, anguish, hope, and sometimes, with a lump in my throat, I pray for the protagonist. I love your quote, "I run against the wind, and sometimes I run with it." It is a pleasure knowing you. Thank you also for my signed copy of the book.

NH: The pleasure is mine, Meenu. I am grateful for the personal and profound connections these stories have brought to my

life and love sharing words with souls who love reading as much as I do.



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.

REGINALD MASSEY'S BOOK PAGE

INDIA by Al-Biruni Edited by Qeyamuddin Ahmad

Not many know that our knowledge of ancient India comes from foreign writers who came to the subcontinent and left accounts of their observations. The first two, Faxian and Xuanzang, were Buddhist monks from China. They were pilgrims who regarded India as a Holy Land and hence wrote glowingly about the country.

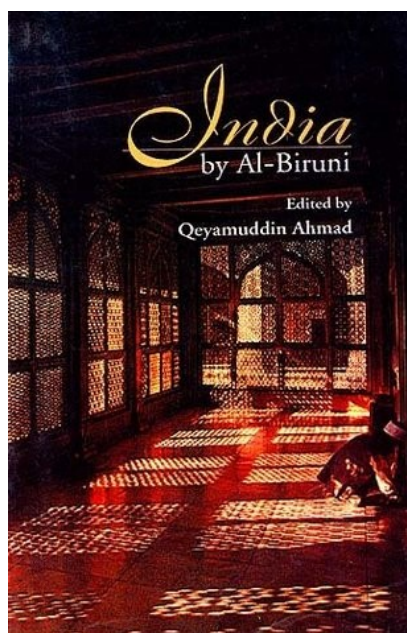
However, the Iranian scholar and polymath Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni who came to India in the wake of the invading forces of Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century was more objective. He was an astronomer, mathematician, scientist and philosopher and wrote an amazing record of the history, manners and customs of India. His book on India was originally called *Takikhu'l Hind* and is considered a classic. It was translated into English by Edward Sachau and edited by Qeyamuddin Ahmad. It was published by the National Book Trust of India in 1983. The English title of the book is *India by Al-Biruni*.

Al-Biruni was a linguist who knew Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Hebrew and Greek. He could therefore compare different civilisations and religions. He praised what he considered attractive about India and criticised what he disapproved of.

He writes "I shall place before the readers the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them. Before entering on an exposition we must form an adequate idea of that which makes it so particularly difficult to penetrate to the essential nature of any Indian subject.

"The knowledge of these difficulties will either facilitate the progress of our work, or serve as an apology for any shortcoming of ours. First they differ from us in everything which other nations have in common. And here we first mention the language. If you want to conquer this difficulty (i.e. to learn Sanskrit), you will not find it easy because the language is of

enormous range, both in words and in inflections. Add to this that the Indian scribes are careless, and do not take pains to produce correct and well-collated copies.



"Secondly, they totally differ from us in religion. In the third place, in all manners and usages they differ from us ... with our dress, and our ways and customs. There are other causes, such as peculiarities of their national character.

"Now such is the state of things in India. I have found it very difficult to work my way into the subject, although I have a great liking for it and although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books."

In spite of the problems that he faced Al-Biruni succeeded in befriending many Brahmins and other upper caste Hindus and even translated the works of the sage Patanjali. His book consists of chapters with titles such as: *The Hindus in General*; *On the Beliefs of the Hindus in God*; *On the Hindu belief as to Created Things*; *On the Castes*; *On the Source of their Religious and Civil Law*; *About the Beginning of Idol Worship*; *On the Vedas, the Puranas, and*

Other Kinds of their National Literature; *Hindu Literature in the Other Sciences*; *Notes on Hindu Metrology*; *On their Arithmetic and Related Subjects*; *On Hindu Sciences*; *On the Shape of Heaven and Earth according to the Hindu Astronomers*; *On Inheritance*; *On Festivals and Festive Days*; *On the Principals of Hindu Astrology*.

Al-Biruni claimed that Hindus were against all foreigners and called them *mleecha* (impure) and did not allow any relationship with them be it intermarriage or sitting, eating and drinking with them. He complains that "They are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he wished it, or was inclined to their religion. This renders any connection with them impossible and constitutes the widest gulf between us and them."

However, he later added "By the by, we must confess, in order to be just, that a similar deprecation of foreigners not only prevails among us and the Hindus, but is common to all nations towards each other. The repugnance of the Hindus against foreigners increased more and more when the Muslims began to make inroads into their country. Muhammad Ibn Elkasim Ibn Elmunabbih entered Sindh and conquered the cities of Bahmanwa and Mulasthana. He entered India proper and penetrated even as far as Kanauj fighting sword in hand. These events planted a deeply rooted hatred in their hearts."

Thus Al-Biruni, himself a Muslim, blamed Muslims for making Hindus hate Muslims so fiercely. He belonged to the Islamic Golden Age and has been rightly called the 'Founder of Indology'. He was an historian par excellence.



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.

N.S.VISHWANATH'S "NIGHTS OF THE MOONLESS SKY"

(ARCHWAY PUBLISHING 2021)

by Girija Madhavan

N.S. Vishwanath's "debut" novel, a thriller, is set in medieval times in the Southern Indian kingdom of Vijayanagara, embroiled then in political strife.

The story begins with the awaited arrival of sixty year old Rajanna, the patriarch of the rich estate of Madhuvana. His third wife, the young and beautiful Aadarshini, is the central character of the novel. She is the mother of Rajanna's male heir, the child Raghu. The priest Prabhakara Swami and Rajanna's Muslim bodyguard, handsome Azam Khan, have pivotal roles in the plot.

The news of the death of Rajanna's death in a far away place precipitates a crisis in Madhuvana. The grisly custom of Sati is invoked whereby wives were immolated alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands. The suspense mounts through sub-plots to the denouement.

Vishwanath's vivid descriptions transform the rocky ruins of Vijayanagara now into a lush landscape of orchards and fields, mansions and rustic hamlets. Against this tapestry, the characters play out the drama of their lives under the moonless sky of the lunar month; the new moon being of symbolic significance to Indians. Evocative images are created of Aadarshini's beauty, the horror of the cemetery and the sudden awakening of erotic love from a chance contact.

The unusual setting for the story, sixteenth century Vijayanagara, makes for interesting reading; the customs superstitions and cruelties. By contrast Vishwanath also dwells on a contemporary and relevant theme; how a sheltered woman like Aadarshini, initially compliant with the traditions of a conservative society, grows in moral strength to question male power and privilege. The Nights of the Moonless Sky is a tribute to a broken woman's effort to reinvent herself. For me, her fight for justice and truth is the core of the novel.

Vishwanath's ancestors were from Sringeri in South India. His childhood was spent in Kolkata. After spending many years in the US pursuing a successful career, he returned to his roots in India, settling in Mysuru in Karnataka state. Fascinated by the history of glorious Vijayanagara which succumbed finally to the onslaughts of the Bahmini Sultanates of the Deccan, Vishwanath researched its history deeply. He even spent some days sitting among the ruins that still dot the landscape there to

get a true feeling for the land and convey it to his readers.

With his evocative descriptions, the author transforms the rocky ruins in Vijayanagara now, into a lush landscape of fragrant flowering plants, fruit orchards, fields, rich mansions, temples and rustic hamlets. Against this tapestry, the characters play out the drama of their lives. Tales of courage and duty, treachery and avarice, lyrical love and lust, unfold under the moonless sky of the lunar month; the new moon being of symbolic significance to Indians.

Sixty year old Rajanna is the patriarch of the rich estate of Madhuvana. His beautiful young third wife, Aadarshini, is the central character of the novel. She is the mother of Rajanna's



only male heir, the child Raghu. She lives in Madhuvana with the two senior wives and a retinue of servants. The priest, Prabhakara Swami and Rajanna's Muslim bodyguard, the handsome brawny Azam Khan, have pivotal roles in the plot.

The news of the death of Rajanna in a far away place, precipitates a crisis in Madhuvana. The grisly custom of Sati is invoked whereby wives were immolated alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands. From then on, the suspense mounts to the final denouement through several intricate sub-plots. The skeins are tautly woven to finally mesh together.

Aadarshini is a sheltered woman who does not wander even in her own garden without Sarala, her maid, accompanying her. From an early age she has been raised to be unquestioningly compliant with the traditions and customs of a conservative society. How she grows in moral strength and physical courage to question and fight a world of masculine power and privilege, a fight for justice and truth, is the core of the novel.

This book appeals to me because Vishwanath has a special feeling for words that fill his writing with evocative images. Mind pictures are created from the descriptions of the loveliness of Aadarshini with her long tresses, the horror of the cemetery; the exotic port of Honnavara with the foreign ships of the Afaqis, [a sect Azam Khan himself was descended from] or the sudden awakening of erotic love from a chance contact.

Vijayanagara in the sixteenth century is a very unusual background for a novel. There are paintings, diaries and court records for example in Mughal times to garner facts about life then. Much less in this kingdom in the Deccan and therefore The Night of the Moonless Sky makes interesting reading. History tells us that from the 1340 onwards two powers were positioned on either bank of the river Krishna; Hindu ruled Vijayanagara with its majestic capital and the Bahmini Sultanate. Internecine struggles and warfare brought down these empires. Vijayanagara in this novel has still over a century to go before history shut it down as coldly documented in history textbooks. To see through Vishwanath's eyes a vibrant society where the destinies of people were transformed Vishwanath's ancestors were from Sringeri in the South of India, his childhood was spent in

Kolkata. After spending many years in the US pursuing a successful career, he returned to his roots in India, settling in the city of Mysuru in Karnataka. Vishwanath researched its history deeply. He even spent some days sitting among the rocks and ruins that still dot historical spots there, to get a true feeling of the land and convey it to his readers.

A gripping historical thriller, "Nights of the Moonless Sky" showcases a broken woman's determined effort to reinvent herself, South India in mid sixteenth century India providing a captivating backdrop.

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.

Kinetic dreams by Sunil Sharma

The two strangers stood awkwardly, displaying goods on the trisection of a busy road; brought together by a common terror called Covid-19; a spontaneous kinship forged by a fatal pandemic among the rank strangers.

The illegal hawkers had converted the corner pavement into their mini stalls.

The man inquired: "Any luck, mate?"

The newly-minted mate said with a weary smile, "Not yet."

"What time did you arrive here?"

"6.30 a.m."

"First day?"

"Third, mine. And you?"

The man replied: "First time." "Peddler?"

"No. A jobless teacher forced to sell the home-made masks and hankies. No job, no money. No option than hitting the street." "True!"

"You, a retailer?"

"No. A high-school student. Papa lost the job during the lockdown. Ma also was fired. I have been forced to shed my books for chillies, ginger and lemons, for no buyers. Cruel fate!"

They watched the traffic. Listless.

Few strollers were headed their way.

The teen started singing in falsetto: "Buy farm-fresh produce at cheap rates, please, madam, sir. Buy cheap---fresh produce."

The strollers paid no attention.

The boy howled, "Bad day again!"

The man comforted. "Never leave hope, son!"

"What else is left for us?" the boy was bitter. "Only hope."

The man was stoical: "wish for the best in the worst!"

The boy shrugged.

The man checked messages.

After an hour, he yawned, "Nobody seems to be buying!"

The teen looked worried. "Unlucky day! How will we survive?"

The man said, "Let us wait for sometime..."

"...then?"

"We move to another place."

"No use. I am fed up. Life is not fair."

"Life is like that," the man observed.

"Do we have a life here?" The teen was bitter. "Want to leave for a better place."

"Same everywhere, son," The man was philosophical. "Life is similar everywhere, believe me."

"Life is not *similar* everywhere," a baritone announced above the din. "Some places, it is much *better*. I know of a city where life is nicer and kinder."

To their surprise, the duo discovered an elf standing in their middle!

"How can I go there, sir?" the teen asked excitedly. "Please, sir, show me the way to

such a blessed city coveted by millions. Will try my luck there."

"Not that easy," said the elf with a twinkle.

"It needs wings to reach that distant city."

"Wings!!" the teen was incredulous.

"Yes."

"How is it possible for humans?" asked the cynical man.

"Humans can *grow* wings. They should know the how of the alchemic process only," The elf replied with a mischievous smile, eyes dancing, hands animated, as the mid-morning traffic increased.

"Can we grow them also?" the pair asked in unison.

"Yes, you can *grow* them." Assured the elf, producing a red apple out of thin air---to the astonishment of the captive audience.

"Tell us the secret, please, sir." Both requested desperately.

"Dreams." The tiny man with pointy ears said on that ordinary day turning magical for the unlikely friends.

The elf promised: "Dreams provide you with the required wings."

"Dreams?" The two again exclaimed.

"Wings? See no connection."

"Yes. Dreams *give* wings. Do you dream?"

"Yes, I do," the man assured.

"I too," the boy added. "Daily. Of a better life. Of a humane world, of equality."

"Oh! But remember, we all dream as humans but not every dream has got potency," the elf clarified. "Some perish. But *kinetic* dreams! They make you sprout wings and fly away into the unknown!"

"How can we have them?" the man asked.

"Tomorrow you will have them--- on the Hill. Meet me there"

.

They came early and were joined by the elf that had brought two cloaks and peaked caps.

"Keep on dreaming forever!" the elf chanted.

"Keep on dreaming forever," the two disciples repeated.

The elf then declared: "Sing with me the Anthem of the Winged-humans that you shall become soon. Here is the text."

The trio sang with gusto:

Think of the City

That promises equality

And is fair to all

The hungry and the denied

Thronging its golden halls

And ports of entry;

We create such Cities

By our praxis only.

Keep on dreaming forever

Friends

Of such spaces!

Dream on. Never give up,

Whatever be the odds!

Soar and fly

Rise up

Up

And fly

To that land

To that ideal city!

They donned the caps, cloaks and sang in earnest.

A miracle happened!

The two males started growing large and strong wings!

Soon the trio took off from the craggy summit of the Hill that faced the direction of the beckoning place.

Flapping their fresh wings, the Winged-humans, overjoyed, thanked the elf---for leading them to the City of Equals.

"We carry an image of such ideal place. Only thing, find the way." The elf observed.

"Many desire but do not follow their heart, preferring the status-quo."

They agreed.

"Every flight into the unknown is a new birth." The elf observed flying through a bank of cottony clouds. "Leaving one city for another is always a new avatar. Not many can undertake such journeys of faith. And survive in the new place."

"Survive?" the man asked.

"Yes. Reaching the desired destination is not enough---surviving the new milieu is crucial."

"Any tips?" the teen asked.

"Dreaming. Keep on dreaming new dreams..."

"...of better worlds," the man responded.

The elf smiled. "And working for those dreams. Cities are not made by empty spaces but by the industrious folks---with shared visions and ethics, humans like us."

They passed through the arched gates, along with other Winged-humans, tired but faces lit up, dazzled by the city.

A giant billboard flashed: Claim, create the City of Equals. Create a better version!

"Goodbye!" The elf said. "Remember: Never allow the wings to rust and heart to age!"

The duo looked at the skyline; sure of claiming a bit of the fabulous city of billion suns, soon, "on the basis of your kinetic dreams," as suggested by the vanished elf on that extraordinary day...

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.drsunilsharma.blogspot.in/>



Rini Kakati (1945-2020)

by Kusum Pant Joshi

Ambassadors are generally carefully chosen and appointed formally for a fixed term by various governments. But London's Rini Kakati, was an ambassador extraordinaire! She was self-chosen, self-appointed and had a life tenure that ended suddenly by divine intervention on 27 December 2020. Moreover, though an ambassador who represented and promoted India in the UK, Rini had a special focus on her native East Indian state of Assam where she breathed her last.

Born in Assam in 1945, Rini was awarded a Master's degree in English Literature from Guwahati University. After her marriage to Dr Kakati, a UK-based medical practitioner, Rini moved to the UK.



At the Indian High Commission, London



Entire group with Lord Dholakia

In 2009, Rini's services were recognised with a 'Glory of India Award' from the India International Society that was presented to her at St James, Buckingham Gate, London. In 2010 The Queen honoured her with an invitation to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace.

Rini also distinguished herself as a promoter of the natural wealth and beauty of Assam. As Coordinator of London's Assamese cultural organisation – the Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (or FASS) – she put her heart

polymath. Informed about the existence of this in valuable dictionary by a scholar from Jorhat in Assam, Rini Kakati had ferreted it out and showcased it in London's prestigious British Library.

The other piece of Assam's cultural history linked with Rini Kakati was the "Vribdavani Vastra" that had been shipped to the UK in 1905. It had a fascinating history evident from the following description: "Measuring over 9 metres in length, the piece of Assamese textile is the largest of its type to survive. It is made up of 12 strips, now sewn

together. [It is said to be] the largest surviving example of an Assamese devotional textile. The 'Vrindavan Vastra' which literally means the cloth of Vrindavan, was produced in Assam sometime in the late 17th century. It is made of woven silk and figured with scenes from the life of Hindu god Krishna during the time he

When Rini arrived in London the during 1970s, UK was still gradually evolving into a more inclusive, diverse and multicultural society. Finding that there was work to be done to help local immigrants with their communication needs, Rini first equipped herself with the skills required to become useful to the people around here.

Armed with a Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from the University of North London, Rini entered the public arena. She started Neighbourhood English classes at the Nicole Road Project Centre in Harlesden, where she lived. She is reported to have established a nursery for underprivileged children and a drop-in-centre for women and children at Church Road. She also served as the first Asian woman governor at Brent's Newfield Junior School. To encourage people to communicate, she ran a BBC programme called "Speak for yourself" between 1979 and 1982.

As an education and welfare worker for Black and Ethnic Minority communities in some of London's multi-ethnic, Rini did considerable social and community work. Gradually, her efforts started impacting positively on the education, health and social betterment of those they were aimed to benefit.

In 2004, she organised the first Convention of the North East Chamber of Commerce & Industry for Non-Resident Indians at the House of Lords. Besides input from Lord Swarj Paul and Lord Dholakia it represented other important sections of British society.

and soul into holding innumerable cultural programmes at important venues including The Nehru Centre in London's Mayfair.

One of the special events in which her ability to build a strong and successful team shone brightly was the annual programmes she held for commemorating and showcasing the genius of Dr Bhupen Hazarika, Assam's outstanding musician, lyricist, singer, film and music director. She had a natural flair for successful programming. While her discerning eye helped her to spot talent in selecting the most appropriate singers, dancers, artists and celebrity guests from across national and regional borders, her genuineness, sincerity and people's skills won her their wholehearted cooperation. She also took the lead in arranging the unveiling of a photograph Dr Hazarika at London's Nehru Centre.

Rini held many programmes to introduce and popularise lesser known yet important aspects of Assamese culture such as the famous Assamese dance form of Bihu. Her most prominent contribution in this field was when she influenced The Nehru Centre to invite a prominent dance group in Assam to visit London to perform Bihu at the Royal Festival Hall during the London Olympics of 2012.

There were two other significant cultural events to which Rini contributed, but for which she is less remembered today. One was the discovery in 2012 of a manuscript of a 212 year old dictionary titled: "Comparative Vocabularies". It was written in the year 1800 by Dr Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, a British

lived in the forests of Vrindavan. The Krishna scenes on the textile are from the 10th-century text the Bhagavata Purana and are elaborated in the dramas of Shankaradeva. A verse from one of the dramas is also woven into the textile using immensely sophisticated weaving technology, now extinct in India."

The fact that Rini was specially invited by Chepstow Museum to be a guest at their exhibition of the Vrindavani Vastra organised with London's British Museum in 2017, illustrated her public recognition as unofficial cultural ambassador of India from Assam in the UK. Commenting on the Vrindavani Vastra, Rini had said: "It was made to be used in the Krishna cult which developed following the ministry of the Assamese saint Shankaradeva (d. 1568)."

In an impromptu Zoom event organised shortly after Rini's passing, her friends and admirers hailed her as a lifelong impresario of India and in particular of Assam in the UK.

Rini was both extraordinary and selfless in her love of Indian and Assamese culture. She is irreplaceable, but we hope her example will inspire others to pick up her baton and continue her cultural race!



Dr. Kusum Pant Joshi is a Social Historian, Researcher and Writer. Kusum was Project Manager for Publications & Digital Media in London's Central Office of Information

(COI). She is presently Chief Researcher in a Heritage Project awarded to the South Asian Cinema Foundation in Dec 2019 by UK's Heritage Lottery Fund.

Book Review

Indira Babbellapati's '*A poem that painted the sky*' by Leonard Dabydeen

Cover Design and Illustrations: by Tabitha

Out of the esoteric palette of life, of the elements that nurture our colourful dreams and imaginings, comes a poem that painted the sky. In this book, *A poem that painted the sky*, author Indira Babbellapati has captured a scintillating roller coaster olio of 60 poems within a heart-throbbing 73 pages wrapped like a bouquet in a beautiful cover design. Most poems are imaginatively inked with illustrations by Tabitha. It was Rumi, the luminary 13th century Persian Sunni Muslim poet, scholar, theologian and Sufi mystic that said, "Only from the heart can you touch the sky."

Author Indira is absolute in this respect!

Moreover, author Indira brings to the fore in this book, *A poem that painted the sky*, her life exuberances in a wealthy symbiosis of atmospherics of nature, and ambivalences and coherences of everyday life. She has contingently immersed the elements of nature – especially in Ayurveda – of bhūmi (earth), jala (water), agni (fire), vayu or pavan (air or wind) and vyom or shunya (space or zero) or akash (aether or void) with life experiences. Then she expansively opens her mind's imaginings in a palette of life to create poems as an artist.

Let me take you through a random selection of poems in this book, *A poem that painted the sky*. In poem #1. Aditya Hridayam (p 7), author Indira is delighted in harnessing the glory of the Sun God against a back-splash of winter, spreading sun all over "earth to begin/yet another game of maya." So illusive and magical, On that early winter morning the sun and I wiggled our way cutting through the placenta to touch the earth to begin yet another game of maya.

In that hazy darkness
the thoughts of a life lived
rushed through the by-lanes
of unfathomable memory

Where were you?
Where are you?
I try in vain resurrecting
The faded memory.

How it eludes me on this earth...!

In my tears of joy and sorrow
I offer the sun born with me
on that early winter
a holy bath ever since.

The title of the poem, *Aditya Hridayam*, reflects on empowerment of the stotra emerging as one of the key mantras based on the 107th chapter of the great epic war – Yudha Kanda – between the army of Lord Rama and the army of Ravana, as told in the Holy Ramayana. The stotra was elicited by Sage Agasthya to Sri Ram in harnessing the sun for greatest strength to defeat all enemies.

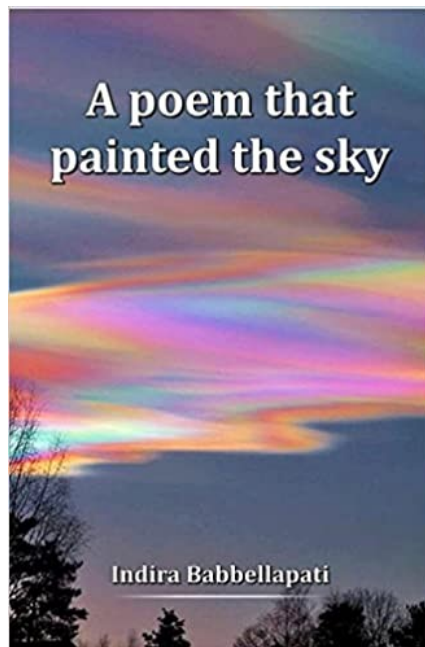
In poem #2. Daughter of Dust (p.8), author Indira echoes a Tagore-like tone in a philosophic and emotional sarangi. Take a read of the second stanza,

Life left me to dream, though
it left a heart untouched:
a heart that can still sing
a melody of immense depth;
a melody that allays

my fears
my guilt
my shame
my tears,
mingling, them all
in the dust
under my seasoned feet.

And poem #12. Obsequies to a tear (p. 21, stanza 2) brings tear-drops to a burst,

Come, pay your respects
before the pyre is lit
before another tear is shed
and placed on the pyre.



In another poem #14. Of peace and strength (p.23), author Indira reflects a breath of Gandhian ahimsa principle,

That which allows one
to stay put amidst chaos –

That's peace.

That which makes one stand
and walk straight in pain –

That's strength!

Where there's peace
There lies strength!

By meticulous ambulation, author Indira has netted her life experiences with rich imagery and emotional sensitivity in this bouquet of poems. Some of the poems, including #30. A wholesome mother (p.40), # 32. On a lonely monsoon night (p.43), Unfolding towards revelation (p.52), #41. A poem expecting rain (p.54), #43. A poem sliding down the glass-pane (56), #46. A poem on unexpected rain (p.59), #47. A poem that painted the sky (p.60), #51. A surreal moment (p. 64), #53. Call of desire (p.66), and # 56. Between birth and death (p. 69) have well-acclaimed postings among her 747 poems on the online <http://www.poemhunter.com> blog. This book's title, *A poem that painted the sky* (# 47 on p.60)

demonstrates the author's "business of the heart" with her amazing life experiences,
Under a sky
that never touch
the earth...

In that virtual space
where none others
ever breathed...

There I hear
the unique raga
my breath resonates.

Between two breaths
lurks and exclusive dream
that I dream of you, for you.

This evening,
the dream morphed
into a bird...

The colorful wings
in multitudes flapped to flight
to paint the sky.

Back cover of this book, *A poem that painted the sky*, offers readers with a vivid profile canvas of author, Indira Babbellapati. She is "a faculty in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences [Andhra Univ. Visakhapatnam, India]...is a widely published poet and translator. Her original poetry anthologies include *affaire de Coeur*, *Vignettes of the Sea*, *echo*, *From the Biography of an Unknown Woman* and *Nomadic Nights*. She translated all genres of literature except drama. *Night of Nectar* for the Sahitya Akademi, *Asampoorna*, the *Incomplete*, *Into a Crowded Aloneness*, in Telugu by Raama Chandramouli are some of the translated poetry anthologies. Her *Own Way*, a book of Akademi award winning short stories translated into English is under publication with the Sahitya Akademi. *Gender Games and Other Stories*, *The Dusk*, a novel in translation besides a few short stories have been published by the Translation Bureau of Dravidian University, Kuppam. Indira also coauthored English text books for Engineering Undergraduates. Indira's poems are also anthologized in *Roots and Wings*, *Suvarnaksha*, *Persona*, *Heaven 2014* and *I am a Poet*.

Prof Indira Babbellapati's English poetry has been translated into Hindi, Bangla, Spanish and French. She made her presence felt at many national and international meets like Asia-Pacific Writers and Translators, SAARC Literature Festival to name a few."

The collage of poetics and high literary acclaim resonates with excitement to rush any reader of poetry to get their hands on this book, *A poem that painted the sky*. Enjoy the read.

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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).



Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens
Ruminating Kiriti Sengupta observes and disinters philosophy



Kiriti Sengupta writes concisely, densely, and explicitly with no distractions. There are no temptations for an adage to expand what he has observed and distilled from a poetic experience. Daringly as a poet, he stops you think: question yourself. His poems quickly pick up the sentiments and drop them in our lap. It is not an easy art because it looks like a simple act! The resultant fresh tangential meanings are for the readers to explore. His poems are frequently short, as if they are some incised moments not to be tired. Hence, in this article, I have talked about a selection rather than a poem to invoke an experience of the poet’s craft. Rituals, religions, rules: they make us behave, react and respond in some expected or required norms. We even forget sometimes why we perform these rituals. As a poet, Sengupta is rebellious like all poets, though while reading his poems you may not feel that; for him, the questions are not just curiosities to be examined, but are challenges we must face. As in philosophy, questions in poetry are not raised by poets to provide a wonderful resolution; instead, they are incidentals to poke the reader to see things in a different context and pitch them against themselves. Sengupta manages that well. He deliberately disturbs the harmony, observes, extracts, reflects, and walks away impassively! How dare he, after he puts readers in a trap!

Look at his poem, ‘Faith’. Brexit released many serpents in Britain to coil into questions about one’s Britishness. Here, in a similar blaze, the poet wonders about the Indianness. He lays down the ground with ‘*Rituals do not add to our credos*’. As I said, ritual sometimes loses the meaning and becomes a duty to perform. The forgotten inconsequential purpose behind tying a *rakhi*, *Eid seviyan* or *singing a national anthem* liberates them to becoming rituals. So, the poet spells it out that Indianness is not a bound but a liberation. Nationalism should not be a dirty word but should be a universal entity; if it liberates itself.

Kiriti Sengupta

Faith

Rituals do not add to our credos.

Rakhi enlivens familial warmth without religious fidelity. On *Eid seviyan* is for all.

Patrons stand-up in multiplexes When the national anthem is relayed.

Indianness precedes theology.

Religion

The shirt I bought waives promises. it attracts stains, odours, and crumples briskly. The salesman had insisted, *We treat cotton to produce fine fabric.*

Isn’t propensity naive? It refutes mutation.

The Stepwell

Kalapani insinuates servitude for a lifetime.

In the premises of *Purana Qila* the *baoli* is alive.

Eighty-nine stairs down water is yet to scour the shine. It awaits liberation.

Note: A stepwell is called baoli, regionally.

Kalpavriksha

Who says it is fetched from Heaven? Do the gods need it to fulfil a wish?

Trees are girdled by treads of trust. They evolve to be imperturbable. Grounded on earth and its evil, prepares them for prayers.

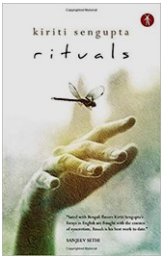
Note: Kalpavriksha, also known as Kalptaru, is a wish-fulfilling divine tree in Hindu mythology.

Promising Griefs

Neither the plough nor the bankrupt farmer knows whether the earth will receive optimum water.

Consider the rice seed – Not sure if it will rejoice sprouting into a plant that will invariably die to give us food for life.

It is supposed to be a ritual for all that can bring us together! Any religion in the next poem needs to understand this, too. What a shirt gathers is not what makes it a shirt. Nor do the assurances of the propagators and prophets selling their wares.



Rituals, Hawakal Publishers
ISBN-13: 978-9387883529

If we are confused about the liberation offered by rituals, then a step-well’s isolationist viewpoint of a disc of the cut-out sky should serve us in expanding our understanding. Anyone’s banishment to *Kalapani* ends up being a survival by servitude. In the name of history–*Purana Qila*, one keeps an old well live, lost from its original purpose and ritual. The disconnected, trapped (stale?) water should be allowed to flow as its natural state. Someone else counting the steps to it is not the liberation from a ritual. The curiosity of that person is not a statement of love. Its only hope is *Kalpavriksha* unnaturally–again–in heavens! We put things in place but create confusions. Why would gods need a *kalpavriksha* if they are gods? So here this tree also needs a liberation. Is it a hint to the climate change arguments? Undoubtedly, the second stanza brings us to that. But there is more to it. One can bypass the girdled treads of trust and flourish unruffled. But that grounded ritual prepares them for prayers full of deliverance, like the ones offered by *Kalptaru*.

So what is the endgame? *Promising Griefs!* The unpredictability of life, what it yields, for whom, and by being life to give life to the others are the only promises you have from the rituals of living. Griefs, they may seem, but life is liberation; also a discipline of rituals simultaneously. Sengupta thus continues to draw the map with philosophical flags on them, flapping with optimism.

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*.

Poem by Roopam Mishra
Confines

Some never travel at all
Like the woman born in a village
A curse to her family,
Married off at thirteen,
Bearing children at sixteen,
Whose childhood was smothered, and strangled
Like the wooden churning
Round whose neck she would tie a rope each Saturday
And twist, and turn relentlessly
To separate the whey from the butter.
Covering not just her head with her *saree pallu*,
But also her face veiled, and voice silenced-
Never knew an uproarious laughter, nor a groan nor a sigh-
Like a ghostly presence, whose existence was felt, perceived,
But never an interaction with anyone,
Except for those who held her reins.
Who'd order her about the household chores,
Defining, and redefining her boundaries.
Let alone seeing mountains, and hills, and rivers, and seas,
For years she never saw her natal home once married,
Not when her cows birthed calves,
Not when her grandmother passed away,
Or, her friend married off in the neighbouring village,
Or, for her brother's thread ceremony.
She stayed bound to the home,
Like cattle remains bound to a peg;
The threshold, the backyard, the courtyard her confines,
The days of her youth passed
Tending to children, and the elderly alike,
Upon ageing herself, not one tended to her in turn.
Her sons found jobs, built lives in the cities,
Daughters married off in faraway villages,
Doomed to a similar fate as hers.
When her husband left for the heavens,
He took with him all possible colours from her life.
Family, and relatives mourned
At the funeral, and left for their own abodes
Yet she never moved an inch
Never crossed the village periphery.
Widowed, colourless, and mourning,
An unwelcome sight for the village, she gradually met her end.
When her body was consumed by furious flames on her pyre,
She must've been free at last,
As her ashes were sprinkled in the Holy Ganges currents,
She must've travelled across cities, and metropolitans
Unseen in her lifetime,
For she remained circumscribed, and bound
To her home,
The threshold, the backyard, the courtyard her confines.

*Saree - an Indian garment worn by women, of six yards of fabric draped in various manners
*Pallu - the loose end of the saree with which women would, and still often, cover their heads
in reverence of the Gods, and the elders.



Roopam Mishra lives in Lucknow, India. She is a Research Scholar at the Department of English, and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow. Her works have appeared or are forthcoming in an anthology Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind, and in magazines, and journals like Setu, Rusty Truck, Café Dissensus, Literary Yard, Borderless Journal, Hastaksher, etc.

It is not Fair

by Sujata Sankranti

From the window of my apartment on the eighth floor I can see mounds of snow. White and fluffy. Freshly fallen. Perhaps during the early morning hours. Or, maybe the snowflakes have been swirling around all night. Strange! We were promised early spring this year, after decades or after hundred years. That 's what the forecast was. But today marks the middle of March. Yet no green shoots peeping out of crevices nor any balmy breeze. The concrete compound floor circling round the condo too is lined with snow. The driveway and the pavement look strangely deserted. No children hurrying to catch their school bus, no corporate crowd zooming out of the gate in their luxury cars. All are locked in their home, like me, following the call of the state, for total lock down. The virus is here. Winging its way across airports and seaports and vast stretches of land it has arrived to spread its vicious lethal net.

The cellphone on the coffee table vibrates and buzzes. It must be a call from either Sophie or Irma, my friends in fair and foul weather, who had walked with me in the journey of my life. They call me every morning to make sure I am alive and kicking. Again, at nine in the night they will call me to ensure I have safely settled myself in bed. God bless them for their good morning and goodnight calls.

The touch screen doesn't flash the smiling faces of my dear friends. But the number that has come up is familiar. Alarmingly familiar. It is the nursing home where my octogenarian mother has been living for the last three years. I have been trying to connect with the center since last evening. Repeatedly. But there has been no response.

Clara Smith?

Yes?

I answer the disembodied voice.

Hesitantly.

This is Nurse Gomez.

My heart skips a beat.

Moth-err... I stammer.

I am sorry I have bad news for you. Your mother is no more.

A pause

She passed away on Wednesday night.

It is Friday today. Why didn't the nursing home inform me right away?

Please try to understand. The Corona virus is spreading like wildfire. We are working

with a skeletal staff. Our hands are full. Our clients, the senior citizens are succumbing to the infection at a fast rate. Your mother is one of them

One of them? Did she test positive? Did you move her to a hospital?

I am screaming now.

Hospitals are overflowing. They are not able to admit new patients anymore.

There are so many younger people who are affected, and they are waiting in line.

Should you leave older people to die?

I did not say that. Please bear with me. Hospitals have a priority policy. You must have heard how grim...how grave the situation is.

Reading reports and stories is one thing. But to know that my own mother is a victim to such an unfair logic, to a policy is different. I am devastated. Why should the question of priority prop up when the contest is between life and death?

Please understand, I am helpless. Her body...Nurse Gomez pauses.

I am coming right away. I will arrange with a funeral home to pick her up.

No. No, you don't have to do that. She has been buried.

No. How could you do that?

I am beginning to sob.

I am sorry I am bringing you such bad news. You know even a corpse can infect people. That's why we had to bury her in such hurry

No embalming, no rites, no wake. No loved ones to hold her hands, to give her a last kiss, to say I love you Mom, one last time! Nothing at all for her!

The phone slips out of my hand. The armchair creaks with the weight of my body. Oh! God why this punishment? Not a soul around to turn to. No one to wipe my tears. Alone, in isolation I mourn my loss.

My last visit to the Care Centre.... I cannot get it out of my mind. Nurse Gómez who was in charge of my mother was sitting with her in the front garden.

Your daughter is here. Look what she has brought for you.

Gomez opened the cardboard box and showed Mother the blueberry muffins I had brought for her.

Thank her, she had prompted Mother.

Turning to me Gomez had whispered, something like an aside,
I don't think she recognizes you. She never refers to your name.

She might have forgotten my name. But the way her eyes softened as she took a piece of the muffin, crumbled it and slowly put it in her mouth, was reward enough for me. Her favourite muffins. The very muffins she had taught me to bake!

And then, Mother broke into a slow chant. In a raspy singsong voice.

When I was young and strong, and sun and light unsought for.... And the clock could be trusted, tomorrow assured And Time would not stop in the dark....

Her voice trailed off as she wobbled across the lawn to reach her room. When I had left her at the Centre three years ago, she had sung the same lines to me, I recalled.

What if she did not remember her daughter's name? She remembered Eliot The English teacher in her was still alive. That had given me hope and comfort.

No embalming, no wake, no rites. Quite possible, there is not even a headstone to mark her grave. My mother dies an orphan's death. Can there be anything sadder, more tragic than this? What if I am doomed to live the rest of my life with that crushing sense of guilt? God save me!

Yet, perhaps, my mother has gone the right way giving someone a chance to survive. Nevertheless, is it fair? Who has the answer? The virus? But the sphere-like Corona with its scary red spikes only spins before me. Menacingly. Mocking the mighty humans, the crowning glory of God's creation?



Sujata Sankranti was born in Kerala, and educated in New Delhi. She worked as Associate Professor in Delhi University. She

was the All round Winner of Commonwealth Short story Prize, 1998. Sujata has published two books "The Warp and the Weft" and "In the Shadow of Legends" Her stories have figured in anthologies in India and abroad. She currently lives in Mumbai.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Battle of Belonging*

20

ON NATIONALISM, PATRIOTISM AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE INDIAN

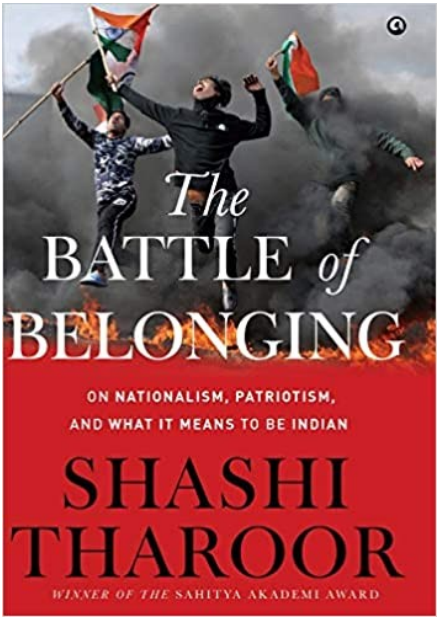
Book review by Anjana Basu

As in his previous books, Tharoor starts *Battle of Belonging* from the ground he knows best – his own life and in this case, his birth in the UJ which gave him the right to British nationality which his parents, proud of their Indian heritage, chose not to accept. He thereupon explores the origins of the word ‘nationalism’ which has roots in the Latin ‘natio’ or by birth and traces its growth over the ages.

Belonging has become a complex issue worldwide but more so, Tharoor feels, in modern India with its citizenship acts and other documentary demands to establish who belongs where. This goes against the ideals of the Constitution which were framed at the time of Independence and he feels that civil society is not doing enough to defend those ideals and fight for the national unity in diversity which India truly is. Instead there is an attempt to impose a kind of majoritarian unification by segregating minorities and erasing them from the mainstream.

This did have its roots in Partition and in Jinnah’s fight to establish two nations grounded on religion – from that arose the initial Hindu-Muslim divide which time and political circumstance has only strengthened. While most would have said that Pakistan was the fallout of Partition, anti-Muslim feeling was the other since the years only served to strengthen an undercurrent of bigotry that had already existed and was utilised by India’s colonial masters to divide and rule. More to the point the Hindu right wing groups had sided with the British hoping to gain a foothold on power and that was the germ of their current stronghold on the nation. Even though the original situation post Independence had glitches but the system limped along for over 30 years before reaching the current scenario where Tharoor feels breakdown is inevitable and with it an apocalypse of all hopes.

He therefore gets down to grips by analysing the Modi government’s approach to nationhood which he characterises as the course of one language, Hindi, one religion, Hinduism as interpreted by the Hindutvavadis and a nation, based on a theory posited by three gentlemen whose surnames began with M: Molesworth, Macaulay and Max Mueller, of whom Max Mueller was primarily responsible for propagating the theory of the Aryan invasion and pinpointing Sanskrit as the language of a Hindu civilisation. A theory that was, as Romila Thapar pointed out, incorrect, but one that was hailed by Hindu nationalists who refused to have it challenged or believe that it could have been formulated by non Hindus.



Before coming down to the roots of the present day scenario, however, Tharoor analyses nine different types of nationalism – including revolutionary, linguistic, geographical, diasporic and civilisation related - and interspersing his analysis with personal anecdotes, quotations from books he has read

or examples that he has heard of – like the example of Switzerland which eschewed nationalism through language and instead declared several, French, German and Italian to be equally valid. Ultimately, after a short dissection process, he distils the nine into two essential nationalisms, ethno and civic. Ethno includes religion under its banner while civic Tharoor writes arises “not from ethnicity, religion, language, culture... but from the consent and active participation of... citizens, as free members of a democratic polity.”

To come to his final argument, Tharoor deftly juggles with multiple subjects that are interrelated and he uses examples that dovetail across continents and centuries which he ties together with examples, quotations and erudition. Though each of the nine types of nationalism could have made an independent book in their own right. ultimately Tharoor’s arguments are brought together in a passionate defence of the ‘Idea of India’. A defence he feels is necessary if the country is to survive as it was originally planned in the Constitution, a nation grounded on idealism and united thought – though such a defence also requires a political vehicle whose credentials are impeccable and given the current state of affairs, this seems to be sadly lacking.

The author throws down a gauntlet in *Battle of Belonging* in the hope that civil society will rise to the cause and there will be a Second Coming of the true nationalism of the like minded. "Our patriotism must be anchored in unity, not division; promote inclusion, not exclusion," he writes.

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



A Poem by Zilka Joseph
Let Us Now Praise Cormorants

21

1

On a small rock
in the shallow end
of the pond, sit a glossy
pair. The male preens
and the female
dozes. Rain streams
down their backs, shiny
as wet stone. In the haze
of this green and silver
afternoon, they could be
Degas' ballerinas
stretching, twisting.
We are suspended in time.
How easy life
seems here.

2

Not called snake birds
for nothing, their serpentine
necks flex around their bodies

so their beaks can reach

each feathered wing and tail.
Dark wings outstretched,
wide as sails,

their feathers hung out to dry

like laundry, they look
like shaggy angels.
I have seen them

dive and dive again, smooth

as seals, surface
with fish larger than their faces
flapping in their beaks.

3

Such gifted fisher-birds these!
How man's sharp eye recognizes,
exploits them. Boats bob
in some seas where fishermen
fish using flocks of cormorants
on leashes. Metal collars

clamped around their necks.
They catch fish in their long beaks
but cannot swallow. Lamps light up
the water like moons.

For hours they dive and fish, come up
spit out their prize. Their master
collects

the silver coins of fish
in old bamboo baskets.

4

At the end of a long night
of fishing, the master
throws his bird-slaves
handfuls of small fish
which they gobble
in a flash. They wag
their thick rudder-like
tails, leap like
puppies
back onto the boat.

This is the only life they know.
They hunker down and sleep.

5

the shallows
of the muddy Hooghly River

trees filled with
wide-winged shiny fruit
my father by my side
cormorants aningas snake or
darter birds they are
also called he says
I hold his calloused hand
with my small one

6

Here, it is still drizzling.
Fall migration. Birds
fill their bellies with whatever
they can find.

The two cormorants on the rock seem
to be in limbo. They have fished
all day

and feral goldfish that have grown large
have given up
their shimmering ghosts in droves.
These are sated birds. Safe birds.

Heavy with their harvest.

They will not fly for a while.



Zilka Joseph was nominated twice for a Pushcart, for a PEN America and a Best of the Net award. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Poetry Daily*, *Frontier Poetry*, *KRO*, *MQR*, *Ablucionistas*, and in several anthologies. Her book, *Sharp Blue Search of Flame* was published by Wayne State University Press was a finalist for the Foreword INDIES Book Award. www.zilkajoseph.com

Hindu Wedding

by Malathy Sitaram

(Continuation from November 2020 issue)

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.

Meanwhile, the bride awaits the procession back at home or at the wedding hall. Her friends would have stayed back also to keep her company. After the procession returns the respective fathers of the pair make a formal announcement of the wedding that is to take place the next day.

The following morning, there is a great hustle and bustle in the bridal household. Nearly everyone is up at dawn. The bride must have a ritual oil bath. Thereafter fragrantly anointed, her long hair is plaited with strings of flowers. This hairstyle is peculiar to South India. One sees a long stress of jasmine and frangipani. She then dons a heavy silk sari. She may wear any colour except black and white. She also wears most of her jewellery. Necklaces, gleaming gold bangles, dangling earrings, perhaps a nose-ring, hair ornaments, rings etc. All of these make a stunning picture. In his quarters, the bridegroom also has an oil bath. He emerges bare-chested in a gold-bordered cream coloured silk dhoti, and a matching upper cloth worn like a Roman toga.

The first few ceremonies are conducted separately for the boy and girl. In spite of the early hour (about 7a.m.) the hall is full of guests dressed in their best clothes. The heavy fragrance of incense hangs in the air. Jasmine adorns all the ladies' heads. They sport magnificent saris and jewellery. There is much chatter and laughter. The men folk occupy another part of the room all uniformly clothed in white shirts and dhotis. The four-piece band is already installed. It is emitting melodious and highly rhythmic strains of

music. The percussion section is excellent. Children are to be seen everywhere. The atmosphere is charged with a certain gaiety and excitement-wedding fever. This is as good a time as any for interested parties to make alliances. Mothers present their nubile daughters to the searching scrutiny of mothers of marriageable sons.

Under a beautifully decorated canopy of flowers the bride and groom soon sit cross legged, side by side in front of a fire. Their parents are in attendance as well as a group of Brahmin priests. Interminable Sanskrit 'mantra' are intoned monotonously by the priest. The couple see to droop under heavy garlands of flowers. In the heat the bride probably feels faint after a few hours in all her silken fiery. Moreover, she and her

Finally, the climax of the ceremony approaches. At a signal, the music rises to a crescendo as also the invocations of the portly brahmins. Everyone leaps to their feet and press closer to the sacred fire clutching a fistful of rice and flowers to throw at the wedded couple.

The bride is now seated on her father's lap. The bridegroom ties a yellow thread around his bride's neck and fastens it with three knots. They are now legally man and wife. On the thread is strung a gold ornament, symbolizing Lord Vishnu's footprint. She will replace the thread by a gold chain after three days. This chain is the symbol of her wedded state and will be worn all the time until her death or God forbid her husband's death. Her parents now wash the groom's feet three times and now he presents her with a sari.



The wedding is over. It is now midday and there is a concerted rush for the dining hall. Everyone sits cross legged on the floor in long rows with plantain leaves placed in front of them. Servers come bustling in armed with brass or steel utensils out of which very briskly they ladle generous portions of a varied menu to all the seated guests.

All over India the basic religious ceremony is the same. However, there are a few differences. North Indian men do not wear dhotis as worn by their Southern counterparts. The women wear saris of different silk. their symbol of wifehood is a necklace as well as toe rings. When the groom puts vermilion in the parting of her hair that is the highlight of the wedding the moment that they become man and wife.

A reception is usually held in the evening. The happy couple sit on two ornate chairs on a raised platform. The groom is now dressed western style. The bride is dazzling in another gorgeous sari. The guests go up to congratulate them. The reception lasts for about two hours and is usually accompanied by music, either vocal or instrumental.

The next day the bride leaves with the bridegroom's party for her new home. She is now for better or worse, his wife. The wedding house seems desolate after everyone has left. But not for long. Another wedding will soon be celebrated there.!

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.



Essay

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MASKED PERFORMANCE

by Tapai Gupta

The evening was warm for the season. I was scheduled to visit the exhibition where three of my paintings had found pride of place. I was eager for interaction with the artists and visitors and arrived in good time. I was fortified in a N95 lemon yellow mask and a printed sun cap with a pointed top. It rhymed with the pointed monkey tip of my mask. This was my first outing after many months of lockdown existence.

I smiled at the sweet girl standing at the door. She did not smile back. I realized she could not see my smile because of my mask. I stepped into the hall and smiled at someone else who I think I knew. He turned the other way and continued chatting with a pretty girl who was not wearing a mask. I realized this was not the man I knew. He was hatted and bespectacled and masked so that only his ears were visible. And I had no knowledge of the contours of the ears of my acquaintance. Not my fault that I had mistaken this man for someone else.

My smile failed on another person who was staring at my lemon yellow mask. This time I had put on a Cheshire cat grin but my resolute mask was determined to curb my socializing. I pretended to be engrossed in a painting of a girl with a dejected looking lotus bud dangling from her forefingers. She had a coy smile and ogling eyes. That gave me the idea. A lady was standing on my left and studying my outlandish outfit which to my mind was quite crazily artistic. I decided to experiment on her. I tried to plant an oblique glance onto her right cheek in lieu of a masked smile thinking that would be a notable substitute. But unfortunately my left eye muscles are rather stiff (or so I thought) because the lady turned and walked away, ignoring my glance. She must be thinking I was cock eyed, I thought. I realized that my specs were villainously restrictive. But I would be short of sight without them.

"Tapati di, how are you? Come and see your paintings," "I will see all paintings first," I said before turning to her (O m' god, a be-masked and bespectacled girl), "I am good, and you?" I said, trying to sound confident but succeeding only to seem a bit uncertain

and vague through my mask. "You don't recognize me," she insisted,

"Now look" and she takes off her mask revealing a young cousin, Bithi.

I took a turn and paused in front of a picture of a girl holding a bird cage that had its door open. Yet the bird was not trying to fly off but was eyeing the girl with its head cocked

on one side. The girl also had her head inclined towards the bird. That gave me some idea of silent communication. Since I had a terribly sore throat and since my voice was hoarse I could not talk much without hurting myself. Anyway even if I did, my voice would not penetrate the mask. I would not take off my mask for that would be defying protocol. So it was a caged bird situation.



The bird had the option to fly off but was not opting for it.

There was someone waving a hello to me. I inclined my head slightly. The person seemed not to notice and waved again. This time I inclined my head left right, left right more vigorously. I could not wave since I had a stiff elbow and the other free arm was holding a heavy bag containing sanitizer, water bottle, disinfecting wipes, Volini spray, house keys and

whatnot. The person stared nonplussed. I made my way gingerly up to the Waving Person, but she turned and walked away. Why was she avoiding me? Did she doubt my sanity? Why will not people accept or innovate new modes of communication in

these new times? Or for that matter why could not I adopt better modes of

performative communication. By that time I had come to realise that the Waving Person had not been waving at me but at someone else. She had

somehow, in her desperation to maintain two meters

distance, miscalculated, and her Target Person had not noticed her wildly waving arms which I did and in my desperation to get noticed, had thought I was her target.

I found myself standing in front of another painting: two lovers face to face, staring into each other's eyes. The artist had painted what appeared as shooting beams of light flying from their eyes and piercing into a pink heart which dangled before them. What a grotesque conception! But could I achieve that much? What with this social distancing, and my unromantic age...By the way, even when I was younger

I had deliberately misunderstood all such efforts of communication. Even when a friend had looked into my eyes for five long minutes of bidding goodbye at the airport I had felt most discomfited and rotated my eyeballs here there everywhere except into his eyes. Needless to say the chapter closed then and there.

But at the moment, and especially due to this compulsory bondage of the mask, I desperately wanted to smile. I had the Malvolio syndrome on me. Shakespeare's Malvolio had worn yellow stockings and declaimed repeatedly "I will smile". And here was I in a yellow mask feeling murderous at myself for not being able to share a smile. Inside the gas chamber of the N95 I kept on trying out different modes of laughter one by one: I sniggered, I giggled, I beamed. My laughter underwent various mutations but stealthily, without infecting anyone. But it simmered with a feverish exasperation.

Over at the other end of the room I spotted teacups doing the round. I tore away at my mask and bolted across, held out my hand, procured my tea and guffawed. The people who had suspected I was nutty were now confirmed I was a wee bit insane. But I enjoyed the tragic-comedy of a time when topsy-turvydom dressed our lives!



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

MY AMERICAN STUDENT

by Cyril Dabydeen

Tall, gawky-looking he is, as he hems and haws. See, he knows I make a fuss about everything and anything with my class of students before me. My unwavering eye; and punctuality is key I advocate. But Nick=s never punctual, and he tries my patience. He laughs almost black-guardedly. The other students laugh with him: he being an American, perhaps used to doing things in a different way.

Now race and complexion, with my own self-awareness or self-consciousness, as I am yet in my stride. A Rainbow Coalition somewhere on the horizon. Indeed the 9/11 tragedy turned the world upside down with everyone becoming more suspicious or discriminately circumspect. But now the inexorable present, seemingly more predictable.

AYou?@ Nick lets out, like he's seeing me for the first time as his English professor.

AYes,@ I acknowledge him.

A mind-game we're playing, like being in an outpost with my instinctual pedagogy. *Really that?* All people, one nation—with my *Canadian* identity no less.

Nick grins, as if seeing through my ruse. *Oh, let's call it that.*

The World Trade Centre coming down, photographers looking up at the sky. And had someone been taking his dog out for a walk in New York at that apocalyptic moment? Firefighters in thrall: the images coming back, and still startling me.

Nick being his identifiable American self with brashness or boldness—he's now my interlocutor. The other students become restive. The classroom is suddenly like our common ground, but simply a meeting place. Pedagogy, sure.

Nick stands out, he with a Scandinavian-sounding last name. *Bortje?*

Maybe like what the Founding Fathers never seriously considered in a frontier landscape. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln—more than existential, as I recreate my sense of the downtrodden, the wretched of the earth, and America welcoming everyone. Refugees,

immigrants. Yes, Lady Liberty. *Only in America, I dare sing along.*

Forget about wars, including the War of 1812 long ago. *Who's Tecumseh?* What now lingers in the classroom setting with real wars going on: in Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya. The other students make faces. Let them be *Canadians*. ATell me,@ Nick invites.

"Tell you?"

The female students are astir--Nick no doubt amuses them. His Americanness is not a bane. And do his parents work for the American Embassy here in Ottawa? Never being hostages, I contrive. His father's an official of some sort. America=s security...protecting the Homeland. The 9/11 tragedy is still in the media's spotlight. Do Canadians ever harbour threats against the Homeland? Never mind Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien not getting involved in the "Coalition of the Willing".

One female student calls Nick...Bort, not Bortje; maybe she has a crush on him. With his Americanness, Nick keeps growing taller. See, I indulge him. Never mind that he's a bad speller, or has poor grammar skills; he, with an awkward gait in his almost rolling manner.

Now more than a mere teacher-student relationship it is with us, I conjure. The classroom=s moment of *frisson*, it seems. Yes, Nick comes from somewhere on the East Coast, not a Southern state with its ongoing Civil War, you bet. And friends who'd immigrated to the US still communicate with me, some with a sense of foreboding: they really want their kids to be educated in Canada.

Nick whirs. He's indeed learning about Canada and its changing landscape with its multi-ethnic mix. *No cult of multiculturalism, see.*

But he has something up his sleeves—really enquiring about me in his casually subversive or perfunctory manner, all about my trying to be an *insider*. Nick's in the back row of the class--as I dwell on it, talking about our *Canadianness*. But he's an American, I mustn't forget-- a country with its vaunted exceptionalism.

Does he think he's from a different time zone, or from a different culture? The classroom's my domain—what I claim for myself. And iconic Canadian writer Stephen Leacock=s diffident bank clerk—this trope is somewhere in my thinking. A counterpoint: Thomas Chandler Halliburton=s gung-ho Sam Slick character in more than the satirical Clockmaker. Nothing simply binary, but polarities nonetheless. Chuffed laughter. Does it have something to do with a Protestant hangover, not just a colonial temperament at play?

I admit to a certain anti-Americanism from time to time because of talk about a vaunted manifest destiny. Nick shifts about uncomfortably in his seat. The other students are aware of his hubris, you see. The school term's coming to an end, and the last class it is now.

AYou?@ Nick hisses again, in his strident way. Everyone becomes more alert. *Expecting...what?* Nick struts forward, going boldly to the front of the class. A large camera's in one hand, and a Canadian flag in the other. *Click-click*. Then he waves the flag, fluttering it more like it.

The other students become more restive, some alarmed. Or just amused. Nick grins—taking them all in. *Click-click*. He really takes a picture of me holding the Canadian flag! A keepsake: for him to show to family and friends when he returns to America--declaring me in Canadian classroom, do you know?

Applause! My own mute applause--like what I longed for, knowing about myself through an uncertain or simply "American" way. Ah, Nick figures the joke's on me, never on himself. As I will keep thinking about being *Canadian*, my way. **END.**



Novelist and poet, Cyril Dabydeen was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Journey Prize, and he twice won the Okanagan Fiction Prize. He achieved the Canute A. Brodhurst Fiction Prize via The Caribbean Writer. He has read from his books across Canada, the US, Europe, the Caribbean, and India.