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Current Affairs

SOUTH ASIA: CONFRONTING THE COVID-19 CATASTROPHE

by Shalomi Daniel

Nearly one and a half years since the COVID-19 virus was first detected in Wuhan, the virus continues to ravage the world. As of May 2021 more than three million lives have been claimed by this pandemic. The virus seems loathe to leave mankind alone, with countries across the globe reporting third and fourth waves. Lockdowns, vaccines, social distancing and teleworking are now common parlance in the new normal. Whilst the pandemic also brought to light several acts of kindness and love that proved to be a ray of hope in the pandemic induced darkness, there have also been tales of irresponsibility and foolhardiness on the part of both governments and individuals which has exacerbated the crisis.

It could be said that different parts of the world experience spikes in COVID-19 cases and resulting public health catastrophes at different stages and seasons. In the early and mid parts of 2019, most of Europe and North America bore the brunt of the pandemic. From Italy to Spain to the United States of America, hospitals were stretched beyond capacity, daily death rates exceeded the 1000s and the world looked on helplessly as the pandemic ruthlessly crippled public health systems, and economies and brought great nations to their knees.

While the situation in these countries have now vastly improved, another part of the world is currently gasping for air as the pandemic ravages across South Asia. Long queues outside hospitals waiting for oxygen, lives being lost by the 1000s and daily infection rates reaching an all time high, were seen in India, home to more than one billion people. The situation continues to be dire with several states in India under complete lockdown and daily infection rates soaring past 350,000 a day. The situation threatens to spill over to India's neighbours in the Indian Ocean. From Sri Lanka to Pakistan to Nepal, lockdowns are being reimposed, and public healthcare systems are already on the brink of collapse.

Are Governments guilty?

Many South Asians are holding their governments accountable for this most recent wave, stating that their governments ought to bear the blame for failing to put in place adequate measures to contain the virus and prevent a public health catastrophe.

Governments have been blamed for taking the virus too lightly and allowing large gatherings and lax adherence to public health guidelines. The *Kumbh Mela* festival in India where thousands congregated at the River Ganges, and the Sinhala

and Tamil New Year celebrations in Sri Lanka, which saw Sri Lankans travelling across the country and gathering in large numbers to participate in festivities, are cited as such examples of governments mishandling the crisis. It has been said that stricter rules should have been put in place to ensure that movement is restricted, that basic guidelines such as social distancing and mask wearing are adhered to, and to roll out the vaccination process far more efficiently. Instead, South Asian governments were complacent with having ridden out the first wave with minimal casualties, with some governments taking personal credit for having vanquished the pandemic. The warnings of local health experts and the reality of second and third waves in other parts of the world went largely unheeded.



Various sectors of society have censured the governments for prioritising economic welfare over the safety of its citizens. What is the use of a thriving economy if it kills its most valuable resource – human capital? Several other governments have been embroiled in political rivalry to pay too much attention to the pandemic. In India, the onset of several state elections, saw election campaigns being held with large crowds gathering as though completely oblivious to the pandemic. Securing votes and consolidating power took precedence over ensuring that the population is protected from the pandemic. Meanwhile neighbouring Nepal was also plunged into political uncertainty with the Nepali Prime Minister losing a vote of confidence, leading to uncertainty and chaos.

Minorities matter

The general public, and especially those in the lower rungs of society and the most economically vulnerable have suffered the consequences of such gross negligence. Whilst the rich chartered their private jets and were whisked off into the blue, the poor, the vulnerable, and the impoverished, were left to fend for themselves.

Lockdowns imposed without putting in place support systems that will provide a safety net for daily wage earners and manual labourers who do not have the luxury of working from home, led to such persons having to battle both the virus and dire financial circumstances. They were left with no choice but to go outside, exposing themselves to the deadly virus, to provide for themselves and their families. Forced to choose between the pandemic and starvation, they opted for the former, hoping that they do not contract the virus, as they go out to forage a living for themselves and their families. Governments are tasked with the responsibility to ensure that measures adopted in respond to public crises such as the pandemic, take on a wholistic approach. Not only should measures be put in place to restrict movement, curtail the spread of the virus and protect public health, governments should take into consideration the needs of the most vulnerable, those who might not be able to sustain themselves in the new normal. Heart wrenching stories are heard about non distribution of relief to the most deserving, of corruption seeping into COVID relief measures, of certain class or community of persons being denied relief based on their race, religion, class or political affiliation.

South Asia also saw a crackdown on free expression, with journalists and citizens being denied the right to criticise their leaders. Allegations of fake news have been levelled against several voices who have dared to ask difficult questions and challenge the powers that be.

Way forward

While the situation in South Asia appears to be dire, there is much that both individuals and governments can still do to salvage the situation. A March 2021 report by World Bank showed that on average South Asian countries spend only 2% of their GDP on healthcare. Increasing budgetary allocations for healthcare, ensuring non-discrimination in rolling out public healthcare, ensuring an organised and informed vaccination rollout and ensuring that the vulnerable and marginalised are not overlooked are just a few of the steps that South Asian governments can adopt to address the rising tide of COVID-19. On the part of individuals, loving one's neighbour has never been more important – from wearing masks, to maintaining social distancing, from looking out for the vulnerable and helping out a colleague in need – small acts of kindness and great amounts of love are essential, if South Asia is to weather this storm.

Editorially speaking:

Our May issue has been delayed due to several reasons. However, it gives me comfort that we have been fortunate enough to produce this issue under the prevailing conditions. As our readers are well aware, the current pandemic crisis has affected all of us directly or indirectly in many ways. This time, we found that contributors have been somewhat slow in sending their works to us on time. Compiling a magazine of this calibre without losing quality needs a lot of patience and focus. I am glad we have been able to offer our best to produce this issue with a variety of content from contributors from different corners of the world.

Talking about the pandemic again, it is quite sad that millions of lives have been sacrificed to the Coronavirus, despite the fact that an effective cure has been found already. India in particular, has been badly hit even though it has been in the forefront of producing the vaccine and making it available, not only to its own population but also for many other countries that couldn't afford to make one. We can't simply blame the political leaders alone for the current crisis even though things could have been handled differently with some hindsight. Let's hope this crisis will come to an end in due course and lessons can be learnt to avoid any future crisis of this magnitude. In the meantime, we would like to urge media organisations and politicians not to use the names of the countries when describing the variants of the Corona virus as it causes a lot of problems among the communities.

As usual, this issue includes many different, interesting features from our contributors. I would like to thank them all for the splendid work sent to us. In future, I would like to maintain an article bank, containing enough content available for each issue. So, please consider sending your contributions at anytime without waiting for a deadline. I would like to ask the contributors to send their work to confluenceuk@yahoo.com email only, and not to any other emails.

We have an active Facebook group which is growing all the time and I like to have healthy discussions on varied topics. Please share your opinions too and encourage your literary friends too to become members.

I look forward to receiving your thoughts on this issue and welcome any suggestions to improve the magazine overall. I wish all our readers a good summer.

Vijay Anand

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Remembrance

Remembering Satyajit Ray on his centenary by Sunayana Panda

It is hard to believe that this year, 2021, is the year of Satyajit Ray's birth centenary. He is someone who has been a part of many people's lives, so intensely present in our memories that it seems as if he is almost our own age. His films have been discussed, appreciated and analysed by our contemporaries so it is hard to believe that he would have been a hundred years old had he been alive. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic this centenary cannot be celebrated as it should be. Perhaps there will be many online events and more people will have access to these discussions than if they had been held in physical spaces.

Satyajit Ray was born in Calcutta on 2nd May 1921. His parents belonged to an educated and cultured family. His grandfather, Upendra Kishore Raychoudhury, owned a printing press which was at that time one of the best in Asia. Satyajit's father was the famous poet Sukumar Ray. Every child in West Bengal knows him as the author of the comic poems in the collection "Abol Tabol". He was also the creator and editor of the children's magazine "Sandesh".

Unfortunately, Sukumar Ray died very young, only two years after Satyajit was born. Therefore one cannot say that the son's creative genius was carefully nurtured by his father. This is an extraordinary case of a father and son, both unusually gifted, both famous in their own field but who did not actually know each other. Here it is important to note that the Ray family was a prominent member of the Brahmo Samaj which was an intellectually open community. Satyajit was brought up in the house of his maternal uncle where he imbibed the influences of the people around him who were all talented and artistic. Literary culture was in the air he breathed. He was an only child so he was very close to his mother but also spent a lot of time alone. This solitude allowed him to read, reflect, imagine and also express. He was sent to Shantiniketan to learn to draw and paint. There too he absorbed the atmosphere of creativity. Growing up in Calcutta during the British rule he had access to Western culture which most other cities of India did not have to that extent.

Ironically, he never really earned much from his films. Although he did a lot of work in various departments, such as music, costumes, etc., he rarely charged the amount that he deserved. He was always worried that the producer would not recover his costs and so he tried to keep the cost of production to a minimum. What many don't know is that his true income, which paid his bills, came from the royalty of his books. His wife wrote in her biography that every time she expected there would be some money she would plan to buy a flat but in the end any extra cash that came their way got spent in tickets to the international film festival which Satyajit Ray had to attend or it went into the creation of another film. They lived in

rented flats all their lives. Fortunately, he had multiple talents which kept him afloat.

Before becoming a filmmaker Ray worked for an advertising agency and in connection with his job he spent 6 months in London. This was the turning point in his life. He watched as many films as he could. This gave him an insight into how international film makers worked. Back in Calcutta he, along with some friends, started a film society which promoted good cinema. Another turning point came in his life when he got the opportunity to assist Jean Renoir when

he was making his film "The River" in Calcutta.

His theoretical knowledge was complemented now with practical skills.

The extraordinary scope of his work makes him outstanding. He has made adaptations from Tagore's novels, he has adapted the works of other authors and he has made a series of films based on his own detective novels. He

has also made documentaries, children's films, films with social relevance, films set in villages, films set in contemporary Calcutta and one film in Hindi, rather in Urdu, a language he was not so familiar with. He touched various genres and various periods in history. He started with black and white films but then moved on to color films seamlessly. For a filmmaker, visually it makes a difference whether he is working with black and white or color images. He was an artist and every frame was like a well-composed photograph.

It was a pity that while he was working he was recognised only in Bengal. Ironically during his lifetime he was better known outside India than within his own country. The sub-titled versions of his films were seen by film-lovers in France, in the UK, in the USA, and even in Japan. But in India beyond the two Bengals, although his name was known, his films remained unknown. Only in film schools his films were screened to an admiring audience and many of those future actors and directors found inspiration in his work.

Very few people know that he received an Oscar award for lifetime achievement as he lay dying in his hospital bed. At least before he died he received appreciation from a global audience. He was also honored by the French government with a Legion d'Honneur. Strangely it was the French who first recognised his genius before anyone else and he is known to all film lovers in France even now. His legacy lives on in the work of the young film makers of Bengal who acknowledge that he was an inspiration in their growing up years.

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



Escape from Covid

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

by Innamburan

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.
— Revelation 6:8

Pestilences lay claim to their tenacious adherence to the law of equality. Covid is no different. People perished, regardless of their status in life - a former President of India, for instance. I lived all by myself in solitary splendour for more than one year in a retirement home. Unlike most others, I could endure it thanks to Zoom/Meet/Skype. I take classes for girls from downtrodden communities of North Chennai and derive immense satisfaction from their spectacular progress. This activity, which set the tone for my own learning curve, shielded me from boredom and ennui and thereby kept dementia and Covid at bay. Not for long though. The second wave struck at us in India, like a bolt from the blue. We shuffled many a card in the intimidating pack that the Corona II dealt unto us. The choices were all bad - stay and risk death; become infected and hope for someone to have mercy and help; or leave India and risk infection. None of these options are good or risk-free. The final "best bad choice" was to leave.

Lockdowns in different countries, abrupt cancellation of flights, and a host of obstacles prevented my children from visiting me. They themselves ran the risk of contracting the disease and they feared infecting us if they came over. It gave us some consolation that I got the second vaccination on April 1, 2021. It was, then, that I beheld the biblical 'pale horse' slaying hundreds of people daily. Horror stories numbed us. I list a few from the clippings. three people in their 20s succumbed to the infection; family members of doctors became infected; "the acute shortage of medical oxygen on a day-to-day basis is putting the lives of

affected COVID-19 patients at grave risk," the government said; eleven patients lost their lives due to a delay of five minutes in oxygen supply; 'India's surge in infections began around mid-March...reaching a peak of more than 400,000 recorded daily cases on Friday, 30 April' [BBC]; Chandrika Bahadur, chair of the Lancet Covid-19 Commission India Task Force, said on May 3. "So it's hard to tell whether the peak will come in the middle of May ... or whether it will take a little bit longer [CNN]."^[1]^[2]^[3]



I refrain from reciting horrendous tales about floating corpses in River Ganga and 24x7 cremations. Nor shall I go hammer and tongs at this or that government machinery as naming, blaming and shaming does not serve the rehabilitative focus of the regulatory system nor the restorative scope for the system under revision.

And, the people should have cooperated more.

As 96-year old Charlie Munger put it on high finance, "Everybody talks as if they know what's going to happen, and nobody knows what's going to happen" applied to Covid as well. I was losing many friends to it and some could neither get admitted to the hospital nor could return to their home, endangering children and family.

As a loner at age 87, I stood little chance of fending for myself. Two other elders of the family and I were chaperoned from Chennai and boarded a flight to USA from Mumbai, after many tense moments. My son-in-law was booking our tickets from distant

shores, all the while addressing our numerous anxious questions and chasing the airlines about wheelchair access.

We underwent the RT-PCR tests manned by nine functionaries and one technician. 10 individuals to complete one swab. The crowded testing site appeared to pose risk of infection in itself. We tested negative. The airport was milling with people who were breaking social distancing rules and wore masks covering their chins and others who were trying to distance themselves in sheer horror. All passengers were jittery.

On landing in Mumbai, my heart melted on seeing a large number of vulnerable elders in a sea of 72 wheelchairs - fending for themselves in extremely trying circumstances. A lady in her late nineties was subjecting herself to a rigorous security check. President Biden's announcement that Indians could not travel to the USA after May 4th added to the desperation.

I empathize with the fear and anxiety of 350 passengers in a packed flight and appreciate the flight attendants who, at risk themselves, were very helpful. We found all, from the wheelchair attendants to the immigration officials, showing that they cared. I turned to my daughter, who had come to escort us and I intoned in a whisper to the Statue of Liberty:

"Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger; for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."
[Exodus 23:9] I am sure that she lent us her compassionate ears.

Despite the perils of such travel, we are the fortunate ones. All of us tested negative and we will do our bit to keep others safe.



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

Dialogues with Ganga in Coronatimes by Sukrita Paul Kumar



The emerald green of the river waters
Is the green of the forests softened
The blue is that of the skies
And the brown
that of the mud
Carried to the plains

With many a million corpses and ashes
In your belly
What of the colour of death
O Ganga?

But death you confirm has no colour
It is transparent like truth

...

In the din of the river
The sound of the universe vanishes
And echoes of demonic silence rise
From within the mind
As confessions from within

O Ganga,
I am ready to
Perform my life again...

...

When there is lightening
Falling on your chest
From the coal-ash skies above
Why do you not pause,
Hold on to it tight
O Ganga

For the forests to light up
For the hanging bats and owls
to go back into dark holes

Let the birds fly and chirp
Let the nightmares crumble
Into daylight and cheer

Shed all ghosts and demons
To the oblivion
Fill the void with music
Of your fast-moving waters

...

In Sanskrit, Ganga is called
Trilokapatha-gamini
One who travels thousands of miles
Across three worlds

O Ganga,
Here when I meet you this instant
I wake up to your energy
Vibrating in the unrelenting flow
All three worlds coming together
Here and now

Remembrance

ZOOMING DOWN MELODY LANE...

A Tribute to Musical Icon – Khemchand Prakash

by Jameela Siddiqi

This otherwise deadly pandemic may have brought us one thing that we hope will remain with us long after things are normalised: the realisation that remote contact through technology can sometimes help us achieve as much, if not more, than what might have been physically possible in a “normal” world.

For example, Lalit Mohan Joshi, a London-based writer, Indian film historian and filmmaker recently hosted a Zoom event, ‘A Musical Icon – Khemchand Prakash: Telling his Story with his Songs’, aired live on Facebook in which Joshi was joined by an array of guests – musicians and specialists – to pay tribute to the legendary Indian composer Khemchand Prakash – (1907-1949) who, in his brief life, dazzled music lovers with his unforgettable creations. In the absence of Lockdown, Lalit Mohan Joshi may well have hosted such an event, for example, at the Nehru Centre or a similar venue. But it’s unlikely that such a panel of international Indian film music experts and musicians would all have been simultaneously present in London.

Indian film songs – particularly those of the golden age that ran from the 1940’s to about the early 70s – are perhaps the one and only area where South Asians of otherwise varying views and persuasions stand in universal agreement when it comes to identifying those iconic numbers that define these memorable musical decades. These were decades in which both, the output of films and the songs that featured in them, was sizeable, to say the least. Ironically, with the exception of just a handful, most of the films from that era have usually been erased from memory but the songs have a stand-alone quality making them immortal. Attracting even more fans with each subsequent generation of listeners, youngsters whose grandparents hadn’t even been born when the songs were first released, are keen to produce cover versions while young contestants at talent shows and auditions, more often than not, prefer to perform one of these golden nuggets as opposed to choosing something more contemporary. Curiously, Indian film music went down the drain in the 1980s at roughly the same time the industry came to be referred to as “Bollywood”.

Similarly, in gatherings of South Asians, even if they’re meeting for the first time – especially in the worldwide diaspora – the mutual love of film songs creates a very special bond, almost like a shared reference point that forms part of their personal soundtrack, engraved on the memory and dripping with nostalgia. Even so, the average person often

perceives these songs in a way that gives least credit to its actual creators and the majority are unable to name the composer or the lyricist. Songs are always thought to “belong” to the person who had the least to do with their creation, that is, the stars who ended up lip-synching them on screen.

Thankfully, there is now a growing awareness and interest in wanting to know more about the creators of songs and events such as this one are to be welcomed as an opportunity to learn more

has made a documentary on the composer and Pawan Jha, who has used his knowledge of technology to feed his other passion – film music. Both personalities contributed a huge amount in terms of our understanding of that period as well as deconstructing the actual format of those songs that served as a template for subsequent decades of music. Best of all, professional singers were at hand to render a selection of Khemchand Prakash’s songs most competently and that too, without the support of orchestration or percussion

which were such an integral part of the original numbers.

Even more surprisingly, Joshi was able to persuade UK-based Indian classical musician, Pandit Vishwa Prakash, to render a film number – (it is extremely rare to see a classical musician agree to sing a film song in public) – from the 1943 hit ‘Ziddi’, a ghazal by the Urdu poet Moin Ahsan “Jazbi”. The song features prominently in film music history, furnishing the first lucky break for a then obscure young singer,

Kishore Kumar, who went on to be a big name in the decades that followed.

Lalit Mohan Joshi is to be applauded for a richly informative and entertaining afternoon. One hopes there will be many more such events for those who like their film music to be placed in a historical context and to know something more about the back-story of their favourite songs.



Jameela Siddiqi is an award winning broadcaster, journalist, novelist and a leading commentator on Indian classical music. She read



International History at the London School of Economics, and worked as a television news producer, scriptwriter and documentary director for several years. She has published two novels: The Feast of the Nine Virgins, 2001, and Bombay Gardens, 2006. She has also taught on creative writing courses and acted as Course Manager and Lecturer for a degree course in North Indian Classical Music for Trinity-Laban and The Bhavan.

REMEMBRANCE

THE ELUSIVE RIGHT TO REMEMBER

by Shalomi Daniel

The right to life, the right to be treated equally, the freedom to express oneself, and especially since the onset of the pandemic, the right to quality healthcare are all rights and freedoms that are part and parcel of quotidian vocabulary. However, one right that is perhaps less discussed and yet equally important, and even sacred, is the right to remember.

The right to remember one's departed loved ones; the freedom to engage in religious rites and observances in their memory; the yearning to collectively memorialize those who have gone before us, is an intrinsic right and something very close to the human heart. It may not always be articulated as a right and may not even be found in domestic lawbooks. However, remembering the dead has been part of human life since its genesis, a thread that weaves together the past and the present, stretching out into the afterlife. The yearning to remember those who have left us, the almost reflex tendency to honour the memory of the dead, is part of what it means to be human.

Memorialisation can come in many different forms, shapes and sizes. They can range from towering monuments to a humble shrine in the house, from a community vigil to a tree planted in memory of the dead. The right to remember and mourn those they have lost, enable the grieving loved ones, to find closure, to find healing and to keep moving forward in their lives. In a post-conflict context, amidst competing narratives and raw wounds, memorialisation has the power to be a soothing balm – to acknowledge each other's griefs, respect the other's loss, and honour the memory of the dead.

As Aristotle said, human beings are by nature, social animals. We tend to crave community and companionship. This is especially so in South Asian cultures, where celebrations and mourning are done in community – hardly in isolation. It is not in the least unusual for family, friends and neighbours to come together either in preparing for a celebration, or in providing comfort and support in mourning. Therefore, community memorialisation efforts are not only a basic right, they are also part of the South Asian DNA. Hence, especially in a post-conflict era, where communities hold shared memories and experiences, it is natural for communities to want to come together to remember those who have died and been disappeared.

For Tamils in Sri Lanka, especially those whose loved ones were either killed or disappeared during the course of the three decade war, and especially at the latter stages of the war in May 2009, exercising this right, has been fraught with controversy. Since May 2009, Tamils especially in the North and East of Sri Lanka have been facing mounting challenges to remember their dear departed. Every year, as they anticipate an

opportunity to remember and memorialize, they are often met with opposition, surveillance and hostility.

Many confuse memorialisation with accountability and blame. Many conflate the cause of the conflict, and the conflict itself, with the right of the individual, family and community, to remember their loved ones. What many forget is, that for these families, it is the death of a son or a daughter, a husband or a sister, a parent or a grandchild, that they mourn. A day to remember them, to offer prayers and blessings, to honour their memory, are therefore essential for these families to heal and to move forward. Denying them this, is to deny one of the most basic human needs, let alone human rights.



The right to remember, has now become the struggle to remember. Much opposition has been mounted since 2009 against the Tamils' right to remember. This trend continues, and has in fact been exacerbated with the onset of the pandemic. In May 2020, law enforcement officials obtained court orders to prevent the memorialisation efforts in the North and East under the guise of public health concerns. While the order was later revoked, the attempt to prevent memorialisation was a stark reminder that the right to remember continues to be under siege.

In contrast however, 'war heroes' day was commemorated in May 2020 by state officials in memory of the armed forces personnel who lost their lives in the war, with no attempts being made to curtail the event under the guise of pandemic regulations.

Since the conclusion of the war in May 2009, grieving families have been engaged in several battles of a different nature – the battle to remember; to memorialize. From being prohibited in 2017 from holding remembrance events at a place of their choosing and being dictated as to where such events may be held, to memorial monuments and plaques being destroyed overnight in 2021, the basic right to remember the dead continues to be an uphill struggle.

The most recent attempt at curbing such memorial events was in May 2021. On 12th May 2021, a mere six days prior to the 'Mullivaikkal remembrance day' yet another memorial in Mullaitivu, was found vandalised, and a new memorial plaque that was to be erected the following day, was nowhere to be found. One of the monuments, a pair of outstretched hands, lay helplessly on the soil, as though endeavouring to grasp the basic right to remember that continues to remain out of reach. Several attempts were made by the police once more to obtain court orders prohibiting any memorial events. Despite this, a court order was obtained allowing the families to remember their dead. However, on the night of 17th May 2021, three police divisions in the Mullaitivu district were isolated on the grounds of curbing the spread of COVID-19.

Successive governments have also repeatedly mounted opposition to 'Maveerar day' commemorations – the day on which families in the North and East remember their fallen who were part of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Governments have argued that allowing such memorialisation would revive the LTTE, and pose a threat to national security. However, for the families of the young boys and girls who died, it is a day to remember the vacant place at the dinner table, the missing face at family gatherings, the memories of someone they loved and cherished.

In contrast, members of the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna, a leftist party in Sri Lanka, to which youth insurrections in the 1970s and 1980s are attributed, were able to remember their fallen comrades. Though the insurrections saw innocent blood being brutally shed on both sides; yet another dark period in Sri Lankan history characterised by enforced disappearances, torture, killings and political upheaval, the right to remember those who died in furtherance of their cause, was honoured in this instance. Memorials in memory of the youth who lost their lives in the insurrections are common in State Universities across the country.

Why two different approaches to the same issue, one may ask. It is a question that has remained unanswered for decades, one may respond. For years to come, generations of Sri Lankans may continue to debate the finer points of politics, of historical grievances, of rights and wrongs, of who threw the first stone. However, for the families of the dead and the disappeared, their grief unassuaged, their wish is quite simple – to remember those they love.



Shalomi Daniel is a lawyer practising in Sri Lanka.

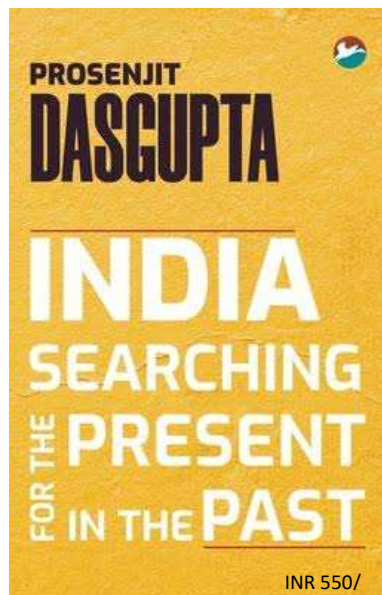
BACK TO THE FUTURE

Prosenjit Dasgupta's India: Searching for the Present in the past

Reviewed by Anjana Basu

To write a book that compares India's past and present chapter by chapter is an undertaking that requires in depth research. Prosenjit Dasgupta has not only done that but directs the reader to the relevant texts from which he has drawn his points in case cross referencing is required. What emerges is a study of the subcontinent's origins and its pluralism that continued without compromise down the ages, more or less untrammelled till the nineteenth century when a combination of British scholarship and Hindu inferences based on a selective reading of portions of texts like the Manusmriti led to a redefinition of what India was and gave rise to the belief that India was responsible for banishing ignorance from countries like Egypt, Greece and Europe in the pre-Christian era. Also that before the Aryans swept the sub continent; the country that became India was unpopulated, though history bears testimony to the contrary. He speaks of travellers like Fa Hien, Hieun Tsang and Bernier who contributed their tales both of the nation's open mindedness and its practices like sati that went unchecked in Mughul times when all faiths were allowed their freedom. Dasgupta traces the gradual narrowing of philosophical and religious thought down the ages, citing examples like Asoka's edicts which spoke of 'Dhamma' as all-inclusive and Sri Ramakrishna's later 'joto mat toto pat' both of which implied that there were many ways of reaching God and that one way was not necessarily better than

another. He also points out that there was no unity among Hindus – the sub continent was divided among regional rulers and that clans like the Rajputs were perennially at war with each other, referring to Tod's Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan and refuting the myth that became more and more prevalent in the nineteenth century of an ideal Hindu civilisation that ruled over all others.



This crystallised into Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's Hindutva, which was written while he was jailed in the Andamans and

first published in 1923 and then brought out five years later entitled Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu? According to the book, Hindus, are those who consider India to be the land in which their ancestors lived, as well as the land in which their religion originated though history does not bear testimony to this.

The India that Dasgupta explores is formed from migrations and cross migrations and even the texts of the RigVeda and Puranas do not claim to be religious documents but purveyors of knowledge. However, Sarvarkar's pamphlet gave rise to the one of the most commonly used words in present day India and a theory which is refuted by the historical references that Dasgupta presents.

Many would be interested to know that Sardar Patel gave his nod to the RSS after they presented themselves as a cultural organisation rather than a political one. For those who are interested in finding out how a nation that believed in unity in diversity became a Hindu focused one, the book will be an enlightening read.

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.



Two short poems

by Reginald Massey

The Wind

It is written 'Do not pluck the Flowers'.
But a strong storm comes and blows them away.
The wind cannot read.

That Afternoon Amidst The Oleanders

That afternoon amidst the oleanders
We said the simplest things.
Things that lovers had said before,
Declarations and questionings.
And a squirrel stopped and envied us
Then flicked away, a streak of grey.
And the sparrows in the bougainvillea
Built their nests throughout the day.
And the flower-beds armed with cannas
Defied the might of suns and kings,
But we just said the simplest things
That afternoon amidst the oleanders.

EKPHRASTIC & SURREALIST POEMS

Anita Nahal's poems

This is an ekphrastic and surrealist poem based on the painting, *Time Transfixed* by surrealist painter, Rene Magritte, and an image from the movie, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (Accessed from free images on the net) The two images were merged into this one piece by the author. Ekphrastic poetry represents the writer's perception of a painting, sculpture, image or movie. This poem is also written in surrealist imagery.



Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee was playing on a mega screen on the expansive canvas of almost captured fields. People were scampering around filling in the shadows of the good, bad and evil. Each side in history believes its good. Arrows, bullets, tears mixed with the neigh of horses were lying on their side, wounded in body and pride. Blood and the guilty swarmed like hungry, disturbed bees. Rusted and tainted buggy lines had left permanent etchings in the muddied road in which lilliputian minds pushed their bayonets into people's shoeless feet. And far away on the horizon, one could hear the wolves howling, babies crying, mothers wailing, and young and all lost. A bison with lush green grass growing from its back sits at the entrance of a burning teepee village begging to be fed and eaten like before. The railroad keeps moving. Even the artist refuses to let the train rest. The steam is chocking and burning inside, outside. No onomatopoeia exists for the sounds of civilizational truths and lies.

Anita Nahal is a professor, poet, flash fictionist and children's writer. Her third book of poetry, *What's wrong with us Kali women?* is scheduled for release by Kelsay Books, August 2021. More on her at: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>



This is an ekphrastic and surrealist poem based on the image of the jazz singer. Ekphrastic poetry represents the writer's perception of a painting, sculpture, image or movie. Image: Photo by Kobe Subramaniam on Unsplash. The poem is also written in surrealist imagery.

Smooth jazz flows through me, soft, tempting, experimenting like an alchemist searching, yearning, transforming lost souls into solid again. There's an ocean flowing through the club where I'm performing, and the Middle Passage is red. All around ancestors are wailing. Unnerving screams are unable to break the chains. Burnt rose buds fly around bellowing my tale wondering how they'd survive infancy. You, and you, and you, or even you, may not fully get it. The sweet fragrance and the tears fusing in my veins. Don't ask me whose fault it is. Delve your arms into your belly for that gut of yours. Pull it out. Shake it. Awake now. Ask it.

Outside its raining saxophones and plethora of hums, echoes, reverberations and silence. The last is louder than all. Some wood, some mast, some gold, some skin, some souls. The other day I went on a fancy cruise to where the slave ships teared through alien waters far, far away from home and the saxophones were enthralling there. The top deck was brilliant and mopped clean. A little tearful. A bit queasy. And many stood watching the heartbeats of the ocean in satin and silk dresses and velvet tuxedos singing midnight extravaganzas. It's raining dead people. Love and hearth are confused. My body, your touch. Strings of music notes hold us together.

Book review

Mihir Bose's Narendra Modi: The Yogi of Populism Reviewed by Martin Lumb (Commonwealth Journalists' Association)

If political populism was an international sport, Narendra Modi would have to be given a handicap.

Seizing on what his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party has decried as the corruption, inertia and nepotism of the post-colonial era, he's fed an eager populace with a simple message: You've been dispossessed.

They lapped it up, and he won two thumping election victories. No need for him to make up stories of election fraud. In a field of impressive runners, he's way out in front in the international populism stakes.

But while his political tactics may match those of some unsavoury contemporaries on the world stage, there is evidence that his fight to the top will be far more consequential than theirs, his manipulation more skillful.

It's this turning point in Indian politics, driven in part by a dark anti-Muslim energy, that has prompted Mihir Bose to look at how his birthplace reached such a troubling juncture.

Bose is the ideal interpreter of this transformation in the Indian political landscape, given his prolific output on everything that makes the country tick - politics, business, Bollywood and cricket.

He traces the striking similarities between the messages hammered home so crudely in recent election campaigns elsewhere, and Modi's own constant theme. That is, you're losing control of your own country, your destiny is being sacrificed, and I'm showing you the true path out of this.

This may sound familiar from the recent American presidential campaign, and the EU referendum in the UK. In India's case, it goes back decades to the seminal moment of independence and Partition, and the ability of Hindus and Muslims to live together.

When Jawaharwal Nehru became India's first prime minister, his guiding principle for keeping such a sprawling multi-layered society together was secularism. What Modi has done is to debunk this, and as Bose argues, what was once considered anathema, and ideas at the very fringe of Indian society, have now been brought to the fore.

Furthermore, says Bose, he's converted this idea of Hindu nationalism into a touchstone of identity, part of his party's core ideology of Hindutva, which he believes all Indians whatever their faith must accept.

Examples of discriminatory measures aimed at Muslims abound in the Modi era. One of the most notorious is the Citizen Amendment Bill, supposedly meant to help illegal immigrants who'd suffered religious discrimination to achieve citizenship. Six minority communities were specified in the bill - Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsee and Christian. One other very significant minority community is not on the list.

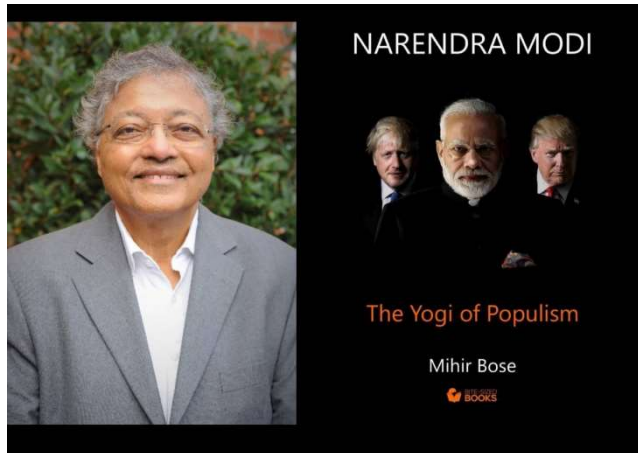
There is also the revoking of Article 370, written into the Constitution

to recognise the special status of Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in the Union. This provision allowed for a state flag and a measure of autonomy, intended when the Constitution was drawn up as living proof that India could be a secular state allowing for people of all faiths. But secularism is anathema to Modi and the special provision was an obvious target for the BJP.

Along with the baggage of populism comes the cult surrounding a leader, and along with the cult comes the

lunatic fringe. With Trump in the US it was QAnon and the message that their opponents were really Satan-worshipping paedophiles. In neat examples of how fanaticism leads to suspension of reality, Bose finds time to talk to Hindu supremacists in India who tell him the magnificent Taj Mahal, built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, was actually a Hindu palace appropriated by the Muslims, and that the high priest of secularism, Jawaharwal Nehru, was in fact a secret Muslim.

But who needs fantasists when hardline Hindu fundamentalists are already so well entrenched in the Indian body politic? This book should serve as a salutary reminder of how perceptions change and how the fringe can become the mainstream.



The Sarasvati Civilisation:

The 9500 year old Cradle of Indian Civilisation

by Kusum Pant Joshi

On Sunday 16 May, London's 'Sannidhya Samvad' run by Lalit Mohan Joshi, presented a scintillating Zoom talk by Brigadier G.D. Bakshi. The subject was ancient India's Sarasvati Civilisation of north- western India which is also the subject of one of his recent books.

The learned General with a Ph.D. from Madras University, based his findings on painstaking research. His sources include excavations and analyses of satellite images, gene mapping and genome studies of an area about 2 million square kilometres in extent over which this highly evolved ancient civilisation was spread.

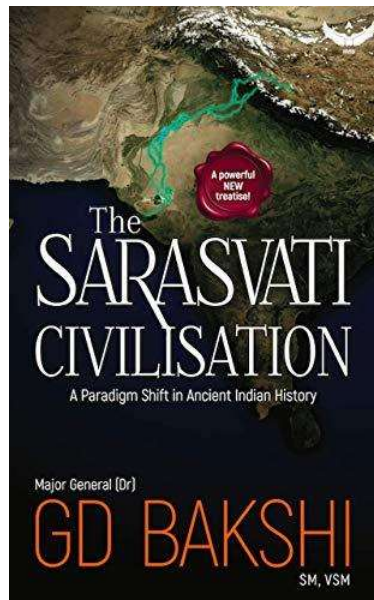
He stressed the need for Indians to end their needless and harmful reliance on western writers to write their history. No other nation outsources their history writing to others he said! It's high time Indians had a hard look at the sources of their history. This includes written texts going back to the ancient era, books, archaeological remains and conclusions evident from the latest scientific analyses of historical data. It is such sources that Indians must examine for rewriting their history in an unbiased manner with a multidisciplinary approach.

This he said, will happen only when Indians shed the debilitating inferiority complex bred during colonial times that has continued to afflict them long after the British Empire has vanished from the face of the earth!

His powerful talk was heard by an attentive group of listeners from different age groups and nationalities. The diversity of their backgrounds ranged from experienced researchers and social scientists from the world of academia to the field of politics and journalism. It included young college students, literary writers and senior artists from the sphere of dance and music as well as young professionals from the sectors of business and finance.

Through his Power Point presentation General Bakshi revealed that the Sarasvati civilisation went back 9,500 years before the birth of Christ. As described in the India's ancient Rig Veda, the Sarasvati, after rising in the Himalayas, transformed itself into a mighty river 4,600 kilometres in length and 6-8 kilometres wide. It is clear that when it flowed past Patiala in modern Punjab where it was joined by the Jamuna and the Sutlej, its width almost trebled to 20 kilometres. After passing through Kurukshetra, the site of the ancient battle mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, and parts of north India, the Sarasvati entered modern Gujarat and emptied itself into the Sea after meandering past the Rann of Kutch.

He said that though it was a spectacular river in ancient times and much feared due to its power, it dried up due to geological reasons and had vanished by 1900 BC. Thus, later on, when India was invaded by foreigners such as Alexander from Greece in 327 BC, they had encountered not the Sarasvati, (which had by then vanished underground), but the River Sindhu or Indus on their march into India. This explains why we they referred to the land beyond this river as "Hind"/ "Hindustan" and its inhabitants as "Hindus".



Through a really powerful Power Point presentation, General Bakshi showcased glorious remnants of the Indus Valley civilisation. These included photographs of terracotta figurines of men and women, children's toys, highly finished pottery, official seals, standardised bricks and a highly perfected drainage system. Such evidence, as remarked by Professor Smriti Shukla of Government M K B Arts & Commerce College, Jabalpur "rightfully kindles our pride in Indian heritage."

Very importantly, General Bakshi added that India's ancient "Indus Valley Civilisation" was first unearthed by English archaeologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1921 who had rushed to assign an arbitrary and inaccurate date regarding its antiquity.

Then, linking the Indus Civilisation to the Sarasvati Civilisation and calling it the Sarasvati-Indus Civilisation, General Bakshi said that the Indus Civilisation was an extension or child of the same and more heavily populous Sarasvati Civilisation

that was located a little away from it. He said that from remnants of this civilisation it is crystal clear that India's ancient Sarasvati civilisation is not only the oldest but also the only living civilisation in the world. It is the Sarasvati Civilisation that is the cradle of Indian civilisation and possibly also of global civilisation.

He emphasised the continuities that characterise India's ancient Sarasvati-Indus Valley Civilisation and Indians today. To stress these continuities that have defied the inexorable passage of centuries, General Bakshi mentioned the following: (1) the use of the 'bindi' or mark on the forehead worn by Indian women, (2) the 'sindur' or vermilion powder innumerable worn by married Hindu women almost all over India on the parting of their hair to this day, (3) their wearing bangles, (4) the worship of the Shivalinga and (5) the practice of Yoga and (6) meditation.

The only civilisation today as regards cultural continuity is that of the Chinese. China, however, has lost huge chunks of its culture and identity though it has tenaciously clung to its language.

He attacked the Aryan Invasion theory mooted during the British Raj for establishing political dominance. He regretted that it was still supported by India's post-independence so-called Marxist and "Leftist" historians and their ilk.

In a riveting session that helped correct the deliberate distortions of India's colonial rulers, General Bakshi revealed the failure, (even after 1947), of indigenous governments to correct the false colonial narrative. It is apparent that a collusion of myopic governments with a section of historians fired by hidden agendas and a brood of visionless bureaucrats and ex-bureaucrats, continues to block essential course correction. It was distressing to hear of the dismissive and arrogant attitude of historians who have ruled the roost so far, towards new evidence-based data.

We now look forward to a spate in which India's indigenous historians will emerge, re-read and rewrite Indian history and come forward with logical conclusions drawn from irrefutable data and a multidisciplinary approach. We will also welcome the dawn of an era when Indian historians of yesteryears will open up and engage in meaningful discussions and constructive criticism of new historical writings on Indian history by Indian historians!



Dr Kusum Pant Joshi is a London based Social Historian, Researcher and Writer. She is the Chief Researcher in an HLF Project awarded to South Asian Cinema Foundation (SACF). She is presently working on a new book "African & Asian Celebrities in London's 'Vanity Fair' magazine (1868-1914): Selective Inclusion?"

Short story

The Detective's Son

by Subhash Chandra

Every morning on my way to college and back, I encountered him.

He sat on his haunches, arms enfolding his legs, back resting against the low boundary wall of the park and chin perched on his knees. He seemed to be a beggar ... well not exactly.

There was something about him which conveyed his innate dignity.

He seemed mad ... well not exactly.

His eyes did not have that classic distracted look of madness. On the contrary, in contrast to his slouching body, stubbled face, and scruffy hair, his eyes were alert and penetrating. Whenever I passed him, he'd mutter incoherently.

I knew, one day I would succumb to my genetic curiosity.

My father was the most highly paid private detective in his Agency. Each success made him happy, but also sad.

"Tejas, this profession has no social respect," he said to me once.

"People avoid you because almost everyone has a patch of shady past. Study hard and join the university. Teaching is the best profession and commands the highest respect in society."

#

This guy was a mystery and all my life I had been fascinated by mysteries.

So, I'd stealthily observe the fellow from our first floor balcony, whenever I could. Sometimes, I caught him sneaking glances at the three-storey Minocha Mansion with a lift -- which was out of sync with this middle class colony, inhabited by salaried people. The Minochas were into some kind of exports -- nobody knew what. They did not socialise with anybody.

Now and then his gaze followed the Anglo Indian widow's two nubile daughters who worked as Escorts to tourists visiting historical places in different cities. They often kept late hours.

But one day I was struck by a thunderbolt! It was a Sunday and Bhavna and I were going to the market. He ogled at her shamelessly, grinned in a grotesque way and made some bizarre gurgling sounds. I decided to teach him a lesson, but when I looked at Bhavna, she was not only unfazed but also perplexed by my irritated face.

One evening, I had to stay late at college for the preparation of the Annual Day function.

It was dusk and he crossed all limits when he espied me.

I clearly heard him use an expletive for me, mutter and laugh aloud. Two men were walking immediately ahead of me, but neither of them looked back.

He was surely a fishy character. I resolved to investigate and find out who he was, why he had chosen to squat in our lane and near to our house and get him hauled up by the police. But my instinct told me to not mess up with him.

But genes cannot be smothered. After a fortnight, I slid out of bed at midnight. I saw the fellow walking away and chased him wearing my sneakers to avoid making any sound and also keeping distance.

He got into a by-lane and disappeared. I stalked him for a week but to no avail. Putting on my detective cap, I concluded he must be getting into one of the houses at the beginning of the by-lane.

One night I closely scrutinised every house till the end of the by-lane, but could not zero in on any. I repeated the process, now lingering in front of each house to find some clue. The door of the second house on right was not properly shut.

Yes, this is it. Your game is up, fella; you can't outsmart the son of a private detective!

I forcefully kicked the door open. But the next moment, I found myself amidst swirling darkness and eerie silence. It's an abandoned house, I thought. As I turned to leave, I heard, "You've come to the right place."

Startled, I peered into the darkness. Keeping my nerve, I asked in a commanding tone, "Who are you and why are you hiding in darkness?"

"The electric switch is on your right."

The guy was sitting cross-legged on a ramshackle chair in a confident posture.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I've worked hard to get you here."

"What business do you have with me?"

"The past is always present."

His behaviour was intriguing. He was insultingly ignoring my questions, as if I had not spoken.

"Have you forgotten me totally?" he asked. My mind plumbed the depths of memory pool. Oh no ... the same tenor-voice ... yes, and the moment recognition dawned on

me, I felt icicles flowing down my spine. An ugly chunk of my youth came alive!

#

Satish and I were classmates at college and we had free access to each other's home. My parents liked him and his younger sister. They had lost their parents in a bus accident. On way to Delhi from Shimla, their bus had hurtled down a gorge. Satish and Darshee were among the few survivors. After college Satish joined a government office as a clerk whereas I went on to do my Masters and then PhD in Accountancy.

Darshee, a simple, pretty girl had the dewy freshness of the mountains. It took me little time to seduce her. Despite knowing fully well my Rajput parents would never agree to our marriage, as they belonged to low caste Hesi tribe (vagrant minstrels singing for sustenance), I carried on the relationship on the sly. Satish would come late from office and I used the opportunity to sneak into their house.

She conceived and when I asked her to abort, she hanged herself.

Satish disappeared without leaving any trace. After six months, his severed body was found on the railway tracks.

#

"Darshee has also come with me," he said and called her. She came and stood shyly by his side.

"But she ..."

"No, she did not die. I got back home early that day."

"And your body ..."

"That was somebody else's."

I turned to bolt out from there.

"No use. The door is locked from outside."



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.



Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

Abhay K. brings us a dictionary and travelogue of culture from Latin America



Abhay K.

César Vallejo

After Mass

The corpse
who was already dead
died again this Thursday
in Paris
all men, women, and children
on the earth
could not save him
from dying again,
he wished to get up slowly
at least once
to embrace the last human
before dying again.

On 29th October Thursday, there was an Islamist terrorist attack in Nice, France. Poet recreates the message in general. Humanity died "again" on that horrific day of decapitation. It dies again and again while the good people try to rescue it as it happens in César Vallejo's poem *Mass*. César Vallejo was a great Peruvian poet. In his famous poem, a scene opens with

*When the battle was over
And the fighter was dead, a man came
toward him
And said to him: "Do not die; I love you so!"
But the corpse, how sad! went on dying.*

This process of dying continues to the end on an abstract battlefield with more and more people joining until the whole human race walks to the corpse and inspires the dying man to get up and live. The poet's message is of power not from the economic globalisation, but instead, from the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्) of the human goodness. Abhay K. takes a tangential skirting on the theme. In his version, he finds the corpse in fact dies, but to only rise again and again as humanity cannot surrender to the executioners from hell. The twist is that in César Vallejo's poem the dying man has given up hope to the end, while in Abhay K.'s poem the dying man is a corpse but "wished to get up slowly", while the whole humanity-"all men, women, and children"- is failing the John Doe.

While paying tribute to Peru's greatest poet, Abhay K. reinvents his exclusive meaning. Such is the power of craft! It shows how with ease some simple material can change ownership to take us to different heights.

The Alphabets of Latin America is Abhay K.'s new poetry collection. It is a unique travelogue of Latin America's cultural carnival through the kaleidoscopic words by our much-travelled, diplomat poet. He organises this riot in A-Z alphabetical order! The book is populated not only by people, animals or important places and cities but also, frequently, by Latin America's most engaging and imaginative artists, writers and poets of stature as in the above poem. This collection is unique in the sense that it has no intention of dragging you into some great contract of poetic epiphany. It rather paints vivid word pictures for you to entice you into feeling touch, smell and vision. Where possible poet also delivers a serious punch as in this very short poem:

São Paulo

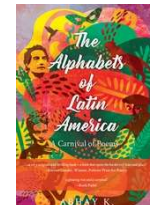
*Giant towers rise
in concrete jungles*

*birds are absent from the sky
trees pray for sunlight*

The extremely crowded and dense city takes its name from Saint Paul of Tarsus, and of course, it has much to offer in arts and architecture, new and old, drumming about Brazil. The alienation is too familiar to the poet with financial towers wanting to reach the sky and create a forest of concrete towers blocking the light at a ground level where nature lives. Poet subtly—rather diplomatically, as he cannot afford to upset countries in his positions as India's senior diplomat abroad—makes us aware of the unnatural neon culture fashioned by the humans in this and any city. It is a place from where birds—with their beauty and songs—have decided to go in exile! Poet laments our disconnection from nature. We are too busy towering our 'concrete' hopes, expectations and ambitions translated into economic success leaving no room for any light for the trees—our rescue and connection to nature; but they are homeless without light! It also delivers a lateral message on the climate crisis.

Abhay K.'s craft also involves shrewd humour! In Simon Bolivar, the hero who overthrew the Spanish Empire to create freedom for many nations, including the one named after him, Bolivia, the poet contrasts Bolivar's personal life with his despair about his native region's freedom, not forgetting what Bolivar said at

the end, "Fellow citizens! I blush to say this: Independence is the only benefit we have acquired, to the detriment of all the rest."



[Bloomsbury India, ISBN 9789389867923](https://www.bloomsburyindia.com/9789389867923)

That stands with the humorous lines of the poem on Bolivar:

*he kept his solemn vow
not to marry again
after the untimely death
of his young wife Maria
though had countless affairs.*

Such is the morality of politics, where promises are kept drenched in hypocrisy.

Fernando Botero is well-known for his inflated figures, especially sizeable women. Botero's *Women* described by Abhay K. as 'bare colossal delight'/exaggerated flaunting/gentle hypnotic/inflated jumbos' are also many other words in that poem. But he points out the play of aesthetics against the reality in the last lines: 'xeroxed/yearning/zoomorphic/but not fat.' Thus Abhay K. creates observations in poems on Latin America.

To close the article, here is a poem Samba. It is always a delight to listen to and watch it. The poet leads us to the spirit of Latin America with a soul full of rhythms enveloping us in an extravaganza of colours and light. There is no room for darkness in Abhay's journey.

Samba



*A beam of light
enters a dark alley—
spirit takes over body.*

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.

Malathy's Musings

Revisiting my Interview with Salman Rushdie by Malathy Sitaram

On the 40th anniversary of the publication Booker prize winner "Midnight's Children" Malathy Sitaram revisits an interview she carried out with its author Salman Rushdie at his London home.

On the evening of 25th October 1981, I was sitting in front of the television in a state of some suspense. For that evening the Booker-McConnell Prize Committee would announce the winner of the prestigious literary prize for 1981. The reasons for my suspense? Well I felt as though I had a personal stake in the outcome. On the final short list of authors whose book *Midnight's Children* had received critical acclaim earlier in the year. I had just finished reading the substantial novel and the euphoria that had begun on commencing reading had not worn off. Indeed I was on a "high". At last someone had written about Bombay, the fabulous city of my childhood and youth with the love and sure knowledge of an initiate. My euphoria was compounded of nostalgia and gratitude. Memory banks in my brain, suddenly activated, flashed a series of images, sharp and clear onto my inner eye. The images brought in their wake sounds, smells and feelings – total recall.

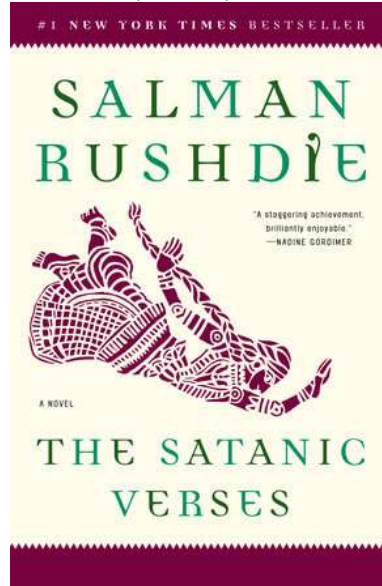
At last, the Chairman of the judges, Malcolm Bradbury, arose and without delay announced the winner- Salman Rushdie. My triumphant yell startled my gentle spouse. Others – foreign others – had appreciated the lyricism of Rushdie's evocation of the Bombay of the fifties and sixties. The city was forever immortalised in print by a kindred spirit who now blinked like a bemused owl in the glare of lights and acclaim. A pale, slight young man, very Parsee in appearance and visibly shaken on receiving his reward of a £10,000 cheque for his endeavours. He had opened up a fresh new territory for the literary imagination: Bombay.

The young celebrity proved to be very accessible on the telephone. We arranged an interview at his home in Tufnell Park, London in two days' time. He seemed glad to talk about the Bombay ethos of the novel. To emphasise this aspect of his book is to do it less than justice. It is a massive complex, funny, satirical and political novel, undeniably brilliant.

The book portrays India's transition from British colonial rule to independence and partition of India. The story is told by its chief protagonist Saleem Sinai and is set in the context of actual historical events. Born at the stroke of midnight on the exact moment of India's independence, Saleem Sinai is a special child whose telepathic powers connect him with 1,000 other "midnight's" children.

Salman Rushdie was born in 1947 in Bombay into a well-heeled upper middle class Muslim family. His childhood was spent in Windsor Villa, Warden Road, the environs of which are described minutely in the book and which, he told me was still surprisingly unchanged. He left India for an

English boarding school, Rugby when he was thirteen. A brilliant pupil at Rugby he then went on to Cambridge. Meanwhile his parents had uprooted themselves from India and had departed for Karachi, Pakistan much to Rushdie's dismay. He confesses that to this day he does not really know the reasons for their departure from India. A secular, Westernised and cultured family, they had all loved Bombay and Rushdie recalls his belatedness and pain at this parent's decision.



After Cambridge, Rushdie went to Pakistan for a few months, but hated it so much that returned to England for good, determined to get by under his own steam. His antipathy to Pakistan is shared by the hero of "Midnight's Children", Saleem Sinai, who spends four unhappy years in Rawalpindi, never ceasing to feel that Pakistan is not his country. Saleem feels acutely the pangs of forced exile from Warden Road and Breach Candy and Scandal point...away from the Cathedral School and the equestrian statue of Sivaji and melon sellers at the Gateway of India; away from Diwali and the Ganesh Chaturthi and Coconut day...

"Back to Bom", he yells happily on his return.

And really it was Rushdie's intimate recollections of Bombay that I wanted to discuss because we had both been there at the same time, had led rather similar lives in practically the same few square miles, although our paths had never crossed. Rushdie understood my triumphant excitement that at last someone had written about that very special city from the inside. What constituted Bombay's otherness? What set it apart from any other Indian city? Its inhabitants were snobbish about their lifestyle. They saw themselves as cosmopolitan, secular, Westernised, urban and laid back in their outlook.

They were unhappy out of Bombay and never completely at ease with Indians from elsewhere. Bombayites were members of an exclusive club. Its manners and mores set one apart. How well I remember declaring to my parents that I could not marry a man from the "provinces" and leave Bombay. I did marry an "outsider" and left Bombay for good in 1961; but for a long time I yearned for the high rise flats, the Bombay accent and slang the steely glitter of the Arabian sea.

Through Rushdie's magical realism he tells the history of India after Independence, starting with hope, and then the descent to despair with the Indo Pakistan war in 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh and ending in the emergency years of Mrs. Gandhi. The initial euphoria of the book that accompanied the birth of the nation dissipates under the weight of political reality.

In recent interviews to mark the fortieth anniversary of the book, Rushdie's disillusionment with India has increased as he now says that India is no longer the country of the novel and believes it has entered an even darker phase than the Emergency years. The hopes that accompanied Independence have been dashed.

Midnight's Children should be read by every Indian. It should be a set book in every Indian University's English Department. It is a historical novel, political satire and zany comedy written in the modern experimental tradition of the West and utterly Indian in flavour.

For me it is Rushdie's record of his childhood in Bombay that was most meaningful. Places, names, happening long forgotten were magically revived and restored fresh and whole. The constant litany of place names between Worli and Colaba has an incantatory effect. Shops, roads, books, pop songs, foods..." How on earth did you remember all this?" I asked Rushdie.

The Metro cub club at the plush Metro cinema was my childhood Saturday morning ritual. To think that I actually took part in the Talent Contest held every alternate Saturday so lovingly described by Rushdie.

Reading the book made me realise that like the protagonist in the book Saleem Sinai, I too am "forever tainted with Bombayness."

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.



Eating out

Dining in Mumbai by Anushka Shinde Franklin

When one thinks about Mumbai, the first thing that comes to mind is the variety of life in India's most vibrant metropolis. This reflects in the city's cuisine—from spicy *Kashmiri kebabs* to the traditional Maharashtrian *missal pav*, there are distinctive flavours to satisfy every taste and palate.

People from different states migrate to Mumbai for their livelihood and to fulfil their dreams. Along with them, comes the flavour of the region: Gujaratis, Sindhis, Keralites and others have their own specialties. The city presents a cocktail full of flavours from North, South, East and West! Mumbai locals love street food- *Vadapav* (potato patty dipped in gram flour, baked or fried served in a bun with garlic

Tourists often prefer fine-dine outlets. Many of them have been there since ages like *Lings Pavilion* (chinese/cantonese) and *Gaylord*

(continental). Some newer ones are *Kuai Kitchen*, *Foo Town*, *Pa Pa Ya* and *Jia* which give us a taste of Thai and Japanese food.

Going into the suburbs, we have places like *Candies*, a legendary eatery in Bandra, that thousands in Mumbai swear by. The Goa Portuguese-styled villa seems to accommodate everyone. Further down at Khar, we have *Ministry of Crabs* a newly-opened Sri Lankan place. After being in business for few years, it has made an entry into Asia's top 50 restaurants. For those who crave barbeque

As we travel away from the city to the outskirts of Mumbai, one comes across local dinners-or- ('Dhabbas') as they are called. They serve

authentic Maharashtra simple food at reasonable prices. The meal usually includes rice flour *rotis*- the dough is kneaded with warm water and lightly cooked on the pan which turns out to be very soft. The vegetarian platter is served with a bowl of lentil (*dal*), vegetables, a sweet dish and *papad*. The non-veg platter or combo consist of rice flour *rotis* along with spiced curry made with coconut, and fish fry with a lot of masala. A digestive drink called *Solkadhi*, (made from dried kokum fruit mixed with coconut milk) is served. The flavours with every sip can be surprising.



mix) or *Panipuri* (fried puff-balls filled with mashed potato and herbed water) or *Bhel-puri* (pop-rice served with a mixture of chopped onions, tomatoes, tamarind paste, and coriander chutney).

Irani cafes are an iconic part of our city and are situated mainly in South Mumbai. However, times are changing and these outlets face an unstable future. Parsi (Iranian) restaurants such as *Café Military*, *Ideal Corner*, *Yazdani Bakery*, *Kyani's*, *Britania & Co*, and last, but not the least, *Jimmy Boy*, have been here since decades and now are historic landmarks.

food, they can go to *Barbeque Nation* which serves a variety of veg/non-veg grilled dishes along with a sumptuous buffet.

The young crowd of Mumbai love going to bars like *Irish House*. The ambience of this place captures the spirit of traditional pubs of grand old Ireland. They have major events such as Oktoberfest & St. Patrick's day. The well-stocked bar has over 50 variety of beers ranging from international, domestic and hand-crafted. The other trending hangout for youngsters is *145*. It used to be a popular night club but has now transformed into a fun place with casual bar-dinning. Their fare is a mix of popular dishes and street food with quirky names such as the *Chicken Makhani bao* & *Animal Fries*.

Mumbai is a city that can mesmerise you in many ways, specially when it comes to food. The covid pandemic has forced people to stay home, but they order out frequently and housewives add to their income by supplying home cooked meals. Alas, restaurants are not doing so well and there is fear that some may close down. We all pray and hope that this lively city will always have the best offer.



Anushka Shinde Franklin writes about food for magazines and blogs. She specializes in Early Childhood Education and works at a school in Mumbai.

Music

The Carnatic Conundrum By Parthiban Manoharan

This background is needed to understand the problematic space in which Carnatic music exists today. Being upheld and almost “owned” by a certain caste and class of society, the music exists in a vacuum, eerily choosing to disregard the surrounding environment that it owes its origins to. For starters musicians outside the Brahmin class or from a Guru-Shishya parampara outside of the Trinity find it incredibly challenging to enter this world. Caste identifiers have increasingly dominated concert attire. Even the younger lot seem to find so much importance in displaying caste identifiers in its full glory than giving importance to “real” issues in hand that can be lent the hand of music while enriching the musical experience itself. While there are exceptions such as the great Yesudas, the fact is that they are still exceptions. The skill of a non-Brahmin artist had to be extensively superior to the average Brahmin artist for a person such as Yesudas to flourish. It is also important to note that in the State of Kerala where Yesudas originates from, Carnatic music exists outside of the confined of Hinduism making it comparatively easier for people from all walks of life to be part of the industry. Many popular vocalists in the South Indian film industry originate from the state of Kerala owing to the access that is made available within the music industry in Kerala.

What are these “real” issues you may ask? Let’s take the Chennai floods in late 2015 and early 2016 for example. The city was under water, everyday life were thoroughly affected, no food, no shelter, diseases were spreading, wages lost, and it disproportionately affected the middle and lower income citizens of Chennai. But the sabhas, concert halls, and majority of musicians felt that the iconic Chennai December Music Season, the crown event in the calendar of Carnatic music, should go on and it did. Musicians dedicated a prayer at the beginning, and may have avoided singing Amirthavarshini, the raga or scale that is bound to shower rain when one performs it with devotion, but this class bubble remained unaffected more concerned about the “cultural identity” of the city of music, Chennai, than the emotional plight it was in. The emotional plight of the very citizens, the ones that are marginalized, who built this city into what it became.

The “Me Too” movement also spread its storm amongst Carnatic Musicians. Many were named but Carnatic music organizations completely disregarded and claims and turned a blind eye to every single accusation. While generic statements were issued on zero tolerance for such behavior and that these organization take these accusations seriously,

they transpired into nothing concrete in addressing these issues where the accused musicians enjoyed much celebration as before. This further questioned the integrity of the industry who it ultimately benefitted.

Let’s fast forward to 2020. First there was COVID. In India the impact was immense. One cannot forget images of the plight of daily wage workers, especially from adjacent states to Tamil Nadu, named as “immigrants” within their own country, who lost their jobs, were penniless, foodless and shelter less but above all had no cries answered in helping them reach home. They walked, thousands of kilometers, some losing their lives on the way, shamefully sanitized in the middle of the roads while we all

the liberty that was up for grabs where the artist was able to choose any theme, composition or structure that they would prefer, it just ended up being an exploration of the compositions of the Trinity, yet again. Some of the titles that were from this season’s concerts were “From the banks of Kaveri”, “A journey with the supreme”, “Rivers of India”, “The guiding light” and “All is well”. As you can see the representation and diversity is spellbindingly absent. It is almost like nothing else mattered. Artists could have chosen contemporary poets, Dalit poets, chosen themes that are connected with the environment they were witnessing but it was conveniently disregarded. Artists are usually inspired by the events that transpire in the

environment they live in but somehow Carnatic musicians seem to be an exception. And even in relation to supporting struggling artists, many of the funds also ended up facilitating artists who were accused in the “Me Too” movement who saw some of their income dwindle even before COVID.

So where do we go from here? I believe the answer is in Technology and the power of Social Media. The biggest boon that is available to all fringe artists is the limitless

possibilities and independence that exists in platforms such as YouTube. There is no need to be supported by established organizations or eminent artists to take one’s own art to the masses. If the art comes from a genuine place, the intention is genuine and if the artist can support their vision by their enduring skillset, then there is absolutely no stopping in the heights that the artist can reach. Social media for the most part has been democratic in who it rewards success. While one hit wonders do exist, they vanish away while true talent lasts in the long run, transforming our known experience of the art while also inviting the eyes of illustrious musicians and production houses. It would be quite hard to believe that women artists were let on a Carnatic stage only few decades ago. That was a hard fight fought by many women but three came out victoriously where we celebrate them as the Women Trinity of Carnatic music today. If this can be achieved in the Carnatic space in a time that was much more restrictive and closed up, then much more can be done today to achieve greater change. Here’s to hope.



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



watched helplessly. But that’s not all. P Jayaraj and Bennicks, a father and son, were brutally sexually assaulted and killed under police custody for opening their store during COVID restrictions. Caste violence escalated with murders and rapes dominating the news throughout the country. Farmers began an unprecedented protest against reform rules that works against them. From a Carnatic music front, due to travel restrictions, many artists found themselves unable to tour as they normally would especially to the USA, where there is a large diasporic base who are patrons of the art. Even within India or Chennai there were very limited concerts that were being held. This meant two things for the artist. One, their income was severely impacted and secondly they had much more time to explore new avenues and identify new compositions and be experimental with their art. In fact I was eagerly hoping that this would be the year that the art faced with such mighty challenges would finally blossom into a new facet. But little did I realize that I was in for a huge disappointment.

Many of the Carnatic organizations and spaces moved their concerts online. Which meant greater access and reach to the arts and an opportunity to explore beyond what an artist traditionally would. Concerts were mostly thematic in nature, and the funds collected were also touted to help struggling artists. But sadly these concerts became just an online version of a traditional in-person concert. For

Short fiction

Dead, alive!

Sunil Sharma

"Indian writing in English is strange fiction," he said, "Characters conversing in English! In a fairy tale, the Chinese dragon speaks Chinese, not English. The characters must speak their native language!"

Who can contradict Jorge Luis Borges?

"The language of fiction is the language of dreams."

After a pause: "But then fiction is fiction. Fact and fiction collapse and this merger is the province of the fictionist."

What is good fiction?

"Fiction is fiction only. Neither good or bad!"

How fictions are created?

Borges smiles.

"By revitalizing imagination."

How, sir?

"Well, listen, my friend." He started thus:

I am going to tell you, Amigo, about a man whom I knew. He lived in Buenos Aires. For that matter he could have lived anywhere. He lived luxuriously. Our friend Jose rarely exited from his apartment. He drank, watched lot of T.V., spent liquor-soaked evenings with pretty women, and conversed with the late-night moon. He collected antiques from a shop whose owner was his friend. The large shop was across the street, a glass-and-brass affair with glowing roof lamps, presided over by a 70-year-old, thin-as-a-reed man, whom we should baptize as Juan. Jose collected vases, masks, coins- "the precious bits of history"- while for the urbane Juan, "it is all about business with the eccentrics". Juan indulged his super-rich clients and played the role well. The apartment of Jose was crammed with objects and those who trifled or mishandled the objects lost their jobs and friendship with Jose. "I care my objects and guard them ferociously", was the refrain. His Brazilian wife suspected that her man was totally freaked out on the objects and could murder family at the altar of an ancient Aztec sacrificial stone. She claimed she often saw a disturbing nightly ritual, when a drunken Jose would openly talk in Spanish or French, with the death masks of the warrior tribes of the rain forests of the Congol "It gives him a high," she confided, "talking with these 'sacred' objects. Scary!"

No wonder, Amigo, she ran away with her kid, after a brutal battering. "Good

riddance", said Jose. Once, this Jose guy was a successful playwright and screenplay writer, but now at 45, his powers were declining, and he could not create anything which was commercially successful. His recent plays and one film had bombed. Gradually he came to be regarded as a bad omen and treated as a leper.

Jose reputation rested on a solid, two-hour, long play called *Shadow*. He wrote it when he was 26, a young and restless exile in the bohemian Paris of Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, Joyce, and Beckett of the 1940s and early 50s. He wrote it in French and translated it in English. Beckett was thoroughly pleased. The play opened to full house and attracted rave reviews. Sartre liked it. Jose became, overnight, a celeb author, the toast of the literary elite of Paris. Soon New York followed. London also fell at his feet. Then Amsterdam, Berlin and Tokyo. The international star was born in the expanding literary market. Even Godard planned a film but could not make it. This raised his stocks. He got everything: big cars, an apartment in Paris, beautiful babes and the paparazzi. Just think: a 26-year-old, out-of-job, émigré, born into a lower-middle-class family, where his father clerked and Mom did the sewing jobs for the neighbours, becoming a great author and earning \$30,000 for his new play. The *Shadows* I saw on Broadway, I found it amusing! On the huge stage, in the center, was a big sofa, a four seater, along with two chairs. A wall-clock, a centre table, a T.V set, a poster of a red sports car. Clothes lying on the sofa. And a man standing at the periphery, in the soft shadows, delivering long soliloquies in a staccato manner, talking to nobody! The person in the shadow went on rambling on absentee parents, priests, wife, kids, neighbours. A world of absence and shadow! Towards the end, exhausted and drained, he sits down and blends with the furniture. Brilliant light highlights the furniture and the person is obscured by an engulfing darkness. Jose was spoilt by success and later on, devastated by the unexpected failure, excessive drinking and womanizing. "The whole world is Hollywood," he would say, "and Hollywood treats failures as shit." Young babes still flocked to him. He chatted, dined with them, and forgot them in the

mornings. Then, one day, badly hung over, he swallowed sleeping tablets but was saved from near death by the doctors. Finally, he stopped seeing people.

Couple of days later, a delivery boy delivered to the bewildered Jose a gift. It was a garden-fresh, long-stemmed rose, with dew drops glistening. It did not have any card or message. The delivery boy did not know the identity of the sender.

For three months, exactly at 7:30 A.M., the rose was delivered with military precision. Then the roses stopped. By now, a disoriented Jose had found a new addiction- the morning rose. For four days, his addictive system screamed for the rose that had spread cheer in his lonely life.

The florist was delighted to see the most-photographed face smiling. He said one Mr. Juan of a shop called "Ancient Treasures" was sending these roses of his own backyard garden, through the florist, with the instructions that his name be not revealed. Jose went back to the shop.

Juan was in the hospital.

Jose smiled at Juan lying amid tubes, medicines, and other fixtures. The old man said, "Amigo". A surge of happy relief went through the visitor. Placing roses, soon he played an old song for his Amigo.

...The nurse, later, discovered the author crying before a lifeless patient!

During the service, Jose muttered, "You made a dead man come alive". Since then, every year, Jose places the red rose, at the grave of his friend.

What happened to Jose?

Borges smiled. "Jose? Just a magical tale for you."

He, too, vanished.

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/>



Reginald Massey's Book Page

The Father of Comparative Linguistics

The Welsh genius William Jones is hardly remembered today. He was the man who was celebrated in the 18th century for his work on what came to be known as the Indo European group of languages. He was born on September 28, 1746. His father, also William, was a notable self-taught mathematician from



Anglesey who was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, a no mean achievement for a man who had never been to Oxbridge. It was he who first used the Greek letter pi to express the mathematical constant which can be approached but never reached. In London he tutored the sons of the rich and the influential and thus became financially stable. His collection of books on mathematics and scientific subjects was immense.

Unfortunately, he died when his son, the subject of this article was only three. His widow Mary became responsible for their child's education. It soon became apparent that young William was a prodigy. He picked up languages easily and seemed to master them without difficulty. While still in his teens his long Latin poem *Caissa*, which he translated into English, made a great impression. It told the story of the nymph *Caissa* who was won over by Mars, the god of war, when he beat her in a game of chess. *Caissa* was later recognized as the goddess of the game.

He went to Harrow and then to University College, Oxford. In 1773 he received his MA. He became a language teacher and translator and was soon accepted as an Orientalist. King Christian VII of Denmark asked him to translate a book originally authored in Persian by Mirza Mehd Khan Astarabadi. The result was *Histoire de Nader Chah* which was the first of many books on Iran, Turkey and the Middle East.

In the meantime he joined the Middle Temple and was called to the Bar. He became convinced that Britain's stand in the matter of the American colonies was both morally and legally wrong. Joining hands with Benjamin Franklin, who was then in Paris, he tried to resolve the conflict between Britain and her north American colonies. As a circuit judge in Wales he gained a reputation for dispensing justice with mercy. While serving in Wales he married Anna Maria Shipley, daughter of Dr Jonathan Shipley, Bishop of Llandaff and later Bishop of St Asaph. He was then knighted and appointed judge of the Bengal High Court.

He was fascinated by India, its people, culture and literature and immediately started studying Sanskrit, the classical language of the country. With like-minded British administrators, Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Nathaniel Halhed among them, he founded the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.



He led European scholars to new and exciting fields of Indic studies. He wrote on Indian laws, society, botany, music and geography. He was a polymath of the highest order. The group he headed were dubbed 'The Orientalists' and he himself became famous as 'Oriental Jones' and sometimes even 'Hindu Jones'.

The Persian grammar that he compiled had the by-line 'Youns Uksfardi'. 'Youns' was 'Jones' and 'Uksfardi' in Farsi meant 'of Oxford'. However, he is celebrated for his enduring work on what came to be known and accepted as the Indo-European group of languages. Much before Jones, the Jesuit missionary Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux noticed and commented upon the surprising similarities between Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and

even Russian and German. But Jones's researches were methodical and based on a first-hand knowledge of the languages he wrote about. He is certainly the father of comparative linguistics.

This is the statement he made in 1786: "The Sanscrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, then could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanscrit and old Persian might be added to the same family". What an amazing paragraph. It is, in fact, an extended sentence. Note the clauses and sub-clauses. Only a man grounded in the classics could write English like that.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer, who had no Sanskrit, depended heavily on Jones's translations and paid handsome tributes to him.

The Hindus of India revered Jones and regarded him as a great Guru who had brought their sacred language to the attention of the western world. Some of them believed that he, in a previous life, was certainly a Brahmin. Many Indians would attend his court when he was delivering a judgement just to see him and hear him speak. They would then tell their friends, family, children and grandchildren that they had had a *darshan* ('a viewing') of the learned white man who knew more of their scriptures than most Indians.

Jones died in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on April 27, 1794. He was only 47. He was buried there in the South Park Street Cemetery. His tomb has the appearance of a Hindu temple. In 2006, the Oxford University Press published an important volume on his life and immense achievements.



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.

Book review

Lopamudra Banerjee's *All That Jazz & Other Pathbreaking Tales* (Blue Pencil Pub., India, 2020)

By Meenakshi Mohan

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
...
But the faith and the love, and the hope are all in
the waiting.*
(T.S. Elliot, quoted in the *Ripples of Life, All That Jazz*)

The above quote by T.S. Elliot is the essence of Lopamudra Banerjee's novella *All that Jazz* and her other ten *Pathbreaking Tales* – in each of these stories, the protagonists and some other characters in this book is suspended with a thin line of 'hope' between love, despair, and desire. The title of this romance novella emerged from the musical band's name the two protagonists, Joydeep and Amrita, created. Rhiti Chatterjee Bose's artwork for the cover with a smiling mask and a woman's disheveled face makes us wonder if all that jazz is all about merrymaking? Dr. Santosh Bakaya, in her forwarding note, says, "...one hears the strangled notes of unsung songs, the strumming of an acoustic guitar and also the soothing notes of *Rabindra Sangeet*."

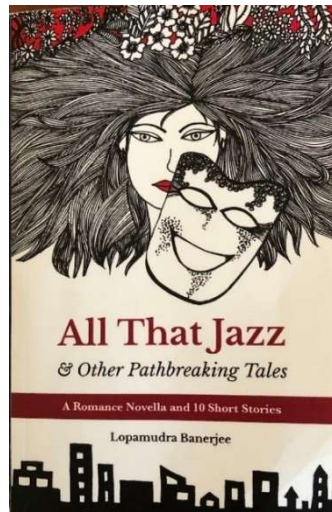
All that Jazz is a love triangle of Joydeep/Joy, Amrita, and Anindita/Annie. Annie was once Amrita's best friend in her college days, with whom she shared the stories of her tempestuous affair with Joy. Annie becomes engaged with Joy and fills up the vacant space in the band, Joy and Amrita's dream child after Amrita decides to move away to the USA. The story weaves around cultural, social, and family conflicts -- emotional turmoil, love, and jealousy being the central theme. Amrita's love and hate relationship with Annie resonates with Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's book, *Sister of my Heart* – how destiny changes the course of life. Amrita decides to go to Kolkata on a three-month sabbatical. She drafts an email to Annie in a daze, "I don't know why, but somewhere deep inside, I feel that this calling is also to let me find out whether a closure has been possible in all these years ... where it all had started ... I believe our destiny will lead us to where we are meant to be ..."

Where would Amrita's visit to Kolkata lead to in this love triangle relationship? In her visit to Kolkata, Amrita wonders, "Was it here that I discovered Joydeep first in that dainty coffee shop ... was it here that our differences soared ...?" Will the old flame rekindle? What happens to her married life with Christopher, her

American husband who believes in an open relationship? Where does Annie, Amrita's old college friend and who was now a part of Joy's life, fit in the story? *All That Jazz* roils around love, lust, ambition, social and cultural bondage, and

how they shape the characters' lives in this novella. In Dr. Koshy's words in the Introduction,

"Long after the story ends, the character of Amrita will haunt us ..." There are scars of her past life, but they become her strength as a liberated woman.



Dark silhouettes hang around most of the characters in all the ten stories under *Other Pathbreaking Tales*. They narrate contemporary urban women's tales and their emotional journeys, life choices, and travails. Romance, sexuality, and the emotional journeys of love and loss form these narratives' central crux. In *Park Street*, two young women meet in Park Street, Kolkata, on New Year's Eve – their paths collide, both scorched and bruised in lost love.

Some stories that touched my heart, and I read them teary-eyed and with a lump in my throat, are:

-- Durga: The Third Eye --Shefali, the ravaged beggar, loses her child Durga in the maddening crowd and at the cacophony of clangor and clamor at the Durga Puja Pandal. She looks for her daughter frantically when she finds her in the arms of an affluent couple. She wants to scream, "Durgaaaaaaa." A sudden downpour

of rain drenches her heart. Will She find her Durga again?

-- Femme Fatale – Flames devours Meenu's body, crushing her bit by bit. She kicks the bathroom door open. The smell of burnt flesh overpowers the space. The thick fog of people gathers around

her, contemplating, witnessing. Sidhu wonders why Gautam, her husband, doesn't come to help her.

-- The Ripples of Life – "Are you still going to marry her, the white girl from your college?" Thomas looks into his father's rebuking, questioning eyes from the newspaper. He nods his head slowly. "She is a cancer patient. Cancer runs in her family ... how can you ruin your own life, knowing what the consequences of this decision will be?" How will Nina and Thomas's love story take shape?

-- Amor Mio – Shalini is deeply traumatized by the bad experiences of her arranged marriage with Rajesh. She loses her child due to Rajesh's physical abuse. Neil helps her get a divorce from Rajesh. Will Neil's love help her get over the trauma of her past life?

The rest of the stories in this collection speak of the same theme, love, loss, despair, and frustration – are there hopes? Banerjee quotes Lee Montgomery, "In the war of the human heart, there were no rules, no ammunition, no battlegrounds, no leader, but only lumps in our throats."

Kolkata, its suburbs, the picturesque mountains of North Bengal, and various USA cities are the novella's and the short vignettes' settings. Banerjee mirrors Sylvia Plath's anguish when she writes about old scars and hidden desires. At the same time, we see Jhumpa Lahiri's style in her writings when she talks about the indomitable passions and irresistible emotions of different characters as they journey through various nuances in their lives. She writes with a bold appetency of Bharati Mukherji in her description of physical intimacy. Her writing flows with a poetic cadence, and her use of Bengali language gives an engaging authenticity.

Lopamudra Banerji is an acclaimed author, poet, editor, and translator. She is the recipient of the International Reuel Prize twice for excellence in literature and writing. *Thwarted Escape: An Immigrant's Wayward Journey* was a First Place Category Winner at Journey Awards 2015.

Dr. Santosh Bakaya, in her Foreword, says, "... this novella and ten short stories are an intoxicating symphony – oft soothing, oft disturbing, oft making one's eyes tingle with unshed tears and oft making one burst into a song ..." Kudos to Banerjee for her debut novella and vignettes of ten short stories – a must read



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.

Book review

A Journey through an Artful and Rhythmic Charm

Nursery Rhymes and Children's Poems From Around The World: You May Not Have Heard!

(Edited by Anita Nahal and Meenakshi Mohan)

Reviewed by Amrita Sharma

An anthology of poetic delicacies that appeal to an inherent sensitivity towards sheer joy and delight, *Nursery Rhymes and Children's Poems From Around The World: You May Not Have Heard!* is a collection that offers a reading experience that is both joyous and diverse in its compilation. Edited by Anita Nahal and Meenakshi Mohan, the anthology brings together the works by thirty eight poets from 'around the world' that blend into a collage of poetic exuberance.

Bringing together works from both established as well as young authors, the anthology offers space to works crafted within the simplistic world of a child's psychological nuances and touches upon themes that surround the subject. As the title suggests, it presents poems written in the form of 'nursery rhymes' and 'children's poems' that remain very contemporary in their subjective flavours. With two eminent poets taking up the editorial task

contemporary and objective. On the other hand, some of the poems offer deeply subjective thoughts, for example "Dream" by Prithvijet Sinha reads as follows:

Say, mother
Where am I?

With eyes open like butterflies
Who put me in your lap
One that you could be forever mine
And cherish me like your little star?

The poems like "I Love Mummy" by Anita Nahal take us back to the joy of reading rhymes and such rhythmic musicality reverberates throughout the collection. Several poems remain remarkable for their blend of natural imagery with imaginative usages while several others in the collection speak directly to the reader as a child and offer the joy of it.

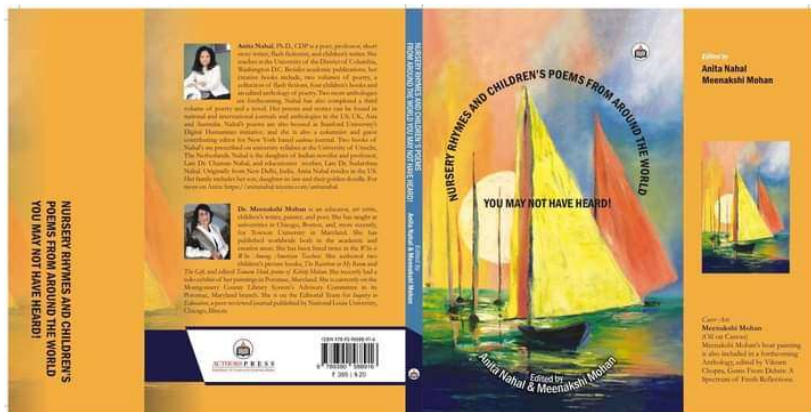
"Pool" by Shashi Kalra, "Baby Kisses" and other poems by Kavita Mohan and Shantanu Lal, and her own poetic contributions that include "A Shining Star" and other poems. These illustrations, thus either added by the editors or the contributing poets, remain very beautifully connected to the poems that follow them and serve to recreate and transform the format of a children's book to a contemporary poetry anthology.

From the Cover art that remains the Boat Painting by Meenakshi Mohan to the overall representation of this paperback edition, the book remains a product of well-crafted editorial and poetic skills. Compiled and produced in the post-Covid era where literary explorations have been expanding

over the virtual connect, this poetry collection takes us back to a world of fantasy and wonder that is marked by streams of innocence and love for the surreal within the real.

The anthology thus stands out as a compilation that adds to one's collection of poetic gems of sheer lucid creativity. Whether to be read out to your younger companions or to be

cherished as an appetite for oneself on a long day, the anthology is recommended for every poetry enthusiast who remains in love with the idea of innocence and its ever youthful charm!



for the collection, the poems appear in a thread of balanced and appealing accord. Both the editorial 'Dedications' reading from the personal to the public realms, they set the readers' journey with the book into the world of children at large.

The introductory note opens with the editors stating: "Let's open the door to magical worlds through nursery rhymes and children's poems" and further sets the readers for an "inventive world of children's merriment and scholarship."

The poems completely absorb with the theme and present varying alterations of objectivity and personal recollections in an extremely simple diction and form. For instance, the first poem in the collection titled "Twenty Magic Seconds" by Vaida Almeida speaks of washing hands and opens as: "When you wash your hands / Please, don't be in a rush! / Wash it well: lather and rub" that remains very

Another of my personal favourite entries in the collection remains the last entry titled "Words" by Zeenat Khan that seems to sum up the poetic possibilities within this themed collection and as well as all others at large:

Some words are clouds
Some words have mouth
Some words have tongue
Some words do run

Ending with the line: "Hear Words, Wear Words" and enrapturing the power of "words" on whole, the anthology begins and ends on a creative note, while all along offering a range of musical and imaginative verses.

Each entry by an author begins with a biographical note followed by an illustration that lends an added charm to the book at large. The co-editor Meenakshi Mohan has also contributed several of these illustrations for entries like "My New

Amrita Sharma is a Lucknow based writer currently pursuing her Ph.D. in English from the University of Lucknow. Her works have previously been published in *Earth, Fire, Water, Wind: An Anthology of Poems*, *Café Dissensus*, *Everyday*, *Literary Yard*, *Trouvaille Review*, *Confluence: South Asian Perspectives*, *Women's Web*, *Borderless*, *Tell Me Your Story*, *Muse India*, *Rhetorica Quarterly*, *New Academia*, *GNOSIS*, *Dialogue*, *The Criterion*, *Episteme* and *Ashvamegh*. Her area of research includes avant-garde poetics and innovative writings in the cyber space. sharma.amrita92@gmail.com



Ratnajeewan Hoole's *Heritage Histories: A Reassessment of Arumuga Navalar* by Charles P Sarvan

It is beyond my competence to write a review of this book, and the intention here is only to give readers some inkling of it. As the title makes clear, the work is a "reassessment" and *not* an introduction. That being the intention, we are taken, "in medias res" into circumstance, characters and controversy: those without any knowledge, particularly of the last two, may find orientation difficult. Secondly, Professor Hoole has carried out thorough and meticulous research, often drawing on original texts including past newspaper reports, minutes of meetings and correspondence. The wealth of substantiation; the detail, the minutiae, are for readers with a special interest.

We must briefly pause over the word "Heritage". Etymologically, it's connected with "to inherit". What we inherit is many and varied, but not everything can be credited with veracity. Heritage history, not being rigorous and factual, must be scrutinised and interrogated – as Professor Hoole attempts to do with the 'inherited', popular history of Navalar. Heritage history, as he notes, can be nothing but heritage myth: sometimes, history is fabricated rather than made. As it has been ironically said, historians have a power that the gods themselves don't possess, namely, to alter the past. 'The Mahavamsa' records that the dying Buddha prayed to the Hindu god, Vishnu, to protect Vijay who would establish Buddhism in Lanka – in turn, replacing Hinduism! Books have influence (if not authority) in that what one book states can be picked up and repeated in another, and so on until it comes to be accepted as truth. Professor Hoole frees himself from the "inherited", and looks at things with an independent mind.

The central character is Arumuga Navalar, 1822-1879, (Navalar = "learned") described in one source as "a Sri Lankan Shaivite Tamil-language scholar, polemicist, and a religious reformer who was central in reviving native Shaiva Tamil traditions in Sri Lanka and India." The other important character is the Rev. Peter Percival (1803-1882) who came to Jaffna at the age of twenty-three. Most Englishmen during those imperial days didn't deign to learn the language of the "natives" over whom they or their compatriots ruled, but Rev Percival mastered Tamil and went on to publish many works in the language. He saw education, rather than direct evangelism, as the more effective tool in Christian missionary work. In re-examining Navalar, his role and contribution, Hoole demolishes the belief that Navalar translated the Bible into Tamil: that work was undertaken and accomplished by Percival. Another and far more important aspect, and the one on which I will focus, is that of caste.

Navalar was "a notorious casteist" (page 155). Even as a schoolboy (then one of Percival's pupils) he refused to sit on the same bench as a low-caste fellow pupil. When this protest was not accommodated, Navalar led several other upper-caste boys in leaving the school: see the book's cover illustration. One is reminded of apartheid South Africa where buildings and facilities were strictly segregated. As I have written elsewhere, **Tamils who don't completely eschew caste have no moral right at all to protest Sinhalese hegemony.**

The incident of Gandhi being ejected from a whites-only compartment in South Africa is well known but what is not equally well known is his reason: he wouldn't move to compartments occupied by "kaffirs", a derogatory term for black South Africans. What follows is drawn from Perry Anderson's article, 'Gandhi Centre Stage', in the *London Review of Books*, 5 July 2012, pages 3 – 11. At the Round Table Conference in London, Muslims, Sikhs and the Untouchables (the last led

caste. Professor Hoole claims it is difficult for someone who is not from the Govigama caste to win political leadership at the national level (page 42). Advertisements for marriage often specified (specify?) the caste of the prospective bride or groom, despite the Buddha having clearly and decisively turned his face against it. A 'litmus test' is defined as "a decisively indicative test". In the past, a question asked (I should say, challenged) of a white person was: Would you allow or like your daughter, sister or cousin to marry a non-white? I suppose people can be asked (or must honestly ask themselves) the same question but with caste substituted for colour.

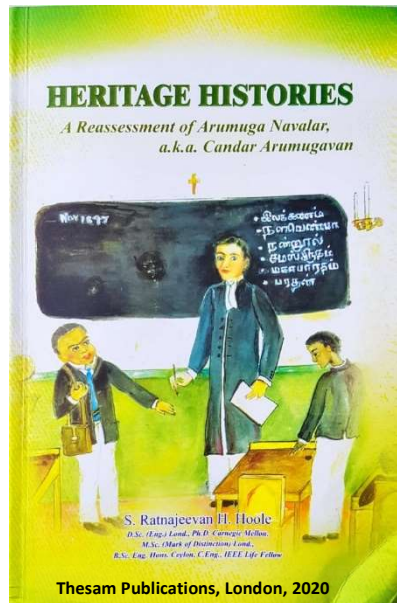
Going back over sixty years, I recall a friend, Dharmasiri de Zoysa, picking up a book and exclaiming in mock (if cynical) surprise: "How did these two entirely different subjects get into the same work?" The title was: 'Love and Marriage'. Similarly, religious doctrine and religious practice are separate; very often, contradictory. Like many Buddhists, Christians also remain infected with caste: for example, Hoole states that Bishop Kulandran justified ban on low caste temple entry (page 126). *'Mirage'* by K. Daniel (translated by Subramaniam Jebanesan, 2016) is a novel but, as the author states, based on fact. It is a searing indictment of caste, both in Hindu and Christian

society. As I wrote (Colombo Telegraph, 28 March 2019), it's an instance of the novelist as witness and testifier. I cite from this article: In the name of religion and ancient time-honoured practice, power and privilege are preserved on the one side; exploitation and suffering perpetuated on the other. (The Tamil Tigers, apart from their many and grievous faults and failings, are reputed to have disapproved of caste, even as they tried to advance female emancipation.)

It can't be easy for a member of a defeated minority group to publicly attack a fellow member. As I wrote in that Colombo Telegraph article on caste in Jaffna: "There's no doubt that those Sinhalese incurably infected with ugly racism will gleefully grab this ... as a bludgeon with which to beat the Tamils, pretending to a moral outrage and a compassion of which they are completely devoid. To change the metaphor, casteism among Tamils can be used as a red herring to divert attention away from racist acts. Racists can come before their victims clothed in the garment of solicitous saviours." But evidently with Professor Hoole, the guiding principle is "Veritas vincit omnia". It's now for others, far more knowledgeable on the subject than me, to enter into discussion and debate - if not disputation.



Retired after having taught in London, Nigeria, Zambia, the Middle East and Germany, Sarvan now lives in Germany with his German-born wife, a published poet



by Dr Ambedkar) demanded separate electorates. However, if Untouchables were to be treated as external to the Hindu community, it would be confirmation that caste was a vile system of discrimination, relegating the lowest orders of society to a subhuman existence with which the smallest brush was pollution. And since Hinduism was founded on caste, it would stand condemned with caste (Anderson). There was also Gandhi's fear that the 'Untouchables' would link forces with the Muslims. Gandhi who had never fasted against 'untouchability' itself, now declared a 'fast unto death' and Ambedkar, fearful that the Mahatma's death would lead to a mass massacre of the untouchables, withdrew his demand for a separate electorate. Of the Satyagraha of 1932, Ambedkar wrote: "There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people [forcing them to] agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus" (Anderson, page 10). For a fairly recent work on the lived experience of caste in India, see Sujatha Gilda's *'Ants Among Elephants'*, reviewed by me in Colombo Telegraph (28 March 2019) under the caption, 'The curse of caste'.

In as much as (non-existent) 'race' proves stronger than religious affiliation, so caste is more potent than religious doctrine. Many of those who convert to Buddhism or become Christian, do not jettison the inherited baggage of

Short story

Bonfire by Chaand Chazelle

"Get rid of that damn thing."
 "What thing?" I surprised myself by daring to ask.
 "Get rid of it, I say."
 "What do you mean?"
 "Are you dumb or something?"
 I decided not to respond as he aggressively rushed towards me with a raised hand, I took a few steps back, weighing his intentions. I wasn't sure, what he was on about. We been married ...six months!
 "You know I am three months gone..."
 "Yes, gone to dogs...just get rid of it, you hear me?"
 This child for him was – 'It' and a 'Damn Thing'? He snarled again –
 "Just look at you, you're 4ft 10, and weigh...what...30 Kilos? Your body is not even designed to carry a baby."
 "Eleven...I'm 4ft.11" I corrected him.
 "So? Ten or eleven...big deal?" He looked at me contemptuously. I averted his gaze.
 "I'm sure I've made myself clear, go and see a doctor."
 "Doctors demand a fee."
 "Sell that bloody ring."
 The ring he referred to – was bought and paid for with my own money before I met him. My father not only refused to pay my university fee, he also demanded that I pay - hundred Rupees towards the family food bill. My first paycheck was – Rs.139.00. Aakash stopped by the door –
 "You don't need to pay, what about your doctor friends... you went to university with?"

He stormed out, banging the door behind him. He always took, never paid back. He was a free-loader. My savings, since our marriage, had dwindled away. That was forty years ago, he left me penniless and homeless. Never contacted his son, who is now thirty-nine.

Aakash, a friend of my brother's, sometimes visited. Whenever he found me alone, he would coax me into seeing him. Against my best judgement, I believed in his lies and got tangled in his silky web of deceit. He charmed me with the promise of migrating to Canada after marriage. At twenty-five, I had never spoken to a boy before, wasn't allowed to. I had no idea, how men behaved. My father objected to our marriage. On one of her visits, my aunt too was enamoured by Aakash. She offered

to host our marriage at her spacious Haveli in Kapurthala. For girls in India, the only escape route to get away from one's unhappy situation was – marriage. I thought marrying him would liberate me from my father's cruel and dictatorial control. My father was a doctor; his patients thought – he was an angel, once he crossed the threshold of the house; he turned into a devil - truly a Jekyll and Hyde character.

Out of the frying pan, I fell into hellfire. I later learnt that Aakash had fathered other children from other women and had walked away. To put it crudely he just wanted his way with me and I was so dumb.

I couldn't stay with my aunt for ever. I came to Chandigarh, out of fifty-four girls in my class, ten of them had become doctors, two of them were good friends of mine. One had emigrated to Britain, the other worked in a hospital locally. I went to see her, the advice she gave me, came with a warning – "First of all, its too late to abort the foetus, you are far gone, it poses a danger to your own life and..." She hesitated. "You may never conceive again, there's always that risk."

No way in hell was it possible for a young single mother to raise a child in Indian society. In desperation, I contacted my friend in London, she sponsored my visit to U.K. My mother's express advice always was – "Be economically independent." Vivek was born in England, I was determined to be a good provider. I worked as a freelance linguist, leaving him with English baby minders. Once, a baby sitter burnt his hand; distraught and dismayed, I enrolled him in a boarding school. I was on call 24/7; working long hours, occasionally even thirty hours at a stretch.

Vivek was the only Indian boy in his class; he was happy, he forged lifelong friendships there. It was inevitable - he became a proper Englishman, there was no family around him to instil in him any Indian values; especially - respect for our elders and not always focusing on self. Individualism does have its merits, so do eastern customs.

Vivek completely identified and immersed himself in the host community; he married

an English girl. I am content that he has a happy marriage.

I have suffered with Arthritis for years. I was hospitalized for ten days, for my knee-replacement. He and his wife were too busy to visit me. It was a difficult road to recovery but with the help of my good friends, I managed.

During this whole year of Pandemic, I longed to hear his voice - he never called.

I once said to him- "If ever I became incapable of looking after myself, I never wish to be a burden on you."

"Well, you were never there for me, I was always left alone, didn't see much of you growing up...now I have someone who loves me." He retorted.

I wanted to remind him: You were and are my first priority, that's why I never married again. You think I didn't love you? I paid for your world travels, bought you cars and funded your business and even a ride on your favourite Concord; fulfilled your desire to be in Vegas on your 21st birthday. It saddens me deeply that I missed your childhood. Was it possible for me to be at two places simultaneously – work and home? You never blame your father? But I stayed quiet, said nothing.

I thought -

However hard

I had strived to achieve my goals; unwittingly, something precious also got lost.

He continued –

"Just run your bath, turn on your hair dryer, take it with you in the bath...it's easy." Then looking around, added - "I will put everything here... on a bonfire."



Chaand Chazelle
 Writer/producer/Director
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South African Newsletter

Biography of a centenarian mother

Amartham Moodley (106)

by Devi Rajab

ON SEPTEMBER 4, Amartham Moodley turned 105, and as her short-term memory fails her, her past comes sharply to the fore. She sings songs in Tamil - an ancient Dravidian language - of hardships faced by the indentured labourers who cried out for mercy as their arms and legs were so full of fatigue at having to slash the cane all day long in the hot sun. "Have you no heart?" they asked their white sugar barons and their overseers. "Even a stone would feel our pain. Has the devil resided in your soul for you to be so cruel?" Later Amartham tackled the abuse of apartheid with dignity. On one occasion when she walked into a white butcher shop and was addressed as "Mary" in the derogatory designation of "Coolie Mary" often given to Indian women, she replied with her head held high: "Can I have a pound of lamb chops, please Jane?" To which the woman replied "My name is not Jane," and she retorted "Well, my name is not Mary". Parenting in the age of apartheid could not have been easy. Her eldest daughter, Professor Kogila Adam Moodley a sociologist based in Vancouver Canada, ventures an explanation: "How did our parents cope? They who were badgered in the workplace, psychologically assaulted in their circumscribed, curtailed movements, forced to sell and relocate from homes they had laboured long to buy, disallowed basic rights, tolerated at best. Yet these emasculated adults went home each day to homes and repaired them to restore the last bastion of their self-esteem. In the eyes of their wives and children, the men were still kings". Working women endured workplace indignities too, but even more than the men, they endured and often took their double disadvantages with the express purpose of giving their children a better life. "I think often about what it must have taken to educate children not to be racist, to believe in their capabilities, to pretend that they had the capacity to become whatever they chose, to be citizens of the world when they were only delimited citizens in the land of their birth."

My mother was born to a large extended family which cushioned her from the tragic loss of her own mother when she was six. At the age of 23 her mother died in childbirth, which was not uncommon, leaving her with two brothers. Shortly after, her father died after he had a dream that her mother had called him. As a senior porter in charge of luggage in the railways, he was often given gold coins as a generous tip which he saved and left to his children as an inheritance. Amartham, which means, sweet-smelling flower, remembers her father buying her silk by the yard and taking it to "the white madam" to sew into dresses for his daughter. "Stitch it to fit her well," he used to say, "and don't let it waddle around." The only problem was that she had to have three dresses made in the same fabric, as he bought so much. To this day her sartorial appreciation of

good clothes has not left her. She remembers her father bringing her large juicy prunes to eat and a porcelain doll, not to be played with but to be put in a showcase to be admired. She recalls him coaxing her to go to convent schools after her mother's death so that she would get a good education in music and literature. When the family heard this, they hid the children under beds and advised them never to heed their father's advice. After his death she was raised by a strict but caring aunt who was like Queen Victoria in her dress and demeanour.

"North Street Ayah" as all the children called her, wore Harley Street shoes on her stocking clad feet and dressed in pale saris with a Queen Victoria pendant at her neck. Her maternal family, headed by KR Pillay, an eminent businessman, had properties and was the first non-white owner of an ice cream factory. The entire family of many brothers and sisters lived in a family owned block of apartments called Crystal Court. My mother attended the Depot Road Primary School where she completed Standard 4, and like many young girls at the time, had to help with family chores

waiting anxiously for her arrival from a shopping trip. I felt very early the fear of losing a parent. Luckily my mother emerged in the nick of time to reassure me that all would be well. On another occasion I recall it was my birthday, and my mother had taken me shopping and generously bought me a pure Egyptian cotton shirt-waister dress for £3 and 10 shillings." "I want the best," she said. This would not have been so memorable if it had not been for the fact that on an earlier occasion I sat in the back of my father's pea green Chevrolet and watched her go in and out of a sari shop to get a good deal for a much-needed Deepavalli (Hindu Festival of Lights) outfit for herself. She settled for a chocolate brown silk sari with gold flecks. My observation at the time was that this was not what she really wanted, but it was a frugal choice based on the priorities of raising a family. She taught us about the dignity of labour in a servant-ridden society. For as long as I can remember she worked alongside her husband as an equal partner running the family store. The tell-tale signs were in her varicose veins. During the height of apartheid, in subtle ways she taught us how to hold our heads high and never succumb

to the pressures of racism. She raised a black child, Sipho, and widened our horizons when it was not fashionable. Some family members had to find an explanation for this utlandish behaviour and attributed her affection for the little boy to a variety of amusing explanations from dementia to disrepute. Alongside her husband they raised four children, giving them an overseas education.



until a suitable young man came her way. Her desires for a suitable partner were simple. All she wanted was a tennis player with clean, well-cut nails who didn't smoke or drink. She got more than she bargained for, as her husband went out of his way to educate her and provide her with an enlightened and an emancipated lifestyle. He encouraged her to read instead of spending hours slaving over pots in the kitchen and so she always carried a copy of the Readers Digest in her handbag. Later the stories that she told me about Lord Byron helped me to win the Jan Hofmeyer Speech contest in 1963.

I have many memories of my mother. Some frustrated me at the time, but were the parameters and limits any good mother should draw for her beloved child. She was strict about the company one kept and encouraged us to interact with people from whom one could learn and emulate. Now, I too, draw them for my daughter. But the memories that linger are touching ones and point to the sacrifices that a parent has to make for children. My earliest memory is of the 1949 Indo-African riots, when as a three-year-old I stood on a sofa overlooking a window in Lorne Street, Durban watching the angry crowds spew forth from the bus ranks and

In 1968 the whole family immigrated to various parts of the world on account of the Immorality Act which prohibited mixed marriages preventing their eldest daughter from marrying a German sociologist Professor Heribert Adam. The Group Areas Act forced the family to give up their home which was declared a white area. They chose not to move into a residential area designated for Indians only and preferred to leave the country. Furthermore, the Separate Universities Act meant that Indian students had to study at ethnic institutions. So the whole family split and settled in various parts of the world. The eldest Kogila is a Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. Next is a son Sundru Moodley who is a highly successful dentist living in Denver Colorado the third is Dr Devi Moodley Rajab former Dean of Student Development at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The youngest is Dr Subithra Moodley Moore a political scientist. They all became professionals, fulfilling the thwarted ambitions of their parents.

After the death of her husband at 85, Amartham discovered the wonders of the paintbrush. Initially her paintings were simple and childlike, but they became vibrant, bold and full of colour. They display a wonder of nature that reflects an

inner world of birds and peacocks and intricate designs depicting the dance of her universe. She is a living statement of the dictum "it is never too late to learn". Now at 104, she has children in Stellenbosch, Durban, Vancouver and Colorado. Her life is further enriched by the diversity of her grandchildren and great grandchildren, who hail from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds. How does she cope with such diversity and still retain her centrality as a Tamil-speaking Hindu woman who grew up in the Point area in Durban at the time of horse carts and separate double-decker trams? Armed with her simple lamp and flowers floating in water she says that it is her prayers that embrace all of these changes. She sent her children to Catholic schools and encouraged them to learn the hymns and prayers that reassured them that as Hindu children, they

need not fear, as "there is only one God, and different religions are like different rivers that flow into the same ocean".

In Zulu philosophy, I was once told by Professor Mazisi Kunene, "the mother gives birth to herself". Deeply embedded in each of her three daughters and only son is a magical combination of all of Amartham— great in wisdom, sweet in kindness, determined in purpose, rich in creativity and strict in discipline. But most of all she displays an interesting tension between ancient wisdom and modernity, sparkling with a *joie de vivre* that excites and baffles the onlooker. In the embodiment of *mater*, she holds many lessons. As Sarasvathi, the goddess of learning, you sit on a rock; as Luxmi the Goddess of wealth you never squandered wealth. As Goddess Parvati, you

stood loyal to your partner but never in his shadow. In Ganesha's worship you removed obstacles from our path. Sita you were, without teaching your daughters her subservience, but only her morality. Long before it was fashionable, you framed our minds and bodies into post-modernist women – tall, upright, principled, tolerant, and appreciative of diversity. Who else could pray in her shrine, and welcome with open arms a Catholic German a Canadian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Rumanian into the family fold, and not lose her essence?

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

Golden Jubilee of Vatayan: HOLI CELEBRATION



A short report by Divya Mathur

Vatayan celebrated its Golden Jubilee on the auspicious occasion of Holi, the Festival of Colour with great fun and frolic. In this program, the audience was requested to wear white kurtas. The program began with rubbing of Gul and Abir (bright coloured and sparkling powders) on their own faces, keeping a special drink called Thandai and special home-made sweets called Gujias; water blasters (pichkaris) were optional. The event continued for two hours with fun-filled chatter, poking fun, reciting humorous poems - all the essential elements of Holi.

Graced by distinguished guests including Virendra Sharma, MP, Anil Joshi, Vice President of Central Hindi Institute, Agra, Divya Mathur, Founder of Vatayan-UK and Chairman Mira Mishra-Kaushik, OBE, this event was chaired by Sarojini Pritam, promoter of comic satire poetry and presented by three compères Dr Padmesh Gupta, Director of Oxford Business College, Shikha Varshney and Ashish Mishra. The poems who made the international audience reel in laughter were Ajatshatru, Pankaj Prasoon, Brij Goyal, Dr K K Srivastava, Abhishek Tripathi and Sunita Pahuja.

Predominantly celebrated in Nepal and India, the popular ancient Hindu festival, Holi has spread to parts of Europe and North America as a spring celebration of love, frolic, and colours. Also known as the Festival of Love, the

Festival of Colours and the Festival of Spring, it signifies the triumph of good over evil. People get together to sing and dance, play and laugh for a night and a day, starting on the evening of the Purnima (full moon day) falling in the Hindu calendar month of Phalgun, which falls around middle of March in the Gregorian calendar.

The first evening is known as Holika Dahan (burning of Demon Holika) or Rangpashi or Chhoti Holi, where people gather, perform religious rituals in front of the bonfire, and pray that their internal evil be destroyed the way Holika, the sister of the demon king Hiranyakashipu, was killed in the fire. The

following day people throw multi-colored powders and perfumed water on each other, the celebration brings in mesmerizing hues of blues, yellows, magentas, greens, violets, and more; clouds of colors dancing in the wind carry the message of love, harmony, and happiness far and wide.

The next morning is celebrated as Rangwali Holi (Dulendi) – a free-for-all festival of colours, somewhat like Spain's La Tomatina festival, where people smear each other with colours and drench each other with Pichkaris (water pistols), water-filled balloons are also used to play and colour each other. Anyone and everyone is fair game, friends or strangers, rich or poor, children and older people. It begins at home and then people go out in the streets, parks, outside temples and buildings. Groups carry drums and other musical instruments; go from place to place, singing and dancing. People visit family, friends and even foes this days, throwing coloured powders and embracing each other, share Holi delicacies, food and drinks.

In the olden days, people used only natural colours like turmeric to cleanse the body and remove unwanted accumulation on the skin. Holika Dahan, on the other hand, was performed to burn all that is dry and dirty to pave the way for new life in the spring.

About its history, besides having a detailed description in the Vedas and Puranas such as Narad Purana and Bhavishya Purana, Holi is mentioned in Jaimini Mimamsa. A stone inscription belonging to 300 BC found at Ramgarh in the province of Vindhya has mention of Holikotsav in it. King Harsha too has mentioned about holikotsav in his work Ratnavali that was written during the 7th century. The famous Muslim tourist - Ulbaruni too has mentioned about holikotsav in his historical memories. Other Muslim writers of that period have mentioned that holikotsav were not only celebrated by the Hindus but also by the Muslims. A 16th century panel sculpted in a temple at Hampi, capital of Vijaynagar, shows a joyous scene of Holi. The painting depicts a Prince and his Princess standing amidst maids waiting with syringes or pichkaris to drench the Royal couple in coloured water.

<https://www.facebook.com/VatayanPoetryOnSouthBank/>

Online Special Feature

Off the Hook: A musical by Anju Makhija

This play is excerpted from the book, **Mumbai Traps: Collected Plays**. <http://www.confluence.mobi/2021/05/off-the-hook-a-musical/>

Off the Hook is a musical inspired by the mythological sufi saint, Lord Jhulelal, the legendary mystic of the Indus valley. By divine intervention, a fish with an evolutionary leap reincarnates into a handsome, young man, Toohey. He is rescued by a frustrated woman, Sheila, who cannot get enough of him! Like any immigrant to Mumbai, he must sharpen his survival skills to confront the city seeped in purgatorial desires and pursuits.

Anju Makhija is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet, playwright and translator based in Mumbai. She has also co-edited anthologies related to partition, women's poetry and theatre. Her new book, 'Poems Grow With You', has been published recently. She is currently working on a volume of her 'Collected Plays'.
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