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CONFLUENCE
SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Sri Lanka: an awakening?

The country is facing an unprecedented crisis, but also an unprecedented opportunity

By Sanjayan Rajasingham

First, the crisis. At its simplest, Sri Lanka lacks the money it needs to buy the things it needs. A few big reasons: structurally, Sri Lanka has had a debt-driven growth strategy, but a lot of its expenditure of that debt was on low-return investments. This worked when Sri Lanka could access loans at concessionary rates, but became a problem when it reached middle income status and had to borrow at commercial rates. Second, Sri Lanka has a problem of low government revenue, exacerbated by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's decision, in 2019, to introduce a tax cut in anticipation of a Parliamentary election – a tax cut that reduced government revenue by as much as 25%. Low revenue and high debt interest repayments made for a perfect storm, and President Rajapaksa then decided, in April 2021, to introduce an overnight ban on chemical fertiliser. This had a significant impact on Sri Lanka's agricultural output, and meant a loss of foreign exchange through a fall in cash crop earnings, and through more money spent on importing rice. COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine were the final straws. They reduced income from tourism and increased prices.

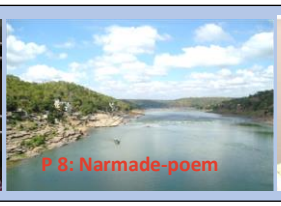
(Continues on page3)

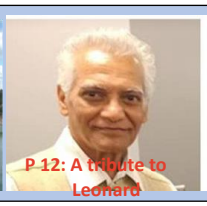
Unmesh: Festival of Expressions The Gigantic International Literature Festival-Shimla

By Divya Mathur

Shimla, 16 June 2022. As a part of the 75th Amrit Mahotsav, the biggest international festival so far, celebrated literature, art, music and freedom of expression. It took place against the stunning backdrop of the Himalayan foothill, in the historic Gaiety Theatre on The Mall, under the joint aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Sahitya Akademi with the support of the Department of Art and Culture-Shimla. The theatre is the hub of cultural events; very popular among Bollywood stars because several music videos and movies are filmed here. My stay was arranged at the beautiful Li Sa Re hotel on top of a hill with breath taking views. Inaugurated with a great pomp and show in the presence of State Ministers, Governor, 425 litterateurs, artists, humanitarians, politicians, TV and cinema personalities, publishers and entrepreneurs, covering 5 generations. Kudos to the entire team led by Dr K Shrinivasa Rao and Kumar Anupam for carrying it through well!

Over the span of 3-days, panel discussions, workshops, readings, talks, debates, book launches, music and dance performances, storytelling, film screenings, exhibitions of books, art & craft took place in 60 languages. It was a privilege **(Continues on page 4)**





Editorially Speaking

This is our summer issue coming as combined May - August issue!

Confluence is reaching its 20th year of publication this year. It is indeed a major milestone for a magazine of this kind as many readers would agree. While establishing and running a publication is not an easy task its continuity over a long time is often questionable. It is sometimes considered as a past time hobby by some people. But those who are associated with Confluence as a reader or a writer would certainly recognise the role this little journal is playing within the literary circles of South Asians. Even though this is a time for celebration, it has not been possible to celebrate our success in a big way, for reasons beyond our control. However, we will be publishing a special 20th anniversary issue this year with special features by inviting our writers and well-wishers who have been of immense help during the past years. Any sponsorship towards the publication of this issue will be greatly appreciated.

Since our last issue, there have been several new developments in different parts of the world. Russian occupation in Ukraine followed by the western sanctions have caused a major hike in prices of fuel and essential commodities making day to day life for many people in many countries a question mark. The on-going economic and political calamity in Sri Lanka is also a cause for concern as the country's leadership has proved its ineffectiveness in controlling the situation and reviving the economy. The dramatic uprising of youth and the way the former president was removed from power was unthinkable until recently but certainly has proved a step in the right direction. It is waiting to be seen how the new president and the interim government will bring back normalcy, stability and unity to this great neighbour of India.

Despite our previous appeals to send submissions on time we are still experiencing difficulties in receiving enough submissions, in a timely manner causing problems in scheduling our issues. Considering these practical issues we will be making changes to the frequency of publication, in the future.

Wishing you all a great summer!

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Confluence is celebrating its 20th year of publication this year. To mark this milestone, we will be publishing a special 20th anniversary issue this year with special features. As space will be limited, authors who would like to publish their works in this issue please write to us in the first instance.

From page 1

Sri Lanka: an awakening?

The result is acute, widespread economic pain – and an economy on the verge of collapse. Gas and petrol are in short supply – people queue hours to get them, and the government doesn't have the money to buy them. Power cuts are at three and a half hours a day and will increase. Medicines are running out. Soon, food items may as well.

Yet the crisis has also led to an opportunity: a remarkable awakening, seen in protests by citizens that are unprecedented in their breadth and depth. Sri Lankans across almost every dividing line have come together, sometimes in their tens of thousands, to demand the removal of Mr Rajapaksa and his family – four of whom held prominent positions, including the posts of Finance Minister and Prime Minister, until recently. From fisherfolk, to garment workers, to university professors, to healthcare workers, to everyday citizens – the call for the Rajapaksas to go, to be held accountable, and for a change to the system, has been resounding.

Particularly striking is the permanent protest site set up at the seafront promenade, Galle Face, just opposite the

President's office in Colombo. The protestors call it 'GotaGoGama' (*gama* means 'village' in Sinhalese). GGG, as it is now known, has grown beyond all recognition. Lawyers have set up a legal aid clinic. Citizens have opened up a library. There are regular impromptu speeches, drama and songs targeting a failed political system. Some started a 'People's University', with regular talks to fuel a nascent civic awakening. By all accounts, GGG is a remarkable space. Women as well as men lead discussions and protests. Marginalised groups, whether Muslims, Tamils, LGBT persons, or working-class individuals – all have an opportunity to speak and be heard. For some, GGG is not a protest seeking a solution – it *is* a solution, a lived community demonstrating what a different Sri Lanka can look like.

Where will Sri Lanka go next? This depends on three things: the fate of the Rajapaksas; the role of the military; and the evolution of protests.

First, will Gotabaya go? For now, he seems to be digging his heels in. His brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was Prime Minister until the 9th of May, but his involvement in setting a group of thugs on protesters at GGG, led to retaliatory rioting and attacks on government MPs and their property, and the murder of one MP. This forced him to resign. The president then appointed five-time prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to the post. Mr. Wickremesinghe lacks legitimacy – he lost his own constituency in the last election and got into Parliament on a bonus seat. In his first speech, he painted a bleak picture and made it clear that things would get worse before they got better. But will there be real change? And was his appointment in exchange for a promise to protect the Rajapaksas? Both remain to be seen, but as if in answer to the latter, the new Prime Minister blocked a motion by the Opposition to censure the President in Parliament this week. And if Mr. Wickremesinghe does not deliver, Sri Lanka's instability will only get worse.

The risk of instability has stoked fears around a second key variable: the military. For some time now, there have been fears that an economic collapse will be used by either President Rajapaksa or by the military itself to launch a coup. From the start of his tenure in 2019, President Rajapaksa promoted the military as the most efficient and disciplined institution in the country. He made sure that serving or ex- military officers became ministry secretaries. In the north and the east, the armed forces police the public, cultivate land and operate hotels. After the chemical fertilizer fiasco, President Rajapaksa promised that the army would 'help' farmers implement his misguided policy. When the military is made to appear 'the best institution for the job', and the people lose faith in the political system, it is easy for them to turn to the military for solutions. This is what happened in Thailand and Myanmar. Sri Lanka might yet go down that dark path.

In the midst of all this, a final question: will these protests lead to a genuine civic awakening? It still could. Up to now, GGG, for all its creativity and potential, had done little to challenge some of the Sri Lanka's fundamental problems: a Sinhala-Buddhist extremist nationalism that sees the country as belonging to the Sinhalese Buddhists, with all others as guests; Buddhism's place in a multi-religious country; and a serious reflection on the root causes of Sri Lanka's civil war and class conflict. This may be why most people in the North and East – mostly Tamils, as well as Muslims – stayed aloof. They feel a deep cynicism, borne of the failure of the south to protest on behalf of Tamils when they suffered far worse economic deprivation and state violence during the civil war. This may be a short-sighted stance by the Tamils, a failure to recognise justice claims that are not their own – but in the context, it is an understandable one.

Yet there are reasons for hope. Sri Lanka's civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended on the 18th of May 2009, in a bloody final push that saw thousands of civilians killed because of the actions of both sides. While the Rajapaksas, who drove that military campaign, have insisted on celebrating the 18th as 'Victory Day', most Tamils see it as a day of mourning. This year, in an unprecedented move, there was an event of mourning and memorialization held at GGG, just opposite the President's office. A willingness to see the end of the war differently by some Sinhalese is a big step. Could this be the beginning of something more? Could Sri Lanka's crisis lead to a generation of Sri Lankans of all backgrounds who are willing to interrogate the deeper divisions and fault lines in Sri Lankan society?

The future of Sri Lanka is unclear, and things are unlikely to get better any time soon. However, history, it is said, does not move in a straight line, but zigs and zags. Perhaps, then, Sri Lanka still has an opportunity in the midst of this crisis.

Sanjayan Rajasingham is a visiting researcher at Thammasat University, Thailand and a doctoral student at Yale Law School, USA. He was formerly a lecturer in law at the University of Jaffna. His dissertation looks at constitutional law in Buddhist-majority states, with a focus on Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Editor's note: Since this article was written there has been some progress in the political situation as Rajapaksa family have been removed from power and the former President has fled the country. An interim administration is in charge for now. However, the country's worsening economic situation is still threatening the country's stability.

From page 1

Unmesh: Festival of Expressions

to be invited to participate in a session on Indian Diaspora: Literary Expressions, along with Vijay Seshadri, Chitra Divakarni, Manjula Padnabhan (USA) Abhay K (Madagascar), Anju Ranjan (South Africa), Sunetra Gupta (UK) and Dr Pushpita Awasthi (Netherlands).

My theme focused on Indian Diaspora writers. As Caroline C. of the University of California has put it, 'A word written by a woman changes the story of the world; Modifies the official or official version. Its relevance is timeless. Women's rights remain a problem even today and writers themselves have a huge responsibility in this fight. This is the reason why I have always given preference to women writers in the editing of my books. The movement has made considerable progress in the five decades since 'Women-Lib'. In her foreword to my greatest story collection yet - Ik Safar Saath-Saath' (A journey together), Professor Francesca Orsini says that 'Through this collection, we can get to know the concerns and narrative style of the writers, as well as what the first generation Diaspora women in the "West" feel. It presents a constructive history of diaspora life, which has been carved by women who have gone through struggles, hence its authenticity is beyond doubt.

It was impossible for anyone to attend more than 3 to 4 sessions in a day, besides the performance at 7 pm daily. Shimla resonated with Gulzar's ghazals, Vishal Bhardwaj and Prasoon Joshi's songs, dance-dramas by Sonal Mansingh, Kacheri by P Jai, Nagada by Nathulal Solanki, Dastan-e-Karn by Mahmood Farooqui, Bhakti and Tribal Music, amongst many more.

The Sessions on Literature & Cinema, Indian Writing, Tribal Writing, LGBTQ Writers, Media and Literature, Folklore, Bhakti Literature and Cultural Integration through Translation etc were brilliant, the eminent writers and celebrities included Sai Paranjpe, Anamika, Deepti Naval, Linda Hayes, Daniel Negers, Chandrashekhar Kambar, Namita Gokhale, Arif Mohammad Khan, Pratyush Guleri, Hoshang Merchant, Sitanshu Yashchandra, Vishwas Patil, Ranjit Hoskote, Leeladhar Mandloi, Arun Kamal, Baldevbhai Sharma, Buddhinath Mishra, Satish Alekar, Vishnu Dutt, Surya Prasad Dixit, Laxmishankar Bajpayi, Maneesha Kulshreshth, Anant Vijay, Ravi Tekchandani, etc., alongside young writers from various Indian states.

Many sessions of multi lingual story as well as poetry readings by eminent authors alongside their four generations was heart-warming. Sessions on Uniting Cultures through Translation, Why do I Write, the Northeast connection, World Classics and Indian Readers, Future of Poetry, Why I write, Indian Literature in Foreign Languages, Transcending Barriers through Translation, specially Literature & Women Empowerment, which included eminent authors Thamizhachi Thangapandiyan, Manju Jaidka, Paramita Satpathy and Sanjukta Dasgupta.

The session on Women's Writing in Indian Languages with Geetajalishree, Dr Mridula Garg and Varsha Adlaja was worth attending. Many agreed in the audience with Mridula when she expressed her unhappiness over the subject itself – why should women's writing be dealt separately.

Hon'ble Governor of Kerala Sri Arif Mohammad Khan chaired the session "Singing the Faith: Bhakti Literature in India, it was overcrowded. Local artists saving the folk culture related to Pin Valley of Lahaul Spiti district in Himachal Pradesh, celebrated the Legacy: Discussion on The Saga of Indian Folklore.

Founder of Vatayan-UK, Divya Mathur is an eminent and award winning author, translator and impresario. During the Lockdown, she has set an unequalled record by organizing over 110 international events in which eminent authors from all over the world participate.

Dalit Writings: Emerging Perspectives
An Anthology for 21st century
Editors: Santosh Gupta and Bandana Chakrabarty

Reviewed by Vijaya Singh

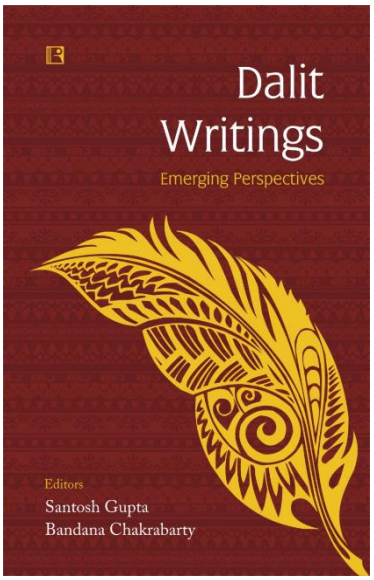
Dalit writings: Emerging perspectives (Rawat: 2022) is an edited volume of essays by Santosh Gupta and Bandana Chakrabarty, both well-known academics in the field of English Literary Studies with many books to their credit. Rawat publishers based in Jaipur have made a name for themselves in publishing high quality academic books on various subjects. This anthology is a fine example of their publishing quality. The cover design of the book too is very attractive and immediately draws you in.

Of late, Dalit Studies has gained tremendous traction in critical discourse. There are multiple reasons for this rise in prominence; the most significant being the force with which Dalit social and political consciousness has pushed back against upper caste hegemony. As also the fact that the writings and thoughts of Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the preeminent thinker, writer and architect of the Indian constitution have not only spread far and wide but have gained recognition worldwide and are a dominant force guiding the creative and critical impulses of Dalit and other progressive writers, thinkers and artists.

The anthology, *Dalit writings* is an acknowledgment of this shift in perspective that began tentatively in the late nineteenth century with the effort and writings of Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitri Bai Phule, and came to be a powerful force in the 21st century. The anthology presents a collection of essays that address a wide variety of issues on caste, class, gender, literature and aesthetics from different periods in various national languages as Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Bengali. Dalit representation in literary forms as autobiography, novel, short story, prose and poetry are examined to highlight the institutionalized oppression and violence of caste and its numerous modes of social discrimination, ostracism, and exploitation. It also highlights the revolutionary force of Dalit voices calling out for dignity and self-respect to all of humanity.

There are a total of twenty- four essays in this volume. The first essay, "Working through experience" by the distinguished academic Jasbir Jain begins by asking a pertinent question, what does it mean to write through experience and how is to be evaluated? She makes a distinction between writing mediated through experience and writing mediated through empathy. This is one of the most vexed questions pertaining to representation. Who speaks for whom?

This theme of writing from an intimate experience of caste oppression is also the theme of Raj Kumar's essay "The 'other' Indians". Kumar, who is a well -known scholar of Dalit Studies, goes into a detailed history of the word Dalit, Dalit literature, and Dalit tradition in Gujarat. He engages with issues of caste, class and power in Gujarati writer Joseph Macwan's path breaking novel *Angaliyat* (1986). He highlights the difference between Gandhian



and Ambedekarite approach to the problem of equality. Gandhian idea of reforming caste society through a change of heart is critiqued in Macwan's novel to show how such an approach failed the Vankar community and other downtrodden communities.

This critique of Gandhi and other upper caste social reformers' ideas of reforming the Hindu community are also taken up by Santosh Gupta in her essay on Kancha Ilaiah's writings. Ilaiah is considered a most provocative writer by some mainstream academics for the simple reason that he deconstructs Hindu myths and religion and shines light on its many dark patches. Gupta's essay, "Kancha Ilaiah's writings: perspective of the 'other' within" is an in-depth study of his scimitar like prose and fiction. She offers a critique of his work by questioning his claims of the inability of Hindus to handle dissent, revision or review of their religious assumptions. She however agrees with him that gaining epistemological independence from Hindu philosophy led the Dalit thinker and writer to seek self-respect, self- assertion and dignity. She has another essay in the book, "Dalit search for freedom" in which she looks at Gita Hariharan's novel, *I have become the tide (2019)* to show the empathetic point of view of a non-Dalit writer Shobha P Shinde's essay, "Dalit women's voices: a new vocabulary of emancipation" is an engagement with Dalit women writers as Jyoti Lanjewar, Meena Kandasamy, Shushama Andhare , Heera Bansode, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamlbe. The writings of these women are statements of resistance against both external casteist mindset and internal patriarchal mindset. Dalit women poets and writers Shinde says suffer the double bind of caste and patriarchy and struggle twice as hard to be heard.

Madhuri Chaterjee too looks at the well-known Bengali woman poet Kalyani Thakur Charal's autobiography and poetry to point out the pathos of Matua community's struggle for survival and recognition in Bengal and elsewhere. In fact, in the book there is a detailed interview with Charal conducted by Jaydeep Sarangi and Bidisha Pal. The interview brings to attention the life and reasons for Charal's writings. Charal reflecting on her life points out that "she writes so that she can protest". Writing is an exercise of purgation for her much like the idea of catharsis in Aristotle.

Yet another essay that deals with Dalit writings in Bengali literature is Bandana Chakrabarty's on the fishing community in Bengal. She explores the alternative aesthetics and lives of this community in Utthanpada's book of short stories, *Survival and other stories: Bangla Dalit fiction.* She is surprised that it took so long for Dalit writings to emerge in Bengali language, even though Bengal has had a rich tradition of reading, writing and publishing since the nineteenth century.

Usha Bande, Mini Nanda, Charu Mathur, Jyoti Bhatia, Urmil Talwar all seasoned academics and scholars along with other writers have written deeply absorbing and insightful essays seeking answers to pertinent questions regarding Dalit writings.

This is a book that any serious scholar of caste would not wish to ignore. A book highly recommended for anyone who seeks to understand the debates around the question of caste in Indian literature.

Vijaya Singh teaches English Literature at Post Graduate Government College Sector 11, Chandigarh. She was a Fulbright Fellow at NYU and a Fellow at IIAS, Shimla. She has published two books: *First Instinct*: a book of poems (2014) and *Level Crossing: Railway Journeys in Hindi Cinema* (2017).

PROFILE

Malathy Sitaram
An English teacher turned magazine editor
by Subhash Chandra

The contributors to London based Confluence: South Asian Perspectives -- acclaimed for the quality and diversity of its contents since 2002 – know Malathy Sitaram, as one of the Editors and columnist with many firsts to her credit: she was the first Asian teacher of English in Wiltshire schools in England, the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace, and also the first Magistrate in England to be appointed to serve the new Sentencing Guidelines Committee under the Chairmanship of the Lord Chief Justice from 2004 to 2010*.

However there is more to her, and many, I tend to think, would like to know more about the shy, retiring, Malathy: her family, childhood, background, and her life's journey until she joined Confluence seven years ago.

After her birth in Delhi, her parents moved to Bombay where her father had got posted as a civil servant. Malathy and her sisters attended a convent school, which they loved. They fared very well, and went on to study in Elphinstone College in Bombay from where Malathy took a B.A. in Philosophy and French. Later she also obtained M.Ed. from Bristol University.

She comes from a distinguished South Indian family: father held a high position in the government of the day and her mother was the first Tamil woman to be enrolled for a chemistry degree at Madras university in South India. She was remarkably modern, spoke immaculate English and was actively involved in social welfare work. According to Malathy, reading was their family's favourite pastime and in the evenings everyone would have their noses in books.

After her marriage, she moved to Britain with her husband in the seventies. Her only child, a daughter, Anya was one of the first Asian television news reporters In the UK.

In her own words, "As a child I was a bookworm. During my growing up years, I devoured books of all kinds – fiction as well as non-fiction – for enjoyment and knowledge. Now I don't read as much, because the Confluence writers fill the gap! Editing has become my passion and it keeps the brain ticking.

I am lucky to have been editing the magazine for so many years… Whoever thought when I was in school that one day, I'd be editing works from distant countries?"

Her column, 'Malalthy's Musings' in Confluence is well known, but I learnt by serendipity (I was looking for my short story) that she is a creative writer too. Her short story "The Letter," (Confluence, August 2015 -- print edition) is a wistful, touching tale! She did not pursue creative writing, as the rigours of editing claimed all of her.

And to cap it all, she possesses journalistic abilities, as is borne out by the jaw-dropping interview -- 'Face to Face'-- of Mrs Indira Gandhi she conducted in 1978, when the former was out of power, post-Emergency electoral defeat. (Confluence, November 2015 – print). The sharp and loaded questions and the politically astute and thoughtful answers make the interview gripping read besides being of great historical value. The accompanying pic shows two sharp-featured ladies with razor-sharp intellects sparring, and each holding her ground.

As we know, Malathy's editing is meticulous and no linguistic infelicity or structural glitch passes through her fine editor's comb. Her responses to writers are often staccato and, therefore, she sometimes comes across as rude, even irked. But I discovered over time that she is a cool and thorough professional, harbouring no hard feelings against anyone.

Perhaps, other contributors would also like to share their experiences with Malathy.

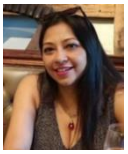
***Based on inputs from Malathy, and my interactions with her over the years.**

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.

Never Judge a Book by Its Cover – Two Monologues

by Anjana Sen

"Hello? Hi, it's me.
Yeah, sorry, it took longer than I thought. I've just got into Central, and the next train is, umm, let me see… 6.15. So, I should be home by 6.45.
Yup, dinner at 7 sounds fine.
I'll just need a minute or two to take this damn belt off, it's killing me.
Yeah yeah, I know, it's for my own good. But honestly Shy, I don't think I can put up with this much longer. It's not quite as discreet as Dr Ireland said it would be.
Oh, I agree, it does help, it has helped. But the physio was saying that I was making great progress. Maybe I can ask the surgery tomorrow if I can wear it around the house. Not outdoors, you know.
Ok, baba, I promise I'm not going to start tennis till the back is completely healed.
Oh, hey listen, you know that frying pan you've been eyeing at Lakeland? I saw it was on sale this afternoon, and I picked it up, who's a great husband now, huh?
Stuffed it into my laptop bag, yup it fit, just about.
Don't worry, baba, I'm not carrying it on my back. I've got the rucksack in front. Like we used to carry Ricky around in a slingy when he was a baby, remember?
Imagine, that was 26 years ago. I don't feel so old, do you.
Yeah right, just the back, but that was tennis, Shaila, not old age that did the back in.
So, what's for dinner today? Yup, I am quite hungry, between the meeting and the physio, I just managed to grab a wee Greg's pie.
I think I'll sit down, there's still about ten minutes till the train comes in.
(Switching to Bengali)
There's this kid sitting next to me, I tell you, she's got metal all over her face, and purple hair. Thank God our two never went in for all that.
I'm not being judgy, but honestly, kids today. She'll be a junkie, I'll bet.
Seriously Shy, I'm not jumping to conclusions, but she's talking on the phone furtively, and giving me these shifty glances. God, I hope she's not after my wallet.
Good she's leaving, all these years and I still feel uncomfortable around these types.
Ah, there's my train coming in. Bye, love you, see you soon."
"Hello? Hi mum, surprise!
Classes finished early today, so I thought I'd land up tonight instead of tomorrow.
Yeah, the train from Dundee got in a while ago, I ran from Queen Street to Central but missed my connection by a whisker. Now I'm on the 6.15.
Mum, can you get me at Whitecraigs, please, it's raining, and I don't want to mess my hair. Thank you.
Ellie and I coloured it last night, you'll love it mum, it's like a candyfloss pink. But dad will hate it as usual. Tell him it's only temporary, ok?
Seriously mum, he always asks me when I'm going to get sick of my nose piercing. He should come and see some of the other students.
I think I'm going to apply for a job at the Union mum. Oh, I know you would, but seriously, I need my own cash, dad and you do so much already.
Fine, I know you'd be my taxi without the flattery, lol.
Oh mum, this is so weird, there's this man who's just walked in. He looks so suspicious.
Honestly mum, you know I'm not being dramatic. He's got this bulging backpack which he's wearing back to front. He's on the phone, but I can't hear what he's saying.
And oh mummy, he's got this huge belt thing under his shirt.
Do you think he's a suicide bomber?
Oh no (whispers), he's sat down next to me.
What should I do?
I can see it mum, under his shirt, it is sort of sticking out, the rain remember?
He's talking in a foreign language mum, and I'm sure its Arabic or something.
Mummy, he looks like the Manchester bomber, what should I do?
Ok, I've moved away now, my train's coming in anyway.
Oh mum, he's following me. Right behind me.
Ok, ok, I'll speak to the security. Yes, I see one right here.
Stay on the line, mummy."



Anjana started writing about four years ago. A few early awards gave her the confidence she needed, in her mid-fifties. Now she has seen her work, mostly short stories and poems, published in magazines and anthologies, both online and in print. In March 2022, she won the Dorothy Dunbar Rosebowl, the First Prize for Poetry for the Scottish Association of Writers. Anjana lives in Scotland and spends as much time as she can in Calcutta.'

NARMADE*

Lakshmi Kannan

You sit so well on the Tamil tongue
that takes your name, Narmada
before any of the other rivers.

Is it because you mark the boundary
between North and South India
a divide that people cannot, will not, forget?

You're invoked first
when your devotees bathe, chanting
Narmade, Sindhu, Kaveri, Godavari,
Sarasvati, Gange, Yamune caiva
jale (a)smin sannidhim kuru,
to bestow your divinity on the waters.
You're true to you name, declares our cook.
Whatever is made with your waters
tastes like the food prepared by Nala[1]

***Narmada**, considered to be one of the oldest rivers of India, forms the traditional boundary between North India and South India. Narmada in Sanskrit means "the giver of pleasure"

Devotees, when they take their morning bath, chant the *slok* in Sanskrit *Gange ce Yamune caiva, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmade, Sindhu, Kaveri Jale (a)smin sannidhim kuru*, invoking the rivers to bestow their divinity on the waters.

[1] Nala, in the epic Mahabharata, is known for his culinary skill. He wrote the first-ever book on cookery titled 'Pakadarpanam.'

Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual writer, also known by her Tamil pen-name 'Kaaveri'. Her recent publications include Wooden Cow (2021), her translation of the iconic Tamil writer T Janakiraman's novel Marappasu, for his Centenary Celebrations, Sipping the Jasmine Moon, Poems (2019) and The Glass Bead Curtain, a novel (2020, c2016).

THINKING OF MY MOTHER ON MOTHER'S DAY
by Shanta Acharya

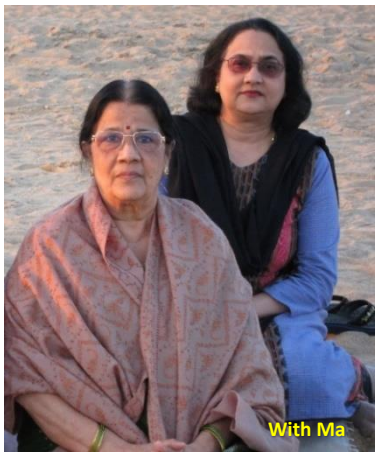
I last saw my mother in person in December 2019 just before COVID entered our lives. Thanks to the new technology, we are able to talk frequently. When I wished her on Mother's Day, which was celebrated in the UK on 27 March 2022, she laughed and said it was just another day. Ma lives in Bhubaneswar, in India. She is the only surviving person I have been having regular conversations with since I was born. That is a great privilege.

My mother was born just days after the Government of India Act 1935 received Royal Assent. Her parents named her Rashmi, the first rays of the sun. Before her first birthday, her father was appointed Deputy Collector in Orissa, a newly created state whose ancient heritage is cited in the *Mahabharata*. When Ma was five Gandhiji started Satyagraha, teaching the nation to be true, fair, and free. Loneliness came to stay when her mother died in childbirth. Ma was not quite seven, unprepared for the many trials of life to come, when she was half-orphaned. The world had been changing faster than she could comprehend.

Left with four young children my grandfather never remarried. He did not think it would be fair to his children if their stepmother did not love them. Nor did he think it fair to expect a woman to care for someone else's children as her own. A man of rare integrity, unable to bend to the unreasonable demands of his superiors, he was repeatedly transferred from one posting to another. It was difficult for him to provide a stable home for his children. Unable to take care of four children, three of whom were girls, he had no choice but to marry off his daughters far too young.

Ma was twelve by the time India broke free from her yoke, stretched her arms and yawned in peace after centuries of not being able to breathe. The young nation was left to heal, face her tormented past, limbs severed in the bloody fields of Partition. Married before she turned fourteen, it was a shock to adopt a completely new way of life. Before Ma learnt how to turn herself inside out, her eldest son was born, the year India became a Sovereign Democratic Republic. My mother was self-taught in just about everything – from cooking to yoga and homeopathy. By eighteen, a mother of two, a son and daughter, nothing surprised her anymore – not the conquest of Mount Everest or Mrs Pandit's presidency of the UN. Before she could gather herself, two more sons greeted her within a few years of each other.

In the eyes of the world, she had been richly blessed. In reality, blessings usually come disguised. Her life was spent fulfilling the endless demands of her extended family. Cooking in those days involved a chula, a traditional wood or coal fired stove. Then came ones for kerosene until the arrival of gas (LPG in glossy red cylinders delivered at home) decades later. Washing clothes meant drawing water out of the tube well in


With Ma

the house as water supply via taps was at best unreliable. Our lives could not have been more different – Ma's and mine. Yet, one thing was common – neither of us wanted Life the way it turned out. What we cannot change, we must accept, acknowledge that life itself is a gift and we have to make the most of it.

Ma continued with her studies after her children grew up and completed her Bachelor's degree, studying at home while looking after the family. Never realized at the time what a remarkable achievement that was. Now I know the true depth of her accomplishment, her willingness to take on challenges under the most trying circumstances, I find it inspirational. Apart from being an amazing and beautiful person, Ma was a gifted writer in Odia. Her articles, essays, short stories, and poems were published in Odia newspapers such as the Samaj and Prajatantra. She was invited to contribute to programmes on social, especially women's, issues on All India Radio in Cuttack. Later in life, she published a collection of poems as well as a book of short stories. However, she never considered herself a professional writer. I have imbibed her idealism. Surely, being a writer is a vocation, not a profession. She too found the politics of publishing utterly disillusioning and destructive to the very essence of creation.

Ma's interest in homeopathy and health led her to write a book about common ailments that benefit from and respond well to homeopathy. As children we were treated for all sorts of utterly inconvenient and disabling, albeit minor, health conditions with magic potions of homeopathy. Without my mother passing on her knowledge and encouraging me to treat myself, I would not have survived living on my own in London. I saved myself a lot of time and energy bypassing the bureaucracy of the National Health Service for minor ailments. I still discuss with Ma which homeopathic medicine would be most suitable for treating a sore throat, tiredness or a crippling pain. What we owe our parents we keep discovering over the years.

It has been a blessing to have a mother who believed in being better and doing her best for the family – she cooked and cleaned, did many things that have been outsourced these days, not always for the benefit of the outsourcers. The concept of takeaways or eating out, for example, never existed. I still prefer to cook than get takeaways. Though even I cannot bear the thought of having to cook every day. Having lost her mother, Ma knew the value of what she had lost. She was there for her children and that including providing them with nourishing meals, freshly cooked every day.

Ma was strong and brave enough to survive the loss of her mother, albeit with help from her father who was a pillar of strength. As I write this I cannot imagine how I would have survived without my mother or how my life would have turned out if I did not have Ma. A mother is one of life's great gifts. Thinking of mothers with love, respect, and immense admiration for the things they do all their lives without expecting anything in return. Feeling blessed to have a mother.

Born and educated in India, Shanta Acharya won a scholarship to Oxford and was among the first batch of women admitted to Worcester College, where she was awarded the DPhil. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University before moving to London to work in the City. A poet, scholar, literary critic, novelist and a financial specialist in asset management, she is the author of twelve books. www.shanta-acharya.com

Book review

A New Opening into Bhagavad Gita: How to Make Life a Joyous Journey?

by K Parameswaran

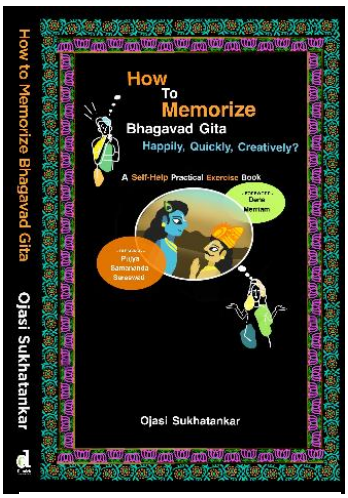
(Disciple of Sri Aurobindo and Divine Mother)

Bhagavad Gita is one of the most popular spiritual scriptures of India. Ancient in its origin, it has always had a worldwide appeal because of its universal character and practical spirituality applicable to daily life. Many have researched, written and spoken about what Sri Krishna taught Arjuna in his hour of crisis on the battlefield of Mahabharata. However, how many have explained and written about 'how' to 'remember' those teachings so that they can be applied or utilised naturally and spontaneously on the battlefield of one's own life's situations?

An accomplished author, poet, speaker and trainer of Bhagavad Gita and spoken Sanskrit, Ms Ojasi Sukhatankar, has brought out a unique book titled 'How to Memorize Bhagavad Gita Happily, Quickly, Creatively?: A Self-Help Practical Exercise Book'. Published by Damick Publications (damickpublications@gmail.com, +91-99992-12301, Delhi) this book is comprised of 9 chapters and 3 appendices. The author herself had memorized the entire Gita (700 Sanskrit verses with meaning) in a span of 2 and half years and was later teaching others to follow her techniques for about 3 years, before she brought this book to completion. In this way, this book is an original writing based on author's own story, research and practice-based experience.

'Memorizing Gita is a journey worth all the efforts. This book is a complete package, a start-to-end guide, for all those who never thought about taking up this journey, and also for those who might be very near to the goal – the goal of memorizing it entirely as well as perfectly – but may be stuck midway due to some or other reason. This book is also for those who simply love Sri Krishna or are curious about Gita and its spirituality', says Ojasi with a big confident smile on her face, when asked about the book.

Indeed to my experience, it has been a common practice to chant Gita and memorize some of its verses or chapters, or, entire Gita if possible. But mostly, this is found to be done by a mechanical repeat-and-memorize method though with certain rare exceptions. This conventional method is beneficial. However, considering Gita's spiritual power that assimilates various life experiences and aspirations, this conventional method has its own limitations too. The author carefully explains these limitations in the 1st chapter, along with all the other necessary background information about Gita and its study. The 4 illustrations from author's personal life on how memorization helped her tide-over and win certain situations, followed by the 2nd chapter 'My Story of Memorizing Gita', are highly inspiring for anyone to memorize anything of their choice!



Cover page design: S. L. Aditya

The 3rd, 4th and 5th chapters 'Process of Memorization', 'Discipline to Be Followed for Memorization' and '8 Creative Methods of Memorization' are the main crux of the book. Here, a memorizing aspirant gets well-formulated, detailed process both in concept and practical methodology. Certain portions such as '5-Step Algorithm for Memorizing Your Adhyaya', and '3 Levels of Recalling a Verse' make the book truly 'A Self-Help Practical Exercise Book' and justify its subtitle.

Other portions such as 'Knowing the Operation of Your Mind' and 'Why Do We Forget or Recall Incorrectly: 5 Causes and Their Solutions' mesmerize the reader by the author's capacity to articulate the deep inner experiences and operations of human memory and mind. Yet other portion 'How Our Memory Works in Daily Life' shows the author's insights on our life in general; while 'Start Memorizing at A Right Stage' and 'Manage Multiple Adhyayas' show the author's strife to explain all the nuances of this journey and her intimate wish that an aspirant would memorize the entire Gita, or, give a try for memorizing at least one or two popular verses with the help of this book.

Considering the wide range of prospective readers, the author has dedicated last 4 chapters (6-9) to '10 FAQs and Quick Tips for Memorization', 'Understanding the Structure of Gita', 'Guidelines on Pronunciations' and 'Additional Guidelines'. Lastly, as a true teacher, the author has taken care to give diagrammatic representations to all what she has explained as a 'process' and 'discipline' of memorization, so that the aspirants can come back and quickly refer to these diagrams and understand how far they have come up in their journey of memorizing Gita.

As said, the book advocates that Sri Krishna's teachings are meant for spiritualisation of our self and our life, and the key to do so is memorization of Gita, and not alone its chanting or study. Written for people of all continents and generations, cultures and religions, students, youth and elders, the book in its structure, style and content, stands up to the mark of what it advocates. No wonder, the book is blessed by Ms Dena Merriam, Founder and Convener, The Global Peace Initiative of Women, New York; and the author by Her Holiness Samananda Saraswati Swamini (GuruMa), Samadarshan Ashram Trust, Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

Dr K. Parameswaran is an Associate Professor of Law (GNLU-India), Psychotherapist, Hypnotherapist, NLP Master & Spirituality Trainer.

SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER

Exemplary role of Indian Women in post-apartheid South Africa by Devi Rajab

Given the impact of over 160 years of settlement in South Africa, how have Indians fared generally and, more specifically, how have Indian women contributed to the land of their adoption? Who are they and how have they adapted to the various multicultural contexts of life in Africa?

For large periods of our history in this country, Indian women were largely invisible. Perhaps it is true to say that among their counterparts of white and coloured women, Indian women were the most occupationally stagnant group under apartheid rule.

Though higher education records paint a different picture, their qualifications didn't always translate into job opportunities or positions of high status. And although they fought alongside their men in the Satyagraha struggles, the taboos of culture, religion and other societal norms kept them locked in the restrictive duties of domesticity.

Post-apartheid freedom has, however, allowed for a renaissance among women achievers in the Indian community, and this piece is an attempt to tell their stories and chart some areas of the development of such women, from indenture to contemporary times. It is by no means a demographic representation of their achievements, but rather a qualitative profile of contemporary women of Indian origin

In a small way, it is possible to provide an alternative view to what Ralph Ellison refers to as "historical amnesia prevalent among a people wishing to forget their origins in their desperate need to be assimilated into the country of their adoption". This condition often results in people either filing away or forgetting aspects of their past, and reconstructing new identities without a clue of their indigenous heritage. In line with this thinking, some may dismiss the subject of this piece as an ethnic glorification of women. On the contrary, in this case, ethnicity may be considered a bearer of culture and an expression of historically evolved memories through which individuals give meaning to their worlds

A saying of Rabindranath Tagore particularly resonates with me. He once said that on each nation is laid the duty to keep alight its own lamp as its part in the illumination of the world. Tagore believed that, through participation and service, the citizens of a country have a duty to uphold the values which are sacrosanct to their country and to the global human family. In this regard, despite their debilitating history of indenture, racial segregation, gender discrimination and systematic economic strangulation, the role played by South African Indians in general, and their women in particular, has been exemplary.

In embarking on this project to profile these women, I discovered many interesting personalities

who are currently bringing us fame and honour – but, as importantly, others who work unobtrusively behind the scenes to develop their communities, care for the indigent and prop up families. They are our teachers, nurses, social workers and housewives, the true backbone of our society, whose contributions impact on the national good of the country. At a more visible level, I was particularly moved by several internationally recognised scientists working in the field of HIV/AIDS medical research, heading multi-million-dollar funded NGOs to fight our scourge. Others excel in law, engineering and architecture; in commerce, politics and the arts. Almost all these positions have opened up for women only since the advent of our new democracy. They include, amongst others, the first Indian woman dean of the Faculty of Law, Professor Managay Reddy; the first Indian woman brigadier in the Defence Force, Neelambal Moodley; Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Wits University, Professor Leila Patel; the first woman Speaker of Parliament in the ANC government, Professor Frene Ginwala; the first Indian woman editor of the Mail & Guardian and latterly the City Press, Ferial Haffajee; the first woman Deputy Minister of Housing, Maggie Govender, and so on.

The remarkable aspect of their achievements lies in their motivation to succeed despite being held down for decades. Now under the new government,

despite the threat of racial quotas, Indian women are being allowed to blossom as never before.

From my interviews with the various women over a period of a year, I noted that all the women, regardless of age, profession, religion, political affiliation or social standing, unanimously saw their identities as being clearly rooted in South Africa.

Even though many were educated and lived abroad under apartheid's restrictive laws, they still considered themselves as South African nationals. "This is our home. We are South African first and Indians after," they claimed unequivocally.

When asked, "What does it mean to be a South African Indian?", the responses spanned a post-modernist impression of dual continents – the smells and tastes, sights and sounds of these worlds emerge into a kaleidoscopic fusion of one's cultural identity.

For South African Indians, India remains a place of cultural renewal; a place to probe roots and go on holidays or pilgrimages. Bollywood films, music and, more recently cricketers, are great draw cards of the youth. Saris, pots and pans and objects d'art are sought after. There is no interest in Indian politics or history however. Identity and allegiance are proudly linked to South Africa.

There appears to be a very clear definition of a South African Indian. According to Professor Fatima Meer, this constructed identity has "imbued Indian South Africans with a sense of pride in their ancient culture so that far from developing feelings of inferiority, they cultivated their own brand of ethnocentrism". However, there is another view to this perspective which many of the participants in this project echoed, namely, the relevance of the replacement of race with culture. They feared that the assertion of an Indian cultural identity over a national identity would interfere with their true place as fully fledged citizens of the country.

While the older generations may still nurture cultural links with India, a new breed of fourth and fifth generation women born exclusively in the republic have no ties with India other than adopting the popular notion of culture previously mentioned.

Many cannot speak an ethnic Indian language though they may practise the rituals of their religion with little understanding of their context or meaning. Though they consider themselves to be Africans, few can speak an African language well, other than a local, much-watered-down kitchen Zulu, although many can speak Afrikaans particularly if they hail from provinces outside of Kwa Zulu Natal where English is the dominant language that unites all groups.

Interracial marriages between whites and Indians, previously restricted by apartheid's Immorality Act, are rapidly increasing as Indian women are choosing partners from all racial groups.

Unlike their mothers, Indian women in contemporary South Africa are pursuing careers even before marriage. In fact, a career is now being viewed as augmenting

one's marriage chances. In many households today women are experiencing more freedom than their parents' generation because they are contributing financially to the family on par with their male counterparts. More than any other force, this economic practice has changed the traditional status of women considerably.

As a minority group, Indians were forced to create their own world of temples, mosques, vernacular schools and residential living, by which they demarcated themselves from others and created a small, cohesive community.

Now in post-apartheid SA, as economic and social opportunities arise they are creating a new emergent wealthy class distinct from a working class. A once economically homogeneous community displays signs of stratification.

However, the Indian extended and nuclear family structure is still very strong and it is this aspect that provides the social glue for the cohesiveness of the community in which there is a strong sense of self-help. Though the divorce rate has increased dramatically in the Indian community, the support emanating from the larger extended family and community seems to keep the minority group intact.

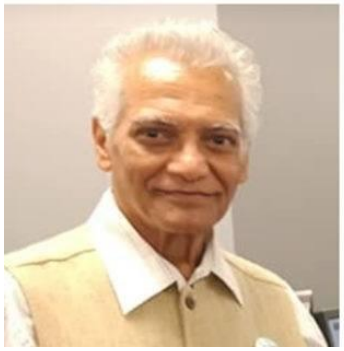
The changing status of Indian women over a period of 160 years has been a remarkable journey of triumph over struggle. In the process a metamorphosis of great historical and sociological impact is clearly discernable when a grandmother picking tea leaves under the hot African sun has produced more than a pot of tea for her masters. She has laid the fertile foundation through her industrious efforts and mighty will to produce daughters in the corridors of the highest institutions in the land. From a 16-year-old Valiamma who gave her life for the cause, to a Navi Pillay who headed the United Nations office for Human Rights, we can proudly say that we are conquerors and not slaves.

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.

Obituary

Leonard Dabydeen (1948-2022)

By Subhash Chandra



With Leonard gone, the world is poorer by one perfect gentleman!

And has been deprived of many songs of love, empathy, and peace that were still to flow from his pen -- blessed by the Muse! Today, when life begins at eighty, Leonard bid adieu to his family and friends rather early.

When egocentrism, arrogance, and 'attitude,' are the new normal, Leonard with his altruism, humility, and helpfulness provided a counter. Exceedingly busy as he was with his family concerns and writing, he never failed to respond to Friends' FB Posts. And his supportive words bolstered the creative confidence of many, me included!

No wonder, he endeared himself to a vast number and his admirers were countless. One of the young poets Leonard encouraged, (Satyananda Sarangi) has written in his poetic tribute:

O poet! Freed from mortal pain,/You may not bloom on earth;

These songs shall find a voice again,/Amid undying worth.

(In memory of poet Leonard Dabydeen Sir)

Leonard came to Canada from Guyana with his wife and children about twenty five years ago and began life, supported by his elder brother Cyril Dabydeen (based in Ottawa, Canada's capital city). After sometime, he took his life into his own hands in the city of Brampton, Ontario--where he has lived for many years.

Relocating in a different space and culture is never easy. But he did reasonably well. He became a Licensed Paralegal with the Law Society of Ontario and a Commissioner of Oaths and Affidavits. He educated their three sons, and made them worthy citizens of Canada. Now the sons are mature adults, well-settled (two of them hold good jobs and the youngest is in college).

He was a prolific poet who published two books of poems: *Watching You: A Collection of Tetractys Poems* (2012); *Searching For You: A Collection of Tetractys and Fibonacci Poems* (2015), besides contributing poems to several prestigious Online journals, such as, *Confluence: South Asian Perspectives* (London), *SETU International* (Pittsburgh), *MUSE India*, and others. They were appreciated by the connaisseurs of poetry and the Editors of these journals held him in high esteem.

He wrote in diverse sub-genres: Nature poetry, *Tetractys* (a syllable counting form with five lines), short Haiku-like poems which condense the essence of life, and poetry of social engagement. (To wit, he wrote in "Racism:"

Deep in the colour of my skin, I live … …

Racism cannot be dressed in any shroud.

A prayer rises from my heart: *May God make more like you, Bro Leonard!*

The tribute by his elder brother, Cyril Dabydeen, quoting Rabindranath Tagore and W.H Auden at Leonard's funeral was touching.

(Inputs by Cyril Dabydeen, a celebrated poet-writer who has received several awards and honours, including the Poet Laureate of Ottawa and is highly acclaimed across the globe).

LONELY WOMAN FROM DELHI*

by Cyril Dabydeen

No one's here, absolutely no one: remembering, not forgetting.

Who are you? A tremor, it feels like. Memory and sensation, what I must cope with--like being in a frontier place. I look at others walking, maundering along without a glance back at me. And I've come from Delhi. *Tell them*. A passage-way, like a new gateway. An arch of sky lit up, like crossing a new boundary line and marking out an emblem for myself on this campus ground. Here in Xanadu…Canada, do you know?

Sheer empty spaces all around, in this nation's capital. *Canada: oh Canada*. Montreal's not really far away. Toronto…how far away?

I'm marking out a special time for myself with a summer to kill, not to remember more about here on campus. And in my mind it is India's bustle, commotion. Tintinnabulation. Not ever a land empty of people!

But I am here now, and people—real people--I want to meet, and to get to know, like I'm accustomed to in India. Not just reading books in the university library, alone. Could I have been at the UN, like my fantasy as I wanted to tell Professor Raj, my mentor?

Now my being an *outsider* here, even with a new-immigrant impulse or instinct, or a refugee sensibility from long ago. Mind-space, oh. And Professor Raj-sir had insisted that I come to Canada: words uttered without finesse, but with a sense of urgency.

"Must I really?"

"You have no choice."

"No choice?"

Inner nerve-centres, fibres. Go West, not the East I am accustomed to. *Go there, nowhere else.*

But where must I really be—if not hoping for some kind of self-realization or illumination with the Indian in me in my marked-out space? *Female, yes.*

"Canada is multicultural," Professor Raj said next in his droll way. Like a special invitation, or temptation--nothing less.

I dwell on it, expecting to meet real people here now, and expecting a new experience--indeed hoping to expand my horizon. A student-cum- world traveller I am. But images of Old Delhi return to me. Voices everywhere. Festivals, parades. The sheer bustle, helter-skelter. People clamouring, riots at the drop of a hat. *Phut-phut*, the rickshaws' distinctive sound everywhere. Cars beeping, ubiquitous.

Slum dwellings, do you see? A gaudy-looking bus hurling down the street with a man hanging out at the edges by his shirtsleeves in the scarce wind. A camel farts and brays. More pollution, see.

But I am here now in almost pristine surroundings, the bright air that I breathe. Now hoping for the right words, or asking someone to speak to me if only with a discreet, or distant, voice--a new longing in me because of my forlornness.

The great big Masjid Mosque somewhere else now, see. And the Hindu temple I prayed in. Ganesha, I call out to--hoping for a real friendly voice. An avatar. I hum words to myself. *AUM*—Creator of the universe. Let the deities come to me. Vishnu-Brahma-Shiva: this triumvirate, as I look up at the Canadian sky.

But where are the people in this town? Carleton University…and seeing people this summer with wry faces, more droll expressions.

My attempt at familiarity as I force a smile...with the semblance of a woman's wiles. Yes, my long jet-black hair. *Real foreigner am I?*

Almost like fantasy: he smiles back at me. Serendipity, yes. In my imagination only. Someone with authority, a member of the Canadian Parliament I look at in this capital city—with a sense of his own space, his pride. More I conjure up in my fantasy and wishing to know about people's origins, if only about Native peoples. Algonquins, they are called. Tribal peoples in India too, like our common meeting point, do you say?

No more foreboding as I yearn for some sense of belonging—with a long summer ahead. Voices, accents--like a new language I am hoping to become familiar with. Now I'm telling this member of Parliament where I come from. No loud car noises here in this city, you see. And oh, India with its millions who want to leave, it seems—and becoming a land suddenly empty of people. Laughter!

"Are you really who you say you are?"

--Yes, me.

I declare myself with forthrightness, being who I am. Distinctive, not defensive.

--We are, well, indeed multicultural. See, you belong here.

But Professor Raj's words…about inventing a new space for myself. "You must feel you belong…if only as a wannabe immigrant."

Let the image go by, for this is not the Lok Sabha in Delhi. I force myself to hear more voices...all that I've left behind but without my forlornness. Let it be the echo of a past life lived as I try sustaining myself and my spirit. And oh, I recall the words on Professor Raj's front door written on a plaque, bringing me back to my Indian self. *Ohm…Sweet Ohm.*

END

*This story was a short-listed finalist in the Strands International Flash Fiction contest # 15.

Cyril Dabydeen taught writing for many years at the U of Ottawa, Canada. He twice adjudicated for Canada's Governor General's Award for poetry and for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (U of Oklahoma).

He last read flash fiction at the University of Vienna. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize by *Prairie Schooner* (U of Nebraska) in 2021.

Short fiction

The Undead
by Sunil Sharma

"Are you busy?"

The voice, although familiar, was a bit hesitant.

Who is not on a working day? But certain calls cannot be ignored.

"Not at all, sir," I said politely, waving off my junior with his account books and ledgers, shutting out everything else from mind for this call.

"Well, it is odd!" The voice was low and diffident, like a man emerging from deep shadows into the summer sunlight.

"What?" I asked, eyes wandering over the pile-up of the files on this manic Monday morning in Mumbai.

"How should I put it?" the voice sounded unsure.

"Please, go ahead. What makes you call me up so early?"

"Well, son, it is about your dad."

"Dad?"

"Yes."
"Any property papers or some old will lost-n-found again?" I said, laughing.

"No, nothing of that kind," it continued, a relic from the past. "It is about a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes. A dream."
"What kind?"

"I saw your dad in my dream."

"What?" I almost shouted. "Dad?"

"Yes. I know he died in the year 1984. Long history."

"What did you see?" I was curious. Some wise guy, a famous psychiatrist, has said that dreams carry their own symbolism. I

cannot remember his full name. "How did he look in the dream?"

"I saw him the way he looked in real. Jovial."

"Did he look like exactly that?" I inquired.

"Yes, he did. No change."
"What else?"

"We were sitting in his attic lined up with the books. Discussing things. Afterwards, we went out for a walk into the countryside and stopped for a cup of tea at a roadside stall. After tea, he stood up and…"

"…then?"

"Smiled, shook hands and faded into the thin air. I woke up with a start, still feeling his presence in my room."

I remained silent, the details sinking in.

"Strange?"

"What?"
"Your dad visiting me after a gap of more than 35 years?"

Indeed! I was intrigued by the report of the visitation.

"Surprising! He visits nobody in his own family?" I said. "Odd!"

The voice paused and then: "Indeed! No apparent reason. Never thought of him. Imagine, talking to a dead friend after more than three decades in sleep, then waking up and remembering the conversation. I thought I must share this with his son."

I could hear a laboured breathing over the line.

I tried to search for the right words. "What can be the meaning of it?"

"Perhaps some part still yearns for my wonderful friend who died suddenly of a massive heart attack in the early morning.

Date is etched in mind. February 13. A grey wintery day that cleared substantially later on. Then became sunny."

I was stunned. Not for nothing, we call him as the man with a long memory.

It was---as being recalled by an 83- year-old person to me over a long-distance call from Ghaziabad, my native town.

"You there?"

"Yes, sir. Listening."

"I can still see that late afternoon," the disembodied voice said, "A cold wind blew from the river Hindon river. Everything was in mourning. The river flowed by quietly. We stood there in small circles, while the pyre was being lit by your elder brother. You had gone into a shell. Dry-eyed, you watched the rites being performed and fire lit up. After that we bowed our heads, washed our faces and feet and started moving away from the burning ghat, saying a final goodbye."

"Every detail is true!" I exclaimed, amazed by his ability to recall distant events so vividly.

"Then you had caught up with me on your thin legs and said, look uncle, how lonely he sleeps on his burning bed! While striding, I looked back. He indeed looked lonely, slowly going up in flames into a dark sky. The golden fire punctured the gloom of the early night and cast a glow to the brooding trees around. It was eerie!"

"Yes," my voice was thick. "Perfectly accurate!"

"I had clasped you to my chest. You were a puny teen then. Pale-faced, awkward, shy. Your dad would say, my youngest child remains a scared kid in his simple heart, always living in his own fantastic world. How would he survive the harsh realities of life? Dad was most worried about you."

My eyes brimmed up, listening to this voice from a time no longer alive. A caring long-dead father was getting resurrected before me in this cabin on the 20th floor of a posh building in south of Mumbai. Colleagues were bustling around with files. Some were sipping coffee, trying to re-orient to the pressures of the day in broker's office.

"How could you remember so much? With so much of clarity?" I asked admiringly.

"If you love somebody really well, even you will remember every detail."

"But you have a phenomenal memory!" I exclaimed. "Now-a-days we cannot even recall what we ate in the dinner last night."

"That is right. People are getting forgetful. But I cannot help recalling things that happened half a century ago. The events come back, unbidden."

"Why dad? Why not somebody else?"

"Perhaps, he is *undead* for me."

Undead! Is it possible? Can somebody be dead for some, and, still living for some others?

"Long memory can be both a blessing and a curse." The voice clarified softly.

"How?" I asked.

"Blessing because you can recall that person. Curse because you are living with people with short memory. In fact, you are pitted against a mighty force…"

"What is that?" I interrupted.

"Erasure."

"Erasure?"

"Yes. If erasure is done super-fast by everybody, a man with a long memory is doomed member of such a society. An oddity. A weirdo."

Just then, I got a call from my boss and I had to terminate the conversation but it lingered on in my mind throughout the day. He was right---the man with long memory.

It is indeed a punishment remembering things in the land of forgetfulness.

Sunil Sharma, PhD (English), is a Toronto-based academic, critic, literary editor and author with 23 published books. He is, among others, a recipient of the UK-based Destiny Poets' inaugural Poet of the Year award---2012. For more details, please visit the link:--- http://www.drsunilsharma.blogspot.in/

False Alarm
By Anjana Sen

(Written in April 2020, when Covid had arrived, we were in lockdown, there was no testing, and we were advised via the BBC to isolate if symptomatic)

I have gone into total hiding since Friday afternoon. As in, battening down hatches and hunkering down, bunker style, in my bedroom. This is because I developed a mild fever on Friday morning. Plus, an asthmatic wheeze and a general body ache. Woke up feeling wretched.

At first, we put it down to our extra-long walk on Thursday, which was fun. We visited Pamela (before anyone says anything, Pamela is a friend in her eighties, who has been asked to shield by the government. So, we walked up to below her flat and she chatted to us from her balcony – very Romeo and Juliet). Later we walked further to goggle at the big houses in Whitecraigs before returning home.

The wheeze however, remained persistent, and instinct kicked in along with the primary objective of protecting my family.

As I said, I brought myself into this room, barked orders at everybody else. They were a tad dismissive at first, but played along, and then it became serious as my fever refused to break, and the wheeze was constant.

It still is constant. But I have lived almost all my life with this condition, so there is no way of telling whether it is The Virus which has invaded my body, or just my usual asthma brought about by spring pollen.

We will never know, I guess. The only way we can tell is if I get worse and need to be hospitalised. That is not going to happen, as per my plan. I am going to fix myself here in this room.

Because going to the hospital is a definite No No!

It is not much of a hardship here, and I remain hopeful about my self-imposed quarantine ending in a week. Because I am in a beautiful bunker, looking out into my pretty garden with all its spring glory.

Plus, I have the world's best butler/maid double act, providing me with better room service than I have ever experienced in any five-star hotel anywhere in the world. They have not killed me with kindness yet, but hey, it's only Day 3!

I have my laptop here with me, my iPad, phone, books, Bose speaker, and the internet. I have the loveliest en-suite and everything I could possibly need. I have only to ask (via text or lung power), and things appear magically on a little table placed strategically outside my door.

Besides, everyone knows my husband is The Best Cook in The World. He has upped his game since the recent series of MasterChef, now his creations are 'plated' not dished out and he shouts 'Service' every time he leaves something outside my door. I cannot be all that ill, I asked for seconds of his excellent udon chowmein last night. Shame it is all delivered on Styrofoam disposable plates… guess the good China will have to wait.

At this point in time though, "good China" becomes a bit of an oxymoron!

As for my brilliant little maid, she descends from her tower like a gentle little tornado and whirls about, cleaning and washing and making our home more sanitised than hospitals. Poor kid, in her zealous efforts to do everything as befits an OCD person, she sprayed bleach on her brand-new hoodie.

Apologies for forcing you all to read such a long post when you probably have other things to do (wink wink). Just thought I would share my woes, for what they're worth, with you.

Why should I suffer alone, eh?

The Real Thing (Written in May 2022)

There is no way you can NOT know if you have the C Virus. I know that now, after contracting it on the 24th of April 2022. Exactly two years after the above piece was written. Ironically, at my first unmasked outing, as per government regulations.

It was a brutal attack, showing no signs of gentleness. This time I was alone, with my husband overseas and my daughter in University. My companions for the 12 days were paracetamol, olbas oil, otrivine and food my friends/neighbours brought me.

A month later, I continue to tire easily and have a residual cough.

Give me the false alarm version any day.

Rebirth of Perception:
A Review of Shekhar Banerjee's The Fern-Gatherers' Association
by Basudhara Roy

From a collection of poems curiously titled *The Fern-Gatherers' Association*, the reader's expectations are indeterminate. How do ferns, one muses, feature in these poems? Does the book embody a specialized biologist's gaze or are these reflections of the more universal nature-lover who is irresistibly drawn towards the profusion, spontaneity and density of ferns as a counteragent to life's incremental malaise?

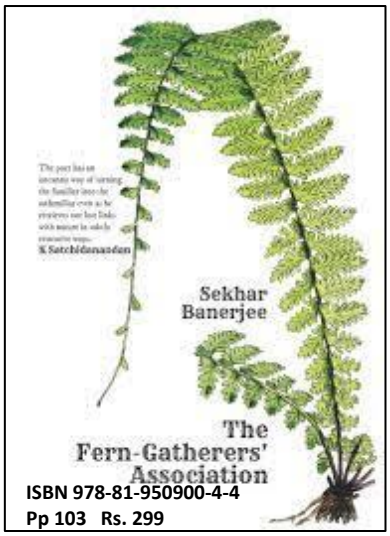
Winding one's way through the seventy-one poems that this book encloses, the reader realizes that in the company of words manoeuvred with deft artistry and an intricate poetic design, the experience of reading will, always and by far, exceed expectations. Resolutely but noncommittally, *The Fern-Gatherers' Association* invites entry and participation into a way of being, belonging and arranging the self around a world that is animated with sentience, emotion and vision.

Contrary to what the title seems to promise, ferns do not so much mark these poems physically as metaphorically. Textured in and through the tenacity, ubiquity and joy of ferns is the multifarious and multi-layered life that we live every day. The daily divergent patterns of longing, love, loss, sickness, nostalgia, memory, displacement and death are put forward through the metaphor of fern gathering, offering an organic understanding of the book's spirit, philosophy and vision.

To me, the compound worldview that this collection offers is, fern-like, generous and pinnate. Central to Shekhar Banerjee's poetics is an ontological borderlessness – a freedom of being. His is a world with no hierarchies between the living and the non-living, let alone between species or humans. Characteristic of these poems and of Banerjee's distinctive perception as a poet is his deep comprehension of the entanglements of life's animate and inanimate spheres and his use of a diction of thoughtfulness to establish patterns of signification and relationships. In 'My Private Tutor's Crows', the sky is "the eye/of the galaxy" and the universe is "one-eyed". In 'Homeless', the slippers are somnambulists who walk to the playground where "an elderly and freckled sky sleeps with the stars,/ planets and the core of the galaxy/ like a homeless family". In 'Sign Language', the poet writes:

A path is a child of a road; it understands the need
to follow the family
It ambles in a forest in spring
to come back to a highway's arms before
the autumn sets in

True to his compound experience of the organic unity of the world, Banerjee's poems become the warp and weft of a rare fabric of the co-determination of existence. As inhabitants of the world, our sense of being is determined by the other beings – animate and inanimate - that surround us. In 'Running Up the Cliff', "the neighbouring mountains" must be consulted before a decision concerning the self is made. In 'The Liles and a Hoe', the mountains are busy "feeding a night to a hen/ so that it can crow in the morning, full of noise/ of the lilies and a hoe". 'The Calcutta Shop', again, weaves the sights and sounds of both energy and entropy, glory and bereavement, antiquity and modernity of the city of Calcutta into a poem of



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great tenderness and empathy:

I juxtapose my relatives with each tree that has fallen
defending a house, an idea, a city or a settlement
as ordinary soldiers always do
and I watch the lanes and bylanes of Calcutta issue
obituaries for an undivided family
for every dead tree – I write an epitaph:
'Here lived Arjun Das (43 years), Palash Das (11 years)
and Dolonchampa Das (38)
They are survived by us'

Nourished by a deeply empathetic vision, Banerjee's images astound by their heightened awareness of life's depth, variety and innate paradoxes. In 'The Calcutta Shop', the Howrah Bridge is "the feeding breast of this city". Letters in 'Letter Sorting House' are "unopened sleep at night". In the poem 'Cemeteries of Lettuce, Lamb and Fish', the refrigerator is both womb and cemetery and a constant guardian to "dead stories". In 'X', the poet urges a comparison of the self with a leap year "a shortage,/ without reaching out to any conclusion/ about those things/ which we generally term 'X'. 'In a Zoo' finds the sea a blind, "prehistoric animal" that is "fastened to the sky/ and vastness is its bondage".

Anxiety over the Pandemic and its new normal loom large over these poems. In 'Property of the Eye', Banerjee observes:

This is a time of knowing too much
of either love or death
and drawing a chalk line around yourself;
now you are a continent

In 'Loss', the poet attempts to explore "the tendencies/ of being alone" beyond the necessity of "sanitation". In 'Sickness', the poet declares – "I have a hospital in my breath" and takes care to wash and dry his masks "as if,/ they are my dead faces for the week". But above all, what distinctly renders this collection a firm testimony to the spiritual upheavals and the philosophical crisis of the Pandemic is its layered reflections on the idea of home, the enclosed domestic space, the uses of solitude and the dimensions of sleep. Being forced by the new normal to turn things inside out, Banerjee stations his subjectivity on the other side of the telescope to look at things minimally and within the wider web of their connected ambience.

In many ways, therefore, to read *The Fern-Gatherers' Association* is to opt for a retreat into a different mode of consciousness and living where the self is an additive of all the 'others' that surround it. Walking through the landscape of these poems is an exercise in mindfulness and compassionate attention whereby each 'other' is identified intimately as a kin of the self - the fern-gatherer whose identity is, like the fern lovingly gathered, always compound, composite and plural.

Deep in their philosophy, penetrating in their intellect, addictive in the languorous sonority of their diction and vigorous in their faith, these poems will be staunchly embraced each time the self is curious to know the world it lives by.

Basudhara Roy teaches English at Karim City College affiliated to Kolhan University, Chaibasa. Author of three collections of poems, her latest work is featured in EPW, The Pine Cone Review, Live Wire, Lucy Writers Platform, and The Aleph Review among others. She loves, rebels, writes and reviews from Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India.

ON THE BRINK OF SURVIVAL

(Inspired by a phone conversation)

by Shanta Acharya

Accustomed to spending days in quiet contemplation, my landline phone startles me with long, loud rings. The sound of an ambulance rushing though the street outside my window merges with the siren of an air raid signal on TV. The news is from Ukraine.

'Have Sainsbury's dismissed the wretched delivery man who attacked you?' Anya's voice tells me she has not recovered from COVID.

Switching off the TV, I reply: 'I have no idea. The police want witnesses. If there had been one, would I have been attacked?'

'Sainsbury's must make amends. How are you?' She asks.

'The bruise has turned blue and yellow, pain lingers in sympathy. My mind will not let me sleep, rages against the injustices of the world.' I reply.

'Our bodies, minds, souls live with the memory of every injury and injustice. The way we remember 9/11 or Tiananmen Square, the destruction of Grozny or Aleppo…'

With Ukraine on our minds, I ask: 'How is your mother?'

Anya is Russian, lives in London; her mother in Moscow.

'What invasion? My mother complains as if I am the one feeding her lies, not the state controlled TV in Moscow. My niece fled with her daughter to Latvia from Dnipro. I used to buy my mother her weekly shopping and medicines. Now I can't due to the sanctions. Mother does not ask why?' Anya sniffs.

Now in her late 80s, Anya's mother served as a judge in Moscow. Realising we would be thinking the same if the BBC had not been reporting a different truth, I say:

'Friends in Kyiv tell me their families in Russia no longer speak to them, they say Ukraine is bombing her own people and cities! Nor do they know that Kyiv existed before Moscow or that Ukraine has elected to determine her own destiny. Talking of walking through the looking glass!'

'He reminds me of my ex-husband who beat me, raped me. Even after we were divorced he said I belonged to him. I felt unsafe until he died of a massive heart attack.'

'There is hope then!' I say. 'If he wants to make Russia great again, be Emperor of All Russia, Great Father of the Fatherland etc., why does he not fight like Peter, the Great, and not send young conscripts to fight his war? All leaders who start a war must be forced to fight from the frontline.' I add.

'Talking of conscripts, those sent to Tiananmen Square were drugged, hypnotised, turned into killing machines. I understand these conscripts had no idea…' Anya paused, before breaking into a coughing fit.

'I know, but some men don't need to be drugged to attack. Sainsbury's delivery man attacked me for no reason, no provocation. Women are killed all over the world by their partners. Indian soldiers responded to General Dyer's order to kill their own in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. If only they had not followed orders, turned their fire on Dyer instead. If Russian conscripts and soldiers refuse to fight Putin's war … If Hitler's men…' I pause for breath.

Anya steps in, says: 'Like Stalin, he dreams of colonising Ukraine. You know, Stalin jailed, deported and killed teachers, writers, artists, thinkers, political leaders. Ukrainian churches were destroyed. Thousands were sent to labour camps, children went to Russian homes to be "educated", peasants were starved, the dead and deported replaced by Russians. Why do you think it was so easy for Russia to annex Crimea in 2014?'

'Surely, he won't destroy Kyiv?' I gasp. 'Even Emperor Ashoka did not wreck so much devastation on Kalinga, my homeland. Surveying the aftermath of his so-called victory – flourishing cities reduced to charnel pits of misery – he cried: '*If this is victory, what's defeat?*' All that death and destruction caused by him turned Ashoka into a Buddhist. When will Putin have a change of heart if not a heart attack? Where is the justice in the death of Shane Warne dying of one? How much damage will Putin be allowed to inflict? Have we forgotten Bosnia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan… Can't the generals dispatch him in an *Et tu, Brute* coup?'

'No one can get close enough to him. Paranoid about catching COVID, he isolates himself in his dacha. Don't you remember that ridiculous conference table? Did you know Stalin was 5' 6" and Putin 5' 7" – both shorter than me?' Anya laughs.

'Zelenskyy is not tall, but he's a decent man. Peter, the Great, tall and handsome, was brutal. Who'd have thought Zelenskyy, a comedian playing President in the *Servant of the People* TV series, would emerge as the real hero of this war!'

'I feel so sad that ordinary Ukrainians had gone out the evening before the invasion not believing an attack was imminent or possible.' Anya says.

'Biden warned of such an attack. But I don't understand why NATO has not intervened? Why is Ukraine not a member if Albania, Estonia, and Lithuania are?' I ask.

'Because of the dispute with Russia.' Anya enlightens me.

'Russia attacks Ukraine because she is not a NATO member, and Ukraine is not a member because of Russia! This is ridiculous!' I let out a cry of despair.

'I agree. Something has to be done. This invasion is a violation of the Budapest Memorandum that assured Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in exchange for her nuclear arsenal. Russia was a signatory.' Anya explains.

'Is there no honour left among men? When good men and women do nothing, it is the end. The UK has a lot to account for – Russian money laundered in our capital, preserved in trust funds. The EU's dependence on Russia's gas and oil reminds me of predatory men grooming young girls for prostitution. When will the EU and NATO wake up? Or are they going to sacrifice Ukraine in order to destroy Russia? All this sacrifice can't be for nothing. *It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world as serving no purpose at all…*'

At this critical point, I lose my voice.

'As long as there is pain, there is hope. In the middle of death and destruction, let's hold on to the thought of that little girl born in a Kyiv subway bunker.' Anya says, trying to cheer us both.

'I can't help thinking of all the Ukrainians dead, dying, injured, homeless, children orphaned, women raped – not forgetting the young Russians returning home in body bags and those who will return traumatized … Why?' I whisper.

My WhatsApp rings. Anya and I say farewell and hang up.

Interview

Shireen Isal speaks to Firdaus Gandavia

About her experiences as an impresario for over 40 years

Q. How did you create your interest in Indian music and dance, given your early training in western music?

A. I was, indeed, a late learner. I discovered Indian dance, and through it, music, when I saw the Jhaveri Sister perform the exquisite Manipuri dance in the early '70s. I was so struck by its beauty that, from that day onwards, I became deeply committed to learning as much as I could of my rich cultural heritage.

Q. You have worked essentially with classical Indian musicians and dancers. Was this an informed choice?

A. It so happened, as explained above, that my path to discovery started with the classical medium. Working with classical artists when I settled down in Paris, France in 1974 was therefore inevitable. I did, however, in the very early part of my career, work briefly with a contemporary Indian dancer and later, promoted two western classical musicians, with Indian connections, in India, a first for me and which greatly enriched my professional experience, given my early training in western music.

Q. Your work was that of an impresario. Can you explain that further?

A. My role as impresario involved representing artists in every aspect of their European tour, from negotiating contracts to overseeing visas, travel and hospitality details, providing that link between the artists on the one hand and ,on the other, organisers who presented the artists in countless European cities.

Q. Your work was therefore not just confined to the two cities in which you lived: Paris (from 1974 to 1990) and London (from 1990 to your retirement)?

A. I started, in 1979, in Paris, followed by forays into numerous French cities. Very quickly, however, I was made aware of the immense interest expressed by European organisers and, by 1984 and beyond, artists were performing in Holland, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland and the UK, amongst other countries.

Q. What were the challenges of working with artists essentially from a traditional Indian environment in a western setting? Were there culture-related issues?

A. Yes, there were situations where one required tact and understanding to bring east and west together. One example – not without humour – comes to mind when a Parisian cab driver refused to take the box containing the *veena*, in spite of assurances that it was not what he thought: a coffin. He won the argument. I recall too the extreme difficulties in obtaining vegetarian food in the Paris of the '70s and '80s, a situation that has fortunately improved today. There were further instances but nothing that could not be addressed through tact and understanding; I was, after all, that bridge between diverse sensibilities.

Q. Can you tell us more of your experiences in working in France?

A. I was extremely fortunate to have started my career in France. The '70s and '80s were the golden period of Indian culture, epitomised by the year-long Festival of India in 1985-86. By the mid-'80s, I realised that India was not a passing fashion but an abiding interest. The French were capable of listening to a lengthy *alap*; there was no need for musical "adjustments". Lec-dems and masterclasses furthered that understanding. I was also very fortunate to work immensely with Radio France, one of the country's foremost organisers.

Q. What were the pitfalls of working with artists? Did you encounter clashes of ego, situations which jeopardised performances and tours?

A. Yes, I have encountered clashes of ego between artists, situations requiring immense tact in order to be resolved. I have also been on the receiving end of betrayals, brought on by overriding ambition, unyielding competitiveness and an incessant desire for recognition, which caused me immense personal pain. Such incidents were fortunately few, less than the fingers of one hand, so to speak.

Q. You mention the unique role Ravi Shankar played in the development of Indian music in the west. Can you expound on that?

A. Panditji, through years of performing for western audiences, laid the foundations for the interest in Indian music in the west. Awareness and appreciation of our music was thus born and we have all been beneficiaries. Indian musicians – including those who have levelled against him unjust accusations of musical compromise – owe him a profound sense of gratitude.

Q. What was the place of *Carnatic* music in the work you undertook?

A. Very early in my career, I developed a personal interest in *Carnatic* music – along with the Hindustani tradition – and was determined to offer *Carnatic* artists to European organisers and audiences. It became my mission to bring both traditions on par and I was thrilled to witness my efforts meeting with considerable success.

Q. Your work with UK-based organisers increased exponentially after your move to London in 1990. How did your UK experience compare with that in France?

A. I was very surprised, in the early years, at the lack of a mainstream audience in the UK. Both organisers and audiences were from the South-Asian community, whose enthusiasm and devotion to our arts were heart-warming. However, there was a vast mainstream audience out there waiting to be tapped and it was vital to work towards attracting their interest. Today, there is greater audience diversity, thanks to the efforts of innumerable organisers and artists.

Q. Who was the most defining artist you worked with, one who had the most profound impact on you?

A. Ustad Bismillah Khansahib, without a doubt! He was a deeply inspirational figure in my life, both professional and personal. What he taught me went beyond music, for, in him, there was moral clarity. I continue to remember, and be guided by, his immense words of wisdom, even today.

I would like to end by paying tribute to my family. Without my husband's unceasing support, working alone as I did and with very limited financial means, I would never have achieved what I did. I owe him – and my immediate family - immense gratitude and thanks.

The book is available:
In the UK, at Amazon.co.uk. (link: https://amzn.to/3gDNeF0) or directly from the author. Price: £7.85 + postage.
In France and continental Europe, at amazon.fr. (link: https://amzn.to/3LF8Xuw). Price: 9.45 Euros + postage.
In India, at www.parsiana.com (link: JOY, AWE AND TEARS - My Association with Sargam (parsiana.com). Price: Rs.599 + postage.

Firdaus Gandavia is a Chartered Accountant and has a PhD in English literature from Mumbai University. He is an avid reader and regularly reviews fiction for Parsiana, (a magazine widely read by Parsis from all over the world).

In Conversation with Lopamudra Banerjee on her English Translation of Ashapurna Debi's Bakul Katha

by Meenakshi Mohan

A gender line helps to keep women not on a pedestal but in a cage.
Ruth Bader Ginsberg

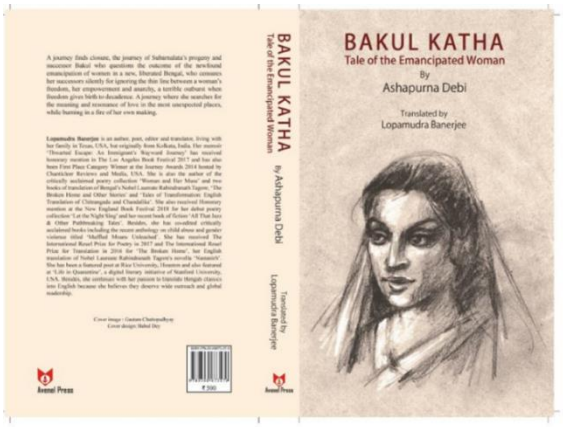
I think the emancipation of women must come from inside.
Khaled Hosseini

I came to know Lopamudra Banerjee through our literary circle on social media. Later I came to know her better when I wrote a review of her book, All that Jazz which was published in the Confluence UK. Recently one of my artworks found a distinguished abode as a cover for her book, 'The Body of Memories'. Lopamudra is a versatile and prolific writer. I read a few of her English translations of Bengali poets, and I am in awe of the way she sketches the ethos, emotions, and cultural semantics seamlessly. I agree with Nandini Sahu's comments in the review of this book, "The translation of Bakul Katha is certainly a milestone and a turning point in the literary career of Lopamudra. This is her major contribution to translation studies as well as to Comparative Indian Literature." Bakul Katha is the final part of Ashapurna Debi's masterpiece of a trilogy, Pratham Pratishuti, followed by Subarnalata and Bakul Katha.

MM: Lopa, Bakul Katha: Tale of the Emancipated Woman is an intriguing story by Ashapurna Debi, the doyenne of Bengali literature and recipient of the Padma Shri, awarded by the Government of India. She seems like a liberated woman herself for her time. Is Bakul Katha a mirror of her life? How much of fact and fiction is merged in the story?

LB: As you already know, Bakul Katha is the last novel of Ashapurna's masterpiece of a trilogy, preceded by the Sahitya Academy award-winning Pratham Pratishuti and Subarnalata. Cumulatively, in these three novels, Ashapurna has portrayed the life stories of three generations of women, over the changing rural and urban milieu in Bengal of the twentieth century. While in the first two novels, the two protagonists Satyabati and her daughter Subarnalata struggle to find their rightful places in the universe amid oppressive patriarchy during the British regime, Bakul, their successor finds herself in the politically volatile 1970's Bengal, in the cusp of change and revolution, confronting the transformed urban milieu of the twentieth century, and keeps questioning the necessity of this transformation.

Ashapurna, the author is known for her proverbial sense of emancipation in her depiction of women in her fiction, and in this, she has been way ahead of her times. But in 'Bakul Katha', she has compelled modern women to think about the bygone generation of patriarchal values, the strange intersection between hard-earned emancipation and the abuse of freedom, degeneration of values, in which Bakul finds herself. In that way, it is a fictional representation of the life that Ashapurna has probably witnessed around her.



MM: Bakul Katha seems like a story of war and peace, agony and ecstasy. Bakul comments, "In which corner would I place my camera to depict an image of this generation? In this same house, women still care to cover their heads in veils in the presence of their elders …. And then, in this same house, there is Shampa!" – How emancipated was Bakul herself?

LB: Bakul aka Anamika Debi, the youngest daughter of Subarnalata remains a spinster and evolves into a famous author, living in her old ancestral house full of the memories of a bygone generation of patriarchal values. On the other hand, in her matured age, she witnesses the boisterous, flamboyant girls of the second generation and questions their spirit of revolt that often borders on anarchy and decadence of values. Not only women's lives, but the entire fabric of society seems diluted due to the overexposure to western ethos, as the changes are documented through her lens. Torn between these conflicting emotions, Bakul's quest is to discover the true meaning and essence of emancipation.

MM: Could you reflect on the characters of her mother, Subarnalata, and grandmother Satyabati, the torchbearers of the feminist movement?

LB: Satyabati and her daughter Subarnalata represent the fierce spirit of women in the face of tremendous oppression of a patriarchal society. With their unique forms of protest, they both had envisioned and fought for a fairer world for their progeny, and perished with their silent spirit of revolt. Together, they actually form the basis of the world in which Bakul finds herself and the second generation.

MM: Shampa, Bakul's modern, liberated niece, comments, "Well, then it's your constricted vision … It's strange that you are so old-fashioned, being an author of repute. And you are labeled as a progressive author and thinker!" Was Anamika aka Bakul as liberated as Shampa?

LB: Shampa and her aunt Bakul complement each other in the various ways their personas are projected in the novel. The feisty Shampa breaks her shackles and revolts against the double standards of her familiar world by absconding with her working-class lover. Witnessing the unabashed love affairs of Shampa, Bakul tends to go back in time and is haunted by the memories of her unrequited love with Nirmal, her neighbour. Bakul had surrendered to the patriarchal whims of her family and sacrificed her love, while Shampa celebrates her emancipation through revolting.

MM: What was so crucial about Bakul's notebook? I see a mention of this in several places.

LB: Bakul's notebook appears as a metaphor in both Bakul's monologues and her letters exchanged with Parul, her sister. It refers to her unwritten stories revealed in course of the novel. As a novelist and author, she has written stories of other women and men, bringing the nuances of their lives from darkness to light, but her own life story remains unwritten. The novel brings from darkness to light her own story, through the metaphor of her notebook.

MM: In this book about emancipation, I see different characters who are liberated women, e.g., Bakul's sister, Parul; Shampa; Madhuri; Namita, and Bakul herself – what does emancipation mean to them? Does being liberated bring them fulfillment in their lives? What footsteps is Bakul leaving for the future generation?

LB: All women characters in 'Bakul Katha' represent the diverse manifestations of the changing world of women as they express their free wills within their respective families and the society at large. Bakul herself, along with her sister Parul and Madhuri, Nirmal's wife represent the spirit of both resistance against various power struggles of society and their eventual acceptance of the contemporary world. Shampa, Namita, Rekha and others from the next generation continue to break their shackles and revolt against the double standards of their familiar world in their own distinct ways.

MM: Thank you, Lopa! I want you to know that your translation of this book filled me with wonder, and different emotions. I thoroughly enjoyed reading your beautiful translation. Thanks for my signed copy. What are your future projects?

LB: Thanks so much for the honor and opportunity! My future projects include another prestigious translation work, a short story collection and a collection of poetry and essays on my ethnic identity. Hope they will be read and appreciated!

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

ELEGY FOR A BROTHER

--for Leonard (d.16.3.2022)

by Cyril Dabydeen

forging his own destiny,
he did--
the miracle of a life
lived

the moment of self-being
without the sense of
conquest or rivalry

a new world with
a new shape being
himself only
--nothing less

his passing, and with
words remembering
more in days to come

his closest family
held him dearest--
worlds being one
with a beginning
--now an ending

the sacred fire burning,
oh fire because of offerings,
telling you once again

W.H. Auden's words--
existence is believing we
know for whom we mourn

--and who is grieving

Book review

Sukrita's *Vanishing Words:* The 'Language of Silence' and 'Deep Sighs'

Reviewed by Girija Sharma

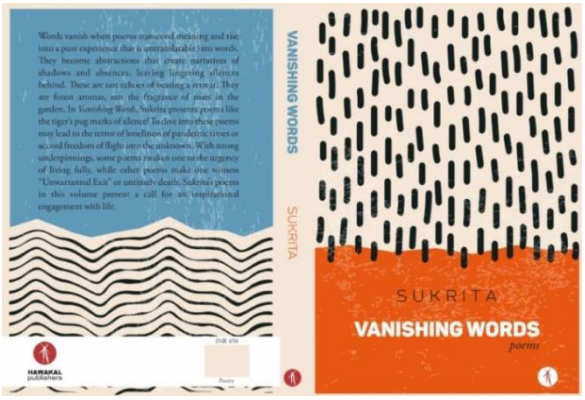
The new anthology of Sukrita's poems entitled *Vanishing Words* half belies and half justifies what the title suggests. As one reads poem after poem, one is ensnared by phrases, images and symbols—profound in their eloquent silence—effortlessly gliding across the quiet trail in "the forest of words". Truly, all noise is cancelled and there is no discordant note—just words in the purest symphony of silence. Silence emerges as a powerful metaphor in the interplay of images.

Observing the images in the poems and Sukrita's black and white paintings on the leaves facing them, one is awestruck by the irrepressible creative energy the collection exudes. Nature in all its hues interweaves a spectacular aura with the poet using both—the pen and the brush. In the very first poem without a title, an epigraph to the collection, so to speak, the poet searches for the "pug marks" that the "tiger of silence" has not left behind. It is obvious that *Vanishing Words* points to the power that silence, when filled in for words, suggests.

The very first poem "On the Dal at Srinagar" sets the tone for many nature poems that follow. The still waters of the Dal reflect a still mind making the thoughts of the poet transparent as she sees her visage: "…a cubist's/ work of art/ yellow, red, green, blue and even bits of white/and purple, /joined together with/ affection, love, attachments/likes and dislikes….

The sharp images give way to a blurry muddle as the colours are diffused, while transparent thoughts become "opaque and dense". In "Affirmation", the negation of the famous Eliotian images, "I am not an etherised patient" and the whisper of the moon that "something might come out of my nothingness" are too obvious to be missed. Another 'moon poem', "Cosmic Connections" movingly conjures up the images of the dear ones—long dead and gone—but reappearing in the "abode" of moon. The image of the narrator, chomping peanuts with her grandmother followed by that of the mother are overwhelming: "Then came my father through those smoky rings/ Such that emitted when he smoked his cigarette/ Waiting for his beloved wife to pass through them. (70) And later: "My mother arrived without any fanfare/ Smiling, with her eyes twinkling/ Alongside the blinking stars/ no complaints no groans. (70) The two "moon poems" showcase the feelings of remoteness and immediacy respectively.

The anthology bears out Sukrita's strong penchant for the flora and the fauna. "Memories" apparently portrays the dialogue between a bird and a tree. The image of the tiny bird, "tiptoeing / Thief-like/ In search for another form/ An oak, a chinar or/ Perhaps a peepal" (27) brings to the fore the poet's fascination with the trees and the birds alike. The 'tree poems' crystallize in "With my Chinar again" —the Chinar having travelled "[f]rom Kashmir of peace, of strife/ Even through savannah grasslands…." (66-7)—and later again reappearing in Africa, "into the lap of Mount Kenya" (67). In "The Chosen One", the



monkeys mourn the loss of their one-time mother, the tree, now fruitless, having been struck by lightning.

Beginning with the 'tiger of silence', the images of animals, birds, insects et al make their way into Sukrita's poems. The guileless, unobtrusive presence of these living beings lends a pristine ingenuity to her poetic canvas. The references to people and society are minimal. "Of Gaddi(s)" is a poem that conveys the elemental simplicity of the Gaddi folk of Himachal, their world seeming to contract in "… several bleating little lambs/peeping from the kukh of their apparel" (36). That the instinct of animals can be trusted more is conveyed in "Animal Instincts", usually a pejorative phrase. The elephants and Jarawas of Nicobar on hearing "…the whispering earth/Felt her rumbling belly/Smelt death/And escaped into the/Heart of the forest/ Away from tsunami, / Away from/Demon waves that/ captured the civilized humanity/with their cameras/clicking pictures…." (34). The subtle sting of the scorpion in "Betrayed" conjures the binaries of "pain and love" as well as "a suicide" and "[a] resurrection" (44) defining the experience of love and betrayal. "In Search of the Snow-Leopard" is a powerful poem, where the "echoes of chanting/ from the monastery" are pitted against "Shadowing the prey/Fleeing in terror". The snow leopard's search for the prey continues as the Lord of compassion looks on.

The last poem in the anthology "Crows are our Ancestors" is deeply ironic, where each crow wishes to "…to exit the dark world of/ Human Aspirations" (72) and "not be like human species" (73).

After an encounter with the guileless world of nature where all fair things inhabit including animals, birds and insects, one is jolted into an awareness of the dreadful reality of an unfeeling world where the "adults [play] with their/ conscience" (16). "Unwarranted Exit", a candid poem on Gorakhpur, tears apart the hypocrisy of powers that be. The haunting images of the "Tiny lungs deflating/squeezed of breath/ Shrinking, greying/ Choking and stifling/ The fading squeaks/ To each its own Hiroshima" keep gnawing at the readers' sensibility long after they have finished reading the poem. "Shaming Death" is an equally scathing comment on the Establishment. It is a poem shocking us into an awareness of the sordid spectacle of death in the pandemic:

> Ganga rebels/ her chest heaving, gasping as/ the bug infested human corpses/ float in pristine waters/ As unconsecrated bodies/ Not sanctified by fire/ No burial nor cremation…. Bodies are carcasses today/ Dehumanized and disgraced/ rolling wild over waves…. (31-32)

The world of inequities stares us in the face in the compelling poem "Colour that Bleeds" subtitled "*For Toni Morrison*". A comment on the tyranny of racism, the poem invokes Derek Walcott's "Sea is History", within the "unseen vaults" of which lie buried the hurt and shame of the black women—"their black screams and yelps/In search of their Africa" (52), haunting the reader. "Arrival at Paris" is not only a powerful invocation of Simone de Beauvoir alone but also of Ismat, Annie Apa, Sylvial Plath and Maya Angelou.

Sukrita has dedicated this book of poems "to all those/who are struggling to survive/ the onslaught of disease and the /loss of dear ones/in the recent times". It does it all—inviting the reader to heal the world—not by escaping the truth and the pain but though "[s]tillness total and absolute" of Nature.

Girija Sharma was a Professor of English and the first woman Dean of Studies at Himachal Pradesh University.

History

Napoleon and racism

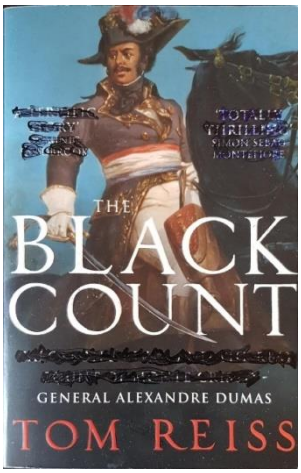
by Charles Sarvan

Of the hundreds of books on Napoleon, few dwell on his attitude to, and treatment of, non-white people. The following is taken from The Black Count by Tom Reiss, a biography of General Alexandre Dumas, father of the famous writer whose works include The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo. Page reference in what follows is to this work. The portrait painting reproduced on the book's cover is not of the General but of his internationally famous son, the writer, in the uniform of his father.

Dumas was born in Haiti in1762. His father was a white Frenchman of noble birth, his mother a black slave. (As Reiss comments, given the reality then, almost all sexual relations between whites and blacks was rape.) In a life marked by precipitous plunges and heady heights, the boy was once sold into bondage by his father but was then brought by him to France and enrolled in an elite school. Tall and with "an athletic figure", Dumas was "educated in the classics, philosophy, fine manners, riding, dancing and duelling" (page 10). Rejecting his father's name, he opted for that of his mother – Dumas, often signing his name not as Alexandre but simply as Alex. Enlisting as a private, his intelligence and outstanding courage led to rapid promotion in the army of the Revolution, a revolution in which he sincerely and passionately believed. As Reiss observes, he rose to the rank of General by the age of thirty-one; commanding divisions and armies. While Napoleon sought domination and personal glory, the ideal of Alex Dumas was liberation.

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam there are stories of a persecuted person falling asleep and waking up years later to find that the beliefs for which he had suffered now had official sanction and popular following: "Oh brave new world" (Shakespeare: 'The Tempest'). Of the French Revolution, the Wordsworth wrote in a poem: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive". But Napoleon turned a potential Utopia into a dystopia for people of colour: as Joseph Conrad wrote in his novel, Under Western Eyes, revolutionary success can mean hopes "grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured... There have been in every revolution hearts broken". The Revolution had abolished slavery but Napoleon reinstated that most cruel of systems. "Rekindling the cruellest traditions of slavery in the sugar islands, French soldiers tortured, raped and murdered blacks in every gruesome way imaginable" (page 311).

Francis Toussaint (1743-1803), born a slave, led the only successful slave revolt in modern Western history. (He added Louverture to his name: the French word can be rendered as 'opening the way'). On the orders of Napoleon, French troops



tricked, captured and sent the hero to France. I cite from page 311: This man of the tropics was thrown into a freezing cold cell with dripping wet walls and a fire that, on orders from Napoleon, was inadequately fed with wood. His iron frame now huddled before the logs measured out by the orders of Bonaparte. The hitherto unsleeping intellect collapsed into long hours of coma.

The so-called Directory government that ran France in the mid-to-late 1790s "instituted the world's first colour-blind elite secondary school. It gave the sons of former slaves […] one of the world's finest educations at a time when the English-speaking world still considered it a crime for black children to learn to read" (pages 185-6). Under Napoleon, such children were unable to attend any school at all (p. 187). On the 20th of May1802, Napoleon re-imposed slavery which had been abolished by the French Revolution. "Two weeks after the slavery decree, Napoleon issued a law banning all officers and soldiers of colour who had retired or been discharged from the army from living in Paris and the surrounding area […] The following year, Napoleon outlawed marriages between people of different skin colours" (p. 314). It is significant that such a man, one who had betrayed the principles of the Revolution; a racist is uncritically admired by so many: his treatment of black people simply does not register. When General Dumas died, the pension due to the widow was not paid and the family was plunged into poverty (page 321). His wife "would spend the next decade petitioning the emperor through every possible channel for the minimum of support to which she and her children were entitled" (ibid).

Napoleon and Dumas had been comrades-in-arms. Indeed, Dumas was a general when Napoleon was still a captain, and continued to outrank him until December 1795 (page 196). Dumas believed in the ideals and principles of the French Revolution, while Napoleon's goal was personal power and glory – at all and any cost. For example, "Dumas clashed with Napoleon on the issue of how to treat civilians" (193). Regarding the treatment of women, Dumas told Napoleon that the law may command but humanity demands (page 195). He also told Napoleon: "I believe that the interests of France should come before those of a man, however great this man may be. I believe that the fortune of a nation cannot be subdued to that of an individual" (250).

Dumas, the writer, tried to have a statue of his father erected but without success. However, after his death a group of his ardent admirers fulfilled that wish: it was to honour 'their' writer rather than his father, the General. The statue was demolished by the Nazis during their occupation of Paris: Napoleon would have applauded.

Charles Sarvan obtained his M.Phil and PhD degrees from Univ. of London. His specialisation was Commonwealth Literature. Now retired, he lives in Berlin, Germany with his German-born wife, a published poet.

Book review

A WILDERNESS CALLED PEACE

By Anjana Basu

The Nutmeg's Curse takes up where *The Great Derangement* left off, following Ghosh's premise that the Western powers were originally responsible for the current climate crisis prevailing today. This he sees as a result of colonial exploitation and the determination to seize trade routes and take possession of valuable commodities by exterminating the people who lived in those areas. The discovery of the New World and the opening up of trade routes to the Indian Ocean launched the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Spaniards and the English on journeys of conquest and consolidation,

Ghosh blames the fact that the Western powers saw Nature as an inert object to be possessed while Christianity dictated that those who belonged to the barbaric regions of the world could be destroyed or dispossessed without any qualms of conscience. As his starting point Ghosh takes up the destruction of the Bandanese, an island people who were blessed with nutmeg trees, a healthy trading existence and a deep rooted belief in the mystic powers that dwelt in the volcano that was the centre of their existence. Word of the nutmeg spread and drew the Dutch to the peaceful islands. What was one of their greatest blessings was transmuted into a curse by greed. The Western powers were only interested in the exploitation of nature for their own ends.

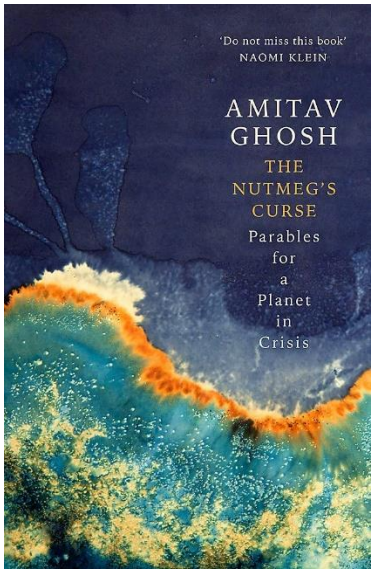
The opening chapters should possibly come with a warning of extreme violence. Ghosh's research unearths seventeenth century versions of waterboarding and their effects. He also examines the minute differences between genocide and extermination. The Dutch also burnt the villages and farms that they overran to the ground, a practice that they also took with them to America which did nothing for the environment that they touched – creating wildernesses and calling it peaceful occupation.

What the early settlers thought was that enclosing beautiful stretches of land, clearing it of trees and breeding domestic animals was 'improving' the place, failing to realise that those who had previously occupied terrain were respecting its beauty but using it to provide for their livelihoods in the way they knew best.

Through his debates with himself and his examination of seminal texts, Ghosh posits the theory that it was actually an issue of technology versus natural resources. He traces the history of humanity through the quest for material goods – the ones he focuses on are spices, tea, opium and fossil fuels with the last two being the most damaging. These are subjects that have recurred in his previous work like the Ibis trilogy where the subject of climate change had yet to come to the forefront.

He also adds the fact that with the coming of the colonial forces, disease was another killer among the indigenous peoples whom they came into contact with. Smallpox, for example, spread like wildfire among the native Americans who had very little immunity since they previously had little requirement for it. In fact, as Ghosh's research proves, blankets from small pox hospitals were deliberately donated knowing that the infected fabric would do its deadly work - this early example of viral warfare would be of particular interest to those living in pandemic times.

Ghosh discusses principles like Lovelock's Gaia theory which suggests that Earth's organisms and their inorganic surroundings are closely amalgamated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life on the planet. Gaia is



uncontrollable and wild when it suits her for the sake of the Earth's wellbeing. Lovelock. now 101 has said that Covid is part of the Gaia system of self regulation to cut down an overcrowded world and ensure that food supplies are adequate for all – something that was not the case in previous times.

Ghosh argues that the world's dependence on fossil fuels is not likely to diminish since petroleum is linked to the power hierarchies of dominant countries and their military forces, with the

Pentagon being the greatest consumer of energy in the US. Logistics cities have been created around places of military importance where the inhabitants, according to Ghosh, are being inducted into a new kind of slavery. He also remarks that entitlement doesn't necessarily mean being better off – there is a kind of justice at work – the Earth responds by abating the damage of an Amphan to the impoverished Bengal regions while Hurricane Katrina calls out the army for disaster management and wildfires increasingly rage in desert areas in North America which in native American times had ponds and water bodies.

The Nutmeg's Curse was written in Brooklyn while Ghosh was holed up during the pandemic. It was a particularly troubled time with the murder of Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, adding a further turbulent backdrop to the situation. Ghosh takes stories from different periods and places, weaving them together to emphasise the shared history of the planet and the deprivation that has piled up over the centuries. It is all he says about colonization, slavery and genocide that have come together in different ways to create the capitalist economy that lies at the root of climate change.

There is a kind of what goes around comes around principle to the parables - what began on islands in the Indian Ocean as a quest for nutmeg now comprises a ring of fossil fuel rich countries in the same region. Call it coincidence or otherwise, the Gaia factor seems to strike back in different ways like a hidden force. Ghosh even links it to the witch burnings that plagued the Dutch before the Banda massacre – why would a lamp's accidental fall in a room on the island of Selamon provoke the Dutch into panic? Ghosh's visit to the sight of the original massacre is repeated by the fall of a lamp in his own room. Is it a haunting?

While Ghosh confines himself to colonization in the 16th century, it might be interesting to travel back in time to the Romans and their colonizing exploits which consisted of much of the same phenomena - enslaving the people that they captured, erasing traces of their existence wherever possible and replacing their villages with the dominance of Roman buildings and fortifications - including renaming places which Ghosh refers to as terraforming. The quest for trade and conquest is as old as time immemorial and the Romans were certainly technologically superior to the races they conquered when it came to military might. The only thing yes, was the fact that they worshipped the same nature gods as the Greeks and had not discovered industry - steel and bronze were in a nascent state of being. But if spices can be cursed

The point is we now have a chance to undo everything that was done before but a tsunami of sustainable energy. However, wind and sun cannot be accessed at light speed and according to Ghosh, the powers that be would be happier with their fossilized domination than anything else until nature strikes back as Gaia is already doing. His suggestion to the problem is vitalist politics, movements of the Gandhi kind or the one in Niyamgiri where the tribals fought the Adanis for their sacred land, a united coming together by activist groups for the sake of the Earth and our own future.

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