

CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

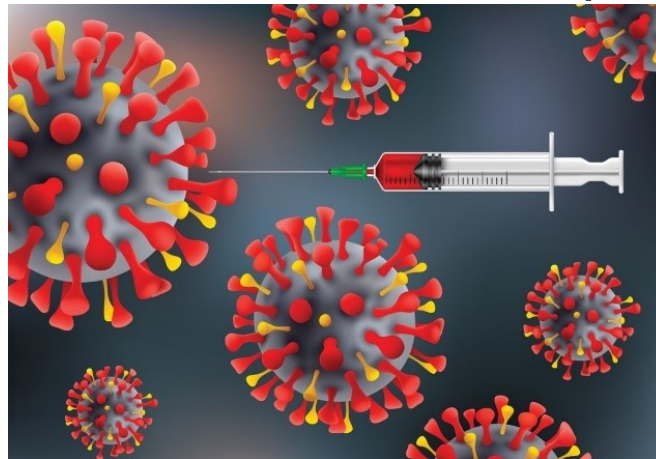
COVID-19: BEYOND THE VIRUS Conspiracy theories & Consolidation of power

By Shalomi Daniel

When reports of a new infectious disease originated from Wuhan in China in early January 2020, the world did not deem it necessary to take it seriously. It was shrugged off as yet another virus, while the increasingly hostile relations between the United States and Iran following the killing of the Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike, caught the world's attention, and people speculated the beginnings of the Third World War. Meanwhile Down Under was on fire, and the world watched on in disbelief and grief as acres of land succumbed to the onslaught of Australian bushfires, many persons lost their lives, and more than one billion wild animals fell prey to the fires.

While nuclear wars and scorching fires gripped the world's attention, the coronavirus, or COVID-19, was stealthily preparing to eclipse the early misfortunes of 2020. By early February 2020, as COVID-19 cases began to be reported in countries outside of

mainland China, concerns grew. As COVID-19 went viral with cases and deaths rapidly increasing across the world, the World Health Organisation, declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11th March 2020.



Since then, the world has witnessed unprecedented mass global lockdown, a drastically increasing death toll and the collapse of daily routines and life as we have known it, while terms such as 'social-distancing', 'lockdown', and 'PCR testing' became common parlance.

It is widely believed that the virus originated in the wet markets in Wuhan. However, countless conspiracy theories as to the origin of the coronavirus have been spun, proliferated and allowed to spread and wreak havoc more than the virus itself.

One of the most prominent conspiracy theories that is still making its rounds, is that the coronavirus was intentionally released by the Chinese, as a biological weapon. This has been further compounded by the fact that the virus, while responsible for a high rate of casualties in Wuhan and in many other countries, has not had as great an impact in other main cities within mainland China. The existence of a virology institute in Wuhan, where various types of bat coronaviruses are studied in detail have contributed towards strengthening this popular conspiracy theory. However, this remains a conspiracy theory, with no concrete evidence to substantiate it.

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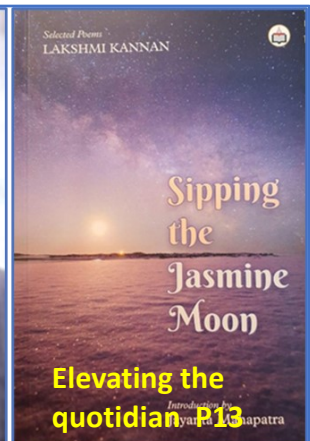
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Editorially Speaking

I am happy to share my thoughts with our readers and writers through this editorial. I am writing this column with a totally different feeling than ever before. As I mentioned in my last editorial in February, this year has already seen unprecedented levels of disasters causing loss of lives, making it an unforgettable year in recent history. This invisible virus has changed our lives and has confined us to our homes. I haven't been able to meet my friends, relatives and office colleagues for well over a month now but am relying on emails and video conferencing tools to keep in touch.

We have fast become accustomed to the new norms such as social distancing and wearing facemasks while going about our essential business. Some countries have lost many thousands of people already to this new enemy with no permanent cure in sight. Sadly, I too, have witnessed some tragic losses within my social circles. While we leave the debate on how we reached this situation or how our lives will be transformed in the post Corona era for scientists, politicians and policy makers, it has become our own responsibility to raise awareness of the factors that led to this situation to the outside world. In this huge crisis, the only positive outcome that I can think of seems to be that there is a bit of global cooling down as opposed to global warming that we have been debating for a while. Falling crude oil prices, shutting down of airports and public transport systems are all indicators of this sudden change of situation. I sometimes think, 'can't we live like this permanently rather than chasing the time and counting the weekdays before another weekend comes'. Then again, I also think of all the boredom and health issues that change of lifestyle could bring about.

I thank all our writers who have done an excellent job by sending varied contributions such as poems, painting, stories, and current affairs. I am delighted to receive their work. The amount of thought that has been put into their work shows the extent of the impact the Corona crisis has on many people's lives. Some writers have commented on the way governments have reacted to the crisis and how the families and working class have been treated and the behaviour of authorities etc., all indicating the seriousness of the issues all over the world and pressing need for an urgent vaccine against this virus. But let us hope there will be some good news before our next issue in August as scientists are working around the clock to find a vaccine.

Editing and compiling this issue has been a special challenge over the past few weeks, but the good thing is that this issue comes with a good mix of literary writing, making sure no reader is disappointed. I look forward to your feedback as always. Keep safe stay well

Vijay Anand

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The spread of the virus has also been wrongfully attributed to 5G technology, despite the fact that it has been proven that the virus made up of biological particles cannot be transmitted through the electromagnetic spectrum. Bill Gates, the brains behind Microsoft, and world acclaimed billionaire and philanthropist, has also been woven into a conspiracy theory. It has been alleged as he predicted a global pandemic of this scale in 2015, and is funding many research initiatives focused on developing a vaccine for COVID-19, he manufactured the virus, to vaccinate the world, and thereby inject a digital microchip into each individual, to track and control people.

There are also plenty of ‘cures’ that are being canvassed. The anti-malaria drug Chloroquine and Hydroxychloroquine were highlighted as cures including by heads of states such as the Presidents of the United States and Brazil. President Trump was also heard to say that ingesting disinfectants was a cure for the virus, though he later stated that he was being sarcastic, when he came under fire for this remark. In the global south, tea, ginger, traditional medicines and various balms, oils and herbal concoctions have been paraded as a cure against the coronavirus.

While such fake news and misinformation is certainly causing much chaos and further exacerbating the current volatile situation, and often causing more damage than the virus itself, many states have been clamping down on ‘fake news’ as well as restricting other fundamental rights and freedoms of their citizenry.

In January 2020 when Li Wenliang, a doctor based in Wuhan, first exposed the possible danger of the disease, the Chinese government immediately suppressed the

information, thus perpetuating the spread of the virus. This trend continues, from Thailand to Azerbaijan to Sri Lanka, governments have come down heavily on those who have purportedly spread fake news, imposing heavy fines and tall prison sentences. While curbing fake news is undoubtedly indispensable, many states have used the purported battle against fake news as a guise to completely restrict access to information and freedom of expression. During times of crises, access to detailed and accurate information is as important as curbing the spread of fake news.

Racism has proven to be another deadly virus that has spread as fast as fake news and caused as much damage as COVID-19. While communities have come together to combat the virus and stand by those in the frontlines, others have also exploited this time to fan communal hatred. Muslims in India and Sri Lanka for instance have been portrayed as vectors of the virus, with virulent online posts trending on social media. In China, especially in Guangzhou, many Africans have been forced out of their residences and turned away from hotels and restaurants based on allegations of carrying the disease. Meanwhile in the West, people of Chinese origin have been subjected to abuse in public places, and blamed for spreading the killer virus; many have even boycotted Chinese restaurants and takeaways.

Further, many states have increasingly undertaken surveillance measures to track the locations, activities, and contacts of their citizens to stop the spread of the virus, by tracing the movement of individuals who later test positive for coronavirus, and to ensure people abide by lockdown regulations. However, this has given rise to the concerning question of state surveillance and infringement of the right to privacy.

Many other governments have also exploited this situation, to consolidate power, and carry out their own political agendas. The Chinese and Hong Kong governments apprehended pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong during this crisis. The Israeli Premier has successfully evaded court hearings on charges of bribery and fraud by shutting down court on grounds of COVID-19. A former army staff sergeant on death row over the murder of eight civilians including a child of five was granted presidential pardon by the Sri Lankan President, while the country was under lockdown.

Whilst it is commonly known and understood that in the event of a public health crisis such as this, certain rights and freedoms will have to be restricted, it is important that such restrictions are necessary, proportionate and in accordance with law. If not, it becomes fertile grounds for authoritarianism and grave abuses of human rights, and the repercussions will be felt far after COVID-19 is relegated to the annals of history. Hence, these restrictions require a sunset clause – a condition that these restrictions are lifted as soon as the threat of the virus is removed; these restrictions cannot be allowed to outlive the virus.

Ensuring that this balance is struck, and the restrictions do not create more damage than the virus itself, is the responsibility of not only the political leaders but of we, the people, ourselves.



Shalomi Daniel is a lawyer practising in Sri Lanka. She enjoys reading and writing in her spare time.

Confluence is in its 18th year of publication. While we thank all our readers, writers and well-wishers for their support throughout, any donations and sponsorships will be greatly appreciated for our long-term success. Donations can be made to Bank A/C: 87347954 Sort Code: 60-04-02. Thank you.



A Silent Prayer

by Meenakshi Mohan



(Dedicated to all those people who are working hard during these difficult times to make our lives as normal and comfortable as possible)

*As my vessel sails through the stormy, tumultuous
waves of life
I stretch my wings to reach Thee
In a silent prayer
Please guide me,
To conquer the clamorous journey ahead
With astute knowledge and strength
Then,
Endow upon me the peace and calm
As flows into the heart of the ocean.*



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

On Remembrance Day To the Indian Soldiers who died in World War 1 A Hundred Years from then

By Bashabi Fraser

Over a hundred years ago
You were required
To turn your backs
On your village homes
In the Punjab and Bengal
In Madras and Maharashtra
From Rajputana to Assam
From the central plains
Of India, her foothills
And forests, her blazing sun,
Her warm drenching rain -
You marched to fight the onslaught
To Britain's right to democracy
On the Western Front,
In East Africa and Egypt
In Gallipoli and Mesopotamia,
Ever on the front line,
Falling, wounded, delimbed,
Shrapnelled or exploded
For a 'just' war while
Your nation remained shackled.

And a hundred years from then
Does your country remember you
In a field of golden marigolds
The Unknown Indian soldiers
Lying in unknown graves
Uncremated, your ashes unreturned
To your green villages
Where the burnished wheat beckoned
Where the paddy green stood plentiful
A hundred years have passed
But do we as a nation
Recall your unquestioning courage
In a war that was not your own?

(An estimated 74,187 Indian soldiers were killed during the First World War).



Bashabi Fraser (Ph.D) is an award winning poet and academic with several publications. She is Professor Emerita and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies, Edinburgh Napier University. Bashabi is the Chief Editor of *Gitanjali and Beyond*. Her recent publications include a biography: *Rabindranath Tagore, (2019)*

Mindfulness

Gratitude

By Sonali Kalia Appanah

An underrated virtue, something easily eroded by the demands of daily life. We are so busy being busy, that we forget to be thankful for the many blessings bestowed upon us. My lessons in gratitude go back to my childhood, an idyllic time, with not a care in the world. Between playing with butterflies, daydreaming and climbing trees; my mother often reminded us to be grateful. Every night she would ask us to pray. Then she would ask my sister and me what we prayed. Like many children, we would seldom ask for something meaningful. My mother would gently guide us to pray to be thankful. Whatever did that mean? Why would we thank God for the simplest of things? Are we not getting in life what we should be or what we were meant to be getting? I mean, God must have decided that for us right, so why would we thank him for his decisions? There lay my first lesson in gratitude, be thankful for the simple things in life. We would pray to God to be thankful for the home that we have the food that we eat, our loving parents, our education, the wisdom to accept the way things are.

Like any nurturing grandparent, my grandmother would tell us stories every night. They would end either in a moral or in a lesson of gratitude. It was an intriguing game to guess the daily outcome. Many a times, these stories would also teach us to be grateful for the things that did not happen, yes, that did *not* happen. Whenever I faced a disappointment, my mother would console me by saying that not getting what you want is also a blessing sometimes. It is God's hands that are guiding you away from harm, into the path of something better or simply taking you away from something that is not yours. She would corroborate her theory with examples of people she knew that experienced a disappointment, only to realize that something better was waiting for them around the corner. The spookier ones were albeit those where people missed an opportunity and that saved them from a disaster or mishap. This was my second lesson in gratitude, be grateful for what did not happen. Concerning our ambitions, aim higher was the motto. However, my third lesson in gratitude was the exact opposite of that - look at those less fortunate than you. Therein the unforgettable story of the boy who cried that he had no shoes, until he met the boy who had no feet. Sometimes the things we

cry for not having, you would agree, are downright embarrassing when compared to the anguish of others.

Speaking of anguish, I remember meeting an acquaintance from our neighborhood. She glows with inner peace. What I did not know about her was that she had lost her husband and son just over a year ago and within months of each other. Intrigued, I asked her how she copes. She told me that no matter what happens life goes on, she was grateful for her daughter whom she still had to raise. This experience set her on a path of self-discovery with meditation as an equilibrium mechanism. She taught me my fourth lesson in gratitude, "there is always something to be grateful for, even when it feels like you have nothing left".



We like to think that we are an intelligent species, an advanced form of life that seems to have a plan for everything. We have plan A, plan B if A doesn't work and a plan C, just in case. We pride ourselves on predicting problems, preparing for them, working out endless scenarios, possible decisions and outcomes to that. We have technology and Science, helping us to push all boundaries. Yet life has a way of throwing things at you when you least expect it and are least prepared for it. Fifth lesson in gratitude, life can change in an instant and we are usually clueless about it. Savour every moment. The true example of this lesson is my own "friend around the corner" story. I had an ex-colleague and good friend around the time that I was expecting my first child. As is life, I took up another job and moved on. She kept in touch and would regularly ask me about my son and how she wished to meet him. I would tell her next weekend, next week, maybe next month. As ridiculous as it sounds, that somehow never happened and one day, just like that, I heard that she had passed. As I sat in my office after receiving the news, I did something that I have never

done before. I wept; I let it all out. Tears of grief and regret. The feeling that life has just overtaken you is a heavy cross to bear. Still, we are on an autopilot that keeps us going, moving, doing and constantly trying to get somewhere. We un-see what is truly important in the mad race against time.

Yet, as I write this, we are all taking forced time out. We are fighting against an invisible enemy that has taught us that life could morph in an instant. Today the world is at a standstill and at an unprecedented level. The speeding train of daily life has come to a screeching halt and we have been thrust forward with a violent shock, landing with a sickening thud. Even so, as a generation that has never faced a pandemic, we got up, regained composure and accepted the impact of it on our lives.

All projects, deadlines, business objectives suddenly evaporated into thin air. We are now faced with priorities like survival and rebuilding the future. Many of us are facing uncertainties. How will the economy fare? Will there still be jobs and salaries a few months down the line? Will my small-scale business survive this? How will our children cope? Will life, as we know it ever return? In the midst of this, we also realize to what extent humanity thrives on humanity. The more fortunate, count their

blessings and help the less fortunate at this hour. Essential workers are putting the needs of the nation and its people before their own and that of their families. Governments are protecting and safeguarding the interests of their people. During these trying times, there is no greater strength than gratitude. No amount of power or money can change our situation; only compassion and understanding. We need to be grateful for what we have and aware of how quickly it could all be taken away. Let this guide you and your loved ones from this moment on. Stay safe and you are in our grateful prayers.



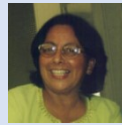
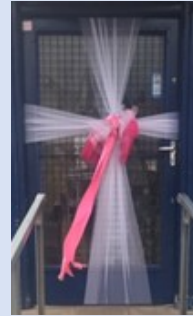
Sonali Kalia Appanah, was born and raised in India. She is a hotelier by profession and describes herself as a typical "Army Kid"! She lives in Mauritius, with her Mauritian husband and two boys. Her passion is to share her childhood experiences, lessons from her profession and her life in Mauritius through her writings.

The Anguish (Coronavirus) By Sheila Malhotra

A tear rolled down my cheek,
I saw colours discarded.
Colours of life!

What with those roses,
Those poppies, those tulips,
Those fragrances
All dumped forever.
Crushed mercilessly!
They in thousands lay on ground,
Crying out for their lives
Arms outstretched,
Pleading for their very existence

The florist around the corner,
Whose gleeful flower pots
Are now, but only a memory.
A white lace ribbon
Crisscrossing,
A small posy atop
Adorning the front door.
If this but be made to lie
Would become
The coffins of today



Established artist, freelance art critic and Road Safety campaigner, Sheila Malhotra is widely acclaimed for her very unique series 'The world through a Porthole.' She has often illustrated the problem of pollution at sea, thus embarking on the subject of Green Peace.

Three poems by Cyril Dabydeen

MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

She stopped giving him intimacy,
but wanted affection only, waiting
for him to propose, and to say,
"Marry me," or indeed--
"Will you marry me, *please?*"

Going on bended knees, he will
think only about yesterday, not
today or tomorrow, aiming to win
her over in a less familiar way,
what's beating inside the rib-cage

I heard tell since the time of
Adam and Eve, I know, or I don't
know, but with tremors of heart
and lungs until another lover
comes along bringing her flowers,

bouquets, tendrils trailing along
the sidewalk hanging from
branches of tall trees, or
from a vase in the living room
like a Grecian urn borrowed from Keats

or some other Romantic poet
I don't know much about. Arms
extended and legs splayed out,
hips concave or convex, what's not
to deny but declaring myself to you

with affection always because
of words like "I do," or "I don't,"
then, "Until death do us part"--
I hear again and again--
ritual from the start.



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

PERPENDICULAR

Perpendicular I stand--
you stand, shape and form,
seen or unseen, becoming
a myriad rainbow without
colors I have left behind.

A lamp-post, a place indeed
to shed light from, but my
being in darkness only--
foreign territory, you see,
I let you know about.

Bracing myself up for it
with heart and lungs,
a merry-go-round life--
never horizontal, but
becoming time-bound.

Ageless. A tree. The hard
ground I stand upon
with a stronger desire--
waving to you only,
I will let you know.

Branches shaking--
in less perpendicular
space, looking down,
not up, being myself,
upright all over again.

ANOTHER SELF

Outside, but with memory folds,
in a new place, believe me--
time foretold with England
yet to come because of longing
and desire, what's dreamed about:
images of mango and palm,
courida and mangrove, nothing
less in the penury of time--
between crevices and corners.

The heart's own place I must
Let you know, brain-waves, walls
breaking down if you can believe it.

2

Conquest, or another journey--
like wanting a new self,
but it's nowhere else to go

being who we're not in India--
Bihar or Uttar Pradesh with
a Bhojpuri voice asking.

Close-up I will whisper about
days and nights ahead with
a new longing, now drifting

apart from you in the cold
and ice, bracing up to it--
real time yet to come.

Udaipur Tales: Staging the Timeless Art of Storytelling

Dr Deepa Vanjani

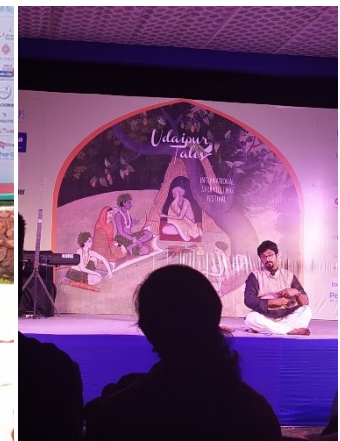
These were people who breathed stories. They had stories running in their blood and when they got together on one platform the result was *Udaipur Tales*, the three day International Storytelling Festival, co-founded by Sushmita Singha and Saili Bhandari, which kicked off at Park Exotica, Udaipur. On stage were storytellers from India and abroad with their varied styles of narrating tales in their own inimitable styles.

An amalgamation of culture and music, the third edition of the Udaipur storytelling festival from 21 to 23 February 2020 at the Venice of the East, Lake City Udaipur was truly an invigorating experience. The folk tradition, the rich traditions of myths from various states of India such as Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat and from Africa and Korea were brought alive in three packed days, woven in a tapestry showcased through various storytelling genres. While Syed Sahil Agha mesmerised the audience by his Hindustani style of *Dastangoi*, Vikram Sridhar captivated everyone's imagination by narrating folk tales from Karnataka in his deliciously humorous style during his session *Talking Myths*. Then there was Bongiswa Kotta from Africa who kept everyone mesmerised by her lively storytelling and Mirande Shah fused folk and Sufi in her vocal performance which was heavenly. Uma Venkatraman's session *Myth* was yet again informative and interesting.

and the whole of Africa. Endowed with the gift of healing, her grandmother's stories had been in her subconscious and somehow channelled her into becoming a storyteller.

The political wit in Valentina Trivedi's narration on Sunday morning and use of refrain in the form of a dialogue added to her performance. Senior journalist writer of biography of Dhoni, winner of Crossword Book prize Shantanu Guha Ray narrated eye-

session titled *Queen of Love and Valour*. Madhya Pradesh was also brought to the fore in the immortal love story of Baaz Bahadur and Rani Roopmati, narrated by Bharti Dixit. *Gunehgaar Kaun*, this humorously satirical tale narrated by Valentina Trivedi made the audience break into peals of laughter. There were so many subtle layers to her satire, one couldn't but help ponder. Manto's raw flavour once again gave the audience goose bumps and the flawless presentation of his story *Padhiye Kalma* captured in their own storyPlay format (mark the capital P) on stage by Rajesh Kumar of *Jash-ne-Qalam* from Mumbai in the form of a monologue. The group of professional theatre and screen artistes has been travelling across the country, with their focus also on colleges and universities, and have been reviving interest in Hindi literature. This has also been promoting reading among youngsters. Equally commendable was the group's second performance *Fitrati Chor* by Vicky Ahuja, whose versatile talent was revealed in the way he rolled many characters into his solo performance and yet could delineate each one of them. "Ours is a storyPlay," they told me when I spoke to them, "which aims at carrying forward the oral traditions." The name storyPlay was devised keeping in mind the fact that they use the third person narrative for telling stories using their voice and body. Each story is selected after discussion on its various dimensions and then retold in their own



The stage resonated with energy when Bongiswa Kotta Ramushwana, storyteller with Freedom Park, Pretoria, Africa, interacted with kids through her stories. For Kotta stories are cathartic and storytelling a connect. Dressed in her traditional African attire, the Ndebele tribe neck piece Inizila, the Xhosa tribe skirt, and the traditional headgear that cuts across cultures, her stories had life lessons and skills to impart. "Storytelling is a heart to heart connect, an opening up", says the storyteller who has travelled to Norway

opening real stories in his two sessions *Murder Mystery and Strange Deaths* and *Dollars in the Mine*, the latter being hair-raising real stories of the diamond industry and some big names in the Indian diamond world and how his investigation took him to Angola, Antwerp, Zimbabwe, London and Congo.

There was Seema Wahi Mukherjee on the one hand who captivated everyone with her tale of the love and sacrifice of Rani Durgavati in her

innovative styles. And their efforts have paid dividends for they find a newfound appreciation for literature.

Seema Wahi Mukherjee while talking about her storytelling process said that she first researched on a story, assimilated it, drafted and redrafted it, then chose the essence from

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it and let it be told. Also an educational trainer, Seema has been associated with Jodo Gyan to teach Maths through stories. "Every person or even a blade of grass has a story to tell. All you have to do is listen", says Mukherjee. She defines storytelling as an interplay of the story, the teller and the listener.

Syed Sahil Agha stole the hearts of the listeners with his rendition of the 13th century oral form of storytelling namely Dastangoi. While there is the Persian style of this form, Agha follows the Hindustani style in which there is greater scope of adaptability in terms of character portrayal and use of dialogue. The chaste diction, the intonations, and the choice of words wove his tale into a delicate and silky thread bringing alive Mir's story. In his other performance he and opera singer Kabuki Khanna got together to present a musical

historical love story. Agha, who was the Cultural Ambassador to Russia, says for him his art is his beloved. "One's culture is one's identity card and so should not be lost", he opines. Also a teacher of the *Dastangoi* form, his show was also very popular and acclaimed on Zee Salaam. Agha is quite open about taking to digital platforms and feels it is a good idea since it has a reach. So if people are unable to reach you, reach out to them, he says. An added charm during the festival was real life stories of two acclaimed sports persons, Ganesh Khaitan and Shreyasi Singh. While the latter is an Arjuna Awardee, and winner of Commonwealth Games gold medal, Khaitan has represented India in Golf for fifty years (a record in itself), and won a senior championship at the age of 66, after having undergone a surgery.

In all, the festival is keeping the rich tradition of storytelling alive. Storytelling, an art as old

as the human civilisation, has been part of every home. Stories have been carried forward from one generation to another. Right from listening wonderstruck to grandmother's bedtime stories, to the television series based on myths and folklores, stories always captivate human imagination and this could be seen at Udaipur Tales as well. As me, many who attended will look forward to its next edition.



Dr Deepa Vanjani is the Head of the department of Languages in a leading college in Indore, India and a visiting faculty with Educational Media Research Centre, UTD and School of Comparative Languages, Indore.

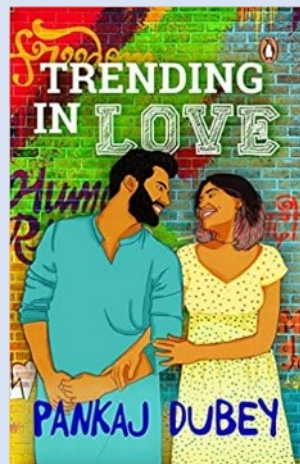
Pankaj Dubey's 'Trending In Love'

Review by Vipashana VK

Exactly midway through the book, Sanam, one of the protagonists in "Trending in Love", is dancing on the stage, and this is when realisation dawns that you have been seeing her in your mind's eye and experiencing what she is feeling. During that moment of performance, bilingual novelist Pankaj Dubey puts his readers in Sanam's skin and takes them on a tour from spring to autumn to winter and back to spring, as she prances around the stage. Every author wants to breathe life into their characters and make them seem real. And Dubey, who has carved for himself a significant space in South Asia's literary scene with four novels (eight titles), all published by Penguin, in mere six years, has a smooth success in doing so. His latest 224-page offering is already set for a web series release.

This time Dubey has embarked on a love story with protagonists from two contrast landscapes—the almost flawless Sanam who comes from an affluent family in New Delhi, and Aamir Fizal, a Jammu & Kashmir boy for whom all circumstances have always been flawed. Published by Penguin Metro Reads, the young adult fiction's first part is about the two lead characters' journey from deciding to take the entrance exam for the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) to the struggle they go through before getting selected, and before their lives intertwine at the training academy. Dubey lays bare open the stark disparity between the aspirations of the privileged living in India's national capital—New Delhi, and those from the constantly embattled Valley of Kashmir.

Aamir's toil in the battered Valley in the face of Sanam's, in her privileged and peaceful house in the power-drunk Delhi, almost breaks heart. But this is a love story, and Dubey wants you to believe in magic; he mends hearts soon enough when Aamir's arduous efforts are made good and he feels there is hope to change the situation in Kashmir.



The second half of this page-turner is a love story—Dubey's forte. His words are simple and scenic yet striking, with splashes of poetry now and then making the heart flutter. Be it the glamour of Delhi, beauty of Mussoorie, trappings of Kashmir, throes of love, humiliation and passion, the Mumbai-based writer paints it all beautifully with his words.

The plot, the prose and the play of words—all is so perfectly aligned that the reader is left wanting for some more. Dubey introduces a strong dramatis personae in the first half of the novella and each has a story to be told. The novel's deuteragonist, who emerges to be Aamir's cousin who is also his friend Moeen, is no sidekick. Labelled a rebel by the government, he is the real face of Kashmir's angst and helplessness. The devouring reader is left asking for more of him and of all the other characters—Sanam's father who has climbed the class ladder despite being from a backward community, and the major who pushed Aamir to take the leap. As far as the lead couple is concerned, Pankaj Dubey ace the characters with all finesse possible. Sometimes, however, Sanam's perfection becomes unreal; she seems infallible and hard to identify with.

With his breezy words, Dubey weaves a narrative of love and hope, something the world is in dire need of at the moment. And it is always recommended to read the book for literary satisfaction before watching the movie (in this case a web series). This one is worth the literary satisfaction.

The reviewer Vipashana VK is a former journalist with The Times Of India and is currently pursuing her Masters in Politics and Communication with London School of Economics.

Story of a Living Legend

Diana Mavroleon interviews Divya Mathur

DM: First of all, please accept our heartiest congratulations to have just received one of India's highest national awards, the Padmabhushan Moturi Satyanarayan Award, for your writings and promoting Indian languages.

Divya: Thank you very much, I am delighted and humbled. It's a wonderful acknowledgement of my contribution to world literature.

DM: You were born in 1949 in old Delhi into a creative middle-class family. Tell us a bit about your background and what your most prominent childhood memories are from growing up.

Divya: I was brought up by my grandparents up to the age of 13. My grandfather was an eminent Mughal artist and Shayer (poet). I grew up in a very large close-knit family that had a keen interest in Arts, especially literature and music. Storytelling was a major pastime for us. We were all expected to contribute to the family gatherings which were frequent, so I learnt to play the harmonium, flute, tabla and of course singing.

DM: To what extent did those early days influence the way your creativity developed?

Divya: I think my work as an impresario is a reflection of growing up in a world of cultural generosity. As a child and teenager, I was as much a part of an audience as I was a performer, and this contributed to my later interest in putting art and culture together - people and creativity. This is definitely the essence of my life.

DM: After your B.A. in English from Delhi University followed by a diploma in medical journalism, your career began as a medical secretary at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (1972-1985) where, to facilitate your work, you invented shorthand for ophthalmology. What brought you to England?

Divya: After 15 years of an extremely difficult marriage, and with 2 young children, I decided that the only way to survive what had become an almost impossible existence and to provide a better life for my children, that we would escape. An old school friend living in Denmark saved my life by sending travel tickets for myself and the children. However, we couldn't settle in Denmark. Those were the days when without knowing Danish you just could not survive in the country. We arrived in London in 1985 with only a six-month restricted visa. I could only work for an international organisation. Eventually, I joined the High Commission of India-London as a

contingency clerk. I basically worked my way up to being selected by the then Minister (Culture) and Director, Mr. Gopalkrishna Gandhi to join the team that established the Nehru Centre. Under his guidance I went on to become Senior Programme Officer and remained there for over 24 years.

DM: So quite a leap then - from contingency clerk at the High Commission to the position at The Nehru Centre with the aim to promote Indo-British dialogue.



Divya: Yes, and placed with such a huge but exciting responsibility. I still vividly remember that day, 15th November 1992 - the very first program in which Pt Ravi Shankar performed with Ustad Alla Rakha Saheb on tabla and Pandit Ram Narain on Sarangi. The atmosphere was absolutely electrifying. I was in total awe. At that embryonic time, we had hardly any furnishing; no stage or chairs even. The musicians had rugs to sit on brought from Mr Gandhi's household and the audience happily squatted on the floor.

DM: Who made up the audience at that time?

Divya: Well we certainly had a lot of Europeans in the audience, mainly due to Mr. Gandhi's contacts. Remember, we had no media to help us in those days.

Networking was virtually all by personal contacts, phone calls, letters, meetings. Enthusiasm was high and that always makes for a good energy. When Mr. Gandhi's term ended in 1995, people queued up to the end of South Audley Street, right up to the American embassy, for an opportunity to say a personal thank you and farewell ...so great was his popularity and influence. The audience increased with the advent of eminent Directors with their multifaceted personalities: Prof Indranath Choudhuri, Girish Karnad, Pavan Varma, Monka Kapil Mohta, etc.

DM: The magnitude of your organizational skills was recognized by the Arts Council of England when you were honoured with the Arts Achiever Award -2003. What do you consider were the main reasons they chose you for this prestigious award? The award acknowledged 'outstanding contribution and innovation in the field of arts.' In the same year, you were also nominated Fellow of Royal Society of Arts.

Divya: My main aim has always been to address the cultural aspirations of the Indian community in the UK and to promote Indo-British dialogue at the level of thoughts and shared experience. Much has come about through these dialogues both individually and collectively.

DM: In 2003 you also founded Vatayan Poetry on South Bank. What brought that about?

Divya: We needed a prominent central London venue in order to promote poetry written and spoken in Hindi, Urdu and other regional languages, alongside English translations. It was a way of introducing many non-Indians to this poetry, whilst at the same time a great opportunity for Indian poets to share their work and ideas. We also organize Poetry-Picnics and Poetry-in-Action at reputed venues like Keats House, Stratford Upon Avon, Roman Verulamium - all very hands on, organic and very importantly - great fun!

DM: You have been at the forefront of propagating Hindi as well as regional Indian languages. This has not only served to help preserve these indigenous cultures but also to promote new growth and development. What has the response been from the younger generation?

(continues on page 10)

(from page 9)

Divya: So it's like a constant process of agitation. We have no choice, because if we didn't bother then the result would be that these languages would eventually disappear from being spoken, publically at least, and become insular i.e. existing only as household conversations.

DM: So not only the languages would disappear, but the history and development of the Indian culture that would disappear along with them.

Divya: Precisely.

DM: As well as being performed as spoken word, you have enjoyed your work being adapted for stage, television and film. Any other forms?

Divya: My poetry has been composed and sung by eminent artists. The album, 'Native Scents', has a selection of poems by Indo-British poets composed by the famous musician, Radhika Chopra (listen on YouTube). Doordarshan has made a film on one of my stories and Dr Nikhil Kaushik has produced a film, 'From Home to Home', based on my achievements.

DM: What do you consider have been your main aims?

Divya: My main aims, past and present, bearing in mind that a lot of my work has been achieved almost entirely through self-funding, has been to give a platform to writers and artists, to give a voice; to share cultures. Not just share, but to integrate and to find new means of expression.

DM: So its like a constant process of evolution.

Divya: Yes, and it comes with the excitement of the new and the positive energy that comes with it.

DM: Another of your main incentives has always been to promote the writing of Indian women and from as early as the early 1990s. It must have been challenging? How did you go about it initially, again remembering it was pre-internet days?

Divya: I literally had to create the mechanisms and means to enable interaction to take place. Today there is quite a lot more on offer and so I have gone beyond UK and Europe. I would like to think that I have genuinely contributed to this development.

DM: How long did the process take to establish?

Divya: It took me no less than six to seven years just to find enough Indian women writers settled abroad and then to assemble the first compilation of stories entitled 'Odyssey', followed by 'Aashaa (Hope)', followed by 'Desi Girls'. I also edited a poetry collection, 'Native Scents: Poems by Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi Writers with

English translations. The momentum gathered as the enthusiasm grew. Connectivity forms strength and a bond like nothing else. It has been an incredible journey really.

DM: So far you have published, besides a novel, six stories and seven collections of poems. What would you consider are your other significant literary landmarks?

Divya: My debut novel, *Tête-à-tête*, is included in Delhi University's syllabus for BA Honours/ and over a dozen postgraduate dissertations/PhDs are carried out on my books. My latest play, *Future Perfect*, was staged at Akshara Theatre-Delhi. My poem, *The Minute Raindrop*, has been included in Arts Council of England's Poems for the Waiting Room. A selection of my poems was choreographed by Dr Githa Upadhyay in four diverse forms of Indian classical dance forms and performed at Cartwright Museum-Bradford. I wrote a collection of poems to celebrate the birth of my first granddaughter, Sia, that further inspired me to go on to translate five books for children for MantraLingua. During this Lockdown, we have organised a series of literary events on Zoom to keep authors up to date.

DM: There isn't enough space to include all your awards here; over a dozen PhD's have been written on your books. You are listed in the volumes of *Inspirational Women*, *Asian Who's Who* and several international collections. I would like to end with asking... what do you consider to be the highest personal achievements in your life so far?

Divya: Firstly, the story that began as a woman's survival went on to become a hugely shared achievement. Secondly, the fact that both of my children have happy and contented lives; they too experienced much and had to work very hard. This means so much to me. If I will have left any legacy it will be... to survive, to tell the story and to inspire and to support others to tell and share theirs.



Diana Mavroleon is a Polymath working as a film-maker and as a radio producer-presenter for Resonance 104.4fm. She is the Founder member of the European Media Arts Network. Her work revolves around documentary film, cultural journalism, curator & events organising. Diana is also a qualified, experienced garden and landscape designer practising bio-dynamic principles.

SALLY VAGABOND

By Prithvijeet Sinha

Sally Vagabond,
a resplendent butterfly as one can see,
is off to socialize,
visiting each of her winged friends,
in the new order of things.

Free from the human stain
that kept her hidden from the world,
in just those fragrant corners of the botanical garden,
so fresh and pure the fruit of solitude it had been;
But her heart longed to see the city in its full morning
finery,
with the air filtered by exhalations of quiet virtue and
not too many talking heads,
or the honk and tap and sneezes and coughs of the 9
to 5 rush hour commencing from daybreak itself,
And how those kids tried to clip her and catch her
and she used to fly away,
from fear of falling out of flight too soon and losing
her one and only gift.

Sally Vagabond,
once or twice did they appreciate your colours,
at the rose and gladiolus show
and you settled coyly on the side of the prize
winning bouquet.
So far hovering above familiar environs and the same
visitors, catching their glimpses from a dignified
distance.
And the favourite child on whose index finger you
lingered for ten seconds is locked in, missing your
tickling sensations.

This is such a peaceful morning,
such a revolt of sorts from what has been.
Fear of crowds has left us,
For the fateful eyes see all.
It's quiet, as if the earthly compass was watered
down by something outwardly,
from nature's own beckoning.
It's pure, the water so blue and unpolluted,
the air crisp and mottled by nary an intoxicant
and the peacocks have left the garden's boundaries
and wandered towards nearby residences,
to trill with their other feathered friends and find out
the most refined golden cry of joy amongst them.
There are sparrows too, down at the watering hole,
gossiping about this extended slumber from those
beyond their reserve.

Sally hears them out,
goes lapping on little drops of water every few
minutes and finds the biggest marigold to extract her
incense from, for the day.
Declares the little mynah's cries the sweetest of all,
thinking of all the other friends in distant, unknown
corners she has to reach out to.

As this drone of peace extends itself out, she must
find a more wholesome company.
For Sally Vagabond, true to her name,
is not to just hover over half-hearted expectations
anymore
but explore her essence in these fourteen days of
composure.

off she goes,
Searching for her own special flower, in a moment of
bliss.

Prithvijeet Sinha hails from Lucknow. His motto in life is to create and expand his world views.

Lockdown

A Global Pause?

By Girija Shettar

I heard the phrase “Global pause” last week, obviously describing the world’s shut-down in reaction to COVID-19. But in my mind’s eye I saw two paws, cat’s paws, holding a globe. A cat-virus playing with a mouse-globe. I wondered what the picture might mean. When news started coming out about the plight of India’s migrant workers, I realised this image was relevant for them.

In March, when the cities locked down and casual work such as on construction sites folded, these families suddenly found themselves without jobs and without financial support. Forced from their homes they took to the roads on foot or squeezed onto overcrowded public transport to make their way to native rural villages.

Writing for British newspaper The Financial Times (3rd April), writer and activist Arundhati Roy said the crisis of COVID-19 could be an opportunity to re-make our world. She wrote:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Let us hold that thought as we consider the greater burden that some are bearing.

As they travelled, the migrant workers faced terrors most of us cannot even imagine. Starvation. Exhaustion. Utter abandonment of human assistance. Reportedly, some faced brutal police harassment as they walked roads unprotected. Some were rounded up like cattle and sprayed down with disinfectant. Some - not just anyone: precious family members - died during these journeys.

For them, COVID-19 is no mere pause. For some it is an end, for others, it is the start of a dangerous new and unpredictable life.

This month it is reported that some of these migrant workers have been stopped from entering their villages, from getting work in the fields. These families, having survived the city exodus, now face starvation.

People of the Muslim faith, too, are being targeted with reports of murderous bullies taking the crisis as an excuse to beat people - people who carry a faith integral to the beautiful patchwork of Indian culture.

In the cities, and among the well-off the story is very different. All except key workers on the front line of the crisis are at home in isolation. It is accurate to say that

in such cases there is a pause: a temporary cessation of normal movement.

Without forgetting the suffering - the increased incidence of domestic violence, the grieving who have lost loved ones to the virus, those struggling with loneliness, and mental and emotional suffering - I think it is fair to say that for the majority, working from home or collecting financial assistance, volunteering to deliver food and essentials to neighbours, exercising in the fresh air once a day, and finding ways to stay hopeful and motivated, is the new normal and constitutes the extent of the crisis. Many are enjoying the peaceful conditions.

Living like this, it is easy to envision how COVID-19 could be Roy’s “portal”; how positive changes could emerge. Worldwide, conversations are being had about the bright new possibilities in waiting. We talk about reducing traffic pollution, putting an end to hundreds of thousands of premature deaths each year from particulate emission

indirectly brought about the discovery of America.”

Where is the beauty of cultural insight, the innovative and high-mindedness of the India that has given so much intellectual, spiritual, and artistic treasure to the world?

India perhaps more than any other national grouping of humanity has demonstrated in its ancient past the human wonders of learning and culture that blossomed not from a narrow monotone materialistic thinking, but from a giant multifarious harmony of diverse philosophical, cultural, spiritual and intellectual perspectives. Its genius lay in knowing, and knowing how to propagate, the grandeur and growth of the human spirit.

This is not to call back in the ascetic tendency that at times and in places has characterised India. That is just one aspect of her colourful cultural life. As Swami Vivekananda pointed out, the country “never stood for wealth” even though it was among the richest of all nations: “It was a powerful race for ages, yet we find that nation never stood for power, never went out of the country to conquer.” This was the nation that attracted the “hungry cohorts of Europe” to her borders, thirsty to partake of her superior cultural and material treasures.

India’s migrant workers are now the hungry, for food and for fairness. The traumas imposed on them seem more akin to struggles suffered by the West, caused by a focus on materialism to the spirit’s detriment. Once upon a more innocent time, many in the West turned towards India for a cure. Were those times to return, would India have anything to offer?

At the start of India’s lockdown in March, watching footage online of the migrant workers gathered at teeming train and bus stations in India, I was struck by how peaceful people were with each other. If my eyes did not deceive me, I spied the long-suffering, huge hearted genius of India’s spirit in action. More words on this would only be an insult to a populous whose innate potential appears to be crushed by social and political chaos decade after decade of this modern era.

So, perhaps it is not whimsical, but essential to ask: will the “portal” of COVID-19 lead to a grand new world for India, or will the cat continue to play with the mouse?



Girija Shettar is a freelance writer based in London.



Image courtesy: AP

inhalation, about how the shopping crisis has made us more careful with our resources now we see how quickly they can be snatched from us. And there is hope, too, that in future we will treat each other in public more gently and with more respect after the enforced discipline of social distancing.

But with the deadly crisis facing some in our world, like our brother and sister migrant workers in India, musing about the bright future this pandemic might bring seems whimsical. Seeing their suffering is a reminder that India’s reality for hundreds of years now is that of having been crushed under the yoke of authorities unsympathetic to and unable to harness the country’s unique genius.

As Swami Vivekananda once said: “As I look back upon the history of my country, I do not find in the whole world another country which has done quite so much for the improvement of the human mind. So great in fact was the superiority of India in every aspect that it drew to her borders the hungry cohorts of Europe and thereby

Obituary

Anton Sebastian

A Doctor who died in the line of duty

by Benedict Thomas

Dr. Anton Sebastian, fondly known to many as Thillahan, fell a victim to COVID-19 on April 04, 2020 while working for the National Health Service (NHS) at the Kingston Hospital in London, UK. He was a Consultant Physician who answered the call from NHS to serve the needy at a time of great crisis. While treating infected patients he contracted the virus and succumbed.

Anton was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka on January 23, 1945 to Dr. Gregory and Josephine Sebastianpillai. He had his primary education at St. Patrick's College, Jaffna and moved to Kandy, a town in the Central Province of Sri Lanka at the age of ten where his father was a Registered Medical Practitioner. The latter had retired early from the State sector to run a Medical Clinic and a Nursing Home which catered to the needy in Kandy.

Anton had his secondary education at St. Sylvester's College, Kandy and entered University of Peradeniya where he graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1972. A few years later he met a charming girl, Vasantha Reginald, a Peradeniya University graduate and married her with parental blessings.

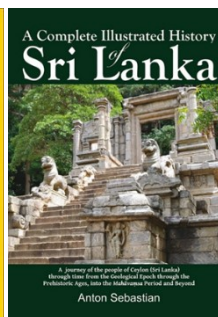
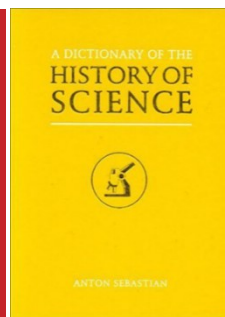
After two short stints as a Medical Practitioner in Colombo and Jaffna, Anton moved to London with his family in 1979. He joined the NHS and worked at the Kingston hospital, London and later qualified as a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. When he got a good job offer from a leading hospital in the city of Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he accepted the offer and worked there for more than a decade. He was a well-known Physician in the Kingdom even treating members of the Royal family. On his return to London, he became a Consultant Physician and soon became widely known for his prowess and even had a clinic down Harley Street, the centre for eminent Physicians.

Anton was a Doctor of Medicine but did not confine himself to Medicine. While always tending the sick with total devotion and passion, he found time to engage in several hobbies and literary efforts. He authored several books on

medicine including one titled 'History of Medicine' which was a pioneering effort by a Doctor of Medicine. This apart, his hobbies included other fields like collection of ancient books, coins, antiques, stamps and what not. You will find shelves and shelves of well-bound books in his spacious home in Surbiton, Surrey. On my last visit to his home



around five years back, I was treated to a fiesta of all his collections which included classic old cars. His collection actually astounded me. It struck me that he is one who could squeeze a 48 hour work into a 24 hour day. Amidst his



encompassing work, he would find time to enjoy music and play Piano to relax with his family. He was a dedicated family man.

Anton was always available for consultations to anyone who sought his services which he gave unsparingly. I have often disturbed him from distant Canada even at odd hours and he was always courteous and considerate.

Anton took the initiative as a Founder, in setting up an after school centre in the village of Mathagal (from where his wife hailed) called 'Village Empowerment Centre' where needy students are taught computer, languages, and other skills like typing, sewing and tailoring free of charge. He was a visionary indeed.

Anton had a passion for history and decided that he should explore the history of his motherland Sri Lanka. He took leave from his Consultancy services went to Sri Lanka and toured the island even visiting several Buddhist temples and monasteries and spending the nights there. He told me that he was warmly received at every Temple he visited and had the opportunity to refer to ancient ola books. After a painstaking effort which was really herculean, he came out with a real masterpiece 'An Illustrated History of Sri Lanka', a massive volume of historical data which virtually stunned all readers. How he could have assembled all the data that had gone into this book remains a wonder. Medicine and History are poles apart but in Anton's life the poles had met. The book which had earned the encomiums of historians, academics, professionals and even politicians has seen four editions, all of which were sold out in no time. <https://antonsebastian.com/>

God had blessed Anton with an intellect and abundant talents and skill all of which he used for the benefit of humanity. More than that, God has also bestowed on him noble qualities of humility, equanimity, compassion and genuine love for fellow human beings irrespective of class or status, all of which were always part of his life. Eventually he died, as he lived, for others.

His death is an irreparable tragedy to his grieving family but they can take comfort from the fact that he is being hailed by thousands as one who had sacrificed his life in the service to humanity.

May Anton's Soul Rest in Peace and let the earth lie softly on his turf forever.



Benedict Thomas (Benny) held executive positions in the Financial and Administrative Service Sectors in Sri Lanka and in the Middle East. He is now retired and living in Canada with his wife and daughter. E:benny55@hotmail.com

Elevating the quotidian

Lakshmi Kannan's 'Sipping the Jasmine Moon'

A Review by Anita Balakrishnan

Authorspress, New Delhi, pp.142, Rs.295

Poetry is particularly important for women writers: among the various forms of creative writing poetry bears the most intimate relation to language. Many women writers share in the task of interrogating received meanings, but poetry is particularly significant in its ability to infuse new significance into language. This makes poetry very valuable to women writers because it allows them to challenge the extant power equations in society through female voices and myths freshly imbued with power.

Bilingual poet and author Lakshmi Kannan's recently published volume of poetry evocatively titled *Sipping the Jasmine Moon*, has all the sensitive, subtle interrogation one has come to expect in her verse, though many of the poems also break new ground reflecting her evolving philosophical outlook. Divided thematically into five sections, the volume contains some of her best known poems from her previously published collections as well as several new additions giving the reader a panoptic view of her thematic proclivities. The book includes an introduction by Jayanta Mahapatra, celebrated Indian bilingual poet, who praises Lakshmi Kannan's ability to translate intense emotions and personal experiences into memorable poetry.

Lakshmi Kannan is primarily noted for her short, imagistic poems that evince her worldview; her impatience with rigid soul-numbing traditions that circumscribe the development of identity, particularly female identity. This volume opens with a poetic invocation to Ganesha, remover of obstacles, whose worship has come to symbolize the syncretism of modern India. The first section in the book titled 'Braided Lives' showcases the poet in her element, drawing on Tamil cultural tropes and mores to create tender vignettes of family life, religious rituals and the inner weave of women's lives. Raised in an orthodox Tamil milieu, the bilingual poet's ability to effortlessly evoke quintessentially South Indian cultural rhythms segues into the more cosmopolitan ethos of her later life and this seamless blending lends to her poetry its unique flavour. The eponymous poem 'Braided Lives' uses the mundane daily ritual of dressing hair to emphasize the strong bonds of love that weave together three generations of women in a family: "three in a row, twisting time/ in the ritual of 'doing hair.'" However, another poem is the very antithesis of this cozy warmth: 'An Autopsy' reveals that the

woman "had stashed away her private moments" in her core, her brain. This is an ironic subversion of the ideology that equates woman with her body; here it is her mind that stores the liquid gold honey that represents her essential self. This poem resonates with others that celebrate Rasha Sundari Debi, a self-taught nineteenth-century Bengali author, and that icon of female power 'Mahishasura Mardhini'. These portraits of female power are juxtaposed with the poems that follow, that depict the love between the poet and her mother and her own love for her son, that tell the truth with subtle circumvention. This blend of South Indian culture and



western enquiry in Lakshmi Kannan's poetry is evident in the frequent allusions to Tamil literary texts and cultural icons that season her writings and lend an intertextual dimension to her work.

The second section 'Maitree', extends the warmth of family relationships that shape the first section to affectionate, enduring friendships where the poet "could come into my own,/ for you just let me be." The poems describe friendships that run the gamut from childhood bonds to the joy of discovering the beauty of classical Tamil literature with a fellow devotee, to friendships that accommodate and transcend differing religious beliefs.

The third section, 'On the Trail', is the still centre amidst the turbulent emotions and swirling waters of the poems in the other sections. In these poems, Kannan explores the teachings of the Buddha and the poet seeks to "delve into its message of order

floating superficially over the dark myth of India", in the words of Jayanta Mahapatra. Perhaps as a reflection of this the poems in this section are different in tone, manifesting a deep yearning: "I shall stand here on the bank of the Phalgu/ and wait for that ferryman/ to take me across the river./ He'll appear my ferryman/ on whose brow sits an expansive sky". Another stunning poem 'Ask For The Moon' is dialogic in form and underscores Kannan's impatience with the patriarchal codes that prevent women from participating fully in cultural and religious customs in South India. The young woman in the poem finally mocks the patriarchy as she "sips at the jasmine moon" and recites the forbidden Gayathri mantra.

The fourth section 'Flowing Waters' contains several delightful poems that are distinctive for their luminous, haunting imagery, 'Aarti' and 'Unquiet Waters' are particularly noteworthy. Kannan's syncretic outlook is seen in poems such as 'That Friday' on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and in 'Mukti through Mango' on Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The final section, 'Candle in the Wind' fittingly focuses on the ephemeral nature of life and the enduring mystery of death.

This is truly a volume of poetry to be read, reread and savoured! Lakshmi Kannan's imagery and verse are so powerfully evocative that they have the capacity to elevate the reader above the ennui and dejection of present-day life to a plane of higher consciousness. I can only end with the lines from the exquisite poem 'Nelumbo Nucifera': "Above the muddy water, you the lotus/ bloom dew fresh, clean and unsullied/ by the filthy swamp below/ That's how said the World Honoured One,/ the lotus keeps its head/ above the waters."

Lakshmi Kannan, a novelist, poet, short story writer and translator, writes in English and Tamil. Her recent novel *The Glass Bead Curtain* is now available in reprint (Vitasta, 2020). Her earlier collection of poems *Unquiet Waters* (Sahitya Akademi) is also available in reprint.



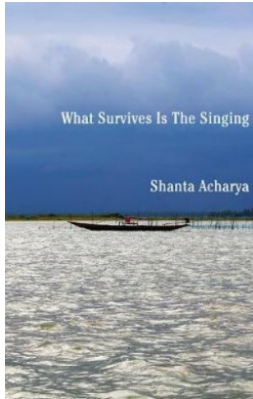
Anita Balakrishnan is Head of the Department of English at Queen Mary's College, Chennai, India.



Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

Shanta Acharya sings, Jennifer Wong sends a letter home

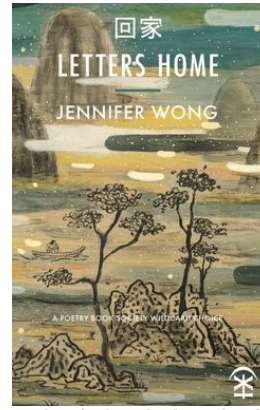


What Survives Is The Singing by Shanta Acharya, Indigo Dreams Publishing

A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer -
It sings because it has a song.

So pens Shanta Acharya, our prolific poet, whose work has featured in hundreds of magazines and seen publications by numerous publishers, a feat almost impossible to repeat. Her new pamphlet *What Survives Is The Singing* is just published by Indigo Dreams Publishing. The lines above capture what is Acharya's core quest. She has songs to part with, but they have spanning wings of views about everything around us, often political. To anchor us in this, her first poem takes us through the dooms of Brexit and influx of migrants, but it has hope: 'a crack is all it takes for light to get in'. Poet's defiance is the light that tries to get through the crack. What is there to challenge? The distortions or fakery: 'the quality of darkness is how it lets us see.' With her light added through the crack, she wants us to see differently. This is the journey in this collection. A pondering poet often discharges a Guru's wisdom: 'When fate deals you a losing hand, play in silence.' Emotions and passions also run riots; 'barbarians run the city', 'a daughter, perfect almost, yet relegated/to live in the shade...', 'chasing other people's dreams', 'a slow sclerosis of vision' of the world, or 'humans pretending to speak'.

Many of her poems have high pitch feminism, occasionally quite an apocalyptic, as in her poem 'Can You Hear our Screams?' with the line 'flushed into toilets, poured into sewers'. These are speaking poems, not 'showing' poems. Speaking poems often tip over into shouting. Refrain I have seen in Venkateswaran - with no compromise on the message - is difficult to achieve. Her distress is crystallised in 'You learn an alphabet of erasure-'. Acharya also takes us to despair: 'I believe in God, now I don't know what to believe.' However, poets capture a variety of momentary sentiments but make them lasting. Their poetry collections reflect such a medley. Acharya's collection also cannot be judged by one poem. Hence she also talks about 'Belonging', 'Home', 'All You Can Do', 'The High Windows', 'Friendship', and more. Poet has also many social concerns; they burst out vividly in her poem 'Graffiti'. However, the darkness still lurks around as in 'I sat holding his hand as he lay dying.' The violence is not too far either, as in 'The Bull Fight'. Finally, I am completely sold on the thought of 'Once upon a time Good and Evil worked together/bringing out the best in each other'. The poem is very playful with the images of 'union of Devils', 'Gods...debating what to do with Evil,' and 'You can be any kind of Devil you want-'. You may even manage a laugh with 'Devil's tattoo'. Acharya's collection is a wonderful potpourri of anger, sorrow, wisdom, love, and all things human. If in her poem 'Home', Acharya says, 'Home' is not a country or postcode', Jennifer Wong, in her poem 'The limitation of maps' writes, 'Maps cannot tell what we're made of.'



Letters Home by Jennifer Wong, Nine Arches Press

In *Letters Home*, a Poetry Book Society Wildcard Choice, Jennifer Wong explores this. An expat from Hong Kong, who went to Oxford, and received a Hong Kong Young Artist Award, she has gained a PhD in Asian diaspora Poetry from Oxford Brookes. Wong is a vintage here with the unquestionable quality of poems and takes us through the apostrophe of our presence connecting the worlds torn apart. Her heart is where her mother is, but the love that her heart is, is in England. This play of 'is' in my sentence brings me to a point how she also plays with the language. Like Rishi Dastidar and Daljit Nagra, her command over two languages allows her to exploit two different characters that have emerged in her, of which she is now conscious. She hammers this uniquely in her poem 'Chinese Classifiers' playing with the units of Chinese words assuming meanings as per their context, taking that further by juxtaposing Beijing, London and Hong Kong. Well, she is Chinese from Hong Kong, but lives in England: Different units of her arguing with each other!

Why is Beijing more polluted than London
and Hong Kong different from mainland?
How much freedom have you got there?
I tell you I don't know. Someone handed us the rules.

All displaced individuals are pawns of similar chess! To reconcile, Wong has devised a mechanism of conversations and arguments as assumed letters, these poems. A conversation is with you, her mother and herself.

Poems are letters home trying to touch the past from her presence. I have never read a poem on the soup so touching to prove this. Mother's recipe competes with husband's vegetarianism. There is a bit of her absent on both sides of a coin. That apostrophic presence runs throughout this collection endearingly trapping us into poem after poem. These are 'showing' poems allowing the collection to be your own treasure-trove. They say much with an indirect beauty, real poetry always does as in Wong's poem 'Glow'. Do not take ice lanterns and their amazing shapes described on the surface. The key is in:

You remember how far
this water has travelled.
The amusement won't last.

Water is fluid as any identity and its expression: difficult to collect or shape. But when frozen in moments, experience and context, the ice creates meaning, which is transient. The life is in enjoying and celebrating these phantoms.

In the Queen's New Year Honours List 2020, Yogesh Patel received The Most Excellence Order of the British Empire, MBE, for literature. He runs Skylark Publications UK and a non-profit Word Masala project to promote SA diaspora literature. Widely published, he has received the Freedom of the City of London.

Book review

Elton John's 'Me' A Review by Anjana Basu

Definitely wonderful and weird, Elton John's memoir is a no holds barred story of his life. He begins with his childhood and his parents who should probably never have been married - Elton John could never quite get away from his father's influence which was difficult for the nerdy child that he was. Reg Dwight from Middlesex, his real self, was always there to remind Elton John who he really was even when he bought himself purple and gold private jets.

Possibly it was Reg Dwight who was responsible for his body consciousness and the spangled outfits he bought to disguise himself. Elton John the name came from two member of the band he joined, Bluesology, the saxophonist Elton Dean and his mentor Long John Baldry.

Music filled his life - though he knew he would never make a classical pianist because his fingers were too short whereas concert pianists had hands like 'tarantulas'. However, despite this, he was determined to be a musician and possibly it was an act of rebellion against his parents who dictated ways to eat vegetables among other things. At heart he loved music and wanted to his love to come through as he performed. Surprisingly he needed lyricists to work with him until he finally got the knack of writing his own songs. His partnership

with Bernie Taupin is documented as is the unstructured way in which John worked, using Taupin's lyrics for inspiration when he sat down at the piano.

As you would expect the book is filled with anecdotes - like the time he threw oranges at Bob Dylan because, like Simon and



Pan Macmillan,
INR 591/

Garfunkel, Dylan was bad at charades or when he confessed that he felt David Bowie never really liked him. Elton John also dishes the dirt on his drug addiction and bad temper continuing to hold onto his humour all the while. There were also attempts

at suicide and a prostate cancer diagnosis that had him wearing a diaper while performing Rocketman on stage in Las Vegas.

Not to mention the passing of those close to him like Versace and Princess Diana. There are sad moments and bad moments that many might not want to put down in words. However, when he came out of the closet, the actual loss of his virginity is glossed over, possibly

beneath all that candour he felt that a certain amount of privacy was needed.

By then he was already a star at the age of 23. Some would think that he did it late but once he had accepted the fact that he was gay, he never looked back. There were episodes of bullying boyfriends and expecting them to drop everything for him, not to mention an unforgettable encounter with a snooker table.

At the bottom of everything there seems to be a yearning for stability, for a family. Today Elton John has settled down with his partner and adopted sons. He does the school run when he can. Possibly Reg Dwight has resurfaced in Rocketman in a more positive way since the rock star is now in control of his life.

Me would not be the book it is if it weren't for the help of music critic Alex Petridis who worked with Elton John for three years, helping hone the warm geniality of his narrative voice. The collaboration is gratefully acknowledged by John.

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



OURS IS AN EPISODIC WORLD Leonard Dabydeen



Ours is an episodic world
we're cradled
within its boundaries
drum-beating in trails of travesty
Kashmir in perplexed identity
Kandahar rumbling in uncertainty
and there are murmurs
and there are whispers
as Syrian children speak
with empty stomach
of empty bellies
no path to comfort
with freedom not a dream

but oceans wash to shore
monsoon brings raindrops
blessing Mother Earth
Ganga Mata adulation
shores in satiation
and we congregate
to touch her Lotus Feet
pledging allegiance
empathy beholden
radiance immaculate
unflinching joy
mind and body in prayer
in effulgence glory
for thus we know
you: Mother and Father
tumre bin hamra kaunon nahin.



Leonard Dabydeen, Guyanese-Canadian poet and member of The Society of Classical Poets (USA), Life Member of MetVerse Muse (India); member of Muse India Journal; member of Muse-Pie Press (Shot Glass Journal and Fib Review). He is also a freelance writer and book reviewer; author of Watching You, A Collection of Tetractys Poems (2012), and Searching For You, A Collection of Tetractys and Fibonacci Poems (2015). e-mail: leonard_dabydeen@hotmail.com

Short story

Uncertain Times

Subhash Chandra

Within six months of their buying the flat facing mine six years ago, they adopted me into the family as a member, though I belonged to the suspect, even shunned category of bachelors. All my needs were taken care of and I lived a carefree life. But unfortunately, *Boudi* (brother's wife) suffered a sudden cardiac arrest and passed away. Avijit was shattered! I lost my mother a second time!

As a member of the family, I supported Avijit's aspiration of becoming an eminent writer. I buoyed him up in this crisis which could imperil his dream.

I told him, "I will take charge of the kitchen and the household chores. You visit the market for essentials and carry on with creative work. I'll not be able to match Boudi's culinary skills, but I will try to cook curries you would find passable.

It took three months of exhortation to send him to the computer. Life hesitantly moved on without the one whose absence was a constant with us.

"I miss her grievously," Avijit said one day.

I placed my empathetic hand on his shoulder.

"Jagat, I can't believe green papaya could be turned into such delicious curry!"

"I'm glad you like it."

"I used to pity you for being a bachelor," he said.

"Now?"

He smiled weakly

"You are a selfish bloke," I said to lighten the atmosphere.

Avijit slowly regained the intensity of his passion to fulfil his childhood dream. He pounded the keyboard as before and became prolific. His stories frequently appeared in several reputed Indian and foreign journals.

"I'm sure, soon your books will top the popularity chart," I said one evening. His eyes sparkled. "You think so?"

"I'm certain. I've read some of your stories. They are superb ... so human!"

And then Corona Virus struck the humankind and began to take swift strides across the globe.

One day I saw him sitting in front of the comp and dolefully staring at the blank monitor. Nothing new. Earlier, too, he could not write for a couple of days and then got going.

But now for a fortnight at a stretch, I found him in that inert state.

He was a tea freak; so I placed a cup on the side table. But it remained untouched. Something was drastically remiss.

One day I asked him, "Why aren't you writing?"

"What's the use?" he said despairingly. We're both seventy plus and easy prey for Corona demon."

"But we're taking all precautions. Besides, India got a head start of more than two weeks and our dynamic Prime Minister took the Virus threat seriously, got down to building resources to fight the Virus, whereas some countries were casual about it and became hotspots. But now they, too, have put their act together and are taking measures. And scientists all over the world are furiously working to develop a vaccine," I said.

"Jagat my haemoglobin is low. Hence I suffer from double whammy - weak immunity because of age and anaemia. I go to the market every day; one day I'll bring home the Virus that would kill you too.

"From tomorrow I will take care of the shopping for daily needs too," I said.

"Are you a strapping young lad and safe from the Virus?"

"I've robust Punjabi genes. And years of uninterrupted Yoga, exercise, and regular walks have given me muscular immunity, stronger than a thirty year old."

He did not respond.

"Besides, Corona V shall be defeated by India and the world before long. You get on with your writing. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

#

But his condition worsened. Now he spent time lazing around, reading the newspaper, watching television or moping. Every bit of negative news about deepening Corona crisis threw him into the cavernous trough of despondency.

"Avijit, if you don't write, then I refuse to act your wife."

"As you wish," he said in a desolate tone.

"But you don't know cooking."

"You need not worry."

After a few days, when I entered his study, the sight unnerved me.

He sat on the floor amidst a heap of shredded papers, head bent.

"What have you done, you fool?"

I had never talked to him like that.

He looked up with desolate eyes and spoke haltingly, "I've torn all the drafts of the stories ... diaries, the small bits of paper ... even the empty envelopes ... on which I had scribbled plots. What is the point of keeping them? Besides, after my death, I don't want my son-in-law and daughter to read these, as there are explicit sexual portrayals."

Now, he was completely bereft of hope - life's sustaining force.

Then the dreaded happened. He stopped getting out of the bed, refused to bathe and change and even eat. He needed urgent psychiatric treatment, but during the lockdown it was not available.

One day I prepared *kheer* (rice and milk sweet dish), his favourite. But he just stared at it blankly.

Sometimes I got exasperated. Taking care of a depressive can be lots of nervous strain. I felt like telling him, "If you are hell bent on committing suicide, then go ahead."

But I continued with my efforts. Whenever I came across good news, I told him. I narrated to him that an eighty-three-year old woman and seventy-two-year old man got cured of the infection. A fleck of life briefly flickered in his eyes and died.

And then a sliver of pale light appeared at the end of the tunnel. Indian government, with the collaboration of people succeeded in flattening the curve. In the next few days, the number of infected cases became a trickle. Other countries also reported decreasing number of new cases.

And Eureka! A vaccine was successfully tested on humans.

When I read out to him the latest news, he sat up in bed.

"Now what do I do? I've no plot, no ideas, nothing. I'm lostif only I could write one story, the flow would start."

I got a flash.

"Write about what you have gone through all these months. But promise to not leave me out of the story."

"Can you make kheer today?"



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

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

Book review

ANDREW KWONG'S 'ONE BRIGHT MOON'

Reviewed by Sharon Rundle

"One Bright Moon" is a first book by Australian author and General Medical Practitioner Dr Andrew Kwong, who narrates the story of his childhood in Shiqi, China, during the regime of Chairman Mao. The gruelling and often terrifying historical and personal events experienced by the author, his family and friends are told in vivid and illuminating detail through the voice of a child.

Kwong is an intelligent narrator who portrays his experiences in a way that results in a significant and compelling memoir. The narrative voice of the young Kwong guides the reader through the turbulent ideological changes taking place in communist China between 1950 and 1968. As he grows into a young man, his outlook continually injects optimism into the narrative.

The book is divided into four parts, a prologue and an epilogue. Occasionally events are reprised in a new way that directly shows their effect on the family. 'Sojourners' who left for the USA or Australia—the New Golden Mountain—in the years covered by the prologue—are strongly encouraged to send vital foreign currency to families still in China who depend on it.

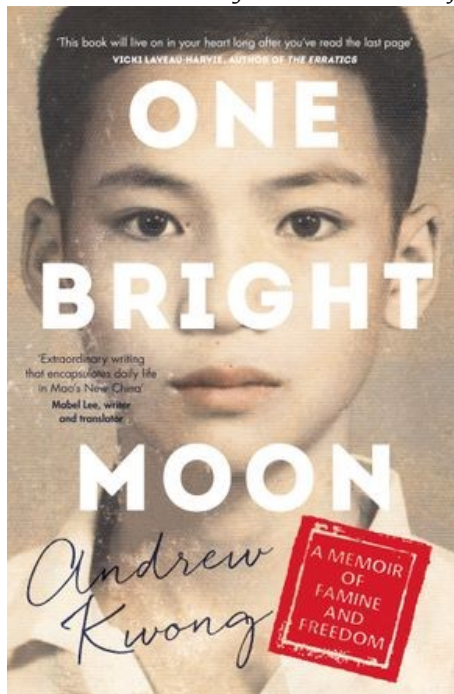
Kwong skilfully uses understatement in his memoir, the prose is never overwrought. Nonetheless, the full horror that he confronts is keenly apparent. Descriptions of the landscapes are evocative, poetic and the sense of place is strongest when it is imbued with humour and poignancy through the sensory and emotional perspective of the author.

'Within days, five families moved in, and our house became as busy as Come Happiness Road at lunch hour. We children were curious of the strangers in our once-peaceful home, and we didn't know what to do, so we stopped playing and quietly watched the chaos set in.'

Shocking scenes of the effect of famine, executions, detentions and denunciations are tempered by gentle scenes of a loving family struggling to survive. As former teachers and intellectuals, Kwong's parents are denounced as 'bad elements' and their possessions are confiscated. All they

have to offer their children is their unconditional love, resilience and unflinching hope.

'But the hushed news that many people had starved to death was too hard for us children to comprehend. There were also stories of people eating the flesh of those who'd died—and, later, of abducted young children... Death was the man shot at Pig Head Hill, his body spurting blood in every direction, slumping, writhing and then not moving.'



Kwong's education was reduced to learning Communist Party propaganda and taking part in Party directed projects, such as 'smashing rocks and breaking bricks' collecting 'waste metal', and eradicating 'the sparrows, flies, mosquitoes and rats [which] were known as the Four Pests', as one of a 'sea of little soldiers in khaki ready to conquer the bad world'. His success in later years is a tribute to his determination and dedication to furthering his studies.

Notwithstanding the oppressive authoritarian rules, the children found joy at every opportunity. The Dragon Boat races, which 'took us away momentarily, from the misery

of the famine', for example, and flying fighting kites.

'The little children on the ground screamed, their faces upturned to keep their gaze on our warrior. I pulled and spun in hard at the same time, sending Red Star into a slicing dive, catching its pursuer at the jugular. Crisp and Clean. I felt it cut right through our helpless enemy's line. Ah-dong, Earring and Yui-Hoi were already off the wall, running after the drifting blue kite. A whole bunch of children followed behind them, screaming and screeching with great joy.'

The narrative moves back and forth in time as Kwong weaves in stories of his family, forefathers and ancestors that broaden out the narrative. For example, that of his father (Baba), who was sentenced to imprisonment in Heilongjiang.

The final Part set in Australia shows how Kwong adapts to his adopted homeland and fulfils his long-held goal of studying medicine. Never one to rest on his laurels, Kwong accepts every challenge that confronts him. He doggedly pursues his aim of a medical degree, despite his yearning to see his family in Shiqi again and his concern for their welfare.

These later chapters set in Australia are not as vividly portrayed as those set in China and Hong Kong, although there are certainly memorable moments. Nonetheless, "One Bright Moon" is a gripping, true story of courage, persistence and eventually escape against incredible odds. Highly recommended.

Publisher: HarperCollins Australia
<https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9781460712399/one-bright-moon/>



Indian subcontinent and Australia"; (Orient BlackSwan, 2019). She is Editor for the Society of Women Writers NSW.

Short fiction

The sun-set viewer

Sunil Sharma

In the Country of the neo-Epicureans (C-n-Es), any non-productive activity was suspect and reported immediately.

The C-n-Es was otherwise "normal" and the citizens doing trade, commerce, science, management, banking, retail and manufacturing were respected as the frontline people by the governing elite of all shades who did nothing but divide the people on many flimsy grounds and thus benefitted enormously by the apparent divisions. The elite fought within for the sake of power and parted later with the opponents. It was all staged as a drama and citizens knew that but grew cynical by the brazenness of the show.

"Politicians! They fight before the world but secretly remain friends." That was the refrain of the voting public, helpless as there were no options.

Each government continued the charade.

They separated the citizens along various lines and got different vote banks.

Ironically, a knowing public easily succumbed to the divisive tactics, making their job easy.

To mask their failure on the educational, health and employment fronts, the politicians, with help from their costly spin doctors, always came up with new slogans; most common being: "Democracy in danger"; "Religion under threat"; "Balkanization imminent"; "Danger within" and more, at the time of elections.

Even the educated got scared and fought with those unlike them!

One thing glued the disparate C-n-Es together was the common national pursuit of wealth, power and hedonism.

The new philosophy was eat and drink till you become an ass!

Every city had turned into a bazaar. Each shop offered discounts. Bars and hotels mushroomed.

Saturday night rule: Drink, eat and dance till you drop!

Women who earlier drank discreetly came out in the open and competed with men.

Kids did it at home.

Enjoy life!

You do not know this might be your last!

Every reveler's personal anthem.

People did die early but due to liver cirrhosis, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, stress.

But the figures were never discussed. Only mantra: Work as a donkey. Prance like a horse!

The ones who did neither were treated as threats.

Idlers. Downsized. Out-of-job. Old and sick. This class was dubbed a liability and treated with contempt.

Passive Vs. active people war it was called. And the biggest danger was the indolent who did nothing and hence, to be reported immediately to the police on the lookout of such viruses, to be eliminated fast.

The small village outside the city was suspicious of one such sudden threat.

Nestled in the jungle, off the highway, near the river, the small community was always on the edge as many strangers passed through that wooded and serene area, often stopping for few minutes for the mandatory Selfies and then move on.

Except a middle-aged man with disheveled hair and long beard and simple clothes.

He was termed the sunset viewer by the Elders.

Needless to say, he would arrive an hour before the sun set and watch the sun go down in the long river.

He was always punctual. Arrived at the precise hour and left after the sun set.

And did nothing but watch the sun set!

The elders were alarmed. "How can a man just sit and watch the sun go down in the river for weeks together? Doing nothing for hours? Sitting idle? Watching and muttering? And occasionally writing in a diary?"

They got frightened.

The sunset viewer did not harm anybody or say anything nasty.

With downcast eyes, he passed through the village and went to the extreme corner that commanded a good view of the long river and the trees and the rolling meadows. He listened to the bird songs and smiled broadly, closing eyes in rapture.

Unusual!

They observed him for weeks and finally called up the cops.

The cops came, watched and immediately arrested the harmless man.

"Suspect caught. He is dangerous. Send reinforcements." The patrol said. The cars arrived soon.

The villagers were relieved.

The sunset viewer was bewildered!

"Why me? What have I done?" he asked.

The officer smirked. "You do not know? Every criminal claims so."

"Let me know my offence?"

The officer glowered. "OK. What were you doing there?"

"Where?"

"At the long river."

The man was scandalized. "Cannot I sit and watch the river and sun in a free country?"

"Why will an able-bodied man watch them on working days? For weeks? Are you nuts?" the officer countered. "Do you not feel guilty?"

"It is ridiculous! Why guilty?"

"Because it is unproductive activity." "I do not agree," he argued. "Not guilty!"

The officer replied, "This does not bring money, power or prestige. Idlers are not welcome in our hyperactive country."

The sunset viewer gaped at the obese authority and said with disgust, "How you can legislate thus? Judge? Atrocious!"

"That is the First universal Law of every commercial culture." The officer said aggressively. "You are a violator of that scared law. You are a clear and present danger."

The sunset viewer laughed: "You are mad!"

The officer felt enraged. "You are calling the law and its enforcer as mad! How dare you, a parasite?"

The viewer was unmoved. "I do not care! You are all mad."

"OK. I slap more serious charges now. What do you write in your diaries?"

"Poems."

The officer was crestfallen: "Poetry!!! You are very dangerous!"

"Why? I don't do harm to anybody. Compose lines near the long river. Watch the sunsets quietly."

"That is the chief crime. Does it pay?"

"No."

"Does it bring laurels?"

"No."

"Then why do you write?"

The viewer looked at the cop and said, "It is sublime. It is deeply spiritual."

"Spiritual?"

"Connects me with nature. Source of bliss. Elevating!"

"How anything unproductive can bring happiness?"

"It brings to me. That is important."

"OK. Is it a job with a package?"

"Without a package?"

"You don't get anything?"

"No, I do not."

"Even then you write?"

"Yes. Gives me high. Enough!"

The officer ordered staff: "Put this no-good idler in the cell for the condemned right now."



Sunil Sharma, a senior academic and author-critic-poet--freelance

journalist, is from suburban Mumbai, India. He has published 21 books so far, some solo and some joint, on prose, poetry and criticism. He edits the monthly, bilingual Setu: <http://www.setumag.com/p/setu-home.html>

Book Review

Aruna Chakravarti's 'Suralakshmi Villa'

Reviewed by Swati Pal

Suralakshmi Villa is writer Aruna Chakravarti's fifteenth book. An educated and empowered gynaecologist (Suralakshmi) suddenly leaves the luxury of her villa abandoning even her son and accompanied only by a Muslim girl: that in a nutshell is the central narrative. Woven into this narrative are the lives of so many people, places, events and issues, from witch-hunting and burning to secret liaisons, from child abuse and botched up abortions to explorations of exciting terrain through travel, indeed one finds many ingredients that make up this delicious read. The title is a telling one, where person and place are locked together in the two words and a sense of time, of history is evoked through the twinning. It is an instant titillation: who is Suralakshmi and what happened in/to the villa named after her.

'I am Suralakshmi Villa. Even as I tell my story, an army of workmen is hammering at my walls. Tearing down my doors and windows. Shattering and splintering the glass. Soon I'll cease to exist. But the thought does not sadden me. I'm old and tired and lonely. I have lived long enough. It is time I went'. These lines on p215 are a testimony to two things. One that the Villa itself is a mute voyeur privy to the lives of the people who inhabit it but is unable to intervene. Besides this, the language stands out. The personification of the villa, how it might have spoken if it could and the underlying verisimilitude is what makes Chakravarti a remarkable story teller; she makes the words jump out of the pages to conjure images in the theater of the mind.

We live in such fractured times. The world may have become a global village but behind the seeming lack of distances between people and the so called brotherhood, there are many tales of racism, religious fundamentalism, regressiveness, class consciousness and hatred between communities. The world within *Suralakshmi Villa* especially that of the village reflects these dualities. The author takes pains to detail the syncretic Bengali culture. People appear to live in harmony and respect each other's cultural practices. But the author does not glorify the villagers. A sense of gloom and foreboding hangs low over the village and so we shudder with horror when the starving Zaitoon Bibi is held responsible, even by family for the bad luck prevailing in her home as her daughter, like her, gives

birth to only still born sons. The way she is punished shows that the veneer of kinship disguises the lurking barbarism. Again, the reader balks at the way in which Eidun's father, Moin-ud- din treats his girl children. His stubborn ego and male gaze make him commodify his daughters so that he decides their destiny while sexually exploiting them in the confines of his home.



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2020. ISBN 978-93-89109-39-9

It is not in the village alone that one sees the shades of grey in men and women. A noticeable parallel to Moin-ud-din is Moinak Sen, Suralakshmi's husband. Despite the difference in wealth, power, education and sophistication, they are essentially made out of the same material. *Brothers below the skin*. Their wives share almost identical destinies. In the highly polarised world we live in today, if we scratch below the surface, all humans turn out to be essentially the same, with strengths and flaws that have nothing to do with their class or religion. The novel reflects this reality.

Relationships, with all their mysteries are unraveled skillfully. An interesting relationship is the one between Kingshuk and his wife Deepa and his extra marital relationship with Joymita. Deepa's unquestioning response to Kingshuk's frequent excuses while on a rendezvous with Joymita, her unwavering stance towards divorce and her wise perception

of the transience of his relationship with Joymita, show the quiet strength in her. She may not be scintillating but her dignity and forbearance make her memorable. Chakravarti excels in creating such nuanced characters. Kingshuk too is so believable. His powerlessness in being unable to resist Joymita; and later, his relief that she was not the marrying type and that thus he could return, undivided, to his wife and son, make him human. It is this non judgmental understanding of people that colours the way in which Chakravarti creates her fictional characters and their relationships. Even those one would love to hate, such as Moin-ud-din or Moinak Sen or Ojju, are treated with a fine mix of candour and pity.

The canvas of the novel is vast but one of the most significant elements in it is the emergence of a new, bold and educated woman from the annals of a patriarchal society that is dark, cruel and often punitive to its women. Suralakshmi is perhaps the best example of that woman and the way she leaves her home is reminiscent of Ibsen's Nora in the famous play *Doll's House*. But almost all the women are brave and exceptional in the way they combat the vicissitudes of life. In that sense, the novel is perhaps liberating. The novel explores too, the idea of rebirth, past life and racial memory that lend a mystical experience to the lives of the characters. And knitted into the yarn of the novel, are ideas of religion and myth, superstition and taboo.

The novel would work well as a film. There is something so visual in the way it has been narrated. And yes, one could hope for a sequel!

Aruna Chakravarti has been Principal of a prestigious Women's College of Delhi University for ten years. Among the various awards she has received are Vaitalik Award, Sahitya Akademi Award and Sarat Puraskar.



Dr Swati Pal, Principal, Janki Devi Memorial College has been a Charles Wallace as well as John McGrath Theatre Studies Scholar at Edinburgh University. She is the author of several books and newspaper articles.

South African Newsletter

Modi's India

By Devi Rajab

On a daily basis we are being smothered with a deluge of information. For every opinion there is a counter opinion. For every view there is another view. Now more than ever before we are being bombarded on all sides with news that is embedded in truth, half-truths and downright lies. How do we as average citizens in a constant state of busyness with little time to sift fact from fiction arrive at the truth? According to Levitt and Dubner, in their book *Freakonomics* "the modern world despite a surfeit of obfuscation, complication and downright deceit, is not impenetrable". If we ask the right questions and are prepared to listen and to think they assure us that it is possible to get to the kernel of truth in any controversial issue.

But this is easier said than done. Too often we are influenced by what we are being fed or by our allegiance to our cultural or religious socialization. I recall as a child watching in shock at my newly converted cousins who refrained from performing the last Hindu religious rites for our grandfather's burial. Religion is a natural divisive force says Freud. We have watched throughout history how wars were waged in the name of this or that religion. So how does one rise above our self-imposed identities. Modi's India today, the once proudest and largest democracy in the world is being ravaged by religious fanaticism. Non-Hindus are being targeted as marginalised people who have to prove their indigenous status in subtle and blatant ways. The controversial Citizens Amendment Bill is the most divisive and alienating attempt to lacerate the human topography of a once rich heritage. Can you imagine an India bereft of its rich Mogul influence in art, architecture, delectable cuisine, exotic dress and music. Can you imagine no Taj Mahal, no mosques, no classical musicians of the Vilayat Khan Garana? Can you imagine no kofta kabaabs and Hydrabadi Biryani? As Modi's Majoritarian India takes over will it eradicate all traces of its rich and diverse minorities one by one? And become another Pakistan? Or a Saudi Arabia where no one is allowed to sport any non-Muslim religious symbols like dots and crosses. In incantations Kabir the 14th century sage ponders: *If you say you're a Brahmin, Born of a mother who is Brahmin, Was there a special canal through which you were born? If you say you're a Turk And your mothers a Turk, Why weren't you circumcised before Birth?*

As a secularist I cherish the diversity of religious experiences outside of my given designation. Born and raised a Hindu, married a Muslim, with Jewish and Christian sons and daughters in law, life for me is a rich tapestry of variegated truths. A swami once saidBe wary of those who claim to be a very good Hindu. Muslim or Christian.....because they are dangerous in their bigotry.....and they can never find truth that may lie beyond their self-imposed boundaries. Besides they tend to build walls around themselves instead opening pastures for knowledge to seep through. Gandhiji said "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any"



What does it mean to be a Hindu? Shashi Tharoor in his book by the same title says

That the essence of Hinduism which stands for tolerance and acceptance of other faiths is under siege in India today on account of a cohort of Hinduvites who see their religion as a singular force to be defended and protected against an invasion of outside forces. He sees this project as one that is hijacking the very essence of a free and open thinking. In all of this he wants to start an internal dialogue amongst Hindus about who they are and what they really stand for.

Believers all claim that there is one Creator of human kind and yet they are prepared to fight and die for their own personal God. India today a once proud example of the greatest and largest democracy in the world is under strain over the very issues of religion and culture. In wanting to build

a so called majoritarian state of hinduvites they have declared a significant sector of their Indian nationals as persona non grata. Using religion as a divisive factor they are constructing barriers between the people who have lived on Indian soil for hundreds of years. There is a compelling argument in history for religion and national identity. The Muslims in India are Indians and their culture and traditions are deeply rooted in India in the Taj Mahal and numerous other magnificent architectural wonders. In small but significant ways the Modi government is slowly tightening the noose around the necks of beef eaters and tannery factories run by Muslim tanners. History is being rewritten to portray new image of a non-secular India. Odius comparisons are being made with Pakistan, a failed state on account of its insular religious practices. So, why should there be a strategy to duplicate their policies when they are not worthy of emulation?

As Indians in the diaspora, we can truly pride ourselves as being a united community of Hindu, Muslim and Christian people. I always felt as I was growing up in Hindu home, that the greatness of my religious teachings lay in its unequivocal acceptance of all. There was never an emphasis on the other. Unlike revealed religions there was no injunction to keep away from others or to let them in or out. There are no conversion rites and rituals for Hindus. That is why Gandhi said..... "Yes I am, I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Jew." This world view resonates well with me. As a child growing up on the Berea with every racial hue, we visited the Basha Peer for blessings, walked alongside Muslim believers of Moharam, went to Catholic schools and learnt to sing the beautiful hymns, came home and learnt to sing bhajans all in total harmony in the essence of oneness. This is why I am quoted to have said that I would walk to the end of the earth to preserve the beauty of a universal sense of who I am.



Dr. Devi Rajab is a well-respected South African journalist and former Dean of Student Development at UKZN and the author of several books.

Malathy's Musings

The Indian Shop

by Malathy Sitaram

The highlight of my week is my visit to the local Indian shop on Wednesdays. We call it the Indian shop although it and a couple of others are run by persons of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. It is Indian as far as we are concerned because it sells Indian vegetables and seasonal fruit as well as all the spices used in Indian cookery. An array of different lentils are available too. In short everything needed for an Indian meal. Besides were we not all of us of Indian origin not so long ago? At the back of the shop a butcher deals with orders for joints of mutton or chicken.

My weekly shopping there is a highlight because I love being in the midst of fellow Indians, some of whom I may know but above all because I get a chance to speak in Hindi, the national language of India, with the owner and one or two of his employees. I hardly ever spoke Hindi, the Indian national language in India as it was superseded by English for me and such others who attended Anglo-Indian schools in which the medium of instruction to this day is English. My mother tongue is Tamil, a South Indian language in which sadly I am not literate and my vocabulary and grammar (somewhat limited) would horrify a purist. I hardly ever spoke Hindi in India as it took third place in my school in Bombay, after English and secondly, French which was taught as a second language. Most Indians speak more than one language. There are eighteen languages spoken in India as well as hundreds of dialects. In Indian cities, the middle and upper class would be able to speak fluent English as well as their mother tongues and especially in Bombay where I went to school and University. We English speaking lot used the name, 'Bombay' whilst it was always 'Mumbai' for non-English speakers.

St. Anne's is the name of my school and even today, a much sought-after Catholic convent school. Such schools were founded under British rule probably as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. We English speaking lot used the name Bombay whilst it has always been Mumbai for non-English speakers. I continue to use the name, 'Bombay' which is of Portuguese origin. It is an island which was gifted to the British in the 16th or 17th century by the Portuguese king as dowry when their princess married an English prince. That was the period when Europeans began to divide the

world between themselves and fought numerous wars against each other on foreign soil. The British ousted the Portuguese from their top dog role in India. And similarly, they dispatched the French and the Dutch by the end of the eighteenth century.

Ah, the joy of speaking Hindi to the man at the till. Joy because I did not know I could do it! The brain whose mysteries have not been fully fathomed has secreted in some part of it the language which I hardly ever used in India as all my friends spoke English. Both my parents spoke fluent English when necessary but communicated in Tamil within the family setting. How do I know these words I ask myself? What neural pathway facilitates this fluency? And why do I feel so happy using it when I hardly ever used it in India? Most of my Indian friends here in Britain often converse in Hindi. With them I dry up and cannot speak Hindu fluently. In the shop, most people do not know who I am and perhaps this is what



spurs me on. We were taught Hindi in my convent school from the age of twelve and I just about scraped through the final exam as I had little opportunity to speak it elsewhere. I cannot read or write in my mother tongue, Tamil. This was because my mother who had a degree in physics from Madras university and spoke English fluently, did not force us children to learn to read or write Tamil.

During the mango season, there is almost a scrimmage to get the nectar bearing boxes. The most common language heard is Gujarati, reflecting the huge influx of Gujaratis from Africa in the 70's. There are also Punjabi speakers, plenty of newly arrived Goans speaking Konkani and some people from South India with its variety of languages, one of which is my mother tongue. Bengalis too. For the half hour that I spend in the shop I feel quite

serendipitous, transported as I am to a miniature India with all the noise and linguistic Babel. I don't think that in India I would feel similarly exhilarated because I am not in the minority there. There's a thought!

Fresh produce arrives on Wednesday morning. A man drives at dawn to a huge market in Southall, not far from Heathrow airport, fills up his van with Indian vegetables, drives back and lays out the boxes of fresh veg. and fruit in a line on the shop floor by 9.30 a.m. These shops are quite small, lined with shelves that are packed with tins and packets and jars. An aroma of dry spices hangs over the shop. The freezers are packed with tropical fish without which Bangladeshis cannot live. We get excellent frozen parathas and chapatis and samosas produced in the UK.

Whilst I was a school teacher, I would go to the shop round 4.30pm and fill my basket with Indian vegetables such as Brinjal, Lady's fingers, Drumsticks, green Beans, coriander leaves and curry leaves. From April to July, the shop is crowded because it is the mango season. Crates of Alphonso mangoes from India and other equally delicious varieties such as Kesar, fill the shop with their heavenly aroma that titillates the senses with the promise of luscious delight. Most of us customers will indulge in an orgy of eating mangoes for at least two months. Every morning at breakfast, I eat one large, luscious, golden orange fruit right through May, June and July and feel the better for it! Over indulgence is not a good idea. My mother would say that too many mangoes would overheat the body and cause boils.

The owner of the shop is a Muslim but we can buy special sweetmeats are available for Diwali, Eid and Christmas. Generally, the shoppers look cheerful and are not in a hurry. I go home pleased that I have obtained the veggies my mother prepared so well long, long ago and which will see us through another week.



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

Three poems

COVID-19

By Anita Nahal

Ache

Who would have known?
 Would have guessed?
 The tidings of the ominous torn
 At the fusing of an obsessed
 Virus gone berserk
 Pointing a singed finger at the lurk
 On almost bare streets
 Sounding fearful beats.
 Who would have dreamt?
 Humans would ache, ache, ache
 Harder than at a normal wake
 So lost, so defeated.
 Did people not think when they were alert?
 One day such a haunting ache would assert?

One day...one day...one day
 For a chance to say hello, or bye...
 Wouldn't be any other pink-cherry way
 Outside the ER waits the final goodbye
 No more held
 Nor kissed
 Nor hands clasped
 No more first-time romance
 Nor growing old together
 Instead folks are fuming for a new glow
 On a fresh positive tableau
 Another kind of breather.
 For now, I wait, looking, seeking, trying to simply inhale
 A whiff of the past as I wait for the recovery mail.

Corona and love-life layers

Layers of love and life are crumbling, some are mixing...some decomposing, some disappearing. It's said humans are social animals, yet some are still unapologetically crude, arrogant, asinine. Some just don't wish to be bothered. Some don't respond. Or connect. Some are merely self-protecting. Some have no choice over the virus. Some say its punishment... even animals are ashamed of us. And Gods don't know what more to tell us about kindness and giving. History hasn't been good. The slave markets, lynchings, murders, rapes, opulence, greed, evil gratification, wars, conflicts, boats of begging refugees left to putrefy, leaving little kids famished, breathing their last on scalped beaches or with their small bodies burning without recovery, without mothers, crying and dying alone on impersonal makeshift tent hospital beds. Animals were not spared either. There's an unusual hush. So eerie even a skeleton in a cemetery is scared, knocking on tombstones, begging other skeletons to keep him company for a while. Some humans could only hear themselves running in grey, opaque skies, densely crowded with cumbersome, soiled clouds standing around menacingly. And the sun didn't want to join the uncalled-for cruel party. Stood afar pondering, "Shall I give them a bit of heat? Do they deserve it, yet?" On the sad flip, the streets had ample fresh air and the ozone was stronger. Trees too were a lush green. One strength replaced by the other. Layers had almost crumbled, conflated, almost disappeared...darkened with soot still trying to remain alive like prettily enticing yet doomed embers on smoldering paper edges.

See the blue sky again

I told my tears, "you go ahead,
 I need to take some rest."
 They hurried along, even more alone
 Without my eyes holding them close.
 They ran past desolate television screens
 And exhausted folks with N-95 masks
 Hazmat-ed hospitals full of fouled beds
 Had rats trailing corona banshees
 And the drains lay mum full of the dead
 While the alive lay hunched against urinated walls
 The air was falling
 With the weight of the petrified
 And I was forced to turn down the volume
 Turn everyone off
 And dragging my muddied cloaks
 I tore the sky apart
 My nails splintered
 But who cared?
 I just wanted to see the blue sky again.



A professor, writer, administrator among other hats she wears, Anita Nahal currently teaches at UDC, Washington DC. Two books of poetry, a book of flash fictions, three books for children and a novel just penned keeps Anita creatively empathetic! For more on Nahal: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>

Lockdown

Edifice of humanity

by Ananya Guha

We have often talked about the world as a global community, And we cite the internet as a working force behind this. So everything is virtual from commerce to conferences and even chats. We wave to each other through virtual mechanisms. What we forget is that we are slowly losing the human touch, why even love and marriages are made through the virtual world. The virtual world and the real overlap in a way, that one cannot distinguish one from the other. Information is garnered from the virtual world. This is the world of information explosion. We have virtual classrooms and online learning. True the internet has revolutionised our lives, radicalised our social, political and educational moorings. But we soon realised its ambivalence in the form of fake news and hate talk in social networking sites. So the global community soon had fissures within it. Technology was both boon and bane, but optimists continued to have faith in its virtues although terrorists continued to use it exponentially. It was a complexity that only human beings in a state of reflection could comprehend. The choice was simple: use it positively or for subversive things. Love co existed with hate.

Then came the corona virus afflicting the whole world and rumours and false news also spread through the internet. But the virus brought together the whole world and our country in a common fight against the sickness. And the clarion call was to battle it out to safeguard your health. This was a real scare where every individual thought that he or she might be a victim. The world was one and so our country. Soon teaching became purely online as students were at home, outside the four walls of the classroom. Social interaction continued through social networking sites, but ironically enough we were pleading for a social distancing, considering the virulence

and contagious nature of the disease. We mingled superstition too, trying to shoo away the virus by beating drums and sounding gongs. The fear was ubiquitous, crossing boundaries of countries. And the world ironically became one and borderless. It was not technology which brought the world together but a deadly virus and of course technology which lay firmly saddled of being both an agent provocateur and a virtue continued to play its double edged role. Rumours and wrong advisories were rampant. New terminologies such as social distancing, which actually meant physical distancing entered our vocabulary. This became truly an existential predicament. No ontology



or philosophy here but a crass reality and an engulfing fear throughout the country and the world. And we will have to live with it for days to come. How will technology help us here unless we have a vaccine to combat this dreaded disease? When will it come? WHO says twelve to eighteen months, that is a pretty long time, and the virus scientists say will be around. People have likened this to a war, the Third World War. And what was the only way of fighting it: physical distancing, we of course use the misnomer 'social distancing' but as long as the virulence continues there may be actual social distancing. We will be fearful and apprehensive of meeting each other and talking to each other, and have no option but to fall back upon the World Wide Web to fulfil our gregarious ends.

In between we saw reverse migration in India where there were tragic

deaths. The innate human goodness came to the fore as good samaritans started garnering food, shelter and clothes for the poor and daily wage workers. We realised that technology which is a means not an end, could not be an antidote. It is only the human touch, the human transcendental love for human beings. Here in Shillong many individual and social and religious groups are rendering yeoman service to the poor and homeless. This shows that human beings can rise over technology and rise in oneness for the poor, irrespective of circumstances irrespective of caste, community and creed.

Let us be clear of one thing.

Technology can only be the means to serve an end. The end is human good or benignity. The end is man serving man, the end is love and a common good. For too long have we thought that materialistic benefits are for the common good. Yes it is if it is

equalitarianism. But this is not so in India and the

world. Could technology fight this disruption that was caused world over? No we depended on human restrictions to curb, mind you not cure the menace.

The good life Bertrand Russell once said in his essay 'What I Believe' is one which is inspired by love and guided by knowledge. We have made a beginning, let love and rationality be the twin concomitants to build and strengthen the edifice of humanity.



Ananya S Guha has been born and brought up in Shillong, Meghalaya INDIA. His poems have been published in various journals, magazines, ezines in India and abroad. Currently he is Regional Director Indira Gandhi National Open University.

Humour

Hear This!

By Dawood Ali McCallum

I have big ears. There we are. I've said it. I've come out. After a lifetime in denial, it's time I embrace the profound dimensions of my lug-holes. They're whoppers. And that's not the half of it. They're not only unnaturally large, they stick out and worst of all, the left one protrudes at a completely different angle from its partner in aesthetic crime on the right.

As a child in the playground I'd be taunted, "Oy? Jug- handles!" "Dumbo!" Even the odd teacher (actually, come to think of it, most of my teachers were odd, but that's a discussion for another therapy session), even a supposedly professional educator couldn't resist a smart-arsed observation at the expense of my auricular protuberances. The slightest inattention on my part would prompt a smile, a raised eyebrow, an exaggerated glance around the room to check the class of small-eared sycophants had picked up that he was about to attempt a witticism at someone's expense. Then, "Goodness, I'm surprised anyone with those ears didn't manage to hear what I just said!"

Much laughter, mostly in relief that it was someone else who was today's target. What a sad loss to the comedy circuit is was when 'Sir' chose the classroom over the stage.

And what would my ears invariably do when their owner was so cruelly mocked? Would they have the decency to shrink shyly away to avoid drawing further attention to themselves? Would they flap intimidatngly like those of an enraged bull elephant? No! They'd betray me further, turning such a vivid shade of puce they could have been used to signal to low flying aircraft.

Entering my teens, they became an absolute obsession. For a few weeks, much to my long-suffering parents' bemusement, part of my preparation for bed was to attach adhesive tape to each ear and secure them tightly to my head in the hope I could train them to behave more like everyone else's. I would literally pin my ears back.

Needless to say, next morning they sprang out in all their former, wayward glory on the removal of the tape. They hurt terribly too. Brief salvation came a few years later when I finally escaped

the rigorously policed 'short back and sides' hair regime at school. College offered freedom, further education and joy of joys, the opportunity to grow my lush, brown locks shoulder length and finally hide my massive ears. Two years of a safe space. Happy days. Then what happened? My hair thinned and promptly started to fall out. Early onset baldness! The good Lord can be surprisingly cruel sometimes. But no one can deny he has a sense of humour, even if it is a pretty unkind one.



So, me: my ears. Not best friends. Yet strangely as I age they seem to exert an ever more powerful attraction to men in the hairdressing profession. I have had cause to make a passing reference to one such incident in a previous article in this august journal. Why should a haircut involve one's ears at all? For goodness sake! I have very little hair: My needs are sadly constrained by nature and easily summarised in words: No. 1, all over. That's it. At no point do my ears get a mention. So why can't these coiffeurs leave the damned things alone?

In Mumbai, a recent trim involved the barber thrusting his index finger deep into my ear and indulging himself in a lengthy bit of electronically enhanced wiggling about which was extremely unpleasant, profoundly invasive and in some cultures probably constitutes a criminal offence. But I am a traveller: I embrace the exotic. At least, I thought on return to the UK I could confine such auricular abuses to memories of journeys past.

Then my son persuaded me to forsake the local barber who has enjoyed my custom for decades in favour of the new, trendy establishment he patronised. I blame myself. I should have known better.

The haircut was OK, I suppose. Some rather flamboyant and, to my mind totally unnecessary scissor work, but then the man clearly considered himself something of an artist so who am I to criticise? Then he frowned and stared, somewhat hungrily I thought, at my ears.

He nodded once, his mind made up and reached for a bottle of Methylated Spirits, a piece of wire with a ball of cotton wool on the end of it and a cigarette lighter.

I glanced desperately into the mirror. My son looked up from his phone, smiled and nodded encouragingly back at me.

The cotton wool was dipped into the methylated spirits. There was a quick shake to dispense with excess alcohol. The ball was ignited, flared with a whoosh and burst of blue flame and was flicked theatrically into one ear, then the other. It hurt and there was an unpleasant, scorching

aroma.

I looked, wide-eyed at my son's refection. He looked back. But was that a smile on his face or a smirk? My glower in return sufficed to discourage him from taking the photo on his phone he had clearly been contemplating.

Perhaps I should be glad my ears give others so much pleasure. But does it move my relationship with them further forward? Do we, after uncomfortably living together for so long, advance toward some rapprochement? Sadly not.

Because those pink embarrassments of my youth have become the leathery traitors of my maturity. "Me, Officer? Exceeding the speed limit? Surely there must be some mistake?" Not even worth a try. "No, of course I didn't put the red sock in with the whites on boil wash." Forget it. Because those blighters on either side of my head will glow anew, but now with smug condemnation. It's not easy navigating the complexities of modern life with lie detectors on either side of your head.



Dawood Ali McCallum is the author of a series of novels published in India and the UK. Learn more at www.dawoodalimccallum.com

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