

Richard C. Bower

An Indian Expedition

Since returning home from my Indian expedition - after the dust has settled from my enlightening visit to South Bengal, Santiniketan, Santhal, Calcutta, and North Bengal - I thought I would reflect upon my experience and share with all its fruitful insights.

To begin, I must proceed by commenting on how I was received by the people of this country. I was welcomed with considerable dignity, warmth, and reverence which was sustained throughout my visit for over two weeks. This provided me with enormous assurance, after having travelled alone for such a great distance to a continent I had never previously set foot in.

The purpose of my trip was due to the invitation of academics over in India. To those who don't know me - I am a writer, and my new book *An Expedition Around My Garden* was to have its official release event in the grounds of Santiniketan, which has the status of being a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

University professors have likened my book to the work of their Nobel Prize winning writer, poet, philosopher, and social reformer - the highly esteemed Rabindranath Tagore - and subsequently offered to host the occasion of the books release at Tagore's home of Santiniketan and, not only that, on the day of his birth anniversary celebrations as well! This was an incredibly special occurrence and produced a frenzy of interest - not least to myself but, due to the result of my visit making national headlines, to the people of India too.

The aforementioned Rabindranath Tagore spoke of a universal philosophy embracing goodness which herein lies the similarities to *An Expedition Around My Garden*. Described as a novel, an epic poem, and a mindful guide to well-being, the book is about the experience and expression of positive energy. This energy then takes the reader on a magical journey, and - I have witnessed the evidence of this first hand - is consequently transforming people's lives around the world.

The book has become quite a phenomenon and its particular impact and appeal in India, I feel, is conducive to the country's spiritual influence and miraculous power of prescience. This is a great

testament as at the nation's heart - which is where one truly speaks - is perpetuated a vision of essential wholeness, that manifests a presence both within and without.

Upon my arrival in South Bengal, and throughout, I was welcomed by my hosts with great sincerity and I immediately felt at home. Due to the meticulous planning of my visit, I was also able to relax knowing everything had been cared for and organised.

During the 'down-time' of my days I took pleasure whilst feeling inspired by the vast imagery around me that was conjured by the senses. The motion of rhythms and sounds flowed into the other with a wondrous quality that tinted one's eyes with a rich evocation of colour - one in which enthused my very being!

An overriding highlight of my visit has to be the very special day, in which I participated, on Tuesday 9 May 2023 – Tagore's birth anniversary celebrations. Through these words I want to indicate the spirit, and mood, to which this glorious day was attuned, along with the deep significance received by all - like sunlight - into the mind.

Great souls are born into a large sphere of life, and are appropriately acknowledged by their people. In celebrating Tagore's birthday we not only realized his union throughout time, but through him we also felt our spiritual intimacy with the world of man; giving us a universal background and contextual sense of being.

Dressed in white, the congregation was cloaked in the early hours of dawn as we proceeded to walk around the university campus of Tagore's Visva-Bharati. It was a delightful experience to feel the sun rise while complimented with the aural praise of his morning song, which was sung by all. This wonderful hymn of sunrise was a most appropriate and soothing way to start the day.

The day then continued into the late afternoon with the official release event of my book *An Expedition Around My Garden*. This is a book that gives (and receives) testament to Tagore's philosophy and vision and was suitably hosted in the very accommodating garden - and by the people - of Birutjatio, a literary group based in the heart of Santiniketan. The distinguished guests joining me for the event were Professor Ananya Dutta Gupta and Dr Jolly Das. The occasion proved to be very special, with the book being given its wings to fly on such an illustrious day.

I trust thus far my experiences are being conveyed as infectiously and befittingly of the way I received them! To capture the activity of my trip, what follows is a direct entry written on the day stated in my journal:

Friday May 12th, travelling on my connecting journey from Santiniketan to Calcutta via South Bengal, I find myself reading Tagore's 'Meghaduta', an essay translated into English for the first time by Supriya Banerjee and Suparna Mondal. The relevance of this heightens the experience of my journey, as an email received from the aforementioned Mondal informs me of her current reading of my work with the view of it being translated into the Bengali language.

I look out of the window of the car transporting me - we are stuck in a compact traffic jam, nestled beside the dominating presence of a dust covered truck. Our ignition is turned off. Heat rises. We are stuck as I tuck back into the book. Traditional bhangra punctuates the moment, with a beautiful, slow, even, resounding rhythm. Life is magical. I'm inspired (and inspiring). I'm travelling without moving.

My journey continued, and the all-encompassing book tour included lecturing on the philosophy of *An Expedition Around My Garden*, and the creative aspect of what it means to be human, to PhD students at the Centre of Comparative Literature, Visva-Bharati and the University of North Bengal, and to students of Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Dhupguri and Dhupguri Girls College.

Two visits of personal pride were to the National Library of India - where I presented officials with copies of all of my books, followed by an appearance as the guest of honour at the Intercultural Poetry & Performance Library (IPPL) at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), where my work was celebrated alongside that of Tagore. The Q&A session included a memorable spur-of-the-moment performance of 'This Is Mansfield' (a poem I have written about my home town) which was requested by the radiant host for the evening, Dr Nishi Pulugartha.

My expedition to India proved to be a very humbling, memorable, and life-defining experience. To be celebrated alongside Tagore is something incredibly special and something that I will treasure forever.

As a nation, strength and pride is everywhere which is built on the foundation of a moral and spiritual essence. This speaks highly of the Indian people for it is in this realm that the country flourishes, and it is to be respected universally with the awe and admiration I have indelibly been left with.

There is no doubt that the customs and people I met here are extraordinary in many ways, and friends they will remain for the duration of my life. For me, personally, I will cherish the love and brotherhood I received for the rest of my time.

Thank you, India, and all, for an experience of a lifetime - and a special whole-hearted 'thank-you' to Dr Saptarshi Mallick who is an outstanding human being.

Richard C. Bower is a celebrated writer, poet, and journalist. He has worked with the BBC, OCD UK, and is the official Mansfield Town Football Club poet.

Accredited by UNESCO Nottingham City of Literature, and a member of the prestigious Authors Club (as was Oscar Wilde et al), Richard C. Bower is the author of four inspirational bestsellers - *POSTMODERN* (2018), *Sanctuary* (2020), *Pleasures In The Pathless Woods* (2023) and *An Expedition Around My Garden* (2023).

Originally from Mansfield, Richard and his work have recently been celebrated as part of the very first Nottinghamshire Day, and his work is being critiqued in classrooms around the world - being compared alongside the esteemed work of Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore.