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Gitanjali and Beyond
Sustainability and Secularism
Issue 9



Gitanjali and Beyond

Issue 9: Sustainability and Secularism

A Journal of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs)
Edinburgh Napier University



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Gitanjali and Beyond

Sustainability and Secularism

Issue 9, Autumn 2023

**An academic and creative journal of the
Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs),
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Foreword

Victory to Him, whose voice thunders forth Truth.

Whose right arm smites the unrighteous,

Whose guidance leads mortals across death!

(chanted by the devotees to Bhairava¹)

The issue of *Sustainability and Secularism* was scheduled to be published in the summer of 2023 as we felt it was a crucial subject in today's world which faces the devastating impact of the climate crisis and the rise of religious intolerance across the world. In the meantime, we have had two guest edited editions entitled, *Organisverse* (creative) and *Precarious Lives: Uncertain Futures* (academic) – which were both peer-reviewed and submitted as finished editions which reflected the ethos of *Gitanjali and Beyond*. These became issues 7 and 8, respectively, as we waited for the double-blind peer reviews of the academic articles that needed to be submitted for our *Sustainability and Secularism* issue. However, our peer reviewers have been under tremendous pressure from the uncertainty they have been facing in their teaching positions, thanks to a crushing juggernaut of a corporate-like system which seems to be seeping into universities, devaluing good teachers and researchers as institutions seem to be keen on working with part time and 0-hour contract teachers, for whom their colleagues in permanent and full time positions have been taking industrial action to ensure the dignity of job security for their colleagues in precarious positions. We have finally received all the double peer reviews for the academic section of the journal (for which we are truly grateful) and are now happy to see *Sustainability and Secularism* published in the Autumn of 2023 as Issue 9, keeping to our schedule of the annual publication of *Gitanjali and Beyond* within the stipulated year of 2023.

Sustainability and Secularism is a rich issue of around 400 pages with thoughtful academic and creative contributions from academics, writers, artists and critics, and we feel that it is a very timely intervention as the planetary degradation continues at a relentless pace and manmade conflicts cause displacement and humanitarian crises on an unprecedented scale. Today the tragedy

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Waterfall*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. 2, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 163 – 208 (p. 207).

of the Ukrainian War continues with no end in sight. Sudan remains entrenched in a war between ruthless warring generals and the terrible attacks and counterattacks enmeshing Israel and Palestine in an apparently unstoppable chain of violence, mean that casualties will continue to rise on both sides, most of whom will be civilians – women, children, the elderly and the incapacitated. And in Tagore’s beloved post-independent India, more than eight decades after his death, the unmitigated tragedy of ethnic violence decimating social harmony in the North East, leaves a country aghast at the lack of political will to initiate a dialogue for peace to return to a people who deserve to live and prosper, assured of mutual respect with the return of human decency and dignity in their community.

In relation to a long-held Indian tradition, Tagore has said, ‘For her, the great fact is that we are in harmony with nature; that man can think because his thoughts are in harmony with things; that he can use the forces of nature for his own purpose only because his power is in harmony with the power which is universal, and that in the long run his purpose can never knock against the purpose which works through nature.’² This is where a sustainable world works hand in hand with secularism, as the latter becomes crucial for the adoption of policies that the world needs to consider and adopt, in order to ensure a sustainable habitat for our children and grandchildren, and thereby instil hope for successive generations who can continue to thrive in a climate of tolerance and cooperation. In such a world, humankind can be alert to and in tune with nature, fostering dialogue between communities within nations, between nation and nation, and thus adopting the essence of Rabindranath Tagore’s thoughts, work and legacy, based on ‘Truth’. This approach can bring back decency, awareness and respect for all life on earth, as we recognise the richness of diversity – biological, ethnic and religious - as endemic to the global reality and the earth’s enduring richness which needs our acceptance and undivided attention and protection. The keyword to this issue is *harmony*, which all the scholars and researchers, creative writers, artists and the reviewers of some seminal recent publications, have recognised and given voice to in Issue 9. We remain indebted to their dedicated endeavour to foster a world through their research analyses and creativity, a world which can survive and thrive in the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Sadhana*, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. 2, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 277 – 346 (p. 282).

and his circle and the thinkers and practitioners today, who continue to value the relevance of the ideas and carry forward their work through their own persuasive writing.

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Bashabi Fraser

Editor-in-Chief

Gitanjali and Beyond

Introduction

Writing in 1962, Bengali academic, writer, journalist, linguist and travel writer, Syed Mujtaba Ali recalls an incident when he was a student at Visva-Bharati. He had taken a newly acquired autograph book to his Gurudev Rabindranath, requesting a message. Rabindranath wrote, ‘May my country realise that its fulfilment lies in truthful harmony with other countries’.

Pursuing truthful harmony in relationships between humans, and between humans and non-humans is fundamental to Tagore’s thought as expressed in his vast oeuvre. Today, eight decades after Tagore’s death, India continues to move further and further away from harmony – engendering and reinforcing division and oppression between majority and minority communities on the one hand, and strengthening a voracious capitalism intent on creating exploitative hierarchies between human and non-human subjects on the other.

Secularism and sustainability are two fundamental ideas that have a big impact on how our world works and how we live. They address essential facets of human existence and provide a way forward for a more peaceful and just world. The 9th issue of *Gitanjali and Beyond* explores the dynamics of Sustainability and Secularism in today’s world.

The environment we live in is dependent on sustainability. This can be achieved through conservation, waste reduction, green growth and responsible resource management. By incorporating sustainability in our daily lives, we help to protect endangered animals, preserve ecosystems, and combat climate change. Future generations can then live on a healthier planet by adopting sustainable habits like recycling, conserving energy, and the production and purchase of eco-friendly goods. Economic advantages also come with sustainable methods. They support the growth of eco-friendly industries, renewable energy sources, and green technology. This promotes innovation and economic progress in addition to creating jobs. People may promote a more secure and prosperous economy by supporting sustainable businesses and activities. Sustainability extends beyond the economy and the environment, ensuring social equity. Sustainable living encourages equal opportunity and just treatment for everyone, regardless of background. Making sure that everyone has access to clean water, wholesome food, and a secure environment is the goal of a just society. Therefore, sustainability addresses the problem of global poverty and inequality with the intention of building a society in which no one is left behind.

Separating religion from governmental activities is a fundamental element of a secular state. This ensures that people are free to live according to their own principles, fostering more social harmony, accepting diversity promoting tolerance and pluralism. It promotes communication and mutual respect amongst those who practice other religions. This is crucial for maintaining societal harmony, averting religious disputes. A just democratic society will uphold the rule of law, which is directly related to secularism. Secularism contributes to ensuring that laws are founded on rational, ethical, and legal grounds, reflecting the values of justice and fairness while defending the rights and liberties of all individuals. By addressing long-held religious beliefs that could be discriminatory, secularism advances gender equality. It promotes gender rights and of minorities rights, encouraging self-determination, and thus helping to create a more diverse and egalitarian society.

Given that sustainability and secularism address important contemporary concerns, they remain essential to our way of life and its continuity. While secularism defends religious freedom and engenders tolerance, sustainability protects the environment, stimulates economic growth and guarantees social fairness. A world where people may live with their freedoms respected, mental and physical wellbeing will flourish, very much in the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore's beliefs and ideas.

The idea of unity has had a key role in shaping Rabindranath Tagore's concept of secularism, allowing for the peaceful coexistence of many faiths and ideologies. He highlighted the value of appreciating and comprehending the diverse cultural and spiritual traditions that make up human civilization. The poem "Ekla Chalo Re" by Tagore is an example of his exhortation to walk alone if necessary, to stay true to one's moral convictions, and not be influenced by communal differences.

Tagore's ideas of sustainability were ahead of his times, which included social and economic factors in addition to ecological ones. He underlined the necessity to strike a balance between development and a profound regard for the environment as well as the need to cultivate indigenous knowledge in the modern world. Tagore's vision of a secular and ecological society is built on his

idea of cooperation and an ‘understanding of the human relationship to the planet’¹ for an environmentally sensitive future.

In a world divided by corrosive, divisive forces, Rabindranath Tagore’s ecological ideas, embodied in his institutions at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, endorse the interrelatedness and the harmonious coexistence of all life-forms through an eco-critical cosmopolitan perspective towards life. As nature remains the life force for human sustenance, a constructive association with nature will enable humanity to experience life with the ‘philosophical illumination which lights up the inner recesses’ of humanity, facilitating the discovery of the ‘unity of kinship needed for true understanding of one another’.²

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¹ Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, “The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism”, *MELUS* 34.2 (2009): pp 5 – 24 (pp. 6 – 7).

² Rabindranath Tagore, “Illuminated Travel Literature” in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Volume IV, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2016), pp. 715 – 717 (p. 717).

Section I: Academic

Samaj and Swaraj: the relevance of Gandhi and Tagore for the twenty-first century

Talat Ahmed

Abstract:

The concepts of *samaj* and *swaraj* as theorised by Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) in the early part of the twentieth century presented a direct challenge to western notions of society and freedom, which are inherently based upon narrow political definitions relating to developments in European modernity. As such ideas surrounding freedom of the individual and society are inextricably linked to the modern nation state – an institution that embodies the rights of both the individual citizenry and the collective nation. Like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great doyen of Bengali literature, engaged in broader questions of society and freedom. This essay will chart the source and developments of how Gandhi and Tagore arrived at their understandings of *samaj* and *swaraj*. The interaction between these two giants of Asia and the wider world spanned many decades from 1915-1941 and saw them debate issues relating to nationalism, the freedom struggle and global politics. In mapping their individual trajectories, the paper seeks to interrogate both the synergies and divergences between Gandhi and Tagore on the question of liberation and mutual cooperation. In exploring the basis of such dialogue, it is hoped to offer some reflections on the necessity of an-all-inclusive concept of society and liberty that is fit for the contemporary world.

Keywords: Gandhi; Tagore; Samaj; Swaraj; Indian nationalism, the state

Samaj and Swaraj: the relevance of Gandhi and Tagore for the twenty-first century

In autumn 1987, Margaret Thatcher as prime minister was interviewed by the British magazine, *Women's Own*, in which she asked ‘...who is society?’ Her answer was ‘There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first’.¹ Some thirty years later, Donald Trump maintained that being leader of the ‘free’ world means not taking any responsibility

¹ *Women's Own*, 23 September 1987, pp. 29-30.

for anything you say or do.² This led Matt Bai, one political commentator, to term this age the ‘shameless’ society, ‘where accountability and apology are just white flags for the weak’.³ Bai’s observation is particularly apt as both Thatcher and Trump, albeit in different ways, epitomise a world characterised by lack of the collective. Individual will and effort is highly prized as the hallmark of progress and matters of conscience only apply to the individual self and immediate members of close family. There is no sense of shared obligation, responsibility, and cooperation at the community level. Paradoxically, the contemporary world exemplifies more integration and exchange than ever: more cultural, political, economic, and social connectivity and yet we are witnessing the exponential growth of economic nationalism parading as patriotism, protectionism demanding the erection of walls, closure of borders and an increasing narrowing gaze of what it means to belong in a nation or society. The notion of ‘othering’ is still a very real entity and demonstrates ongoing debates over what constitutes society, freedom, and the role of the individual within it. It also reveals how ideas of society and liberty are persistently presented as a natural evolution emanating from the west, the cradle of ‘civilisation’ that non-western societies were expected to follow.

The concepts of *samaj* and *swaraj* as theorised by Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) in the early part of the twentieth century presented a direct challenge to western notions of society and freedom, which are inherently based upon narrow political definitions relating to developments in European modernity. As such ideas surrounding freedom of the individual and society are inextricably linked to the modern nation state – an institution that embodies the rights of both the individual citizenry and the collective nation. Like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great doyen of Bengali literature, engaged in broader questions of society and freedom. This essay will chart the source and developments of how Gandhi and Tagore arrived at their understandings of *samaj* and *swaraj*. Both were children of late colonial India. Tagore died at the age of 80, whilst Gandhi died aged 79. The interaction between these two giants of Asia and the wider world spanned many decades from 1915-1941 and saw them debate issues relating to nationalism, the freedom struggle, and global politics. In mapping their individual trajectories, the paper seeks to

² James Fallows, ‘2020 Time Capsule #3: “I Don’t Take Responsibility at All”’, *The Atlantic*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2020/03/2020-time-capsule-3-i-dont-take-responsibility-at-all/608005/>

³ Matt Bai, ‘Trump and the shameless society: Which came first?’ *Yahoo News*, 10 January 2019. <https://news.yahoo.com/trump-shameless-society-came-first-100033959.html>

interrogate both the synergies and divergences between Gandhi and Tagore on the question of liberation and cooperation. In exploring the basis of such dialogue, it is hoped to offer some reflections on the necessity of an-all-inclusive concept of society and liberty that is fit for the contemporary world.

Influences

“Be the change you want to see in the world”. This quotation is often attributed to Gandhi, but what Gandhi stated was,

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.⁴

This shows that Gandhi was aware of the dynamic interaction between the self and wider society, but it also captures something of the “personal is political” concept which arose with the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The wider sense of thinking globally was shared to some extent by Tagore, and this is not surprising if we remember the transnational and global influences that Gandhi and Tagore drew upon to help formulate their ideas on society, the individual, freedom and to tease out the common purpose they enjoyed. There were clearly similarities between both thinkers but also some disjuncture in their intellectual outlook, ethical and political understandings.

For Gandhi, *samaj* and *swaraj* were ideas rooted in a Pan-Indian tradition that drew on a myriad of theological ideas from Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhist texts, but also drew inspiration from monotheistic traditions and conversations across three continents with contemporary fellow non-conformists. As such his concepts were pluralist, inclusive and the embodiment of a heterogeneous historical tradition. Tagore shared much of this thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is worth briefly outlining some of the influences shaping both Gandhi and Tagore as they grew to intellectual maturity. Both came from areas that in their own ways were

⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 9 August 1913.

cosmopolitan regions. Gandhi's hometown of Porbandar was a port town with connections to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, and so to Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and a site of pilgrimage, trade and migration. Tagore was born in Calcutta, a major city of trade, commercial enterprises, migration and movement of peoples, ideas and goods. Both studied law in London (though only Gandhi successfully completed while Tagore left before completion), and so both were part of wider transnational and global interactions and conversations. The historical period they were having these conversations was one of intense political fervour – with emerging and rising nationalism and a cultural re-awakening in colonial societies leading to a new politicisation of identities. The two figures themselves first met in Shantiniketan, and then between 1915 and 1941, Tagore and Gandhi exchanged a series of letters. Gandhi invited Tagore to open the annual Gujarati literary conference in 1920 and gave him the title of *Gurudev*, divine mentor. Meanwhile Tagore in return gave the name *Mahatma* to Gandhi when he returned to India in 1915.

Yet the two figures began to differ on the strategy and method with which to campaign for such ideas, and again here the different influences shaping them are worth recalling. The two came from quite separate backgrounds, with Tagore hailing from Calcutta, seat of the eighteenth-century East India Company, from an elite Bengali *bhadralok* background, and was part of the Bengal Renaissance. Gandhi was born into the Bania caste in a princely state in a small coastal town in Gujarat. Whereas Bengal as a region had been characterised by renaissance, a deep literary tradition and a “heretical spirit”, Gujarat, both under princely sovereign states and British influence, has the appearance of being traditional, conservative and epitomised by lack of intellectual inquiry.

Indeed, part of Gandhi's appeal came from being held as quintessentially Indian, authentic, and harking back to the golden age of a pre-modern, pre-historical era that was both mythical and mystical. Gandhi was at pains to re-define *swaraj* – the sovereignty of the self - in the early 1920s, to point to the need for a radical break with and not the mere replacement of British colonial rule for the rule of the brown sahibs.

Real Swaraj will come, not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.⁵

⁵ *Young India*, 29 January 1925, p. 41.

Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen... I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange king log for king stork.⁶

For Gandhi self-rule meant a complete mental and psychological break with existing society. Writing in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi wrote that “English rule without Englishman...you would make India English. And when it becomes English it will be called not Hindustan but Englishtan. This is not the Swaraj that I want.”⁷

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 partly as a response to developments in India at the time and reflects debates on how to oppose the colonial state – was it through an endorsement of forceful tactics as inspired by the “extremist” wing of nationalism or by imitating the British system of parliamentary representation, as advocated by the “moderates”. Gandhi’s views were influenced by what he had seen in London and South Africa, where for him the ugliness of industrialisation resulted in people being exploited by machines. The squalor of Victorian cities, the slums of African townships and the poverty that blighted urban life convinced Gandhi that industrial development did not equate progress. These were not uncommon ideas in the wider world, amongst European non-conformists, where there was a long tradition of opposing industrial development and the commercialisation of society. Gandhi’s own views on the state and society had been profoundly influenced by two such individuals: the American Henry David Thoreau, and the Russian, Leo Tolstoy. Thoreau was an abolitionist, environmentalist and influenced by transcendentalism as a means of personal salvation and renowned for his espousal of simple living.⁸ He opposed slavery and the Mexican-American war. His conclusion was to refuse payment of taxes to what he labelled an unjust government. He was imprisoned for this but still refused to pay. His seminal 1849 essay *Civil Disobedience*, originally referred to as “Resistance to Civil Government”, is where he articulates vehement opposition to the American government and questions the necessity of a state. “That government is best which governs least” and in the final

⁶ *Young India*, 12 June 1924, p. 195.

⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1938), p. 30.

⁸ Thoreau published *Walden (Life in the Woods)* in 1854. This is a manual on living in natural surroundings, spiritual discovery and self-reliance. For him personal self-introspection would be the path to true independence.

analysis insists, “‘That government is best which governs not at all’; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have”.⁹ His essay had a transformative impact on Gandhi who confessed to the journalist Webb Miller in 1931 that his inspiration for the name of his movement in the Salt campaign stemmed from Thoreau’s essay.¹⁰

Gandhi first came across Thoreau’s writings whilst in South Africa as he embarked upon the campaign against the 1906 Asiatic Registration Act. This was termed the “Black Act” by Gandhi, as it required all Indians and Chinese in Transvaal to register and produce on demand a valid certificate. Failure to comply would result in arrest and a fine, deportation or imprisonment. Reflecting on Thoreau in a letter dated 12 October 1929, Gandhi stated that “Civil Disobedience” had “left a deep impression” upon him.¹¹ He set about translating portions of the essay immediately publishing it in instalments in *Indian Opinion*. In introducing Thoreau to Indians of South Africa Gandhi argued for his greatness, which lay in the simple fact that Thoreau “taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself”, risking imprisonment “for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity”. As such the essay had “been sanctified by suffering. Moreover, it is written for all time. Its incisive logic is unanswerable.”¹² In an article titled “Duty of Disobeying Laws” in 1907, he credits Thoreau’s essay as “the chief cause of the abolition of slavery in America”, and wrote that “Both his example and writings are at present exactly applicable to Indians in the Transvaal”.¹³ Using the force of Thoreau’s ideas to the South African context Gandhi led a call to arms declaring in the Asiatic Registration Act, “British Indians have not only a law which has some evil in it... but it is evil legalised, or it represents friction with machinery provided for it. Resistance to such an evil is a divine duty...”¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quoted by George Hendrick, ‘The Influence of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” on Gandhi’s Satyagraha’, *The New England Quarterly*, 29: 4 (1956), p. 463.

¹¹ Henry Salt, *Company I Have Kept* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 100-101.

¹² *Indian Opinion*, 26 October 1907.

¹³ *Indian Opinion*, 7 September 1907 and 14 September 1907.

¹⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 7 September 1907.

If Gandhi imbibed the art of non-cooperative resistance to unjust laws and an unjust state from an American rebel, Russian Christian anarchism would inspire non-violence and further crystallise his attitude towards the state and society. Leo Tolstoy, a giant of Russian and world literature and philosophy espoused the virtues of non-violent anarchism as a moral force that could replace all state power. In his 1900 essay he wrote,

The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order, and in the assertion that, without Authority, there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by a revolution. But it will be instituted only by there being more and more people who do not require the protection of governmental power...There can be only one permanent revolution—a moral one: the regeneration of the inner man.¹⁵

Though influenced by the works of anarchists such as Kropotkin and Proudhon, Tolstoy eschewed their readiness to resort to violence and as evident from the above; his critique of the state rests on his belief in the inherent violence and authoritarianism endemic to it. He also chastised those who thought revolution was simply the replacement of one state by another, “in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself”.¹⁶ From this it is easy to see how Gandhi could be drawn to Tolstoy’s vision of a non-state society achievable through of non-violence, but also the intonation of “be the change you want to be”.

Gandhi was so favourably disposed to Tolstoy’s thinking that in South Africa he would make a detailed study of much of his work, particularly, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. A philosophical treatise, the book was first published in Germany in 1894 after being banned in Tsarist Russia but became a key text for Tolstoyan, nonviolent resistance, particularly appealing to Christian anarchist movements. For Gandhi it “left an abiding impression...Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book...seemed to pale into insignificance.”¹⁷ Under Gandhi’s influence it would be transformed into a global text to challenge

¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy, ‘On Anarchy’ (1900), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/on-anarchy.html>

¹⁶ Leo Tolstoy, ‘On Anarchy’ (1900), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/on-anarchy.html>

¹⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with the truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajiran Publishing House, 2002), p. 127.

oppression and economic exploitation. Following this logic Gandhi himself stated, “The best, quickest and most efficient way is to build up from the bottom . . . Every village has to become a self-sufficient republic. This does not require brave resolutions. It requires brave, corporate, intelligent work . . .”¹⁸ And this he began to elucidate in the pages of a key document where Thoreauvian and Tolstoyan influences could clearly be detected.

Gandhi, modernity and *samaj*

Gandhi’s ideal polity was one with minimum regulation from a central force and where individuals would exist as a harmonious entity to be guided by principles of truth alone. This is a state where “everyone is his own ruler... In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no state.”¹⁹ And he reiterated this belief stating, “the ideally non-violent State will be an ordered anarchy. That State will be the best governed which is governed the least”.²⁰ Therefore, I suggest it is paramount for understanding Gandhi’s notion of *Samaj* and *swaraj* that his ideas are foregrounded in interactions with late nineteenth century non-conformist thinkers. This was a cosmopolitan conversation ranging across three continents and situates Gandhi quite firmly in a transnational network of ideas. The context of late nineteenth century industrial capitalism is crucial to understanding the roots of his ideas. They represent a response by a certain social milieu to the horrors of a world locked in conflict, with wars and the dehumanising impact of industrialisation and the commercialisation of Victorian society with its emphasis on consumerism and market values benefitting a wealthy elite at the expense of the majority.

Gandhi’s prescription for India was to avoid the forced industrial and urban developments pursued by the colonial state. Instead, he believed India’s future lay in its rural heartlands. He advocated self-sufficient village communities that were marked by interdependency and social cohesion. Gandhi viewed the state as an inherently violent institution that could not act as an enabling instrument of empowerment. Instead, he emphasised a decentralised village-oriented,

¹⁸ *Harijan*, 18 January 1922.

¹⁹ *Harijan*, 18 January 1922.

²⁰ *Harijan*, 21 July 1940, p. 209. M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Dehli: Navajiran Press Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), vol. 79, p. 122. All citations are from this hard copy version and will subsequently be cited as Gandhi, *CWMG*.

agrarian economy and a simple life revolving around a cooperative socio-economic structure. Gandhi believed that in such a community, individuals would be responsible to govern themselves, as long they did not impose on the rights of other individuals. In this ideal state, "...there is no political power because there is no state."²¹ As here the integrated social ideal aims at "reform of the individual as the reform of society."²²

Village communities, which for Gandhi were "unconsciously governed by non-violence",²³ were the basic unit of social organisation but he also accepted the necessity for leadership in the form of panchayat - a council for each village comprised of five annually elected adults, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. The Panchayat would act as the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office....²⁴ For Gandhi the *Kisan* – peasantry – would be the backbone of village civic life.²⁵ Writing further, Gandhi envisaged a society of villagers avoiding disputes "...where there would be speedy justice without any expenditure. You will need neither the police nor the military..."²⁶ and he added, "If we would see our dream of Panchayat Raj, i.e., true democracy realized, we would regard the humblest and lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land. ..."²⁷ The above would suggest that Gandhi was articulating ideas of representative democracy without reference to western political systems and as Ananya Vajpeyi argues, India's political modernity is unimaginable without Gandhi".²⁸

²¹ *Young India*, 26 December 1924.

²² Gandhi, *CWMG*, vol. 8, p. 3.

²³ *Harijan*, 4 August 1940.

²⁴ *Harijan*, 26 July 1942.

²⁵ *Harijan*, 7 December 1947.

²⁶ *Harijan*, 4 January 1948.

²⁷ *Harijan*, 10 January 1948.

²⁸ Vajpeyi, Ananya, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 49.

Tagore

Tagore first met the author of *Hind Swaraj* in Santiniketan in rural Bengal on 6 March 1915, after extending him an invitation. Tagore, emanating from a long line of liberal and reform minded elite Bengali Brahmins, too believed in constructive programmes, social reform, and upliftment. Much of Tagore's work stemmed from his idea of bridging the cultural divide between east and west. He wanted to engage the west in an intellectual discourse to reduce antagonism between the colonisers and colonised, and to address the "narrow sentiment of nationality", counter posing instead the idea of The Universal. Tagore believed in the universal essence of humanity. This is not the same as cosmopolitanism (basically all peoples merging into the same culture), which he saw as a threat to variety. Tagore believed in culturalism which referred to the idea of the preservation of cultures and their intellectual engagement with one another.

These efforts are most strikingly revealed in Michael Collins's essay "The Politics of Friendship", in which he presents this policy through Tagore's friendship with three counterparts, the famous Irish poet W.B. Yeats, and the British missionaries Edward John Thompson and Charles Freer Andrews. Through these friendships Tagore attempted a cultural synthesis of two cultures in order to better understand one another. Collins quotes a letter from Tagore to C. F. Andrews dated January 1913:

[t]he problem of race conflict is the greatest of all that men have been called upon to solve... different races and nations of the Earth have come nearer each other than ever they did before. But we have not been ready to accept the responsibilities of this wider humanity. Men are still under the thralldom of the spirit of antagonism which has been associated with a narrow sentiment of nationality. . . I feel that the time has come, and after all kinds of patch-work of superficial experiments the spiritual nature of man is getting ready to take up the task and broaden the path of reconciliation of all different races and creeds.²⁹

Writing later that year, Tagore seemed to accept his new vocation: "the world is waiting for its poets and prophets [and] when the call of humanity is poignantly insistent then the higher nature

²⁹ Rabindranath Tagore to C.F. Andrews, in C.F. Andrews' notebook, *C.F. Andrews Papers*, Rabindra Bhavana, January 1913, quoted in Michael Collins, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Friendship', *South Asia Journal: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2012), pp. 118-142 (p. 119).

of man cannot but respond”.³⁰ Tagore and Yeats were both nationalists in that they represented societies that were under imperial control. Both were poets interested in the relationship of spirituality, music, and poetry; both used landscape and nature in their poetic imagery. But their form of nationalism drew from “new” cosmopolitanism emphasising the global nature of nationalism that strives for a larger connectivity. Similar to Gandhi’s disdain for western nation states, Tagore cautioned against nationalist fervour of the nation state as an entity developed at the expense of society, which was based on fluidity, vibrant rich confluences which modern states eschewed in favour of rigidity and singular domination.

During his visit to Britain in 1912, Tagore had developed a relationship with Yeats, following a reading of Tagore’s partial translation of *Gitanjali*, at a dinner for the Indian bard hosted by Yeats. The young Irish poet was clearly infatuated with Tagore’s work, which he championed, and which arguably led to Tagore being awarded the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature. Tagore saw in Yeats’s attention the friendship of one cultural elite with another, a relationship that could help both to learn and grow. Clearly, Tagore was patrician but the last two decades of his life hint at his receptiveness to democratic impulses of a rising and militant nationalist movement. Tagore was awarded a knighthood in 1915. Yet he famously returned the knighthood in disgust in 1919 following the Amritsar massacre, stating “a great crime has been done in the name of law in the Punjab”.³¹ In his letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, Tagore castigated the British press for praising the “callousness” and “making fun of our sufferings,” and concluded he had no alternative but to give “voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror”.³² Towards the end of his life Tagore was moving in a Left direction that eclipsed Gandhi as he sent an address to the second All-India Progressive Writers conference in 1938, held at the Ashutosh Memorial Hall in Calcutta. Unable to attend due to illness, his speech endorsed the movement as he argued,

³⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’, 1913, in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, volume 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 363.

³¹ *Tribune*, Lahore, 16 April 1919.

³² Letter from Tagore to Viceroy Chelmsford, dated 30 May 1919 published in *The Statesman*, 3 June, 1919.

To live in seclusion has become second nature to me, but it is a fact that the writer who holds himself aloof from society cannot get to know mankind. Remaining aloof, the writer deprives himself of the experience which comes from mingling with numbers of people. To know and understand society, and to show the path to progress, it is essential that we keep our finger on the pulse of society and listen to the beating of its heart. This is only possible when our sympathies are with humanity, and when we share its sorrows...New writers must mix with men, and recognise that if they live in seclusion as I do they will not achieve their aims. I understand now that in living apart from society for so long I have committed a grave mistake...This understanding burns in my heart like a lamp, and no argument can extinguish it.³³

Thus, demonstrating the degree to which the great bard could ascertain his own shortcomings and identify with subaltern agency.

The early friendship with Yeats was significant as the European literary world was largely dismissive in early twentieth century of the non-western world, whose literary cannon was still held to be unworthy of great western scholarship. Either orientalist perceptions of exoticism or pejorative ideas dominated. So, D. H. Lawrence in 1916 could write that “The East is marvellously interesting, for tracing our steps back. But for going forward, it is nothing. All it can hope for is to be fertilised by Europe, so it can start on a new phase”.³⁴ Yeats represents the opposite view as he saw in Tagore a sagaciousness that was more spiritually complete as civilisation than Europe. Yeats helped to popularise this interpretation and as Collins suggests, Tagore then became an instrument by which European intellectuals could attempt some form of cultural recovery out of the bondage of imperial rivalries.³⁵ Yet Yeats had limited knowledge of Tagore’s context as Yeats have never visited India and his knowledge was shaped by encounters with Theosophy in the west and was

³³ Quoted in Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 210.

³⁴ D.H. Lawrence to Lady Otteline Morrell, 24 May 1916, in James T. Boulton and George J. Zytaruk (eds.), *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Volume II, June 1913-October 1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 608.

³⁵ Michael Collins, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Friendship’, *South Asia Journal: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2012), p. 125.

thus limited.³⁶

C. F. Andrews, with his background firmly stamped with Christianity, wanted to affect a change in the moral basis of the colonial relationship by using the idea of attempting social reform in order to atone for imperial guilt. In 1904, he became the principle of St Stephens College, Delhi and had more immediate experience of the India from which Tagore was writing than Yeats. According to Collins, the relationship between Andrews and Tagore manifested itself as one of complete devotion by Andrews for Tagore. In 1912 Andrews declared he was glad “that my own country was doing homage at last to the genius of India, revealed through her greatest living poet”, and a year later noting that “Tagore’s giving of his heart in its simplicity to his fellow men in the West would begin to break down barriers.”³⁷ Andrews moved to Bengal, took on Bengali clothing and renounced his Anglian ministry in 1919 in an attempt to whitewash his association with Britain. He also helped Tagore with the translations of his work into English. For Andrews, Tagore represented an alternative vision of the messiah. Andrews came to worship Tagore as a Christ-like object of veneration. Ultimately, Andrews wanted to use Tagore’s work to re-balance the colonial relationship through a reconceptualization of Christianity that was reformed via eastern influences.

Edward John Thompson (father of the more famous son, the radical historian Edward Palmer Thompson) also had a background of Christianity and spent nearly his entire life in missions around India. In 1910 he moved to the West Bengal mission, where he stayed for over ten years. Like Andrews, he was also concerned with affecting a change in the moral basis of empire. Though instead of devotion and self-reform, he wanted to give “a fair hearing and honest criticism” to India and Tagore’s work. He therefore wanted to overcome the blind-hero worship of Tagore and delve into his complexities. Thompson’s intellectual relationship with Tagore began around 1914. As a proficient Bengali speaker, Tagore requested assistance with translations of his work as he held many to be of poor quality and the basis of decreasing popularity in Europe. Thompson wrote a critical biography of Tagore, aiming to judge his works by broader standards, to put him on a par with European poets. This tapped into an anxiety of Tagore’s as he feared that much of the complexities of his poetry, and the Bengali language, would be lost on European audiences.

³⁶ Collins, pp. 124-125.

³⁷ Quoted in Collins, pp. 126-127.

“Universal” standards, therefore, were not balanced in Tagore’s favour. This met with fury from Tagore, who in the same way Gandhi critiqued ideas of “Western” progress, parliaments, and civilisation in *Hind Swaraj*, saw Thompson’s standards as actually western but masquerading as Universal.

Michael Collins looks at Tagore’s liberalism and argues Tagore’s philosophy was centred on the praxis of individuality, and so falling into the trap of elitism and fear of demotic (colloquial) culture. It appears Tagore’s philosophy – unlike that of Gandhi’s - excluded collective and subaltern agency. This leads Collins to interpret Tagore as an elitist figure, unlike Gandhi, who is seen to champion mass involvement, and stresses that it was this avoidance of mass action that underwrote his conflict with Gandhi. Tagore emphasised the role of the “civilised” individual as the main agent of change. While cultivating friendships with elite characters trapped in imperial and orientalist paradigms like Yeats (with his interest in the exotic), Andrews (with his blind devotion to Tagore) and Thompson (with his imperial apologetics), did not attempt to encourage the involvement of the masses in the national movement.

In his friendship with Gandhi, Tagore parted company on a whole range of issues, including the strategy and tactics of the Non-Co-operation Movement that demonstrates a deep ideological gulf. Even at their initial meeting, Gandhi’s missionary zeal was on display. He began to lecture Tagore, who was eight years senior to him, about the shortcomings of behaviour he observed at Shantiniketan, and suggested that the ashram would improve if it adopted the austere principles of Gandhi’s project at Phoenix, Durban.³⁸ A decade later, in September 1925 Tagore wrote a scathing piece on Gandhi published in *Modern Review*, titled *The Cult of the Charkha*. The article criticised not just the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Charkha, but the ideas of patriotism and nationalism as well, which Gandhi stood up for. “As is livelihood for the individual, so is politics for a particular people — a field for the exercise of their business instincts of patriotism. All this time, just as business has implied antagonism so has politics been concerned with the self-interest of a pugnacious nationalism.” Tagore, who had been one of Gandhi’s early admirers, described Non-Co-operation as “political asceticism” adding, “It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation, which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst that orgy of frightfulness in which human nature,

³⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with the truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajiran Publishing House, 1959), p. 281.

losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation”.³⁹ Tagore was vehemently opposed to notions of pious suffering, making a virtue out of misery as opposed to focussing on actual social and political emancipation.

Tagore was also highly critical of what he perceived as the “cult of the charkha”, whereas Gandhi saw this as providing useful work for India’s mass rural and urban populace. On the merit of khaddar and modernisation, for Gandhi Indian conditions negated the need for industrial modernisation. In letter to Saklatvala, the Indian Communist and first Indian Labour MP, Gandhi viewed the cities as “an excrescence...draining the life-blood of the villages. Khaddar is an attempt to revise and reverse the process and establish a better relationship between the cities and the villages.”⁴⁰ Gandhi believed spinning could deal with the problems of idleness and unemployment. It was useful work that also provided a service to the nation. Just as *khadi* was indigenous, spinning relates to Gandhi’s views on industrial development and his romanticised notion of some idyllic past that India should strive towards achieving. Tagore saw in this the levelling down of all into some pre-ordained uniformity that denied genuine creativity of thought, activity let alone any sense of individuality. He had a profound belief in principles of rationality and scientific education thinking. That is why he castigated the very principle of spinning as any meaningful part of achieving independence, “...instead of removing poverty or achieving Hindu-Muslim unity, or leading to *swaraj*, it was more likely to paralyse the reasoning power of the people and perpetuate their habit of reliance on the *guru* or some magical *mantram*”.⁴¹

The mantra lay in the inflexibility and total obedience Gandhi expected. Gandhi was authoritarian as acknowledged even by Nehru when he referred to Gandhi’s “Kingliness” that compelled a willing obeisance from others.⁴² Nehru’s further observation seems quite apt that Gandhi was consciously and deliberately meek and humble. Yet he was full of power and authority,

³⁹ Letter from Tagore to C.F. Andrews dated 2 March 1921, published in *Modern Review*, Calcutta: May 1921.

⁴⁰ Letter from Gandhi to Saklatvala, 17 March 1927, p. 23, quoted in *Is India Different? The Class Struggle in India* (London, Dorrit Press, 1927).

⁴¹ Tagore, *Modern Review*, Calcutta: September 1925.

⁴² Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 129.

and he knew it and at times he was imperious enough, issuing commands which had to be obeyed.⁴³ Gandhi's lack of tolerance and expectation of total acceptance of his particular method smacks of desire for blind obedience and elitism. An example of this came during the late 1930s when Gandhi was in battle with Subash Chandra Bose over the political direction of Congress. At Tripura Congress Seth Govinda Das demanded unquestioning obedience to the "Mahatma" as he favourably compared Gandhi to Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Tagore, though quite ill, rightly protested this crass tendency to admire fascists and totalitarian leaders.⁴⁴

Speaking of the giant thinkers of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru remarked that "No two persons could probably differ so much as Gandhi and Tagore. The surprising thing is that both of these men with so much in common and drawing inspiration from the same wells of wisdom and thought and culture, should differ from each other so greatly!...I think of the richness of India's age-long cultural genius, which can throw up in the same generation two such master-types, typical of her in every way, yet representing different aspects of her many-sided personality."⁴⁵ Elsewhere Nehru insisted of the two figures that "they seemed to present different but harmonious aspects of India and to complement one another".⁴⁶ Similarly, Kripalani contrasts the irrevocable disagreement between Tolstoy and Lenin with the manner in which "Tagore and Gandhi have confirmed and upheld each other and represent a fundamental harmony in Indian civilization."⁴⁷ Writing from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the Bolshevik Anatoly Lunacharsky described Gandhi as the so-called "Indian Tolstoy" and noted the "pantheistic mysticism" and "psychological insight" of Tagore, who was declared to be "an advocate of the Hindu *svaradzh*" ("swaraj") and placed in a similarly harmonious relationship to Gandhi.

[Tagore] is also an ennobled nationalist. In his works there are many points of continuity with Gandhi's, and, just as Gandhi was recently arrested by the English police and is

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 129-130.

⁴⁴ Sibnarayan Ray (ed.), *Gandhi, India and the World* (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Ltd, 1970), p. 121.

⁴⁵ Nehru letter to Krishna Kripalani, in 1941, quoted in K. R. Kripalani, *Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru*, (Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1949).

⁴⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 361.

⁴⁷ K. R. Kripalani, *Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru* (Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1949), p. 8.

currently in prison, the writer, having acquired a position of global significance, was also deprived of freedom in his time. But, Tagore, as a poet, is more wide-ranging and elegant than Gandhi. Although he is exceedingly popular even with everyday people, nevertheless his influence expands mainly among the Hindu intelligentsia [...]⁴⁸

Clearly both did emanate from the same well. Born in the aftermath of the brutal suppression of the 1857 rebellion, neither were admirers of empire and force. As Indians subjected to an English education system, Tagore and Gandhi appreciated the importance of vernacular languages for learning,⁴⁹ which is why writing in Bengali and Gujarati was essential to them. Both figures were suspicious of political schemes setting the agenda for framing debates and understanding of freedom, society and the individual. For too long these have been associated with European developments of historical evolution, where notions of the universal and modernity are reduced to western concepts. Today our world, now dominated by the power of global capital, is blighted by a renewed sense of rugged individualism, rooted in the concept of self with often a xenophobic rejection of the ‘outsider’. Triumphant neo-liberalism and laissez-faire economics renders the principles of the collective spirit of *samaj* and collective ideas of *swaraj* irrelevant and antiquated. However, the dialogue, deep engagement and openness that Gandhi and Tagore theorised and debated over a hundred years ago, along with the ideas of pluralism, syncretism and heterogeneity are desperately required for the twenty-first century.

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⁴⁸ Anatoly Lunacharsky, ‘The Indian Tolstoy [Indiiskii Tolstoi]’, *Krasnaia Niva*, 1, 1923, p. 30. Thanks to Nigel Foxcroft for help in translating this.

⁴⁹ See Bashabi Fraser, *Critical Lives: Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2019), pp. 213-215.

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“from the healthful dust of the earth...:”

An Ecocritical Study of Tagorean Education System

Madhurima Neogi

Abstract:

This article focuses on Tagore’s attempt to build an educational ecosystem that foregrounded the primordial relationship between human beings and Nature. Tagore sought to position Nature as an active educator in his institution which would result in the successful development of the student into an ecocitizen. This ecophilosophy of Tagore is analyzed through critical reading of his essays on education, and the history of the development of Tagore’s educational institution at Santiniketan. Tagore, alongside demonstrating a unique eco-aesthetic in the physical development of his institution, also introduced festivals and practices that countered uncontrolled consumption of Nature which, as he insisted, would seriously disturb ecological balance. His educational philosophy, in theory and practice, emphasizes on the need to shift to a more sustainable model of living that would bring mankind back into a state of harmony with Nature.

Keywords: Ecophilosophy, Brahmavidyalaya, Anthropocentrism, Deep Ecology, Santiniketan

When India was struggling to keep up with the colonial education system that had replaced the indigenous epistemological practices, Rabindranath Tagore identified the inherent flaws of the colonial education system that had rendered education into a burden artificially and externally imposed upon Indian students. Tagore sought to posit an alternate model of education that derived its roots from the Vedic education system of Ancient India. To that, Tagore added methodologies that were born from his own theory of what ought to be necessary part of a holistic education system.

The education system posited by Tagore effectively avoids the pitfall of presuming that the natural world exists solely to serve the interests of mankind or taking the anthropocentric position that implies that action is controlled and determined by humans alone. Rather than being only an environmentalist in his approach, Tagore repeatedly emphasizes on a model that would create the subject position of the student as an ecocitizen. Tagore’s educational model not only challenges the supremacy of the Western epistemological model touted by the white colonizer as the necessary

civilizing education for the Indians, but also interrogates the suitability of accepting that model as adequate to address the educational needs of the contemporary learner. In this process, Tagore highlights the immense importance that world of nature holds as an educator for the young minds.

It is necessary to identify what exactly was the role that Tagore conceptualized Nature to be playing in his education system. It is relevant in context of the modern and varied streams of ecocritical approaches like Environmental Education, Ecocritical Pedagogy or Education for Sustainability. According to Kopnina, “While the earlier forms of EE, such as naturalist, systematic, scientific, value-centred, or holistic perceived the environment as nature, system, object of study or field of values, ESD conceives environment as ‘resource for economic development or shared resource for sustainable living’ (Sauvé, 2005, 34)”.¹ It is thus necessary to understand Tagore’s perspective on nature at a time that predated the birth of the very concept of Ecocriticism. Tagore’s spiritual philosophy that bore the heavy influence of the Upanishads and Vedas, could not possibly have viewed environment as an economic resource alone and it is particularly so in context of education. In his essay “শিক্ষাসমস্যা” or “Problems of Education”, Tagore clearly states the role that he wishes to see Nature playing in the education system:

চিরদিন উদার বিশ্বপ্রকৃতির ঘনিষ্ঠসংস্রবে থাকিয়াই ভারতবর্ষের মন গড়িয়া উঠিয়াছে।
জগতের জড়-উদ্ভিদ-চেতনের সঙ্গে নিজেকে একান্তভাবে ব্যাপ্ত করিয়া দেওয়া ভারতবর্ষের
স্বভাবসিদ্ধ হইয়াছে। ভারতবর্ষের তপোবনে দ্বিজবটুগণ এই মন্ত্র আবৃত্তি করিয়াছেন-
যো দেবোহগ্নৌ যোহপসু যো বিশ্বং ভুবনমাবিবেশ।
য ওষধিষু যো বনস্পতিষু তস্মৈ দেবায় নমো নমঃ ॥
যে দেবতা অগ্নিতে, যিনি জলে, যিনি বিশ্বভুবনে আবিষ্ট হইয়া আছেন, যিনি ওষধিতে যিনি
বনস্পতিতে সেই দেবতাকে নমস্কার করি, নমস্কার করি।
অগ্নি বায়ু জলস্থল বিশ্বকে বিশ্বাত্মা দ্বারা সহজে পরিপূর্ণ করিয়া দেখিতে শেখাই যথার্থ শেখা।
এই শিক্ষা শহরের ইন্ধুলে ঠিকমত সম্ভবে না; সেখানে বিদ্যাশিক্ষার কারখানাঘরে জগৎকে
আমরা একটা যন্ত্র বলিয়াই শিথিতে পারি।² (Tagore, 1987)

¹ Helen Kopnina, “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD): The turn away from ‘environment’ in environmental education?” in *Environmental Education Research*, 18(5), pp. 699-717.

² Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 6 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988), pp. 580-581.

[From time immemorial, the mind of India has been developed through intimate contact with the great universal Nature. It has become habitual for India to thoroughly immerse oneself within the consciousness of the world. The Brahmins of the *tapovans* had chanted this mantra-

Yō dēbōhōagnōu yōhōpsu yō vishwang bhubanmabibēsh.

Ya oshadhishu yō banaspatishu tasmai dēbaya namō namaha

The God who is in fire, in water, immersed within the universe – the one who is in plants, in trees – I bow down to that God.

To learn to see, in completeness, fire, air, water and land, through the soul of the universe, is true learning. This learning is not properly possible in the schools of a city; there, in the factory of learning, we can only know the universe as a machine.]³

By quoting these lines, Tagore is locating the spiritual in Nature thereby cancelling any possibility of regarding Nature from a utilitarian point of view where one's concern for Nature arises from the need to ensure the continued supply of resources that human beings need from Nature. The Tagorean philosophy of education emphasizes on the need for a young learner to embrace and realize the spiritual and one of the ways to achieve the same is through understanding and valuing the innate relationship of humankind with the non-human world around. This idea of an innate relationship can be traced back to the Vedas and Upanishads that also formed the basis of Tagore's educational experiment in both theory and practice. The Brahmavidyalaya (also known as Brahmacharyashram) at Santiniketan, that later expanded to form Visva-Bharati, germinated from Tagore's desire to retrace his steps back to the Vedic model of education and found a school that based on the values and practices of the Vedic model. A close reading of Tagore's essays like "Santiniketan Brahmacharyashram", "The Problem of Education", "Education of Ashram" would immediately reveal how he was motivated by the spirit of inward inquiry as found in the Vedas and Upanishads. In the education system formulated by Tagore, the position held by nature is clearly driven home through the lines of his essay "আশ্রমের শিক্ষা" or "The Education of the Ashram" where he states,

³ The translations used in this article are made by the author of the article.

ছেলেরা বিশ্বপ্রকৃতির অত্যন্ত কাছের। আরামকেদারায় তারা আরাম চায় না, সুযোগ পেলেই গাছের ডালে তারা চায় ছুটি। বিরাট প্রকৃতির নাড়ীতে নাড়ীতে প্রথম প্রাণের বেগ নিগূঢ়ভাবে চঞ্চল। শিশুর প্রাণে সেই বেগ গতিসঞ্চার করে। বয়স্কদের শাসনে অভ্যাসের দ্বারা যে-পর্যন্ত তারা অভিভূত না হয়েছে সে পর্যন্ত কৃত্রিমতার জাল থেকে মুক্তি পাবার জন্যে তারা ছটফট করে। ... বিশ্বপ্রাণের স্পন্দন লাগতে দাও ছেলেদের দেহে মনে, শহরের বোবা কালা মরা দেয়ালগুলোর বাইরে।⁴

[Boys are very close to nature. They do not seek to lounge on couches; whenever opportunity presents itself, they seek to take their holiday on the branches of trees. The primordial stream of life courses through the veins of great and wide Nature. That flow induces vitality within the life-force of the boys. As long as they are not overcome by the habits imposed upon them by the disciplining of elders, they strive to free themselves of the trap of artificiality. ... Let the beating heart of the universe touch the mind and body of the boys—away from the dumb and dead walls of the city.]

Here, Tagore refers to that primordial relationship of humans with the world of Nature that is an apt expression of the ecological unity found in the Vedas which state the human beings are a part of the wholeness that is composed of the harmonious union of mankind, the world of nature and the divine. Man's existence, by itself, is a fragment of the wholeness and thus the "very idea of environment as an objective entity is beyond comprehension for a Vedic ṛṣi (seer)..." (Misra, 1992, p. 57). In the approach of the Vedas towards Nature, one can locate the values of Deep Ecology as according to the non-dualism of the Supreme Power, Nature manifests that very Supreme Power that ought to be venerated and cherished and by no means, viewed as a resource to be either exploited or economized. Misra explains, "Nothing exists which is not a part of everyone's existence. The distinction between Man as the enjoyer and fruits of the Earth as the material for enjoyment is conspicuous by its absence..." (ibid., p. 57-58).

In his education system, Tagore insisted that his students realize the intrinsic value of the non-human world and abide by the innate bond that exists between human beings and nature. Thus, when he formulates the working principles for his school, he writes a detailed account of how he

⁴ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 16, p. 349.

wants this goal to be attained. These working principles were laid down by Tagore in a twenty-page letter written to a teacher of the school, Kunjalal Ghosh, dated 13 November 1902. This letter can be regarded as the first constitution of Brahmacharyashram. There, he writes,

বাহিরে জগৎ এবং আমার অন্তরে ধী, এ দুইই একই শক্তির বিকাশ—ইহা জানিলে জগতের সহিত আমার চেতনার এবং আমার চেতনার সহিত সেই সচ্চিদানন্দের ঘনিষ্ঠ যোগ অনুভব করিয়া সংকীর্ণতা হইতে স্বার্থ হইতে ভয় হইতে বিষাদ হইতে মুক্তি লাভ করি। ...

যো দেবোহগ্নৌ যোহপ্সু যো বিশ্বং ভুবনমাবিবেশ।

য ওষধিষু যো বনস্পতিষু তস্মৈ দেবায় নমোনমঃ ॥

ব্রহ্মধারণার পক্ষে এই মন্ত্রই আমি বালকদের পক্ষে সর্বাপেক্ষা সরল বলিয়া মনে করি। ঈশ্বর জলে স্থলে অগ্নিতে ওষধি-বনস্পতিতে সর্বত্র আছেন, এই কথা মনে করিয়া তাঁহাকে প্রণাম করা শান্তিনিকেতনের দিগন্তপ্রসারিত মাঠের মধ্যে অত্যন্ত সহজ। সেখানকার নির্মল আকাশ এবং প্রান্তর বিশেষ্বরের দ্বারা পরিপূর্ণ, এ কথা মনে করিয়া ভক্তি করা ছেলেদের পক্ষেও কঠিন নহে।⁵

[That the world without and our intellect within us, both are the manifestations of the same power—should we know this, we would feel this intimate connection between our consciousness and the world, between our consciousness and the Eternal One and thus be freed from the narrowness of self-interest, fear and despair. ...

yo devo'gnau yo'psu yo viśvaṁ bhuvanamāviveśa

yo oṣadhīṣu yo vanaspatiṣu tasmai devāya namo namaḥ

I consider this mantra to be the simplest for the boys to acquire the understanding of Brahma. By feeling that God resides everywhere, be it in water or land, fire or trees, it would be easy indeed to bow down before him amidst the fields stretching to the horizon in Santiniketan. The pure light, sky and fields over there are filled with the Lord of creation and it would not be difficult for the boys to revere Him if they bear this in mind]

The Tagorean value system found a prominent expression in Tagore's rural reconstruction process that he undertook through Sriniketan and Siksa-Satra. At the core of Sriniketan was Tagore's

⁵ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, pp. 303-304.

ecophilosophy that emphasized on eradicating the greed with which mankind has repeatedly exploited Nature; he wished to propagate the idea of giving back to nature both as an atonement and as a way of living in synergy with nature. The idea of human greed is underlined strongly in his essay “হলকর্ষণ” or “Ploughing the Land”:

পৃথিবীর দান গ্রহণ করবার সময় লোভ বেড়ে উঠল মানুষের। ... নানা প্রয়োজনে গাছ কেটে কেটে পৃথিবীর ছায়াবস্ত্র হরণ করে তাকে দিতে লাগল নগ্ন করে। তাতে তার বাতাসকে করতে লাগল উত্তপ্ত, মাটির উর্বরতার ভান্ডার দিতে লাগল নিঃস্ব করে। অরণ্যের-আশ্রয়-হারা আর্ষাবর্ত আজ তাই খরসূর্যতাপে দুঃসহ। ... আজ আমরা স্মরণ করব যখন পৃথিবী স্বহস্তে সন্তানকে পরিমিত অন্ন পরিবেশন করেছেন, যা তার স্বাস্থ্যের পক্ষে, তার তৃপ্তির পক্ষে যথেষ্ট ...⁶

[When it was time for mankind to receive the gifts from Nature, their greed grew exponentially. ... to satisfy their multiple needs, they kept cutting down trees and, in the process, stripped the earth naked by robbing her off the clothes from her back. They caused her air to get heated and depleted the wealth of fertility within her soil. Thus, today, the land of the Aryas is bereft of the shelter of forests and is burning in the merciless heat of sun. ... today we will remind ourselves of the time when the earth herself served sufficient food to her children – food that was adequate for their health and satisfaction ...]

Here, Tagore is stating his views on the uncontrolled consumption of Nature by mankind that has seriously disturbed ecological balance and is vociferously insisting on the need to shift to a more sustainable model of living that would bring mankind back into a state of harmony with Nature. This idea finds repeated expression in both fictional and non-fictional works by Tagore. The play *Red Oleanders* is a prominent example with its theme being based on the idea of man’s unbridled greed towards consuming the wealth of the earth. Through this ideological position and consequent action, Tagore was in anticipation of negating the cultural of commodification and blind consumerism that Antonia Dardar has vociferously critiqued:

⁶ *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 382.

... the repression of the body is manifested with capitalist fervor to commodify as quickly as possible its design on the new generation. Schools are one of the most complicit institutions in the repression of the body and thus, the repression of our emotional nature, our sexuality energies, and the spiritual capacities that open us to communion with natural world.⁷

It was Tagore's aim to build an educational ecosystem the values of which could counter this subject position of educators even before it had come into pass in its entirety.

Tagore was a firm believer in the fact that close proximity of children with Nature made their minds acquire some of the best lessons possible from the classroom of Nature. Brahmavidyalaya, apart from being a school devoid of four-walled classrooms, was also a place where students were encouraged to actively engage with Nature and attune themselves to the changes of each season and the variety they brought to the great sensory feast of Nature. Kathleen O'Connell comments, "Through his art and the structure of the curriculum, he tried to convey to the students the subtle resonances which existed between the moods of nature and their own personalities".⁸ There are a number of memorial accounts that fondly recollect how the advent of rains at the onset of the monsoon was greeted in the open-air classrooms. Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury, who later served as secretary to Tagore, pens his experience as a teacher and records that while he was new to the job, one day, the sky clouded over signaling the onset of rain. He dismissed his students, telling them to enjoy frolicking out in the rain. However, he grew apprehensive afterwards and started doubting the correctness of his decision. Tagore not being present at the ashram, Raychaudhury wrote a letter informing him about the incident and perhaps anticipating approval from him. The approval was not late in coming. A gladdened Tagore wrote back expressing his joy at the students freely feasting in the banquet of nature:

... পেয়ালাভরে তোমরা প্রকৃতির সুধার ঝরণা থেকে সুধা পান কর। ... সেদিন যে ছেলেদের ক্লাসের বেড়া টপাটপ ডিঙিয়ে দৌড় দিতে দিয়েছিলে, সে খুব ভালো করেছিলে। আনন্দনিকেতনের

⁷ Antonia Darder, "An Eco-Pedagogy in the Pursuit of Social Justice and Peace" in *Social Justice, Peace, and Environmental Education: Transformative Standards*, ed. by Julie Andrzejewski Marta P. & Baltodano Linda Symcox (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. xi.

⁸ Kathleen O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2012), p. 188.

আনাগোনার রাস্তাটা তাদের খুব করে চেনা হয়ে যাক। মক্কা-মদিনা, কামস্কাটকা, কোচিন, পাটাগোনিয়ার ঠিকানা তারা যখন হয় জেনে নেবে, কিন্তু বিশ্বলক্ষ্মীর স্নেহকালের ঠিকানাটা যদি এই বয়সে খুঁজে না পায়, তবে যেদিন মস্ত পণ্ডিত হয়ে আমার মতো চোখে চশমা লাগাবে, সেদিন আর কোনো আশা থাকবে না। আর সকল শক্তির চেয়ে খুশি হয়ে ওঠবার শক্তিটা ওদের যেন পুরোপুরি ফুটে উঠতে পারে - ...⁹

[... Fill your cups and drink deep from the fountain of Nature's nectar. ... You did very well in allowing the boys to briskly jump over fences and run away on that day. May they come to know the road to the palace of joy intimately. They may learn the address of Mecca-Medina, Kamchatka, Cochin, Patagonia in their own sweet time but if they cannot find the road to Nature's loving lap, then once they grow into a great scholar and wear glasses like me, there would be no hope for them. May the power to be joyful grow more fully in them than any other power ...]

This letter is almost brimming with joy itself as Tagore sends his blessings for his students to enjoy the moods of Nature even at the cost of losing classes. His message is loud and clear that the spontaneous knowledge gained from nature would benefit students more than any book-learning. This highly characteristic letter from Tagore makes the reader wonder why Raychaudhury even felt the need of seeking Tagore's approval, particularly because by 1915 – when his letter was written – it had already grown into a custom of the ashram to dissolve classes as soon as raindrops began their descent.

Tagore cast Nature in the role of an educator, a teacher with an active agency whose sympathetic mode of teaching makes the learner imbibe those lessons spontaneously without feeling burdened by institutionalized pedagogy. Tagore compares the method of teaching deployed by a conventional school teacher with the way nature educates and concludes that the latter is far superior. He states, “The Schoolmaster is of opinion that the best means of educating a child is by concentration of mind, but Mother Nature knows that the best way is by dispersion of mind. When we were children, we came to gather facts by such scattering of mental energy, through unexpected surprises ... Facts must come fresh to children to startle their minds into full activity” (Tagore,

⁹ Sudha Kanta Raychaudhury, “Santiniketaneer Smriti” in *Shantiniketaneer Shekal*, ed. by S. Chattopadhyay (Kolkata: Kishalay Publication, 2019), p. 189.

1994). In order to ensure that his students were integrating into his ecosystem of education, Tagore created the ethos where the students would walk miles simply to look at the seasonal flowers in full bloom – “বসন্তে পলাশের শোভা দেখতে আমাদের চলে যেতে হত উত্তরে গোয়ালপাড়া ছাড়িয়ে কোপাই নদী পার হয়ে শেয়ালা গ্রামের জঙ্গলে। ... বসন্তে দল বেঁধে পলাশ ফুল দেখতে যাওয়ার কী উত্তেজনা আমাদের, চৈত্রে শালফুল।”¹⁰ [During Spring, in order to have a look at the beauty of Palash flowers, we had to go the jungle of the Sheyala village that was to the north of Goyalpara and across the river Kopai. ... How excited we were to go in groups to have a look at Palash flowers in Spring and Shaal flowers in the month of *Chaitra*!]. This ecosystem of education also incorporated the practice of students, particularly those of Kala Bhavana, to go for regular walks to the Santhal villages in the vicinity of the ashram in order to study the interplay of life, nature and culture in those places. In this context, perhaps it would not be a fallacy to suggest that through these walks and expeditions, Tagore was implementing nascent steps for anticipating the kind of nature walks that Adrienne Cassel describes as a part of her project at a community college in Ohio where her effort was to put into action “an experiential, ecocritical approach to teaching research writing”.¹¹ He wanted his students to absorb the knowledge that Nature dispenses so freely and in course of it, realize their innate connection with the non-human world around them. This orientation was facilitated by the unconventional celebrations that Tagore started in his school. He started the *Briksharopan Utshab* which celebrated the planting of a young sapling, the *Halakarshan Utshab* which celebrated the first ploughing of the cultivational ground, the *Barshamangal* which celebrated the onset of monsoon and *Bashantotshab* which was a celebration of the season of spring. A detailed account of the *Briksharopan Utshab* provided by Rani Chanda – a student to Visva-Bharati and wife of Anil Chanda who was personal secretary of Tagore – gives as insight into how love and respect for Nature was an integral part of life and aesthetic of the ashram:

... একটি চারা গাছ – যা রোপণ করা হবে আজ। ... ছোট একটি শিশু চারা নিয়ে এক বিরাট উৎসব। এই কোমল একটি প্রাণের কাছে কত আশা-ভরসা, কত প্রার্থনা আমাদের ... মানুষ

¹⁰ Amita Sen, *Ananda Sarbakaaje* (Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute, 1996), p. 8.

¹¹ Adrienne Cassel, “Walking in the Weathered World” in *Teaching Ecocriticism and Green Cultural Studies*, ed. by Greg Garrard (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 27-26 (p. 28).

মানুষকে নিয়ে উৎসব করে, দেবতাকে নিয়ে উৎসব করে, আজ এই কচি কোমল চারাগাছটিও সেই সমান সম্মানের অধিকারী। (Chanda, 1984, p. 177)

[... a sapling – that which would be planted today. ... A huge festivity centers around one little sapling. So much of our hope and faith, so many prayers are devoted to this one tender little life ... human beings celebrate other humans, they hold celebrations in honour of gods, and today this tender little sapling is deserving of respect equal to that.]

Alongside celebrating and venerating plant-life, Tagore had, during the *Briksharopan Utshab* of 1926, composed five poems in the honour of the five elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Sky – and those poems, together with selected Sanskrit slokas were read out as a significant part of the celebration. To Tagore, these celebrations constituted an effort to give back to Nature, at least in part, what mankind is in the constant process of consuming. So he states, “... এর দ্বারা বসুন্ধরার যে অনিষ্ট হয় তা নিবারণ করবার জন্য আমরা কিছু ফিরিয়ে দিই যেন। ধরণীর প্রতি কর্তব্যপালনের জন্য, তার ক্ষতবেদনা নিবারণের জন্য আমাদের বৃক্ষরোপণের এই আয়োজন।”¹² [... we have to give back something to heal the harm that is caused to the earth as a result (of our action). To fulfill our duty to earth, to ensure the healing of her injuries – we have organized this *briksharopan*.] It is implicit in Tagore’s statement that the man-made changes to the environment are markedly different from the evolutionary changes which have taken place organically and are thus not detrimental in nature. Tagore’s target was clearly to bring about a change in the thinking process and approach of his entire ashram – students, teachers and all the inhabitants – towards the non-human world. He wanted to create a culture of responsible mutual relationship between the human and non-human world where there would be no mindless taking from the non-human world without any consideration of the impact that the human world has on it.

Since performing arts like music, dance and theatre were essential part of the curriculum at Santiniketan, Tagore wrote a number of plays on the theme of seasons like *Sharadotshab* and *Phalguni* which were performed by his students under his direction. Nearly all aspects of education at Brahmavidyalaya and Visva-Bharati enabled the students to attune themselves with the world of nature both spiritually, artistically as well as habitually. Tagore describes the process thus:

¹² *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 373.

From the beginning I tried to create an atmosphere which I considered to be more important than the class teaching. The atmosphere of nature's own beauty was there waiting for us from a time immemorial with her varied gifts of colours and dance, flowers and fruits with the joy of her mornings and the peace of her starry nights. I wrote songs to suit the different seasons, to celebrate the coming of Spring and the resonant season of the rains following the pitiless months of summer. When nature herself sends her message we ought to acknowledge its compelling invitation. While the kiss of rain thrills the heart of the surrounding trees if we pay all our dutiful attention to mathematics we are ostracised by the spirit of universe. Our holidays are unexpected like Nature's own. Clouds gather above the rows of palm trees without any previous notice; we gladly submit to its sudden suggestion and run wildly away from our Sanskrit grammar. To alienate our sympathy from the world of birds and trees is a barbarity which is not allowed in my institution.¹³

Tagore's use of the word "barbarity" is of particular interest in this context as Tagore is asserting that mankind's ability to aptly respond to nature is a marker of his prime failing. Tagore is thus implying that the modern civilization is responsible for this unnatural separation of human beings from nature. He says, "Civilized man has come far away from the orbit of his normal life" (Tagore & Elmhirst, 1961). The barbarity occurs when man transgresses his "normal" and innate relationship with Nature and under the aegis of so-called progress of civilizations, not only turns away from nature, but also exploits nature for satisfying the demands of civilized life. This theme is invoked repeatedly by Tagore in his plays like *Rakta Karabi* (*Red Oleanders*) and *Muktadhara* (*The Waterfall*). Tagore has described the agony he experienced as a child because he keenly felt the separation from a primordial state of belonging with Nature. He writes, "The misery, which I felt, was due to the crowded solitude in which I dwelt in a city where man was everywhere, with never a gap for the immense non-human".¹⁴ It is here, in his desire for being both in communion and harmony with the non-human world that Tagore expresses legacy of the Vedas and Upanishads

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 627.

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 627.

alongside coming striking close to the philosophy of the Deep Ecologists. Debarati Bandyopadhyay opines,

Following the Upanishads, Rabindranath sought the Supreme Being in nature, in a manifestation of a pantheistic sentiment. As a result, nature is supremely important, in itself, to him. We have learnt from Deep Ecology in the latter half of the twentieth century that nature should be valued for its own sake and not for exploiting potential natural resources necessary to sustain human civilization. Though Rabindranath was writing about these ideas in 1910, there seems to be a similarity between him and the Deep Ecologists regarding their views about nature.¹⁵

The idea that Tagore had anticipated the advent of Ecocritical approach is also corroborated by Ananda Lal who, in while critiquing Tagore's seasonal plays, comments:

Tagore instead stressed the healing, immanent bond between nature and humanity and, as such, became the first theatrical exponent of the Green Movement much before it had become a movement. Deep ecology and environmental consciousness, so significant on paper in India's school system, begins with *Shāradotsab* and the cycle that followed it: *Phālguni* (Play of Phālgun, Month of Spring, 1915), *Basanta* (Spring, 1923), *Shesh barshan* (Last Rainfall, 1925), *Sundar* (The Beautiful, 1926) ...¹⁶

That Tagore was successful in creating an ethos of an eco-aesthetic is attested by the artistic style that emerged as a marker of Santiniketan's identity. In Tagore's lifetime, the houses built in the ashram were kept low in height so that they do not become obstructions to the view of the boundless sky. Their earthen walls were kept unpainted partly due to the lack of funds and partly so that they quickly become weather-marked and blend naturally with their surroundings. Even the *alpana* or the decorative floor art painted during festivals, were integrated into the natural milieu as the fallen leaves and flowers on the floor were not swept away but lovingly accepted as Nature's participation in mankind's festivity. The art born from Santiniketan thus echoed this spirit of harmony. Swati Ganguly records, "... his eyes were riveted by the jade-coloured cement sculpture in front of the building. Done in an abstract style, it appeared like supple limbs entwined,

¹⁵ Debarati Bandyopadhyay, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2019), p. 72.

¹⁶ Ananda Lal, *Three Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 105-106.

or like two succulent creepers growing together to suggest an enigmatic harmony. This sculpture, known as *The Lamp Stand* (1940), was the work of Ramkinkar.”¹⁷

As the paper has already stated, Tagorean education system drew heavily from Vedas (particularly from *Atharva-Veda*) and Upanishads (particularly from *Taittiriya Upanishad* and *Kathopanishad*) and thus, the resonance of *advait* philosophy can easily be traced in it. It is the imperative of the *advait* philosophy that no hierarchy exists in the relation of human kind with the non-human world around them:

An ethical framework genuinely antihumanist at its core, singularizes the dominant Indian tradition which accorded equal status to the human and non-human spheres. Such an egalitarian view was instrumental in engendering a philosophy of immanent monism (*advaita*). Indeed, the rise of the *advaita* philosophy may be traced to the realization that human beings live in a more than human world, characterised by mutual interdependence and more importantly, that any alienation of the two spheres could spell doom for the earth.¹⁸

Tagore’s ecophilosophy bears the legacy of this philosophic tradition and it is clearly evident in a number of his essays like “The Religion of the Forest”, “The Message of the Forest”, “The Philosophy of Our People” among others, where he not only provides his interpretation of this philosophy but also ecocritically comments on texts like Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*, *Kumara-Sambhava*, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *The Winter’s Tale* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But the most emphatic and holistic expression of his ecophilosophy is to be found in Tagore’s educational enterprise both in its theoretical construct as well as the practical execution thereof. This ecophilosophy was not the product of a poetic romanticism as Tagore succeeded in creating a stable ecology at Santiniketan. His ecophilosophy was also effective in the way he conceptualized and executed the functioning of Siksa-Satra and Sriniketan – both off-shoots of his educational enterprise. Tagore sought to create a committed, sincere and value-based education system that would empower its students to make their life and action choices that would lead to a harmonious and respectful cohabitation of the human and the non-human. At the core of Tagore’s

¹⁷ Swati Ganguly, *Tagore’s University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2022), pp. 295-296.

¹⁸ T. J. Abram, “Ecocriticism, Ethics and the Vedic Thought” in *Indian Literature*, 51.6.242 (2007): pp. 179-186 (p. 184).

ecophilosophy was the faith that both the human and the non-human world are the manifestations of the same Supreme Power and are thus interconnected in a relationship which, when honoured, would bring fulfillment to human lives. In his words,

For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.¹⁹

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¹⁹ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 2, p. 521.

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“Aamra Dujona Swargo-Khelona Goribo Naa Dharonite...”¹:

Modern Self, Conjuality and *Bhakti* in Tagore Songs

Manosh Chowdhury

Abstract:

This paper aims to revisit Tagore songs, a very popular yet contested musical genre among the Bengali speaking population for near about a century, with special reference to some specific attributes of the educated middleclass people of this region. Focusing on devotion and conjugal relationship as two attributes, this paper seeks to understand how Tagore songs provide a space where even an exhibiting secular self could merge into the realm of devotion (*bhakti*) and how the songs themselves could turn into worship of Tagore, a very illustrated cultural and national icon across the border of India and Bangladesh with prolonged international stature. This paper also looks into the ways his devotees guard performance styles, advocate for ‘purity’, that again endorses ‘*bhakti*’ in a defined but ever-changing secular conjugal space, how the songs take on a life of their performance styles changing as does the meaning of the songs dependent on when and where and by whom they are performed.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, modernity, love, middleclass, ‘core’ values

¹ Tagore, R. 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. Kolkata: Visva-bharati. pp. 291. A line of Tagore’s song, categorized as part of the ‘love’ section by Tagore himself. “Not a fake heaven on the earth we’d rear..”. Translated by Anjan Ganguly found on geetabitan. com: <https://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/rs-a2/aamra-dujona-swargo-khelna-english-translation.html>

aamra chitro oti bichitro

oti bishuddho oti pobitro... [“We are the portraits very amazing we are, very pure and very revered indeed...” *Taser Desh: Tagore*]²

With only a few last months remaining of school, someone mentioned that Sukanta Bhattacharya³ had memorized more than 500 lyrics written by Tagore. Not quite sure whether it was my admiration for Sukanta or Rabindranath himself, I felt the urge to memorize at least 500 of Tagore’s lyrics, if not more. Sure enough, the passion I was driven by made it possible. Fortunately, nobody was there to remind me that the *Shantiniketani* style of singing a Tagore song was absent in my amateur attempts, and hence, I had kept on going. It had been a thrilling experience. It wasn't long before people repeatedly noticed me as I attended any ‘cultural function’ of the small town. A higher secondary boy turns into a singer, that too with a cache of so many songs! The vibes/attention had already touched my parents by then too. Whenever someone used to pay a visit to our house, it was almost routine work to place the harmonium in front of them. Even after about two decades, the memories feel awkward even though almost forgotten. Partly because the hype itself was silly, but mostly because neither I celebrate the status now, nor have any plans to continue it anymore. Tagore, for me, is now a historical phenomenon of critical investigation, and so are his songs. For he was, and still is, such an important figure for the middle-class people of both Kolkata and Dhaka that I aim to engage with his intellectual creations thoroughly. I can perceive that he himself, and his music in particular are at the cultural core of the middle-class identity of both these cities. An identity that I desired to be a part of for years, like many others. And with the change in my perception, it has turned into an identity that must be confronted, as a political act. Thus, it is a huge process of unlearning which might be tough, but indispensable.

Most of those who detest *Rabindrasangeet* [songs by Tagore] defend their choice using a fussy argument saying that the pieces are tedious and uninteresting. The position fairly holds some validity, given the fact that the music industry is moving rapidly towards technological support

² Tagore (1973, p. 807). This is my translation. Many of Tagore’s poems and lyrics have been translated over a very long period of time in addition to his own translations in *Geetanjali* for which he received the Nobel Prize. Still, many of them are yet to be translated, and more importantly not all translations are easy to access in a single directory or collection.

³ Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926–1947) was a poet from Kolkata in British India who died at a very young age, before turning 21. Still he has 7 books of poems and lyrics, all published after his death. He is regarded as one of the most politically conscious writers of Bengali literature for his sharp Marxist position and communist expressions.

and Tagore schools are not usually interested in keeping up with that. But that doesn't necessarily explain the whole situation. Even in contemporary music, one can frequently find songs with repeated compositions from very different schools. Aged songs can be re-configured, re-manufactured using modern technologically advanced audio industries, a transition which is typically seen from 'folk' to 'band' music. Nevertheless, all these songs have a set audience of their own. My point here is, respect for any musical genre is not only subject to the composition, but also to the crucial self of an audience. And *Rabindrasangeet* as a genre, isn't any different. Furthermore, composition should not be dissociated from the very style of its presentation, or even from the words it conveys. Then, how can we make sense of the contempt in which Tagore songs are held? *Gharanas* [schools] will opt for an answer which reveals the ignorance and intellectual incapability of the listeners. The answer is not convincing enough for me because, let alone the complexities and intensities of the '*Baul*'⁴ songs the masses deal with, the middle class audience too, have consumed complex global musical products since the Beatles. I am not defending the shallow tendencies of producing a lot of claptrap songs by the audio industry here, which is a different point. My position here is pretty simple. Although *Rabindrasangeet* played a crucial role for the becoming of a modern self, which is essentially Bengali, it's that 'self' which now contradicts those songs of the late-modern age. For a long period of time, Tagore songs advocated conjugal ideology and *Bhakti* [devotion or piety] altogether. That was, and still is, the project of Tagore songs and the *gharanas*. To my understanding, that is what the present-day urban middle class still continue to espouse.

If we are to revisit Tagore songs polemically, we need to pinpoint some methodical questions. Let them be, for example, as follows: What are those factors of the core self that Tagore songs generate? How did the very process of generating meaning emerge to be the heart of a particular juncture, for a specific social group? In what fundamental ways did a particular class iconize Tagore? What are the values, even virtues, of a particular class exemplified in a specific musical genre, like Tagore songs? For me, these questions help to get into the 'adore-abhor' model of appreciating Rabindranath, and especially his songs. It became more important for me to find out

⁴ *Baul* is a generic term used to indicate all and every possible 'non-urban' 'non-Westernized' musical performer. But the people who are called 'bails', by the 'modern' and 'educated' people and mostly by the state agencies, do not always identify themselves with the term, but are obliged to due to state categorization. There are many theological and philosophical trends, all are named distinctively, and they should not be reduced to musical performances only.

why most of the *gharanas*, apart from an appraisal of his works, are reducing Tagore songs to a wretched style of representation. The tendency is similar in both *aangik* [physical] and *baachik* [verbal] aspects. Rather, it could be said that a surgical separation of these two is at the core of the modified style. I would like to suggest that this tendency has something to do with the tension between construction and portrayal of a modern self. To explore the question of the ‘self’, let’s examine the use of pronouns in Tagore songs. Not surprisingly, I encountered a very idiosyncratic use of pronouns in them. ‘You’ is at its center, along with ‘me’. One can well argue that this is a feature of *aadhunik gaan* [modern songs] too. Of course! And who is going to claim *Rabindrasangeet* as non-modern? Rather by looking at the early gramophone history, we can rest assured that except for some Lucknow-*gharana Toppa* and *Thumri*,⁵ it was only *Rabindrasangeet* that captured a large portion of the market of the early gramophone products in India, particularly after *Shantiniketan* was established. I prefer to see ‘modern songs’⁶ as a response to, or a successor of, the Lucknow-inspired musical genres that formed the early generation musical products manufactured by the gramophone companies⁷ in India. And of course, there was the pressure of maintaining the length of a musical piece. ‘Modern songs’, including Tagore songs, came to be the right product for an initial long-player.

We must think sensibly, about the ‘you’s in Tagore songs which are dichotomously conditional to the ‘me’s; that they are likely to be pronounced by a male ‘self’; and that the Kolkata

⁵ *Toppa* and *Thumri* are said to be two classical (or semi-classical according to some scholars) musical genres that emerged from Punjab and other areas of Northern India. I referred to Lucknow in a more casual manner to connote Lucknow as a ‘musical hub’ for colonial India. Bengali *Toppa* and *Thumri* largely are said to be influenced by the classical traditions in Lucknow. In the early years of gramophone products, these two genres were among the appropriated ones.

⁶ ‘Modern songs’ (*aadhunik gaan*) is a genre that largely refers to lyric songs, usually 3 to 6 minutes in length and has some serious connection with technological transformations as well. In Bengal, many major poets started writing and composing songs that were recorded in the studios and came out as gramophone-records. In Bangla everyday usage, people and commentators often refer to songs that started being penned and composed during the 1940s, often as teamwork, for the gramophone companies, and not the ones that were penned and composed by the renowned poets like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Rajanikanta Sen, Atulprasad Sen, Dwijendralal Roy or the like.

⁷ Initially there was a single company HMV (His Masters’ Voice). A British company named ‘The Gramophone Company Limited’ started its Indian operation in 1902 just a few years after beginning its operations in the UK and US.

*Bhodroloks*⁸ then are journeying towards a nuclearization of relationships. I am well aware of the fact that I may sound crude, but the experts are much interested in the categories Rabindranath himself proposed for his songs – love, worship, patriotism and so on. The devotees of *Rabindrasangeet* are always trying to convince the public of how worship songs can be distinguished from and are different to love songs. Yet ordinary people are happy to find these categories intersect at some point. The finding is supported by a popular secularist idea that Rabindranath has combined worldly with eternal love. Worldly love here, unlike the *Qawwali*⁹ or some other trends, is heterosexist.

However, I find the latter idea to be much more sensible. I mean, the pair of ‘you’ and ‘me’ in the genre match with a conjugal desire, whether it is the case of love songs or of worship songs. Of course conjugal desire is not constant. It is ever-changing over the course of time; it is ever-varying amongst social groups. But the urge expressed in those songs has something to do with an imagined pair – a pair that is pleasant, soothing and pure. Even in the patriotic songs Rabindranath usually personified the ‘homeland’ as the mother or as a *Devi* [Goddess], which makes him consistent in his project. For the subjects linked to the mother or *Devi*, it may well be a case of true and ‘pure’ emotions. And following this line, I am also arguing that the ‘self’ in *Rabindrasangeet* is pretty modern. It is because of its [self] integrity, its familial emotions, that its unique nature of being alone and ‘a part of the pair’ altogether comes about.

Yet then, what about *bhakti*¹⁰ in this verse? How do I see it as a crucial element of *Rabindrasangeet*? *Bhakti*, for me, should also be seen in terms of the self. It is the perfect fusion of incessant passivity and self-assured authority, as it appeared to be the case in Tagore songs. I

⁸ ‘*Bhodrolok*’ is a translation of ‘gentlemen’, but connotes a particular social class emergent in the wake of colonial Bengal with the virtues of education, Western taste etc. While this term has long been a praiseworthy adjective for the people belonging to this class, many critics use it to refer to a hegemonic group of people with a colonial mindset.

⁹ Qawwali is a musical form derived from the Sufi tradition of Islam and originated in the Indian subcontinent. For some complicated cultural-political reasons, this form is often popularly perceived as a ‘Pakistani’ genre.

¹⁰ ‘*Bhakti*’ is a Bengali word that can be translated as devotion or reverence or piety, mostly used in religious context. Though not much used in the present day, or used as synonymous to ‘respect’ in social context, yet with an overt sense of status-quo. However, during the formation of the middle-class in undivided Bengal, not only was ‘bhakti’ a regularly used term, but also expressed the grave concerns over its use, as the social and intellectual formation was believed to challenge the older forms of religiosity. Further, with the advent of the gramophone company, ‘devotional songs’ (*bhaktimulok gaan*) were a genre that regularly released albums. Rabindranath Tagore, an icon of the ‘secular’, seems to remain idiosyncratic in this regard. He perhaps was the sole ‘modern’ author whose manifestation of ‘bhakti’ has long been accepted by the modernist-secularist educated middleclass people.

found scrutinizing fusion particularly in the context of the secular age to be the most exciting, because no other ‘modern’ poet of his era enjoyed an open pass, definitely from the urban newly-formed middleclass population, for illuminating *bhakti*. Eventually, I came to be convinced, *Rabindrik bhakti* [devotion as it is implied in Tagore’s pieces] doesn’t contradict the secular self, not even the male-self. A fascinating move would be to notice what I called incessant passivity, about how activities are being organized in the words of those songs. That is to say, the tangible actions taking place and the actors who have performed those are of my concern. We can find numerous events where the material objects, sometimes personified though, are moving about and acting around. In contrast to this, people are waiting, desiring, thinking, feeling and sometimes singing, especially people who are presented in the ‘I’ or ‘me’ form. For example, non-humans are accountable for actions in these lines: “*alokh pother pakhi gelo daki...*” (Birds of invisible route flew past chirping...)¹¹; “*kotha hote samirana, ane nobo jagorono...*” (Unfamiliar gust of wind rejuvenating...)¹²; “*jemon oi ek nimeshe bonya ese. Bhasiye ne jay...*” (...like a sudden flood that runs with its offerings...)¹³; “*kon rater pakhi gai ekaki...*” (Lonesome nocturnal birds sing along...)¹⁴; “*se namkhani neme elo bhuye, kokhon amar lolat dilo chhuye...*” (Then the name came down to earth, and touched me on the forehead...)¹⁵. In contrast, humans are accountable for actions in these lines found in the same lyric/poem: “*amar mon kemon kore, ke jane kahar tore...*” (Anguished is my heart – Who is it for – who knows...)¹⁶; “*lage buke sukhe dukhe koto je byatha...*” (Emotions galore for joy misery pain...)¹⁷; “*amare ke nibi bhai sopite chai aponare...*” (Come

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356. Love section, song serial 214. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 281. Love section, song serial 29. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 219. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 558. Translated by Tagore himself, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 215. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 546. Translated by Anjan Ganguly, found in Geetabitan.com.

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 145. Devotion (*puja*) section, song serial 350. Translated by myself.

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356.

¹⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 281.

friend, who can free me from bonds of toil...)¹⁸; “*ami kan pete roi, o amar apon hridayhohon dware...*” (I press my ears deep into my own heart...)¹⁹; “*akash jure shuninu oi baje tomari nam sokol tarar majhe...*” (I heard the song of your name, among all the stars of night...)²⁰. The examples are random selections from my end as my target is not to simplify the reading of Rabindranath, but to provide some explanations. ‘Self’ is reduced to a thinker, very sacred and pure, longing for a union of essence. And for sure physic is not there, thus self is predominantly asexual. Passivity here lies in the foundation of the regime of beauty, and is illustrated through non-activities. Whereas, authority lies upon the fact that ‘self’ is prudent in defining beauty, and divinity, and also an architect of that very union ‘he’ is longing for. This very essence of self is at the core of *Bhakti* in *Rabindrasangeet*. So, there is no reason for me to differentiate love songs from other songs.

One may pose the question as to why *Bhakti* is so crucial. As I have already mentioned that it tends towards asexuality and purity, one may very well raise the question about how conjugality ties in with this. Encountering the question, we can make an assumption which is, conjugality contradicts *bhakti*. But I strongly oppose that assumption myself. Rather, I believe that one must concentrate on what is being said about conjugal love in the public discourses. And, also remember the times during which Tagore was writing, which marked the beginning of a new order in relationships.

However, purity and selfhood do matter at the end in these songs. Negating the physical entity constantly, *bhakti* not only suggests the ways of how a newly constructed self should relate to the universe, but also form the ‘core’ of a pair, a heterosexist conjugation of two pure selves. Earlier, I mentioned a possible ‘male’ self in *Rabindrasangeet* because the ‘you’s do have a particular set of meanings. Composition could be seen as a supplementary venture in this path. No wonder that I, an illiterate person in the field of music, find no inconsistency in those. It’s a bit ironic that *bhakti* now, is a style for Tagore himself to be cherished by the people involved in

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 219.

¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 215.

²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 1973 (1931). *Geetabitan*. p. 356.

Rabindrasangeet. Since Debabrata Bishwas²¹, the myth of grammar and ‘purity’ is a story told throughout. Performing style is an amusing aspect to look at. Not only *Shantiniketan*, but a number of institutes in Bangladesh and in West Bengal are also preserving what they see as the ‘originality’ of the style. It reminds me of an acute musical drama by Tagore, *Taser Desh*, once again. But that is a different tale.

It is indeed burdensome work to find a similarity between *Taser Desh*²² and Bangladesh, yet not unworthy. Rabindranath was a central motivating force for the nationalists, in West Bengal and in Bangladesh, though, ironically, he himself was a critic of nationalism. In the later years, his songs were turned into the subject of many more social emotional outlets: superior taste, stylistic purity, higher artistic nature, heterosexual yet almost asexual playground etc. He himself became a monument of worship (*bhakti*, again). The ironic part is, he himself was critical, though inconsistent, of reducing a performance into a fossilized type. This is important for me, because, even after a critical engagement with his lyrics, I think there could be some newer interesting explorations to be made in Tagore songs as a musical genre. But the core of *bhakti* makes it dubiously impossible. For example: *bhakti* as a form of regulation of the self that requires one to achieve an idealized level of ‘purity’, and as a mode of adoring Tagore eternally. Hence, if one feels stimulated to do something with these songs, I believe, one would face a serious assault by the *gharanas*. But that hypothesis is not of the utmost priority for me. What makes me curious at this point is: why did some of the middle-class population, being ever regulated, secular and conjugal, have a dislike for these songs? The answer to this question might be pretty simple. *Rabindrik bhakti* comprises a purity unfashionable in an age of fusion-products. It is an age for a more active ‘me’. Otherwise, the project remaining is similar; it might even be the same.

²¹ Debabrata Bishwas (1911 – 1980) was a prominent Tagore singer who was born in then East Bengal, and later spent his professional life mostly in Kolkata. He was an active member of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), a left-leaning organization that worked for Indian freedom. But he was mostly known for his musical talent. Though he reached unparalleled popularity for his Tagore songs, he was labelled as a ‘non-grammatical’ by the Tagore gurus. In my boyhood, I was often confused as to whether I should follow his performance style or that of Ashoketaru Banerjee, another maestro Tagore singer.

²² Tagore, R. 1933. *Taser Desh*. Kolkata: Visva-bharati.

A musical play by Rabindranath Tagore. Here I refer to its acute satirical nature to the governance structure of an imagined land ruled by the playing cards.

Notes

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The *Avatar*: realistic science fiction between Mercantilism and Marxism

Sonja Stojadinovic

Abstract:

The mass popular science fiction movie *Avatar* with its broadcasting in 2009 has reached mass popularity and again has raised questions about the depiction of colonialism, capitalism and destruction in the name of profit. The Na'vi tribe, inhabitants of the Pandora planet, are attacked and colonized by an army from the Earth in search and exploitation of "unobtainium", a rare natural resource. The rhetoric and approach through humiliation and destruction by the Earth army depicted in white soldiers against the "primitive" tribes who have to be "civilized" is a pure copy paste of the mercantile period in human history. This period as a predecessor of capitalism and neoliberal capitalism that we currently live in has used the colonial approach to start accumulating capital as main currency for the stability of the states. The movie clearly depicts the Marxist theory of accumulation of capital and also the theory of mercantilism in the period of British and Spanish colonialism of other newly discovered continents and civilizations. The key characters in the movie that represents mercantilism as an economic system that was established mainly on imperialism and colonial expansion, are depicted by Selfridge and Quaritch. These leaders of the industrial military complex from Earth that ruthlessly occupied Pandora present the ideology of mercantilism based on expansion to other territories and mass exploitation of natural resources. The opposite characters that depict Marxist theory and the fight of the oppressed working class are presented through Na'vi people of Pandora and main characters Neytiri and Jake who turn from the side of the oppressor to the side of the oppressed.

The aim of this paper is to create a parallel between the mercantilism and Marxist theory of the struggle of the working class depicted in the movie *Avatar*. It will compare the Marxist approach to accumulation of capital and class struggle against ruthless colonization of other worlds practiced in the mercantile period from 16 to 20 century. The paper will cover mercantile philosophy and Marxist philosophy through the movie *Avatar* with the aim to prove that mercantilism and colonialism have never disappeared and they have changed their form of existence and exploitation. In order to more clearly present these two philosophies, the approach will be as follows: analyzes of the actions and roles of the two characters, Selfridge and Quaritch as pure representatives of mercantilism. On the "opposite" side will be an analysis of the characters

of Neytiri and Jake together with their roles in the movie. Furthermore, the paper will also cover part of the work of Rabindranath Tagore who in his magnificent work did not miss to write about the life under British rule which was a representative of the both the dying mercantile and rising capitalist system at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: capitalism, mercantilism, Avatar, colonialism, Tagore

Introduction

The popular science fiction movie *Avatar* broadcast in 2009 has immediately reached a high position on the movie list and wider popularity. Although it is not the first to criticize the US foreign policy (one of the first ones was “Full metal jacket”, 1987 by Stanley Kubrick¹), it has definitely steered public discussions. In order to draw a line between the science fiction that covers social conditions philosophically theorized and explained in the work of Karl Marx and Rabindranath Tagore, this paper will attempt to make a triangle of approaches to humans long lasting problem: equal distribution of wealth. The movie, *Avatar* has posed this never solved problem through a science fictional form, indirectly connecting an imaginary planet inhabited with indigenous people not familiar with unequal distribution of wealth and violence based on greed, reflecting the philosophy of Marx and Tagore. Marx’s approach to the unequal distribution of wealth has critically analyzed the capitalist society based on two premises: capitalists’ endless needs for commodities and unequal distribution of wealth. This endless need for commodities directly endangers the environment because its foundations are based on the expansion and extraction of wealth from nature without consideration of the consequences. On the other side, Tagore speaks about different forms of wealth distribution in which rich people are responsible for creation of the quality of life of community members of all layers of the society. The paper will connect the critical science fiction of *Avatar* with Marx’s critique of capitalists and Tagore’s view of equal distribution of wealth in society. An additional importance of this paper is the connecting line of three important examples of work from three different centuries, seeing how they are

¹ Brian Marks, ‘Full metal Jacket- Stanley Kubrick’s Misunderstood Masterpiece,’ <https://tilt.goombastomp.com/film/full-metal-jacket-misunderstood-masterpiece-30/>, [Accessed 18 November 2022]

intertwined and how much they show that the problem of unequal distribution of wealth is relentless.

Mercantilism and Marxism in 21st century *Avatar*

The narrative of the movie is placed in the imagined future year of 2154 on a planet - Pandora, a fictional moon in a distant galaxy. The main inhabitants of this planet are blue skinned indigenous people by the name of Na'vi, who live in harmony with nature and worship the mother goddess Eywa. On the other side of the story, is a powerful and rich corporation, RDA from the Earth which invades Pandora in search of a mineral called unobtainium, and in their ruthless approach towards the natives they present a recognizable copy of the colonizers from the 16th and 17th centuries. Core representatives of the RDA corporation are the characters of Colonel Miles Quaritch and Parker Selfridge. At the beginning, from this group of colonizers private Jake Sully is selected to infiltrate the natives with his avatar that is a full copy of the physical appearance of the Na'vi natives. However, as the time goes by and Quaritch and Parker with their orders clearly explain their true intentions (the extraction of unobtainium at any cost, even the death of the Na'vi), Jake Sully slowly but surely makes up his mind to support the fight of the Na'vi for the preservation of their planet and freedom. On the other side of the coin, we have Jake Sully and Neytiri, the daughter of the chieftain of the Na'vi people, who are organizing the struggle for their homeland. The switch of sides of Sully from a sole private who listens to orders of the RDA corporation, to a courageous leader and member of the Na'vi people, is triggered by the reality that the aim of the RDA corporation is only profit, propelled by greed and bloodshed. Furthermore, the Avatar body is a complete replacement for his body that is half functional (he is a paraplegic) and can completely fulfill its need that cannot be filled by the empty promises of the RDA corporation for new prosthetic limbs.

Here we can freely make the first connection with the philosophy of Karl Marx following the motives of the RDA corporation. As Marx has noted, colonialism is another form of capitalism, capitalists used colonization as a means to achieve primitive accumulation, the "original sin" of capital.² As a fully adequate example for the actions of the RDA corporation, we also have mercantilism as an economic strategy that is a predecessor of capitalism. This economic strategy

² Karl Marx, *Das Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Volume I (London, UK: Penguin, 1976), p. 873

arose in 16th and 17th centuries and its standpoint was “import less, export more” and a country’s wealth should be measured in its gold and silver, by the philosophical approach of Adam Smith, most popular figure of mercantilism and his work *Wealth of Nations*.³

Therefore Spain, Portugal and later U.K., France and Netherlands were the main colonizers in other continents and these European countries became richer because of colonialism and the mercantilist system of imposed high tariffs of imported goods.⁴ The sole representatives of the mercantilist system are depicted in the form of RDA corporation as the colonizing country and the characters of Quaritch and Parker representing military or Spanish conquistadors. Even in the sci-fi movies in the 21st century we cannot avoid mercantilism and its exploitative nature. Through the eyes of Franz Fanon, French psychiatrist and journalist, Nathan Eckstrand explains the separation of one country by colonialism. Colonialism has one most visible element of oppression: direct military control of the land, resources and people. This world is split in two, one of the colonizers and other of the colonized. The solid line that keeps two worlds separated and without contact, is the military and the only language spoken by the authority is violence. In *Avatar* the depiction of a divided world clearly follows the line of colonialism, the main pillar of mercantilism. The character of Selfridge is the authority who does not have any contact with the colonized people (Na’vi) and Quaritch who is the oppressors’ extended hand, that is, the military.⁵

An additional element of colonialism is its justification by the colonizers with adding how much infrastructure they have built (roads, schools, hospitals) and how much have they contributed into the quality of life of colonized people. This can be seen in the speeches of Selfridge and Quaritch, accentuating the roads they have built for the Na’vi people. The usual narrative for this justification by the colonizers is that people want the provided goods and services, therefore colonizers have a right to exploit the land. One fact that is intentionally ignored by supporters of colonialism is that replacing one society with another (imposing goods and services that are not

³ Adam Hayes, ‘Adam Smith and the Wealth of Nations,’ <https://www.investopedia.com/updates/adam-smith-wealth-of-nations/>, [Accessed 19 November 2022]

⁴ Nachiket Nishant, ‘Theories of International Political Economy: Mercantilism, Liberalism and Marxism,’ <https://medium.com/@worknachiket/theories-of-international-political-economy-mercantilism-liberalism-and-marxism-13f6b0f25e65> [Accessed 19 November 2022]

⁵ Nathan Eckstrand, ‘Avatar and Colonialism’ in *Avatar and Philosophy Learning to See*, ed. by George A. Dunn, (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), p. 193.

previously required) creates a new society in which the colonized are dependent on the colonizers which creates an inferiority complex, while colonizers consider themselves a superior race.⁶ This feeling of superiority expressed through insulting and dehumanizing language can be seen in the statements of these two characters when they are naming Na’vi people as “savages” and “blue monkeys”. This dehumanizing labeling of indigenous people is much seen and read in the myriads of papers of Spanish conquistadors and British colonizers with which they were justifying their mass killings during the era of colonies. The absence of indigenous people in the Bible was endlessly used for their extermination from the face of the Earth.

As mentioned above, in the middle of the movie, Jake Sully decides to change sides and join the Na’vi people. A parallel can be drawn here with the labourers and bourgeois. Jake is a labourer, while the bourgeois are his employers, the rich corporation from Earth. Furthermore, Marx explains that capitalists in their never-ending quest for commodities are prepared to go to the end of the galaxy and more.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.⁷

The movie *Avatar* no matter how much is a product of the director’s imagination, is a good example of Marx's theory of the endless need for commodities of the capitalists.

The equal distribution of wealth that is one of the basics of Marxism, is seen within the structure of the Na’vi people. Although they are depicted as indigenous people living in harmony with nature, not familiar with the technological advances of the Earthlings, they do not seem to miss much from the commodity that is imposed by the invaders. As Marx explains: the constant expanding of the market for products, pushes the bourgeois class to the limits of the globe⁸. They have to go everywhere, in order to establish new connections for the capital and profit to flow. But

⁶ Nathan Eckstrand, ‘Avatar and Colonialism’ in *Avatar and Philosophy Learning to See*, ed. by George A. Dunn, (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), p. 194

⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Volume I (London, UK: Penguin, 1976), p. 945.

⁸ Mike Wayne, ‘Jameson, Postmodernism and the Hermeneutics of Paranoia,’ in *Understanding Film Marxist Perspectives* ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 114.

this omnipresence requires massive productive forces together with perfect coordination, cooperation and production. To be more precise, it requires socialization of the mode of production. So, the conclusion is that in order to establish this mode of production with mass cooperation, collaboration and coordination, socialism itself has to be established. The Na'vi tribe with its smooth function in which everybody is organized within the needs of the community and based on the endless network of nature from the mother goddess Eywa, indirectly sends a message that they are already in the future, way far from capitalism. This confirms the theory of communism, that socialism is one step after capitalism, suggesting a direction to a classless society with established equal distribution of wealth by the people according to their needs and contributions.⁹

Tagore's view of society and equal distribution of wealth

In the article named "Wealth and Welfare", the prominent Indian author Rabindranath Tagore explains how property and wealth were treated and seen in Indian society "in former days".¹⁰ Public opinion had a strong influence on the wealthy and many public works were voluntarily supported by the rich classes. The philosophy of sharing for the masses to have water supply, medical help and education, was spontaneous adjustment of mutual obligation. Furthermore, the surplus of wealth followed the channel of social responsibility and it was a supporter of civilization. However, the position of Tagore towards property was slightly different from that of Marx. His opinion was that the urge for the rise of property is a fundamental part of human nature. The social training that we receive through life aims to make our property the expression of the best in us.¹¹ Additionally, the rise of the standard of living contributed to the creation of self-centrism where wealth is the ultimate goal of life and strongly contributes to class division. Tagore compares the rise of self-centrism and individualism with pests infecting crops, destroying the quality of the soil and harvest and his opinion that it has to be dealt with as a calamity. This is in

⁹ Mike Wayne, 'Jameson, Postmodernism and the Hermeneutics of Paranoia,' in *Understanding Film Marxist Perspectives* ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 115.

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Wealth and Welfare,' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 623 - 625 (p. 623).

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Wealth and Welfare,' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 623 - 625 (p. 624).

line with the Marx's position that workers have to rise against capitalism, which is also seen at the end of *Avatar*, where the Na'vi people rise against the RDA corporation.

Furthermore, Tagore indirectly explains the connection of how mercantilism and its descendant capitalism have destroyed the roots of Indian society. In the essay, 'Philosophy of Fascism', while explaining his impression of Mussolini, Tagore clearly notes that: "in bygone days in India, the State was only a part of the people. The mass of the population had its own self-government in the village community. Dynasties changed but the people always possessed the power to manage all that was vital to them. This saved them from sinking into barbarism. This has given our country a continuity through centuries of political vicissitudes. Our Western rulers have destroyed this fundamental structure of our civilization, the civilization based upon the obligations of intimate human relationship. And therefore, nothing today has been left for the people through which they can express their collective mind, their creative will, or realize the dignity of their soul, except the political instrument, the foreign model which is always present before their envious gaze."¹² Tagore's memory of how Western colonizers have destroyed the fundamentals of Indian society has a direct connection to the destruction of the Na'vi society and land by the RDC corporation, imposing their own standards and values and justifying their actions with a deceiving statement that it was all for the good of the Na'vi people.

Conclusion

Although historically mercantilism as an economic strategy ended at the beginning of the 20th century, it is not dead and it is very much alive within the foundations of the capitalist system. Occupation, colonizing, mass killing, divided societies, humiliation and extraction of the natural wealth of occupied territories, are all seen nowadays and in the movie, *Avatar*. As purely Western economic models, both mercantilism and capitalism are vividly dissected in Tagore's writing as having destroyed the pillars of Indian society and humanity itself. The struggle of the Na'vi people to preserve their planet is the struggle of all people around the world in the last five centuries that were colonized by Western civilization. Based on the inhumane securing of commodities, stockpiling gold, mineral resources and without equal distribution of wealth, the West and its

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, 'Philosophy of Fascism', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 771 – 776 (pp. 774-775).

economic models have jeopardised the planet and humankind. However, the voices of the majority who have experienced the whip of capitalism and occupation for illegal extraction of mineral resources and wealth, is rising. Although the movie *Avatar* is fictional, its narrative indirectly depicts the condition of humankind today. The 1% of the population that are feeding on the wealth of the rest 99% or the 10% of the Western world which is building its wealth, influence and manipulation on the back of the 90% who are manipulatively named as Second and Third world countries. In reality the Western world implies that the citizens of these countries are second- and third-class citizens without a right to create their own destiny. The triangular narrative of the movie *Avatar*, together with the philosophies of Tagore and Marx, draw a bloody line through the centuries in which the authors worked, clearly showing that the problems of unequal distribution of wealth followed with the greedy accumulation of commodities, are problems that are deeply rooted in the foundations of the human nature. Mercantilism and capitalism as systems will continue to function as long as humankind is ready to tolerate this dehumanization and killing by its own kind. Maybe, as the movie *Avatar* suggests, it is much easier to kill somebody who does not look like you, reflected in a mirror, like somebody from another planet. But when this “copy” of yours is endangering your life and its existence, the obligation to rise and fight is necessary. Additionally, we have to read and follow the works of philosophers and authors like Tagore and Marx who were very much aware of the threat to humanity posed by capitalist greed and warned us about the danger in their writing. We need to learn not to repeat the mistakes from the past, and be ready to build a different, safe and prosperous future and not in sci fi movies.

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Tagore and Gandhi: two philosophies of education and ‘ecosphaesthetics’

Varadesh Hiregange

Abstract:

While Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas K Gandhi, the two prominent ‘makers of modern India’, were mutually admiring friends with many commonalities, they also differed on many issues and nature of action. With much mutual respect, they discussed and debated those differences both privately and publicly through correspondence and journalism. One such area of their common interest and action was education and this paper takes a closer look at their philosophies and educational thought. Incidentally, two significant texts *Gitanjali* (of Tagore) and *Hind Swaraj* (of Gandhi) were written almost at the same time during the first decade of 20th century.

There were certain commonalities in their philosophies and philosophies of education. But there were differences as well. While Gandhian philosophy seemed to emphasise more on the ‘ethical’ component of life, Tagorean thought seemed to focus more on the ‘aesthetic’ element. While there seemed to be a fundamental agreement between the two in their ‘eclectic’ view of life disregarding ‘exclusive’ nationalisms, their difference in emphasis vis-a-vis the ‘ethical’ and the ‘aesthetic’, seemed to reflect in their philosophies of education as well.

The two philosophies need to be essentially captured together; the ‘ethical’ and the ‘aesthetic’ need to go hand-in-hand as they complement and complete each other; this is true in every walk of life, so also in education; such an approach could be a response to contemporary challenges. Both seemed to be quite conscious of the possibilities and limitations of ‘nature/environment’ and hence advocated an ecosophical life. Combining the philosophical thoughts of Gandhi and Tagore, the notion of ‘ecosphaesthetics’, could be derived as a comprehensive view of life and a way of life.

Key words: philosophy, education, philosophy of education, ecosophy, ethics, aesthetics and ecosphaesthetics

Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi are the two most significant figures of 20th century whose ideas and experiments cut across ‘time and space’ and hence need to be revisited again and again. Tagore’s comment on Gandhi that the latter’s practice outshines theory – is a telling one and Tagore says: “Gandhiji’s genius is essentially practical, which means his practice is immeasurably superior to his theory. We may be sure that when the scheme is actually worked out, we shall discover in it, only one more testimony to the genius of this practical sage whose deeds surpass his words”.¹ ‘Philosophy of education’ of these two most influential humans, who admired each other, respected and agreed on certain counts, yet disagreed on many other matters, is the area of exploration of this paper which adopts textual interpretation as its method. To take a look at the evolution of the word ‘philosophy’ as an area of study, Mautner says, initially in the universities, everything apart from theology, medicine and law were included in philosophy or faculty of arts; physics was considered as ‘natural philosophy’. In the 18th century, philosophy was treated as one of the subjects in the faculty of philosophy. Now the content of philosophy varies between countries and between institutions.²

Writing about the offshoots, he mentions that logic, physics and ethics were considered as the branches of philosophy from Xenocrates to Kant through several centuries and physics resulted in ‘science’; later, evolution of ‘theoretical philosophy’ included logic, epistemology and metaphysics; ‘practical philosophy’ included action, virtue and justice; in the late 18th century, areas such as ‘philosophy of law, the state, religion, language, logic, mathematics, psychology, mind, art, technology, environment etc’ emerged.³ There is an indication to the phrase ‘philosophy of education’ in Mautner’s exposition when he explains the complexities associated with the phrase ‘philosophy of...’, citing examples of philosophies of history, religion, law and mind; he also hints that philosophy could also be a second order of inquiry, examining the concepts of other subjects. Hence, it may be deduced that philosophy of education, in a sense, is the second order of inquiry, examining the concepts of education.⁴

For Radhakrishnan, the philosophy is ‘darsana’ in Indian context and terminology. He

¹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India: National Book Trust, 2008), p. 35.

² Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 466.

³ Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 466.

⁴ Thomas Mautner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 467.

continues that the root word for 'darsana' is 'drs' which means 'to see'; the seeing may be perceptual observation or conceptual knowledge; it may be inspection of facts, logical inquiry or insight of soul. Darsana is not intuition even though it is connected; it is a critical exposition, logical survey or a system; it is a thought system acquired by intuitive experience and sustained by logical argument.⁵ Radhakrishnan, along with Mautner, provides a right entry point for examining Tagore and Gandhi vis-a-vis their philosophies of education.

The word 'education' originates from the Latin word 'educatum' consisting of 'E' and 'Duco', the 'E' implying movement from 'inward' to 'outward' and the 'Duco' implying a kind of progress. The Latin word 'educere' also means propulsion from internal to the external. It could be a process of developing 'inner abilities'. It could also mean a kind of a change brought about by practice.⁶ Etymologically, education implies some kind of propulsion from 'inside' to 'outside' and progress; something is inside which needs to be brought out and it progresses.

This etymological meaning of education goes well with what the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, in his book 'Democracy and Education: an introduction to the philosophy of education', observes that as learning is 'coming to know', it involves a movement from 'ignorance to wisdom, privation to fullness, defect to perfection and non-being to being' in the 'Greek way' of putting it.⁷

It so much reminds one of those lines from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (of the pre-Christian era) in Indian tradition – Asatoma Sadgamaya, Tamasoma Jyotirgamaya, Mrityorma Amritamgamaya – take me from non-being to being, darkness to light which can mean 'ignorance to wisdom' and momentariness to eternity which may stand for a shift from 'privation and defect' to 'fullness and perfection'.⁸ Between these two lines – one Greek and another Indian - the shades of meaning may differ; but one doesn't fail to recognize a similarity in the essence of their meanings. These comprehensions also elevate education to its philosophical plain.

Discussing the meaning of education Kamala Bhatia and B D Bhatia maintain that initially

⁵ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (Vol I) (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20.

⁶ G R Sharma, *Trends in contemporary Indian philosophy of education* (New Delhi, India. Atlantic Publishers, n.d), p. 7.

⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* in Krishna Kumar (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2017), p. 355.

⁸ Krishnamurthy, Yayavaram, (2017), *Asatoma Sad Gamaya* (www.speakingtree.in) (Accessed 18 June, 2023).

children were taught necessary skills for living and gradually it also meant an attempt for more enriched social and cultural life. According to John Dewey (quoted in Bhatia and Bhatia) education is a process which has both psychological and sociological side; a child's urges and powers form the basis and provide initial point for education and later child is shaped as per the social consciousness and needs. So, Bhatia and Bhatia conclude that education is a tri-polar process involving educator, educand and social forces.⁹

This view is broadly confirmed by Ozman and Craver who say philosophy of education exists ever since humans became conscious of education as a 'distinct human activity'; even in pre-literate societies, education involved a philosophy of life; initially, education was primarily for survival, teaching skills necessary for living; but over the years, it has grown into a complex system catering to 'refined' socio-cultural life; as there are educational practices, so there are theories about it and the task is to connect theory and practice intelligently.¹⁰

According to John Dewey (quoted in Chandra and Sharma), philosophy of education is the theory addressing the 'difficulties' of contemporary social life. In his understanding, it is clearly suggested that education and society are closely connected and not independent of each other.¹¹ Dewey further says (cited in Ozman and Craver), if we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and our fellowmen, philosophy may even be defined as general theory of education.¹² This view is a seminal one in the sense that it hints at the interchangeability of philosophy and theory of education – so inseparably intertwined. Against this background, Tagorean and Gandhian philosophies of education are discussed.

⁹ Kamala Bhatia and B D Bhatia, *Theory and Principles of Education: Philosophical and Sociological Bases of Education* (Delhi: Doaba House Publication, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁰ Howard Ozmon A, and Samuel Craver M, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. (London, UK: Merrill, Prentice-Hall International, 1999), p. 1.

¹¹ S Chandra and R K Sharma, *Philosophy of Education* (New Delhi. India. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (p) Ltd, 2007), p. 34.

¹² Howard Ozmon A, and Samuel Craver M, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. (London, UK: Merrill, Prentice-Hall International, 1999), p. 9.

Tagore and Gandhi: Divergent Unity

Literature on Tagore and Gandhi generally compares their ideas and practices. Their commonalities have been identified and divergences have been elaborated. Their debates may be described as a kind of ‘dialectic’ even though their positions were not ‘polar opposites’ all the time, they also helped one understand their own positions in a better light. “The intellectual quality of the dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, possesses an enduring interest.”¹³

Their philosophies, their ideas on Swaraj and the State, nationalism, science and technology, have received much attention, so also their philosophies of education. Both believed in the primacy of education, but both advocated such ideas on education, much different from the conventional model. But they were not mere theorists, but also practitioners of education; they built institutions – Tagore spending a lot of time on Shantiniketan and Gandhi deciding the destiny of Gujarat Vidya Peeth, as well as contributing much to Wardha scheme of education. Gandhi was also constantly experimenting in Tolstoy farm, Phoenix farm, Sabaramati Ashram and Wardha Ashram. Philosophically, both believed in the unity of all human beings and nature too. For Tagore it comes through his belief in Brahman as Radhakrishnan says¹⁴ and for Gandhi, this comes from Advaita, Dvaita, Anekanatavada, Buddha and Gita, as A L Basham says.¹⁵ As a result, as practitioners of their philosophy, they opposed all kinds of discrimination and exploitation; they visualised a just social order; as a result, both believed in education cultivating individual growth meeting social needs.

The hymn that was chanted in Tagore’s school was – “The God who is in fire, who is in water, who interpenetrates the whole world, who is in the herbs, who is in trees, to that God I bow again and again” which is from the Upanishads. The Vedantic Absolute as much as Tagore’s God is a ‘concrete spirit’. In Gitanjali, he says, He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones.¹⁶

¹³ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 1-37.

¹⁴ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. (New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2015), p. 4.

¹⁵ A L Basham, *Traditional influences on the thought of Mahatma Gandhi in Debating Gandhi*, ed. Raghuramraju A (Noida, India: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2015), p. 44.

I am advaitist and yet I can support dvaitism. The word is changing every moment and is therefore unreal, It has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an anekantavadi or syadvadi.

But my syadvada is not the syadvada of the learned, it is peculiarly my own,¹⁷ says Gandhi. For him, morality is the basis of all things and truth is the ‘substance’ of all morality. So, is Gandhi suggesting that morality whose ‘substance’ is truth, is beyond reason at times? Or is he merely privileging ‘morality’ over ‘reason’ in his practical, philosophical cosmos? But here in itself, there seems to be a ‘reason’able logical argument. He did mention that he moved from truth to truth. And he certainly moved from ‘God is truth’ to ‘Truth is God’. But when he says that to see the universal and all-pervading spirit of ‘truth’ face-to-face, one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself, he in fact, is suddenly bringing ‘truth’ from the speculative metaphysical world into the real, practical, physical world.

In the initial years, Shantiniketan and Sabarmati shared many commonalities. Both Gandhi and Tagore were trying to build educational institutions outside ‘state-sponsored system in colonial world.’ Both of them emphasised the primacy of mother-tongue in teaching. Both tried to shape the schooling drawing from India’s culture and way of life. Both gave significance to students’ participation in creative and productive activities.¹⁸ Emphasis on mother tongue as the medium of instruction, was perhaps also an attempt at ‘decolonising the mind’ at the cultural level as both of them were not really interested in mere political freedom for the country. While Both of them were not against English and Englishmen per se and in that sense, they were not jingoistic nationalists and their nationalism was without hatred, they were certainly in favour of making use of native languages in education without which ‘Swaraj’ did not hold much meaning for them.

Tagore’s village school- Shiksha Satra – founded in 1924 in Sriniketan was visited by Gandhi in 1925. Its principal A William Aryanayakam, was invited by Gandhi in 1934 to head an experimental school on Gandhian lines at Wardha and it was Aryanayakam, who was commissioned by Gandhi in 1937 to be the secretary to the committee he set up to frame the Basic

¹⁷ A L Basham, ‘Traditional influences on the thought of Mahatma Gandhi’ in *Debating Gandhi*, ed. by Raghuramraju A (Noida, India: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 33-34.

Education scheme. In this sense too, one may notice certain ‘undercurrent’ which connected the two institutions.

When the scheme, also known as Wardha scheme, was published in Harijan in 1937 and discussed in the ensuing meeting of Indian National Congress. Tagore raised some questions. His comments centred around two features of the scheme. First, Tagore questioned the utilitarian centrality given to the productive manual work in the basic education scheme. Secondly, Tagore was uncomfortable with the idea of earmarking for rural poor a special type of education which destined them to a limited vocation.¹⁹

To Mahatma Gandhi, these questions might have been irrelevant since his object was, first, to make the schools financially viable and independent of government support and secondly, to use productive manual work as the prime means of intellectual training. Tagore did not press his points and readily conceded. “Gandhiji’s genius is essentially practical, which means his practice is immeasurably superior to his theory...we may be sure that when the scheme is actually worked out, we shall discover in it, only one more testimony to the genius of this practical sage whose deeds surpass his words”²⁰

Once Gandhi returns from South Africa in 1915, he visits Shantiniketan with his Phoenix boys. Both Gandhi and his students spend some time there. Then Gandhi starts his Sabaramati Ashram. Education has been an abiding interest for both of them. For Gandhi, education is drawing out the best from the students. His was a ‘three H’ formula - ‘head, heart and hand’. For him Hand is the entry point. Head and Heart need to be trained through hand.²¹ Gandhi was simply making a radical rupture in the philosophy of life itself. In his philosophy of education, perhaps, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau and a Karmayogi of Gita – all were coming alive. He was making a radical point. He was subverting a very ‘demeaning demerit’ of Indian education. He was subverting the very basis of ‘Padbhyam Shudro Ajaayata’ system (the birth-based hierarchical social order). Shudra was becoming central to him and all the values Shudra represented. Manual labour was becoming important to him.

¹⁹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), p. 34.

²⁰ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2008), p. 35.

²¹ Anil, Sadgopal, *The Pedagogic Essence of Nai Taleem in The Living Gandhi: Lesson for Our Times* ed. by Tara Sethia and Anjana Narayan (New Delhi. India: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 168.

When he sums up Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, his key point was - physical labour is as important as intellectual labour. He was attacking the very basis of hierarchical social order which considered intellect as superior to the body. "If I were a poet, I could write poetry on the possibilities of the five fingers"²², Gandhi says. For him, it was not just craft-based education, but everything was to be taught through craft, even the philosophy. Head and heart need to be trained through hand.

Gandhi did have his sense of the aesthetic. He looked at literature and art through his strict ethical perspective. He loved music, mostly devotional music. Hence Vaishnava Janato and Raghupati Raghava Rajaram are so popular. Ekla Chalore was his favourite. Looking at the sky and moon, he could have been happy. He liked Dickens and did not like Oscar Wilde. He feels that Oscar Wilde focusses on external beauty and "art for art's sake" doesn't make much sense to him. Instead, he likes Charles Dickens both for his themes and style of writing.²³ Mulk Raj Anand revises his significant novel 'Untouchable' after meeting Gandhi on his advice. This is also an interesting episode which gives insight into Gandhian view – not only, of art but of life itself (consequently, of education too), narrated by Anand himself in his essay 'Why I write'. After writing 'Untouchable' in Europe under progressive influence, he respectfully gives its manuscript to Gandhi, seeking his opinion. Gandhi feels that the protagonist of the novel has been characterised as a 'Bloomsbury intellectual' and the writing is too verbose. In response, Anand brings it down by nearly hundred pages. As Gandhi frequently feels that art needs to serve the masses and the poor, his emphasis seems to be more on the 'ethical' than on the 'aesthetic' as evident in his dislike for Oscar Wilde.

As a contrast, Tagore grew up in a different kind of environment and under different circumstances and influences. He did not like conventional education. For him school was a prison. He was taught at home. He was more inclined to arts. (Devi Prasad, 2000).²⁴ Like Gandhi, he was

²² Anil, Sadgopal, *The Pedagogic Essence of Nai Taleem in The Living Gandhi: Lesson for Our Times* ed. by Tara Sethia and Anjana Narayan (New Delhi, India. Penguin Books. 2013), p. 167.

²³ M. K. Gandhi, *The Voice of Truth, The selected works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol VI* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1994), pp. 284-305.

²⁴ Devi Prasad, *Rabindranath Tagore: Philosophy of Education and Painting* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2000), pp. 1-42.

also sent to London to study Gandhi became a failed lawyer. Tagore actually failed; in the sense he did not complete law. He was more inclined to arts. He could enjoy Kumarasambhava and Shakespeare. He wrote poetry. He set up the school when he was 40 in a place which was meant to be a place for meditation. Tagore started a different kind of meditation, a meditation on education, cultivating free individuals. Hence Tagore's famous song: "where the mind is without fear and the head is held high..."²⁵

Of course, even for Tagore – head, heart and hand – were to be trained equitably - mind, body and the intellect. But Tagore was essentially an aesthete, a poet, story teller, an artist, and hence, his emphasis seems to be more on mind and intellect. The curriculum included all kinds of arts – music, dance, theatre, painting, literature. The very name Vishwabharathi was semiotic with India reaching out to the world having both Bharathi (India) and Vishwa (the universe) It was also craft-based education. The institution was also concerned with rural development. Tagore and Gandhi's concerns were the same. Both of them advocated mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

But the differences were due to their difference in temperament, in their persona, in their very mental make-up. One was poet-an aesthete-an artist-a story teller-a thinker; another was a pragmatic politician, a hard-boiled idealistic realist or realistic idealist and a practical theorist. On their differences, as Gandhi himself says that they complement each other.²⁶ There was also something that was predominantly common between them – love for the nature/love for the earth. There is a need to combine Gandhian and Tagorean philosophy of education. There is a line by Gandhi at the height of their disagreements- "We complement each other". They complete each other. The dialectic between the two, creates something new, something complete. Tagore represents the aesthetic and Gandhi represents the ethical. Both of them have immeasurable love for nature in different ways.

'Nature provides enough for everybody's need, but not everybody's greed' – is a much quoted Gandhian line and Tagore spoke in terms of 'forest universities'. Both of them cherished

²⁵ Devi Prasad, *Rabindranath Tagore: Philosophy of Education and Painting* (New Delhi, India. National Book Trust, 2000), pp. 1-42.

²⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi, India: National Book Trust, 2008), pp. 1-37.

certain kind of 'eclectic, yet rooted universalism' and were trying to bring out the best from fellow humans regardless of all barriers in harmony with all others and nature. Putting all these together, it could be called 'ecosphaesthetics' - which combines ecosophy (which may be traced back to the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess whose post-graduate dissertation was on M. K. Gandhi)²⁷ and aesthetics being the philosophy of arts. The most significant challenge of 21st century is ecological which also holds in its belly issues of 'equity and peace'. Hence, 'ecosphaesthetics' is the philosophy of education for 21st century. At a time when, the world is quite concerned about the issues of climate change and global warming, ecosophical thought has been consciously integrated into the educational curriculum. If that could also be made aesthetic, ecosophy could be more effectively taught through different forms of arts such as music, theatre, dance, visual arts, literature and cinema. While a book published in 2018, has its title as 'Ecosophical Aesthetics', deriving 'ecosophy' from Gandhi and 'aesthetics' from Tagore, one may term the new age philosophy of education as 'ecosphaesthetics'.

²⁷ William Edelglass, 'Naess, Arne' in *Green Ethics and Philosophy*, ed. by Julie Newman and Paul Robbins (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications Ltd, 2011), p. 327.

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Rabindranath, Islam and The Ashram: Tagore's Quest for An Inclusive India

Parantap Chakraborty

Abstract

It is a well-known fact that Rabindranath Tagore was deeply concerned about the relationship between India's two largest religious communities and throughout his life wrote extensively on the subject. The paper focuses on how Tagore's university at Santiniketan, which has been seen as radical reworking of the concept of the 'self' and 'other' became a space for mutual understanding of communities through education. The paper traces the early difficulties of integrating Muslims into the Asrama and how the divisions was gradually overcome. It also looks at how Tagore used Islamic studies as a tool to enhance mutual respect between communities.

Keywords: Hindu-Muslim Relationship, Islamic Studies, Self-Other,

In 1901 Rabindranath Tagore started an alternative school about a hundred miles away from the city of his birth — Calcutta. The school that began with a handful of students transformed into a full-fledged University within two decades. The motto of Tagore's university — to cradle the world into a nest stands for an inclusive world and was antithetical to some of the prevalent political and cultural ideas of that time many of which centred around the formation of rigid imagined identities predicated on the self-other binary. Therefore, the idea of creating an inclusive refuge can be seen as the logical continuation of Tagore's radical take on Nationalism which he perceived as a divisive force and "menace" to civilisation. Swati Ganguly in her book *Tagore's University: A History of Visva Bharati 1921-1961* has pointed out:

Thought of as haven for the best minds across the world during the First World War, Visva-Bharati represented a radical rethinking of the relationship between "self" and "other"— the notion that the self can only be conceptualised and enriched by co-operation with the "other". Implicitly, it was a rebuttal of hostility — of its manifestation both in the First World War and imperialism.¹

¹ Swati Ganguly, *Tagore's University: A History of Visva Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2022), p. 4.

Ganguly also explains that Visva-Bharati was indeed a swim against the tide as many other contemporary educational institutions were based on religious and cultural identity catering to the sectarian nature of anti-colonial nationalism. This particular tendency is visible from the late nineteenth century with the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College set up in 1875 which became the Aligarh Muslim University by 1916. Annie Besant founded the Central Hindu College in 1898 which was later absorbed into Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya's Benaras Hindu University founded in 1916.² Tagore responded to Malviya's idea of a Hindu university in the essay titled "Hindu Visvavidyalaya" (1911):

Therefore, who fear the establishment of separate Hindu or Muslim Universities, their fear cannot be dismissed as unfounded. Yet, it has to be mentioned that the education system that has accommodated both eastern and western knowledge cannot forever be indulgent in excess of anything. When diverse peoples find their places next to one another they dispel their profligacy, and their eternal truth becomes immanent. One can always prepare a mighty seat for oneself within the confines of one's home but one's stature can only be determined in presence of others. If the "world" finds its place in the Hindu or Muslim university then there is nothing to fear in the expression of their distinctness. It is only by this means that the distinctness will receive just evaluation.³

This essay is often considered as the first articulation of his own philosophy of founding a university⁴ and university as an open and inclusive forum. Rabindranath Tagore began his journey as an ideologue at a time which was rife with various political tensions. The ever-growing mistrust between the two major religious communities of the subcontinent was the chief among these. Suranjan Das in his book *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (1993) illustrates that to the census of 1872 showed that more than half of the population of Bengal was Muslim, however this demographic predominance was not reflected in socio-economic privileges. On the contrary a large portion of this population resided in the low-lying areas of Mymensingh, Pabna and Noakhali

² Swati Ganguly, 2022, pp. 13-16.

³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Rabindra Nath Tagore) (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1986), volume 9, p. 605. The quotations from *Rabindra Rachanabali* used in this essay are translated by me.

⁴ Swati Ganguly, 2022, p. 13.

mostly earned a living as agricultural labourers or tenant farmers.⁵ On the other hand the working-class grievances often expressed themselves through communal turmoil rather than class-based agendas. Das notes that in the last decade of the nineteenth century there were at least three major communal unrests in and around Calcutta.⁶ This unrest was not merely a political one. The cultural otherization of the Muslim often reared its ugly head in the public domain. When Rabindranath Tagore referred to Akbar as a sympathetic ruler in a essay called “Ingrej o Bharatbashi” (British and Indians) read at a public meeting, he was fiercely challenged by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay who perceived Akbar and other Muslim rulers as usurpers and perpetrators of heinous acts against Hindus. Vidyasagar’s biographer Chandicharan Banerjee⁷ referred to this very public disagreement and Tagore himself confirmed this in a 1911 letter.⁸ Tagore’s 1891 essay “Muslim Mahila” (Muslim Women) was perhaps his first foray into understanding the position of Muslims. Tagore’s more public exhibition of his intention to support Hindu Muslim unity came at the wake of the proposed Bengal partition of 1905 when he staged a march and organized a Rakhi Bandhan ceremony and tied Rakhi on the wrists of Maulvis at Nakhoda Masjid along with other members of the Tagore family.⁹ Thus, Tagore used a primarily Hindu festivity, turning it into a potent political symbol for unity when the demands for two-state policy and separate electorate was threatening to tear the country apart along religious lines. With the growing distance between Muslims and Hindu elites and the establishment of All India Muslim League in 1906, and growing support for divided Bengal from Khwaja Salimullah and his associates the political discord between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal became more complex than ever.¹⁰ In this light Tagore’s untiring effort to arrive at a respectable solution for this growing debate becomes all the more poignant. His concern for the political future of the country becomes eloquent when he writes,

⁵ Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1993 rpt. 2005) p. 18.

⁶ Suranjan Das, 1993, p. 3.

⁷ Prasanta Pal, *Rabijibani* (Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 1978 rpt. 2005) vol. 3 p. 278

⁸ Prasanta Pal, 1978, p. 277

⁹ Abanindranath Tagore, *Ghoroa*, in pp. 29 - 31

¹⁰ Farzana Shaikh. “Muslims and Political Representation in Colonial India: The Making of Pakistan.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 539–57. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312536>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2023.p. 542.

It has now been decided that India will become a federal state instead of having a unitary model of governance. In other words, it has been accepted that our country has enough divisions, which prevents a complete merger without any traces or marks of joining. Let us assume that this is a practical solution to our problems as a nation-state. However, a difficult knot is the division between Hindu and Muslim. This difference has been internalised due to various reasons. It cannot be fixed by applying a political adhesive from the outside. In times of rising temperature, the fissure will reappear.¹¹

Tagore witnessed firsthand the discriminatory measures Hindus often took against the Muslim people and how that became instrumental in widening the cultural gap. In a letter¹² to Kalidas Nag in 1922 he talks about this discrimination:

Customs are the bridge between people, but this is where the Hindus have confined themselves. When I first took over the Zamindari estates, I saw that if a Muslims subject needed to be offered seats, the Hindus would lift up a side of the mattress and ask the Muslims to sit on the ground. To consider the followers of different customs as impure is the biggest hindrance in forming a human bond. It is India's ill luck that India has two communities like the Hindus and Muslims. For Hindus the barriers of religion are minimal, but the barriers of custom are insurmountable. For the Muslim religion provides the barrier and not the customs.¹³

Rabindranath Tagore did not merely confine himself to writing on Hindu-Muslim unity but wanted to create an ideal space for Muslim students within the Ashram, an effort which proved a more complex task than he had originally imagined. Rabindranath Tagore saw Visva Bharati as an ideal space for implementing the pedagogical exploration of India's diverse cultural history. He believed Visva Bharati could potentially pave the path towards initiating a cultural dialogue between the two major communities. However, his ideas of unity did not easily transfer onto others in Santiniketan.

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 12, p. 668.

¹²Bhuiyan Iqbal. *Rabindranath O Musalman Somaj* (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2010), p. 424

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 251.

It was in 1911 that a palpable tension around admitting the first Muslim student arose within the *asrama* community.¹⁴ One Muslim gentleman wanted his son to be part of the ashram school, but objections came from within. Some Teachers, Students and most significantly the trustee Dwipendranath Tagore expressed their dissent to this decision. Tagore wrote twice to Nepal Chandra Ray, explaining that the student will be accompanied by a domestic help and this student can stay with teachers who have not objected to his admission. He suggested that the student could lodge with Nagendranath Aich, the drawing teacher and some students. Expressing his concern, he wrote:

In the Ancient *tapovan*as the tiger and deer drank from the same water source, if we cannot make the Hindu and Muslim drink together in our modern *tapovana* then our whole endeavor is a failure. Please reconsider your position and do not turn away that person who has come to the gate of your *asrama*. In the name of the one and only god accept him without fear or prejudice.¹⁵

But as history suggests Tagore's appeals fell on deaf ears and the student could not be inducted. Yet the letter made Tagore's intention of imparting education in a non-divisive set up abundantly clear. After this initial setback, it took a few more years to materialise his ideal of creating a refuge of non-divisive inclusivity in the face of rampant sectarian politics.

In 1919 an East African student Jafar Ali had come to *asrama* temporarily and his reference is found in C. F. Andrews' letter to Rabindranath dated 3rd August 1920. The large group of Gujrati students in the *asrama* were fairly conservative. There were about twenty students from Gujrat at the *asrama* at the time. Andrews writes "by slow degrees, The Gujerati prejudices are breaking down... We are not making any hasty changes. Jafer Ali, our new Mohammadan some day will come and dine with the rest, but one must go step by step".¹⁶ The first permanent Muslim student of the *asrama* was Sayed Mujtaba Ali. It was reported in the *Santiniketan* journal.¹⁷ The year after

¹⁴ Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar. *Kabir Pathshala* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2015), p. 87

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, Letter to Nepal Chandra Ray, qtd. In Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 87

¹⁶ Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 87.

¹⁷ Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 86.

Syed Mujtaba Ali was enrolled in the university, in September 1921, Mujtaba Ali spoke on Eid at the meeting of the Visva-Bharati Council while Rabindranath presided over it.

Rabindranath Tagore found it important to reaffirm his beliefs on India's shared heritage in his various addresses within the ashram which were later collected, Visva-Bharati essays. In his message to students published in the "Santiniketan" published on 20 Falgun 1328 BE, (This later became known as Visva-Bharti Essay No 4)¹⁸ he states:

We must not merely know about the Hindu soul in India. Indian literature, the arts and architecture are a fine combination of Hindu-Muslim creativity. To know this is to know the actual India. We have no appropriate institution that gives us this education, which is why our education is inadequate.¹⁹

This intention was further consolidated through the setting up of a chair of Islamic Studies at Visva-Bharati, which was funded by the Nizam of Hyderabad with a generous donation of one lakh rupees. The first incumbent of this post was the Hungarian Scholar Julius Germanus (Later known as Abdul Karim Germanous, after he converted to Islam). Germanous was a polyglot and a man of immense scholarship. He arrived at Santiniketan on January 7, 1929. His essay "Islamic Studies", published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* of July, 1929 also reveals what the programme of Islamic Studies entailed. Germanous went about trying to dispel what he believed were certain myths and negative stereo types of Islam. His essay starts off with a discussion of the history of Islam and the teachings of the Prophet and why it is important to learn this history. He goes on to talk about the spread of Islam and argues that "...Islam does not in any way imply a uniform culture. On the contrary it resembles a magnificent river with many tributaries".²⁰ The essay ends with an appeal which reveals a great deal about the project.

Through the generosity of H. H. The Nizam-ul-Mulk of Hyderabad it has become possible to establish a chair for Islamic Studies at Santiniketan, where, under the beautiful Sal-trees, a new foundation for the synthesis of world culture is being firmly laid under the guiding

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 267.

¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 251.

²⁰ Julius Germanus, "Islamic Studies", *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* July (1929): pp. 46 – 50 (p. 46).

influence of Rabindranath Tagore. And we now appeal to all who have the cause of Islamic studies at heart for books and manuscripts, and also for further benefactions for the maintenance of advanced students and research workers. We have every confidence that our appeal will not be in vain, and that it will be possible to create at Santiniketan, “the Abode of Peace”, a living centre for the study of the history and culture of Islam — “the Religion of Peace.”²¹

Apart from Germanus, there were other efforts of documenting India’s diversified cultural heritage under the aegis of Visva Bharati. In 1929, Kshitimohan Sen, who had been one of the longest serving members of the asrama, and scholar per excellence, delivered the Adharchand lecture on “Bhartabarshe Madhyajuger Sadhana” (Spiritual Practices of Medieval India) at Calcutta University which was published as a book soon after with an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. In this book Sen analyses the Bhakti tradition and the Sufi tradition. A major portion of Sen’s work is devoted to understanding the fluid religious identities and the intermingling of religions in medieval India that produced and uniquely amalgamated Hindu-Muslim culture of the non-mainstream, non-organized religious movements. Stressing on the centuries of peaceful co-existence and hybrid identities of alternative religious sect Sen tried to show how the people of freely intermingled demolishing the perceived rigidities posed by the customs of either of the communities. Sen uses the example of Hossaini Brahmins and the Immam Shahi community to illustrate his point.²²

Throughout the next decade there was a concerted effort to consolidate and expand the production of knowledge on India’s composite culture. A few notable examples are to be found in the pages of the newly inaugurated periodical *Visva Bharati News*. Hashem Amir Ali’s essay “The Tenth of Muharram” was published in the first volume of *Visva Bharati News* (1932-33) which celebrated coincidence of Muharram and Buddha’s birth anniversary as a good omen.²³ Apart from Ali’s romantic account of unity, the volume also published Krishna Kripalani’s essay on Sufism

²¹Julius Germanus, “Islamic Studies”, *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, July (1929): pp. 46 – 50 (p. 50).

²² Kshitimohan Sen. *Bhartabarshe Madhyajuger Sadhana* (Spiritual Practices of Medieval India). (University of Calcutta: Calcutta, 1930), p. 12.

²³Hashem Amir Ali. “The Tenth of Muharram”, *Visva Bharati News* (1932): pp. 104-106, (p. 104).

and poetry.²⁴ and Rabindranath Tagore's welcome address to Aga Pour Davoud, who came to occupy a chair of the professor of Persian endorsed by Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran.

The academic and Extra-academic work on Islam produced in Santiniketan would be even more diverse and dynamic in the following years. In March 1935, Rabindranath invited Kazi Abdul Wadud to deliver the Nizam Lecture. Wadud's lectures titled "Hindu Musalmaner Birodh" or the conflict of Hindu and Muslim attempt to analyse the reasons for the conflict and refute the idea that Hindu-Muslim conflict is a relatively new conflict. Wadud was also looking at the impact of British imperialism and ended with the possibility of unity, which he, like Rabindranath, deemed to be an essential component of any future Indian nation. Rabindranath attended the lectures spread over three days and Visva-Bharati published it the next year with an introduction by the founder himself.²⁵

In August of the same year, Tagore was requested to contribute a foreword to Maulvi Abdul Karim's book *Islam's Contribution to Science and Civilization*. Interestingly, Tagore used this opportunity to discuss the necessity of Islamic Studies:

One of the most potent sources of Hindu-Moslem conflict in India is that we know so little of each other. We live side by side and yet very often our worlds are entirely different. Such mental aloofness has created immense mischiefs in the past and forebodes an evil future. It is only through a sympathetic understanding of each other's culture and social customs and conventions that we can create an atmosphere of peace and goodwill. With this end in view I started a few years ago a department of Islamic Culture in Visva-Bharati with the generous financial support of His Exalted Highness the Nizam. I am glad to say the experiment has been successful.²⁶

It is evident that Rabindranath Tagore saw this pedagogical exercise as a viable method to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims. Visva-Bharati, therefore continued to provide impetus to more works in the broad field of Islamic Studies. In 1935, Visva-Bharati published a translation

²⁴ Krishna Kripalani "Sufism and Poetry", *Visva Bharati News* (1932): p. 93.

²⁵ Bhuyian Iqbal, 2010, pp. 56-62.

²⁶ Rabindranath Tagore. "Introduction" *Islam's Contribution to Science and Civilisation* by Abdul Karim. Qtd in Iqbal p. 142.

by M. Ziauddin of the *Grammar of Braj Bhakha* by the 17th century literary figure Mirza Khan. The book is foreworded by the great Suniti Kumar Chatterji.²⁷ This was followed by Ziauddin's work on Muslim Calligraphy, being first serialized in the quarterly and then coming out as a book. It shows the diversity of the knowledge being produced and disseminated at this time. Unfortunately, Ziauddin died an untimely death in 1937 and Rabindranath, of course breathed his last in 1941, however, by this time much had changed from the early setback of 1911. In spite of the early roadblocks Rabindranath's efforts of integrating students and scholars from the Muslim community within the Ashram was now relatively successful. By the time Amitabha Chaudhury, who later became a noted journalist, joined Visva-Bharati as student there were a sizable number of Muslim students at this time, Mofazzal Haidar Chowdhury, Ashraf Siddique, Muntakim Choudhuri and others who lived in the same hostel and had access to the same kitchen and it did not make news anymore.²⁸

While it may be true, that Tagore's literary representations of Muslim life, or Muslim or even India's Muslim past can be questioned for its scarcity, in his non-fictional writings, Tagore was consistent about Hindu-Muslims unity as a fundamental requirement for India to prosper as an inclusive society. This in turn reflected on what Tagore himself claimed to be his most significant creation, – Visva-Bharati – the vessel that carried the “cargo” of his life. Under Rabindranath Tagore's guidance, Visva-Bharati had produced some first-rate academic articles and books either on Islam or larger Islamic culture. What kind of influence this wielded on society at large is a difficult measure, but we cannot deny that the ashram had taken large strides in initiating and maintaining the atmosphere suitable for a cultural dialogue between two communities who were at odds fueled by cultural and political tension.

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²⁷ Mirza Khan. *A Grammar Of The Braj Bhakha* (1676 A.D.) Translated by M. Ziauddin (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati: 1935).

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Rabindranath Tagore: A visionary of future ‘sustainable development’

Shakti Mukherji

Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore’s concern for nature is well-discussed but his practical experience and experiments are not properly known. Tagore’s praise and worship of nature and natural objects, even the minute ones like dust particles (*dhulire dhanya karo*) are born out of a deep spirit of togetherness and feelings of a creational bond between human and nature. Nature is not a separate entity of human civilization rather we are all co-creatures in the world of creation. It is obvious that to forward life and make it richer, healthier and more educated there is no other way but to resort to technology and science. But Tagore wanted science to be taught along with India's own spiritual and philosophical knowledge, not just borrowing and copying from the west. Tagore cautioned against the unusual speed of industrialization, over production of consumable goods and rush for more higher standard of living, exploiting earth’s resources without adding value to the human soul. He urged that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthen and we are to assimilate them for our own sustenance. He introduced tree-plantation, afforestation in the form of festival at a time when there was no contemplation of nature conservation, green alert or ‘World Environment Day’ as now is propagated by United States. This essay attempts to explore how Tagore, visioned man and nature relationship for increasing the sustenance of human civilization which now is theorised as sustainable development.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, sustainable development, environment, ecosystem

The term “sustainable development”, which gained prominence during the latter decades of the 20th century and subsequently became a ubiquitous topic of discussion in various spheres of global discourse, has had a profound and enduring presence within the rich cultural and historical heritage of the Indian civilization. The notion was deep-rooted in different forms in our religion, rituals, folk culture, religious rites. In contemporary times, environmentalists continue to document the presence of tree species within sacred groves located in indigenous tribal habitats, species

previously declared extinct. This preservation is notably attributed to tribal practices that strictly prohibit the cutting of these trees.

The formal integration of sustainability as a mandated factor in public policy-making emerged in 1980 through the publication of the ‘World Conservation Strategy’ by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This first approach was not all pervading and was criticized for focusing on the preservation of habitats to the detriment of conjoined human activity. After 7 years in 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹

A century ago, Rabindranath Tagore envisaged a perilous future marked by the looming imbalance in ecological systems because of the unbounded pursuit of human-made luxury and technological advancement and cautioned in his own way. He referred to the great civilizations in the West as well as in the East, which have flourished in past because, in his own words, “they produced food for the spirit of man for all time”,² these civilizations thrived on a foundation of faith in enduring ideals, a faith that possessed a profound creative essence. Tagore’s anxiety and fear of impending destruction found expression in the following lines:

These great civilizations were at last run to death by men of the type of our precocious schoolboys of modern times, smart and superficially critical, worshippers of self, shrewd bargainers in the market of profit and power, efficient in their handling of the ephemeral who presume to buy human souls with their money and throw them into their dustbins when they have been sucked dry, and who, eventually, driven by suicidal forces of passion, set their neighbours’ houses on fire and are themselves enveloped by the flame.³

¹ *UNO Sustainable Development Goals* <https://www.un.org/sustainable> [Accessed 1 July 2023]

² Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Can Science Be Humanized?’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 164 – 165 (p. 164).

³ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Can Science Be Humanized?’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 164 – 165 (p. 165).

Tagore's vision for Santiniketan as well as Sriniketan in terms of an integral structure for the well-being of the village and villagers as a societal unit carried towards what is now considered the four pillars of sustainable developments – environmental, economic, social, and cultural. He wrote:

We have started in India, in connection with Visva Bharati, a kind of village work, the mission of which is to retard this process of rare suicide.⁴

In this essay I aim to explore Tagore's thoughts regarding sustainable development, a century before, not only academically but also through practical works or movements, he endeavoured.

Rabindranath Tagore was born and brought up in affluence and urbanity. His involvement with the sustainability of the river, the villages, the village folks, and the environment as a whole took a turn when at the insistence of Maharshi Debendranath he had to take over the management of the family estates at Shelidah, a small village on the bank of the river Padma in the district of (then) Nadia (now Bangladesh), far away from madding urban society. It remains intriguing as to why Maharshi selected his youngest son at early age (1890). Nevertheless, Tagore not only carried it out successfully what was asked on him, but also implemented a comprehensive system of community development within the villages under his supervision.

The river-centric life of India is a living cultural continuity since our ancient past. Our civilization is marked by the intricate interplay between the rivers, lands and the rhythmic existence of humanity built around its natural environment. Natural resources have been intimately entwined with the ebbs and flows of life's struggles and joys in this region. However, such vitality, began to face disruptions with the advent of initiatives for development. Eastern Bengal Railway, solely motivated by commercial interests, began laying railway tracks, inadvertently puncturing the fabric of village life, disrupting harmony and encroaching upon the riverine landscapes and ecosystems in and along the, adjoining areas of the rivers Gorai and Kali Ganga, a vital branch of the river Padma.

In particular, the Eastern Bengal Railway wanted to transport commodities from distant villages to the river docks for further conveyance to European markets. However, in doing so, they

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Introduction' to Elmhirst's address, 'The Robbery of the Soil' in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

opted for solutions that satiated only their commercial needs. Rather than constructing river bridges over the river, that would preserve the natural flow, they ended up obstructing the flow of the river Kali Ganga by constructing an earthen dam on it, which ultimately choked the river.⁵ It was Tagore, who initiated a historical protest against this destructive project towards the river, land, man and nature and developed a systematic documentation of the process, full of data, drawings, plan and maps as “Gorai Setu Kali Ganga Nathi” and submitted it to the British administration as a scheme – alternative, for better river-land management and preservation of ecology.⁶ Although the British administration, for vested interests, ignored such an environmental scheme, this document was perhaps the first ever Indian river-environmental document for protecting river, land, and ecology.

Tagore's play, *Muktadhārā* (*The Waterfall*, 1922) though published decades after this, was the extreme expression of the jeopardy of the life of the river and it's hitting back towards an environmental as well as economic and human misery. Tagore held a deep appreciation for scientific progress, yet, he harboured reservations regarding the mechanized civilization that seemed to stand against nature and a balanced human-nature relationship. The disquieting consequences of this so-called development is expressed in the following lines of *The Waterfall*, translated by Tagore himself.

Messenger from the Crown-prince said that people of Shiu-tarai cannot believe that any man can deprive them of the water, gift of God...

Bibhuti: I had not the time to trouble my mind about what would happen to some wretched maize fields of some wretched cultivator in some place or other...My mind is occupied with the contemplation of the majesty of the Machine...when labourers became scarce in Uttarakut, I had all the young men of over eighteen years of age from every house of Pattana village brought out by the king's command, and a great number of them never returned to their homes.⁷

⁵ Arunendu Banerjee, *Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes*. (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2005), p. 33.

⁶ Banerjee, 2005, p. 34.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore. 'The Waterfall' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), pp. 163 – 207 (p. 167).

Tagore cautioned the future generation through his two politically symbolical plays *Muktadhārā* and *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleander*, 1924) against the exploitation of earth's resources: the first one on damming river while the later on digging mines. Ananda Lal writes,

It is chastening that, though Tagore raised these issues nearly a century ago, only in recent times has the world begun to rethink the value of massive dams and to realize the havoc caused by open mining.⁸

Tagore wrote,

What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind, and thus kills, or hampers, the opportunity for the creation of a new thought – power by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened, not to resist the western culture, but truly to accept and assimilate it; to use it for our sustenance, not as our burden; to get mastery over this culture, and not to live on its outskirts as the hewers of texts and drawers of book-learning.⁹

Tagore's creativity in sustainable development at the backdrop of man-nature relationship and unique experiment of rural welfare in Santiniketan is well-discussed. But, an account, not so well-known, is what motivated him to plan an experiment of rural reconstruction in a remote corner of Bengal, Shelidah and Patisar, single-handed with his own resources is worth mentioning.

The land around Patisar was inundated every year and only paddy could grow under such conditions. Tagore was anxious for improving agriculture. His concerns are evident from the letter he wrote to his officer at Patisar,

Please encourage them to grow in their homestead land, on the boundaries of the fields and wherever possible, pineapple, banana, date palm and other fruit trees. Good and strong fibres can be obtained from the leaves of pineapples. The fruit is also easily marketable. Tapioca

⁸ Ananda Lal. 'Rabindranath Tagore Drama and Performance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 102 – 130 (p. 106).

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), p. 565.

can be grown as hedges and the tenants should be taught how to extract food material from its roots. It would be profitable if they could be induced to cultivate potatoes. Try again to sow the seeds of the American maize which have been kept in the office.¹⁰

Tagore took an active part in the political movement during the partition of Bengal, composed songs, poetry, delivered lectures, contributed a series of essays in the monthly magazine *Banga Darshan*. But at the core he was not a political leader, but a thinker of creative personality, and realized that the best way to combat an alien political power would be to ignore it and to establish a self-governing community in the villages. Key to *swaraj* lay in improving the economic condition of the masses living in the villages of India. With this motivation he took the following measures:

1. Scientific method of agriculture (Is this not surprising that a century back when affluent Indians were sending their sons abroad for achieving degrees in ICS, bar-at-law, Rabindranath Tagore sent his son Rathindranath Tagore and his friend Santosh Majumdar to study agriculture at the University of Illinois, USA)
2. Establishing and maintenance of schools and dispensaries
3. Constructing roads
4. Filling up stagnant pools and excavating tanks
5. Rescue the trapped village folks from the clutches of money lenders

Tagore concentrated his efforts at Patisar, headquarter of Kaligram Paragana which consisted of an area of nearly 70 sq. miles (150,000 *bighas*) with 60,000 - 70,000 people living in 125 villages.¹¹ Tagore, for an efficient management, divided the estate into three zones (*bibhagas*), each with a self-governing organization but federated to a central administrative body called the *Hitaishi Sabha*. He introduced three elected posts: village headman, *Pradhan* and *Pancha Pradhans*. To meet the expenses, a general fund was made from the compulsory levy of 3 pies for every rupee

¹⁰ Rathindranath Tagore. 'Father as I knew him', in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 55).

¹¹ Rathindranath Tagore. 'Father as I knew him', in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 53).

paid as rent by them, later this ‘self-imposed betterment tax’ increased to 15 pies per rupee. Tagore also started an agricultural bank at Patisar to sustain the bankrupt cultivators.

Tagore writes to Lady Abala Bose from Patisar around 1908 after establishing *Hitaishi Sabha*:

Arrangement has been made so that the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling their disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up *Dharma-golas* (grain bags), etc. and in every way to contribute their own share in the welfare of the village in which they belong.¹²

Sustainability, to Tagore, was inter-disciplinary, focusing on every sphere of life, be it religious, cultural, or spiritual. He reminded us several times that the problem of poverty is only second to the ever-growing needs of humankind, which leads to overall unhappiness. “It is the problem of unhappiness that is the great problem”.¹³ Of course, Tagore did not deny the necessity of wealth, but at the same time he reminded us that search for wealth is the synonym for the production and collection of things, if used ruthlessly “can crash life out of earth”¹⁴. Happiness may not compete with wealth, but it is creative and has its own source of riches within itself. To bring happiness, rather, “to flood the choked bed of village life with streams of happiness”¹⁵ he called for the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists, as well as the scientists to offer their contributions to make a world, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever renewing life.

¹² Rathindranath Tagore. ‘Father as I knew him’, in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 54).

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

Tagore was in favour of cottage industry for economic growth. He observed that the tillers of Patisar remained busy with agricultural works for a few months only, at that time, paddy was the only crop. He wished to introduce handicrafts so that they can earn during the idle months. He, first, started a weaving school at Patisar and later undertook several projects like pisciculture, pottery, making of umbrella etc. what today we call ‘environment-friendly’ and of course sustainable for both nature and man. It is a pressing concern of present day that heavy industries not only displace thousands of people from their places of origin, leading to an increase in marginalized populations, but also contribute significantly to global warming. Recent media coverage has shed light on how the lives of hundreds of migrant labourers were ruined while coming back to their homes during the pandemic. This phenomenon is not confined to pandemics alone, but this encompasses a broader trend where rural communities are compelled to seek employment in the city, primarily as labourers in ambitious construction projects. Despite labour regulations in place, some never return, and we, as modern individuals, akin to Bibhuti, the royal engineer, fail to pay due attention to this complex issue.

Tagore’s love for the river is well known and expressed in his songs and poems. He was mesmerized with the greatness and beauty of Padma, Ganga, Meghna, and when leaving these riverine lands and settled in Santiniketan, he equally appreciated the wild beauty of the dry ravine, known locally as Khowai (eroded tract) and rivulet Kopai:

Ekhan amar pratibeshini Kopai nadi

Prachin gotrer garima nei taar

Anarya tar naam khani

Kato kaler santhal narir hasya mukhar

Kala bhasar sange jarito

I have for my neighbour the tiny river Kopai

She lacks the distinction of ancient lineage

The primitive name of hers is mixed up with the loud laughing prattle of the Santhal

women of countless ages.¹⁶

The environmentalists are now appreciating the importance of the little streams and rivulets in carrying forward the ecological as well as economic development of the vast rural India.

Tagore scientifically identified the very fundamental environmental function of a flowing stream,

The river flows-all its waters are not used up in our bathing, drinking, and in growing our autumnal rice. The largest part of its water is meant to keep the river flowing ever on. Even without carrying out any other tasks, there is great significance in maintaining its flow.¹⁷

Today scientists are talking of ecological imbalance and its impact on changing of the weather and atmosphere. In this regard Tagore wrote,

Streams, lakes, and oceans are there on this earth. They exist not for hoarding of water exclusively each within its own area. They send up the vapour which forms into clouds and helps in a wide distribution of water.¹⁸

Sustainable development in Tagore's views is all encompassing, not only environmental or economic, it also cultural, social, and religious development. Tagore himself composed around 2500 songs and assimilated and improvised musical tunes and notes from traditional songs (like kirtans, folk songs (even Scottish folk tunes are found in Rabindra sangeet) and others and gave a unique orientation. He was much influenced by the *bauls* and the *baul* songs. Music is one of the components of our culture and tradition. Tagore affirms,

¹⁶ S. P. Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore and the World*. (Kolkata: Sadesh, 2006), p. 128.

¹⁷ S. P. Das Gupta, 2006, pp. 129 - 130.

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Introduction' to Elmhirst's address, 'The Robbery of the Soil' in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 180).

In the centre of Indian culture which I am proposing, music and art must have their prominent seats of honour, and not to be given merely a tolerant nod of recognition.¹⁹

He emphasized to study the different systems of music and different schools of art which lay scattered in the different ages and also in different provinces of India and in the different strata of the society. In Santiniketan, he introduced art school and various art forms for students, invited famous artists like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Bej, Kasahara, whose art works still remain there. He introduced ‘dance within Bengali culture’, revived and started Manipuri dance classes along with other dance forms.

Viswa Bharati campus architecture is also the landmark of Tagore’s innovation in environmental, art and architecture. This not only revived Indian architectural heritage but also environmentally sound economical and locally available but strong and simple in aesthetic expression. The buildings, *Udichi*, *Shyamali*, *Udayan*, *Mrinmoyee* are unique in nature and visual expression. There are some wonderful examples of mud architecture, conversant with climatic conditions, low-cost functional interiors. These houses represent the blend of the Mughal art, oriental art and architecture, Indian traditional architecture including Buddhist pillars and traditional mud houses.

Earlier we have referred to the four pillars for sustainable development, environmental, economic, social, and cultural. Tagore’s innovative ideas, practical experiment, and overall, his love and passion for a holistic and joyful life not only inspired his literary works but also led him to initiate projects that were eco-friendly and conducive to sustaining life. The festivals he initiated in Santiniketan, *halakarshan*, *briksharopan*, or *poush parbon* – exemplify his commitment to social responsibility towards the preservation of nature’s ecosystems, use of renewable resources and focus on sustainable development. These initiatives were not perceived as mere tasks but were imbued with love, expressed through music, poetry and dance, reflecting Tagore’s dedication to a harmonious connection with the environment.

¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), p. 567

Before his demise in May 1941, his addresses were full of agony but with the hope of new world,

As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet, I shall not commit the graver sin of losing faith in man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere is rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the east, where the sun rises.²⁰

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²⁰ S. P. Das Gupta, 2006, p. 167.

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Dr Shakti Mukherji is Research Officer in charge at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata. Her areas of interests are Sanskrit literature, Indian mythology and the pantheon of Hindu gods. She is also keenly interested in the life and works of Sri Aurobindo and Mother and regularly writes inspiring articles that bring to light relatively lesser-known incidents as well as works and philosophies of their lives.

Section II: Creative

Poetry

*Mario Relich***Badge of Identity**

My father used to tell me the worst thing
a man can do is to change his religion.

Yet he was a 'born again' atheist. He once
saw a chaplain, sombre in well-cut cassock,
blessing artillery on huge carriage wheels
ready to pound the enemy, but he loathed
this wartime ceremony and thereafter
lost faith in his childhood religion.

When I was a boy, I had no idea why
changing one's religion was so terrible,
being idealistic enough to think
that only the quest for truth mattered.
Much later, I discovered that for him
it was matter of remaining faithful
to his own people.

While he and his family kept safe
in our adopted country, his own became
so torn by ancient religious animosities,

with allegiances to match made worse
by lying demagogues, that a civil war
erupted like poisonous mushrooms.

Reported were massacres of frail old men,
vulnerable women, and helpless children,
with starving, skeletal young men beaten
by guards in barbed-wire open prison camps.

Religion, he realized then, had become
a badge of identity, determining the side
he had no choice but to support, so whether
he believed in his own God or not, it hardly
mattered, the Devil always did his worst.

Note: An earlier version of this poem appeared in the 'Dovetales' website, ed. by Jean Rafferty.

Miniature Globe: A Cold War Story

It does have a function:

it's a pencil sharpener

which belonged to my father

in his Slovenian retirement.

He was still too far from Split

on the Dalmatian coast.

That's where he grew up,

but my step-mother

was adamant she was keen

on returning to Slovenia,

her native land, both settling

in the town of Murska Sobota.

Whatever his motives

for making such a move,

or the truth of the matter,
he had simply retired.

But this globe, still serviceable,
must have been a reminder

of everywhere else
he had been, all the time

always finding work
abroad, relieved to leave

his Croatian homeland
under Tito's dictatorship.

He'd been a draughtsman
and electrical engineer

in Buenos Aires
after the War, and later

in Montreal, a designer

of light fittings, working

for a small company,

and key to its success.

Staunchly anti-Communist,

It meant a lot to him

to live in a free Canada,

raising his family there;

yet he ended up in Slovenia,

then part of Yugoslavia,

but it was very different.

He really liked it because

of its robust prosperity

unlike anywhere else

in the Federation,

while foreseeing

that the diverse country
would one day explode.

Slovenia's determined bid
for full independence

did not come as a surprise
to him, absolutely inevitable

in his view, and so was
his dissident's odyssey,

the miniature globe I hold
all that's left of him.

Mario Relich is a citizen of Edinburgh and is on the Board of Scottish PEN. For a number of years he was Secretary of the *Poetry Association of Scotland*. He is retired from teaching Post-Colonial Literature, MA Studies in the Eighteenth Century Novel, MA Studies in Victorian Literature, and Film Studies for the Open University. He also taught in English Departments at St. David's University College, Lampeter, Aberystwyth University, and Film Studies at the Edinburgh College of Art. His Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh was on David Hume, George Berkeley and other British writers of philosophical dialogue. In the eighties and nineties, he reviewed Festival Fringe Productions for *The Scotsman*. At present (since 2011) he is a regular contributor to the sociological/cultural quarterly *Scottish Affairs*, for which he writes literary reviews and an annual retrospective article on the Edinburgh International Festival. He has published two poetry collections: *Frisky Duck & Other Poems* (Grace Note Publications, 2014) and *Owl at Twilight* (Kennedy & Boyd, 2022).

*Brian D'Arcy***Tsunami (2004)**

The waves came – rising into consciousness –

Scattering Nature's inhumanity,

Uprooting all that lived and tried to breathe.

Now count the bodies lost and bodies found,

And count the haunted living who survived

Moments of madness – and their consequence –

Indelible in eyes that wait to cry.

Remembrance Day Haiku

Poppy abundance

flourishing on slaughter fields –

devoid of reason.

Brian D’Arcy (1933 – 2023) was born in Rossendale, England. He was a prize-winning poet for children and adults. His poetry collections are *Tha Shein Ukrosh: Indeed the Hunger*, *Footsteps in the Dust* and *Ghost Horses Dancing*. With fellow poets in Mini Mushaira, he co-authored *Another Bridge*. He co-edited, with his wife Debjani Chatterjee, a few anthologies for children. He took early retirement from teaching at Sheffield Hallam University and chaired Healing Word, a cancer support group using reading, writing and storytelling. Apart from poetry, Brian had a passion for: music, painting, horses, Irish history, and folklore.

*Stewart Conn***Offshore**

Edging from shingle, the dinghy turns
a tight half-circle, heading past the island
with its twisted pines, the twin horns
of rock guarding the bay, out across the sound.

Opposite the lighthouse we ship the oars
and drift, lopsided. The boys let out handlines,
each hook hidden in plastic and red feathers:
preferable, they feel, to bait moiling in tins.

Each, thinking he has a bite, finds weed.
Small hands grow icier, with each haul;
until only hope deferred, and pride,
sustain them. I wish them mackerel –

but find my thoughts turn, coldly, towards
the foreign fleets who come
trawling our shores; recalling the words
of those who say this was a fisherman's kingdom

once, the surface phosphorescent from shoals
of herring feeding; holds crammed,
decks silver with their scales,
a bygone age, not likely to return; the unnamed,

as is customary, having destroyed. The boys,
eyes glistening with weariness and trepidation,
wind in for the last time. Grown wise,
they know I know there's nothing on the line.

from *The Touch of Time: New & Selected Poems*/Bloodaxe Books

Stewart Conn was born in Glasgow, grew up in Ayrshire and has for many years lived in Edinburgh. Poetry publications include *The Breakfast Room* (2014 SMIT Poetry Book of the Year), *Ghosts at Cockcrow* and *The Touch of Time: New & Selected Poems* (all Bloodaxe Books), *Aspects of Edinburgh* (Scotland Street Press) and *Underwood* (Mariscat Press); and most recently, as editor, *Other Worlds: Scottish Island Poems* (Polygon). He is a fellow of the RSAMD, and a Knight of Mark Twain; was from 2002 to 2005 Edinburgh's inaugural makar; and in 2006 received the Institute of Contemporary Scotland's Iain Crichton Smith award for services to literature.

Sheila Templeton

Broken

It's still here, over four years now
since that morning I watched from my high window
as a summer breeze whipped it up from a careless bin.

One ordinary white plastic bag. I held my breath,
willing it not to get snagged in the sycamore tree.

But no, this bag was determined, almost danced
onto the twiggy branch, clung like a lover
impaled itself. I hoped, I suppose I prayed, that a sharper
gust would dislodge it, that a tall teenage neighbour
across the back court would come outside right now,
grab a long branch, pick up a broom.

None of that happened. It flutters still, living testament
to the indestructability of plastic. I can't allow myself
to think any more about our oceans. It's unbearable
to multiply, to imagine the zillions surviving out there,
these banners of unsought immortality.

I hate how some days it's very beautiful,
ripped into silvery pennants, ghostly blossom.

Summer brings relief, the blessing of green cover,
hopeful whirling of helicopter seeds
I can tell myself it's gone...

But today the last russet leaves are trembling
into winter, there's no hiding. It's still here
blackish-grey now, sullen, hanging, this broken flag.

Sheila Templeton writes in both Scots and English. Her poetry has been published in poetry pamphlets, collections, anthologies, magazines and papers, read on BBC Radio...and won prizes in several competitions...the McCash Scots Language, the McLellan and Neil Gunn competitions. Her most recent collection is *Clyack*, pub Red Squirrel Press 2021; and she has work currently in a Doric Scots poetry anthology, *Norlan Lichts*, published by Rymour Press in June 2022. It is with some glee that she realised recently she's spent longer (29 years) full time writing poetry than she did as a secondary school teacher (28) years...which was work she loved, but got very tired, so happily accepted early retirement...and a headlong dive into scribbling.

A. C. Clarke

At the retreat centre

After Juana Adcock Vestigial, 'this dusk'

This afternoon when even November rain is blurred
and daylight, leached to a blue pallor,
folds itself up
I wonder how much point there is
in going forward.
Circling as in a labyrinth might lead
to more conclusion.

Yet, when I walk this way I find
in spite of leaves and debris the path
always makes itself known.

I step firm over sodden ground,
a palmer on a self-appointed
pilgrimage for our grim age.
It seems too late but
I still wish for ~~self-belief~~
~~trust~~ ~~certainty~~
faith ...

Scottish-Mexican poet Juana Adcock's latest pamphlet, *Vestigial*, is a collection of poems written after Alasdair Gray's seminal work, *Lanark*. It was published in June by Stewed Rhubarb Press.

Consider the wild iris

People are forever *growing and going on journeys*
and being the best they can be.

Consider the wild iris

which waves its yellow flag in crowds
at the margins of burns,
thrusts up from still ponds,
cools its roots in wetlands.

Every spring it grows to full height,
every autumn dies back.

Is it the best it can be?

It just *is*.

Let's hear it for windfarms

Turbines virtue-signal from the horizon
flailing their triple arms like ineffectual
birdscarers. I've met a man
whose sole task was logging deathcounts,
birds versus windfarms.

What about
birds versus windscreens, birds versus radiomasts
birds versus cats? The blades whirr on
lighting our nights, warming our virtual hearths.

Blot on the landscape? Not more than any other
crop of metal sown among green pastures;
as elegant as any fenland spire
pointing its sermonising finger upwards
to urge our faltering prayers to heaven.

A. C. Clarke has published five full collections and six pamphlets, two of the latter, *Owersettin* and *Drochaid*, in collaboration with Maggie Rabatski and Sheila Templeton. Her fifth full collection, *A Troubling Woman* came out in 2017. She was one of four winners in the Cinnamon Press 2017 pamphlet competition with *War Baby*. She has been working on an extensive series of poems about Paul and Gala Éluard, later Gala Dalí, and the Surrealist circles in which they moved. The first set of these was published as a pamphlet by *Tapsalteerie* in 2021. A full collection based on the same material, *Alive Among Dead Stars*, is due to be published by Broken Sleep books at the end of 2024.

Simon Fletcher

Tagore

In praise of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

I'm still reading my way to you. One day,
perhaps, I'll make my way to Jorasanko.
How many rivers flowed into the delta
of your mind, what beasts, what birds and fish?
Your sunlit willow, mangrove metaphors
amaze in density and range of thought.

Poet, novelist, composer, artist
and educationalist, philosopher,
constructive critic and good friend of Gandhi,
you also knew the farmers of Bengal.
Your words washed even stony British hearts;
a man for all those holy, eastern, seasons.

Did loss of loved ones drive you on, the deaths
of children, friends, your darling Mrinalini?
When most of us are thinking to retire
you travelled, tirelessly, and made new friends.
I'm crossing rivers, wading through your words;
large minds and hearts like yours inspire the trip.

Note: 'Jorasanko' was the Tagore family home north of Kolkata,
Mrinalini was his wife.

Simon Fletcher lives in Shropshire. He's performed across Britain, with 'Mini Mushaira', and in Pakistan & Norway. He's read his work on BBC Radio Shropshire & the BBC Asian Network. He runs poetry writing workshops in green spaces/ places, organises festival programmes, and MCs various monthly events. He has been a 'Poet on Loan' in West Midlands libraries. He is the (co) author of 3 pamphlets, including *The Cherry Trees of Wyre*, and *A Little Bridge*, with Basir Sultan Kazmi and Debjani Chatterjee, 4 poetry collections, his most recent, *Close to Home*, Headland, 2015, and co-translations. For more go to: www.simonfletcherwriter.com

Simon is also manager of Offa's Press and has brought out 32 books/ pamphlets/ anthologies/ CDs to date. A pamphlet of his 'environmental' poetry *Wild Orchids* was published this spring by Offa's Press: www.offaspres.co.uk

In 2022 he was commended in the Michael Marks Environmental Poet of the Year Award.

Nandini Manjrekar

Aamar Robi Thakur, 2002 (My Tagore, 2002)

I never really knew him, although his words
 Came to life from Father's shiny long-playing records
 Every evening in my years of growing up.
 His signature embossed on the cover of each book
 In the set of collected works – so many twins in a nautilus shell,
 Emerging one by one in the long summer evenings.

Mother reading to us, her half-breed brood,
 Images of love and longing she imagined
 We would never know, taking us to different places and times,
 Names that sounded like they came from another country,
 A language of indefinite approximation.
 Her voice twilight soft,
 Holding back a sigh here and a sob there:
 Wistful sorrow in the last letter of an abandoned wife,
 The warm lilt in the voice of the man from Kandahar,
 A dying boy by the window, laughing with his little flower-girl friend,
 The postmaster coping with the everyday inanities of village life,
 A young man torn between love and revolution.
 “Every emotion”, Mother told us,
 “Every sensation of human existence,
 The poet captured them all for us:
 Passion, grief, the changing seasons, the land, the river.”

In the morning, she sang his songs in the kitchen;
 In the evening, standing by the window.
 The Arabian Sea swallowing a sun that only ever rose

Over paddy fields, palash trees, blue-green rivers,
 East and west, west-east in fervent embrace.
 Lines from his poems and songs her philosophical punctuation:
 Upset by a son's tantrum, a daughter staying out too late,
 A husband's indifference, a news story of a young bride
 Burnt for dowry, a village submerged in a dam-burst...
 Every emotion.
 But I in my youth having neither
 The fortitude of his heroines, nor their histories,
 Remained a stranger to this poetic sorcery.
 His garlanded portrait, beautiful face of a patrician poet,
 The distant look – failed to move me.
 Romance hedonistic and godless, a body not demure nor strong,
 Books the stuff of escape, words, not hues of lilac and cerise,
 But like the copper and steel in which they were noisily cast
 In dark humid rooms.
 In the magic of discovery: not the quiver of a lip,
 The barbet's song, the river's swaying moods.
 A century later, the cold unmaking of humanity.
 Steel and copper, grime and dust, the odour of labouring bodies.
 Everywhere the metallic stench of blood,
 The crackling of broken glass underfoot,
 Women's cries for mercy circling dead smokestacks.
 Starved for words, searching in the poet's gaze
 A way to speak about loss.
 The agnostic asks his question, hard and direct,
 Lyric extinguished by the sword
 On this evil day:
 "Canst Thou forgive the outrages of the night?"
 Sad melodies of uncertain metre, the boatman's cries in the sky,
 Young girls dancing in the first rain, the widow's silent tears,

Green, brown, coral and gold from a faraway land.
Memories of evenings, kitchens, youthful transgressions,
Newspaper stories in inky plaintive notes,
A palette of moods etched in remembrance.
History returns
Searching for every emotion.

Nandini Manjrekar is a Professor at the School of Education, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She lives between this mega city and a smaller one in western India, when she is not traveling elsewhere. Apart from her academic interests, she is interested in music, writing and photography, to which she hopes to give more time in the coming years. Her writing has been published in *Caesurae* and *Hakara*. Currently she has no pets, but would like to have some because she knows they would bring cheer in dark times.

Vahid Davar

Ode to the F-14

*When Hafez speaks, it's no surprise
If Venus dances in the skies
And leads across the heaven's expanse
Lord Jesus in the whirling dance.*

Hafez of Shiraz

Above the fourth roof of heaven
where Hafez sings to Venus's harp-song
as Christ dances
a supersonic fighter sweeps past
leaving a circular white BOOM

Placing his set-square leg on the cloud
Jesus ponders:
'See that geometric cat
with spears beneath its wings!
Well, not quite a cat,
more like a fire-winged moth!
And there was I thinking
the sons of thunder were James and John.'

Looking up at the blank dome, Hafez says:
'The damn thing scattered those adorable cherubs.
It was Iblis, wasn't it?'

Venus – harp strings still trembling
after the sound barrier collapses –

fingertips a down feather off her skirt.
A breeze takes the little parachute
away
out of sight.

Through holes in the clouds
down on earth
the outline of an airport is visible.
Somewhere near the horizon
flames are swallowing the oil refinery.

Above it a black melting speck
falling
trailing a cloud of smoke
through which the pilot has ejected.

Christ laughs:
'Lo and behold!
Iblis is going to crash headfirst.'

Hafez puts his lips to Venus's ear:
'Onto the earth
that is Adam
falling curst.'

The supersonic fighter sweeps away.

Notes:

The F-14 Tomcat is an American fighter jet that proved invincible in the operations to intercept Iraqi bombers it carried out for the Iranian Air Force during the Iran-Iraq war.

Hafez of Shiraz (1315-1390): The most celebrated writer of ghazals in the Persian language, in whose poetry various belief systems of fourteenth-century Persia are in dialogue. He is best known as an advocate of wine-drinking and an enemy of hypocrisy.

Looking up at the blank dome: 'This multi-patterned plain ceiling' is a metaphor for heaven in one of Hafez's ghazals.

Islamic astronomy is based on the assumption that heaven has seven layers. In the Persian version of this religion the fourth heaven is the seat of both the Messiah and the sun, i.e. Mithra.

Pastoral 5 (Prayer)

In the heavenly Jerusalem
there is a high throne
which my friends have carved for us
from thunder water and rain fire.
And its ice legs do not break
from the passing rumble of trolley dollies' wheels.

Oh angel-swarmed, pilotless heaven
with wind-ribbon and snow-mound clouds
once you have revolved anew
and past centuries have unravelled
in wedlock join me and my mother.
Join our hands somewhere
in some bluegrass where
no coin, no gold chain has falle
There let me make her a lavender crown
and with the dried wings of dragonflies
glinting, caught on pomegranate thorns
weave sandals round her feet.

Behold my bride!

Behold my bride!

Something the Colour of Pines on Fire

Have you heard a pheasant's call?
You couldn't tell it from a dragon's.

One fern-faced morning I came from home, went to the dukedom
where bale by bale on soil tractors have laid eggs
and manors oversee junipers and hawthorns.
And I went along the mallards' breakfast route
passing by the foxglove
and the deer's brake.

The wind was running on the hills.
It was spring
when kings went out to battle.
Every dyke I saw
covered by lichens and kestrels' droppings
was so intact that I thought
they had slain an army's sentinels with their bronze spears
and stripped them of their cuirasses and helmets.

Under a hawthorn instead of a sword
I found a broken golf ball
something to place on my desk alongside the shells and inkpots.

A pheasant was singing: drag-a-drowned, drag-a-drowned, drag-a-drowned.

The grass was strewn with threadbare feathers

as if a snake had crept up and put it to flight.

But where would you find a snake on this island?

A pheasant sang: drag-a-drowned, drag-a-drowned.

Something ran – white-collared –

something the colour of pines on fire.

The thorn hedge was there to help

the thorn hedge evaporated it.

I was thinking of home

of the midday nap.

I had reached the far end of the pine forest

where an alley opened out – a dark alley.

On the stubble-covered path I kicked a red shell.

A pheasant was singing from afar

or was it an unoiled harrow?

Notes:

When kings went out to battle: 1 Chronicles 20:1 and 2 Samuel 11.1.

Drag-a-drowned: This is an attempt to render, or compensate for, an onomatopoeic sound in the original Persian, *gharqā gharqā*. The invented onomatopoeia in Persian derives from *gharq* (drowned) and a pun on *qarqāvol* (pheasant); it sounds as though the bird is telling the speaker of the poem: ‘you who are drowned!’.

Vahid Davar is a published Iranian poet and PhD researcher in Persian Studies at the University of St. Andrews. ‘Sefr-e Safar’ (The Book of Journeys), Davar’s debut poetry collection, was highly commended by the 2019 Ahmad Shamlou Prize, the most prestigious poetry prize in the Persian Language. His second book, ‘Ahd-e Nassim’ (Nassim’s Testament) is included in the British Museum exhibit, Atlas of the World, 2022. In November 2022, Davar won the Jafar and Shokoh Farzaneh prize for best article on Persian literature. *Something the Colour of Pines on Fire*, a pamphlet of his self-translated poems published by Matecznik Press in 2022. Vahid’s poems published in *Gitanjali and Beyond* Issue 9 have been published in this pamphlet.

*Lakshmisree Banerjee***Hopes of Tomorrow**

Roving across

the mind's ocean

in sinuous waves

on pinions of saffron desires

on planks of pellucid images

on feathers quivering with fire,

the seed

in reverie

with eyes aflutter

dreams to

touch the sun.

Her nimble hopes

soar through aerial stretches

the endless fields of the cerulean

in lambent molecules

till she meets her god ---

Till the tall, great, tender, benevolent sun

tells the seed 'I have come, my love, I have come'.

Nature Rhythm

I find no failing rhythms
while the birds chirp
in the felicity of love
the river sings in fluidity
as dry leaves flaky swim
gaily in the rippling water
the seeds rest in cosy beds of the soil
beating retreat with winter
waiting to dance with the spring ---

I find no failing rhythms
in the play of innocence
of kids in nursery schools
hurrying into classes and buses
pushing and pulling in amity
while brown leaves cuddle the green
the seeds hibernate to grow again
winter slowly embracing spring
in harmony of fellowship ---

I find no failing rhythms

in the sun, moon and stars
moving in ballets of space

with no crash or clash
an elysium of orchestra livens
the ballads of divine dance
cosmic concerto we often fail to hear
as we draw our forbidding lines
devoid of joyful beats or songs ---

Can we not follow in matching steps
this natural choreography
the rhyme of this friendship-dance
the fox trot or the salsa or the *kathak*
from any slice of borderless expanse
when we have such cadence and melody
such truth, love and beauty
the skies bending to kiss the horizon
fruit-laden trees stooping to hug creepers ---

I find no reason for schisms for
I find no failing rhythms---

Rethinking India (On 75 Years of Independence)

Time to unroll

Time to unfold

Time to unravel---

Un-weave, think, move and act

Time to re-knit

The looming looms of history---

To get our tints, our hues

Our patterns right

Our reality in imagination bright---

Let us spin tight

Our fabric of truth

Our sunshine legacy ---

Open our caskets of glory

Forsaken in dark, dank rooms

In crannies of lies---

Let us unwind all

That which is designed
To create the wrong design---

We have arrived across
Aeons of civilization, veneration
In hallowed light of seers---
To un-mould the mould
Of all partisan perfidies
Of tempests within and beyond---

To arrive despite the miasma
As our placid sea of humanity
Merges with tides of the world
Our shorelines erased forever now
In the liquescence of brotherhood
Our summit at the still point of history.

Professor Laksmisree Banerjee, PhD, is an Award-Winning globally well-known Poet/Writer, Litterateur, Editor, Indian Vocalist, an Ex-Vice Chancellor and University Professor of English and Cultural Studies. She is a Senior Fulbright, Commonwealth and National Scholar from the University of Calcutta. Widely published and anthologised across the world, she has Nine Books of Poetry to her credit and One Hundred Twenty Research/Academic Publications including Books. She is the recipient of the University Grants Commission Post-Doctoral Research Award for her ground breaking work on World Women Poetry. Her many Awards include the International Reuel Lifetime Achievement Award, Literoma Laureate Lifetime Achievement Award for Art and Literature, Two Women Achievers Awards, Kala Ratnam Award, Global Panorama Book Award, Honour of Conossieur of the Literary Arts (Tunisian Asian Society) and many more. Dr. Banerjee is a Sr. Rotarian, a Multiple Paul Harris Fellow and has been the Indian *Rashtrapati's* (President's) Nominee on Boards of Central Universities. She believes in using her Pen and Voice for Social Transformation and International Goodwill.

*Elspeth Brown***Flow country**

Gulls already in the air, dawn sees more birds rise from the marsh,
harsh cry of a hen harrier in the winter air. Red deer drink from a fresh pool
free in the wide spaces of Caithness and Sutherland,
their home for thousands of years.

Water seeps through the peatlands,

flowing slowly to the burns.

The river Wick rises with the January snow.

Sphagnum moss hangs down its banks.

Strange how such wild places can save the planet.

We see these bog lands in a new light

as we follow the river to the edge of the sea

and into the harbour by Old Pulteney and Wick.

Frog Against the World

While leaders are arriving to plan
how to stop global disaster,

I am searching a pond for a lost frog
who has hopped out of my garden.

While hospitals fill as a pandemic strikes humanity
I would love to have some answers to it all but -

I worry that my frog – my frog!
will be killed; on a road, by cold, by a predatory gull.

If I rip out the boiler, plant trees, lose the car,
get solar panels, eat no meat, will it be enough?

Maybe all I can do today is save a frog
and place him gently near the garden pond.

Pond

A new pond in the garden.

no heron knows of it yet.

Spring leaves rustle around it,

reflection toning down the blue sky,

tadpoles swim among fresh weed.

Some will grow to frogs

through all the dangers creatures face.

Will there be water beetles, dragonflies,

common, palmate, even crested newts?

What lives will be lived there among

roses, alliums, catmint, foxgloves?

Already the water smells of woodland

algae creeping on stones,

wash of water spiders

patterning the surface

rippling with possibilities, drowning

the disturbance of these days.

Elsbeth Brown's present poetry inspiration is in the human connection to the environment and the additional problems caused by Covid 19. Previous Scottish writing interests are James Clerk Maxwell, and John Muir and climate change as it affects wild places. She was recently one of three first prize winners for her *Declaration of Dunbar*, now published in *Declarations on Freedom for Writers and Readers* by Scottish PEN.

Her poetry publications include, *Starling and Crane*, published by Indigo Dreams who also published *Skunk Cabbage*. An earlier collection, *A Crab in the Moon's Mouth*, was published by Markings.

She has enjoyed reading in many venues throughout the U.K from the Isle of Wight Literary Festival to the north of Scotland, where her family originate.

Gili Haimovich

In the Old City
the past is a beating heart
exhausted by tourists.
We can trust finding falafel
more than finding Jesus.
I follow you,
or you follow me,
Via Dolorosa,
the Alley of the Impure,
Santa Claus on a camel.
I don't find a destination
but your eyes
searching for salvation.

Dust

In India everything is covered in the thick gravy that is India. Even the familiar.

Is it spice or dust?

And how can you tell

dust from dust,

dust from ashes,

ashes from Ganges?

You are a blank spot

in a place of multiplications:

gods with many hands,

cascades of languages,

of vehicles,

of people,

of cows,

gliding all over.

You don't even have one of each.

Yet it doesn't enable you

to pass through, like thinning air,

to breath out more than in,

to be out more than within,

within the walls of your computer, yourself, your cell.

The problem must be you, look where you got:

monkeys hang from the fence, the guy in the corner sells the sweetest mangos.

Isn't it beautiful, intense enough,

to dilute you over the landscape,

spread you like ashes?

Or try this one:

a long, leveled, taxi drive with Dr. V. from the Hindi department.

Your chatter adorns the road
and the road is transformed
from clumsy bustling
to greening hustle.

It's called New Delhi
and as you go south it gets fenced,
not just around park-centered neighborhoods,
but also with etiquette
and women weighing
gold gems on their bodies.

It's called New Delhi
and it's already covered with dust.

It's called New Delhi
and certainly it learned a trick or two,
(while you don't seem to have any up your sleeve),
but clearly history had passed here wanting to linger.

Long before you left wanting to leave behind
no more than transparent traces,
the ones you can leave
without weighing longing,
without posing obstacles
in letting it be Bharat.

New Delhi, New Year*To Reshma Ramesh*

I want to believe again
as I did in India
when Reshma took me
to the Hindu temple in Bangalore,
and told me that anything is possible.
On the way back,
we lost our way,
already.
But we laughed.
We were brave
and we knew it.
Now, in New Delhi, almost New Year.
A crow, rat, and parakeet
eat together breadcrumbs from a bowl
beside the ruins of a mosque
in Lodhi Garden.
I already doubt.
And Reshma isn't even that far
as of yet.

The Land

The land is beaten down by heat and lethargy.

The only journey that might succeed here
is the one after comfort.

The Holy Grail is left somewhere
on top of hearths or churches
framed by double glass windows
overlooking a landscape with potential for snow.

But in this soil, the ambition of faith left different traces.

Its footprints are going backwards
to the trees
as if they're the cradle of civilization.

Their roots are creeping above the concrete
like veins, secrets,
paving their way towards revelation.

Or arrows pointing
to Holy Grails that glow as brightly
as all non-existent treasures.

These roots confront the comforting camouflage of the soil's bosom.

Whereas synagogues are concealed between apartment buildings
as if modesty could offer salvation.

Failed Secular

It's my father,
 who chased away pain
 the same way I run away from pleasure.
 I do not know which one of us got farther.
 If I stick my hand into my father's throat,
 like a chick attempting to feed,
 I won't pull out a big NO from there.
 However, I can't be fed by approval.
 It's the darker minerals that I crave.

I have grown estranged from peacefulness,
 even when not attempting to hide.
 I still kick
 theoretically.
 When presenting, prefer to add,
 to my maiden name, not to my surname,
 into the present tense—
 Passive Rebellious.
 So there is no revealing of past struggles
 instead I winnow (win + now?) a hint of secrecy.

I have failed at being secular.
 Managed too well living as a couple.
 Became accustomed to the belief I love you.
 I don't know what other beliefs I've accumulated.
 What a shame, to keep on being lonely,
 even after getting married.
 I unite better with things that aren't me.

Gili Haimovich is a prize-winning Israeli poet writing bilingually. She has four books in English, six in Hebrew and a multilingual book. She was awarded prizes for best foreign poet at the international Italian poetry competitions *I colori dell'anima* (2020) and *Ossi di Seppia* (2019), a grant for excellency by the Ministry of Culture, Israel, (2015) a fellowship residency at the International Writers' Workshop Hong Kong (2021), and several grants for her Hebrew books and translations. Her poems are translated and published in 33 languages, featured in numerous anthologies and journals such as: *World Literature Today*, *The Best Asian Poetry Anthology*, *International Poetry Review*, *101 Jewish Poems for the Third Millennium Anthology*, *Washington Square Review*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, *Colombia Journal* and all major publications in Israel as well as poetry festivals and events in Canada, France, Mexico, Italy, India, Chile, Hong Kong, Romania, Taiwan, Kosovo, Mongolia and more.

*Karla Brundage***e-co-dependent**

Things we think of killing but cannot, children
lovers, our lover's other lovers,
for me, a particular tree.

I want to kill you, but cannot because
I love how you grow—
how I have grown to love your

shade from the neighbors' glance.

Plumbs that punish yearly
stain my pavement
gardens, leave potted plants in ruins.

Tempted to murderous ideations, but resisted,

You want to kill it,

tree pruner asked.

Yes, I said, meaning no.

II

I can murder this morning glory, I planted

under my gate. She is in full bloom.

Creepers crisscrossing my patio

satin forest green leaves shaped like baby hands,

faces of the blossom, searching for the sun.

She is not so innocent to me.

Her tentacles run deep, creating chaos

in basement bowels,

destroying intricate workings within.

Strong, ropelike, she creeps unwanted,

stunning most to silence with her beauty.

Malignant

From a small seed she grows
purple glory in tangle or mourning
producing dangerous blooms.

Into dark spaces she crawls
creates hidden cavities
weaves her way into plumbing,
arteries of our house and home.

Found unobtrusively in
home and garden section
no warning sign
telling of dangers.

Strong tentacles unfurl unnoticed
rip and tear down fences,
cover entire buildings
grow out of control in purple glory.

Beauty

She crawls into dark spaces and

Into hidden cavities

Weaving her way into

Plumbing and arteries of the house and home

Tumors

I bought her at home depot

There was no warning sign

About the dangers

Benign

How strong the tentacles are

How the rip and tear down fences

Cover entire building

Grow out of control in Purple glory

Karla Brundage (<http://karlabrundage.com>) is author of two books of poetry, including *Swallowing Watermelons*, and co-author of *Mulatta–Not so Tragic*. Her work as editor and publisher for *Pacific Raven Press* has included authors in the Bay Area, Hawaii, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya in the following anthologies: *Sisters Across Oceans*, *Our Spirits Carry Our Voices* , and *Black Rootedness: 54 Poets from Africa to America*. Media credits include Sister Power on ThinkTech Hawaii, C-SPAN, LitSeen, Wanda's Picks and Chills at Will Podcast. Her poetry, essays and short stories can be found in *Konch*, *Literary Magazine*, *sPARKLE & bLINK*, *MiGoZine*, *Black Fire This Time*, *Essential Truths*, and *A Gathering of Tribes: Black Lives Matter Issue* amongst others. A graduate of Vassar College, Mills College MFA Program, and San Francisco State Clinical Schools Project, Karla is curator for the 2023 LitQuake Poetic Tuesday reading series and founder of *West Oakland to West Africa Poetry Exchange*. Her newest collection *Blood Lies: Race Trait(or)* will be published in 2024 by Finishing Line Press.

*Donald Adamson***Forebodings**

The ants that all summer long
foraged for queen and larvae
think on winter: mend their mound,
fix the roof, shore up crumbling walls
with scraps hauled from the forest.

Tap by tap woodpeckers hammer
seed-filled cones from a store
they filled to the full. They know what to expect
as the sun gouges the skyline
and dawn and dusk narrow down the options
and the air's sharp saw-edge cuts
more keenly day by day.

Thus all other creatures live and act
on their forebodings – so may we,
dismissing plans drawn up by fools
and knaves, believers in the infinity
of space, resources, time: schemes
that will surely cost the earth – unless –

– unless we end the madness
of everlasting growth and goods, return
to the ancient contract signed
with nature that is in us and around.

Donald Adamson is from Dumfries. He worked as a teacher of English in France, Finland, Iran and Kuwait, then spent several years working for Longman Publishing. In 1996 he returned to Finland to work as a lecturer in Finnish universities. He currently lives in Tampere, Finland. He has translated Finnish poems for *How to address the fog: Finnish poems 1978–2002* (Carcanet/Scottish Poetry Library, 2005), and *A Landscape Blossoms Within Me*, translations of the Finnish poet Eeva Kilpi (Arc Publications). His collection *All Coming Back* was published by Roncadora Publications (2019) and a collection in Scots, *Biold*, was published by Tapsalteerie in 2021. His awards include first prize in the Herald Millennium Competition (Adjudicator Edwin Morgan), the 2019 Scottish Federation of Writers Competition, and the Sangschaw 2022 Scots Translation Competition.

Catherine Nicolson

Pole Position

The polar bears I saw in the zoo
weren't as white as they might have been.
Their yellow trousers were embarrassing,
and the blue-painted concrete pool
had no-one, even the penguins, fooled.

Now on TV ice cliffs plunge away
into the sea as the white land dissolves.
Poles apart the bears are lost
where no one will think to feed them
iced buns against the rules.

The penguins are already dressed for the Titanic.
The white bears will follow with the floes,
each shrinking island in a widening sea.
Then we, on our own small islands of conviction,
will be swept at last by a wave of giant tears.

Catherine Nicolson has worked in educational publishing, as a publisher's reader, a photojournalist and a published novelist. She was born in tropical Africa, and brought up there for most of her childhood, with intermittent periods spent in Manchester, Bristol and an idyllic though isolated hamlet in rural Cambridgeshire. After school in Bristol she attended Oxford University for a degree in modern languages, and subsequently spent some time as a translator from French into English. She now lives in central London, and her poetry has been published both online and internationally. Her favourite accolade is for her first novel to have been mentioned in broadcaster Alistair Cooke's 'Letter from America', and to have featured in the New York Times. Her mother Dee Nicolson is also a poet, and her grandfather Alan Tabor was a calligrapher and illuminator much interested in the works of Tagore, which he published widely with great success.

*Eveline Pye***Waste**

Huge flagons of blow-moulded plastic
hollow handles gripped with a fighting fist
ousted by little bottles tucked on my doorstep
—the scrape and clink as I take them in.

The tinfoil top teases out an old memory.
I'm about ten, listening to the dawn whine
of an electric float, the shoogle of crates.
I see a blue tit, with the black eye-stripe

of a miniature bandit, using its sharp beak
like a jackhammer to puncture the cap.
My mother chases the bird away
finally decides to move with the times.

A lifetime later, trash is killing seabirds.
I reassess the miracle of plastic,
the thoughtless ease of a throwaway culture,
return to washing out the empties.

Small Tortoiseshell

I have lived with the knowledge
of endangered species, felt regret
at the loss of saolas, vaquitas,
pangolins, Columbian spotted frogs,
American picas, Lebanese vipers.

But when I read the tortoiseshell
is in decline, I suffered for the fragility
of its orange and black wings, felt them
sweep inside my childhood hands
remembered that moment of release.

My granddaughter and I are searching
for siskins and squirrels when she says,
*This is boring, Granny. Let's look for
fairies and unicorns* and I wonder whether
her child will look for bees and butterflies.

Technical Solution

In response to colony collapse
they're seeking a technical solution
trying to build a better bee
in the Smart Industry Field-Lab.

Fleets of tiny robotic drones
could sweep across the country
pollinating our food. Imagine
the litter of spiky dead bee-bots.

Nature spent 100 million years
perfecting bee design.
It's self-replicating, biodegradable,
carbon neutral — unbeatable.

Thresholds

We're like black bears in an apple tree
venturing further, growing in self-confidence
until the weakened branch cracks and breaks.

We fly abroad to revel in the sun, laugh
while sea ice melts in the Arctic Ocean,
Greenland's glaciers creak and groan.

Meanwhile, frozen soils thaw, release
methane, start chain reactions, transgress
invisible boundaries to a point of no return.

Eveline Pye is a mathematician and lectured at Glasgow Caledonian University for over twenty years. She was an invited poet at Bridges Conferences on mathematical poetry in Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, Austria, and Canada. Her first collection, *Smoke That Thunders*, Mariscat Press (2015), explored her experiences as an Operational Research Analyst in the Zambian Mining Industry. It included the poem Mosi-Oa-Tunya which was chosen for the 20 Best Scottish Poems of that Year. Her second pamphlet, *STEAM*, a collection of STEM poems, was published by Red Squirrel (2022).

*John Eliot***Conversation with the Reverend**

The conversation is very important
To the Reverend. I knew from
His pietist frown, the
Clergyman's portrait. His received
Queen's English spoken as
An old-fashioned wind instrument
With a broken reed.

A quiet afternoon. Late September
Sunshine and apples, lawn neatly cut with
Flowers sawing, reminding him
Cambridge so long long ago;
A different world of Hebrew and Greek.
The Reverend's wife, saddened
Jill over tea, in another place.
And we, wise, as he airbrushed
Mary Magdalene from tissue sheets.
Reverend, Christ's reflection. The wife,
A different Mary.

Hello Father,

I am sorry to bother you. I can only imagine that you are too busy for me. But sometimes...
 Some words sent to me; had to tell someone. A fellow poet,
 And a piece he had written made a reference to
 Psalm 77. Psalm 77, I read, re-read. In my mind
 I saw the poet composing over two and a half thousand years ago. Positive faith. I
 Don't know why I'm telling you this. I needed to speak. I miss the poetry of St Cadocs.
 Do they understand
 Likening God to parents sleeping in another room. Such faith that
 They will wake. You know
 People don't believe me when I say I have read the Bible. Cover to cover like ladies read the
 Latest John Boyne for book club believing themselves to be very clever. I missed the begat bits.
 Well
 Who wouldn't?
 A Jewish friend, Orthodox, he who can trace back to Adam, the prophets, the poets, David, Isaiah
 visited the Wailing Wall.
 He spoke Psalm 128 for me
 Swaying back and forth in prayer.
 At your going out and coming in.
 Coming in, going out.

John Eliot has published four collections of poetry with Mosaïque press: *Ssh!*, *Don't Go*, *Turn on the Dark*, and *Canzoni del Venerdì Sera*, a translation of his work into Italian. John is now poetry editor for Mosaïque Press and with Italian and Romanian universities is editing translation anthologies. *Curente La Rasceuce* English/Romanian *Correnti Incrociate* English/Italian He is Writer in Residence at Eutopia English Academy, Romania.

Santosh K Dary

Under the Open Sky

In a small village in northern India, I live by a hill where a river flows.
It takes a village to raise a child, under the open sky.

Hoots of an owl, whistling of crickets, wake-up calls from cockerels,
a blanket of mist lifts to another glorious day under the open sky.

Here I take my solitary rounds, amid winding walks in ruined grounds.
Elders chat over fences in fields under the open sky.

Many games played in the shade; the young contend as the old survey.
I often pause on every charm, under the open sky.

A village of hopes, a village of dreams, as many ghosts as the living.
Temple open for daily prayers, under the open sky.

The mustard field is like a yellow sea, white butterflies bounce around.
In the trick of sunlight, corn glistens. Golden nuggets under the open sky.

Sitting under the mango tree, I watch heaps of chapatis made.
Saag simmers all day long in a clay pot over a *chulla* under the open sky.

Mooing of cows before dusk, we exchange food, so no-one stays hungry.
Hour-long meals, as we sit in our *vehras* under the open sky.

I walk from *vehra* to *vehra*, running errands and giving messages.
Warm soil caresses my bare feet, a foot therapy under the open sky.

Elders recite folklore and legends, creating a vision of mystery.

Lying on *manja*, I avidly listen, imagination wild, under the open sky.

Over the hill, deep in the woods, where witches live - both bad and good -
To scare the children naughty and nice, under the open sky.

Remedies for ailments, disorders, and germs.

A gathering of herbs, Nature's offering, under the open sky.

Community of families without blood-ties, staying together.

In cultural caring, always sharing, under the open sky.

Punjabi Words

Saag: puree of mustard and spinach leaves

Manja: lightweight portable bed

Chulla: clay cooking vessel used outdoors

Vehras: gardens

Santosh K Dary is a member of the Punjabi Women Writers' Group and has read her stories at the Wolverhampton and Ironbridge Literature Festivals. In 2022 over a period of three months she read Bulleh Shah's poems in Punjabi at her local library as part of Elliptical Readings for the British Art Show 9 Wolverhampton. Santosh has contributed to collections of Japanese poetry featured in *Ripening Cherries* published by Offa's Press. The Arts Foundry published her reminiscence of childhood experiences in the *Living Memory Book* and her poems were published in *Gitanjali and Beyond* issue 5. Her prize-winning poem 'Bulbulhamptan Tuesday Market' was featured in the Black Country Magazine winter edition 2021/21 Bostin News. Her poems have been published in *New Voices* a poetry anthology of new poets by Offa's Press. Santosh took early retirement from social work with Wolverhampton City Council to spend time with her family.

*Kathryn Waddell Takara***Double Swing Secret**

Meet me on the double swing
in front of Sacred Falls.

On the corroding beach

I am here for now.

Meet me

At an unpredictable time

You may hear my humming calling

I am there too

Imagine me

Sweet as chocolate cake

Singing pleasure songs for your ears only

Delighted sighs and moans

Meet me past Kahana Bay

After the swell subsides at Punalu`u

Just before Hauula

Do you hear me calling you?

I leave

Invisible messages on the breeze of singularity

silent as a hallowed hymn

on a chilly winter day.

Meet me on the shifting sands of time

I will come again when you do.

On the Deck

Sitting on the deck

remembering footprints, wings, phantasms

accepting we are going, forward, backward

a mountain stream of moments

passes, mostly unnoticed

lessons learned upward.

Winter and climate change

early rains and flooding

followed by North wind and chill

rambling inner eyes consider or dream

ponder the set of my sail

where to and when to wait.

Sending prayers of hope

to those in harm's way

fires eating houses

wild floods

earthquakes destroying,

hurricanes, hunger

global disconnect

I sit for a while in stillness

peace holds me gently

personal power illusive

survival not guaranteed

I weep for the children

pray to the ancestors

listen to invisible voices

for guidance divine and sacred.

Screaming Trees

In the path of the freeway construction on Windward *O'ahu*,
I saw several giant trees uprooted,
lying helplessly on their sides,
recording every shade of pain,
their roots taller than the tractors
that slew them.

In the Arctic Circle
of their imminent death,
they seemed to be crying,
screaming for someone to help
to put them back upright
into the nurturing bosom of Mother Earth.

I felt so powerless
before their tragic grandeur.
I could neither stay
nor ignore the haunting echoes
of their wilting lives.
Two days later I passed again
hoping to see them gone,

taken away to be transplanted elsewhere.

To my dolor

I heard their muted moans fading,

I saw their slowly shrinking leaves,

branches broken in their falling,

life ebbing like a siren

into a kithless night.

Today, sitting in my living room,

I heard a sudden slitting fall

through the still *Ka`a`awa* air,

the crash of coconut fronds.

I went out on the deck

thinking the tree pruners

were trimming.

But no, they cut down two tall trees

older than the grandparents

still healthy and strong.

I felt threatened

that the enemies of green silence,

and ancestral giants,

the enemies have drawn closer

to my earth margins.

I still hear the trees screaming.

Kathryn Waddell Takara, PhD, a winner of the (BCF) 2010 American Book Award, has published over 300 poems and 3 books of poetry: *New and Collected Poems*, *Pacific Raven: Hawai'i Poems*, her recent book *Tourmalines: Beyond the Ebony Portal* and numerous academic articles. She is currently a writer and traveling performance poet since she retired from the University of Hawaii as a widely travelled professor and public scholar of ethnic and Africana Studies. She was born and raised in Tuskegee, Alabama, educated at George School and Tufts on the East Coast, and studied in France. She earned a M.A. in French from the University of California, Berkeley and moved to Hawai'i in 1968, where she earned a PhD in Political Science from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, wrote, and taught for 31 years.

*Jane Prior***Faces**

I

See

Faces in

A tree's branches

The folds of a blanket.

They look at me to make them real,

I let them down when I look away.

Why did they

Choose

Me?

Interactions

A

Girl

A cat

And a tree...

One is grinning at me.

One is ignoring us both.

The other is just being a tree.

Anchored

Head above water

Swimming the breeze I stand fast

Anchored by friendships

Keenly comes the traveller

Gently weeps the winter clouds
White tears and silver spheres
Softly whispers evening's breeze
Through trees of evergreen
Brightly shines the Hunter's stars
Notched bow and arrow
Loudly cracks the heavy step
Echoes round the frozen ground
Warmly wrapped in coat and scarf
Cold nose and senseless toes
Keenly comes the traveller
Christmas gifts and breathing mist
Timely ends the shortest day

Jane Prior studied English, Film and Writing hypertext in literary fiction while working as a academic skills tutor at the University of Dundee. She held the post of Editor for the *British Fantasy Society* magazine *Prism* for a year contributing editorial commentary and reviews under pseudonym. She has received commendations for her stories and poetry. D. C. Thomson has published two of her short stories. Her poem *under the Bathmat* was short listed for the Bridport poetry prize in 2017 and two poems, *On Not Telling the Truth* and *A Candle Lit* appear in *Dundee Writes*. The narrative poem, *Down to the Sea*, was selected by artist, Moria Buchanan to feature in her art exhibition *All Washed Up*. Jane is developing a website to showcase her short stories and poems and is working on her first novel.

Ross Donlon

Living Music

Perhaps the beginning of any life
is like a note of music, and thereafter
the composition proceeds in all
its many moods and beauties
until it ends. The notes, each
and every one vital to the completion
of the work, are sustained
for just the amount of time
they must, for the being to thrive.

Being alive is like a kind of music.
I think of the first notes of J. S. Bach's
Well Tempered Clavier, as first bubbles
of breathed air, first specks of soil
moving apart as seed germinates,
tip taps from inside a pale shell,
water movement as eggs begin to float.

Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*

has forty- eight Preludes and Fugues,

making of who knows how many

thousands of notes, each sustained

for just the right amount of time

to be a complete part of the whole.

If these were likened to species of animals

like ourselves, or others, we might see

how sustaining their part in the world

well-tempered, will complete a composition

how it is naturally meant to be, how a note cut short

is both discordant to itself and destroys the whole.

Ross Donlon is an Australian poet who has published five books of poetry, most recently, *The Bread Horse*. He is represented in numerous poetry anthologies in Australia where he is also publisher of *Mark Time Books* & convenes the monthly poetry reading, *Poetry from Agitation Hill*. Winner of two international poetry competitions, he has performed at festivals in Australia, the U.K. & Ireland as well as other readings in Romania, Poland & Norway. Other awards include *The Dorothy Hewett Flagship Fellowship* and *The Launceston Cup*, premier spoken word event of the Tasmanian Poetry Festival.

Gillian Mellor

Once, forest existed just as forests

The sun makes me fat with carbon.

It slips through stomata

forms my cells, flesh, stems.

My flowers bloom and turn to seed.

My canopy domes earth like heaven.

You touch me without permission.

I hear myself between your fingers

rustled like paper money.

You say my limbs are hot as currency.

My heat leaves only ash -

the remnants of stardust.

That sounds like poetry,

but it catches in throats,

settles on land that needs returned,

not left skinned and sickened,

and stripped free of song,

its echoes forever searching for an ear.

Refrains exist to unite a choir -

The party is ending:

stop burning,

stop burning.

Gillian Mellor lives just outside Moffat in Scotland and her poems can be found online in The Dangerous Women Project, The Selkie Anthology: Transformation, New Boots and Pantocrasies; in print inside Poetry Scotland, Gutter, Pushing Out The Boat, The Poets' Republic, Southlight and the co-authored pamphlet: Compass Points. She was highly commended in the 2022 Liverpool Poetry Prize.

*Stuart Paterson***Katie's Wood**

Passing Nethermill, the rasping clarity
soundtrack of a working farm
spreads over endless earth-rich fields of day,
ploughed into ears by bladed air
long sharpened on the whin & stone
of Criffel. I remember when
a heron quietly materialised
just past an almost hidden gate,
wing stretched to write a sign that only
we could read to lead us down to Katie's Wood.

Harelaw

Harebells lay foundations
underfoot, bright paths through May
which seasons Harelaw Wood,
each flower a tiny cryptic hallelujah
to the month, perhaps to us,
each bloom a beautiful blue styptic
on all hearts that hope for soon.

Stuart A Paterson: Past recipient of a UK Society of Authors EC Gregory Award & a Creative Scotland Robert Louis Stevenson Fellowship, Stuart's recently written nationally-distributed, award-winning poems & lyrics for Lidl, Scottish Water & Scotland's Street Orchestra, The Nevis Ensemble. During 2017-18 he was BBC Scotland's Poet in Residence & in 2019 was the visiting poet to Rhodes University & St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, South Africa, in the UN Year of Indigenous Languages. His illustrated 2020 book from Tippermuir, 'A Squatter o Bairnrhymes', was the first large book of original poems in Scots for children in decades & he was publicly voted '2020 Scots Language Awards Writer of the Year'. In 2023 Stuart's 'Wheen: Collected and New Scots Poems' has been published by the Ulster Scots Community Network & funded by one of the Scottish Government's first ever Scots Language Publication Awards. He lives in Mid Nithsdale.

*Preeti Kailey***A Song of Dust**

The sitar, rubab, guitar belong to one musical family,
playing the prayers of a Sufi poet.

And God is Tagore's friend
who carries a promise
to live with all nations.

To follow and remain close to all;
to love and trust;
to sustain faith
in what remains,
before we all return to dust...

Waters of life

With Waheguru on our side
 these five rivers shall sustain life
 as long as *bani* lives in you.
 We are one and to one we shall return.
 No need to question preservation of life.

These waters are forever blessed
 as are my mother's tongue
 and mother's land.
 Mother India will live.
 She has been tortured and divided
 but has never failed.

Notes:

Waheguru: 'Wondrous Guru', a Sikh name for God.

Five rivers: The Punjab is 'the land of five rivers': Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum. But due to Partition in 1947, only three rivers flow through Indian Punjab. Chenab and Jhelum now flow only in Pakistan.

Bani: An abbreviation for 'Gurbani', meaning the 'Gurus' words, i.e. the writings of the Gurus in the Sikh sacred scriptures.

Preeti Kailey uses her writing as therapy to explore themes like mental health and cultural heritage. She enjoys pouring out her thoughts and feelings on paper. As a poet, she considers it important to capture her Punjabi and Indian heritage, plus her British nationality. Alongside engaging in art that influences her daily life, she is studying Fine Art at university and is a member of Punjabi Women's Writing Group.

*Sue Whitmore***Dragon**

The boilers roared.

We had the dragon by its tail
or so we thought

until it turned on us;
and now its hot and acrid breath,
its open maw
is taking forest, farm and heath -
like war.

And it won't stop -
though nor it seems, will we,
still firing up the dragon's rage.

Oh yes, it's come for us,
come through gardens,
roofs and walls, come
for all the comfortable stuff
of living.

One day we will wake up
and find the creatures of the world,
like our regrets, are ashes on the wind.

Dragons can be unforgiving.

God's old ear

'...to doubt is to immediately go out.' - Wm. Blake

Of course she was angry -
stiff with adolescent rage
childhood innocence now seemed
like gullibility.

But no, they hadn't lied,
only led themselves, and her,
to believe this, that and the other,
that if she was good and chaste and prayed,
trusted the oracles, obeyed,
honoured her father and her mother,
life wouldn't hurt so much.

Such kind intentions.
Parents: too strong and yet too weak,
their tiny mortal boats will leave you
on a moment's waning breath,
any words you might have said all spoken,
all bonds broken.

However old that's when it hurts -
no mum, no dad, no forwarding address,
no phone, no letter,
they're not around to make things better.

Too strong and yet too weak?
Sounds just like their God, in fact,
an old ear pressed against the confessional grille

locked in omni-impotence -
hearing all yet simply cannot act.

Of course she was angry!
They'd tried to share their limp old God with her
and here she was
stuck with nagging human fear
and a withered relic -
God's old ear.

When the waters rose

Drifting on without a chart
we're losing sight of land -
nothing about this trip was planned;
and where is Noah the old drunk -
lost to his bed?

The cruise is in full swing
and one thing's clear,
we revellers must be fed
and fellow passengers of fur and beak,
scale and wing will quietly disappear . . .

If things we don't yet know to name
are lost to flood and flame, so what?
Everything's fine -
Noah is in his laboratory storing genes on ice,
seed, eggs and sperm in a frozen zoo.

He's making play with DNA
in his all-too-human, all-too-apelike way.
He's not to blame,
we've all done *far* too little *far* too late,
Party's over now it's down to fate.

The world keeps turning
and our cruise moves on.
When history judges
we will be long gone.

Sue Whitmore: Poet and artist Sue Whitmore studied at University College London and Central and Wimbledon Schools of Art. She has a lifelong commitment to imagination, language and the human experience expressed through poetry and enjoys performing her poetry. Her poems have been broadcast and published in many journals. She convenes a Stanza of the Poetry Society. She is a member of Greenwich Printmakers. In 2012 she was made Champion of Culture by Art in Business for her contribution to the arts. Publications: *'Sue, Realist: A Selection of Poems & Drawings'*, 1992 and *'Blood, Fish & Bone' [Books I & II]*, 2017, a pamphlet, *'Human Interest'* - commended in IDP's Geoff Stevens Memorial Competition in 2018.

www.suewhitmore.co.uk

*Donna Campbell***Plumbing the Truth**

How sweet the
light afore darkness
comes and shadows
brave
steal the day.

How sweet the
first intake
of breath
from a new born
child
upon entering
the world.

How sweet the
dream that lingers
on when
waking
to a cold
November morn.

How sweet the
quiet refrain
of a violin standing
alone
at the end
of a song.

How sweet the
caress of a
lovers touch
when all seems
lost
and life sits
heavy upon
ones shoulders.

Brave child
waking alone, lost,
follows the quiet refrain
of a violin. Life's breath caresses
shadows, shoos them out the way
to let the light of day enter
the dream that lingers on
within the song that guides us all.

Donna Campbell is a performance poet who has showcased her work widely across the UK. She has worked with the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, as co-producer of the show *2nd Stories*, produced multi-media poetry events for the CCA, and was Project manager on the *Full of Life* exhibition and publication between Survivors Scotland and Project Ability. Her work has been published in various magazines/anthologies. She is part of the collective, *Wanderlust Women*, who toured U.K festivals and abroad with the publication *Wanderlust Women*. Her first poetry collection, *Mongrel*, was published in 2021 by Seahorse Publications. Her second collection, *Looking For Mae West*, will be launched in February 2023. Donna is a proud Glaswegian who lives alone and thoroughly enjoys doing so.

*Em Strang***Crocus**

I am a woman, you are a man
but this is a crocus.

This small flower opens
only for the sun.

It's not a slave to its name,
its colour nor its scent.

On windy days it moves
in some new direction.

It speaks in *Crocatus*,
a kind of yellowy hush.

The sun is its only true love,
even when the bees have been.

It knows it cannot outrun
time or darkness or snow.

In silence, a cup is being filled.

The Calling of St. Matthew

After Caravaggio

Outside, the streets burn. The awning of every shop and tavern has been destroyed and is hanging in shreds or drifting in the air as ash. The inbye land is burning. The fields are red with fire, hot orange and bright white as though heaven and hell have come together as one. The trees burn like torches, sending flares up into the sky: the time is now.

Further out, beyond the towns and cities, the land is folding beneath fire. The wind has fanned the flame for forty miles and only a fool walks barefoot on the earth. All the way to the coast, the land is blackened, a burnt crust for extinct birds.

Inside, the men are pointing. To point is to beckon attention. To point is to signify and to clarify. Are we pointed at? Do we point?

The boy's bright tunic refuses to go outside. It'll barter everything to stay where it is, to be comforted by the familiar, to secrete itself in the folds of its sleeves. It watches everything – the open ledger, the inkwell, the young man fiddling with coins. It reflects back what it knows to be true: gold is the setting sun and red is the blood spilt elsewhere.

Outside, all of Rome is burning. Inside, the other, older flame.

Em Strang is a poet, novelist, mentor, editor, prison tutor and founder of Scottish charity, Three Streams. Her writing preoccupations are with nature, spirituality and the question of evil. Em's first full collection of poetry, *Bird-Woman*, was published by Shearsman in October 2016, was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Best First Collection Prize and won the 2017 Saltire Poetry Book of the Year Award. Her second collection, *Horse-Man*, was published in September 2019 and was shortlisted for the Ledbury Munthe prize for Best Second Collection. Her first novel, *Quinn*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Fitzcarraldo Editions Novel Prize and was published by Oneworld in 2023.

*Chrys Salt***Missing you already..**

Time was we'd find
gloomy pop-eyed presences
in damp dung coloured corners of dead leaves,
cup warty panting bellies in hot hands;
find marvellous gold cords
coiled behind corrugated iron
to muscle round our fingers,
and slide through;
watch pig-mouse snouts
on slug hunts
whiffle round flowerpots at dusk,
splayed quills and tiny bones,
tattooed in tyre tracks,
evidence of tribes.
Trapezing athletes, russet in the sun
feasting on garden feeders upside down,
jelly dollops beached by tides,
the sideways disappearing acts
in sodden sand,
blood spattered massacres on glass,
legs snapped by wipers,
striped furry nuzzlers
in nasturtium mouths so few,
our toxic legacy of legions lost
for future generations to download-
the hedgehog with the dinosaur,
the bumble bee, the toad.

Mountain Voices

*'Do we learn anything from history
the stranded polar bear, the rising sea'*

So used the Romans were to broken things,
smashed oil lamps, wine jars,
rattled urns, the creak of houses,
tumbling masonry,
they just shrugged off the portents
of a mountain's rage,
repaired their fallen walls
and soldiered on.

Those who could read the writing in Spring wind,
sun's scribbled messages on Yukon ice,
told the prospectors it was dangerous,
warned of a snowpack in the mountain's throat,
before it raised its mighty voice and spoke.

So when Vesuvius spewed its guts,
and two millennia on a slice of snow
broke loose from nature's moorings,
smothering everything,
too late in either case
to call for gods, too sudden
for the moment's fending off.

Some were found curled to foetuses,
or fused together in a last embrace.
Some frozen in a running shape,
or curled like cats asleep

heads on their forearms
under ash or snow,
perplexed perhaps to hear their mountain roar
before the snow or lava outran everyone.

When writing this I found a photograph,
an unnamed man in glasses,
balding, elderly.
He holds against a sky blue shirt,
a plaster cast -
the body of a child from Herculaneum,
hands splayed across the tiny back,
so tenderly
you'd think the child
and his heart might break.

Chrys Salt, MBE has performed across the UK and Europe, India, Australia and Yukon. She was International Poet at The Tasmanian Poetry Festival 2019, guest of honour at The Dialogia Festival in Finland August 2022 and one of seven International Poets to feature at The Kistrech International Poetry Festival in Kenya in November of the same year. She has been recipient of awards and bursaries (various) and in 2014 was awarded an MBE in the late Queen's Birthday Honours List for Services to The Arts.

*Lakshmi Arya Thathachar***Translation**

Your words in my mouth:

two tongues, inter-twined.

Your words, redolent of the empty embrace of

the deodars in the Himalayas.

Mine, the language of a Queen

not my own.

Would that we could share a vice other than these words,

add rings of grey to clouds,

fading grey buildings, wet streets,

as we watch the metro train

zip against the sky.

Perhaps sip on a glass of ruby red

as the evening sky puts on her jewels

for a night of revelry.

And I take off my earrings,
as our bodies lean
against dusty railings,
feeling the metro train shudder through them.

Your words, coffee-coated,
tasting of home;
mine, grey like the wet streets
and early evenings
when the lights go on a little sooner,
under the shrubs and autumn leaves of Sofi Sunnyvale.

We shiver a little
at the year's end.

We do not let our words wander down unlit streets at night
lest they lose their way home
or stumble and fall.

So, we lean against railings,

watch sunsets,

write poems,

translate.

Your words in my mouth.

Lakshmi Arya Thathachar is Dean - Research and Associate Professor in RV University, Bangalore. She has a PhD in Modern Indian History from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Lakshmi has been awarded several fellowships. She has been a Fulbright-Nehru Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Emory University, Atlanta; a Charles Wallace Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London; Gender Sexuality and Law Visiting Fellow at Keele University, UK; and a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla. She has previously held faculty positions in various institutions, including O.P. Jindal Global University. Lakshmi's academic travels have taken her out of her home / discipline into other cities, continents, and terrains of thought. She teaches, writes and researches in the areas of socio-cultural history of modern India and Philosophy. Lakshmi also writes creatively. Her poems and short stories have been published in several literary journals. *Gitanjali and Beyond* has previously featured one of her poems.

*Debjani Chatterjee***Weather**

Mother's frown forecast a freak storm brewing,

Brother launching intermittent snoring.

Dad thundered ominous grumbling warning,

Sis rained nervous drizzle, but no rainbow.

Cautious, peeping from my igloo duvet,

I check I have weathered the tornado!

Weather Tongue-twister

Whether we weather our weather and dither

Depends on whether we dither forever

Or whether we weather weather and dither.

Debjeni Chatterjee is a poet, writer, and arts psychotherapist. Awarded an MBE for services to Literature in 2008, and an honorary doctorate by Sheffield Hallam University, she has had over 75 books published, including eight poetry collections, most recently *Laughing with Angels* (2022). Former Chair of National Association of Writers in Education and the Arts Council's Translations Panel, she is an RLF Associate Fellow and a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature. She has been called 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino) and 'a national treasure' (Barry Tebb). Find Debjeni on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debjeni_Chatterjee

Stories

*Meenakshi Bharat***Mushi**

1971

Mushi had been my dearest friend in class in school. The only one to whose house I had been allowed to sleep over. In turn, the only house that Mushi ventured out to over weekends was mine. There was any number of days that I had spent playing under the shade of the expansive banyan tree in Mushi's sprawling garden. Both of us would clamber up the tree when her mother wasn't looking and hang from the branches and swing on the roots in careless abandon. Till a voice cried out from the kitchen window, 'Mushira! Mushira Hashim! Get down this instant!' and, when we entered the house, our heads weighed down with mock guilt, the remonstrance was quick to the assault, 'And what will Gayatri's parents say...what have we taught their well-brought up daughter...to behave like a rascally BOY!'

Then, with equal censorious adult ease she would glare at me, and reprimand me on our unladylike show, promising dire consequences once she reported our 'doings' to my parents. We would do a commendable job of looking suitably chastened, only to be told off with a wag of a slim, bejewelled hand to the toilet to wash up and to come down to the veranda for kebabs. Giggling, we'd dash to the bathroom, trying to edge in first...the promised succulence of the snack laden tea giving spring to our spirited limbs. Mushi's Ammi would sigh and, suppressing an indulgent smile, get back to her cooking.

Pretty, gentle, petite Mushira Hashim had indeed been my 'bestest' friend in school, and at home...this was saying a great deal considering the kind of times we lived in. Those were the days when there used to be a fierce division between our formal school lives and our very discrete home lives. But with Mushi, it was as if this school-time barrier never existed. We never felt the need to question the special-ness of the situation ...we just accepted it for what it was. We were what we were. Nothing else mattered. Nothing separated us.

That is, until time and circumstances intervened. Daddy was posted away from the city. We were too young to either have the discipline or sense the responsibility of writing letters. We lost touch.

1991

On one of my rare forays into the bedecked brow of the city, C.P., for that ultimate of all shopping experiences in the capital, I bumped into Mushi again. She had become prettier than ever. We recognised each other instantaneously and caught each other in a long, rapturous hug, banishing the separating years away in this instinctive summoning up of our childhood bond.

Later, we found a table in the quiet lounge of the Imperial Hotel and got down to exchanging excited notes. She had been bamboozled into an early marriage. Thankfully, Rafiq had turned out to be exactly the mate she herself would have chosen. Progressive and understanding. She had two children, a little girl and a baby boy, Nafisa and Shan, whom she had left behind with her sis-in-law to do some shopping for the latter's marriage.

'You must come for the wedding,' she insisted warmly, 'You'll love Rafiq and his family.' I looked at her fondly, glad that she was happy. I, for my part, had had no time either for romance or for marriage, caught in the single pursuit of success in the competitive world of private business. The high profile executive job that I had taken up, in fact, hardly left me enough time to look up my parents who had since retired to a quiet hill retreat.

'When is the wedding?' I asked mentally deciding that this was something that I had to make time for. Would make time for. Because I wanted to. I wanted to see Mushi's family. To be part of her world once again. I noted the date in my diary and assured her I would be there. We exchanged addresses and I waved bye to her, forced to drag myself away to a meeting with prospective clients.

I couldn't make it for the wedding. I was suddenly asked to represent the India division at the Annual meet of the company in Los Angeles and there was no way I could say no. I called Mushi and apologised, promising to see her after I got back.

As it turned out, I got so caught up in the mad hectic schedule of a company on the upward swing that there was hardly any time I had even for myself. I would crash into my bed around midnight every day and force myself awake every morning to dash off to work.

Hard work paid off. I was promoted. A big promotion! I was sanctioned a secretary to take care of all my mundane requirements to allow me to concentrate more wholeheartedly on official matters. Relieved of having to chase telephone bill inflations, and electricity bill payments, things became easier. Somewhat.

And I could think of Mushi comfortably once again.

In the interstices of my busy days, my mind had flitted guiltily to her more than once. But I had not wanted to do myself the injustice of hurried pressed contact. I would take three four days off and visit her and then push off to my parents. God knows I needed the break! A long weekend was round the corner. Some festival on the Friday, plus Saturday and Sunday could be suffixed with two days of leave and I could do myself justice.

But before I could plan anything, Thursday evening, the bell rang while I was in the bath. Harihar Kaka had already offered them water and was engaged in coaxing them to have something cold or hot when I finished. I came out, wet hair plastering my temples, wondering who could have come into my bachelor pad without prior notice. Metropolitan Delhi had easily slid into the cosmopolitan impersonal, distancing habit of 'fixing up' before meeting even the closest of associates. It was Mushi! I felt the warmth of a thrill that I had thought I had lost with those carefree days and nights

of bygone days. Childhood years of relationship gushed to the fore and I hugged her. It was only then that I noticed the handsome, gorgeous young man at her side. She turned happily to him and told me simply, contentedly, happily, ‘Rafiq.’

I put out my hand to greet him and begged them to sit down. The first rush of words over, I called in Harihar Kaka and gave instructions that the guests would be staying for dinner. I hadn’t even asked them. There was no demur from the couple but they did say that they would prefer to leave early to get back to the children. Rafiq settled back in my deep sofa and indulgently let me and his wife have our say. He would pitch in supportively with a ‘Janum, wasn’t it when we....’ Supplying gaps in Mushi’s narrative of her life in the intervening years. How they loved each other. It warmed me to see their obvious devotion to each other. And they made such a striking couple...he, tall, extremely good looking, she, willowy, gentle and regally beautiful. This seemed too good to be true. I frowned at this thought...as if this was an unwelcome intrusion, I shook it off, determined to enjoy my evening with my friend.

‘Oh, I completely forgot, Gayatri,’ she gently tapped her forehead as if reminding herself, ‘Let me tell you why we’ve come. Rafiq has been offered a very good job in a multinational investment firm in Bombay. We are moving out next week. I couldn’t leave without meeting you.’

‘Mush, has not stopped talking about you ever since you met each other in C.P. I had started feeling pretty sidelined and reckoned the only way of regaining her affections was by getting her over to meet you. But jokes apart, I thought Id would be a good time to come over and say hullo and to invite you over to Bombay to our new home.’

I warmed to this man who had made Mushi’s his own so spontaneously. I smiled at him and promised that I would come the soonest my job allowed me. He bent forward and pushed the little box towards me saying by way of explanation, ‘Id sweets.’

‘And this is especially for you,’ Mushi dug into her leather bag and fished out an elegantly wrapped gift. I exclaimed that it wasn’t my birthday but nonetheless tore the wrapping open. Inside, was a beautiful crystal piece...two little girls hugging each other in quite evident joy. I mistily murmured my thanks. But soon, Mushi and I jumped into our irrepressible memory-reviving chatter once again.

Dinner done, we reluctantly tore ourselves from the happy mood and murmured our goodbyes. Mushi promised to send her address and telephone numbers as soon as they had settled down in Bombay.

I sank down into my bed and switched on the T.V. feeling an unquantifiable contentment at the end of a fulfilling evening. I called out to Harihar Kaka to put the mitthai in the fridge. I also asked him to take a few pieces for himself. Mummy too used to do the same when I was a child. Faithful retainers had to be taken care of! That was one lesson I had been taught early and had learnt rather well. And especially when somebody had been with you for as many years as Kaka had- he had literally brought my brother and me up. In fact, one had to also make allowances for idiosyncrasies. So, knowing Kaka’s wayward sweet tooth, I had taken to always asking him beforehand to partake in this harmless fare. I had found that I could trust him with everything else but with sweets... no, no, never. I, for my part, would more often than not forget that there were some rasgullas or gulab jamuns in the fridge. When, and if, I did recall them and asked for them, he would mutter that they had gone bad and that he had therefore, thrown them away. Or, didn’t I remember that they had finished when so-and-so had come and I had asked for them to be served. I never contested what he offered as lame subterfuges because I myself was not a sweet person. I didn’t miss them. I didn’t mind at all that they had been purloined. At least, they had been accorded the respect they deserved.

The next couple of days made back-breaking demands...I never got home before ten and had just about enough energy to force down the food that Kaka had laid out for me. The third day was a

little kinder and I was back home at eight. I had a quick shower and decided to eat in front of the T.V. My old favourite *Gol Maal* was showing. Kaka too hovered in my wake, snapping up some of the perennial jokes. Loath to leave, he asked me if I wanted a coffee. I nodded and as he moved to the kitchen, I asked him to get some mitthai if there was some. He immediately got the box Mushi and Rafiq had got, and placed it in front of me. He disappeared to get the coffee. I opened the box and marvelled to see that nothing had been touched. I popped a cashew burfi into my mouth.

When the coffee came, I told Kaka to take some and sit down and watch the film if he so wished. To my surprise, Kaka said he didn't want any and picking up the box made to return it to the fridge. Worried, I asked him if he wasn't ill. 'No, no' he was perfectly well. Then what was the problem? Nothing. ---No he must let it out, I persisted. Finally, he came out with, 'I don't eat anything given by a Mussulman.' It went against his beliefs, his dharma.

Angered, I got up quickly and switched off the T.V. and curtly asked him to retire for the night. I was no longer in the mood for the combative antics of a moustachioed Utpal Dutt and a defensive Amol Palekar. I went into the bathroom to brush the bad taste left in my mouth.

Mushi called before they left for Bombay. Initially, they would stay with relatives in Mahim. Later, when they found a flat for themselves, they would move. She had to break off to attend to a crying baby. Promising to get in touch once they had settled down in Bombay, she put down the phone.

I didn't hear from her. I figured they must be busy trying to dig their heels in the big mad city. I too got caught in a spate of assignments that required extensive travelling. Touching Delhi in between my hectic dashes to opposite ends of the globe, I had little time to pursue the need to locate her and to get in touch with her.

I did think of her though. On my long, empty flights to Singapore or to Hong Kong, when I rested my head after long hours at the laptop, my thoughts would flit to her, trying to retrieve moments of leisure, of uninhibited communion, long past from the fairytale leaves of the album of childhood. Now, impossible.

The year gave way to another. And soon that too slid by. Caught in the relentless mad swirl of time, I had little enough time to think of myself!

January 1994, papers screamed riots in Bombay. Mushi came to the mind immediately. I hoped that she and her family had not been touched. Since riots in India are generally an offshoot of the Hindu-Muslim divide, it was not strange that fears of their safety should leap to the mind. And when the fine newsprint detail poured out the atrocities that man piled on man, my heart retched, leaving me strangely exhausted.

The little crystal token of the bond between Mushi and me came to mind. It wasn't on the side table that I had placed it on. Soon, I was rummaging through drawers, peering into nooks and crannies. The search became frantic. But, all efforts proved useless. I summoned Kaka. 'Where's the glass piece that my friend Mushi had given? Have you broken it? And then quietly thrown it away?' I didn't know what I was saying. Detachedly, I could see the hysteria behind the tirade. I couldn't understand why I felt and behaved the way I was doing.

He gave me a look of injured surprise at the point-blank accusations. He didn't remember any such item. In any case, why was I getting so agitated over such a trifle?

I stiffened. I knew for sure now that Kaka had got rid of the present. He was trying to tell me, in so many words that I should never have placed any importance on the gift...on anything to do with Mushi. I remembered with a sickening feeling how he had reacted to the Id sweets. What venom! It spewed from his whole demeanour. I turned away. He quietly slid out of the room.

A month later I managed to work up a reasonable excuse to go to Bombay officially. I had asked for leave but that had been denied on the plea that we were moving towards the end of the financial year and that it might be a better idea to leave my vacation for April, or later. I would also be able to take a longer while off then, they had placated me.

I worked through the first day. A Wednesday. I managed to wrap up my engagements by lunch on Thursday and took a taxi for the local address that Mushi had left with me long ago. If luck held, she would still be there. It was lucky that this was almost on the way to the airport from where I had to catch a flight back to Delhi.

She had moved. But I did manage to get a forwarding address from the helpful old Parsi landlady who lived in the flat next door. No, Mrs Currimbhoy didn't have a telephone number. She was really sorry.

There was no time to go careening across to the other end of the city. I ought to make straight for the airport. I'd write once I returned home.

I did write as soon as I got back. But there was no reply. Only, dead silence.

The pace of life once again swallowed me. I did not get leave that summer. Fall, I was sponsored by the company for a year-long management programme at Harvard.

Two years later, armed with a new degree, I was invited to speak at a conference on Religion and Management in Bombay, now Mumbai. Just before leaving, I ferreted out the address that Mushi's

ex-landlady had given and pocketed it. The conference had kept one day clear for sight seeing and shopping. I had seen enough of Mumbai, knew enough about it. I certainly did not want to don the tourist's sunglasses. Junk shopping! Enough of that in Delhi. It would be fun to meet up with Mushi once again. Yes, I'd keep that day clear for her. I warmed to the thought in anticipation.

I found that the area into which the taxi turned was a neat, posh area. Rafiq was obviously doing well professionally. Neat hedges were punctuated with evenly spaced palm trees. Beautifully designed Agra stone benches sat snugly under well-manicured, voluptuous trees. Overlooking these was a cluster of six multi-rise buildings. Elegant designer facades overlooking the sea. Comfortable life!

I took in all this as the cab driver supplied the address query of the guard. At the same time, he fished out a lined register in which I was asked to fill in basic details in pre-drawn columns: who to meet, why to meet, address, time of visit, and a signature. Tight security! But the next moment when the register snapped shut without so much as a glance at what I had filled in, I wondered at the effectiveness of the effort. The guard asked me again. Redundantly, I thought, since I had just furnished this detail, 'Which block?'

I gave the detail and he waved us off in one direction. The flat was a second floor flat. I took the stairs. I rang the bell of the flat. No response. I rang again. Disappointed, I turned back. One flight down, I met a maid in her langad dhoti, coming out of the flat just below Mushi's to clean the foot mat. I stopped her, 'Bai, do you know where I can find Mushira Memsahib of flat 204?'

She looked at me first, pityingly, then, her eyes suddenly awash with pain, she put out her hand to take the support of the railing, as if something had hit her, and sat down on a step. She signalled me dumbly to do the same. Tears sprang up in her eyes and spilled over. With an effort, broken words issued forth, 'You know...the Hindu-Mussalman lafda...when it took place, na?... Two years ago?'

I nodded, unable to guess what she was going to say, my heart weighed by misgiving. She had overheard a band of Hindus, ruffians from her jhopadpatti nearby asking for a list of all the Muslim occupants of the complex. 'Sab ko dekh lenge. We won't leave anyone.'

She had run up the service stairs to Mushi Memsahib's flat and had entreated them to run quickly. She sputtered what she had overheard as she guided the two of them to safety, a sleeping child in the arms of each, down the service stairs that she herself had used. They had got into the car and she had heaved a sigh of relief to see them drive away.

But as she watched, in front of her disbelieving eyes, a wall of saffron clad warriors suddenly materialised from she knew not where, to block their car to a stop. A minute later they had put a flame to the car.

The sobs had become uncontrollable now, 'Memsahib, she was so sweet, so good, so kind.' Yes, that was Mushi all over. Loving, gentle, kind Mushi.

What had she been asked to pay such a heavy price for?

For the lack of charity in human beings?

For the lack of love and tolerance that poisons man.

For the sins of mankind?

For our sins. I thought numbly.

Meenakshi Bharat, creative writer, translator, reviewer and cultural theorist, teaches in the University of Delhi. Her wide and variegated writing, both creative and critical, is spurred by contemporary concerns. Apart from her extensive critical publications on literature and culture, she has co-edited and contributed to five Indo-Australian Short Fiction anthologies which have variously taken on the burning issues of terrorism, asylum seekers, technology and us and tolerance and intolerance. Serving the cause of the written word, she is a dedicated advocate for the power of storytelling and its ability to inspire change. She has actively participated in writing workshops and literary events, sharing her expertise and nurturing the next generation of storytellers. She served as President of the International Federation of Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM, UNESCO, 2014-2017). She is on the advisory board of the FILLM Series, John Benjamins, The Netherlands.

*Brian D'Arcy***Last Night**

The night is cold; there is a chill in the air that I have felt only once before. It was the night, many years ago, when I was but a small child that my father sat me on his knee and said: "It's time I told you the tale that my father told to me." And so he began.

"It was a night much like this, a chill in the air as sharp as steel and dark clouds hiding the moon and stars when I wandered out onto the moor. Perhaps 'wandered' is not the word to use for I knew why I was going there. The night before I had been crossing the moor on my way home, it was bitter cold and dark, and lonely too. It felt as if I was all alone in the world, but deep inside I knew that I was not alone. Something or someone was watching me, but I could see nothing, nor could I see anyone. Then, in the far-away distance, I thought I heard a melody being sung in a voice so full of tears that it put the fear of death in me. And so, I was not going a-wandering but going to see if the moor and my senses had deceived me.

As I left the shelter of our home, to make my way onto the moor, the night felt even colder and, although there was a pale moon shining, it seemed even darker. But tonight, the moor was not silent for, at first soft and distant but getting closer and louder, a voice was singing the saddest song I ever heard. Suddenly beside me there was a shape that wrapped itself around me and whispered in my ear. 'Last night you heard the Banshee cry her melody and tonight she holds you close to tell you why she cries. She comes to gather the tears of those who mourn for the passing souls of the beloved ones that she is here to gather. For three nights she will gather tears and on the third night she will also gather, into the death coach, the souls whose time of passing has arrived. The morrow will be the third night of her gathering – and this I come to share with you.'

'It seems we part until the morrow then,' I sighed.

'It is indeed until the morrow,' she replied."

Then my father told me that two nights ago he too had heard the Banshee cry, and last night he too had heard her whispering, and his soul too would now be gathered 'on the morrow'. This he told me all those years ago, and now I must confess that last night I thought I heard the Banshee cry.

Note:

Banshee or Bean-sidhe is Irish for 'fairy woman'. Her mournful cries and wails are also called keening. The Banshee's cry piercing the night always foretells a mortal's death. She is a solitary fairy woman, whose task is to gather the tears of passing (but that is another story) and to bring a warning that the death coach is coming. Unseen, Banshees will often attend the final hours of the beloved dead, her voice blending in with the cries of the human mourners. She always leaves before the happy times are remembered and the wake begins.

Brian D’Arcy (1933 – 2023) was born in Rossendale, England. He was a prize-winning poet for children and adults. His poetry collections are *Tha Shein Ukrosh: Indeed the Hunger*, *Footsteps in the Dust* and *Ghost Horses Dancing*. With fellow poets in Mini Mushaira, he co-authored *Another Bridge*. He co-edited, with his wife Debjani Chatterjee, a few anthologies for children. He took early retirement from teaching at Sheffield Hallam University and chaired Healing Word, a cancer support group using reading, writing and storytelling. Apart from poetry, Brian had a passion for: music, painting, horses, Irish history, and folklore.

Debjani Chatterjee

Mosquito

‘In the fullness of things, you and I are mere mosquitoes. In fact, we are all mosquitoes!’ The monstrous head with its compound eyes nodded persuasively.

I was in no mood for such maniacal philosophy – least of all from my unwelcome intruder. ‘We are all mosquitoes’ – what nonsense! It may please some poets to grandly declare that the world is a stage, and we are all actors in it. Some, with a spiritual bent, claim an exalted kinship – ‘we are all children of God,’ they say. Hah! Such generalisations irritate me with their imprecision.

My Biology finals loomed large in the morning, but it looked as though I would get no sleep tonight. Earlier I had indulged myself with an hour of watching TV; cricket is compulsive viewing for me – and India was playing Australia, so how could I resist? It was too bad of the exam-wallahs – this was hardly a civilized time to hold exams! The Aussie batsmen had started well but I did not think their luck would hold; India had some formidable bowlers. Ricky Ponting was batting, but soon it would be Dhoni’s turn to bowl - and the tall Jharkand bowler was sure to take a scalp or two.

Perhaps that was when my nightmare began – a stupid mosquito kept buzzing in my ear, drowning out the commentary. After I repeatedly waved it away, it even had the effrontery to settle for a moment on my hero on the well-lit screen. I rolled up my *Times of India* into a makeshift baton and – splat! – I dispatched the scoundrel to kingdom come! But I had hardly settled in my wicker chair again than disaster struck. The electricity flickered and then went altogether! I groaned. It was a blazing summer – traditionally a time for frequent load-shedding. But our economy was said to be making great strides these days; there was no excuse for such scarcity of energy.

There was no way to tell how long I’d have to put up with being in the dark. I looked out of the balcony and noted that the whole neighbourhood was plunged in darkness. That mollified me a little – it’s a strange kind of togetherness when we are all in the dark and alone! So, I lit my torch, always kept handy for such occasions, and prepared a very simple vegetarian dinner on my one-

ring gas stove. The meal consisted of throwing in some rice and lentils in a pan. I diced a potato and a couple of carrots into small pieces for boiling in the rice; then washed and tore some spinach leaves for adding at the end. I call this my bachelor dinner. Afterwards I poured myself a drink of coconut juice and sliced an over-ripe mango for afters. I lingered over the middle segment, sucking the oval seed clean and dry, in the hope that the electricity would come back soon. When it did not, I called it a day and went to bed. I did not particularly fancy revising by torchlight for my exam. Besides, I was as prepared now as I could ever be and should not risk having the torch-battery run out on me.

My bed was a grand affair in an otherwise somewhat bare apartment: it was a creaky four-poster, so I could easily have tied a mosquito net if I had such a thing. I was already wearing comfortable pyjamas and a vest, but I now discarded the loose handloom kurta that I invariably wear like a Gandhian uniform. Almost at once, my ears were assailed by the monotonous drone of a mosquito. On my way home tomorrow, I would buy a tube of foul-smelling Odomos, I promised myself. How I hated the tiny, winged blighters!

For a long while I lay in bed and listened to the drip-drip-drip of a bathroom tap and the other familiar noises of the city at night. No electricity meant that the ceiling fan could not blow the hot air in my room, and I dared not open a window as mosquitoes would be queuing up outside to launch their determined onslaught. In spite of the heat, I kept myself well wrapped in a cotton sheet for I knew that exposing the slightest part of my anatomy meant an invitation to mosquitoes to come and feast.

Actually, swaddling myself at night was a habit that I had got into in early childhood. Older cousins would tell me bedtime stories that were anything but conducive to relaxed sleep: tales of the ghosts of star-crossed lovers who had committed suicide in remote dak bungalows; stories about the dreaded *nishi* who stalked the streets at night in search of innocent souls to capture in their earthen pots; cannibalistic demons that appeared from nowhere and disrupted the ordinary activities of people, even having the audacity to interrupt the meditations of sages and hermits, as I well knew from stories in *The Ramayana* epic; and of course female vampires that inhabited certain trees, spoke to people in a whining nasal twang, and stretched down their long legs to strangle any

unsuspecting passersby who were foolish enough to walk beneath the branches at night-time. So, I would repeat empowering mantras for my protection – the main one being a little Bengali ditty that went: *'Bhoot amar poot, petni amar jhee; Ram-Lokkhon bukey achhey, korbi amai kee!'* It translates as: 'Ghosts are my slaves, she-demons are my maidservants; Ram and Lakshman are in my heart, so what can you do to me!' In winter I also wrapped myself in blankets and quilts against the ghoulish creatures of the night, and in warm weather I sheltered under light sheets - I took no chances.

Mosquito nets may seem protective, cocooning one, as they do, within a rectangular structure. But after a distant visiting cousin from Gaya told me of a haunting in their sprawling old ruin of a house, I became vigilant against all manner of mosquito nets. It seems her brother had come home from boarding school in Nainital for a summer vacation and went to sleep in an upstairs terrace room. He woke up in the middle of the night, to find the net being tugged and heard the quavering voice of an old ayah who had died some years ago; the voice addressed him with a nickname that he had long outgrown: 'Shona baboo, here's a glass of nice hot milk for you!' Not surprisingly, he had refused to sleep in that room again.

My eyelids now drooped with exhaustion. I was on the point of falling asleep – or maybe I *was* asleep – at any rate I was in that limbo state when one is neither awake nor asleep. That was when I was suddenly jolted awake. I had felt the faintest sensation of someone lifting the sheet where it covered my feet. A cold wet tickle on the sole of my right foot made me draw back my foot. Just then, the buzzing sound acquired a loud and frenetic note. And, *yes*, it emanated from a mosquito alright, but an insect unlike any that I had ever seen. Saliva dribbled from its mouth and I realised with horror that the wetness on my foot must have been the effect of its licking me, as though I were a tasty morsel! The bug-eyed apparition was huge – at least as tall as me, and I am 5' 9", which is tall for an Indian! Its many eyes were large, reptilian and all seemed to reflect me – I could see myself as I now sat up in bed, my hair was ruffled, and fear blazed sickly white on my face. I was in every one of its bulging eyes – almost as though the monster had captured me. Its slender body was in three sections and was a disgusting greyish beige throughout. Its long stick-like limbs were segmented like a crane-fly's and bent at every joint: I counted three pairs of limbs protruding from the abdomen and one of them reached a bedroom wall on which it performed a

strange balancing act (it must be a formidable acrobat, some detached part of me noted), but there was also a long and threatening fourth pair that emerged from the thorax and was directed at me. A pair of wings fluttered with dizzying rapidity. A cold sensation held me in its grip, yet perspiration beaded my face and my mouth felt dry.

It was the proboscis that frightened most. Long and cruel needle-like antennae, the size of javelins, jutted from the head and were directly pointed at me – it was weird to see them swaying a little in the stifling airless room. The creature seemed to be testing my bedroom air with them before letting fly its vicious needles. As I shrank back against my pillows, the bed creaked, and I swear there was a leering expression on the insect's face as it leaned in ominously from the foot of my wooden bed. I remembered the mosquito that I had killed just before the electricity went. Was I now being haunted by its ghost? Or was this perhaps some strange mosquito god come to punish me?

That was when the thing spoke to me – somehow that in itself did not seem strange: if it could be such a monstrous size, then it seemed natural enough that it could also talk. I did not see any mouth moving, but its voice was a stilted tinny sound in my head. It reminded me of the evil daleks, a race of robots in the Dr Who series on television. The daleks had wanted to take over the world and only the intrepid Doctor stood between them and cosmic annihilation. I half expected it to announce: 'Ex-ter-mi-nate! Ex-ter-mi-nate!' The world that I knew was already taken over by mosquitoes; they needed only to spread themselves and to multiply. But to insist that we were both mosquitoes? Surely not! I could not accept that I was the same as the blood-sucking harpy fluttering about in my bedroom. 'No!' I protested, 'you and I are certainly not the same. I am human while you are a mosquito, a titchy bit of nothing, easily squashable – you deserve to be squashed!' 'Ex-ter-mi-nate! Ex-ter-mi-nate!' echoed in my brain.

I did not understand this nightmare. Why was I even talking to the demonic beast? 'Yes, I am nothing,' nodded the mosquito, 'but so are you. Think about it: your few decades of scampering for life on this planet – how are they so different from my life-span of four to eight weeks? If you think in terms of centuries, there's no difference at all.'

It was a bizarre scene, but, in spite of myself, I could see what it meant. I remembered some lines by Shakespeare – the bard had just the right quotation for every situation under the sun. He had said that we humans were like flies to the gods who ‘kill us for their sport’. Flies or mosquitoes, we were just the same, I reflected – and both were dirty vermin. My night visitor had pressed a button of deep cynicism and I wondered if either of us mattered to our Creator. If I viewed the creature as a disgusting predator, for all I knew I too might appear thus to the mosquito – and perhaps also to our Creator. Wasn’t it sheer arrogance that my imagination clothed the Deity in human garb? Perhaps the mosquito too saw God in its own image. If the Divine existed, perhaps it was indeed as a mosquito. Or perhaps a fly, a spider, a cockroach, a scorpion, a slug, a shark ... my imagination ran riot. ‘Get a grip on yourself!’ I bade my cowering self. I could not – would not – accept that I was the same as an annoying bug. After all, I had the advantage of many thousands of years of evolution on my side, over an irritating pest that merited extinction.

‘You are not welcome in my house,’ I said, with what sternness I could muster. ‘Go away! Go away at once!’

‘I won’t!’ said my audacious trespasser. I swear there was a jeering smile on his face and it fanned my rage. ‘I don’t need anyone’s permission – I go where I will and there is no fortress that I cannot infiltrate. Besides, ours is a blood relationship!’

It was infuriating that it could crack a joke at my expense. ‘You are less than nothing to me and I’ll swat you out of existence without a second thought! You will not have my blood.’

The thing withdrew about a foot away and cocked its horrid head to one side. I was glad that my words had made an impact, but wondered if I was really strong enough to fight it. I sat up straighter in my bed and my covering sheet slipped off my shoulders and cotton vest, exposing my neck and arms. The segmented javelins waved in a frenzy. I quickly pulled up the sheet to cover myself again.

‘Why do you fear me?’ The voice was serious now, and placating. ‘Is it such a heinous crime to want a drop of blood? It won’t hurt you in the least: you have so much of the red stuff to spare.’

And you must know from all the blood tests you have had that your body will replace the blood lost in no time at all. You have had your blood taken so often – full test tubes of the stuff; you never objected. All I want is a drop. What is a mere drop to you? You would not even miss it, whereas for me it is life and death.’

‘You are a thief! You steal into my home, and you suck blood while people sleep. You are shameless! And how dare you cover my foot with your disgusting spittle!’

‘Alas!’ said the shameless one, ‘my motive for secrecy is a kind one – I strike at night in your sleep so as not to disturb you. My needle would only be the tiniest pin-prick – it is nothing compared to the pain that large syringes give you. Yet I would save you from feeling even this miniscule sensation. That is why I came in secret as you slept. It is a pity that you woke up, but one way or another I will have your blood. As for my saliva, I will tell you the truth – why should I prevaricate! Human blood is a sticky substance and I need it to run freely; my antennae are both sensitive and delicate – a miracle of Nature! I cannot have them getting stuck in your blood; that is why I first prepare your skin: my saliva contains an anti-coagulant. Why not consider that I am simply here to give you a small injection. Doctors and nurses also first prepare your skin: they wipe the area with a bit of cotton wool soaked in antiseptic. You see, I do know what happens.’

‘Get lost!’ I said. ‘You can’t compare your bite with blood tests and injections! Those were done in my interest: to cure me or to prevent illness. You, on the other hand, spread disease with your pin pricks. Many of your victims have even died. You are a spreader of epidemics and a murderer to boot!’

My visitor sadly shook its head. ‘Your talk of murder and epidemics is an unfair generalisation. I have caused no epidemics in my short life on earth. On the contrary, my mission here is life-enhancing: a response to a biological need that is ingrained in every form of life, a duty to perpetuate my species. Drinking your blood will let me lay eggs – the lives of my future offspring depend on it. Your blood is urgently needed; believe me, that is the only reason I am here. I humbly beg you for the gift of your blood.’

‘You may be carrying a thousand offspring, but what are they to me? I have no intention of helping to perpetuate your kind!’ In reality I was not confident that I could swat such a gigantic mosquito, but I spoke out confidently: ‘I’ll kill you if you don’t leave – and, believe me, that will give me immense satisfaction.’

The monster edged forward an inch, wings beating at an incredible pace. ‘How violent you are! Haven’t you learnt about ahimsa? Isn’t this the land of Mahavira? Is not Mahatma Gandhi one of your heroes? Don’t you think that such deliberate murder would be a grievous sin? How would you sleep at night!’

‘My conscience is clear. And I’d sleep soundly without your droning racket,’ I replied rudely. ‘Your talk of the Mahatma is like the Devil speaking of God! It does not become you.’

‘Well, if ahimsa means nothing to you, let me raise the matter of reincarnation. Don’t you think it is possible that you and I are blood brothers – that our lives are linked by ties that we cannot even fathom? So should we not share what we have?’

‘Blood brothers? God forbid!’ I said. ‘We’re nothing of the kind! You are here like a leech to take my blood; I don’t take yours.’

‘Yes, blood brothers’. The creature nodded its ugly head.

‘No!’ I said. ‘Blood brothers share in a way that you never can. They cut open their palms and then join their bloodied palms together.’ I had seen the rite in movies about cowboys and Indians.

‘Well, we are many mosquitoes strong. If I don’t take your blood, another assuredly will. Who knows? – It may even infect you with its sting. But I approach you openly; I tell you my intention truthfully, for our lives are indeed connected. And I don’t only take; I will give you something in return for your blood.’ The creature was persistent.

‘Our lives are in no way joined,’ I protested. ‘There’s nothing that you can offer me, nothing that I want from you. Go away!’

‘Ah, but there is!’ said the diabolical thing, fluttering at the foot of my bed. ‘I will gladly oblige you with my departure – once I have what I came for.’ Its voice was sly and wheedling. ‘What if I tell you that I know your family secrets over many generations? – that I know them for they are also mine? Secrets of past lives that are wiped clean from your memory. But it is my karma to have this insect body and retain the knowledge of my human past. Why do you suppose that I chose *you* to visit this night when the entire populace of this sleeping city is mine to prey upon? There are crowded homes with many more targets for me to practise playing at darts. Can’t you believe that a karmic bond must exist between us? – I tell you, it is one that stretches from generation to generation. You still owe me a gift of life; kill me at your peril. If I die at your hands, our interchange must continue into the next life. So you may as well accept reality!’ The creature was warming to its subject and its tinny voice now carried an ominous warning.

‘You are man’s enemy,’ I muttered through gritted teeth. ‘That is the only truth I need to know!’

‘You hold me in such contempt! For whatever deeds and misdeeds I am imprisoned in this shell, but you of all people may not judge me. What if I said that I am your ancestor? Would you lift your hand to strike your own flesh and blood, to kill your own forebear? Think what a heinous crime that would be!’

‘No, I don’t believe a word of this! No ancestor of mine can be a mosquito!’

‘Then let me tell you that you too were a mosquito once! No, no, I don’t mean a metaphorical mosquito – I mean a real one!’

‘I don’t believe it! And I’ve had enough of your hypothetical far-fetched flights of fancy. You’ve had fair warning – I see you as a pest to be destroyed, so go away!’

‘So? I see that I must spell out the bond of debt between us. There was a time when our roles were reversed; it should not surprise you to know that you were the mosquito then and I was the one who heedlessly swatted you. It is how the Law of Karma works, as well you know.’

‘No, I know nothing of the kind!’ I shouted. ‘You are a liar and a mother of liars!’ I searched under my pillow and lifted a plastic fly-swatter in triumph.

‘Stop, stop!’ said the mosquito, backing away and inexplicably shrinking in size. The creature was still trying to appeal. ‘Think about it – would I truly stay here and have this long conversation with you, if we had no ties of blood? I tell you, I am your ancestor from another life. A mosquito’s life is very brief, as it is. So why take the trouble to swat me? Why burden yourself with the sin of slaying your ancestor? You know that you would have to pay a price for such sacrilege – if not in this life, then in the next. Besides, the world is big enough for us both to co-exist. If I and my kind were entirely wiped out, think what could happen to the eco-system!’

Seeing it retreat to its end of the room, emboldened me. I stood upon the bed and shouted: ‘Earth’s eco-system does not need you and you are no ancestor of mine. In fact, you aren’t even a mosquito! Lowly insects don’t talk to people. You are a hallucination, you don’t exist!’ I aimed and let fly my swatter at the grotesque creature that was now cowering on the floor. Splat! The swatter made contact and that was the end of my night-time visitor.

I woke up, feeling exhausted after the night’s strange happenings. The electricity must have returned at some time during the night because I found that my ceiling fan was on. I examined the wall and floor opposite my bed, half expecting to find the dead mosquito there, but everything looked normal. There was my kurta, hanging on a clothes peg behind the door. My jeans were lying folded on a chair. My shoes were by the bed and my cotton socks were rolled up in them. Everything looked as it should. In the ordinary light of day my dialogue with the giant monster seemed very much like a remote nightmare. I wished I could go back to sleep now in the safety of

daytime, but it was, of course, my Biology exam day. So, I had a quick bath and some half-burnt toast with marmalade and a semi-boiled egg, washed down with a mug of sugary tea.

My bicycle was in readiness outside and soon transported me to the exam hall where I joined another fifty or so students.

The invigilator was old Miss Diana of the eagle eyes and beaky nose. She wished us all luck and then instructed us on when we could start writing. At a signal from her, we all opened our copies of the question paper. The very first question carried 30% marks. I smothered a shriek, turning it into a cough, as I read: 'Describe in detail, and with diagrams, the four stages in the life history of the *Anopheles* mosquito'! My stomach churned. All eyes in the exam hall shifted to me for a moment.

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Essays

Malashri Lal

Desire in Ageing: A Literary Perspective

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I

On his eightieth birthday, 7 May 1941, Rabindranath Tagore published a collection of poems titled *Janmadine* (On Birthdays) which captures both the joy of the passing years as also the trepidation about impending illness and death. Philosophical, accepting and poignant, these are exquisite lyrics that have imparted strength to generations of Bengali readers who are confronted with the same paradox of ageing. The opening poem has the lines:

My birthday today.
 It's arisen from the dark, distant horizon
 With a missive from Death.
 Seems the faded garland of yesteryears is torn apart,
 A new garland has to be strung today,
 On a new birthday.¹

Tagore passed away a few months later on 7 August 1941 in Calcutta after a celebrated and productive long life as a global intellectual and Nobel Prize awardee, a patriot and a famous litterateur who was adored by his friends, family and disciples at Shantiniketan-- his abode of peace. During Rabindranath's prolific career, he wrote finely nuanced verses on every emotion in human experience including being bedridden with ill health and his faith in Healing. In the last days he dictated poems when he could no longer write and he overcame pain by extending affection to his caregivers. Two remarkable books which were the outcome of Rabindranath's thoughts on ageing, *Rogshojyaye* (In the Sick Bed) and *Arogya* (Healing) are almost therapeutic for readers in their senior years.

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Janmadine* 1, translated by Malashri Lal.

A recent book, *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*, translated and edited by Somdatta Mandal gives insights of five women who were Tagore's caregivers: Pratima Devi, his daughter-in-law (Bouma), Rani Chanda who was the wife of Tagore's personal secretary, the novelist Maitreyi Devi, Nirmalkumari Mohalanobis, wife of the famous statistician Prasanta Mohalanobis, and young Amita Thakur, a grand-daughter-in-law to Rabindranath.² It is fascinating to see the feminine sentiments of care ethics interlacing with the poetic sentiments of the celebrated author-patient. Of these I take a few examples.

Elderly people are always reminded to wear warm clothes, so was Rabindranath by his *bouma* Pratima. In her words: "In the morning I saw him sitting with all the doors and windows open. From the open door, a white mountain peak was visible. Piercing through that eternal silence, the first rays of the sun entered the window and fell upon the white hair and forehead of the meditating poet; over his body blew the sweet touch of the new morning. 'Babamoshai, the cold has just set in. Only a shawl is not sufficient here.' He smiled and said, 'All of you are too scared of the cold; it is not cold at all here'.... He wrote:

The blue of the hills and the blue of the horizon
 Unite in the sky and earth in rhythm and sameness
 They bathe the forest in the golden sunlight of autumn.³

Rabindranath was fortunate in the many people who willingly looked after him, an entourage that organised doctors-- English as well as Indian--, capable men who planned his journeys, and the household women who were deeply tuned to his needs. The attributes of the caregivers were widely known: "That person's touch would have to be soft, and he or she should have an acute imagination and be able to understand everything at the slightest hint. Also he or she had to be always happy,

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*, trans. and ed. Somdatta Mandal (Bolpur: Birutjatiyo Sahitya Sammilani, 2021).

³ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 13.

be very good at handiwork, and above all be a connoisseur of wit and mystery.”⁴ Celebrities may be attracting such devotion that is not available to common people enduring old age and suffering. Rabindranath was aware of this. Deeply appreciating the affectionate services he wrote a poem called “Nari” (woman) praising woman’s unstinting generosity, abundant energy, patience and glory. The original poem was addressed to Rani Chanda but changed to a more generic title with Tagore’s conviction, “Patients are like Gods for all of you. When a woman takes such responsibility upon herself, the world gives her the duty to serve and rear it. In that respect, women are universal. The world’s power for rearing is inherent within you too.”⁵

Feminist critique of care ethics may assess this scenario as a “male bias” but in the context of Indian middle-class values of domestic coexistence, the nursing responsibilities being largely of the woman is the established norm. As I have projected in my book *Tagore and the Feminine*, the writer was gifted with an androgynous imagination, and he created some of the most impressive women in literature and positioned feminist debates through numerous short stories and novels.⁶ Though his health was frail in the last few years, his voice remained strong, and the ardent appeal of the essay “Crisis in Civilisation” was penned just four months prior to his death.⁷ It’s obvious that a sharp mind and a weak body creates a sad disjunction in old age, the mind always striving for much more than the body can cope with.

II

If the desire for poetry framed Rabindranath’s advancing years, my thought shifts to women who lay dying, and their need for care giving. I have selected three examples: Premchand’s *Buri Kaki*, Githa Hariharan’s *The Remains of the Feast* and Krishna Sobti’s *Ai Ladki* since they reflect on different kinds of desire.

⁴ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 22.

⁵ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 85.

⁶ Malashri Lal, *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translation* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2015).

⁷ Bashabi Fraser, *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), p. 215.

Buri Kaki published by *Hans* magazine in 1921 is about a nameless old woman, the ubiquitous ‘aunt’ with a nephew and his wife who are occupying her home under the pretext of being her caregivers. In actual, she is severely neglected physically as well as emotionally, the nephew occasionally suffering a twinge of conscience but the wife has no such qualms. The story is about a celebration at home to which hundreds of guests are invited and a grand feast prepared, but the old woman is told to stay in her room till all the guests have eaten and left. She is hungry, dreams of the food, smells the fragrance of cooked spices, ventures to the kitchen to satisfy her curiosity and is suddenly hauled up by the niece- in-law, accused of stealing food and shoved back into her room with stern admonitions. Here are some soul stirring lines:

Catching hold of the old woman's hands, she said, “Were you feeling stifled in your room? The guests have not had their meals, no offerings have been made to the gods yet, but you are getting impatient for food! People will say the old woman is not fed properly; the hag is bent upon shaming us! She eats the whole day! Go back to your room; you will be given food when all the others are served and not before.”⁸

The desire for food is a basic need. With age when most other occupations are curtailed or denied, food shifts to the core of the imagination. Sociologically, an old woman is not a welcome guest, so loneliness and longing exacerbates the bodily hunger. *Buri Kaki* is forgotten by the family and no one serves her the *poori aloo* she is hankering for. In the dead of night her grand-niece brings in a small box of eats that she had saved up and *Buri Kaki* devours it with glee but also wants more. Finding her way to the garbage heap of discarded, *jootha* plates, she licks the remains with a great sense of satisfaction. That’s how she is discovered by the errant caregiver—the niece-in-law who is now stricken with remorse.

This story breaks many stereotypes of female ‘natural’ instinct for caregiving. Like Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand had an acute eye for social realism. “If there were a being in the world whose eyes could look into other people's hearts, very few men or women would be able to face up to it,” said Munshi Premchand. Unlike Tagore, Premchand’s focus was on the lower rungs of society and he was also encountering the emergence of modernity in India. This story picks up an important trope about the exploitation of the elderly, property-owning woman who has not been educated to

⁸ <https://www.youthaffairz.in/premchand-boodhikaki2.html>

safeguard her rights. It also builds focus on the importance of food as a centre of desire for elderly people. Younger caregivers think physical debilitation is naturally accompanied by the loss of appetite and other disinterests in the functions of living. This is not so.

Another remarkable story about the desire for food is Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" (1995) situated in the sickroom of a ninety-year-old Brahmin widow, Rukmini, who is now quite bedridden. All her life she has observed the strictest codes of piety through deprivation in food, clothing and ornamentation. Her deepest affection, fortunately reciprocated, is for her great granddaughter who is twenty years of age and utterly patient with the old woman. One day Rukmini starts her craving for forbidden food -- street food from the market, a smuggled bottle of coca-cola, a cake from the Christian bakery—and the list goes on. In the narrator's words:

"So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice-cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-Brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid's room. To the deathbed of a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure home-cooked food for almost a century."⁹

The ethics of care function under the strange dilemma of fulfilling the wishes of a dying woman or observing the strict codes of family discipline. One's understanding of elder psychology will determine the outcome. The denials of a lifetime surface in the longings expressed in the dying moments and these are, in fact, a castigation of a society that has imposed control on the simplest of human desires—that is, for wholesome food. Moreover, a Brahmin widow is compulsorily dressed in a dull saree, kept away from all community events, and expected to live by only serving others, silently. Githa Hariharan joins a long line of reformist thinkers who strategize social upliftment for such women by spreading awareness of their plight. Rukmini's story is set in contemporary times to show the carryover of ancient prejudices in the inherent customs of middle-class homes. Rukmini asks to wear a red and gold saree one day—which, unlike the food, is a desire that cannot be fulfilled by the great-granddaughter. But when Rukmini dies and her body is being dressed for her final journey, the young caregiver tries to place a red saree on her deprived, shrivelled body-- an attempt easily thwarted by the gate-keepers of tradition.

⁹ <https://newint.org/features/1995/02/05/feast>

Not all ageing women are quiet sufferers of patriarchy, Krishna Sobti suggests in her powerful story *Ai Ladki* (Listen Girl!), published in 1991, a dramatic exchange between the elderly, aggressive Ammi and her silent daughter who has chosen to remain unmarried. Ammi's biting words are a curious defense of conjugal life and motherhood: "The body dies, not the soul. Water dries, but not blood. It flows in one's children, and in their children" she says, or, "Ladki, a pitcher full of water is better than a vast desert."¹⁰ Expressed here is the old woman's desire to control the daughter's choices and her refusal to accept the limitations of her failing body. The story opens with Ammi complaining that the room is kept too dark till the reader recognizes that the lights are actually turned on and Ammi's vision is fading. Her recumbent body has festering sores which Susan the professional nurse periodically attends to, the doctor pumps her with injections – yet through all this, her adversarial stance towards the Ladki/daughter propels a constant tirade.

It is believed that Krishna Sobti wrote this story while attending on her mother, an experience by which she gained insights into ageing and the mind's resistance to the inevitable deterioration of the body. Sobti's literary flair turned this into a much larger issue — of how women perceive their progeny and the future of a family when they are no longer present. Hence the desperate call to their sons and daughters to marry and bear children — the bloodline is to be kept sacred.

The story is filled with sentiments that are often expressed by the aged:

- Ladki, there is no place for old people either in someone's heart or in someone's house. And here am I, occupying an entire room. After I am gone, spread a carpet and play your music here.
- Old age robs one of dignity. It's hard for anyone who enters it. Operations, doctors, medicines, injections, oxygen. The doctor probes the whole body — jabs hundreds of needles. What is left of this body now? Only my voice remains.
- The body is a cloth. Wear it and enter the world. Take it off and go to the other world. The other world — the world of others. Not one's own. Listen, ladki, in the beginning parents

¹⁰<https://www.purplepencilproject.com/book-review-listen-girl-by-krishna-sobti/#:~:text=In%20the%20long%20period%20of,with%20the%20living%20before%20dying>

hold their children's hands and teach them how to walk. But, when the parents grow old, they become the children of their children.¹¹

III

In conclusion, one may recall that literature is said to hold up a mirror to life. The mind of an astute reader is almost voyeuristic as stories unfold into scenarios that have not been experienced personally but which reside in the realm of possibility. As one grows older it is a useful occupation to turn the pages of a book to find accounts that may match one's own experiences of a weakening body, social marginalization, loneliness, uncertainty and doubt. Reading negates the self-absorption and self-focus that elders are prone to, along with an error or perception that one is a unique, singular sufferer. Through literature one comprehends the narratives and coping strategies of others in imagined spaces. Yet each individual is destined to live out his or her journey mitigated by whatever positive forces that can be garnered. In Rabindranath Tagore's words, "Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky."¹²

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¹¹ <http://www.littlemag.com/2000/sobti.html>

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1917), p. 76

Malashri Lal, Professor in the English Department (retd.), and Former Dean, University of Delhi, has authored and edited seventeen books. These include *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (2020) co-authored with Namita Gokhale, that received the Kalinga Fiction Award. *In Search of Sita* (2009), *Tagore and the Feminine* (2015) and *Finding Radha* (2019) gathered much acclaim. Malashri Lal's latest book is her debut collection of poems titled *Mandalas of Time* (2023) which blends her cosmopolitan experience with the memory of India's epics and legends, magnificent landscapes and metonymic associations. Her poems and stories have been published in *Indian Literature*, *Confluence*, *The Beacon*, *Setu*, online portals and anthologies. She received research fellowships at Harvard University, Bellagio, and Newcastle. She has been a Senior Consultant to the Ministry of Culture, and member of international book award juries including the Commonwealth Writers Prize, London. Malashri Lal serves on the English Language Board of the Bharatiya Jnanpith, and is currently Member, General Council, and Convener, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi. Among other recognitions, Malashri Lal received the Maharani Gayatri Devi Award for Women's Excellence, 2022. (<http://malashrilal.com/>)

Eveline Pye

Climate Change Poetry: Is It Effective?

There have been several initiatives designed to encourage poets to write about climate change. *Magma* devoted an entire issue to climate change in 2018. Extinction Rebellion Oxford is currently soliciting poems about the climate emergency for an anthology to be published later this year. Grey Hen Press are running a series of poetry readings on climate change and donating all proceeds to the UK Youth Climate Coalition and the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) commissioned poetry for an online anthology on climate change. It seems likely that there will be even more initiatives. Simon Armitage, the new Poet Laureate, stated in an interview in May 2019, “I definitely want to initiate something on climate change. I think it is absolutely essential that poetry responds to that issue.”

This essay considers the effectiveness of existing climate change (CC) poetry *in terms of its potential to bring about a change in knowledge, attitude or behaviour in the general reader*. Poets with other goals may find the information contained within this essay useful in avoiding approaches which, research into climate change communication has shown, tend to have a negative effect on public engagement. There is also a brief description of the STEM poets group which supports informed writing on climate change.

It could be argued that poetry should be a pure art, independent of the attempt to change its reader’s attitudes or behaviour. Auden’s phrase, “poetry makes nothing happen”, is often quoted to justify this point of view. A little consideration reveals Auden’s statement as impossible to falsify. There are far too many inter-related factors to separate out the effect of one poem. However, it is also impossible to disprove the statement “conversation makes nothing happen” which most people would agree is untrue and, after all, poetry is only one particular type of communication. If one kind of communication can affect events then surely it must be true for the others. The most likely truth is that poetry makes nothing happen on its own. Reading or writing a poem never occurs in a vacuum but it can be one of many factors which help to change attitudes and, on some occasions this will translate into actual behaviour change.

Other poets complain of a tension between the desire to create a work of art and the desire to inform the reader and change attitudes. However, the poetry by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, inspired by the First World War, qualify as some of the most wonderful poems in the English language. Their scathing verses on the horrors of life in the trenches and the effects of mustard gas informed their readers about the reality of the war being fought in their name with a scathing clarity, and few would dispute their contribution to changing attitudes. Psychological research states that for messages to be attended to and responded to, the message must be clear, relevant and coherent. The work of the First World War poets fulfils all these requirements.

Let us consider the CC poetry available on the internet for its potential to inform, change attitudes or behaviour in the general population. A tremendous amount of uninspiring, poor-quality verse is available on the web. A significant percentage can be immediately discounted as well-intentioned but harmless doggerel. A common mistake is to write about weather rather than climate. Climate is defined as “the weather conditions prevailing in an area in general or over a long period”. Using this definition of climate, a poem which describes an individual storm without any reference to long-term trends is not a CC poem. Some CC verse on the internet spreads misinformation, though possibly with no deliberate intention to mislead. Another common error is to assume that all environmental issues are related to climate change. This is obviously not true. Many important environmental issues have no effect on climate. On occasion, CC poetry is excessively opaque, using symbolism in a way which allows many possible interpretations. While this can convey a sense of the complex nature of climatic variables, it is more likely to appeal to other poets and it may increase confusion in the general reader. Ideally, the average reader should accurately comprehend at least some of what the writer intends to express.

An online poetry publication on climate change has been selected to illustrate some of these issues. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) is a London based organisation committed to finding practical solutions to social challenges. They published *9 Original Poems on Climate Change* in 2015 with The Climate Change Collaboration. Eight excellent poets were commissioned to write for this collection: Ruth Padel, Alice Oswald, Grace Nichols, Selina Nwulu, Tom Chivers, John Agard, Simon Barraclough, and one spoken word performer, George the Poet. This collection includes extremely good poems by very talented poets

but most do not qualify as CC poetry. Others will be shown as likely to be ineffective or counter-productive in changing attitudes or behaviour when evaluated as climate change communication.

The following is a brief summary of the current guidelines for effective climate change communication, taking into account both government guidelines and independent research. It is based on the climate change awareness raising project in West Sussex undertaken as part of the EU funded ESPACE (European Spatial Planning: Adapting to Climate Events), DEFRA's (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) Communications Guide, Futerra's Principles of Climate Change Communications and the Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan: Third Report on Proposals and Policies 2018-2032.

These sources maintain that effective climate change communication should:

- i) be clear, relevant and coherent avoiding references which are unlikely to be understood by the general public;
- ii) not rely on evoking fear either for the reader or the next generation but should evoke positive emotions which support people's internal sense of agency – the feeling that their actions are meaningful;
- iii) not be overly strident as this increases the likelihood that the message will be discounted or ignored, and should avoid highlighting the difference between the reader's attitude and actions since this is more likely to change their attitude than their actions;
- iv) focus on past loss and the restoration of what has been lost, near-term benefits and opportunities to avoid future losses rather than apocalyptic scenarios;
- v) help overcome negative associations and poverty attributions associated with actions we want to encourage such as buying second-hand furniture and clothes, drinking tap water and using public transport.

Returning to the online anthology, *9 Original Poems on Climate Change*, Ruth Padel's contribution, 'Water is Company', is a beautiful poem about drought with no explicit connection to climate change. A warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, and globally water vapour increases

by approximately 7% for every degree centigrade of warming. Regions that are already wet are likely to get wetter although dry regions will get drier. The rainfall in Scotland is increasing overall as a result of climate change although summers tend to be hotter and drier. As a result, a poem about drought in a collection on climate change, which does not reveal location, may confuse the reader rather than provide enlightenment.

Alice Oswald's poem, 'Alongside Beans', describes the planting of beans and the subsequent miraculous process of growth in wonderfully evocative language. If there is a link with climate change, it is somewhat tenuous and too oblique for most readers. This poem does not fulfil the requirement that effective climate change communication should be clear and relevant.

The next two poems have minimal engagement with climate change. Grace Nichols's poem, 'Except for the Lone Wave', is about pollution in the Atlantic Ocean, "the lone wave of rubbish – /old car tyres, plastic bottles,/styrofoam cups – /rightly tossed back/by an ocean's mood swings". This is a fine poem but there are no clear links in the poem between maritime pollution and climate change. Selina Nguwu's poem, 'We Have Everything We Need', considers many aspects of modern urban life and only the following two lines out of twenty-nine have any obvious link to climate change; "I wonder what will this all look like in 50 years' time./How will our cities exhale then?" The RSA's own report *The Seven Dimensions of Climate Change: Introducing a New Way to Think, Talk, and Act* (2015) explains that it is important to "differentiate it (climate change) from broader environmental concerns". Several of the poems in this collection fail to successfully differentiate climate change from general environmental issues and do not make a clear distinction between CC poetry and ecopoetry. While all CC poetry can be classified as ecopoetry, the reverse is obviously not true since many environmental issues have no impact on the climate.

As previously stated, research stipulates that for climate change messages to be attended to and responded to, the message must be clear, relevant and coherent. So far, four poems out of the nine in the collection have failed to meet these basic criteria for effective climate change communication. These examples illustrate the general finding that many poems labelled as CC poetry have no clear link with climate change or contain little relevant material.

Tom Chiver's poem, 'Untitled', is a dystopian vision of the future in which "stocks ran low/ we entered the mangroves at dusk,/trapped the spectacled caiman in his lair/and sucked his eyes for juju beans". The internet yields many examples of CC poems with 'end of the world' or 'face the terrible future' scenarios. Poetry has always been concerned with evoking an emotional response, so it is perhaps understandable that some writers have chosen to attempt to provoke fear in the reader as a way to cut through complacency or denial.

The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) is a group comprised mainly of psychotherapists. They acknowledge that climate change "engenders fear, denial and despair" and that anxiety and feelings of helplessness are generated by the possibility of species extinction and even offer emotional support to those badly affected. In August 2017, the CPA published a poem by David Slattery, 'When Autumn Came In Summer'. The final three lines are:

A sound to match and meet apocalyptic hooves. A sound announcing the coming of the end of the world. A sound that has fallen on deafened ears for far too long now.

The evocation of fear not only creates negative emotional outcomes for some people, but many researchers have also shown it to be ineffective. Susanne C. Moser, Social Science Research Fellow at the Woods Institute for the Environment at Stanford University, is a leading expert on climate change communication. In *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (2011), she says, "Numerous studies have documented that audiences generally reject fear appeals (or their close cousin, guilt appeals) as manipulative. Conservative audiences – at least on climate change – have been shown to be particularly resistant to them". She warns against the use of catastrophe frames, disaster imagery and apocalyptic imagery, such as that used in both Chiver's and Slattery's poems, since they do not bring about the long-term genuine engagement required for successful climate change mitigation.

DEFRA's 'Tomorrow's Climate, Today's Challenge Communication Guide (2006)' advises communicators not to rely on human survival instincts and states that being 'forced' to deal with difficult emotions can be totally counter-productive as a long-term strategy. The guide advises great caution in the use of fear as a way of motivating the population and maintains that it should never be used without agency since fear can create apathy in individuals who have no agency to

act upon the threat. This concurs with Susanne C. Moser's conclusions. She says "Fear appeals or images of overwhelmingly big problems, without effective means to counter them, frequently result in denial, numbing and apathy, i.e. reactions which control the unpleasant effects of fear rather than the actual threat".

John Agard's, 'Inheritance', is an excellent poem which exhorts the reader to consider the condition of the Earth and the children who will "inherit an earth whose rainforest lungs breathe a tale of waste". This poem is clear and relevant to climate change but is not likely to be effective in contributing to a change in attitudes or behaviour. Futerra's recommendations to DEFRA in 'The Rules of the Game: Principles of Climate Change Communications' document state that communicators should not rely solely on concern about our children's future. Recent surveys show those without children may care more about climate change than those with children. After evaluating the available research, they conclude that, "The evidence base indicates, therefore, that relying on an automatic sense of intergenerational equity is unlikely to succeed".

Only three of the nine poems in this collection meet the criteria for clear, relevant and coherent climate change communication which does not rely on generating either fear or evoking concern for the next generation, methods which have been dismissed by mainstream communicators, behaviour change experts and psychologists as ineffective. Two of the remaining poems were written by Simon Barraclough, 'How's My Coal' in which a God-like voice assumes we are using solar as our main source of energy rather than depleting the Earth's limited resources and 'Polar Heart' which portrays a love affair between the poles in which the North Pole melts. The last poem, George the Poet's 'A Climate for Change', advises in a general way that we should pay attention to scientists and change our lifestyles.

The stated intention of the editors of this collection, Abi Stephenson and Jonathan Rowson, is to help "close that chasm between cognition and action" in climate change. However, even the three poems which meet most of the criteria for effective climate change communication fail to suggest any particular action which the reader should take to mitigate either climate change or the effects of climate change. The RSA's own report 'The Seven Dimensions of Climate Change: Introducing a New Way to Think, Talk, and Act' (2015) explains it is important to "clarify what it really means – for people, business and Governments – to act on climate change with conviction".

A review of other collections available on the internet shows a similar pattern, even the most prestigious, *21 Poems on the Theme of Climate Change*, curated by the former UK Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. This collection includes some wonderful poems beautifully read by famous actors but many don't meet the criteria for effective CC poetry. 'Causeway' by Mathew Hollis, 'Storm' by Michael Longley and 'Vertigo' by Alice Oswald describe flooding, storms and rain. None of these poems have any overt link to climate change, not even a statement that these natural phenomena will be more common due to global warming. Others have no discernable link to climate change but do engage with environmental issues and would be better classified as ecopoetry. The collection also includes dystopian visions of the future, without any hope or positive vision, which have already been shown can be counter-productive.

Many poets choose to focus on an imagined future or write in a general or opaque way about climate change due to a quite understandable concern about their lack of scientific knowledge and worry over getting the science wrong. Doing their own research can be challenging and time consuming. The internet allows access to a flood of contradictory information. Even well-respected newspaper sites tend to 'oversell' the results of good quality research, glossing over its limitations in favour of an arresting headline. The original research itself is expensive to access and difficult to evaluate.

These problems can be minimised by writing about a branch of climate change where there is a general consensus, as in the following:

i) atmospheric carbon dioxide levels have increased to over 400 ppm, higher than at any time in the past 800,000 years; ii) average global temperature is increasing, and projected to reach at least 1.5° to 2° warmer than 2000 levels by 2100 (0.2°C per decade); iii) glaciers are retreating in almost all continents; iv) summer ice cover in the Arctic is decreasing each year, with that region seeing the fastest average temperature increase.

The power of poetry in this context is to explore feelings about these changes in our world, to examine ambivalences and the conflicted nature of our responses. CC poetry should be memorable, universal, accessible, relevant and accurate, and (as with Owen and Sassoon) authoritative, based on lived experience and critical understanding. CC poetry should embrace the entire gamut of

opinion, including those who doubt the accuracy of most of the predictions for the next 50 to 100 years, those who remain sceptical about the figures for species extinction and those who doubt our ability to control climate change and wish to focus on adaptation.

Writing about a branch of climate change where there is less consensus is more challenging. To illustrate the extent of this challenge, consider the poet who reads that the butterfly population is being adversely affected by climate change and wishes to check the veracity of this statement before using it in a poem. It turns out to be complex. Increased temperatures during spring and summer months have a positive effect, but higher winter temperatures and increased rainfall have negative effects, probably because unusually high temperatures in winter cause them to wake up too soon. Some species, like the painted lady butterfly, migrate and are unaffected by UK winter temperatures. Estimation of abundance is complicated by shifts in range with some species expanding their range to include Scotland. Although there is a clear long term decline in butterflies in the UK, it is difficult to assess the effect of climate change independent of changes in farming, forestry practices, urban development and pollution. It is perhaps not surprising that our hypothetical poet, wearied and confused, may choose not to write about the effect of climate change on the butterfly population. This is unfortunate. While it is correct to be concerned about spreading misinformation, and care should be taken about claims made, it is perfectly legitimate to acknowledge, indeed embrace, uncertainty, where it exists.

One attempt to ameliorate the reluctance of some poets to write about climate change has been to pair poets and scientists. This well-meaning endeavour has met with limited success. A few brief meetings of a poet with a scientist are unlikely to yield sufficient mutual understanding in the face of so much complexity and uncertainty unless the poet already has some scientific knowledge. It is perhaps surprising that more effort has not been made to pair established poets who already have scientific backgrounds, or a special interest in science, with climate change professionals, as this has more potential for success.

A new group has been established, called STEM poets, writers with a background, or special interest in Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics. They support STEAM, a global initiative to introduce the arts within STEM education in order to encourage creativity and break down barriers between the arts and sciences. STEM poets believe it is important that readers are

presented with factually correct and truthful STEM knowledge in works of imagination, specifically poems and short fiction, and wish to promote informed writing on climate change. They want to encourage more people to write about STEM subjects and will offer support and review of STEM content. A series of seminars, readings and workshops are planned for 2020, beginning with a seminar and a masterclass on climate change poetry to be held at the Scottish Writers Centre on 11th February and 25th February, respectively.

The 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will be held in Glasgow in November 2020. This event is the most high-profile climate change gathering since the Paris agreement was signed in 2015. It is expected to attract up to 200 world leaders for the final weekend and more than 30,000 delegates. Thus, there is a year for Scotland's poets to establish an effective body of work for this event.

Eveline Pye is a poet with a Masters in Psychology. She taught Research Methods and Statistics to undergraduate and postgraduate multi-disciplinary students at Glasgow Caledonian University for over twenty years and won the Boyd Prize for Achievement in Education. Her first collection was *Smoke That Thunders* (Mariscat Press, 2015). A new collection, *STEAM*, containing poems about the STEM subjects, will be published by Red Squirrel Press.

<https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2020/01/29/climate-change-poetry-is-it-effective/>

James Mackenzie

Invasion

I started this ramble with the two verses below on the date mentioned. I thought then they would need some explanation. I realise now that it's almost all about books and writers. If it does no more than whet someone's appetite to read one or more of them, that's good. Books not bombs...

27th February 2022

1. In the 1960s, two young Soviet Union poets achieved almost celebrity status in the West: Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the former even appearing at the Royal Albert Hall International Poetry Festival in 1965*. It was during the “Khrushchev era”, when there was a liberalisation of culture, that these two poets were able to have their work published in the USSR. “Babi Yar” is perhaps the most famous of Yevtushenko's work, and laments the official refusal to acknowledge that this 1941 Nazi massacre, near Kyiv in Ukraine, was of Jews (over 33,000 of them), not Communists (although the site was used for further massacres of non-Jews). “I am Goya” is an early Voznesensky anti-war poem whose subject is the 1941 invasion by Nazi forces. Francisco Goya's etchings, *The Disasters of War*, are uncompromising in their depiction of brutality. This is one of the tamer ones, *Sad presentiments of what is to come*:



Hey Yevgeny!
 Andrei hallo!
 Where are you now?
 Why do your red voices
 Not ring in the snow?
 Have we done with your Goya,
 Buried so deep Babi Yar,
 Quite forsaken
 The plough for the sword?
 O Yevtushenko,
 Ay Voznesensky,
 What would you sing now
 In the reddening snow?

*This was actually entitled the “International Poetry Incarnation”, which was held at the Royal Albert Hall, London, in June 1965, and some of which is documented in the film “Wholly Communion”, directed by Peter Whitehead. Contemporary literary luminaries such as American “beat poets” Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and from Britain, Christopher Logue, Adrian Mitchell, and Tom McGrath (both the latter two wrote for “Peace News”) were present. Mitchell’s filmed reading of “To Whom it may Concern (Tell me lies about Vietnam)” is still spell-binding in its intense and graphic anti-war sentiment. The poetry event was celebratory, and celebrated, as is implied by the descriptive words incarnation and communion. I recall at the time feelings of optimism and hope – that a better, more peaceful and just, world was being born (and with it of course, came “Better Books”!). You don’t have to be a cynic, no, just be a trifle sceptical, to note that not a single woman took the stage at the festival. Yes it was an all-man peace offering. So on to the next piece...

2. I first read Leo Tolstoy’s short story “Master and Man” in a wonderful book by George Saunders, “A Swim in a Pond in the Rain”, in which he analyses the way seven 19th Century Russian short stories are worked by their authors (Gogol,

Turgenev, Chekhov and Tolstoy) to the extent that they can be regarded as masterpieces. This one is outstandingly powerful, but as Saunders points out in an afterword, has a shortcoming, relating to Tolstoy's view of Russian peasantry...I have to say I clutched Saunders' book to my breast after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, as if it were some kind of comfort toy – a feeble reminder of humanity.

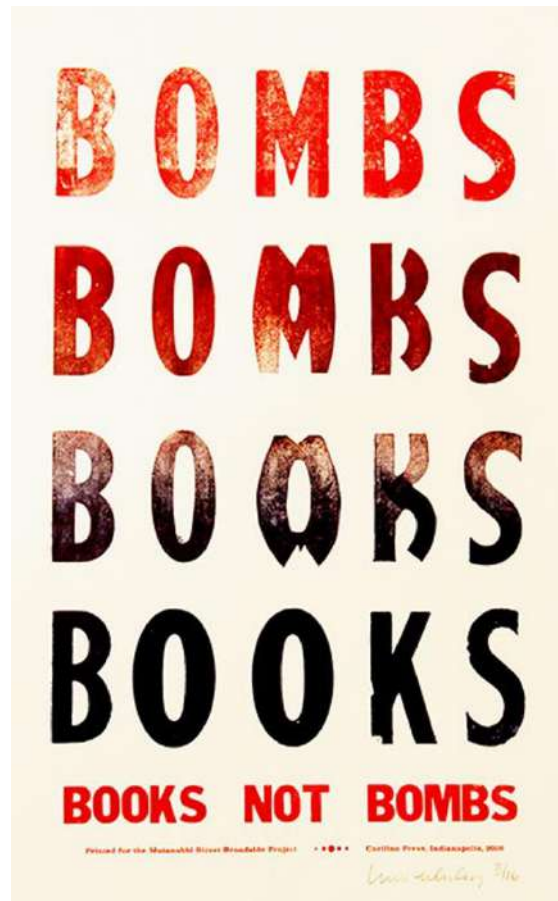
There's a storm out there
 The wormwood's
 Whipped by the wind
 Going round and round
 And back and forth
 Just like the sledge
 And that poor pony...
 God, Tolstoy
 It makes me feel sad
 Thinking of
 Master and man
 And what we've to learn

N.B. There are actually three ponies in the story, one of which is sorely mistreated, and two of which are evidently loved and cared for - but the "poor" one of those is also exploited, and finally neglected.

3. There's a scene in "The Little Red Chairs" by Edna O'Brien, who in this book doesn't shrink from exposing brutality, nor from seeking redemption. The chairs in the title refer to a memorial to the siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces begun in 1992. Hotel workers (most of them immigrants to Ireland, refugees) gather on the veranda after work. This is what Ivan the pastry chef (from Czechoslovakia) says:

"My friends I tell you we are a jolly group but put us in uniform and all that change. In war I don't know who my brother. In war I don't know who my friend. War make

everybody savage. Who can say what lies inside the heart of each one of us when everything is taken away?”



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<https://www-tc.pbs.org/auschwitz/learning/guides/reading1.4.pdf> [Accessed 1 September 2023].

James Mackenzie was born in 1948. Since 1976 he has shared his life with gardener and writer Rosa Stepanova, creating an oasis in the wet, windy desert of Shetland, bringing up a daughter, and tending a small flock of sheep along with dogs, cats, and numerous birds and other fauna and flora.

They now live with two border collies in that more temperate corner of Scotland called Fife.

James occasionally finds the need to put pen to paper or to stab at a keyboard. This can occur at moments of grief and pain. For example, what Palestinians refer to as the Day of Nakbar is one day before his birthday, and still, after 75 years, words are used by the rich and powerful to justify oppression and cruelty.

Nature is a great solace and can stir him to write, but he recognises that even that can hurt sometimes.

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.

Translation

Chaitali Sengupta

Translated Poems from Rabindranath Tagore

The original prose poems by Rabindranath Tagore, *Meghla Dine (On a Cloudy Day)*, *Sotero Bochor (Seventeen Years)*, *Kritoghno Shok (Sorrow Ingrate)* were collected in *Lipika* first published in 1922 (BE 1329). In this book, Tagore muses about the dusk and the dawn, about the cloud messenger, about a rambling path. His subject matter in this book involves the day-to-day activities, fairy tale, mythology, but his deep poetic sensibility runs throughout the verses. He conveys the mundane incidents and trivial ideas through delicate words and renders them momentous. This collection, therefore, contains some of his finest and most delicate works, and that makes *Lipika* very unique.

In *Lipika*, Tagore experimented with what he named ‘*Gadya kabita*’ (prose-poems) in Bengali. To understand his prosodical experiments, a close reading of *Lipika* is an absolute must. Here he keeps aside all constraints of form and uses ‘free verse’ and yet as we read through the mellifluous creations, we can see that the lilting, musical lyricism is not absent.

On a Cloudy Day/ MEGHLA DINE

Every day is a busy day, filled with a lot of work with many people around us. And each day I wonder if the day is going to end, going through the daily chores and the millions of communications attached to it. And possibly there won’t be time to muse upon that which is left unspoken.

Layers upon layers of pregnant rain-clouds fill the breast of the sky this morning. Like other days, there is also work stipulated for this day, and there are a lot of people around me. But today makes me brood upon the thought that not everything that lies within can be exposed or expressed outside.

Man has crossed the seas, climbed the mountains, and dug holes inside the caverns of the earth, extracting rubies and pearls, but that which lies buried deep in one’s heart, man has failed to express to others.

On this cloudy morning, it is this thought that flaps its wings like a bird in a cage within me. The person that resides within me, says: “Where is she, the one who is eternally mine? The one who is going to seize upon the rainclouds in my heart, turning it empty and arid?”

On this overclouded morning, I hear that innermost call within, knocking tirelessly against the padlocked door. And I'm wondering, *"What should I do? Is there someone, at whose call, my words will cross every barrier of drudgery, and carrying the lamp of melody she will go on a rendezvous with the world? Is there someone at the behest of whose one glance, all my strewn sorrows will be woven into a garland of joy, which will light them up in a bright flame? The one, who can thread in the right tune, and demand the song from me? To her, I shall give my true words. Where is this all-consuming supplicant, where does he wait for me, by the side of which street?"*

The sorrow within me is colored saffron today. It wants to get away, out on the streets of the world, away from all work, on a path that is linear, as the one-stringed instrument *ektara*, that tunes in to the beats of the steps of my innermost one!

Seventeen Years/ Sotero Bochor

For seventeen years, she knew me.

So many meetings, so many visits, so many words were exchanged.

And so many dreams, conjectures and cues, and several signals orbited around them all. Beside these, there was the light of the morning star, waking me up from my half- slumbering state. There were also moments, fragrant with the whiff of jasmines on July evenings, and then there were moments when those tired notes of the concerted music floated up during the last hour of spring. For seventeen long years, she wove all these in her heart, like a garland.

She mingled with these moments and called me by various names, matching them with all these moods and minutes. The man who responded to her many names, could he be the creation of one sole God? He was the pinnacle, the culmination born out of her seventeen yearlong experiences; sometimes in love, sometimes in disregard; sometimes in need, sometimes needlessly; sometimes in the company of others, and sometimes in complete seclusion, in private. His form was the summation of her knowledge about him that she kept buried in her heart.

Since then, another seventeen years have gone by. But the days and the nights of these seventeen years never come together in union, never intertwine. They simply scatter away.

And they end up asking me, each day, *“Where do we belong? Who will call after us and care for us?”*

I have no answer to that. I fall silent and I try to think. And they disappear, flying away in the air. “We’re setting off to search,” they say.

“Search for whom?”

They too do not know whom they are searching for. So they wander here and there, and as evening falls, they sail away towards darkness, like the wayward clouds. And then, I lose them, too.

Kartik:1326

Sorrow Ingrate/ Kritoghno Shok

At early dawn, she bid adieu.

My mind tried to console me by saying, “Everything is an illusion.”

Annoyed, I retorted back. I said, “There on the table is her sewing box. On the terrace garden there are her flowerpots, her monogrammed hand fan lies there on the bed. All these are indeed real.”

My mind tried to explain further. “Yet, give it a thought, again.”

Quick came my rejoinder. “Stop saying that. Look at that story book over there, her hairpin is stuck in the folds of a page in between, indicating that she hadn’t finished reading it. If these are all illusions, then why did she turn out to be a greater illusion of all?”

My mind quietened down. A friend came over and gave me his wisdom. He said, “What is good in this world is true; it never fades, never dies out. The entire creation preserves it in its heart like a valuable gem in a garland.”

In anger, I replied again. “How do you know? Are you trying to tell me that a body is useless? Where has that body gone?”

Like an enraged little boy who keeps hitting at his mother, I too struck and hurt every little thing that provided sustenance to me in this world. I kept complaining, “This world is false and unfaithful.”

Soon, in an abrupt manner, I was startled out of my stupor. I felt someone was saying, “*An ingrate you are! Ungrateful.*”

Outside my window, the three-day-old crescent moon was shining, hidden behind the tamarisk trees. It was like the smile of the dear one who had departed. It was as if she was playing hide and seek with me. Under the star-spangled darkness, an admonition floated through the air. “*When I surrendered to you, you took it as a deception. Now that I stay concealed, do you place your faith there and do you, in earnest, believe only that?*”

Chaitali Sengupta writes and translates poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. A reviewer and a journalist, her debut collection of prose poems *Cross Stitched Words*, received the ‘Honorable Mention’ award at the New England book festival 2021. Her latest work of translation is *Timeless Tales in Translation*, a collection of 12 short stories by Indian authors. Recently, her collaborative translation *Legends Speak: Bengali Women’s Narratives in Translation* was launched at ICCR, Kolkata. She has contributed to esteemed anthologies and to well-known online/print journals. Presently, she is working on a translation work featuring the Dutch author, Louis Couperus.

Sitesh Alok

The Noseless

Translated from the original Hindi by Dr Aruna Sitesh

The bus screeched to a halt. He held Babua's finger by one hand and picked up the box with the other. Radhia carried Munna – holding him, she had barely managed to get off the bus with a thump. She gave a sigh of relief and looked around. Sarna continued to glare hard at her.

“Stop gaping, and collect the luggage,” he turned towards the bundle. “The train won't wait for you.”

Radhia changed to action mode. With a quick jerk, she swung Munna from her left hip to the right one. She stretched her left arm and reached out for a bundle.

The bedding wrapped inside a thin carpet and tied with a string, still lay on the roadside. Sarna seemed to flex his muscles, then decided. He put down the box, held the bedding under his arm and picked up the box.

The weight made him extraordinarily agile. He knew that he couldn't possibly hold on for long – either the bedding would slip off or his fingers, fastened on the box-handle, would give out.

He went on to the road; the variety of vehicles zooming past transfixed him. Hesitating, he looked back at anxious Radhia, and his own grip on Babua's fingers tightened.

Facing him was an unending flow of vehicles. Radhia put down the bundle. “Don't, don't!” he almost lost his temper, “when the road clears, you will get busy lifting it. The traffic will start again in no time.”

Perhaps a signal somewhere had turned red. Vehicles slowed and stopped. Just ahead of him was a network of various vehicles and the gaps in between were gradually getting filled with the

approaching cars, rickshaws, scooters and bicycles. And, he knew, that within moments the road would again be chaotic. Ignoring the painful pressure on his fingers, Sarna entered the crevice between a truck and a car. In any case, no one was going to run him over. It was just a question of once getting in. Years ago, just as *Mai* used to tell the story of Abhimanyu's battle – the array now could not have been very different. Zigzagging down the road, with Babua trotting on one side and the luggage dangling on the other, he ran through a gap between the vehicles.

“What was so great about Abhimanyu? Even I have accomplished the same feat!”

On reaching the central verge, he let drop the box on the ground with a thud and looked at his aching fingers. Pitying himself, he opened his palm, then closed it again. His glance shot back and rested on Radhia, still waiting on the other side. The traffic was again running wild. He quietly cursed her.

Only if he went back, could she come along. There was yet one more road to cross. He felt trapped in the mad rush flowing in two opposite directions.

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The train was jam-packed. After two futile rounds, he forced his way into one of the compartments. In between the two berths there was just enough space to spread his carpet. Now he could breathe again. The box placed in-between the berths served well for Radhia. The man at the corner of the berth moved a couple of inches to make enough space for him to barge into. Once seated, his arms and calves began to smart. The throat was parched too. He should have listened to Radhia and bought a plastic water-bottle. It had seemed such a useless extravagance at the time. Instead, he had thought of running to the water tap as and when the train stopped.

But here? Now? The train might move out of the yard, with him on the platform. Suddenly he thought of Radhia and turned towards her. She was looking at him. Her eyes seemed to beg for water or perhaps they were reproaching him for not buying a plastic bottle. He averted his gaze.

The money to buy a water-bottle was never a small amount for him, in any case. But visiting his ancestral home after four years had made every penny very precious. Suddenly he admitted: “It will prove so very expensive...” But the idea could not be abandoned either. Heartstrings, you know! And if one goes home, one obviously takes gifts for everyone there.

For youngsters he had bought lemon drops from a pavement vendor. Two each would be fine. But the selection of possible gifts for the grown-ups burnt holes in his pockets.

An ordinary sari for *Mai* had cost him twenty-seven rupees. After striking the bargain he had looked at Radhia for some possible reproach. But her eyes were utterly blank. While visiting her parents some time ago, she had wanted to take a sari for her mother. Unable to sidetrack the issue, he had used the traditional trump card – “Will it befit you to take her a gift? She won’t accept it in any case. Can one accept gifts from one’s daughter?”

He felt uneasy – Radhia would not have forgotten all that. What should we do then? Going home after such a long gap without anything for his *Mai*?

Many a time he thought of bringing *Mai* to stay with him, but then he wondered if he would manage to give her any comfort that she was getting at home. Similarly, he occasionally thought of going back but there was something that made him stay put.

Manglu *Kaka* had come to see them. His father tried to persuade him to take Sarna with him to the town. But *Kaka* was hesitant.

“Too young... but I’ll try....”

“What ‘try’?” *Bapu* wouldn’t listen. “You have such good contacts. Been there for full ten years. You have only to put in a good word for him.”

“It takes time.” Mangloo *Kaka* was lost in his thoughts, “One has to try very hard.”

“That is no problem. He can easily wait for a few days. You have got a house – he will lie in a corner somewhere. You must take him along this time. Salvage his life, please.”

He had just passed the eighth class that year, though not with good marks. “He barely managed to pass in Mathematics and English,” the teacher had told *Bapu*, “It can’t go on. You must engage a tutor for him.”

He couldn’t hear what *Bapu* told the teacher in reply. A little later, however, *Bapu* had pulled his ear, “Enough of studies! Better to think of your daily bread now.”

It had just struck Sarna that Mangloo *Kaka* must be having heaps of bread with slabs and slabs of butter piled on them. Taking out his own share would be his only job. That wouldn’t be difficult! What bliss! It was about “real life”, to quote *Bapu*.

Sarna could still recollect *Mai* expressing her disapproval in a low voice. “Why send him away so soon? Why not a little later?”

Bapu’s eyes sparkled with Mangloo *Kaka*’s glitter. He could set all her doubts to rest, “Ten years ago when Raghuveer uncle had taken him along, Mangloo must have been the same age. I was not so fortunate. So here I am. Just see the way he flaunts his trousers and wristwatch! Got his own house there. Can see a movie at will or roam around in buses.”

Mai muttered something like “Who knows?” and kept quiet as usual.

He remembered very clearly. As soon as he got off the train at the platform, a mad rush seemed to engulf him. Instinctively he caught hold of Mangloo *Kaka*’s shirt and wouldn’t let it go, even after realising that he was behaving like a child. The thrill of sitting in a bus, nay, boarding the bus for the first time, failed to touch him because of the constant jerks and bumps he had received from the surrounding crowds.

Thereafter, every day, every minute, all that he came across belied his expectations. He did not yet feel free with Mangloo *Kaka*. A wide distance lurked between the two, a distance verging on fear perhaps. Else he would surely have asked, "What, *Kaka*... Is this your house? Is this what you call a house? On the footpath!"

At night he slept on the roadside on the *durrie* he had brought along. *Kaka* slept on a loose cot close by. *Kaka* consoled him, saying that things would work out by and by. There would be money for him and a place to live in as well. Unnecessary worrying won't do, nor would writing back home. Many a man had become a millionaire here by sheer hard work. What could the village offer? Even if he decided to go back, what was there to gain? He would only be the butt of the whole community, everyone wanting to know about the laurels he had come to win.

When he couldn't get a decent job after quite a few days he got nervous. Utterly complacent and idle, he couldn't enjoy the free meals at *Kaka's*. *Kaka* and *Kaki* seemed to have changed or perhaps he was imagining things. He felt that the heap of rice had reduced. And was the *dal* diluted with water? He couldn't look Mangloo *Kaka* in the face. The latter rebuked and snubbed him occasionally, "how can it be? All the bungalow fellows are complaining about not getting a domestic servant and you still say...."

Working for the bungalow owners – sweeping and washing? He craved for an escape. But the return journey home meant money. He had to compromise and started working in a bungalow. Keeping guard for a locality, then a brief spell at a flour mill, and finally working for a grocer. Now he could sit back and relax – his job was delivering goods to the customers in a cycle rickshaw.

By way of savings, he had so far drawn a blank; his wages were quietly going into Mangloo *Kaka's* pockets. A few coins were handed out to him in the name of pocket money. In return he was getting two square meals a day, a place to sleep and an assurance that he would have his own house one day.

One day he parted company with Mangloo *Kaka* and thatched up his own hut. After a gap of three years when he went to his village for the first time, he not only had a pair of trousers and a bush shirt to flaunt but also a second-hand wristwatch.

On the whole, he was still better off than the villagers. His playmates came to him with a sense of awe and envy. He had gone back home never to return to the city – he had hoped to find a job there itself. But now he just did not know how to say it, considering the conditions that prevailed. Everyone seemed eager to accompany him back to the city! *Mai* had bidden him a heartrending farewell but said not a word about his staying back with them: “be happy wherever you are, my son.” *Bapu* was a little serious, a little bent, and incidentally mentioned that some money would come in handy for *Mai*’s treatment.

So, he came back and for many days he cursed himself for that. The new pair of trousers and the bush-shirt were neatly folded away, and he went back to work in the same old pyjamas and shirt. Would his people still want to accompany him if they saw him in these rags, he wondered.

He resolved to tell his father the truth and to find himself a job back home. But he lacked the courage. He thought he must try his luck for a while longer. If nothing turned up, he decided to go to his family in his very shabby clothes and not in the newly bought clean stuff.

It was not so easy though. When he returned home for the second time, he carried gifts for everyone. Contrary to his earlier resolutions, he himself was dandily dressed. A pen for the front pocket and a pair of glasses, though he knew they were useless! Still.... A pack of cigarettes, instead of *bidis*, were kept in his pocket just to take a puff and offer to others.

The scene at home was once again repeated and he came back cursing himself. Time marched on. He met Radhia and soon afterwards they got married. Informing people back home was not all that important. They had children. Despite the municipal authorities’ zeal to raze down his *jhuggi* on several occasions, he did manage to put up another thatched roof nearby. With each addition to the family, needs increased. He had to concede, reluctantly, to Radhia working as a housemaid. He looked for a second employer in addition to the one he was already serving. He needed a machine

to make more and more money. And yet he tossed and turned all night, wondering how to make more money so that he could acquire the kind of trousers he had seen a gentleman wearing, live beneath a concrete roof, buy more rice, a toy or two for the children, buy Radhia a pair of silver bangles and get himself a pair of the shining shoes so invitingly displayed in a show-window.

Money was needed not only to spend but also to save for a rainy day. The *jhuggi* could again be pulled down any day. Another one would mean more money. Somehow a visit to the native village was always an attraction. The fare alone cost anywhere between 150 and 200 rupees. And one couldn't possibly go home empty-handed.

His thoughts would run riot again. Why not look for a job there itself? At one stroke he could rid himself of spending so much on transport, and also of life's uncertainties. But it was easier said than done. What about Radhia? She couldn't even bear the idea – "I can't follow a word of what they say! Their dialect sounds so very funny."

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When he woke up, his back had gone stiff and the right arm felt numb. He had curled asleep in a tiny space. Late at night he had also made room for Radhia and the kids, while he himself inched forward along with the luggage on the upper berth.

Radhia was wiping Babia's face, with Munna on her lap. Sarna got up and said, "Why don't you also dress up decently?"

Radhia raised her voice, "Is this my first visit?"

"In a way, yes! Last time it was four years ago, soon after our marriage. This time you carry these two along too." Sarna smiled mischievously.

"So what? You seem to have set your mind on staying on." Radhia looked unaware of his smile.

Sarna turned serious, “You feel bad? Listen, whatever happens, it is bound to be better than this.”

Radhia silently looked out of the window.

“You won’t have to sweep and wash for others anymore. You can stay at home and relax...” He tried to gauge her feelings. She continued to stare outside.

At the station they got into a rickshaw. It was not very comfortable, with the luggage and everything. But he found it umpteen times better than the crowded city buses. He calculated the fare – it was decidedly cheaper.

At home everyone surrounded them. He really felt big handing out gifts to one and all. *Bhabhi* got some ice from the neighbourhood and offered them *Sharbat*. *Mai* was engrossed in Munna and Babua. *Bapu* looked more bent and haggard after retirement. *Bhaiya* was out at work. His children peeped in from behind the door. Sarna knew that *Bhabhi* must have forbidden them to enter the room, lest they too asked for the cold drink.

Bhaiya returned in the evening. He too seemed bent and did not look especially happy. Perhaps Sarna had expected too much.

Bhaiya sent for tea and commented meaningfully, “Don’t use the worn-out cups today! After all, the big folk from the city have arrived.” Sarna could not make out whether it was intended as a joke or a taunt.

A short while later *Bhaiya* broke the silence, looking intently into his teacup, “Having a nice time there! All by yourself! Shouldn’t you think of *Mai* and *Bapu* as well?”

Bapu added, perhaps just instinctively, “No need to worry about me!”

Bhaiya suddenly shouted at him. The entire household appeared instantly paralysed. Sarna wanted to know if this had happened just today or was it a routine occurrence. But who to ask? And who would tell?

Before he went to sleep, Radhia asked, "Did you talk to them about your job?"

"Let's wait and see." He avoided her. Before dozing off, he pondered over his own words.

In the morning *Mai's* voice and Babua's laughter woke him.

"So, he had his nose clipped too?"

"Ya! He too," *Mai* said.

Sarna recalled the story. It had been repeated over and over in his childhood. "There was a man with a clipped nose in a village. As the only one without a nose, he was a laughingstock for all. At long last, he hit upon a plan. He started telling everyone, 'It is not a mishap. I had my nose clipped on purpose. You can experience eternal bliss with your nose chopped off and you can see God too.'"

"At first, people didn't believe him. But there were a few who agreed to have their noses clipped in order to see God. But after getting their noses clipped, there was no god anywhere in sight. When they lost their temper, the original one with a clipped nose explained: 'Look here! You can't ever get the nose back. It is now in our interest to spread the news of our divine bliss and ability to see God. Otherwise, people will make fun of you too.'"

"They had no choice. They started bragging about their extraordinary powers. So, some more followed suit. Very soon the entire village had their noses clipped!"

Sarna became lost in deep thought. Suddenly, Badri *Kaka*'s voice pierced through: "The sun is over your head, and you are still asleep!"

Sarna got up and touched his feet. *Kaka* had brought his son Kishori along. Badri *Kaka* completed his sentence. "You are a big man now, settled in the city".

"Oh no!" But he couldn't finish his sentence.

"Don't deny it. As if we didn't know! You've even got a house there – and a good job."

Words choked in his throat.

"Listen! Shouldn't you help your own folks too? Take Kishori along and get him fixed up somewhere."

"Oh no!" he wanted to explain but didn't know how!

"You must be knowing so many people – just put in a word about him." Badri *Kaka* had already resolved to send Kishori with him.

"But – it takes time," his lips moved. He couldn't believe his ears. Nor could he make out how, suddenly, Mangloo *Kaka*'s voice was emitting from his throat.

On his way back, Sarna kept wondering about Kishori's reaction when he would see him in his labourer's attire in the city. What would Kishori say to his *jhuggi* instead of a house? Where and how would he get Kishori a job? How would he tell him not to write about all these things to folk back home because – because it would serve no purpose?

He tried to recollect how Mangloo *Kaka* had broached the subject and talked him into doing the same many years ago.

Notes:

Noseless: One with a clipped nose

Munna: Little baby

Mai: Mother

Abhimanyu: A young warrior in the *Mahabharata* epic

Kaka: Uncle

Bapu: Father

Durrie: Carpet made of coarse cotton thread

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Saptaparna Roy

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Kabyar Tatparya' (1894) Revisited

Srataswini said to me, "I wish to listen to your recitation of the poem related to *Kacha-Devayani-samvaad*."¹

On listening to this, I felt a slight sense of pride, but haughty Madhusudan² was alert so Deepti spoke out of impatience, "Don't be annoyed, I could hardly understand the significance or the intention of that poem. That piece of writing has not been good."

I kept silent. I muttered by myself- had this opinion been uttered with a mild humility, it would not have specially affected *sansar*³ or truth would not have been denied; because while it is not surprising to find flaws in writing, it is also not absolutely impossible to discern a lack in the sense of poetic appreciation in readers. I expressed aloud, "Though a writer may have convincing opinions about one's own composition, yet that may be fallacious as exemplified through examples in history. On the other side, the critic-community too is not completely correct; there is no absence of such evidence in history. Hence, only this much can be ascertained that this piece of my writing has not been according to your heart's liking- that is surely my misfortune or may be it could be yours too."

Deepti briefly stated with a sombre face, "That may be." Having said so, she pulled a book and started reading it.

Thereafter, Srataswini did not request me the second time to read the poem.

Byom, casting his glance out of the window and addressing a distant imaginative man under the skies, said: "If you speak of significance, I have accepted an importance of your recent poem."

¹ *Kacha-Devayani-samvaad*: Tagore's poem is inspired from Mahakavi Vidyapati's seminal composition, 'Prem Padya'. Vidyapati (1350-1448) was a Maithili court poet of repute who revived the language Maithili and composed *padas* that were orally transmitted from one generation to the next.

² *Madhusudan*: It is another name of lord Vishnu who killed the demon Madhu. It has other associations with lord Krishna with multiple interpretations of the name in Hindu mythology.

³ *Sansar*: Derived from the Sanskrit word *samsara*, it means the 'world'.

Khiti said, “Tell us about the matter first. I have not read the poem; I was concealing this fact for so long out of fear for the poet, now it had to be revealed.”

Byom explained, “The gods had sent Brihaspati’s⁴ son Kacha to the *ashrama*⁵ of the lord of devils, Sukracharya for pursuing the study of life-restoration. Kacha had spent hundreds of years there entertaining Sukracharya’s daughter Devayani through dance, songs, and the play of musical instruments, acquiring the knowledge. At the end, when it was time to bid farewell then Devayani offered her love to him, pleading him not to leave the *ashrama*. Kacha proceeded towards the abode of the gods despite his heart-felt attachment for her, ignoring her interdiction. This is the story. There is a slight difference from the Mahabharata, but that is minor.

Khiti spoke with a little distressed look, “The story will not be longer than twelve feet of green melon. But I fear that from it a thirteen feet long significance will be drawn out.”

Without paying heed to Khiti’s words, Byom continued speaking, “The matter relates to the body and the soul.”

On hearing this, everyone felt tensed.

Khiti said, “Let me now take leave this day with my body and soul.”

Samir pulled his shirt with both his hands to make Khiti sit, “Where are you going leaving us in the face of danger?”

Byom said, “He has come from the heaven of the living to this *sansar-ashrama*. He took his learning from the joys and miseries here. As long as he is in his studentship, he has to pacify the heart-in-the-body of the daughter of the *ashrama*. He knows the beautiful art of appeasing the heart. He strums at the body’s *vina*⁶ of the senses, playing a heavenly music that unfurls beauty’s pleasurable oasis. With the power of its own holistic sense-perception of sound-smell-touch, rejecting the rules of instrumental music, the body pulsates in a marvellous celestial dance.”

⁴ *Brihaspati*: He was referred as the *Guru* (teacher) who was venerated as a Hindu deity and also a sage by the gods according to ancient Vedic scriptures.

⁵ *Ashrama*: It means the secluded abode of a Hindu hermit where his disciples live away from their families to be educated in the spiritual hermitage.

⁶ *Vina*: Vina is a stringed Indian instrument with variations in the name and design according to regions.

In the meanwhile, dreamy Byom with a blank look became elated and sat on the bedstead saying, “If you see it this way, you will observe that there is an eternal performative-amour. Watch how the being is driving his indiscreet, dependent companion to madness. He is streaming such a desire in every cell of the body which has no satisfaction within *deha dharma*⁷ or the dharma of the body. He is bestowing such beauty to the eyes that with the power of sight its horizon cannot be seen, so she expresses herself with this saying, “I have been appreciating his charismatic aura my whole life, still my eyes are not satisfied.” The music that is being borne to the ears cannot be grasped by the hearing ability, so she anxiously tells, “I have been listening to his sweet chant produced by the voice of the soul, still I wish for more.”⁸ Again, this life-embled, imprudent companion like a creeper ramifying hundreds of branches, entwining the being in a tender, loving embrace lulls him into a latent stupor, gradually enchanting him; like a shadow she serves him through various customs with a tireless care, so that the ‘foreign’ is not perceived as foreign; so that there is no lack of hospitality, she keeps her eyes-ears-hands-feet alert, active. Despite the love, one fine day the being lays this everlastingly devoted, uniquely enamoured body-creeper on dust to abandon her. He says, ‘Beloved, I love you selflessly, yet I will heave only a sigh to desert you.’ The *kaya* or body then clasps his feet to plead, ‘Dear companion, if you have to leave me on the earth like a fistful of dust and walk away today, then why did you for so long cast me as though I am glory-embodied! Alas, I am not worthy of you- why did you then once come to venture forth in this life-lamp lit cloistral golden temple on a dark mystery-clad night, having traversed the endless seas. Which strength of mine had fascinated you?’- no one knows where this foreigner went without answering this piteous question. That termination of a lifelong union, that day of farewell before the journey to Mathura, that last address between the *kaya* or the body and the *kayadhiraj* or the master of the body- where else can we find a similar tragic scene in love poetry?”.

Suspecting an imminent mockery in Khiti’s facial expression, Byom said, “You do not consider this as amour; you are thinking that I am only relying on metaphors to speak. It is not so. This is the first amour in this world and like life’s first amour remains forceful beyond all, the world’s first amour is similarly simple and strong. When this primeval amour, this bodily love

⁷ *Deha dharma*: *Deha* refers to the material, physical body and *deha dharma* implies the religious fulfilment of the necessities of the body and the functions of nature. However, the concept has multiple interpretations within ancient Indic literature.

⁸ These are Maithili lines from Vidyapati’s poem, ‘*Prem Padya*’.

appeared in this *sansar*, then the earth was not divided into water and land- there was no poet then, no historian was born, but that day on this watery, mossy, unformed earth it was announced that this world is not simply a mechanised one; an indescribable, pleasurable, painful will power called amour is enlivening the growth of moss and today in the devotee's eyes upon that mossy life beauty-embodied *Lakshmi*⁹ and feeling-embodied *Saraswati*¹⁰ are ensconced.”

Khiti said, “I am delighted to learn that within each one of us a mammoth poetic drama is sustaining- but it must be admitted that the restless *aatma*'s behaviour towards the simple *kaya* is not satisfactory. I earnestly hope that my *jeeva-aatma* or individual soul does not express this kind of an impatience to at least permanently live for long in bodily-Devayani's *ashrama*. You too bestow that blessing.”

Byom rested his back on the bedstead and placed his legs on the window sill. Khiti said, “If I get the opportunity then even I can narrate one meaning. I am observing that the basic essence of the evolution theory connoting expressionism is embedded in this poem. The life-restorative knowledge implies the knowledge to live. It can be clearly seen in the *sansar* that one man is consistently practicing this knowledge- not for hundreds of years but millions of years. But the one on whom he is depending on for applying his knowledge, it can be seen that he has only transient love for that living breed. Once that chapter is completed, then the cruel lover and restless visitant leaves her unkindly in the face of destruction. The song of lamentation buried in every layer of the earth is etched on the stony stretch.”

Before Khiti could complete her words, Dipti said in an irritated manner, “If you eke out such significance, then there will be no end to significances. To put fire on wood to accept fire's farewell, the escape of the butterfly from the cocoon, the emergence of the fruit from the wilted flower, the bursting of the bud from the seed- such numerous significances can be heaped.”

Byom spoke gravely, “Right. Those are not significances, they are only instances. The innermost essence of these is that we cannot walk in this *sansar* without using at least two legs. When the left leg is stuck backwards, the right leg motions forward, again when the right leg is

⁹ *Lakshmi*: She is the Hindu goddess of beauty, wealth, prosperity and power. She is a part of the triad or *Tridevi* along with Parvati and Saraswati.

¹⁰ *Saraswati*: She is the Hindu goddess of learning, wisdom and the arts.

engaged backwards, the left leg breaks free from its shackles to move forward. We bind ourselves at one time, again the very next moment we sever the ties. We have to love and that love will have to be detached- the *sansar*'s greatest trauma, and it is through this great trauma that we have to progress. This analysis works for society as well. When new norms constrict us to one place in the course of time in the form of antiquated customs, then social revolution emerges to uproot the system and emancipate us. The leg that we step forward that leg must be lifted the next moment, or else we cannot walk- hence, there is the pain of separation in every step- this is divine dispensation."

Samir remarked, "None of you have mentioned that there is a curse at the end of the story. When Kacha gained the knowledge and dissociated himself from Devayani's bond of love, then Devayani cursed him that he will be able to transmit the knowledge he has learnt to another but he will not be able to use it himself; I have drawn out a significance by including that curse- if you have the patience then I can explain."

Khiti said, "Whether I will have patience, I cannot discern beforehand; if I make a commitment, at the end I may not fulfil it. You may start now; at last, if according to the situation your kindness may be generated, you may please stop."

Samir explained, "Let us say that the knowledge of good living is called life-restorative knowledge. Let us assume that a poet has come to this world to bestow to another that knowledge which he has learnt. He with his simple celestial power enchants *sansar*, retrieving that knowledge from *sansar*. That he does not love *sansar* is not the fact, but when *sansar* said to him- 'You submit to my binding', he said, 'If I submit, if I am attracted to your vortex, then I will not be able to teach this life-restorative knowledge; I will have to remain detached myself even in the midst of others within *sansar*.' Then *sansar* cursed him- 'You will be able to disseminate the knowledge you have gained from me, but you will not be able to use it for yourself.' Since there is the presence of *sansar*'s curse, the *guru* or teacher's knowledge is useful for the student, but compared with his student he is incapable of applying that worldly knowledge in his own life. The reason is that if the knowledge is attained externally in a detached way, then it can be learnt properly; but if one is not constantly engaged in work, its functional knowledge is not acquired."

"All the arguments that you have raised are too ordinary ones. Supposedly, if it can be said, the significance of the Ramayana is this- having being born in a royal family, many endure

suffering; or the significance of *Shakuntala*¹¹ is this- it is not impossible that a man and a woman will feel mutual love in their hearts given a suitable opportunity but this cannot be claimed as a new learning or a special message.”

Sratiswini faltered a little to say, “I think so that all those ordinary words are words of poetry. Being born in a royal family, irrespective of the possibilities of all kinds of happiness, like a fowler intense pain has chased Rama and Sita from danger to more dire danger until death; this very plausible, very primeval traumatic narrative of *sansar* within human destiny has attracted and moistened the readers’ hearts. Practically, in *Shakuntala*’s love-scene there is no new learning or special message; only this extremely ancient and ordinary saying is there- at an ominous or ill-ominous opportunity, love unites the hearts of a man and a woman clandestinely with an inevitable force in an enduring bond. The existence of this very ordinary understanding ensures that the general public has been relishing its *rasa* or essence. Some might say, the special essence of Draupadi’s disrobing is that death is attracting the clothing of the flora-and-fauna covered earth, but by god’s grace in no age is there an end to the edge of the saree- eternally the earth is bustling with life and beauty, remaining attired in a new robe. But in the course of the meeting when the blood of our hearts was surging and at last, when the two eyes flooded with tears by god’s mercy on the endangered devotee- did it happen on accepting this novel, special meaning? No, was it because of the shame of the oppressed woman and that too ordinary, natural and primal shame-alleviating axiom? Even in *Kacha-Devayani-samvaad* there is one very eternal, simple trauma narrative of the human heart; those who consider it as insignificant and prioritise particular theories do not possess *kavya-rasa* or poetic sensibility.”

Samir laughed while addressing me, “Srimati Sratiswini has summarily exiled us from the rightful premises of *kavya-rasa*; now let us hear what the poet himself has to say.”

Sratiswini was extremely embarrassed and being repentant repeatedly protested against the false accusation.

I said, “So far I can state that when I sat to compose the poem, then I did not have any meaning in my mind. By your grace I now realise that the poem is not altogether trifle, the meaning

¹¹ *Shakuntala*: Composed around the 5th century CE by the Indian poet Kalidasa, it is considered to be the greatest composition based on Shakuntala’s narrative in the Mahabharata and is popularly known as *Abhijnanashakuntalam*.

is not being contained within a dictionary. The strength of poetry is that the poet's prowess of composition incites the reader's writing capability; then according to individual nature some create beauty, some morality, few others construct theories. As though it is like igniting firework- poetry is that spark of fire, the readers' minds are various sorts of fireworks. The moment it is ignited, some like rocket firework rise to the sky entirely, some like the *tubri*¹² become excited, some keep making sound like a bomb. Hence, overall I do not perceive any difference of opinion with Srimati Srataswini. Many opine, the seed is the primary part of the fruit and it can be proved by scientific logic. But, albeit a person with poetic sensibility can savour the pulp of the fruit and discard the seed. Similarly, in a poem if there is any special learning, no one can blame the poetically sensible person for extracting the succulent part of the poem and rejecting the learning aspect. But those who interestedly wish to eke out only the learning element, I bless that they may too succeed and stay contented. Happiness cannot be forcibly induced. Some might extract the colour from *kusumphul*¹³, some might remove its seed for oil, and few others may appreciate its beauty with enchanted eyes. Some draw historiographic signification from poetry, some resurrect the philosophical implications, some excavate morality, some exhume the subject matter- again some cannot extract anything apart from *poetry* from poetry. Let one return home satisfied with whatever one has acquired, I need no reason to oppose anyone, and there is no outcome from conflict.”

Agrahayan, 1301

¹²*Tubri*: A type of spherical terracotta firework with gunpowder in it that is ignited at the top, producing colourful sparks that rise high into the air.

¹³*Kusumphul*: In Sanskrit the word *kausambha* refers to the medicinal plant, *Carthamus tinctorius* which is grown for its vegetable oil. *Kausumbha* is known as *kusumphul* in Bengali and safflower in English.

References:

Tagore, Rabindranath. '*Kabyar Tatparya.*' *Sankalan* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati Granthalay, 1894), pp. 194-203.

Dr Saptaparna Roy is presently working as an Assistant Professor for English and Departmental Co-ordinator with the Department of Humanities at Heritage Institute of Technology, Kolkata. She has more than sixteen years of teaching experience across esteemed business schools such as ISB-K as Head of the Department, and engineering institutions in Kolkata. Apart from being an academician and administrator, she is a widely travelled Pedagogy Trainer empanelled with UGC Bangladesh as a Subject Matter Expert. She is also a Visiting Faculty with premiere institutions and a translator, poet and poetry performer. She is an Executive Council Member of Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library at ICCR Kolkata. Her areas of interest include women's studies, translation, culture studies, pedagogy and English Language Teaching, having several national and international publications and projects to her credit.

Art

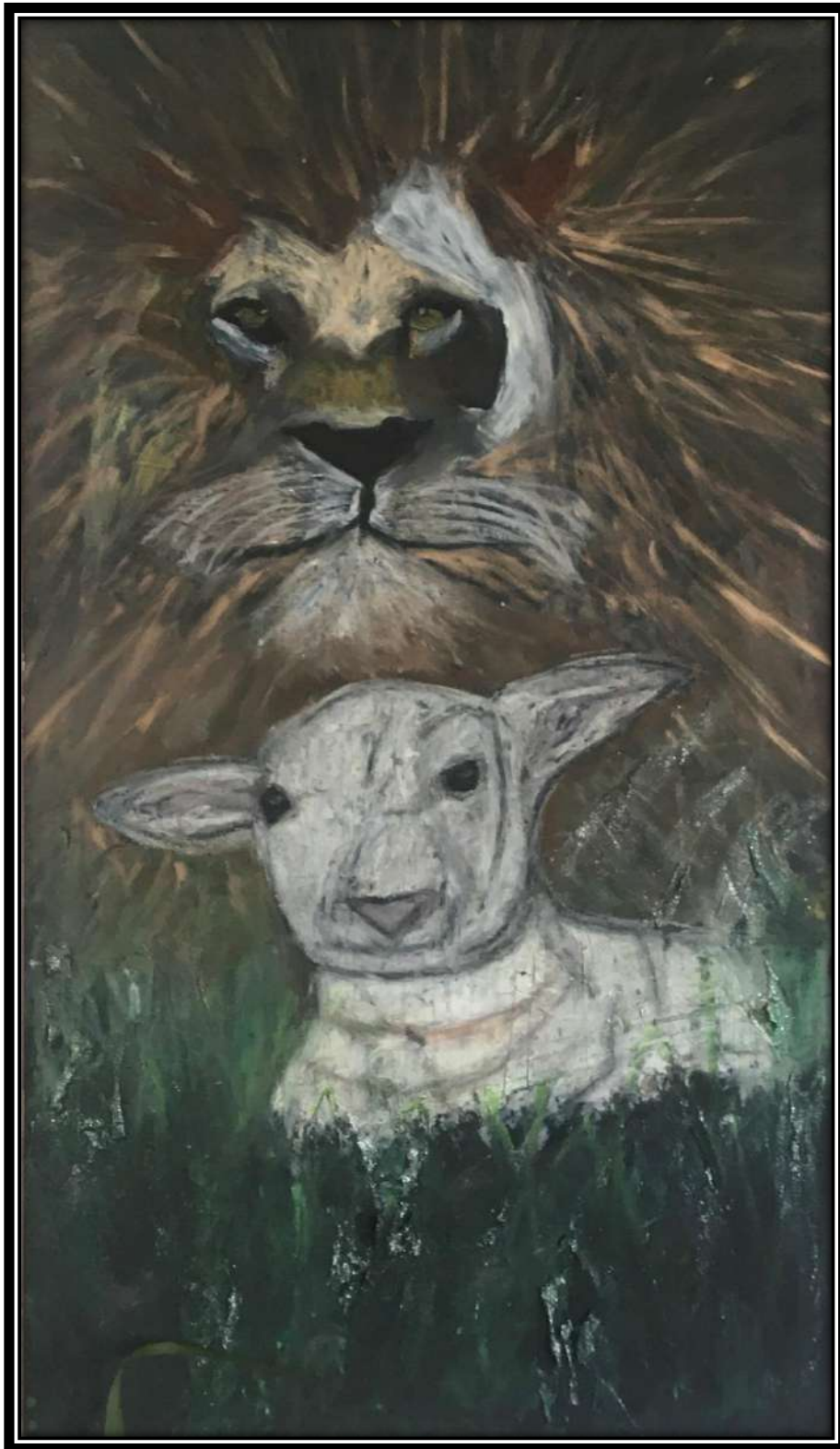
Elizabeth Radice

The Eye in the Storm



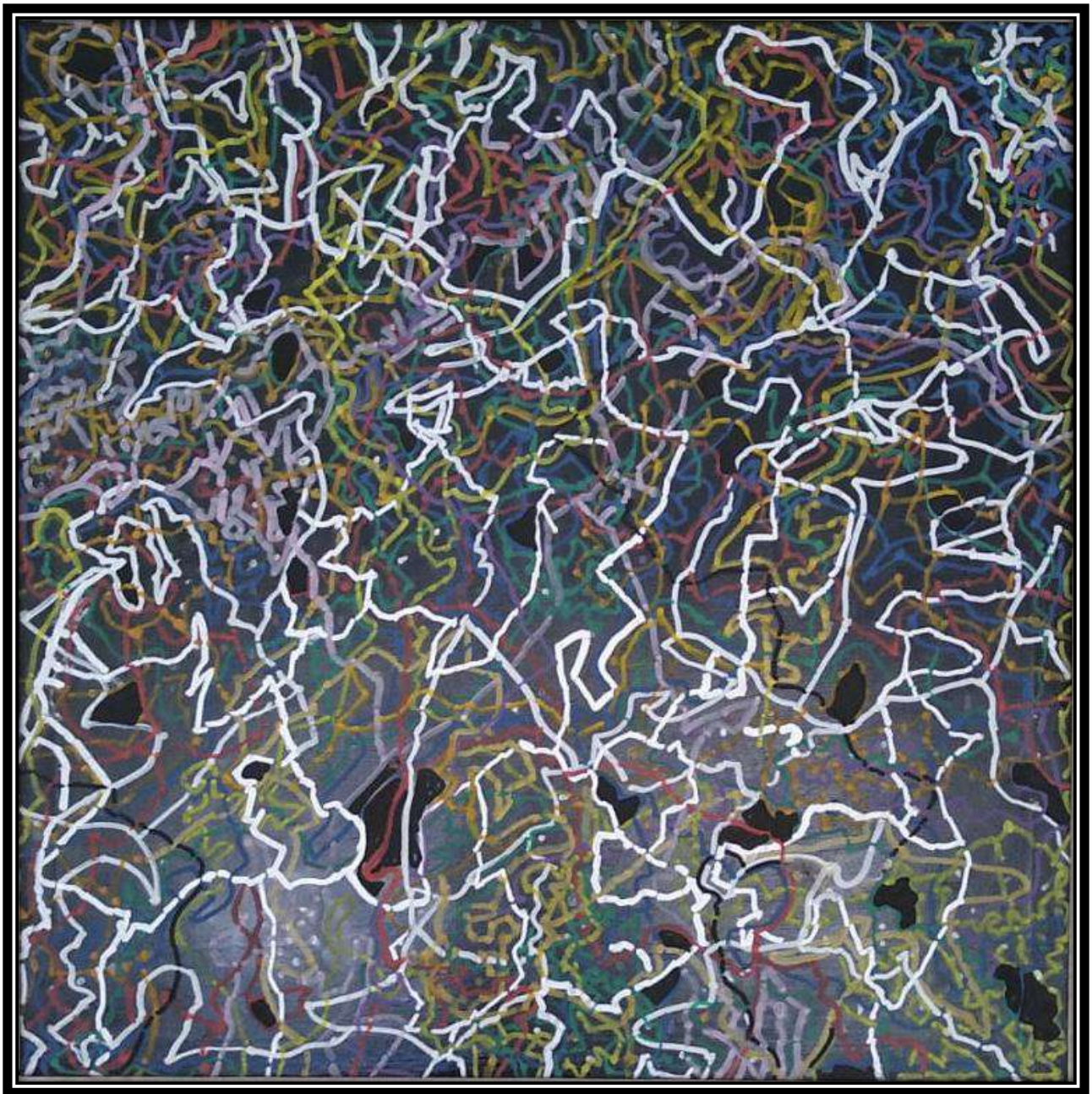
This piece is presented on plain paper, I have used paints, chalks and pastels to create it. It resembles the beautiful chaos of life and that God our creator sees everything. We too are creative like our creator. Our lives read like a story in a tapestry of life in colour, shape and in patterns. This is displayed in my house and I hope it connects to every pair of eyes that see it. I hope one sees the fullness and richness of being alive in this picture. Notice also an outline of love in places. The most precious commodity in the whole world universe!

The Lion and the Lamb



This was painted on a hard wood board and is displayed in my sitting room. I have used paints, chalks, old face makeup and glitter. It represents something important to Jewish and Christian people of faith, the Messianic Age. The lion is the resurrected Jesus Christ. The lamb is Jesus on earth and shows the sacrifice Jesus gave to the world in his death of crucifixion. A Bible verse that expresses this is John chapter 1 verse 29, ESV, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" More personally, it speaks of a better world where a lamb is not in fear of a predator but in-fact they live in harmony with one another.

Dot To Dot



This picture was made using a background of matt black paint and paint pens. It is on canvas. It is hosted in my sister's house. As children we did, "dot to dots," joining points or numbers to end up with an outline of a whole picture. I made multiple dots using many coloured pens and joined them up and intertwined them, they go over and under each other. The concept for this piece was from a very simple idea. It plays with the idea of fate and the alternative that we actually make our own path and journey. It shows a kind of map in all the places we go, the people we meet, the choices we make and the consequences. The white line stands out the most. I'd like this to be an ambiguous meaning. The Bible verse that connects to this for me is Romans 8:28, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love Him, those whom He has called according to His purpose."

It Is Finished!



This piece is on canvas using oil pastels and chalks. It is a picture representing very core Christian beliefs. It references what Jesus said on the cross just before He died at the Place Of The Skull, Golgotha. This was a place of Roman crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem. By saying those three words He showed His mission was complete. What He came for was done. The tragedy and injustice actually transpired to be a victory and justice in the end! The picture represents an image of Jesus as described in the Bible book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. The single words are there to describe all that he was and is and is to come. As a Christian all my hope in life is based on the belief that this is actually true and it really happened.

Elizabeth Radice, maiden name is Taj is a daughter of a Pakistani immigrant father from Rawalpindi and an English and Irish heritage mother. She has lived in Bradford, West Yorkshire all her life. Aged 45, she is married to Alexander Radice, nephew of William Radice, a name very familiar to academics studying Rabindranath Tagore's works. Married since 2002 they have two children now at university. She has been writing poetry and painting since she was aged 12. She met Mr Richard C. Bower at a poetry event in the open moors. Through this inspirational writer she first came across *Gitanjali and Beyond*. Although her father is a Muslim, she has had freedom to choose her faith. She is a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. The belief in the divine and her beliefs of the purpose of life now and the hereafter does influence and informs all aspects of her life.

Section III

Book Reviews

Title of the Book: *Murder at the Mela*

By Leela Soma, Ringwood Publishing, 2020, £ 9.99, ISBN: 978-1-901514-90-2.

Maura McRobbie

I have to admit, I am not a fan of crime fiction but I can't deny the growing popularity of the Tartan Noir genre. It's everywhere and there's no getting away from the fact, that if you are a writer, crime pays. Leela Soma is a Glasgow based writer of Indian heritage. She is the author of *Twice Born*, *Bombay Baby* and several short story and poetry collections. She is also Scriever 2022 and founder of the Kavya Prize which is a competition for writers of ethnic origins, to support and raise awareness of their work.

Soma's *Murder at the Mela* is set in Glasgow and the central character is a young ambitious DI Patel, the first Indian 'Taggart' who has responsibility for solving his first murder - a young Asian mother, murdered in Kelvingrove Park on the night of the Mela. The strengths of the plot are the relationships and family ties that run through the story. We learn early on that Nadia, the victim, had been previously married to a gori (a white man) and that she was happily married to a Muslim man and had a little boy. She worked in the bank, had lots of Scottish and Asian friends, and she was a young, 'switched on' woman living in the vibrant city of Glasgow. What then had made her return to the Mela late at night alone? And who had reason to murder her? The Kelvingrove area of Glasgow always has been an area notorious for random attacks and murders on lone women, but perhaps this murder wasn't so random? Maybe Nadia knew her assailant? Maybe DI Patel will uncover the mystery and seal his DI credentials?

Another relationship running through the novel is DI Patel and his girlfriend Urma. They have a secret relationship. He is Hindu and resistant to bringing shame on his family by being open about his love of Urma, a young Muslim police officer. They are both taking risks being seen together but both cannot resist the urge of being together.

Soma is very good at writing about young love. '*Bombay Baby*' had similar scenes: the longing to be together; the spark of anticipation and the initial excitement. Their secret love is so relatable and so too is the wish to progress in their careers, to please their parents and yet, they are aware too that it's so frustrating. Why should it matter? Black or white? Rich or Poor? Catholic or Protestant? It was ever such, the prejudices, the suspicions, the fears.

While other Detective Inspectors like *Taggart* or McIlvanney's *Laidlaw 2* take to drink, smoking incessantly or travelling round Glasgow on a double decker bus turning over clue after clue, Patel's life is less tortured. He is more responsible and focused. The only fly in the ointment is the officer beneath him who didn't get the job and his pathetic racist jibes would by now be a most certain sackable offence. The

other nuisance is Patel's Aunty PP, the ever-present busy body and pillar of the Asian community. She sees the couple in a local supermarket and Patel knows she will certainly report this back to his family.

I cared very much about Nadia the murder victim, the fiery, lively Asian girl caught between two cultures: her Muslim upbringing and the traditional expectations. She certainly didn't deserve to have her throat cut. I also loved the recognisable descriptions of Glasgow, the Clyde Tunnel, the Armadillo, the BBC studios on the River Clyde and Glasgow's Asian area of Pollokshields. The city takes on its own vivid character in Soma's hands, and it is '*no mean city*'. But while it's uplifting to read glowing images of Glasgow and of the professional work ethics of Patel, I realised from Soma's book just how much Asian women, especially when they seek to live independent and professional lives, can still find themselves caught up in community traditions and expectations about never bringing shame on the family.

This is where I felt so aggrieved for Nadia. Could she be the victim of a jihadist who believes women are the property of husbands? DC Patel is living and working in 21st century Glasgow, where women are equals, have the right to stand up to misogyny, and should be able to be out alone at night. Soma's *Murder at the Mela* throws up many social and cultural questions, that will take more than DI Patel to solve.

References:

McIlvanney, William. *Laidlaw* (UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

Taggart, Scottish Television, 1985 – 2010

Maura McRobbie is a Glasgow based writer of Scottish/Irish descent. Her first novel *Howth* was published in 2019 and is the semi-biographical story of her grandmother Florrie who grew up in Dublin in the early twentieth century, before settling in Scotland in 1918. The novel explores the social, cultural and religious differences of the time and the barriers Florrie faced.

Maura's second novel: *Vikings and Skylarks in Cumbrae*, is children's fiction for the 8 – 12 age range. It is set on the Isle of Cumbrae in Scotland in 1263, before the Battle of Largs. Moranna, a young Scots girl, befriends Sten, a Danish boy living in the Viking longhouse on the island. How will the Battle of Largs decide their fate? It has been Highly Commended by the Scottish Association of Writers.

Maura is a member of Bearsden Writers and more info can be obtained from her website: www.Mauramcrobbe.com

Title of the Book: *Declarations of Love*.

By Jim Aitken, Culture Matters Co-operative Ltd., 2022, £12.00, ISBN: 978-1-912710-49-2.

Mario Relich

Optimism of the Imagination

According to Greta Thunberg, ‘Beyonce was wrong. Girls don’t run the world: corporations and financial interests do.’ But how do you write poems about the kind of world we live in, as defined by Thunberg? One way of doing so is by keeping such a conviction as an undercurrent, but the poems first of all have to be about the resilience of human beings even in the worst circumstances. This is what the poems in Jim Aitken’s poetry collection *Declarations of Love*, in which all of the poems focus on what Graham Greene called ‘the human factor,’ brilliantly achieve.

The title-poem itself links such a project with appreciation of the natural world. The poem is made up of six quatrains, and in the last stanza the poet declares ‘I will come clean and openly admit to my infatuation,’ which has much to do with glorifying the onset of the seasons: ‘Every Spring it is copper beech, silver birch and laburnum/ and every Autumn it is maple and rowan. ...’ Other poems in this vein include ‘Fuchsia, Kinghorn’ and ‘Glitter and Glimmer’. The former identifies fuchsia as originally a Caribbean flowering plant, so at the end it’s declared ‘a migrant success.’ The latter describes the ‘diamond glitter’ of early morning frost, but by evening, the poet concludes,

‘I saw a mere slither of the moon
piercing the darkness of the day;
a glimmer of hope for the world.’

Such lines indicate an ‘optimism of the imagination’ (close to but distinct from what Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Letters* called the ‘optimism of the will’ which needs to leaven the ‘pessimism of the intellect’).

The poems expose the stark realities of for many today, but also never give up hope that change is possible, however unflinching the poem.

‘Homeless Man’ and ‘Drunkard’ are two of the most unflinchingly realistic. The second of the three stanzas goes as follows:

He lay there like a smashed egg
 and as I helped him
 on to his unsteady feet
 he mumbled some inaudible
 words of gratitude.

There is nothing judgemental about the ‘smashed egg’ image, nor is it sentimental. It conveys complete helplessness and a hint of psychological damage, which even the ‘inaudible/ words of gratitude’ cannot repair. The final lines avoid any easy way of dealing with this bleak situation, asking ‘how much/ you have you have to drink to get like that’, and ‘how much does it take/ to have this system afflict you so?’ The capitalist system in its current neoliberal phase is evidently blamed for the unfortunate state of this man, but this is not suggested in an ideologically censorious way; it’s a matter of how many questions need to be answered when we’re confronted with everyday misery.

In ‘Homeless Man’, one line refers to the man as ‘the victim of an elite’s rapacious greed’, and nothing in the poem contradicts this view. Yet it ends with the poet telling us that the man would not have welcomed being told ‘who had reduced him to this condition’, going so far as being scatologically rude about didactic advice. In short, it is not only a poem which denounces the economic conditions, indeed deliberate policies, responsible for homelessness, but also a powerful, illuminating statement about human dignity.

‘Beachcombing’ is a tribute to George Mackay Brown in three sections. In the first section we have the Orkney poet brooding, ‘like Hamlet before him’, on a ‘seaman’s skull’. The second section draws a parallel between the North Sea and the Mediterranean: ‘Once we called it Mare Nostrum.’ Not coincidentally, readers might remind themselves that it is what Mussolini called it. The section describes Greek beachcombers who ‘would welcome salty leather boots/ that had danced the waves from Orkney’, thus linking the historical traditions of seafaring in Greece and

Orkney, in tune with Mackay Brown's deep historical understanding. The second of three stanzas in the third section serves as a keynote to all the poems in *Declarations of Love*:

'For fragile is what we all are,

vulnerable our condition.

And what should flow, should surge from this

is nothing less than compassion.'

A poem like 'The Citizen of Nowhere' makes such a call for compassion totally explicit. It denounces how the authorities treat 'unwelcome' immigrants, pointing sardonically that

'...the blackbird has no papers

and needs no permission to sing

for he is native wherever he flies.'

Aitken's voice here echoes that of Robert Henryson's medieval animal fables.

In a lighter vein, but sharply satirical for all that, the title of the poem in Scots 'If Only Nicholas Witchell Spoke Scots', prepares us for what the poem tells us about members of the Royal Family who are well insulated from any 'cost of living crisis.' The poem is wonderfully illustrated by Martin Gollan. His drawing shows a television set in which 'Mitchell Scunnered' displays two fingers at us. Other drawings are more lyrical, and they all contribute to an attractively produced book.

In her Introduction, radical writer Fran Lock praises Jim Aitken as 'a poet who understands the power of language to shape perception, to create or restore our bonds with each other and with the world, but also to dominate and destroy.' In short, he is very much a political poet, but a nuanced poet who encourages readers to come to their own conclusions, above all, to imagine a better world.

Reference:

Aitken, Jim. *Declarations of Love* (U.K.: Culture Matters Co-operative Ltd., 2022).

Mario Relich is a poet who lives in Edinburgh, and on the Board of Scottish PEN. *Owl at Midnight* is his latest collection of poems.

Title of the Book: *Tagore's University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961*

By Swati Ganguly, Permanent Black, in association with The New India Foundation & Ashoka University, 2022, 488 pp., Rs. 1200.00, ISBN: 978-81-7824-640-6

Somdatta Mandal

The very mention of the name of Santiniketan brings to our mind the ubiquitous and somewhat cliched images of young school children in saffron coloured clothes sitting under the trees and learning their lessons in the free and open atmosphere in the lap of nature away from the stifling confines of a traditional classroom. But very few people are aware of the educational philosophy underlying them. We know that Rabindranath Tagore moved to Santiniketan, 'the abode of peace' in 1901 along with his family with the purpose of setting up a school at the ashram his father had established with a Trust deed. When the school began with meagre resources – five boys (including his son, Rathindranath) and five teachers – it was named Bramhacharya Ashram which would imbibe a spirit free from orthodoxy and religious constraints. Following the Upanishadic dictates of the *guru-sishya* tradition, Tagore's imagination had been fired by the concept of the *tapovan* where the pupils were imparted a holistic learning and a lot of emphasis was given on simplicity that would help in building the character, where the method of rote learning was abolished and replaced by creative and innovative education. The enormous financial hurdles that Tagore had to constantly face to sustain his institution during the period of political unrest, especially during the idea of the first Partition of the Bengal province that was mooted by Lord Curzon and the Swadeshi Movement, and the way Santiniketan would always beckon the poet throughout his life, where he would return with relief after periods of restless travel is also well known. From this remote corner of his institution, he remained connected to the nation and the world.

In 1916 Rabindranath had written to his son Rathindranath from Japan that "The Santiniketan School must be the thread linking India with the world. We must establish there a centre for humanistic research concerned with all the world's peoples." Accordingly, he set up his campus university in the fields of Bolpur where along with other disciplines, a lot of emphasis was also laid on rural reconstruction. By the time he laid the foundations on 22 December, 1918, at a special meeting at Santiniketan, he explained his idea of the university to his students, teachers, and invited guests. It was to be an institution where differences of religion, caste, race and class would be levelled by people coming from all backgrounds to study together and teach. It would be a cultural learning centre promoting cooperation between the East and the West and engaging in collaborative research. Its motto, *yatra viswam bhavati*

ekaniidam (where the world meets in one nest), embodies Tagore's ideal of social inclusion, universal understanding, and acceptance. The poet's conception entailed several autonomous centres – for Asian studies, the visual arts, music, and rural reconstruction – in defiance of the standard notions of a university. An essay titled “The Centre of Indian Culture” (1919) is the first English lecture to formally outline the ideals of Visva-Bharati. It was formally established three years later on the same date, 22 December, 1921 (8 Poush according to the Bengali calendar). What happened after that?

This is where the present book under review becomes significant. *Tagore's University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961* traces the first four decades of this large experiment in building a cultural community of learning, teaching, and scholarship. A hundred years ago, this institution radically rethought the epistemology of the liberal arts, and which included within its ambit Asian and European studies, the visual and performing arts, and the rural economy. A thoroughly cosmopolitan and quintessentially international vision of education and nation, an implicit rejection of the xenophobic and insular nationalism of its own day and ours, came into being more than a hundred years ago with the act of naming a university “Visva-Bharati” – *visva* meaning the world, and Bharat, the country. Visva-Bharati epitomized Tagore's vision of a specifically Indian institution of learning which might contain within itself the magnitude of the world's intellectual and creative aspirations. Culled from the archives, memoirs, official documents, and oral narratives, it tells the story of exceptional individuals from across Europe, Asia, America, and India who became Tagore's collaborators in a mini-universe of creativity and humane intellection. The author Swati Ganguly explores the many achievements of what Tagore called his “life's best treasure.” It reveals why in its heyday Visva-Bharati was so internationally renowned as an extraordinarily attractive institution.

Originally intended as the close exploration of a single decade – 1951 to 1961—in the life of Visva-Bharati, this book expanded to cover a far longer period. The key moment in this temporal frame was the passing of the Visva-Bharati act in parliament in 1951, declaring the institution a central university, and Ganguly's initial idea was to examine how, as part of its nation-building ideology, the formally decolonized nation handled its commitment to protect and preserve institutions like Visva-Bharati. In trying to do that she had to also move backward in time and was “led to digging into the pastoral past of a sleepy town transformed into a hub of intellectual and cultural activity.” Thus, the narrative of Visva-Bharati over four decades is roughly divisible into two sections. The first, comprising four chapters, follows chronology, pre 1921 to 1961. Incidentally, Visva-Bharati was established at a time when major institutions with denominational sympathies, such as Banaras Hindu University (founded in 1916) and

Aligarh Muslim University (given university status in 1920), had been established, and when the vigour of the nationalist movement demanded the rejection of what was foreign. Very soon, and somewhat against the grain of nationalist feeling, Visva-Bharati became the site for an intellectual and creative interaction between East and West. We have to remember the larger truth that Visva-Bharati was founded against the nationalist currents that swept India during the Gandhian non-cooperation movement. The second, whose temporal frame overlaps with the first, comprises another four chapters. The first three of these explore the institution's research in language, cultures, visual arts, music, performance, and rural economy. The final chapter of this section is on Santiniketan, a place which continues to exercise a certain hold on the popular imagination.

The history of Visva-Bharati evokes its founder, but the Rabindranath here is different from the one who, as poet, mystical philosopher, and artist lives in the popular imagination. His involvement in Visva-Bharati shows a different aspect of his creativity. In this context, Rabindranath is an astute thinker laying down a broad intellectual framework of investigations in fields as diverse as Buddhist philosophy, the anthropology of medieval rituals, and the lexicography of ancient languages. He is as interested in discovering the principles of agricultural economics as in developing modes of exchange that might benefit hinterland artisans. One has to remember that though the university may have been conceived and founded by Rabindranath, it was also made a singular institution by those he called upon or assembled or inspired. Thus, while Rabindranath remains the protagonist of this narrative, Visva-Bharati owes no less to his many collaborators – people such as the French scholar Sylvain Levi, the Italian Giuseppe Tucci, the Oxford Sanskritist Moriz Winternitz from Austria, the English missionaries C.F. Andrews and William Pearson, the British agricultural scientist Leonard Elmhirst, and the art historian Stella Kramrisch – to name a few of those who came from abroad. Equally significant were people from within the country, such as Vidhusekhar Sastri, Kshitimohan Sen, Hazariprasad Dwivedi, Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, Dinendranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Rathindranath Tagore, and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. There were dozens of others in subsequent generations and in diverse parts of India. Collectively, they were instrumental in transmitting Rabindranath's message, adapting it to their own fields of expertise, and interpreting and transforming it in line with their own individual genius. Ganguly rightly calls them as 'collaborators,' not as the mere executives of Rabindranath's blueprint because each represented a specific generational, cultural, linguistic or other form of wisdom and contributed to the shaping of Visva-Bharati. Such artists and scholars were usually too free-spirited and independent-minded to endorse what he scripted; they often edited it, usually with

a sense of moral responsibility to the ideas that he had for Visva-Bharati. Sometimes they also swerved away from his “truth”, causing some consternation or disillusionment in the founder, who oscillated between the primacy of the idea of Visva-Bharati and his dependence on collaborators to give shape to ideas that broadened and branched out from his own.

In the very first chapter of this monograph entitled “A Poet’s Ashram School and a World Centre of Culture,” Swati Ganguly tries to address a critical fallacy that has plagued many scholars regarding Visva-Bharati being a natural extension of the early ashram school. The primary reason for the misconception that there was a pedagogical continuum is the location of both the school and Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan. And since Visva-Bharati was both initiated and located in the ashram, a sense of continuity with the older Brahmacharyashram has been posited. The second reason for seeing an essential link between the school and Visva-Bharati is that the faculty of the school overlapped with that of the world centre. Many talented people directly or indirectly connected with the school were incorporated into Visva-Bharati. The 40-year-old poet who had set up the Brahmacharyashram in 1901 had links with Hindu revivalism and was driven by a nostalgia for a supposedly glorious Hindu past. But with time Rabindranath gradually moved away from the rigid Brahmanical hierarchy and the rigours of brahmacharya. By the time he conceived of Visva-Bharati, or even a little before, the ashram school had been reconceived as a place where pedagogy was infused with joy, creativity, and a sense of freedom. The Santiniketan ashram project, with the school as its pivot, had been an experiment in building a traditional and self-reliant pre-colonial community. These were not the ideals that lay behind Visva-Bharati. The ideal community of Rabindranath’s mind was now international and interfaith, and the best minds were in his conception now not necessarily Hindu. He no longer rejected the West but attempted a dialogue with the West. Thus Visva-Bharati was conceived as helping to hold in balance the ethical and the economic, the spiritual and the aesthetic, the philosophical and the political as an amalgam of East and West.

As someone who received her education in Calcutta and later joined this hallowed institution as a teacher, Ganguly could compromise with the outsider-insider syndrome and give us an objective and extremely well-researched documentation of the forty years’ history of Visva-Bharati, something that had not been put together in detail earlier. She narrates changes in the material life and spirit of the place after Tagore, when it was shaped by the larger forces of a newly independent India. As she rightly concludes, coming to the end of her monograph in 2021, she is struck by how prescient Rabindranath was. He challenged the notion that learning and culture were the exclusive rights of certain communities – the high caste, the politically powerful elites; he negated hierarchies created and perpetuated in the name of

ancient tradition. In the newly built institution of his vision, no voice of history was too small, no cultural stream less important than any other. Visva-Bharati was meant to be such an inclusive, participatory institution of the future in independent India. This was where the mind was going to be free and the head was going to be held high. It was, once upon a time, Rabindranath's gift to the country, his "life's best treasure." Tagore's University was meant to represent values whose sustainability was dependent on commonly understood conceptions of democracy, nationhood, citizenship, and humanity. While the Constitution of India adopted a decade after Rabindranath's demise sought to enshrine some of these ideas in terms conducive to the flourishing and survival of Visva-Bharati, the contours of the meaning of these noble principles have now been radically altered. How much Visva-Bharati managed for a time to continue its originary ideals, and how it changed and diverged from them has been the basic thrust area of this monograph. Ganguly rightfully opines that "how radically it has been changed over the past few years can only be understood if we acknowledge that even the best treasure of a great man and his collaborators is vulnerable to the exigencies of history, and to the forces of the world to which it is now made to belong."

The detailed bibliography at the end of the book gives us evidence of the hard work that Ganguly undertook to locate primary information about Visva-Bharati from all possible sources. These include the Visva-Bharati Papers, containing the proceedings of the Samsad or Court, the Sriniketan Papers, the different volumes of the *Visva-Bharati News*, the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, various other Journals, Newsletters and Reports, the Ministry of Education Papers preserved in the National Archives, New Delhi, the Syamaprasad Mookerjee Papers kept at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Official Government Reports, and plenty of primary and secondary sources from Tagore's works and biographies. The innumerable rare photographs accompanying the text and supplied by the Rabindra Bhavan Photo Archives is obviously the USP of this volume. Last but not the least mention must be made of the New India Foundation Fellowship that enabled Swati Ganguly to complete her dream project and let this monograph see the light of day. Indeed, a very valuable addition to Tagoreana and to Visva-Bharati's institutional history which commenced a hundred years ago.

Reference:

Ganguly, Swati. *Tagore's University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, in association with The New India Foundation & Ashoka University, 2022).

Somdatta Mandal, author, critic, and translator, is former Professor of English at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India.

Title of the Book: *Ambedkar: A Life*

By Shashi Tharoor, Aleph Book Company, 2022, Rs 599.00, ISBN: 978-93-91047-50-4.

Shreya Ganguly

Ambedkar: A Life written by Shashi Tharoor, senior leader of the Indian National Congress, is an effective biography of Dr Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. This book advocates Ambedkar's journey with inordinate lucidity, thoughtful insight, and esteemed approbation. Shashi Tharoor traces the arc of the great man's life from his birth into a family of the Mahar's in the Bombay Presidency on 14 April 1891 to his demise in Delhi on 6 December 1956. Tharoor exemplifies that Ambedkar was a self-made man in the profoundest sense of the term.¹ He refers to several incidents of caste discrimination, humiliation and social hurdles Ambedkar had to overcome in a society that stigmatized his community. Tharoor most prominently discusses Ambedkar's single-minded determination with which he incapacitated every obstacle encountered throughout his journey.

Shashi Tharoor recounts the pivotal movements of Ambedkar's hostile journey and his legacy. In 'A Note from the Author', Tharoor states that some will object to this book on the basic ground that "I am not a Dalit"² so this might not be possible to understand the discrimination and ethos of marginalization of the depressed classes which came to be known as the Scheduled Caste after 1935. The author has divided the book in two parts, the first part deals with Ambedkar's upbringing as a Dalit, his education, humiliation, prejudices, tragedies in his personal life. This part highlights that despite having the willingness he was not allowed to study Sanskrit, so he studied Persian.³ In matriculation, Ambedkar was the first of his community to achieve distinction; after that, he owned a scholarship to the U.S.A.⁴ Ever since, Ambedkar submitted his doctoral dissertation, which was published later as *The Evolution of Imperial Provincial Finance in India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance*,⁵ Tharoor has elaborated the will power of an iron man who received the doctorate

¹ Shashi Tharoor, *Ambedkar: A Life* (Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2022), p. 187.

² Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. xii.

³ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 9.

⁴ Shashi Tharoor, 2002, pp. 9, 11.

⁵ Shashi Tharoor, *The Evolution of Imperial Provincial Finance in India: A Study in the Provincial Decentralisation of Imperial Finance* (P. S. King & Son, Ltd., London, 1925).

degree from the University of Columbia and continued his studies with a postdoctoral scholarship in the London School of Economics. Ambedkar established himself as one of India's most qualified economists – “a man of rare learning and acumen, with a string of degrees few (if any) in India could boast and a mastery of several academic disciplines.”⁶ Amartya Sen considers him as “the father of my economics.”⁷ In 1905, he was married to a nine-year-old Mahar girl, Rami, renamed Ramabai. Tharoor's extensive study denotes the rise and fall of the graph of Ambedkar's life due to the various socio-cultural obstructions faced by him in his journey to success.

Ambedkar: A Life provides us insights into the various battles and hardships Dr Ambedkar fought to make untouchability illegal; his disputes with the other political and intellectual titans of his era, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and his determination to invest India with a visionary Constitution. He contributed the notion of ‘constitutional morality’⁸ that enshrined within it the inalienable rights of the individual and modern conceptions of social justice.⁹ Through his entelechy and foresight, Dr Ambedkar emerges as the harbinger of development for million citizens in future India. Extensively researched with insightful and thought-provoking archival references, this book, enables us to know the historical importance of Ambedkar and his cardinal contribution towards political democracy which cannot exist in the absence of social democracy.

Ambedkar: A Life offers readers a fresh and profound understanding of Dr Ambedkar as a champion of Dalit empowerment, but his first and foremost legacy to the nation was as a constitutionalist. As a lawyer by profession and a moralist by instinct, he also developed his own ideas on the values and principles, spiritual as well as political on which Indian society should be based. In 1935, Dr Ambedkar was invited by the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal (organisation) dedicated towards abolishing casteism through inter-caste marriage. The draft of his presidential speech was considered as an unnecessary attacked on the morality and

⁶ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 25.

⁷ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 25.

⁸ Judiciary invoked morality in order to strike down laws which violate fundamental rights. Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 151.

⁹ In this context Tharoor refers to the laws which violate fundamental rights such as the criminalization of same-sex relations through Section 377 of the IPC or laws which treat women as the chattel of men. Shashi Tharoor, 2022, pp. 151, 152.

reasonableness of the *Vedas* and other Hindu religious books.¹⁰ As a result, Dr Ambedkar refused to attend the conference as it was against his principles. Tharoor narrates that Dr Ambedkar finally had the text published himself in May 1936 as a short book entitled *Annihilation of Caste* which vowed strong attacks on orthodox Hindus and their religious leaders and a ‘rebuke of Gandhi’ for his ambivalence on ‘varnashrama dharma’.¹¹ Gandhi wanted ‘avarnas’, ‘Ati-Shudras’ and ‘Depressed Classes’ to be assimilated as equals into the caste system; on the contrary, Dr Ambedkar believed this would resolve nothing in their condition.¹² Tharoor points that Dr Ambedkar considered Gandhi as a defender of the status quo, trying to put an acceptable spin on oppressive traditions. ‘Gandhi’ he declared is the most determined enemy of ‘Untouchables’.¹³ Tharoor refers to Dr Ambedkar’s two major books, first, *Who Were the Shudras?* (1947) - explaining the creation of the concept of untouchability and tracing the origin of the untouchables; second, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (1948) – explaining the origins of untouchability.¹⁴ Dipankar Gupta’s¹⁵ “Towards Affirmative Action” vindicates Ambedkar’s distinctive emphasis on fraternity, with the implicit idea that the assets of the privileged would be used to uplift the untouchables and other unfortunates – inculcating “a sense of common brotherhood among people with divergent histories and who occupy vastly different positions in the economic and social structure of societies.”¹⁶

Tharoor recounts a story of Dilip Kumar, the legendary movie star meeting Dr Ambedkar, when the latter was trying to set up an education institution in the city. Dilip Kumar wanted to donate towards Dr Ambedkar’s educational institution; he readily refused as moral ethics went against taking donations from actors, industrialists and businessmen. Referring to this, Tharoor illustrates Dr. Ambedkar’s determination to do things at any cost, even at the risk of losing

¹⁰ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 79.

¹¹ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 81.

¹² Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 81.

¹³ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 84.

¹⁴ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, pp. 106, 107.

¹⁵ Tharoor refers to Dipankar Gupta, the sociologist’s, observations on Ambedkar’s distinctive emphasis on fraternity. Shashi Tharoor, 2022, pp. 150.

¹⁶ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, pp. 150.

well-wishers and financial support.¹⁷ Tharoor has also expounded the moments of otherworldly courage, defiance, and iron will of Dr Ambedkar with an admirable economy of words. In the more engrossing second half of the book, he sojourns through Dr Ambedkar's legacy: the imprint of his ideas abroad, his notion of 'constitutional morality',¹⁸ democratic nationalism and the widespread symbolic appropriation of Dr Ambedkar by parties he would have considered his political opponents. In legacy, he narrated how he became the king of Ghetto.

The author, perhaps has overlooked in his elaboration of what he calls 'Ambedkar's Four Flaws'.¹⁹ For Tharoor, Dr Ambedkar's flaws are: his patronizing attitude towards the Adivasis; his deprecation of Hinduism; the ungraciousness of his disagreement with Gandhi and his absolute faith in the state as an instrument to transform society. These are the familiar tropes, often invoked alongside a hilarious claim that Dr Ambedkar collaborated with the imperial British. Tharoor narrated that it had become difficult for Dr Ambedkar to handle two powerful enemies at that time – the British and the Hindu upper caste. It is unquestionably the biographer's duty to dwell on his subject's failing as well, let his endeavour becomes a hagiography. Nevertheless, Tharoor's reckoning of Dr Ambedkar's flaws is brief on the relevant context.

There is no doubt that Dr Ambedkar's views on Adivasis need to be problematized. A robust attempt to do so would begin by asking what were the normative views and diction prevalent in the discourse on the indigenous people at that time? How does Dr Ambedkar compare with them? Did he act on the advice of the representatives of Adivasi interests? As for Dr Ambedkar's accusation of Hinduism, the citations are inexplicably selective. Dr Ambedkar's take on Hinduism is well known "I was born a Hindu, but I shall not die as a Hindu," as he was converted to Buddhism.²⁰ Tharoor narrates that Dr Ambedkar addressed the press by telling them that he had specifically chosen Buddhism because it was a faith that was born in India and an authentic part of the Indian Culture.²¹

¹⁷ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, pp. 100, 101.

¹⁸ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 147.

¹⁹ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 170.

²⁰ Mujahid Imam, 'I Was Born A Hindu But I shall Not Die A Hindu: The Struggle For Equality By Dr. B. R Ambedkar'. *The Companion*, 21 March 2023.

²¹ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p.127.

While evaluating the legacy of Dr Ambedkar, Tharoor also points out areas where he might have been legitimately faulted, ensuring that this work is not a hagiography, but a short biography.²² One of the flaws is that Dr Ambedkar did not speak up for the tribal people. Here is the author's role to point out the demerits of one of the greatest Indians for ignoring the original inhabitants of India in the building of the state. Another, is his inelegant comments on Gandhi, even after his death, in a BBC interview, where he said "I know Gandhi better than his disciples (do), they came to him as devotees, and saw only the Mahatma. I was an opponent and saw the bare man in him."²³ Ambedkar's disinclination to acknowledge Gandhi as a Mahatma and his insistence on referring to him as Mr. Gandhi sprang from this couplet, "Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone. But the untouchables remained untouchables."²⁴ The author quotes Christophe Jaffrelot, who sees Dr Ambedkar as "wavering between the aspiration to rise within the Hindu society and the urge to sever his links with it,"²⁵ giving an overview of a varied assessment of this great Indian.

Dr Ambedkar's idea of the state and his absolute faith in institutions are counted among his other weakness. Shashi Tharoor also refers to Dr Ambedkar's views on Hinduism and the Hindu society, which Bhiku Parekh considered to be 'quasi-Manichaeism'.²⁶ Shashi Tharoor's *Ambedkar: A Life* does not deal critically on Dr Ambedkar's dependency on state power. Tharoor glorifies Dr Ambedkar as a great political and social reformer over critically exploring the historical character in his short biography.

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²² Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. xii.

²³ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 175.

²⁴ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 15.

²⁵ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 172.

²⁶ Shashi Tharoor, 2022, p. 172.

Tharoor, Shashi. *Ambedkar: A Life* (Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2022).

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Title of the Book: *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*

Translated and Edited by Somdatta Mandal, Birutjatiyo Sahityo Sammiloni, 2021, xxix+432pp., Rs 810.00, ISBN: 978-81-949426-1-0.

Shyamasri Maji

To common people, who have known Rabindranath Tagore only through his creative works, it is unusual for them to imagine the agony of his last days. In their eyes, he is ‘biswakobi’ (“world-poet”) or ‘kobiguru’ (“the poet-mentor”), a quasi-divine figure whose songs, poems and prose impeccably manifest an indomitable spirit of life force. Many readers and scholars are aware of the tragic incidents that wrecked his personal life such as the untimely deaths of his wife and three children, but, most of them may not have any idea about how he endured his ailments. It was only his family members and close associates who could witness from proximity the gradual erosion of his health in the last few years of his life. The present volume, comprising selections from five memoirs in English translation, unfolds a first-hand account of the resilience the poet put up against morbidity through the eyes of five women—Pratima Thakur, Rani Chanda, Maitreyi Devi, Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis and Amita Thakur.

Pratima Thakur was Rabindranath’s daughter-in-law, wife of his elder son Rathindranath Tagore. Amita Thakur, was his granddaughter-in-law. After her father’s death, an eight-year-old Amita was brought to Santiniketan by Tagore. Since then, she stayed there and grew up under the shade of his affection. Her reminiscences show that her “whole life was centered on Rabindranath” (xiii). Rani Chanda, wife of Tagore’s personal secretary Anil Kumar Chanda, took notes of Tagore’s words in her diary. Her works such as *Alapchari Rabindranath* and *Gurudev* represent her recordings. Maitreyi Devi, author of *Mongpu-te Rabindranath* and *Swarger Kachakachi*, is a well-known Bengali writer. She lived in Mongpu in North Bengal with her husband. Tagore stayed in her house several times when he visited North Bengal. Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, also known as Rani, was the wife of Prasantachandra Mahalanobis, the famous statistician who set up the Indian Statistical Institute in Kolkata. He was also the Secretary of Visva-Bharati for many years. Tagore and the Mahalanobis couple travelled together to Europe and South India. Their travels are represented in Nirmalkumari’s travelogues such as *Kobir Shonge Europey* and *Kobir Shonge Dakshinattey*. This volume includes her memoir *Baishe Shravan* or “22nd of Shravan,” named after the death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore.

The terminal phase of his deteriorating health—the urgent surgery at home in Jorashanko, the post-operative complications and gradually his succumbing to those — certainly, has been documented by male writers and biographers. Somdatta Mandal mentions some of them in the Appendices: Buddhadeva Bose (“The Last Days of Rabindranath: Record of a Visit to Santiniketan”), Kumar Sri Jayantanath Ray (“The Great Nirvana of the World Poet”), Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay (“Rabindrajiboni”) and Nityapriya Ghosh (“Rabindranath Tagore: A Pictorial Biography”). However, their representations of the incident are limited to factual descriptions. Mandal remarks, “This incident is narrated in different biographies and memoirs, but interestingly enough, all the established biographers mention the last phase of the poet’s life very briefly and cursorily. On the other hand, though subjective, the memoirs of the five women...fill up that gap” (xii). Their narratives smack of emotional attachments and highlight female responses to crises and pain. The affective aspects which are ignored in biographies of the male writers come alive in the reminiscences of these women.

The five women belonged to different age groups but all of them shared special bonding with Tagore. Their memoirs consist of long narratives, letters and diary entries. The testimonies presented by them excavate a lesser-known chapter of Tagore’s life and personality, which hitherto remained buried under the glorious records of his public activities and achievements. Details of the poet’s family life such as how he travelled from one hill station to another in the Himalayas for his daughter Renuka’s recovery from tuberculosis and how his heart was full of anxieties for Meera, his youngest daughter whose marriage failed, throw light on Tagore’s character as a father. Other unknown facts that also come up in these memoirs are: how, under his mentorship, Rani Chanda’s writing skills flourished; his nephew, the great painter Abanindranath Tagore, whom Tagore addressed as “Aban,” was full of interesting stories; the poet insisted Rani Chanda to record those stories; he drank coffee in the morning, etc. Ironically, his last collection of poems that came out in May 1941 was titled *Janmadiney* (“Birthday Poems”). Pratima Thakur, the author of *Nirban*, observes that perhaps he had the premonition of his impending death, which he expressed in one of the “Birthday Poems”:

When the birthday and the day of death both come face to face,

I see in that union

Between the sunrise and the sunset

An exchange of the glances of that exhausted day—

A beautiful end and tribute to a bright glory (35).

Tagore's death on 7th of August, 1941, which is the 22nd day of Shravan, the month of rains in the Bengali calendar, was a national news. The public reaction to this incident—an unmanageable crowd flocking around the dead body of Tagore, a large procession accompanying him in his funeral journey — as represented in Satyajit Ray's 1961 documentary film *Rabindranath Tagore* shows the impact of the death of a great man on his countrymen. Mandal quotes Ray's voiceover against this scene as a fitting epigraph to the volume:

On the 7th August 1941, in the city of Calcutta, a man died. His mortal remains perished. But he left behind him a heritage which no fire could consume. It is a heritage of words and music and poetry, of ideas and of ideals which has the power to move us, to inspire us today, in the days to come. We, who owe him so much, salute his memory.

The selections of memoirs in the present volume shows that Tagore's greatness lies not only in his poetic feats. His iconoclastic vision in the field of education and his outreach activities as a nationalist with cosmopolitan outlook established him as the man of the world. His aura as a public figure is as resplendent as his name 'Robi' meaning the sun. His death, as Amita Thakur notes in her reminiscences "The Last Journey of Rabindranath" was the setting of the "human sun" (378). *The Last Days of Tagore in Memoirs* is not a bland description of a sick man's travel towards death, rather, it is a cinematographic frame of his sunset years.

During the last two years of his life, illness confined him to four walls of the domestic fold. The responsibility of taking care of the sick poet at home was vested with the women, who volunteered to serve him out of unending love and unsurmountable regards. He was so fond of them that he often addressed them by various names: he called Rani Chanda "Dwitiya;" Maitreyi Devi "Mangpei" and "Mitra" and Pratima Thakur "Mamoni." As mentioned in Maitreyi Devi's memoir *Swarger Kachhakachhi*, he called his granddaughter Nandita aka Buri by different adorable names such as "apple of grandpa's eye," "short girl with an umbrella," "sparrow" and more such epithets (160). These women were well-educated and modern. Most of them had Brahmo upbringing. Their memoirs add a special dimension to the representation of Tagore's 'last days' because they played the role of *sevika* ("nurse"). At the same time, they were his long-time companions with whom he uninhibitedly discussed his literary creations and shared his thoughts. The five women interacted with one another either through letters or in person when they met in Santiniketan and Jorashanko. Also, they had a rapport with other members of the Tagore family. They were also familiar with many important personalities of

the time, who were friends of the Tagores. In this respect, the perspectives of these women as represented in their selected works have enormous importance for studying the inner circles of Tagore's life history.

They looked after him at home and also during his travels. He loved the food cooked by Amita Thakur. With her perceptiveness she had realised that the aged poet disliked oily and spicy food. So, she used minimum ingredients. In her recollection titled "Rabindranath Tagore in my Memory," which is a selection from the preface of her book *Jorashankor Thakurbarir Procholito Ranna* ("The Traditional Cooking of the Tagore Household at Jorashanko"), she observes, "I hardly knew how to cook, but since I devoted my entire mind and heart into cooking, probably it turned out to be good and he liked what I cooked" (374). Nothing was more gratifying to the young girl than to see her *dadamoshai* (grandfather) sipping the full bowl of vegetables or mutton soup she prepared specially for him.

The selections of the memoirs in this volume show that all five of the *sevikas* were sincere and dedicated though they did not have the formal nursing training. This lack of training, sometimes, turned out to be a serious issue. This is evident in Maitreyi Devi's recollection of the incident of accompanying the unconscious Tagore from Kalimpong to Kolkata in September, 1940. Being an amateur nurse, she did not know that false teeth should be removed from the mouth of an unconscious person. She had taken it out from the poet's mouth and had placed it back after cleaning it. On reaching Kolkata, she was rebuked by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy for this mistake. Unlike Rani Chanda, Nirmalkumari and Amita Thakur, it was not possible for Maitreyi Devi to visit the poet frequently or to stay with him for a long time in Santiniketan and Kolkata. However, there was regular correspondence between them through letters. When Tagore was seriously ill, he wrote letters through his deputy and put his signature with a trembling hand. At that time, Maitreyi Devi wrote few letters to him to save Tagore and the deputies from taking the pain to respond. Although she did not say that to him, he could understand it and was overjoyed to receive her gift, a box of oranges from Mongpu.

Pratima Thakur mentions that though both men and women felt blessed to serve him, "he liked more to be served by women than men" (23). He dedicated his poetry volumes such as "Rogshajyaye" ("In the Sick Bed") and "Arogya" ("Healing") to his two female caregivers — Nandita Kripalani and Amita Thakur. Defending his partiality towards women, he would say, "Women belong to the mother's race; serving others suit them" (23). It is obvious from Pratima Devi's recollection that Tagore sought the warmth of maternal affection from his female

caregivers and he believed firmly that this warmth was innate in them. To him, the childless Nirmalkumari was his 'Head Nurse.' He addressed her as his 'Last Friend,' who he believed would not leave him in any adverse situation. To the sick man, the presence of women was a reminder of umbilical bonding between the mother and the child. As recorded by Rani Chanda, his philosophical musings in a state of trance shows that in spite of achieving limitless success and fame, old age and its ailments hit him with an ordinary's man's agony. Loss of physical strength and the disillusionments with close relationships increased his feeling of helplessness. He yearned for the consolation ingrained in maternal affection. Chanda recalls an incident that speaks of Tagore's unfathomable faith in the feminine power of caregiving:

One day he wrote the poem "Nari" (Woman) ...and gave it to me with his name signed below. He told me, "Though I am addressing it to you, I am also writing it for all the women in the world. Patients are like gods for all of you. When a woman takes such responsibility upon herself, the world gives her the duty to serve and rear it. In that respect, women are universal. The world's power of rearing is inherent within you too."
(85)

Tagore had great reservation in accepting someone's service, the five women had won his confidence and trust. This not only made them proud but also jealous of one another for each one of them thought that Tagore liked her more than the rest. Their reminiscences reveal that he had a deep understanding of human nature, and it was his respect, adoration and empathy for women that drew him close to their hearts. In this context, Rani Chanda's diary entry on 25th October, 1940, is worth referring: That day when Tagore was taking rest, the women of the household were chatting among themselves on the issue of women being stigmatised as jealous. While some of them protested against such a stereotyped view and a few argued that men are more jealous than women, Tagore observed gravely, "No, women are jealous, men are treacherous" (56). The witty remark not only ended the argument but also emphasised his ingenuity in contesting gender stereotypes.

Though Maitreyi Devi had once arranged for a trained nurse so that Amita Thakur could get some relief, the nurse fell ill before she could meet her patient. Maitreyi Devi considered this a big loss for the nurse because by serving Tagore she could have gained a lifetime experience. Tagore had consented to her recruitment, though earlier he complained against his son for frequently changing the nurses. During those days, he often wept like a child for *trivial things*. The emotional change in his temperament surprised Maitreyi Devi because it was the

same man who had overcome his son's death with stoic calmness. Pratima Thakur, who addressed Tagore as *Babamoshai*, narrates a "trivial" episode, which unlike the previous one, is a piece of happy memory. It represents the homely old man in a jolly mood as he shares with his loving *Bouma* (daughter-in law) the glimpses of his conjugal life describing to her how he often guided her mother-in-law (his wife Mrinalini Devi) in culinary matters. In her Introduction to the volume, Mandal observes that while the scholars and the established biographers brushed aside these "trivial things," representation of these through female gaze have a special appeal to the readers. The trivial things they mentioned in their memoirs not only present the domestic nitty-gritty that concerned the poet as a family-man but also unfold the different shades of Tagore's mood in his last days—puerile, fun-loving, pensive and anxious.

The quick deterioration of Tagore's health, which was apparent in symptoms such as swollen feet, numbness of fingers and frequent rise in body temperature, could not droop down his jovial spirit. He often cracked jokes with the servants. He could lighten the gloominess of a sick man's room with his remarkable sense of humour. One such episode is his interaction with his elder sister Barnakumari Devi in Rani Chanda's memoir *Gurudev*. When Barnakumari Devi came to visit her bedridden brother and rebuked him for running around carelessly, Tagore replied that from then onwards he would go everywhere sitting (79). As quoted on the book blurb, he confessed to his associates that he was more afraid of undergoing complicated medical treatments than facing death. Like a baffled commoner, he sought cure in various streams of medical science—allopathy, homeopathy and ayurvedic. Renowned physicians such as Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and Dr. Nilratan Sarkar supervised his medical treatment. He was very anxious about the surgery and enquired several times of Dr. Jyotiprakash Sarkar, nephew of Dr. Nilratan Sarkar, if the surgery would hurt too much.

Tagore had his own way of seeking spiritual help during crises. Instead of asking for deliverance, he prayed to the Almighty for courage to withstand pain. A couple of days before the surgery, which was done on 30th July, 1941, he had asked his *sevika* Rani Chanda to recite the poem '*Bipade more raksha karo.*' Mandal has provided the readers with its English translation:

To protect me from danger

Is not what I am praying for—

But that I should not be fearful when in danger (93).

In the last years of his life, Tagore suffered in body as well as in mind. While the pain of his body was caused by disease and old age, the pain of his mind was caused by the sufferings of the poor and the indifference of the British government to them. On the one hand, rapid developments were taking place in the fields of science and technology, on the other hand, human values were disappearing. The atrocities of the Second World War shocked him and compelled him to write the essay “Crisis in Civilization.” In *Baishe Shraavan*, Nirmalkumari narrates his disillusionment with contemporary political movements. He withdrew himself from the Swadeshi movement when he discovered that to some leaders their personal interests were more important than public welfare. Instead of losing himself in that selfish crowd, he affirmed, “I am a poet and my greatest work must be to dedicate myself in drawing the attention of the people towards differentiating between what is right and what is wrong. When the dignity of character is diminished, my duty is to point out what true glory is. The greatest job is to raise consciousness, to be able to respond to the call of truth” (245). Till the last day of his life, pursuit of truth was his supreme priority. According to Nirmalkumari, only a person like Tagore had the mettle to withstand social criticism and walk alone as a mark of protest against shams and factionalism. This, she describes, is well-reflected in his song, “*jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe, tabe ekla chalo re*” (“If no one comes forward at your beckoning, keep on moving alone”) (245).

The Last Days of Tagore in Memoirs is unique for its thematic concept. It represents the man of the world as a homely person who played several roles in the private sphere — a caring father, a loving father-in-law, an engaging uncle, an obedient brother, a true friend, a strict mentor and a doting grandfather. In this respect, the translation of the selections from the memoirs is indeed a great addition to the oeuvre of Tagore history and should interest scholars who cannot access these in the original Bengali version. The personal history presented in the selections will receive a distinct dimension if these are analysed through the critical prisms of Memory Studies and Affect theory. The simplicity of the language definitely is an advantage for the layman readers. Mandal’s translation of select poems of Tagore not only enhances the beauty of the narratives but also reveals her finesse in translating both prose and poetry. The two black and white photographs on the cover page of the book deserve attention and applause. The last photograph of the poet taken while he was alive is foregrounded on the faded background of a funeral ceremony suggesting his last journey to the realm of immortality. Interestingly, both the images reiterate the theme of “last days” in the life of the great poet.

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Title of the Book: *The Queen's Lender – A Novel Set in History*

By Jean Findlay, Scotland Street Press, 2021, 250 pp., £12.99, ISBN: 9781910895559.

Mario Relich

The Queen's Jeweller

Jean Findlay is well known for *Chasing Lost Time*, her biography of C. K. Scott Moncrieff, classic translator of Marcel Proust's famous masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past* and an edition of Scott Moncrieff's writings, *Ant*. *The Queen's Lender* is an historical novel, dealing with George Heriot, goldsmith and Jeweller to the Danish Queen Anna, consort of James VI of Scotland. A morally scrupulous, kind-hearted man all his life, Heriot was from Edinburgh and at his death left his vast fortune to found what is now George Heriot's School. His aim was to benefit children too poor to afford a decent education at the time. A pub in Edinburgh's Old Town, at Fishmarket Close, is named after him: 'Jingling Geordie'.

As befits the modest jeweller, who was probably wealthier than his royal patrons, the novel is not an epic one, but on a small scale, like an Elizabethan or Jacobean miniature. Stylistically, the prose is at times delicately jewel-like, particularly at heightened moments of Heriot's family life. The novel, moreover, gives us vivid glimpses of what it must have been like for Heriot to follow James VI from Edinburgh, to London. The King succeeded Elizabeth I as James I of England. Heriot survived Court intrigue, and the novel shows this in dramatic detail, because he knew how to avoid being overly conspicuous. His relationship to the Queen was a warm, friendly one. She much appreciated his efforts to cater to her wishes regarding jewellery, and the generosity with which he tolerated her accumulating unpaid debts to him, simply by accepting part payment from the King. Much of the dialogue is in Scots, applied to the Scottish characters, including sometimes to King James and his Queen, but predominantly in English, lightly sprinkled with Jacobean turns of phrase.

The novel certainly succeeds in conjuring up the precariousness of life at the time, both in Court and in the Edinburgh and London streets. It includes a historically true episode of the playwright Ben Jonson, usually regarded as second only to Shakespeare, walking all the way to Scotland in order to visit and exchange gossip, with the Scottish poet William Drummond. Findlay amusingly contrasts the former bricklayer Jonson's rough-and-tumble style of conversation with Drummond's more reserved, buttoned-up one. Hawthornden Castle, Drummond's aristocratic seat, is now a 'Literary Retreat for Creative Writers'. In short,

Findlay's novel pays tribute to Scottish Jacobean personalities whose legacies live on. It is also a delightful read.

Reference:

Findlay, Jean. *The Queen's Lender – A Novel Set in History* (U.K.: Scotland Street Press, 2021).

Mario Relich is a poet who lives in Edinburgh, and on the Board of Scottish PEN. *Owl at Midnight* is his latest collection of poems.

Title of the Book: *It Begins at Home and Other Short Stories*

By Sanjukta Dasgupta, Virasat, 2021, 123 pp., Rs 350.00, ISBN: 978-93-92281-06-8.

Tania Chakraverty

The moment one picks up a book titled *It Begins at Home*, the inevitable question that arises in the mind is ‘–What begins at home?’ The titular story “It Begins at Home” in feminist writer Sanjukta Dasgupta’s anthology of stories, *It Begins at Home and Other Short Stories* brings the readers’ attention to the sad and unpleasant truth that molestation, especially child molestation, begins at home. Statistical reports of RAINN state that (i) one in nine girls and one in fifty-three boys under eighteen experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult (ii) eighty-two percent of such victims are female (iii) females aged sixteen to nineteen are four times more susceptible to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.¹ What is worse, the report also states that the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are very often related to the victims concerned. The story begins with Mrs. Ghosh, head of an NGO “Speak Up” receiving yet another shock caused by the report of a thirteen years old being molested by her father, an affluent chartered accountant. The father and abuser, keeps molesting and then raping his daughter luring her in spite of her fear and discomfort with ‘the latest Apple iPhone’(59) and also ‘[d]resses, pocket money, a new laptop’(60). The story brings to our attention another sad and unpleasant truth that such actions by the perpetrators often go unreported. The thirteen years old Mimi’s mother refers to her daughter’s behaviour as a gross ‘overreaction’(60), though she wishes to report the incident to the police. Nearly seven decades back Simone de Beauvoir had stated that in cases like these, the mother often guards the molester instead of the victim, citing his ‘reputation’. Mimi keeps the incident a secret even from her husband later in life, a secret ‘like a malignant tumour’(66). Dasgupta’s story alerts us to the sad plight of young girls whose fates remain unchanged in the andro-centric patriarchal world.

As a feminist myself, I have always been drawn to fiction centering around women’s issues and some of the stories in this anthology do address the issues of women in patriarchy — sexism, economic inequality, trauma, lack of access to equal opportunity, caregiving, balancing career and motherhood. The plight of women, girls and the marginalised in the rural belt or the suburban areas has indeed remained unchanged in India. This is underscored in some of the other short stories in the anthology.

¹ RAINN. Children and Teens: Statistics (2022) <<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>>

“Just Another Suicide” centres around a woman, Kalyani, who needs to have a surgery — hysterectomy. She, like a good wife, understands her husband’s difficulty in hoarding the amount needed and plans that she will pay off the amount by working as domestic help or in a factory. Kate Millett blatantly stated that “[one] of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another”.² Since patriarchy has already established the notion that women are the worst enemies of women, should it come as a surprise that the ones to curse Kalyani ‘for bringing ill luck to their family, first by giving birth to two girls, and then this cursed disease ’(14) would be her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law? When the mother-in-law takes the matter into her own hands, what transpires gets passed off as a suicide, the police and medics not even bothering to arrange for a post-mortem. The unnecessary burden of the wife removed effectively, Nemai the husband remarries, as most widowers with children do.

“Hair-raising” is a tale on the issue of eve-teasing, where Bela a high-school girl with big dreams is followed and pestered by Madan, who ‘had to have Bela as his wife ’(74). Amitabh Bachchan as advocate Deepak Sehgal caused quite a stir when he mouthed the words, “No means No!” in *Pink* (2016), a film directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. We could ask as Sehgal does, how many men in India, or for that matter how many men in patriarchal cultures listen to the ‘No’s of women – known women, unknown women, friends, girlfriends, sex workers, or their wives – how many? To Mackinnon, sexuality is “a form of power. Gender, as socially constructed, embodies it, not the reverse. Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalize male sexual dominance and female sexual submission”.³ Thus, in patriarchal phallographic cultures, conjugal rights imply the rights of property that men as subjects have over women as objects. In heterosexual relationships, when a man exercises his rights, sex occurs. And surprisingly, it is not only the husbands who claim such ‘possession-rights’, but also men with toxic masculinity who choose who they wish to possess. “Hair-raising” addresses this issue, a story based on a newspaper report.

“Bhajan Ram’s Last Night” deals with the predicament of the subaltern, a man of low caste, ‘abhorred by the upper classes as locusts’ (18) with a wife, so busy with household work that she had no time ‘for fear, low self-esteem, stress, trauma and bi-polar disorders’ (20). Such

² Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 102.

³ Jane Freedman, *Feminism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001), p. 60.

women of colour, brown women in this case, led Alice Walker to develop womanism as an alternative to feminism.

“Bird’s Eye View” and “Divide” document phases of encounter between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’; the former story documenting a short and shallow phase of sharing between a lady Mrs. Gupta and a bunch of children and adults, and the latter dealing with another lady Mrs. Lahiri who feels guilty about her family’s affluence as she contrasts her grandchild with the grandchild of her maid. Both the stories underscore the often-shallow and often-distorted perceptions humans have of people belonging to another class. “Distress” is also a story of sharing, between the aged Prof. Roy and her students and research scholars in the era of ‘Post-Truth’ (31).

“Metamorphosis” contrasts the dream Indians nurture regarding their children and the American Dream that they usually get caught up with. “Loser” is a tale that tugs at the heart strings as it documents an unusual love-story between a simpleton and an insane human being. “Good Friday 1930” is a story ‘arising from a world of dreams’ as Kunal Basu mentions in his blurb. It is a story centering around the dreams of the young Kanti of freeing India from bondage, led by the legendary freedom fighter Master-Da Surya Sen.

Actually Kunal Basu mentions that ‘[t]hese sharply observed tales, [arise] from a world of dreams and despair’. The stories that follow are indeed tales of despair. “Change” documents the change that comes over a young girl Putul, daughter of a domestic help mother, who pursues Bengali Honours and a distance learning course in Masters with the hope of succeeding in competitive exams which would get her a job. Helplessly she is drawn back into the vortex of ‘jewellery and marriage’ (91), interestingly backed by a college principal who cannot overlook any young woman’s pressing need for security. “Mira’s Madness” is about Mira’s descent into madness after being spurned and humiliated by her husband and in-laws. Betty Friedan’s words ring true; often both mother and father encourage young girls “to find ‘security’ in a boy, never expecting her to live her own life”.⁴

“Retake” is a tale of male infidelity and subsequent re-union with Sumantra’s first wife, Srimati. This is a tale I personally disliked simply because the ending was unexpected from the pen of a feminist writer. But this ending probably is more realistic as most women do pardon husbands who cheat on them. Half a century before Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Laura Riding had written, “Woman has two works to perform: a work of differentiation, of man from herself,

⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), p. 391.

and a work of unification, of man with herself...”⁵ This is precisely what Srimati does; she decides to get back with her erring husband.

“Adjust” and “Freedom” are tales of female camaraderie, the latter with a touch of Kate Chopin. Adrienne Rich has used the term ‘lesbian continuum’ to include, “... a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman”.⁶

‘Please write about me. ... Write about me’ (105) urges Ruchika in “Adjust”. Write indeed women must, for women and about women. There are millions of stories waiting to be narrated, even more waiting to be shared amongst women and with men / humanity at large. Dasgupta’s *It Begins at Home and Other Stories* offers a glimpse into the vast gamut of experience of the other half of the populace often neglected and muted in patriarchy.

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⁵ Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings*, ed. by Elizabeth Friedman and Alan J. Clark, (New York: Persea Books, 1993), p. 1.

⁶ Bonnie Zimmerman, ‘What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism’ in *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism: A Norton Reader*, ed. by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), pp. 551 – 566 (p. 552).

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Title of the Book: *Murder at the Mela*

By Leela Soma, Ringwood Publishing, 2020, £ 9.99, ISBN: 978-1-901514-90-2.

Mridula Sharma

New Depictions of Identity and Conflict in Scottish Crime Fiction

Early on in *Murder at the Mela*, as Caroline walks on in the Kelvingrove park, we are told that her golden retriever proceeds to mark her territory. The detritus of the Mela is "on the far side." When Caroline discovers a blood trail and discerns a pair of "legs covered in jeans partially hidden behind the bush," she calls the ambulance and explains, "Ambulance, please ... someone is lying here, blood all over, maybe a body." Nadia becomes the detritus that earlier appeared on the far side, to Caroline and to us. The remains of her body mark her murderer's territory, not hers. Thus begins DI Alok Patel's investigation into the crime.

Inaugurating an Asian DI in Scottish crime fiction, Leela Soma's *Murder at the Mela* is a curious intersection of the personal and the political. Soma utilises Nadia's murder to probe an investigation uncovering multitudes of intercultural conflicts that coalesce to form a picture of chaos. Here, rivalry is marked by differences in religion, nationality, citizenship, and culture. Social and political discord is rarely contained: cultural friction ruptures interpersonal romantic and platonic relationships, too. Nobody remains untouched by disharmony.

Soma sheds light on Glasgow's Asian communities, uncovering their relationship with the city and among themselves. An overt association of Hindu characters with India and Muslim characters with Pakistan does restrict the scope of dialogue, but the advantages of the constraint outweigh the limitations. At the heart of Hindu-Muslim social intercourse is the clandestine love story of Usma and Alok. Their relationship thrives despite frequent verbal assaults by unsympathetic family members. It is in their mutual affection that Soma locates the possibility of transnational solidarity, in spite of extant religious conflicts that mar such a vision.

Literature becomes a medium to strengthen the couple's relationship and overcome familial opposition. The Hafiz poetry collection, which is Usma's present to Alok following his successful investigation, is one such example. Their interest in attending Edinburgh Book Festival together is another. Soma's portrayal of literature as a means of cementing warmth and intimacy in Usma and Alok's relationship is striking because her novel, an imaginative contribution to Scottish literature, performs precisely the same function: *Murder at the Mela* becomes a beacon of hope for stronger cultural relations across Glaswegian communities.

Even when Soma deconstructs the oversimplified notion of the ‘Asian’ by hinting at the many dissimilarities and disputes among South Asian communities, she manages to preserve the Asian category to subsume the very differences she invokes. Usma and Alok may find themselves separated by religion, but an Asian identity brings them together, suspending, for a moment, the precarity of their relationship. Their union, otherwise susceptible to antagonism, becomes somewhat legible when they are viewed as Asians instead of Asian Hindus and Asian Muslims.

The many ways in which Soma captures the usefulness and limits of an Asian identity speaks volumes of her experience in her craft. Her expertise in writing helps her tap the true potential of her authorial voice. For instance, Soma’s depiction of interpersonal and sexual relationships among Asians undermines conventional narratives into which Asian women’s sexuality is enclosed. Her characters call into question desexualised or hypersexualised representations of Asian women.

Although Soma seems preoccupied with Asian communities in Glasgow, her novel successfully explores an unmistakable Glaswegian spirit among Asians in the city. An overarching emphasis on Glasgow isn’t limited to references to its geography. Everyday conversations dextrously synthesise the polyphonous voices shaping the city. Even the Mela, which represents a melange of cultures, exerts its spectral presence throughout the novel as a *Scottish* Asian marker, becoming, in effect, a unique symbol of transnational and transcultural diversity. In fact, allusions to Usma’s carb-free diet and Alok’s mother’s search for a ‘suitable’ bride — with “light skin and pretty face” — for her son cleverly blend colonial ideals of beauty in South Asia with wildly popular standards of global beauty myths.

The structure of a crime thriller allows Soma to capture such nuances with precision. Even the revelation of the murderer in the concluding pages brilliantly develops the novel’s sustained engagement with a complex conversation on identity and conflict. In *Murder at the Mela* lies the carefully written story of a crime propelled by personal motives arising from conflicts of political importance. Alongside its uniquely insightful presentation of crime and policing, the novel manages to respond to contemporary farragos of fact and fiction about Asian communities in Glasgow. Soma’s work deserves recognition for its magnetic charm and relevance.

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Soma, Leela. *Murder at the Mela* (U.K.: Ringwood Publishing, 2020).

Mridula Sharma is a scholar and a writer. She is currently working on a book length manuscript. Her work has been accepted by publishers such as Routledge, University of Delaware Press, and Vernon Press, among others. She has received grants and scholarships for her research from institutions in Germany, Scotland, India, England, and the US. In 2021, she was shortlisted for Speculative Literature Foundation's Diversity Grant.

Title of the Book: *Unbound: New and Selected Poems (1996 - 2021)* by Sanjukta Dasgupta.
 Edited and Introduced by Jaydeep Sarangi and Sanghita Sanyal, Authors Press, 2021, ₹
 350 / \$ 25, ISBN: 978-93-91314-81-1.

Tania Chakraverty

Unbound is a repertoire of poems — a new set added to six old ones — by poet and academic Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta who has mesmerised countless students in the austere lecture halls at the University of Calcutta with her teaching and has motivated and enthused each student, particularly each girl student I should say, inducing each girl to be her own mistress and never to efface the self. The title of the anthology, *Unbound*, in two different ways, captures the spirit of the poet as well as the first compiler and editor of the first book of selected poems by the poet and author. Dr. Sutapa Chaudhuri who always dreamt of compiling a collection is unbound too, now, having left the bondage of the mortal body in May, 2021.

As the two editors of the present volume, Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi and Dr. Sanghita Sanyal have mentioned, reaching across a quarter of a century of a remarkable poet's body of poetry and selecting the best from amongst them is no mean feat especially so because the poet's voice in all her poems, in every locale and in every time frame has been firm, decisive, and I should add, unbound.

The first collection titled *Snapshots* (1996) contain snapshots of contemporary events. The titular poem reveals how snapshots 'sellotaped' to the wall behind her writing table, shook her mind. The poet remains a protester, very sensitive too, her fingers becoming 'limp and cold' as she is bombarded by news intruding her home in the form of the newspaper or the TV in "News Missile" and as she waits for Naina Sahni the socialite, murdered in a gruesome manner, to rise like 'Phoenix or Nemesis' in "In Memoriam". The socialist in her, speaks against the 'Voice of Capitalism' monitoring every human movement and every moment in "Rigmarole". "Lament - 1995" recapitulates the horror of terrorist attacks in the capital, horrors 'Man-made / God-forsaken'. "Oh Jessica" speaks of overvaulting ambition and the aftermath, speaking of the seven-year-old Jessica who died in an air-crash in her bid to become the world's youngest pilot. The feminist in Dasgupta applauds the spirit of the 9th century woman poet, who could 'provoke and tantalize' with her Prakrit verses in "To Avantisundari".

"Dilemma" in *Dilemma* (2002) records the angst of the urban individual, who saunters through the city in high heels yet longs for 'birds, flowers, fruits to hide [her]'. The poet's self gets lost in past memories in "Telephone" as it also laments over the loss of books — the greatest treasure of the civilised world — in a devastating fire in "Reconstructed". "Shame"

remains my favourite poem in this collection, documenting how each young girl is forced to ‘become a woman’ in traditional patriarchal society by forsaking western outfits that accentuate sexuality and switch to the saree instead that hide the curves of the body and curb the freedom of the self.

The titular poem in *First Language* (2005) takes up an issue dealt with first in “English” in *Snapshots*. The poems with semi-autobiographical overtones refers to tongues hissing, witnessing the “[d]aughter of freedom fighter / Writing poems in English”. “First Language” manifests the poet’s suspension between and eventual straddling of two linguistic worlds, Bengali and English, a ‘twin-togetherness’ in the upper-middle-class Indian urban space. ‘Bengali? Indian? Anglo? Cosmo? / Four-in-one?’ the question resonates. “Hai Ishwar Hai Allah” speaks about power politics in secular India in the name of religion, sad but true; and “Empty Nest Blues” voices the feeling of every loving parent in contemporary India. “Gypsy” and “Shut Up” are feminist poems critiquing among many things, the custom of the the bride losing her first name and taking her husband’s surname as a matter of course and the woman losing herself and her voice in the name of ‘adjustment’.

More Light (2008) begins a trend that has now become one of the signature verses of the poet — the decision not to be an angel in the house, a conscious decision not to be a Lakshmi. In “More Light...” the first poem in the collection, the poet wishes to take on attributes of the ‘fearless and free’ Kali, the ‘fearless’ Durga, or that of Goddess Saraswati, ‘[w]ith the inviolate light of knowledge’ but refuses to be Lakshmi with a ‘calm composure’. “The Art of Lying” and “Consumed” are sharp and satirical pieces, the former exposing the lack of integrity and the latter exposing greed and consumerism. Another poem in the collection, “Where there is no Love” exposes the dehumanised and synthetic modern world. A series of poems titled “Durga”, “Lakshmi”, “Ganesh”, “Saraswati”, “Kartik”, “Manasha—Snake Goddess”, and “Kali” uphold the distinctive traits of each deity. “Freedom Fighter” hails every woman as an ‘unacknowledged freedom fighter’, saluting the day, November 25, 2006 — International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and also welcoming the long-awaited Domestic Violence Bill, 2006.

The first poem “Lakshmi Unbound: A Soliloquy” in my favourite collection, *Lakshmi Unbound* (2017) that begins with two epigraphs, one by Virginia Woolf and the other by Rabindranath Tagore, voices the rage against the fetters of patriarchy and of domesticity ending with the woman’s declaration, ‘I don’t want to be Lakshmi / I am *Alakshmi* / Trap me if you can!’. Tagore’s rebellious women find a place in this wonderful repertoire, Mrinal who deserted her husband and in-laws in “Mrinal’s First Letter”, Chandalika the Dalit untouchable woman

finally securing acceptance in “Chandalika”, Chitrangada the non-conformist warrior princess in “Chitrangada”, and Anandamoyee who shunned caste and rituals and embraced and adopted an infant belonging to another race and clan in “Gora’s Re-birth”. In “Girl-child” someone whispers, ‘No, no this one is not a child / This tender little thing is a girlchild’ thus exposing the Self/Other alterity in patriarchal society. Rape is an act for which there cannot ever be a reprisal in kind says Susan Brownmiller, and so the only reprisal remains killing; “I Killed Him M’Lord” is testimony to such an act — of murder, based on a true event, by a woman Shreya Chakraborty who killed her husband after having suffered years of violence and marital rape. Similarly, Mohsina, a simple village girl turns the dowry tables on her groom as she hurls the curt words ‘Talaq / Talaq / Talaq’, disowning him in a poem bearing the title “Talaq”.

Sita’s Sisters (2019) continues the trend of powerful feminist poems. The name of Sita is used in poems like “Sita’s Sisters”, “Sita’s Lament”, “Sita and the Golden Deer”, “Sita Meets Lakshmi”, “Kind Karuna” critiquing the plight of the mythical Sita and also contemporizing the abject misery of the model *pativrata*, with unselfish devotion. “My Mother’s Harmonium” is a silent protest against the tradition of male lineage, celebrating instead the female family line, a mother-daughter continuum. “The Hunted” records the brutal torture and rape of Nirbhaya, Jyoti Singh in December 2012 — an event that shook the world. Her words, ‘Tell me what was my mistake’ reverberate, trying to reach the ears of ‘Friends, teachers, parents, politicians and priests’. “Who Killed the Little Tribal Girl” also deals with rape and murder, once again underscoring the fact that a girl or a woman is a peripheral presence in the world of men, pounced upon any time she is not guarded by another man, and any time she does not shut herself in at home. “Dhoti Dance” pays tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, penned in the sesquicentennial year of his birth.

The theme of death looms large over some of the New Poems in *Unbound*, “Covid 19 Season 11”, “Coffin Factory”, “Corona Likes Oldies”, “Gasp”; the obvious reason being this health crisis unprecedented in our lives — the Covid-19 pandemic. “Walking Home” focusses on the sad plight of the migrant workers, without jobs or income, forced to begin arduous journeys back to their villages. As walking often remains the only option, they begin to ponder, ‘Are we Citizens / Or are we refugees / In our own country?’. “Chipko” does not just celebrate the forest conservation movement, it celebrates sorority bonding too as the leader Gaura Devi urges the women, “Cling on dear sisters / Hug as tightly as if it’s the last day / Of your lives / *Chipko, Chipko*”. “O Boishakh” and “Hope” are poems of hope. Boishakh the first month of the Bengali Calendar is seen as the harbinger of compassion as she heals and cleanses the earth. “Hope” salutes the indefatigable spirit of humans.

Editors Jaydeep Sarangi and Sanghita Sanyal have brought the readers' attention to Dasgupta's sharp and incisive thoughts and dazzling brilliance, as also to her strength, clarity and elasticity of expression in their marvellous introduction. Like the poet herself, the book of poems *Unbound* is bound to be an inspiration for all lovers of poetry.

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Dasgupta, Sanjukta. *Unbound: New and Selected Poems (1996 - 2021)* eds. Jaydeep Sarangi and Sanghita Sanyal (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2021).

Tania Chakraverty is currently the Dean of Students' Welfare, Diamond Harbour Women's University, Sarisha, West Bengal. Educated at Presidency College, Calcutta and the University of Calcutta, Chakraverty has done her Ph.D. from the University of Calcutta under the supervision of Professor Dr. Sanjukta Dasgupta. She has formerly taught Full-time at Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata and concurrently as Guest Faculty in the Post Graduate Department of English, University of Calcutta. Chakraverty visited the U.S. to participate in an academic group project, "Strengthening and Widening the Scope of American Studies: The U.S. Experience" in 2010 as part of the prestigious International Visitor Leadership Program, (IVLP). She has authored Rhapsodies and Musings; her essays have appeared in national and international journals. Her areas of academic interest include Gender Studies, American Literature and Literature of the Diaspora. Chakraverty is the Assistant Secretary, Executive Council, of the Inter-Cultural Poetry and Performance Library (IPPL), Kolkata.

Title of the Book: *Language, Limits and Beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore*

By Priyambada Sarkar, Oxford University Press, 2021, Rs 1295.00, ISBN: 0-19-012397-4.

Bashabi Fraser

‘It is a well-known fact that Wittgenstein, while resenting the questions asked by the members of the Vienna Circle, often turned his back on them and read the poems of Rabindranath Tagore.’ This is how Sarkar’s book begins her study of the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and his appreciation of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). The book establishes the connection that the philosopher felt with the poet, as they were both aware of the inadequacy of language to express the profoundest truths that remain unutterable, eluding language, but which may be felt and experienced only through silence.

My husband has told me that when he was studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) at Oxford in the 1960s, ‘Wittgenstein was the rage’. It was also in those Oxford days, that my husband and his generation read and were moved by the spiritual power of Tagore’s *Gitanjali*. Much has been written about the later Wittgenstein, as his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) was the book that caught the intelligentsia’s imagination after his death. Yet Sarkar addresses the earlier work by the logician, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921, English translation, *Treatise on Philosophical Logic* 1922), reigniting an interest in and understanding of Wittgenstein’s apparently paradoxical claim that there are limits to language of that which remains inexpressible, thus incommunicable and which is, nevertheless, implicit in the silence that has to reign at the core of the unutterable, propounding the ineffable theory where the unsayability of metaphysical truths sustains Wittgenstein’s defence of the nonsensical in his work. Sarkar quotes from *Tractatus*: ‘T6, 522: There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical’.¹ This is where the realm of silence becomes poignant and meaningful, signifying the unmanifested, understood by the philosopher and shared by the poet, through logic and literature, respectively. The explicitness of scientific language is seen against the language of feeling/emotion, which is inexplicit.

¹ Priyambada Sarkar, *Language, Limits and Beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore* (India: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 69.

Sarkar traces the links in their thought through a consideration of the diaries, notebooks and letters and other manuscripts of Wittgenstein which have been published alongside the discussions he had with philosophers like Ludwig Von Flecker and Waismann. She takes examples from Tagore's poetry in *Gitanjali*, *Stray Birds*, *Fireflies*, his last poems in *Punasca* (Postscript, 1932) and *Seshlekha* (Last Writings, 1941), his views expressed in essays like 'Construction and Creativity', 'Personality' and his Hibbert Lectures gathered together and published as *The Religion of Man*. A major section is dedicated to Tagore's symbolic play, *Raja*, translated into English as *The King of the Dark Chamber*; a text which was deeply appreciated by Wittgenstein and later revised by Tagore as *Arupratan*. The evidence of the parallels in their work is provided through indicative quotations which move the argument in the book forward and provide a seamless continuity of thought as Wittgenstein appreciates and Tagore embodies the power of poets, artists and musicians whose works 'breathe love, joy and trust',² sharing the domain of ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics and religion, in a 'secular spirituality'³ that expounds the philosophy of harmony.⁴

Both Wittgenstein and Tagore recognise the opposites/binaries that exist in life, which once understood and accepted as inevitable to the life experience, account for the liberal humanism that marks the work of both the philosopher and the poet. The Introduction and Conclusion flank Sarkar's five chapters entitled,

1. Crossing the Threshold of Language: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore
2. In Silence There Is Eloquence
3. The Domain of the Ineffable: The Ethical and Aesthetic
4. The Domain of the Ineffable: The Religious
5. The King of the Dark Chamber and the Remarks of Early Wittgenstein: An Interpretation.

They provide a progressive argument which meticulously analyses the contingent and necessary, the relative and absolute, thus distinguishing between the world of facts and the domain of the sublime. The realisation of the individual man of himself, enables him to identify with the Universal Man in an understanding that transcends the mundane, expressed through

² Priyambada Sarkar, 2021, p. 61.

³ Priyambada Sarkar, 2012, p. 142.

⁴ Priyambada Sarkar, 2021, p. 166.

the power of humanity's creativity. In *Language, Limits and Beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore*, Sarkar undertakes the difficult task of explaining the inexplicable and succeeds in unravelling the purpose of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in which he establishes the innate value of the formless, which he finds so powerfully expressed by the poet Tagore in the eloquence of silence:

When the voice of the

Silent touches my words

I know him and therefore I know myself.⁵

Reference:

Sarkar, Priyambada. *Language, Limits and Beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore* (India: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁵ Poem no 251, from *Fireflies*. Priyambada Sarkar, 2021, p. 61.

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