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Given these competing pressures, as well as the current state of relationships within the Security Council,

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One for seven billion

THE NEW UN SECRETARY GENERAL

“Appointed after the most transparent process in the UN’s history, can the next Secretary-General deliver change for the world’s people?”

By Natalie Samanasinghe

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BREXIT
A NATION DIVIDED

By Shanta Acharya

Just to put Brexit (term for the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union) in context, Britain eschewed membership of the European Economic Community which was established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. But changed its mind in the early 1960s only to be rebuffed by Charles de Gaulle. Securing Britain’s entry in 1973 was regarded by former Prime Minister, Sir Edward Heath, as his greatest achievement. On 5 June 1975, a referendum was held, after renegotiating the terms of entry, and the vote went in favour 2:1.

The 23 June 2016 referendum took place without the terms of exit being defined. Those who voted to leave the EU (51.9%) did so mostly on grounds of sovereignty – to secure greater independence over decision-making. Since 2000 the EU has moved towards greater integration, promoting free movement of goods, services, capital and labour. Remaining in the EU while restricting immigration from the EU was not an option.

Britain joined the EEC to stem its economic decline, but joined too late, at a bad moment, and at an avoidably larger cost. Despite former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, succeeding in clawing back some of the contributions (the UK rebate), differences within both the main parties regarding EU membership persisted. It was the irreconcilable division in the Conservative party that prompted David Cameron, former Prime Minister, to offer a referendum. It was a political decision, not one driven by public demand.

However, the lack of preparation for a possible Brexit vote was irresponsible. Being remembered as the prime minister whose referendum delivered Brexit was not what Cameron had in mind. We now have a new prime minister, Theresa May (who voted to Remain), elected by her party, not by the country, though her party won a respectable majority in the general election. Since she declared ‘Brexit means Brexit’ there has been no clarification of what Brexit means nor of the government’s plans to involve Parliament in defining the terms of a deal.

May wishes to ‘make a difference’ while redefining her vision for a fairer Britain.

But making the country work for everyone and securing a Brexit deal that will be acceptable to the 48.1% who voted to remain in the EU may turn out to be a pipe dream. Discriminating against immigrants or the rich is not the way forward. Making sure that corporations and the wealthy pay their taxes will be fairer. So will investing in infrastructure, education and the training of British workers to make the UK globally competitive.

In the meanwhile, the Labour Party re-confirmed

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Time has raced past and it is time to write the editorial for the last quarter of 2016.

The fallout from the turmoil in Syria and Iraq, Eritrea and Sudan, has led to the refugee crisis with Western countries doing the right thing by offering to take in a fair share of refugees and in particular, children. Donald Trump has announced that he will not take in any Syrian refugees because they are Muslims if he wins next week’s election. The ugly campaign for the presidency has raised serious questions about the suitability of the candidates for the world’s most powerful position. In another unrelated development, the one-time world’s largest empire, Great Britain is facing many legal challenges at the very beginning of the process to leave the EU. Scotland and N. Ireland voted by a large majority to remain in the recent referendum. Scotland is already thinking of leaving the Union by holding another referendum asking the Scots to choose whether they want to be part of Britain or become an independent nation free to stay within the EU.

In the meantime, member countries of the United Nations have elected its newest Secretary General to serve for the next five years. He faces a tough job of sorting out innumerable problems in member nations. It is hoped that he will provide the necessary leadership and diplomacy required to find solutions.

While tragedies are unfolding from all corners of the world, we can’t helplessly watch but have a responsibility to raise our voice when and where necessary through our readership that includes many intellectuals, diplomats and perhaps decision makers. In this issue two experienced writers have discussed the years of uncertainty facing us and the need for political will to face the upcoming challenges. Strong and transparent leadership is of the utmost importance in dealing with them.

We wish all our readers and well-wishers a peaceful and prosperous 2017 in advance.

Vijay Anand

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even the most optimistic UN commentators thought states would compromise by selecting the lowest-common denominator candidate. But Guterres is hardly that.

A seasoned diplomat, he has served in high-profile roles, including as Portugal’s Prime Minister and head of the UN’s Refugee Agency. He is widely considered to be an effective manager, as well as an outspoken advocate for the vulnerable, willing to challenge powerful states.

So why did the Security Council endorse him? Many UN watchers believe it was down to the new selection process, which UNA-UK and its partners in the 1 for Billion campaign worked hard to achieve.

Making the UN work better
Given the dysfunction within the UN system, changing a recruitment process does not sound particularly transformative, particularly not to readers in South Asia, where views of the UN tend to be more unfavourable than in other parts of the world.

The reform that would make the most difference – political will – remains elusive. It is the UN’s 193 members that call the shots, setting its priorities and budget. Of these states, the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) – China, France, Russia, the UK and US – wield disproportionate influence, and the Council’s composition is unlikely to change any time soon.

But despite its flaws, it is clear that we still need the UN, now more than ever. The biggest challenges we face, from climate change to extremism, are global in nature. The UN remains the only truly global platform we have, able to convey a unique legitimacy on decisions and to serve as a vital space for multilateral negotiations.

Small but mighty
This is why we decided to focus on a smaller reform with the potential to have more immediate impact: a better way to select the Secretary-General.

While Secretaries-General have limited power, they can have a profound impact on the UN. They can serve as a voice for the marginalised; coordinate efforts to tackle cross-border challenges; encourage action on situations that lack big-power interest; make smart appointments to key positions; and pioneer norms and partnerships.

Peacekeeping, for example, was developed by Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjöld. U Thant played a significant role in de-escalating the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kofi Annan brokered a life-saving deal with pharmaceutical companies to widen access to HIV/AIDS treatment. And Ban Ki-moon, the current post holder, has used the Secretary-General’s moral authority and convening power to champion LGBT rights and action on climate change.

P5 stranglehold
Reforming the selection process was also an important marker for signalling dissatisfaction with the power imbalance between the Security Council and the General Assembly.

The UN Charter gives both bodies a role in the process, saying the appointment is made by the Assembly upon the recommendation of the Council. But for most of the UN’s history, the Assembly’s role has been relegated to rubberstamping the P5’s choice, made behind closed doors, subject to secret bargaining, including on other senior positions. Often the wider UN membership did not even know who was in the running, let alone the UN’s most important constituency: the world’s people.

The process was wholly out of step with modern recruitment practices and contrary to the UN’s own principles of good governance. Above all, it was geared to selecting someone unlikely to rock the P5’s boat, instead of the best person for the job.

Transforming the process
In 2013, UNA-UK co-founded the 1 for 7 Billion campaign to push for a better selection process. We worked to build momentum for change within the UN, with great support from the Non-Aligned Movement amongst others, as well as in capitals and communities around the world. Over 750 NGOs and nearly 200 million people joined our movement.

Two years later, in September 2015, the General Assembly adopted a ground-breaking resolution that endorsed many of our proposals: a timeline, selection criteria, a list of candidates and the chance for them to present their vision for the UN at hearings involving all member states and civil society.

It was the hearings that proved the most transformative. Not only did they engender some of the most open discussions on the UN, they also enabled experienced candidates to shine. Mr Guterres, for instance, was not considered a front-runner when the process began, but was widely seen to have done well at his General Assembly dialogue (US Ambassador Samantha Power described it as his “breakthrough” moment), becoming the obvious go-to candidate when the P5’s first picks weren’t gaining the required support.

A cynic might add that selecting a well-regarded candidate was the easiest way for the Council to reassert control over the process. But one hopes that this rare moment of PS unity – and their choice of someone seen as a strong leader – shows that even they recognize the need for an effective UN system at this turbulent time.

What next?
Mr Guterres will take up his post at a time when an overstretched and under-funded UN is constantly asked to do more with less, with little sign of greater political or financial support. Like his predecessors, he will not have any powers to compel states to act, or to provide the UN with more support.

At the same time, there were calls throughout the selection process for the next Secretary-General to focus on a dizzying number of issues, and to be not only the world’s top diplomat, but also an inspiring communicator, a voice for the poor, a hard-headed reform driver, a negotiator and more. Mr. Guterres will need to prioritize.

With this in mind, we hope that he will set out an ambitious but realistic vision for the organisation, which sees it focus on those areas where it can make a unique contribution, notably, resuming a central role in peace and security. There is now a growing raft of actors well-placed to take forward UN agendas on issues such as sustainable development. But the UN remains the only body able to fulfil the primary role for which it was created: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

Conflict has continued to blight the lives of too many people around the world, yet we have avoided the all-out global wars of the last century. Today, this long period of relative global peace is in peril. We must all do our bit to help the UN succeed in its mission.

Natalie Samarasinghe is the Executive Director of United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) and co-founder of the 1 for 7 Billion campaign to reform the selection process for the UN Secretary-General.
The Great Custodians Of Indian Culture

By Reginald Massey

Today Indian culture and art has fallen into the hands of glib academics, the Akademis in New Delhi, state level academis, non-governmental bodies and even corporate funded festival organisers. In short, culture is big business in India. This is termed India’s soft power. Meanwhile the culture vultures hover hungrily for rich pickings.

Dancers, singers, musicians and actors are dished out high honours and awards but the real custodians of culture have been erased from the country’s history because it makes uncomfortable reading since it involves prostitution, not mere secular prostitution but sacred prostitution. I refer to the Devadasis, the ‘servants of the gods’.

The ninth and tenth centuries saw the most glorious period of temple architecture and it was at this time that the great temples of South India were built. The richness and the decoration of these temples were fittingly complemented by the enchanting forms and matchless dancing of the devadasis. We know from inscriptions that the magnificent Chola king Rajaraja installed 400 dancing girls in his temple at Tanjore. They not only performed services for the idols but also provided a source of income for the shrine. They were housed in luxurious quarters in the streets surrounding the shrine. They were furnished with not only the pleasures of the flesh but also with intellectual and cultural stimuli.

In his book Castes and Tribes of South- ern India he described the devadasis in considerable detail. One of the chief reasons why the Devadasi system fell into disrepute was that sometimes young girls from poor families were abducted and sold to the temples. This led to a concerted effort on the part of the British government, Indian social reformers such as Gandhi and the enlightened Hindu Maharajas of Mysore and Travancore. In 1910 Mysore stopped the dedication of devadasis ‘respectable’. Therefore Brahmin dancers now dominate Bharat Natyam. The dance has survived; but the devadasis have been erased from the entire narrative of Indian culture. The last great devadasi was Balasar-aswati who was descended from generations of devadasis. I saw her dance in London when she was well past her best. And when she died I wrote her obituary in The Dancing Times of London (May 1984). Officially there are no devadasis in India today but there are still some temples where sacred prostitution is clandestinely practised. Indian cultural historians must recognize that it was the devadasis whom we must honour for preserving one of the oldest classical dance forms in existence today.

Fortunately Rukmini Devi now appeared on the cultural scene. She headed by a British Governor (May 1984). Officially there are no devadasis in India today but there are still some temples where sacred prostitution is clandestinely practised. Indian cultural historians must recognize that it was the devadasis whom we must honour for preserving one of the oldest classical dance forms in existence today.

Picture courtesy of Madhavi Puranam, Editor, NARTANAM.

In September last year one of Reginald Massey’s poems was awarded the first prize in the all-British Forward Poetry competition. He has been writing a regular Book Page for CONFLUENCE for years. Most of his books are available from Amazon UK.

In 1927 in Madras Presidency alone (which was a province of British India headed by a British Governor) there were still 200,000 registered temple prostitutes. But that figure is grossly misleading. Many devadasis claimed that they were married women, happily married to a particular god. In the same year Gandhi wrote: “There are, I am sorry to say, many temples in our midst in this country, which are no better than brothels.” Gandhi, a Gujarati Bania of the shopkeeper caste was not only a failed barrister but was also not interested in Indian art, music, dance or culture. He was, however, keen to ‘cleanse Hinduism’ and if that meant the demise of Dasi Attam (the dance of the devadasis) so let it be. He was happy to throw out the baby with the bath water.

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BREXIT: Continued from Page 1...

Jeremy Corbyn as its leader, though his popularity among party members is not matched amongst Labour MPs. The divisions in the party resulted in a lack of contribution from Labour towards the future of the country. One is inclined to concur with The Economist that ‘Labour’s feebleness has already contributed to Britain’s most calamitous decision in a generation, that of leaving the EU’. Had the country voted for proportional representation in 2011, there would be a more collaborative decision-making process in place providing greater transparency, not to mention better scrutiny. As things stand, it is up to all the parties, especially Labour, to execute their responsibilities diligently.

Theresa May announced that Article 50 (dubbed by Cameron as ‘the gamble of the century’) will be triggered by the end of March-2017. The way Article 50 is drafted implies there will be no deal until everything is agreed because there are too many moving parts, which suggests a protracted period of uncertainty for businesses and individuals. Uncertainty also springs from the lack of confidence in the people in charge of Brexit. There is real concern that Euroscepticism within the Conservative party will determine the terms of Brexit, referred to as ‘hard’ Brexit. The recent High Court ruling that Parliament would have to be given a vote in the process adds a welcome layer of scrutiny. These terms will define the way in which the UK will deal not only with the EU, but with itself (especially Scotland) and rest of the world. Nicola Sturgeon (the current First Minister for Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party) is putting together plans to secure Scotland’s right to remain in the EU (62% of Scottish voted to remain). From businesses to universities in the UK, it will affect their future plans, may change them altogether. There have been some high profile investments into the UK post Brexit, but most firms are altering their plans as they wait for clarity on the nature of Brexit. The Brexit storm is yet to hit the UK.

The problem lies in not knowing how exactly to prepare for it.

Business confidence may have recovered since the vote for Brexit, but central banks cannot keep reducing interest rates or invoking the mantra of quantitative easing indefinitely. The Bank of England introduced a package of funding measures taking its total asset purchases to £435 billion. How much more spending (read borrowing) will it take to keep this fragile confidence going? Unsurprisingly, Sterling remains weak. Consumer spending will be affected by higher prices as inflation takes hold, higher than the 1% currently. A weak currency, low interest rates, quantitative easing and the prospect of greater fiscal spending has contributed to an irrationally exuberant stock market. The cost of Brexit hasn’t started to bite. It will prove costly for the EU too.

Philip Hammond, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, confirmed that he expects turbulence ahead for a few years as businesses remain ‘uncertain about the final state of our relationship with European Union’. And regardless of the eventual outcome of the negotiations, he made it clear that his government will act to support the economy, pushing back deficit reduction targets and increasing infrastructure spending. While greater spending on infrastructure can be no bad thing, it is simply a matter of time before the nation’s burgeoning deficits take a significantly higher toll. It is difficult to predict the future, but one thing is certain – years of uncertainty.

Shanta Acharya was born and educated in India, she won a scholarship to Oxford, where she was awarded a DPhil in English. She was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University before joining the City, specialising in asset management, serving later at London Business School. Shanta has the unusual distinction of being published in fields as diverse as poetry, literary studies, fiction and finance. www.shantaacharya.com
M S Subbulakshmi was born on 16 September, 1916. To commemorate the 100th birth anniversary an event ‘Homage to MS’ was held in her honour on the same date at Bharatiya Vidyabhavan, which included performances by twenty singers/dancers on the stage on which she sang in the seventies.

She was the first musician ever to be awarded Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian honour to be awarded by the Government of India. It is an universally acknowledged fact that the music world produces a phenomenon like her, once in a century. No wonder Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister said of her, “Who am I, a mere Prime Minister before a Queen, a Queen of Music”.

MS had a long singing career of spanning 70 years, starting from the age of 11. She has followers who have the attitude of devotees, not only in South India but all over the world. Apart from singing on Stage, she also acted in a few Tamil films, early in her life.

In addition to the support that she received from her mother, who was also a musician, she enjoyed strong support from her husband Sadasivam (Editor of the Tamil Weekly Kalki). At the insistence of Sadasivam, who saw music not as an aesthetic exercise, but as a vehicle for spreading spirituality among people, she developed a rare catholicity in her music.

An interesting incident worth recollecting involves Mahatma Gandhi, who wanted her to sing Hari Tuma Haro, Meerabai’s Bhajan for him. MS answered that she was not familiar with the song and he replied that he would rather hear her speak the words than hear someone else sing it. She learnt the song and sang it for him, which was played by All India Radio repeatedly, when a few months later Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated.

Tirupati Devasthanam honoured her as a resident artist (Asthana Vidhwan) and her bronze statue has been installed in the temple town in 2006.

An interesting aspect of her life was the shade of blue of her sari, which she wore—MS Blue—which has been named after her—possibly the only colour with a human touch!

Most of the prize monies from awards and her Albums as well as from performances have been donated by her to Charities. During her life time she gave more than 200 charity concerts which raised over twenty million Rupees.

Her major achievements in over seven decades of singing is the development of a style of her own, not based on identifiable techniques of execution, but on the communication of a mood; of an ecstasy of emotion, which rendered her unique voice into an inimitable form of divine singing.

Normally towards the end of hymns, she played the cymbals with eyes-closed concentration for the Rajaji hymn “Kuraionrum illai” (I have no regrets). For all the beauty of her music, the name and fame that she enjoyed, it is her image as a saintly person which will probably endure in the minds of people, just as in the case of Meerabai. In the finest tradition of the Indian way of life, MS linked her art with the spiritual quest, where humility and perseverance assure the practitioner of grace and enduring charisma.


The performers were Ratna Srikantiah, Pushkala Gopal, Annapoorna Kuppuswamy, Srikanth Sarma, Veena Pani, Neetha Kalluri, Kavya Rajagopal, Sandhya Anantraman, Prakriti Ganguly, Deepa vishwamohan, Durga, Ranjitha Chowalloor, Arifa Khan, Biranavi Kirupakaran, Shivani Sekar, Abheesa Mahendran, Srinidhi & Jayalakshmi Padmanabhan, Ruchira Sreekanth and accompanied on the violin by Achuthan Sripatiama-than and Mridangam by Vijayanaraj Mylavaganam.
Bashabi Fraser’s recent book Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers is a heart-warming collection of poems on the art of bridging many cultures and imbibing human values from each. The poem ‘A Confluence’ carries an apt title and metaphor for transgenerational and intercontinental journeys brought on by a visit to London’s Nehru Centre. Here, India and UK intermingle, Fraser’s memory of her mother in Kolkata and her own daughter in Britain merge, and the eternal image of rivers, the Ganga and the Fraser’s memory of her mother in Kolkata and her own daughter in London’s Nehru Centre. Here, India and UK intermingle, the poem ‘A Confluence’ carries an apt title and metaphor for

Mothers is a heart-warming collection of poems on the art of reinforcing the maternal role. Her outlook is contemporary, her tribute meaningful, and her language tightly passionate. Here is a book that deserves close reading.

This is more than a book of memories: it’s a rich tribute to mothers as a transcendent category for their quiet wisdom and practical action that assures the wellbeing of the next generation. In today’s world of blatant individualism with its cynicism about marriage and motherhood, Bashabi Fraser’s poems come as a refreshing reinforcement of the maternal role. Her outlook is contemporary, her tribute meaningful, and her language tightly passionate. Here is a book that deserves close reading.

The tribute to Mothers is shaped into three neat sections. The first is based on memories such as aesthetic creativity at home, travels in India, UK and other places abroad, and emerging family relationships. Added to these are political readings of occupancies in Bhopal, Palestine, Japan, Chile, recounted with vivid articulation. The idea of letters is conveyed in the dialogic style adopted as two trusting people enter each other’s varied world. Edinburgh, that becomes Bashabi’s home, and Kolkata which shaped her younger years are compared with a cultural understanding that captures food, artefacts, political views, street experiences and a lot more. The crowded familiarity of one is offset with the calm order of the other—each bearing its own harmony.

In all of this, there are contrasts and confluences, a transformative mode that Indians living abroad negotiate at every turn. While remembering her mother, Bashabi Fraser reflects on the cross cultural expressions of her own daughter, bringing a new acuteness to the parenting role which constitutes both action and mediation. An example:

You will catch her on an early morning tube
Reading Purple Hibiscus, her ghungru
In her jute bag, resting on her lap, still For now…
…she will bring her bird flight agility
Of her ballet training to the ground
Spins of a fusion of gharanas.

The second section of the book, “Interlude”, comprises of a marvellous single poem “She was my mother” which I am tempted to quote in full because it evokes mythology and modernity, the

east and the west, dreaming and wakefulness, a single flower as well as the firmament. That’s what a Mother connotes, from ages immemorial in the cultural memory of all civilisations; a primal bond that defies the vagaries of history.

She was the Sheuli in my wonderland
Discreetly tender, fragrantly appealing
She was my Swedish summer sun, hospitably warm—
My emblem of constancy and undying light,
She was my Zephyr, my refreshing energy
My liberating libretto, my compelling harmony
She was my Zodiac, my lucky songster
My winning universe, my orbiting dream
She was my Zenith, my sonic destination
My rainbow nation, my own Milky Way
She was my Rubicon, my intrepid defender
My splendid torchbearer, my true faith healer
She shone when all the stars left the stage
She stood, her head high, when the applause died.

The final section devoted to “other mothers” presents vignettes in different moods, a few occasional pieces written for weddings, some written for aunts and friends, one to Kadambari who is a character linked to Tagore, and thoughts on the sacrifices of motherhood.

At the end of such an honour roll there’s a curiosity about the real mother who inspired Bashabi’s sheaf of poems. Interestingly she is not named though vivid details of the Bengali partition and the families who had to reconstruct broken trajectories are poignantly brought out in the Introduction. Better unnamed, because this mother encapsulates a generation of women in Calcutta and beyond who learned to cope with adversity resulting from political upheavals and worked hard to educate their daughters. They were often teachers and social workers pioneering women’s empowerment. Bashabi’s mother was among the early feminists in Bengal who did not use that term but practised its principles. “She was the only female lecturer in her department at her college where she taught in Calcutta before we went to London. She won a scholarship to the London School of Economics where she did a Research Masters. For Bashabi, the grief of losing such a mother, first, to the twilight zone of dementia and then to mortality, silenced the poetic tribute for many years. When the spell broke through a prescient dream that Fraser recounts in a poem, the mother is transformed into a generic figure, “Mothers All”, those patient folks who “forego promotions and pay packets/… Night watchers who feed and rock and calm to sleep.”

Diasporic transitions have sharpened the poet’s cultural empathy. Awarded high recognition for Literary Services in Scotland (2009) and known as a Bengali intellectual, an expert on Tagore and a prolific translator, Bashabi Fraser’s writing in the creative realm points to the gains of cosmopolitan identities. This slim book has a deep resonance calling out for restoring human contact in rapidly fragmenting families.

Malashri Lal is a retd. Professor of English and the Dean of Academic Activities at the University of Delhi.
The lovely hill station of Ooty or OOTACAMUND, the abode of the indigenous peoples of the blue mountains, acclaimed as a World Heritage Site for its precious biosphere, resounded excitedly to an unusual event: The First Ooty literature Festival (Lit-Fest) held at the newly renovated Heritage Site: the 200 year old Ooty Library, for two days in September.

It could not be more perfect - the setting, the weather at 22 degrees Centigrade, the aroma of the eucalyptus leaves twined with the bright yellow marigolds that decorated the podium, and the long hall with its French windows that let in the warm sunlight through the glass panes on the audience gathering there in numbers with their woollen jackets, sweaters and shawls.

Everybody had their programme schedule for the two days in their hands, which they were busy scanning for the names of writers, poets, moderators and publishers. The sessions were well spaced giving enough time for the panelists to make their presence felt and appreciated by the audience. And more importantly the audience did not have to move from room to room in quest of a session or a favourite author. There were close to 30 writers at the 2 day Lit Fest, whose works were on display at the book stalls set up by different Publishing Houses.

The concept of a Lit-Fest up in the hills was the brain child of a handful of old residents of Ooty and Coonoor who could not live without books. The renovation of the Ooty Library which is nearly 200 years old is nearing completion and its special status during the British Raj made residents think of holding an event that would highlight this landmark building in the Hills whilst at the same time encouraging young and old to read. The old timers of Ooty put their heads together to plan a Lit-Fest - the first ever in the Nilgiris. Their planning was meticulous and assisted by experts in the field of Event-Management. They put together a packed event for 2 days in mid-September and as one of the organizers told me, every invitee was delighted to accept the invitation.

The famous OOTY CLUB which is a historic monument to the privileged exclusivity of the Sahibs of the Tea Gardens and Officers of the Raj, offered its rooms to the special guests to be housed there for 2-3 days. Air fares were paid for expected writers and publishers who would arrive on time for the start on 16th September. The ex-BBC journalist, Mark Tully, the big attraction on the first day itself, said he had always wanted to travel on the toy train called the Blue Mountain Express that chugged up from Mettupalayam to Ooty, very similar to the Darjeeling Toy Train from New Jalpaiguri to Darjeeling. Both these Toy Trains are declared World Heritage Property.

One of the best panels was the one with the authors, Mansoor Khan and Mark Tully, Theodore Bhaskar and Dr Kaveri Nambissan moderated by ex-Ambassador CV Ranganathan. Mr. Mansoor Khan’s book, The Third Curve explored the concept of Growth. He discussed the different uses of the word ‘Growth’ and the fear that the word conjures up when used in medical terms, suggesting cancer and death. His book discusses growth that is necessary to bring about equity in society but needing checks and balances for at the other end of growth as visualized by governments is the despoiling of Nature. Ooty’s residents are also great crusaders of Conservation and Protection of their Biosphere that contains rare species of plants, insects, birds and plenty of wild life, would fight even the government to keep their environment free from any form of encroachment in the name of development. At the end of his talk, we were informed that he is the Uncle of the actor Amir Khan and the producer of the film ‘Kayamat se Kayamat Tak’.

Mark Tully at 80 plus was a big draw with 2 sessions for him, of which one, was a stand alone interview by his partner Gillian Wright, an author herself and translator of Hindi and Urdu Literature into English. Both of them had started their careers with the BBC in London and had travelled to India at different times to take up their assignments with BBC Radio in Delhi in the late 1970s. Their common interests drew them together and they have lived here for some years. She has helped edit most of Tully’s books.

Her informal conversation with Tully took him to his very early days as a child growing up in Calcutta, living in a palatial mansion as deserving of a Burra Sahib’s son. His father the General Manager of Gillanders Arbuthnot lived the exclusive life of the White Sahibs, denying his son any contact with children of the Indian servants who lived in the quarters at the back. At the age of 11 he was sent to prep school in England, and then went on to Oxford where he studied theology with the intention of becoming a priest. But that never worked out for various reasons, and he joined the BBC where his Indian background led to his being appointed as Foreign correspondent in the Delhi office. It turned out that his upbringing did not prevent him becoming fluent in Hindi!

Another big attraction was the legendary Malayalee author M.T.Vasudevan Nair. People were thrilled to be able to hear this prolific writer, poet, translator, film script writer and film director. His introductory speech spoken in excellent English for over 15 minutes was superb. Every guest on the stage spoke in perfect English even if their books were written in the vernacular. Even during the lunch breaks some members of the audience crowded round the writers and poets of their choice to talk animatedly to them about their work.

The festival was sponsored by the Rotary Club of West Nilgiris, whose President Mr. George Thomas owner of the Good Shepherd School in Ooty was present welcoming guests as they arrived and gathered around the blazing bonfire lit with fragrant juniper pine wood within the Shamiana as the nights were cold. The excitement and dynamism of this historic event was strong right up to the end of the second day when Photo Ops gave everyone who was there the opportunity of being recorded forever by digital cameras.

Gomathy Venkateswar: Gomathy has had a long career in Education. Starting as a teacher, she became a sought after principal of schools in India and Nepal. In retirement she works with a few NGOs to promote literacy for women and children in slum areas.
The pedagogy of classical dance in India is found to have two aspects. One: the traditional aspect that adheres to India's age-long guru-shishya parampara, and the other the institutionalized aspect that has a documented course-curriculum, examination-pattern and evaluation-method leading to conferment of degrees. The former gives complete freedom to a guru to choose and decide almost everything – quantitative magnitude of dance taught to disciples, quality of dancing imparted to them, the time spent on their riyaz, the expected level of perfection in their performance, and the pace at which each disciple can learn and master advanced levels during his/her discipleship of at least 10 years and even more. These aspects are discussed, designed and approved by an academic board whose members are high-profile expert artists in respective dance-forms, such as Kathak, Bharatanatyam and so on.

The teachers who opt for the institutionalized pedagogic practice follow the respective patterns and teach their students all the requisites as expected by the examination board. Whereas the guru-shishya pedagogy functions under the direction of an individual guru, institutionalized pedagogy brings various dance-teachers onto a common platform which in turn helps in the academic administration of dance irrespective of the teacher. Since the features and benefits of one pedagogic system are not available in the other, the current trend found prevalent among gurus/teachers of classical dance in India is to combine both – the traditional as well as the institutionalized practices. Classical dance trainers of the current generation seem contented with such a combination of pedagogic manners, owing to its overall benefits that suit the modern-world of professions and lifestyles. The students also known as disciples, after spending many years of hard-work and training under such combined pedagogy, must understand, what does it really mean to become a dancer in the current time-space context of modern world and life?

Personally, I have seen in many students, and also in parents who place their little ones in dance training as soon as their child learns to walk and jump, a passion and a burning urge that says – I want (or, I want my child) to become a great classical dancer, and I am ready to take on a life-time of effort (or, we as parents are ready to give a life-time of support). On one side while I respect their passion and dedication, on another I also ask them – but do you know what it means to become a dancer? And then, I see most of them raising their eyebrows either in surprise or in confusion. It means, either my question had never occurred to them previously, or, they simply assumed that becoming a dancer is only about getting a Nritya-Visharad (BA) or Alankar (MA) or Praveen (Doctorate) degree in dance. What many students or parents do not realize in this is that, a degree alone cannot carry one very far in professional life and in the modern world of dance and dancers. One needs, additionally, to be a dancer at heart and absorb the ‘soul of art’ in order to bring it creatively into one’s dance. However, such misinterpretation is bound to occur if a student and parent do not perceive the difference between becoming a true dancer and passing a dance-examination to get a certificate.

So what does it mean to become a dancer? Or, ‘who’ decides ultimately that one has become an accomplished ‘dancer’? Who confers that status – the guru, the examination board or society?

Considering only the traditional pedagogic viewpoint it is the guru as well as the audience since one must undergo the scrutiny of both. Considering merely the institutional viewpoint it is the Examination Board. In that case, it becomes the student’s choice, depending upon what kind of dancer career he/she chooses, whether one should rely on public acceptance to become an established dance-professional. Since most students today opt for a combo-pedagogy, the answer is that both the guru’s scrutiny and society’s acceptance are indispensable. The approval of examination boards becomes important though not indispensable. This applies especially for those who aim at becoming accomplished classical dancers within the profession. How is it so? Here is a brief explanation.

A degree in classical dance helps in the making of a dancer in two ways. 1: It opens up opportunities to work as a teacher at schools or higher level educational institutes. 2: It gives one an objectively recognizable platform from which one can apply for various scholarships including the ones for travel and performance in other countries. In turn it helps in building a good reputation which every dance-aspirant requires for crossing the beginner stage and proceeding towards becoming a fully-fledged dancer. And yet, a degree in dance is not all that is required for becoming a dancer. Rather, it is only an external support. It is like the scaffolding of a building or could become the strong masonry in the building of a dance-career. It is because, in ‘reality’, what must ‘become’ a dancer is one’s deeper self. That happens purely in a traditional guru-shishya model of pedagogy in which a shishya, by close companionship of several years with her guru, grows within the true spirit of art and thereby becomes ‘one’ with the artistic soul of dance of which the guru is a living example.

A lot is researched, written and spoken about the guru-shishya relationship which is widely accepted as essential in the making of a true classical dancer. So here I would go one step further and say – that in some students, I find that their deeper self is already a dancer. That deeper self is clearly reflected in the way that they have absorbed art of dancing and with the way they dedicate themselves to riyaz. I see them as accomplished lovers of dance and devotees at the feet of a goddess called Art. While such students may be rare, for others this ‘inner’ accomplishment can come gradually, while they pursue a dance-career in the world ‘outside’ them. When students unlock their inner self and thereby experience the Art in its deeper dimensions, their ‘being’ which is essentially that of a dancer will merge with their ‘becoming’, thereby reaching a state of fruitful completion.

Ojas Sukhatankar (M.A. in Dance Cultures, Histories and Practices from University of Surrey, U.K. & B.E.) is a classical Kathak exponent and software engineer. She has performed, choreographed and taught classical Kathak in India, U.K. and U.S.A. She writes performance-reviews, research-articles, and also lectures on Dance, Art and Women’s issues.
Why label?  
by Anita Nahal

People, come like cows  
One after the other  
Have their fill and walk away  
Carrying the fat of innocence  
In their rotund, burping,  
shameless bellies.

Emotions  
Feelings of love  
Are washed out and wrung dry  
No one to soothe creases  
No sure fingertips  
To straighten ruffled hair  
No soft lips to wipe tears away  
People, come like cows.

Why label cows when we don’t know them?  
Perhaps cows don’t want to be like people.

You, me and the animals

Many worlds in one, for you, me and them…  
Our living edifices might be different,  
And a reasoning mind is supposed to help,  
Yet, outside or inside, filth, disrespect,  
blame and insult defines Decency and indecency, forever seductive bed partners.  
The pendulum shakes its head as thinking minds are lost, and at loss.  
We crib, complain…eternal narcissists, we blow steam recklessly.

They seem to know more and we look down upon them…the animals.  
Who really are the animals?

Copper fix  
labyrinths of dust  
guard the house  
that no longer stands.  
Rickety bones, I waver  
by it’s side torn that it is half broken with pieces in air. House of dreams.  
How apocryphal are your stories  
the plum and peach trees dissolving into winter’s thick nights of pestilence broken windows.  
Are the glass shades not enough to see mirages, of those deaths taken place. You are no ghost  
you are just broken, shattered,  
your crumbling walls and vapid paint echo another past, past which is entrenched into others’ wombs.

Give birth to a new gnomic order of worldliness. See, the moon is half stuck in the skies under which the shed, where she lived, crawling woman, peering eyes took shelter  
When those murderous rains threatened sanity.  
You saw all that but still unbroken.

Ananya Sankar Guha is a Bengali who lives and works in Shillong. He is an academic administrator at the Indira Gandhi National Open University. He has been writing and publishing poetry for over thirty years. He says that he writes poetry instinctively.

Remembering My Grandmother  
(14X18, Oil on Canvas)  
by Meenakshi Mohan

“I have come to dedicate my lamp to the sky!”

Gitanjali by Rabindranath Tagore
**Nature can deceive**

Moth on bark or parakeet on bough,  
Seeming other than they are,  
Teach us that Nature loves deceit;  
Yet priggish man exalts the truth,  
Being then most seeming in his  
Moral camouflage.

**Photosynthesis**

One morning on the bus,  
The rain-blobs on the window  
Caught the orange of the street lamps,  
Shivered a little and slid aslant.

One evening in the park  
The soft renaissance of treetops,  
Filtering the sunlight  
Made a golden highway.

I am photo-sensitive,  
But I absorb the light:

All that dazzles and refracts  
Is safely inside.

**Points of View**

The worm’s-eye view  
Is fine for you,  
Until you see  
That cavity  
The bird’s-eye view  
Can seldom do.

Mr Madhavan is a retired Indian diplomat who had worked in many countries including London, Moscow, Tokyo and Bonn as Commissioner and Ambassador. His interests include literature, history, music, cultural interchanges and speculative thought. He has also written poems in English.

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**Dulwich Park in May**  
*by A. Madhavan*

Birds at dormitory gossip,  
Where the rhododendrons blaze,  
Many-coloured as the slacks  
Under the slanting sun.

O man in a check-suit  
Posing against the bower,  
Your snap will miss the fragrance  
Of this afternoon.

Cute toddler unconcerned  
To snap the slanting time,  
One day you will learn  
What I nearly missed.

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**Inside A Sanctuary**  
*By Amarendra Khatua*

Draw a circle please.  
Before I step inside, do  
Construct an arc of  
Unmade assurances.

See how I totter  
With anticipation. This body  
Of shredded disguise  
Has to find a foothold  
In the island of sheer  
Acceptance. You have  
To be around somewhere.

Then you paint the pictures  
The tree branches whispering with  
The wind, a naïve cloud flying in  
Autumn abandon, we are to  
Discover lifesize togetherness  
Or a forest of waiting vibrating in  
Wordlessness.

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We are inside the circle, woman,  
Each step has its own calling,  
If in the name of love, we dance  
With drunken steps, if in despair,  
Our songs die before I read  
The message without your  
muted declarations.

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**Atonement**

She stumbles and falls,  
I hear. Not a single day  
Passes by when I do not  
Cover my blind eyes and  
Stay hidden.

I am not blind by birth.  
My wingless dreams  
Populate my corrupt world.  
She mumbles and prays,  
I curse. The days grow  
Into habituated cruelty,  
We just exchange symbols.

We are not other people. We  
Build a house and christen the  
Doormats into a home. We  
Craft nine months into  
a beautiful future, a child  
Is named. Then the apnea  
Of daily passage  
Unburdens a whole picture  
Of insincerity. She knows,  
I wish I knew!

Where are the groping hands  
In shameful happiness?  
She never blames, I store  
My fangs and lust under  
My borrowed shadows. Now I  
Wear her pain as my  
accomplishment and she continues  
With the life as if nothing  
Has happened, in my admission  
Of a pretence that I forgive no more.

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Ex-Diplomat Amarendra  
Khatua is now Secretary in the  
Ministry of External Affairs and  
Dean in the Foreign Service Insti-  
tute in New Delhi.
Black and white paintings can be highly evocative, creating an illusion of movement in the sparse outline of a charging bison or a clump of bamboo leaves. The Japanese art of “Sumi-e” or Ink painting and its derivation, “Suiboku”, or Ink and Wash painting, can create vivid images with minimalist lines and brush strokes. Japanese artists use various media in their painting. Ink and brush combine to make monochrome pictures, where black ink is diluted into shades of grey. In contrast, the folding screens and paintings in Japanese castles and temples glow with colours on gold backgrounds. Light colours on paper or silken scrolls are the acme, the silk producing a mellow and delicate portrayal of flowers or landscapes. Even now artists in Japan are innovative, while following traditional techniques.

Sumi-e and Suiboku reflect Zen concepts. The very lack of colour, except for black and shades of grey, is hard to work with; but focuses on the essential nature of the subject in the true spirit of Zen. The preparations for painting create a contemplative frame of mind. The paper is laid out, brushes placed in proper order along with water and, finally the ink stick is ground into a thick solution.

The artist has to concentrate to paint with “One Touch”, without overworking the lines. The blank areas are as important to the composition as the painted ones. The Canadian artist, Norman Sjoman, writing as “Naramani Somnath”, describes this as “painting the empty spaces”. In the Indian tradition and often in western art, a picture is filled with detail, not complemented by blank spaces. The Canadian artist, Norman Sjoman, writing as “Naramani Somnath”, describes this as “painting the empty spaces”. In the Indian tradition and often in western art, a picture is filled with detail, not complemented by blank spaces.

From 1985 to 1988, when we were with the Indian Embassy in Tokyo, I was able to learn ink painting from Mme. Shoko Ohta, a fine exponent of the art. I joined a weekly class which I keenly looked forward to.

Shoko Ohta, addressed by her pupils as “Ohta Sensei” [teacher or guru], was born in 1930 in Kobe. In 1945, she must have known of the cataclysmic events in her nation’s history. Devoted to her art, she set herself to propagate it, teaching foreign students as well. She had great dignity, composure and confidence. She always appeared in fine silk Kimonos with the appropriate floral motif for the season, a brocaded sash or Obi round her waist, her short and abundant black hair neatly styled. She did not wear jewellery. She and her daughter, a fourth generation painter of the family, continue to teach in Tokyo.

She taught me how shades of colour can be translated into monochrome strokes by varying the darkness of the ink or the pressure of the brush on paper, how lines should flow from the brush to pulse with life, the leit-motif being “One Touch”, spontaneity. We had to observe the subject, keeping in mind the appropriate brush stroke to depict it. I remain grateful to her for showing me the grace of small things: a blade of grass springing from the stem, lake-side reeds or the translucent, veined wing of a dragon-fly.

Though my hand may lose dexterity, my eye and mind will perceive beauty all around, translated into strokes from Ohta’s brush, following “the way of the brush.”

Girija Madhavan; Following in the footsteps of her mother, Mukta Venkatesh, Girija is both a writer and an artist. She lives with her ex-diplomat husband in Mysore.
GROWING UP IN SUGAR PLANTATION GUYANA

by Cyril Dabydeen

Canefields are far away, yet close up. Feelings mixed in with abstractions, memory and consciousness in a time of my youth. A cane factory loomed large at the Rose Hall sugar plantation, where I was born and had grown up (before moving to Canada in my twenties). But the Rose Hall-Canje district is a special place in Berbice, the “ancient county” (so-called), where the first sugar plantation was founded by the Dutchman Abraham van Pere, in 1600. The word Berbice derives from the Arawak word birbishi, meaning banana: a special, indigenous kind. Here in this wider Canje region at Magdalenenburgh the first slave rebellion occurred, in 1763—now called the Berbice Slave Revolution, pre-dating the totemic Haitian slave revolution with heroes like Coffy and Akara.

After Abolition of slavery, my East Indian forebears were brought to the region as indentured labourers starting in 1838 and ending in 1917. During this period the two main races—Africans and Indians—the underclass, mixed in an unconditional way due to forced labour. Latent hostility tied to ethnicity and stark economics compounded their insecurity. In the sugar-plantation world, the struggle to survive aligned with their anonymity and degradation. British historian Hugh Tinker called the Indian indentured labour system “another form of slavery.”

In the early fifties and sixties when I grew up, I recall visiting a logie—initially a slave dwelling—a bare, narrow wooden structure housing the cane workers, as part of that seminal life. Workers in those years came to my grandmother’s cake-shop, as I watched them and later wrote about their hardships and mannerisms, in a hodgepodge life. Indeed, 239,000 Indian indentured servants—called coolies—came to Guyana. Many also returned-re-migration to India—causing its own trauma.

The Rose Hall plantation run by the Bookers-McConnell Company I knew well. I taught in a school situated almost across the mammoth sugar-cane factory a few hundred yards away. Some years earlier, I’d watched white sugar-estate overseers (mostly from Scotland and Ireland) on their heavy mules going along the narrow village roadways and canals as long lines of iron cane-punts traversed to the cane factory. The cane-punts often clanged thunderously. One or two overseers would end up in my grandmother’s shop, and we mutely called them backra-man (perhaps derived from Victorian English explorer James White Baker whose father, James Baker, was a prominent sugar merchant).

My maternal grandfather (he died when I was four or five) was known as Albion Driver (“Albion” was romantically associated with England); but he actually came from another plantation in the Corentyne district named Albion and might have started as an indentured labourer-turned-supervisor. He was mimicked as a maharajah and my grandmother as a maharani. In an odd way, India reinvented itself then in our district, and Indian religious beliefs mixed in with West African lore. A dialectal-creole language evolved. Rituals and customs commingled as a nascent Guyanese spirit slowly formed. But our Indian forebears were associated with the subcontinent. With the younger ones, a sense of the new place with nationhood started forming. Provenance, it was: our being Guyanese with a vague British sensibility in our English-speaking South America.

Images associated with Rudyard Kipling’s tales and the British Empire were also redolent, communicated via the Royal Reader canon. Lore from the Ramayana and the Bhagavada Gita was in the background, alongside Tagore’s Gitanjali, which stirred our instincts alongside Muslim and Christian sensibilities. Ram and Sita, and the monkey-god Hanuman, as well as the figure of Ravana, came close up—as cane-fires burned in my imagination. I regularly visited the nearby town of New Amsterdam in my vicarious wandering: the public library and the British Council Library became my regular haunts. The polarities of coastland and hinterland stirred us too, geography being destiny; and the local but elusive South American jaguar was somehow associated with the fearsome Bengal tiger as more than trope.

Village houses were built on stilts, like our Adelphi Poorhall Settlement—our demarcated space (and place); but in Rose Hall the estate manager and overseers lived conspicuously in palatial homes with splendourous lawns of hibiscus and ixora. Above all, the sugar factory kept grinding. Heady molasses smells would rise. Sucrose permeated the air. I would watch the workers come home, faces blackened with cane ash after a long day in the field. Labour strikes and the concomitant politics of nationalism grew. As the years rolled on, a burning desire to achieve self-determination and betterment subsisted with an anti-colonial verve tinged with sometimes Marxist ideals.

A time of turmoil and frenzy, it was. Cold-war politics raged as Castro’s Cuba emerged and became iconic. Local leaders like Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham sought to shape futures and...
Looking back from Canada, I knew everything remained in the ubiquitous consciousness: as memory is the mother of the imagination. At a Writers Union of Canada gathering in Ottawa where I was an invited guest panelist, I evoked the kala pani and the first and last ships coming from India through the “dark water”. My Indian forebears forged more than a notional jahagi or tribal consciousness. Novelist V.S. Naipaul, however, goes against this grain with an individual existentialism. To the Writers Union audience I drew attention to the eponymous Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa—the name of one of the last ships that brought indentured peoples to Guyana. I would recreate my grand grandmother and another great grandfather, who came as a young boy on the last ship to the “land of many waters,” (Guyana). So it will again resonate next year at the UN’s 100th Anniversary of the Abolition of Indentureship. Canefields will burn in the Canadian snow, deep in the heart of my beliefs and memory—nothing less.

A former Poet Laureate of Ottawa, Cyril Dabydeen was born in Guyana, South America. He teaches Writing at the University of Ottawa. He has written a number of books including novels and poetry. He is included in the Heinemann, Oxford and Penguin Books of Caribbean Verse. His novel, Drums of My Flesh won the top Tree Press—about it). Resonances, echoes, everywhere.

**ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR**

**By Migel Jayasinghe**

The only self-aware species in the natural world is us, homo sapiens. We feel, we think, we use language, and have developed elaborate, hierarchically institutions like the nation-state, religion, science, technology, customs, culture and civilizations. Over centuries we have accumulated knowledge and acquired control of both the external world and to some extent the inner workings of that unique apparatus, the human mind. Although almost continuously throughout recorded history, we have been murderously at war with each other, collectively, we have also extended our capacity, and power, to do things at an exponential rate. All this is of course a general statement about human potential for achievement as a species, and does not reflect the wide and varied limitations under which any one individual lives.

Humans, even when at war, tend to live within accepted boundaries of right and wrong usually reinforced by legal sanctions and penalties. Worryingly, the current Syrian conflict has brought even this time-honoured premise into question. Morality and ethics are important to humans, although there are no universally agreed or accepted rules. There are no absolute standards, and no fixed and firm reference points as to what ethical conduct involves. However, world religions, even when they are in conflict with each other, demand adherence to what they claim to be universal standards. And so, ethics is held to be important in both private and public life. Guilt and shame are associated with any transgressions which are almost always felt initially at the unconscious level.

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The other day, I had occasion to contemplate and negotiate a line of ethical conduct. I drove up to the local supermarket to buy a few grocery items. There was a large queue at the till, and I felt pressured to conclude the transaction quickly. I put the groceries into a bag I had brought with me, and received the bill and the change for a 20.00 euro note. The receipt was for 4.14 euros. I therefore thought to have received 15.86 euros as change. It had been my practice to put the receipt straight into the grocery bag, which I did unthinkingly. Then realised that I had only 5.86 euros as change in my hand. By then, I had moved a few steps away from the till, and the next customer was being served. I interrupted the check-out operator and told her I needed a further 10.00 euros as change. She asked for the receipt, which I fished out of the bag, without even a glance at it. The checkout person then opened the till and gave me a ten euro note.

On returning home, when I was emptying the grocery bag I discovered a ten euro note there. I then looked inside my wallet and found the extra ten euro note, I realised, I was not entitled to. To return 10.00 euros meant driving a few kilometres back to the supermarket. I could have reminded myself of at least a couple of occasions when I was short changed (deliberately or not) to justify keeping the money. No, that wouldn’t have been ethical. So, without further ado, I returned to the supermarket and handed the 10 euro note to the cashier explaining the circumstances.

Migel Jayasinghe is the author of ‘Solace in Verse’ (2013) SBPRA. He is also a retired Occupational Psychologist in the UK.
Meeta looked at the clock on the wall. It was 8.20 already. In ten minutes her elder sister would phone her from Bangalore. Through the open window she could hear the neighbour’s wife shouting at her husband again.

“What is there in a marriage?” thought Meeta. “Only fighting and shouting.”

Her father had died before he could get her married. So Meeta had remained unmarried. In her youth she had lived in the hope that one day her brothers would find her a good husband so she had never bothered with her education. But the brothers had better things to do than look for a husband for their sister and pay a huge dowry. As time went by Meeta moved in with a widowed sister who had no children and who lived in Bhubaneswar. But now that she had crossed the age of fifty she was beginning to see the futility of marriage. Her days rolled by in a steady pace. It was only in the evenings that she found it hard to pass her time. So she had found this wonderful pastime of phoning her eldest sister who now phoned her at a fixed time every evening.

Some months back Meeta had bought a mobile phone and asked the neighbour’s son to teach her how to use it. Now suddenly the world had opened up. “So what if I have neither a career nor a husband, neither a college degree nor children,” she thought. “I have this little object in my hand and it can bring me all the happiness in the world.”

The little red mobile phone rang and Meeta picked it up at once and said, “Hello, Didi. How are you?”

“Not very well. My foot is aching again.”

“So, what was the result of the blood-test?” she asked.

“The blood sugar level is 240. But that is nothing. The heart is the problem.”

“I know, I know,” said Meeta with a tone of finality. “The doctor has blocked it. He has tried every possible course not!”

“My daughter has gone to her friend’s house to the astrologer. Anyway, what could he predict? He has paid someone to stop his promotion.”

“Yes, yes,” said her sister at once. “Why don’t you go on Friday and ask the astrologer for him. What can his evil ex-wife do if the stars can be made to do something else?”

“You are absolutely right,” exclaimed her sister with a sense of relief that in her next life she would not have to live through this discomfort.

Meeta knew that advice would be obeyed to the letter. Before long, tickets would be booked and hotel rooms reserved. She would then spend two wonderful weeks in Ayodhya guiding her sister in all the rituals that had to be followed. Meera was sometimes surprised at her sister’s blind faith in her. Sometimes she thought that if she asked her to jump into a well she would do it.

“By the way, what happened to your daughter when you should be living with your husband?” said Meeta forcefully.

“Maybe she has invented sorrows.”

“Sneha has gone to her friend’s house and will be back soon,” said the older sister who was nearly 70 years old. “It’s so wonderful to be able to chat to you while she is away.”

“Your daughter has no time to listen to you. After all, what can she understand of your life? These modern women! All they know is money.” Sneha, her sister’s daughter, was working in a bank and had a hectic social life.

Her sister was speaking again. “She knows that I talk to you but has she once said ‘How is Auntie’? Never! She and her husband talk endlessly but rarely there is a word for me.”

“Why are you so upset? I told you I was there for you. You can call me at any moment of the day.”

“Luckily, you are there. My heart feels so light when I have spoken to you.”

“I know, I know,” said Meeta with a laugh. “You have nothing to worry as long as I am there.” There was a silence. “Remember to fast on Tuesday,” she added.

“Sneha has gone to her friend’s house to the astrologer. What can his evil ex-wife do if the stars can be made to do something else?”

“You are absolutely right,” exclaimed her sister with a sense of relief that in her next life she would not have to live through this discomfort.

Meeta knew that advice would be obeyed to the letter. Before long, tickets would be booked and hotel rooms reserved. She would then spend two wonderful weeks in Ayodhya guiding her sister in all the rituals that had to be followed. Meera was sometimes surprised at her sister’s blind faith in her. Sometimes she thought that if she asked her to jump into a well she would do it.

“By the way, what happened to your son’s promotion?”

“Someone is taking revenge on him and has blocked it. He has tried every possible way out of this terrible situation but nothing has worked. Poor boy!”

“Everybody wants to pull everyone down,” said Meeta with a tone of finality. “It’s Raja’s ex-wife who is after his blood. She has paid someone to stop his promotions.”

“She is away.”

“I know of a good astrologer in Puri. He can predict everything. If one pays something to him he can even change a man’s destiny with his powers. I was just thinking about Raja. I could easily go and see the astrologer for him. What can his evil ex-wife do if the stars can be made to do something else?”

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“Yes, yes,” said her sister at once. “Why don’t you go on Friday and ask the astrologer if he can do something. Pay him a thousand rupees. See if he can get all this bad luck out of the way.”

“Yes, I can get that done. It’s only a couple of hours by bus to Puri.”

“Take an air-conditioned bus. I’ll send you the money for the bus fare and also the money that you have to give to the astrologer. This is so important.”

“Yes, I will do that. The heat is unbearable these days.”

From the neighbour’s house she could hear the dramatic music of a television serial. How people loved looking at invented sorrows.

Meeta smiled to herself. That little mobile phone in her hand had such powers. She was connected to a comfortable life. Her sister’s money was bringing to her the kind of enjoyment no husband or son could have given her. Was she begging for it? Of course not.

“Didi, it’s time for our favourite television serial,” said Meeta, cutting her sister short in the middle of a long account of all her sorrows. “I will speak to you again tomorrow.”

“Yes, yes, tomorrow,” said her sister, ending the conversation.

Meeta rushed to the television and switched it on. The adverts were coming in one by one. Her mind was elsewhere. The weeklong holiday to Puri had to be properly planned. She would phone the guest-house the next day. She need not even go to the astrologer. Anyway, what could he say that she could not invent?

Sunayana Panda is a writer and an actress. She divides her time between London and Pondicherry in India. (picture attached)
The first woman on the podium stood up. She was from Uttar Pradesh. She looked nervous and embarrassed, clearly not used to public attention. There was an awkward silence. A restless susurration started in the audience. Suddenly in a burst of shrill words, she blurted out, "If there is a next birth, I will not like to marry this man," and sat down.

Stunned silence! The only audible sound in the auditorium was the flutter of a pigeon in an alcove.

Everyone knew the man referred to. Ten writers from regional languages had responded to the invitation and brought their spouses along to this Annual Award Conferment function. The wives were seated in the front row on the stage. Behind each woman sat her husband. The ladies were dressed in their regional colourful attire which made for a pretty sight.

The writers looked at each other in consternation.

The Hon’ble Minister of Arts and Aesthetics, sitting on the front sofa with his entourage had a bland expression.

Lines of worry appeared on Dr. S.R. Patkar’s face. He had recently been hand-picked by the Ministry from the Indian Cultural Council to join as the Secretary of the Centre for Arts because he had a reputation for original and innovative thinking. He had found the Centre in a state of limbo. Even the prestigious Annual Award Conferment programme was thinly attended. The monthly event of AuthorSpeak had become a joke, as only a handful of superannuated stragglers, on the lookout for an air-conditioned space and a free cup of tea and snacks, appeared.

Therefore, this year Dr. Patkar had laid out a different template for the Annual programme. The wives were to talk about their lives with their writer-husbands. It had had the desired effect. The hall was chockfull.

The compere collected herself and invited the second lady who was an Odiya. She was sharp-featured and lanky, with an erect figure and belligerent air. She turned out to be explosive material.

She launched a vitriolic attack on her husband, "He is neither a grateful son, nor a good husband, nor a responsible father. Worst of all, he is not even a good human being."

A hush of the graveyard descended on the hall. Everyone saw her husband squirm. Dr. Patkar fidgeted painfully, as if he was sitting on nails.

She drew in breath and resumed, "He never took his ailing father to a doctor. Can you imagine? His very own father! I did. He always ignored the whining of his old mother for Zarda and paan or massage-oil for her arthritic knees. I would get her these. He did not spend time with our two growing daughters, nor did he ever help them with the homework. They hate him now."

She took a sip of water.

"He tried to stifle my ambition to become a writer. I wrote poetry in the little spare time I got and gave him my poems to read. He scoffed at them and called them crap. I lost confidence and stopped writing. After a long gap I resumed and today I have two published collections of poems to my credit."

The audience had turned into mannequins.

The next, a Sindhi lady, looked angry when she stood up.

"My husband is a flirt and a rake. He has multiple affairs. He goes gallivanting with nubile girls who send him drooling fan mail and then writes about them in his novels and short stories. I wish somebody would sue him for defamation! Forget about me. I have given up on him long back. But what is he teaching our growing up son? I am afraid he might become a clone of his degenerate father. I don’t want our son to imitate his immoral ways. Therefore, I have decided to divorce him.

A gender divide took place among the audience. Women were happy and cheered when their sisters shedded their husbands to pieces and felt proud of them. Men maintained a glum, sullen silence.

The last lady to speak was Bengali. She was dusky, of medium height and highly articulate. She dropped a bombshell. "He is a thief. He should be arrested and jailed."

The audience, both men and women, gaped.

"He lifts pages from old novels of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, and even Tagore and cooks up a novel which he calls his own. It gets good reviews and a large number of copies are sold. Let the Centre for Arts appoint an Enquiry Committee who should run the plagiarism software on his works to see how much he has stolen from the classical writers."

Her husband stood up, red-faced, and shouted, “Have we been invited here to be honoured or insulted? This is atrocious. I walk out in protest.”

The others exchanged glances briefly and then they, too, stomped out. The women in the audience hooted them and shouted “Male chauvinist pigs!” Some of the men retaliated with “Down with feminist propaganda!”

The Minister got up and left. Dr. Patkar tried to read the Minister’s face, but couldn’t make out his expression. Dr. Patkar saw the dark clouds looming. He would not be spared; he would have to pay with his job.

Dr. Patkar could not sleep a wink at night. In the morning, he got ready and came to office with a heavy heart. He headed straight to his room, without answering the greetings of the staff and started waiting for the doomcall from the Ministry. It did not take long. With trembling hands he picked up the receiver.

“The Hon’ble Minister wants you to see him at 11.30 am sharp,” It was the Minister’s PA.

“Very well done, Patkar. You have blazed a new trail. Something like this was needed to shake up the dying Centre for Arts. I am going to constitute a committee to overhaul the government-funded institutions set up to promote arts and culture. Would you like to head it?”

Subhash Chandra retired as Professor of English from Delhi University. He has published four books of criticism, several research articles as well as short stories in Indian and foreign journals.
**IT WAS NOT TO BE**

*By Malathy Sitaram*

It is depressing to read news from India that cover the harsh treatment including murder meted out to young couples who have fallen in love and wish to marry but are thwarted from doing so by their parents who continue to wield the big stick for monetary reasons perhaps or because the person chosen does not meet their expectations of the partner suitable to the community or because they had long decided who the partner should be. The story below is based on a real life tragedy that took place in the thirties.

The year: 1932, the place: Madras City, the capital of Madras Presidency. A march by University Students supporting the Independence movement is taking place. About a 100 young men and women wearing khadi clothing, waving banners, their faces solemn, are walking briskly in the centre of town. The march is led by a youth with a shock of black, unruly hair shouting, “We want freedom”. The city had made significant contributions to the Independence Movement since the 20s when M.K. Gandhi had taken over the leadership of the Indian National Congress.

The procession was followed by the police in jeeps and on foot with batons ready for use at their sides. Pedestrians cheered as the students marched past, shopkeepers came out thrusting fists in the air. Within an hour the students halted and started to make their way back to their respective colleges. The youth who had headed the procession stopped to chat with friends. “Hey, Venkat, that went very well. We must do this again”, someone cried. A young woman clad in a skirt and blouse came up to congratulate Venkat. Turning to look at her, his heart seemed to jolt as if electrified and he was speechless. He was gazing at a pair of grey green eyes, fringed with long lashes in a pale skinned face and for the first time in his life he was mesmerized. Recovering his composure he asked what her name was. Her name was Sara Jacob and she was studying chemistry at Queen Mary's College, the well-known Christian college for girls and lived in the hostel. His heart thudding, he asked her if he could walk with her to the college which was not too far off. He told her it was extraordinary, but he too was a Chemistry student at the Jesuit Missionary College for Boys and he too lived in the college hostel. They were both eighteen years of age.

And so began the love story of Venkat and Sara. It was fated. On that memorable day, they were in a small group of returning students but stayed side by side telling one another about their antecedents and their ambitions. Sarah was a Syrian Christian, her mother tongue, Malayalam. He, a Brahmin Iyer from a strictly orthodox, vegetarian household, his mother tongue, Tamil. He had lost his father some years ago, and was the youngest of a large family of brothers and sisters all of whom were married and settled in different parts of India. His recently widowed mother lived with his widowed sister in Trichi. This, let it be remembered was still an era of child marriage and extreme caste prejudice. He was a brilliant scholar, finishing school in Trichi with flying colours. His much older brothers decided he should have the benefit of university education in Madras and took care of the college fees as well as supporting their mother.

He did not know anything about Syrian Christians and as they walked back, she told him about it being the earliest form of Christianity. The apostle now known as St Thomas travelled to India in the first century AD from the Middle East, arriving in Kerala which served as an entry point for traders sailing from Greece and Rome. Thomas set about preaching the Christian doctrine with the permission of the local king who even permitted him to build a church similar in its practice to very early churches in Persia and Eastern Syria. The converts called themselves Syrian Christians and their liturgy was in the ancient Syriac language.

She too had felt an electrical charge throughout their walk and when their hands brushed one another she trembled. It was time to part. Venkat took his fill of gazing into those stunningly beautiful eyes. They had decided to write to one another to arrange meetings. That one mile electrified walk made them want to be together again soon. They found a small coffee house well away from both colleges where they could meet occasionally and hold hands under the table. They also took long public bus rides once a week to distant suburbs and back simply relishing sitting next to each other, chatting endlessly about their backgrounds, their love of the country and their aspirations. She told him about her family and her mother’s plans to find a suitable boy from their community to be Sarah’s husband. Venkat’s heart sank. Could he live without Sara?

They found a less frequented beach in Madras where after sunset, far from prying eyes, they became lovers. They could not bear being apart. They planned to have a civil wedding once they had graduated in a year’s time knowing that their families would not sanction the union. He was confident of getting a good job that would allow them to lead a simple life together. He knew how his mother would react. “Marrying a Christian! Someone of a low caste! What sin had she committed to be punished in this way?” Maybe his brothers would withdraw their financial support. It was almost a year since they had first met but their passion had not diminished. Examinations were looming and it was better not to meet for a while. Venkat was determined to get a first and studied late into the night, knowing Sara would be doing the same. The seven days of revision and study, gave him confidence and he felt he had acquitted himself very well in the papers and oral tests. He was now impatient to see Sara and his heart leapt with anticipation. They would discuss their marriage plans. They had agreed to meet at the usual bus stop the day after the exams. He set out to meet her but she was not there. After more than an hour, he walked aimlessly returning to the bus stop full of foreboding. Finally he returned to his college exhausted.

The days passed and Venkat sank into despair. Where was she?

Three weeks later he received a letter. He recognized Sara’s handwriting on the envelope. Fingers trembling, he removed the letter and opened it. As he read, the room seemed to swirl around him and he had to sit down. Sara wrote to say that she had been seen with him in the coffee shop and on the bus by someone who knew her family. Her parents had arrived at her college before the second last day of the exam and had taken her home to Trivandrum where she was kept locked in her bedroom. The following week she had been married off to a young Syrian Christian man from a decent family. She now lived with him not far from her parental home. She bid Venkat farewell and wished him good luck.

The following morning Venkat’s friend called for him as usual to go together to the classroom. On not getting any response he had opened the door and found Venkat’s body slumped on the floor. The boy was dead. Near his body was a small strip of paper with some powdery material at the edges. A strong odour of almonds hung round the room.

**Malathy Sitaram** was the first Asian to teach English in Wilthire Schools and simultaneously, the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace. Now retired, she is just as busy.
A TALE OF FOUR CITIES

By Our Chennai correspondent Innamburan

Come August, I am in the august company of scholars from distant shores, at École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Pondy.

Puducherry is the official name since 2006 of Pondicherry, an enclave of mystique and irresistible French charm on the Coromandel Coast. “Luminous and unforgettable,” this 343-year young Puducherry had earned the fond sobriquet, ‘Pondy’. Pondy figures in the novel, Life of Pi by Yann Martel as its ‘blend of French colonial and Indian culture is unique in South India and a true one-off for travellers.’

Archaeological digs have unearthed Roman pottery excavated from nearby Arikamedu revealing ancient trading with the Roman Empire. The kingdoms of the Pallavas, Cholas and Pandyas had suzerainty over this territory during their heydays, only to lose it to colonial encroachers from Europe: Portuguese/Dutch/Danes/English and French. The French emerged as victors in battles for supremacy in 1673, only ceding Pondy to free India in 1954 after centuries of French occupation.

My first visit to Pondy was in 1960 and I could see the ‘white’ town sporting French colonial architecture and even the streets (still charmingly called ‘rues’) were Parisian in character. The ‘black’ town was pushed back to the interior with its typical verandas, tiled roofs, barred windows and street houses. Interaction being minimal between the two races, we have the Tale of Two Cities. I value the Black Town as the abode for his Sadhana. The Ashram remained of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in two separate chambers, the physical remains of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and attracts pilgrims daily.

The UNESCO “World Memory” Register archives the research work completed at the centre. Dr. Anjaneya Sarma, our Sanskrit professor and Dr. Eva Wilden, my Tamil professor are recipients of Presidential Awards. Doctoral students come from all over the globe. The welcome addition this year was that of four young female Ph.D. aspirants from the Central University, Thiruvayur. The summer programme is hectic with classes, fora, concerts and field trips. I return to Chennai rejuvenated, every year. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it in his Book of Pilgrimage, “By day Thou are the Legend and the Dream. That like a whisper floats about all men, The deep and brooding stillnesses which seem, After the hour has struck, to close again.”

Both EFEO and IFP merit longer narratives.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram dominates the Pondy landscape with its integral Yoga, rule books, stooping elders, real estate ownership of about four hundred mansions, acute business acumen, reams of controversies and litigation. I doubt whether Sri Aurobindo would fit in with the milieu of the contemporary Ashram!

Sri Aurobindo (1872 -1950) was British to the core through his upbringing. A Cambridge alumnus, he spurned the Indian Civil Service, opting to serve the forward-looking Baroda Government for eleven years. His self-education and prolonged reflections led to the spiritual edifice of the Ashram in Pondy. Incensed by Curzon’s Partition of Bengal, he returned to Bengal as a rebel and presided over the riotous Surat Indian National Congress Meet. Acquitted of sedition charges in 1907, he was arrested in the Alipore Conspiracy Case. Jailed, the revolutionary in him had transformed into a Karmayogin by 1910. He chose Pondy as the Abode for his Sadhana. The Ashram had ‘grown around him as its centre’ (as he put it) when he handed over the mantle to his spiritual collaborator, “the Mother”, a French woman, earlier known as Mirra Alfassa (1878 - 1979) in 1914. A white marble shrine in the tree-shaded Courtyard of the main Ashram building holds, in two separate chambers, the physical remains of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and attracts pilgrims daily.

Srinivasan Soundararajan (Innamburan) is a Tamil scholar with degrees in Economics, Applied Sociology and Tamil Literature. He has long resided from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service in which he served as Additional Deputy Comptroller & Auditor General of India. He has also spent some years working in the UK as an Adviser for the Citizens’ Advice Bureau.
As expected, the escalating Indo-Pak conflict is creating havoc all around. The cultural community, too, is facing bans of all kinds. Artists from Pakistan are not allowed to perform in India and vice versa; bollywood films are not permitted there. When Indian superstar, Salman Khan, spoke against the ban, he was severely criticized from all quarters. As the situation worsens, we seem to be forgetting that the two countries share a common cultural heritage, be it in film, music, art, poetry or theatre. Having worked extensively with sufii and partition literature, I know there has always been unity between the two communities. Hindu poets used to interact freely with their Muslim counterparts and many gatherings would begin with the prayer: ‘May God bless Hindus, Muslims and all others’. The big question is: will the power brokers that be, understand the language of sharing and love? Obviously in this nuclear, global set-up, that language is all but forgotten. Thanks to Heritage Foundation USA, the memory will be etched in full. Many channels are adding to the rousing political state-of-the-art. It’s truly heartening to see that some Indians intellectuals, like Shri Aurobindo, had envisaged creating a different kind of society. During my recent trip to Pondicherry and Auroville in the south of India, one was exposed to the possibilities of alternative ways of living. Auroville, as many people know, is home to over 50 nationalities, all working to create an environment that’s in harmony with nature. Ofcourse, there are problems, but not the massive ones we face in today’s scenario. Many organizations there are also striving to preserve their receding beaches. Pondycan, a citizen’s action network, focuses on coastal environment sustainability. In places like Mumbai, too, the coastline is under constant threat with the increasing reclamation of land. Not many seem to care. A Shivaji statue is being built in the middle of the sea in Mumbai at the cost of millions. Prime Minister Modi has begun the process of setting up ‘smart cities’. But, it seems, he cannot see beyond technology! The ‘smart cities’ fail to utilize our rich culture resources, be it in auroveda, agriculture or building expertise. There is blatant imitation of western failures. Also, with multi-nationals flooding the market, youngsters are glued to mobiles and other devices. The epidemic is not only in the cities, but has spread to the villages. Obviously, technology has its advantages, but, here, it seems to have become the end all! Realizing the process of setting up ‘smart cities’, has been a failure; the vast repertoire makes it all harder.

The Dalit movement continues to be in the news. Over the years, it has given birth to many folk musicians, who sing paeans to Babasaheb Ambedkar. Their music speaks of breaking the shackles of exploitative Brahminical structures. The vast repertoire of Bhim Geet (Ambedkar songs), has been the lifeblood of agitations. The traditional community-based songs are giving way to a new generation of Dalit pop singers. Caste is still their main agenda.

As a doctor came and cured it.

I am from a backward community. In our community, I represent the healed generation. Naturally, I will be his ‘deewana’.

One of our best-known writers, Mahasweta Devi, passed away. She worked for the down-trodden tribes all her life. Her stature in the pantheon of Indian literature is well known with books such as Hajar Churashir Maa and Sri Ganesh Mahima. Anju Makkija is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet, translator and playwright based in Mumbai who has written/edited books related to partition, Sufism, women’s poetry and theatre. Her articles and columns have appeared in several newspapers. makkijaanjum@gmail.com
The great Hindu philosopher Radhakrishnan who became President of India once observed that India had inherited three glorious gifts from Britain: Shakespeare, the King James’s Authorized Version of the Bible and the limited liability company. The poet Macaulay who is often criticised by right-wing nationalists for having “imposed English on Indians” by issuing his famous Minute on Indian Education (1835) should in fact be thanked. He firstly gave the Subcontinent a common link language whereby a Bengali could speak to a Malayali and a Tamil could speak to a Punjabi. Secondly, English gave Indians ready access to modern science, technology, medicine and secular thought. Without English, India would never have achieved the industrial progress that it has. English is not only the International Language but is also an Interplanetary language. The American who first landed on the Moon spoke to us Earthlings in English. Not in French, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic or Hindi.

I am prompted to make these statements after having read Professor Brijraj Singh’s recently published memoirs: Professing English on Two Continents (Zorba Books, Gurgaon. India). ISBN 978-93-8502062-9. Rupees 299). He hails from central India and was despatched to Daly College in Indore, a British-type public school that educated the offspring of the Indian gentry. After that he joined St John’s College, Agra (founded by Anglican missionaries) and it was there that I met him. We both did well in our MA (English Literature) degree examinations though I must confess that he did rather better than I did. However, we were both appointed lecturers and embarked upon a life in academia.

Soon after I left for France (the Sorbonne and Lille) and he got a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford where he acquired an English Honours degree. He returned to India where he taught English at St Stephen’s in Delhi and became head of the department of English and Dean. He obviously enjoyed himself professionally as a teacher but also the social and cultural milieu that Delhi provided. His descriptions of the tug and pull and polemics among academics ring true. They exist all over the world, even among the top brass of leading international universities. The shenanigans at St Stephen’s reminded me of the rivalries in a Cambridge college so vividly recorded in C.P. Snow’s masterly novel The Masters.

However, Brijraj Singh names those whom he considered conspiratorial but does not stint in praising the high-minded such as Principal Rajpal. He lists his promising students such as Anwar Ahmer and Prabhu Guptara as well as several others. He recalls his dear friend Noorul Hassan, now a leading professor of English. Brijraj Singh is not only an inspiring teacher of English literature but also a loving guru (ustad). He writes: “When I think of these extraordinary students and their extraordi-nary accomplishments, I feel a bit like Yeats must have felt when he visited the municipal gallery and saw the portraits of his old associates, all of them now extremely distinguished.”

‘The Prof’, as I call him, then decided to migrate to North Eastern India. He and his American wife Frances joined the North Eastern Hill University in distant Shillong. Now Shillong was very different from New Delhi. The Khasi, the Garos and the other tribes are by and large Christian but retain their strong cultural identity such as adherence to a matrilineal society. In simple words, they are not polygamist but polyandrous. I once knew a Khasi Christian and asked him his father’s name. He proudly said: “I do not know who he was. But I know my mother’s name. My late beloved mother had four husbands.” Now it was in this society that Brijraj and Frances had to teach Shakespeare, Milton, Byron and Shelley. No mean task.

After Yale, where ‘The Prof’ got his doctorate on a Fulbright fellowship, they decided to teach in the USA and Brijraj, basically a decent do-gooder, decided to teach the English language to the poorest sections of New Yorkers (Whites, Blacks, mixed race and Latinos). He did this for many years and is now a respected Professor Emeritus of the City University of New York. The last chapter is a brilliant summation of English studies in India and the USA. I salute my friend. He and Frances, also a Yale PhD, have visited us here in Wales and are always welcome.

The South Asian diaspora which has escaped the corruption and poverty of the Subcontinent is possessed of a strange psychological dilemma which only they can solve. There has been an amazing upsurge of creative writing not only in English but languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali. However, second and third generation Asians cannot read or fully understand the language of their forefathers. Now enters Divya Mathur, accomplished Hindi poet and literary activist. I reject the Hindi term kavitri (poetess) which smacks of male dominance. Divya is a poet. Period. She has founded Vatayan, a lively platform for all writers with origins in South Asia. She with her Co-Editor the Urdu poet Dr Hilal Fareed, have selected poems in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu by Asian poets living in Britain and published them in the original scripts but with very competent English translations.

Now this is a brilliant idea. Full marks. This is what makes Britain great: multicultural, multi-lingual, multi-coloured, multi-religious. Mind you, this did not happen overnight. It has been a long fight. But good men and women spent their lives fighting for these principles. I have had the good fortune of knowing the likes of Tony Benn (Lord Stansgate), the great Michael Foot, Kingsley Martin and his partner Dorothy Woodman, and John Grigg (Lord Altrincham, my son’s godfather). They are no more but their lives and achievements must be recorded. What puzzles me is the following: Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis live together peacefully in Britain. But in South Asia there is constant conflict.
Shyam Benegal is an eminent film maker, writer and director of international repute who has always used his pen to write against the inequities in society. “My films are based largely on my personal, egalitarian values. I’m critical of the hierarchical nature of things in our country,” he has stated. I first met Mr. Benegal in 1978 at the set of the film ‘Jaanoo’. I was interviewing Ismat Chughtai, who wrote the dialogue for Janoo. She plays a grandmother in the film. As we were chatting in her room in Avadh Clark hotel, she invited me to the film set, saying, “Come with me, there’s always such a boring wait in between takes”. So I tagged along and I had the honour of meeting Shyam ji.

On my recent visit to Bombay earlier this year, I met up with him for a chat. I was not surprised when I learnt that from the age of ten, he was determined to be a film maker. He used to watch 4-5 films a week. Growing up in Hyderabad, there was no facility to watch any sort of films. So he started the first film society in Hyderabad and grew up on a diet of films such as ‘Roman Holiday & Ben-Hur’ made by William Wyler, and several other film makers like Billy Wilder, Alexander Korda, Kurosawa and many French and Italian directors too. “So I became fairly film literate before I made my first film,” he tells me. Shyam ji’s father was a photographer, who also made 16 mm films about the family. So as a child Benegal was not unfamiliar with the film medium.

“It wasn’t a surprise for my father that my sole ambition was to make films.” But his father made sure that it was not at the cost of neglecting his education. “To have a dream is one thing but in reality opportunities in India and around the world are few and far in between,” he asserts. He continues, “Ever since I was a child, I wanted to create a world cinematically which was different from the one we live in”.

While growing up there was no film industry in Hyderabad in the 1950s, and he realized that if he was to be a film maker he had to be in Bombay or Madras or Calcutta. “I needed to be connected to the film medium. He moved to Bombay, the nerve centre of Hindi film making. The only way forward was to get into advertising, which was a growing profession. “I was a reasonably good writer and could write a good copy”. Within 6 months his boss realized that his main interest was in films. The well-known agency Lintas, had clients such as ‘Hindustan Lever’. They pioneered making ‘Ad films’. The head of Lintas, Alyque Padamsee was a leading light in Bombay in English amateur theatre and he became a good friend of Benegal’s. “He would leave me to my own devices, once he was convinced that I was doing a good job. So I was writing, casting, directing and editing those films, which was a better training for me than going to film school and I was earning money too.”

Three and a half years later he joined another company as Creative Head. The entire creative field was open to him: print, copy and radio etc. At the same time he was learning London and Berlin etc. It did create some ripples.” When Raj Kapoor saw it, he invited me to meet up with him and said, ‘This certainly is not your first film’. “What makes you say that?” I asked. ‘No one can teach you how to make a film, the manner you tell the story cinematically shows that you are a practiced hand, it shows imagination.’ I told him that technically it was not my first film since I had made a number of documentaries and 200 Ad films. “After that I made 7 films in 5 years from 1973-78: Manthan, Nishant, Bhumi, Janaan etc.”

For his first film ‘ANKUR’ he chose a subject which was taboo. So much so, that the actress, Waheeda Rehman was nervous about accepting that role. He wrote that film script when he was still at college, aged 17-18. In this film, a maid falls in love with a land owner, who abandons their baby, but she wants to keep it. These days an unmarried woman having a child is not a big deal, even in Mumbai. But at that time, it was a sensitive subject to make a film about. “The majority of people want to follow traditional conventions,” he says. “Hollywood has several genres: Westerns, Thrillers, RomCom etc. but India has one: Either realistic or mythical, with song and dance sequences, very predictable. I chose not to adhere to that form.

Shyam ji’s other passionate interest is Indian History. He filmed 53 episodes of ‘Bharat aik Khoy’ based on the book- ‘Discovery of India’ by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Another 15 part series is called ‘Yatra’. It is about two of the longest train journeys in India. It’s not a documentary but it’s about human stories. Yet another remarkable 10-part series is ‘Sanvidhan’. (Apparently Prime Minister Modi gifts this series to heads of states around the world to make them acquainted with ‘how democracy functions in India’.)

His latest venture is a series commissioned by the Punjab government, which would be continuously shown every day on the Delhi Amritsar Highway and on television in Kartarpur. “It’s for those Punjabis who have not been to India for a long time. Amritsar is their Vatican,” he says. Benegal now sits on the Film Classification Board which categorizes films by the suitability of content for different age groups.

I asked him if he would like to direct a film such as Shekhar Kapoor’s English film, ‘Elizabeth’ I asked him if he had any such ambitions.

His reply was emphatic, “Not particularly”.

Chaand Chazelle, who lives in London is a successful Writer/Producer/ Director/Actor and Broadcaster. Her poems have been published and she is now working on a novel. The title of her new screenplay is Stolen Goods.
Quietly and without much media coverage, a white dean of the medical school was nudged off the radar screen. Instead the students demanded a black Dean who would be more attentive to their needs. The precedent is a dangerous one as it implies that academics have to be politically acceptable to their students and not necessarily committed to their discipline. Nowhere else in the world would this expectation of racial homogeneity be entertained. On one occasion I recall a student rejecting a black counselor in preference to a white one. She was politely asked to leave the centre and come back when she had dealt with her prejudice. But the battle against racism in SA is hampered by policies that crudely advocates race over all else. How will our children studying and playing together process race? How does an Indian, a Coloured or a White child feel when he or she is told that there is no place for you in the medical school because of your race?

Our hospitals and medical training institutions are advocating racial quotas to the detriment of creating rich multi-racial professional teams providing good service to patients. How long should we be separating our own people along racial lines? Have we taken on the persona of our past oppressors? Another area of grave concern is our educational institutions. When students have the temerity or rather stupidity to burn down the very structures from which they are agitating to receive an education, one wonders whether they do indeed deserve to have an education. When students at UCT burnt down valuable art treasures and more recently the law library they effectively displayed a grave disloyalty to their country and to their own responsibility towards nation building. In the guise of fighting for their rights for a free education they have become anarchists in the guise of fighting for their rights for a free education they have become anarchists and not necessarily committed to their needs. The precedent is a dangerous one as it implies that academics have to be politically acceptable to their students and not necessarily committed to their discipline. Nowhere else in the world would this expectation of racial homogeneity be entertained. On one occasion I recall a student rejecting a black counselor in preference to a white one. She was politely asked to leave the centre and come back when she had dealt with her prejudice. But the battle against racism in SA is hampered by policies that crudely advocates race over all else. How will our children studying and playing together process race? How does an Indian, a Coloured or a White child feel when he or she is told that there is no place for you in the medical school because of your race?

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Another area of grave concern is the resistance that South Africans are displaying towards learning from each other. Post-apartheid integration of ethnic institutions has brought within is wake many challenges to educationists in SA. There have been several reported incidents in schools in KwaZulu Natal where pupils have been locked in battle over the length of their hair, shaven heads, beards and burkas or a red string bracelet and such paraphernalia. Faced with a diverse population of children from a variety of backgrounds-cultural, linguistic, socio economic and academic-school authorities are finding the transition difficult. Rules or regulations not questioned in the past are being increasingly challenged. From the perspective of the dominant culture, educationists have been traditional, exclusive and inclined towards a mono-cultural point of view. Perhaps this is so because rules are constructed to address the needs of the dominant culture and in most instances tend to frustrate the younger learner by negating his or her cultural roots. The assumption that all children must abide by monoculture school rules that are insensitive to cultural diversity is a problematic one and can cause much angst and rebelliousness among questioning and thinking students. At one level we teach them to develop critical minds and at the same time we punish them for questioning the illogical nature of rules.

Research has shown how important a strong well-balanced ego is to the learning process. Children from other cultures whose traditions are not understood or respected can feel marginalized and this can seriously affect their performance levels. From a multicultural perspective students should receive an education that continually affirms human diversity and embraces the history and culture of all students. Octavia Paz says reminds us “life is plurality, death uniformity. Every view that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes the possibility of life.”” When education takes place every individual-teacher, student or administrator-brings his or her cultural background to that process. Unless educators learn to prize and value differences and to view them as resources for learning, neither majority nor minority groups will experience the teaching and learning situations best suited to prepare them to live effectively in a world whose population is characterised by diversity.

By Devi Rajab

THE Real South Africa

South Africa is a living laboratory of race, ethnicity and language. 21 years after the demon of apartheid has dissipated, South Africans are not free of the flames in every conceivable combination fuelled with racial ammunition sparking the shape of the whole from a sector of its tusks respectively and each declaring its own prize and value differences and to view them as resources for learning, neither majority nor minority groups will experience the teaching and learning situations best suited to prepare them to live effectively in a world whose population is characterised by diversity.

Dr. Devi Rajab is a respected South African journalist and former Dean of Student Development at UKZN and the author of several books.
HINDIPENDENCE IN A SMALL WORLD
By Shridhar Phalke

Only recently co-opted into the Confluence writers’ Club, I have been struck by the diversity of the readers and contributors to Confluence. I enjoy the sharing of ideas and challenging of assumptions.

I have recently returned to the work place after 18 months of self-determined parental leave. I have joined the Jeff Bezos revolution and become an ‘Amazonian’ at his newest base in Manchester. All levels of patience and negotiating skills have been tried and tested by our six year old, I am back in regular adult company. I confess to missing his fresh, if slightly football-centric world view, and, a little weary of the banter of my largely twenty something colleagues. But like any ‘new school first day blues,’ lost souls and the likeminded eventually find each other.

My current job entails me dealing with colleagues who reflect our ‘smaller world.’ Never have I worked with such a diverse array of nationalities. The subtleties of language are at times lost in translation. You can imagine a rather ‘disunited nations’ as opposed to the United one at times. Polite and crude hand gestures fill the gaps where necessary. A testing day can feel like a laborious game of charades. But amongst the graft there is wit, warmth and humour too. I confess to feeling inadequate, when to negotiate with colleagues who reflect our ‘smaller world’ I am naturally assumed to be somewhere ‘other’ than my birthplace of Swindon, England. ‘Indian,’ concluded my Senegalese colleague. I tried to explain my roots in a mixed Indo-Pak household of film lovers. Given he is touching 30, the poem from the 50s and film from the 70s, attests to how film, music and lyrics can touch. The emotion of a song can cross cultural divides.

Pulling my leg gently Mr Senegal inquires: ‘Hindi atha hai?’ Do you understand Hindi? (My father uses this as a regular rebuke and critical review of my broken second language). I reply with hand on heart, ‘I’m touched, but, wouldn’t your wife better appreciate the sentiment?’ He smiles broadly. He then translates for the rest of our canteen table: our Polish instructor, Portuguese HR Manager, two Lithuanians, my friend Dan from Romania, colleagues from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and, Jenny from Manchester, UK. Eyebrows raise, laughter breaks and the joke share is appreciated.

The ‘smaller world’ I am touching on has some unique and positive outcomes when cultures share. I am thinking particularly of music, film, food and travel. Riffing of things filmic, triggered by my brush with Kabhi, Kabhi, I found myself in the attic uncovering a box of old VHS video tapes and DVDs. Films that have aged well and those that have been perhaps neglected by the multiplexes but are critically successful as film festival entrants. We will also be introduced to South Indian cinema.

Visit HOME’s website and look out for the ‘Not Just Bollywood’ season for March 2017, and, Omar Ahmed’s article as curator. I would highly recommend a visit to HOME, a champion of the up and coming; on stage, in cinema and all things Art. HOME is soon to be home to a season of Indian cinema. There is promise of a strong collection of independent films, or affectionately ‘Hindies,’ that introduce us to those that have been perhaps neglected by the multiplexes but are critically successful as film festival entrants. We will also be introduced to South Indian cinema.

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At our next meeting I heard rather than saw my Senegalese friend (which we have now become). A slight falsetto and a soft voice singing to me:

‘Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein khayaal aata hai, Ki jaise tujhko banaya gaya hai mere liye…’

‘From time to time I get this thought in my heart as if you were made for me…’

A heartfelt piece of poetry and a score from the 1976 Hindi film ‘Kabhi, Kabhi.’ It is a song of lament and hope. The singer most attached to the song is Mukesh. However I had not appreciated that the lyrics started life as a poem by Sahir Ludhianvi, much earlier. I have come across the song in my youth thanks to my parents’ love of music. It has remained tucked away in the memory banks of my adult subconscious, submerged under a CD collection of Springsteen, The Isley Brothers and The Clash, until now.

But how had my Senegalese friend come by it? He had spent his student years in a mixed Indo-Pak household of film maestro – John Woo! Lagaan (cricket with rebellious intent. AK in fine form) Kurosawa (discovered thanks to The Magnificent Seven and Sergio Leone) The World of Apu trilogy (Ray a much admired auteur around the world)...’

I still feel a sense of anxiety when viewing ‘Mother India,’ as the heroine battles with man, beast and nature. I confess my first tears in a film.

When my mother took me to the Film Institute of India (Pune) to see ‘Nayak,’ my eyes were opened to an Indian cinema of story, emotional depth and character that was miles apart from the Bollywood soap opera pulp we had gorged on. More recently she introduced me to the film ‘Piku,’ a must see for the Big B’s performance and for any carers of the elderly. This just shows that beyond the dazzling distractions, of the major studios, however enjoyable, there is a community of writers and directors taking on the anxieties of our age, telling stories and surprising us with fresh eyes behind the lens.

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The above booklet was published in 2016 by PEARL, an acronym for the USA-based, non-profit organisation, ‘People for Equality and Relief in Lanka.’ I thank Dr Karunyan Arulanantham for arranging for a copy to be sent to me, an excellent summary of the present plight of Eelam (Sri Lankan) Tamils written after PEARL’s fact-finding visit to the East and North: “violence and harassment by members of the security forces, occupation of traditional Tamil lands acquired illegally, torture and sexual violence of Tamils, absence of answers for families of the ‘disappeared’, and the continued detention of Tamil political prisoners without charge.” (p. 5). Those who make inquiries about the “disappeared” are harassed, humiliated or, at the extreme, themselves disappear.

Though there is no threat of violence, almost 200,000 soldiers are stationed in “the Tamil-majority North-East” (p. 13). The military is “prominently involved in police administration (such as schools), continues extensive surveillance of the population, and continues to harass and intimidate [...]. It also continues extensive commercial activities, including several large farms on occupied private land and a network of shops” (13). It’s not civilian enterprise but the Air Force which provides helicopter trips, while the Navy conducts whale-watching tours (p. 17). Over 90% of the newly-appointed research assistants sent by the Department of Agrarian Development to the North were Sinhalese unable to speak Tamil (p. 33). Briefly glancing elsewhere, the Northern Province Chief Minister, C.V.Wigneswaran, has complained that the Sri Lankan army is running hundreds of schools – as many as 344 primary schools - in his province when it has no right to do so under the 13th amendment of the constitution (Daily Mirror, Colombo, 3rd Nov 2016). As I have written elsewhere (Colombo Telegraph, 24 October 2016), land is forcibly grabbed to build security camps, holiday resorts and farms. Those being settled in the North and East are the very people who have perpetrated crimes: their contempt and brutality continue.

I quote from a recent letter of mine: “Allow me to mention one aspect of a many-sided, total, onslaught. It is reported that the army and police are selling drugs in the North and East, targeting the young. They not only make money but create addicts, and so help to demoralise (de-moralise) a people. Lord Acton’s famous saying - “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” - is usually read as meaning that those who possess and wield power get corrupted. True, but as I have written elsewhere, power also corrupts those who must exist under a harsh regime with absolute power - as is the case now in the North and East. And so we have Tamils cooperating with the armed forces, including in (forced or persuaded) prostitution. For a parallel from history, see those Jews who collaborated with the Nazis in the concentration and extermination camps. Power also tends to corrupt the powerless.” (End of quote).

PEARL cites (p. 34) a female social-worker: Even if we didn’t have electricity, we were safe. Now we have developed roads and street lights – and we feel unsafe: not only because of the military but also because our own boys are intoxicated and cause trouble. (Compare the high level of alcoholism among Native Americans and Aborigines – people who have lost hope and, with it, the will to live. They have given up on themselves.)

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