

CONFLUENCE

SINCE 2002

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

MAY 2018

www.confluence.mobi

Current Affairs

THE FUTURE OF COMMONWEALTH IN THE AFTERMATH OF WINDRUSH SCANDAL

By Vijay Anand

At their recent annual meeting, Commonwealth leaders formally announced that Prince Charles will be the next head of their organisation after the Queen. Addressing what is most likely her last Commonwealth Heads of Government summit, the monarch said: "It is my sincere wish that the Commonwealth will continue to offer stability and continuity for future generations and will decide that one day the Prince of Wales should carry on the important work started by my father in 1949."

everyone's immigration status in order to meet the government's arbitrary net migration target. The so-called Windrush generation (named after one of the first ships bringing Caribbean citizens to Britain) included families with children who arrived between 1948 and 1971. There were families who could not produce citizenship documentation or passports and were denied healthcare, prevented from working, and even threatened with deportation. In fact these Carib-



The Commonwealth evolved out of the ending of British empire in the mid-20th century, and Queen Elizabeth has been its head since she ascended the throne in 1952. She regards the Commonwealth, a union of 53 former colonial nations as the greatest success of her reign. While Britain is preparing to leave the European Union (Brexit), its attempts to re-energise links with former colonies at a summit meeting in London were overshadowed by the outrage felt by the descendants of migrants to Britain from Caribbean colonies over Prime Minister Theresa May's past treatment of migrants.

In 2012, while she was responsible for Home Office, Mrs May set in motion, measures designed to create a "hostile environment" for people who had entered the UK illegally from the Caribbean. Her policy demanded that landlords, doctors, nurses and employers should check

bean settlers, who came here on the invitation of UK government were entitled automatically to British citizenship on arrival.

"This is a day of national shame... let us call it as it is. If you lay down with dogs, you get fleas, and that is what has happened with this far-right rhetoric in this country," said David Lammy, a London-based opposition lawmaker and son of Windrush migrants, during a speech about the rights of the Windrush generation, in the House of Commons, blaming the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Britain over recent years.

In a recent U-turn, the Prime Minister and her cabinet colleagues have repeatedly apologised to those who were affected by the scandal and agreed to compensate them, but the credibility of the government remains tarnished over the issue.

NUCLEAR OPTIONS

By Malathy Sitaram

It has become obvious in the course of Trump's Presidency that he would like to remove as much of President Obama's legacy as he can. Obama introduced many reforms, an important one being the nuclear deal with Iran that was arrived at in 2015 with the support of world powers that included Russia and China. Under the accord, Iran had agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and allow in international inspectors in return for the lifting of crippling economic sanctions.

The desire to erase Obama's achievements tell us a great deal about the man. As a very right wing Republican Trump's view of the world must differ hugely from that of the liberal democrat that Obama is. In Trump's first year as President, he wished to stop immigration from Muslim countries but much to his chagrin found that American judges and public opinion ruled that out.

It would not be too long before the nuclear deal with Iran would begin to unravel. It is clear that Trump had always intended to erase Obama's achievements one by one. President Obama had defended his decision to engage in the negotiations from a position of strength and had assured the American people that, under the deal, Iran would not be able to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Obama's successor, President Trump must have been biding his time to negate Obama's most important diplomatic coup. He had never believed in it and on May 8th 2018, he withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal much to the consternation of European leaders.

Trump has decided to ignore the appeals of President Macron, Angela Merkel and the British Foreign secretary, Boris Johnson who had actually rushed to Washington to try to persuade Trump not to end the nuclear deal with Iran. It seems



Trump was far more inclined to listen to Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel and also to the voice of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin

Salman who apparently shares Israel's deep distrust of Iran. Ex-President Obama has voiced his disapproval but it falls on deaf ears. Trump and his advisers true to form as Republicans are Iran hawks. Iran's support of Hezbollah is seen as a threat to the stability of Israel. The new American Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo has made a statement about America's intention "to eliminate the threat of Iran's ballistic missile programme; to stop its terrorist activities worldwide; and to block its menacing activity across the Middle East and beyond".

However, with this turn in events it is possible that Iran will decide to carry on with developing its nuclear arsenal in view of the likely restoration of sanctions by America against the export of Iranian oil. Russia, China and India are the biggest buyers of crude oil from Iran.

Is Trump prepared to run the risk of isolating America from its key allies who believe that Obama's deal with Iran was working? Trump's decision puts him in breach of a UN Security Council resolution that had backed the deal. It could also result in a crisis in relations between America and Europe.

It seems President Trump has set the scene for dramatic developments in the world order in 2018.

I am pleased to release this issue, even though it is a little late this time. At the time of publishing this issue, some good things are happening in the world. Summer has finally arrived. A much-awaited intercultural royal wedding is certainly another example. It has been a painful process this time due to reasons beyond our control. Even though it is not unusual for a magazine like ours to be delayed we want our readers and writers to be aware that publishing can be problematic.

Despite some hurdles, as usual we are bringing this issue full of interesting contributions from our family of writers. As I mentioned in our February issue, the late arrival of articles and their quality does impact on our scheduling of each issue and the number of pages per issue. Therefore, I would like to ask our contributors to send their contributions regularly on time at least three weeks before each quarterly issue. So, we should have received your submissions by mid-April.

In our cover stories we have touched on some of the events that have attracted much publicity in recent days. Since these issues affect our lives directly or indirectly, we thought it a good idea to write about them.

Finally, I would like to hear from anyone who want to join our team and help us in many ways to run this magazine smoothly and bring new ideas too.

Enjoy summer!

Vijay Anand

To subscribe to *Confluence* online please register at www.confluence.mobi or www.confluence.org.uk

Published by
CONFLUENCE PUBLISHING
23 Cray Avenue, Orpington BR5 4AA
United Kingdom
Telephone: 01689 836 394 / 07801 569 640

MANAGING EDITOR
Dr. Vijay Anand

SUB-EDITOR
Malathy Sitaram

FOUNDER EDITOR
Late **Joe Nathan**

For subscription enquiries, please email:
confluenceuk@yahoo.com

Design by
Professional Systems Integrators Ltd

The views expressed by interviewees or contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect Confluence editorial policy. No part of this publication or part of the contents thereof may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form without the express permission of the publisher in writing.

© Copyright, Confluence Publishing 2018

CONTENTS

(CLICK LINK TO GO DIRECTLY TO THE ARTICLE)

1	CURRENT AFFAIRS -
2	EDITORIALLY SPEAKING - <i>Vijay Anand</i>
3	BOOK REVIEW - <i>Reginald Massey</i>
4	KALAKSHETRA AS .. - <i>Innamburan</i>
5	RACISM - <i>Devi Rajab</i>
6	A LONG AWAITED TRIP - <i>Uma Phalke</i>
8	MUMBAI EXPRESSIONS - <i>Anju Makhija</i>
9	IT'S ALL A MATTER OF GOOD TASTE - <i>Suresh Subrahmanyam</i>
10	GRABBING LIFE BY THE HORNS - <i>Rashmi Sahi</i>
12	INDIA'S SHAME - <i>Malathy Sitaram</i>
13	A REVIEW OF "WHY I AM A HINDU" - <i>Anjana Basu</i>
14	VERSE JOURNALISM - <i>Yogesh Patel</i>
15	IMMIGRANT BLUES - <i>Anita Nahal</i>
16	CHETTINAD - <i>Sampath Kumar</i>
18	THE SECRETS OF THE SECRET - <i>Meenakshi Mohan</i>
19	POEMS BY - <i>CA Joseph & Ananya S Guha</i>
20	A REVIEW OF K.D VARMAS BOOK - <i>Malashri Lal</i>
21	IMPULSE - <i>Subhash Chandra</i>
22	INDIAN LINKS - <i>Lincoln Seligman</i>
24	CHILLING IN SALT LAKE - <i>Neil McCallum</i>
25	A SLICE OF INDIAN CULTURE - <i>Meenakshi Mohan</i>
26	A JAMAICAN BOY - <i>Cyril Dabydeen</i>
27	A FILIAL JOURNEY-BOOK REVIEW - <i>Hema Nair</i>
28	SAROSH ZAIWALLA

REGINALD MASSEY'S BOOK PAGE



Over the past seventy years several histories and analyses of the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan have been published and now the latest has just come out. From the Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab (Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-108-42811-8. Rupees 795. Email: academic.marketing.india@cambridge.org) has been authored by Pippa Virdee who teaches Modern South Asian History at De Montfort University. It is a rigorously researched work that outlines the history of the Punjab region, its society, culture, religions, and the idea of Punjabiya. Punjabiya, based on the teachings of the Sufi and Sikh saints, has often been bypassed as have the experiences of Punjabi women who were molested and raped in their thousands. As often happens, it is the women who suffer most. It was the poet Amrita Pritam who wept for all Punjabi women in her famous lament addressed to the great Waris Shah.

Dr Virdee has trawled all available sources in Lahore, capital of Pakistan's Punjab province, as well as sources in Chandigarh, the joint capital of India's Punjab and Haryana states. She was warmly welcomed by academics and members of the public on both sides of the border which proves that there is no problem where people-to-people contacts are concerned. However, we must not discount the sickening charade that is enacted every day at the Attari-Wagah border when the flags of the two 'enemy countries' are lowered and the steel gates are ceremonially slammed shut to the cheers of hundreds. This is nationalism of the most obnoxious sort and the sooner it is stopped the better.

The chapter describing how abducted women were returned to their families gives due credit to those who risked their lives in this difficult endeavour. However, many women who had been raped refused to go back to their families since they knew that they would not be welcomed back. They had been 'tainted and dishonoured' and were hence a stigma on their family's reputation.

This book stretches well beyond the trauma of Partition. It is a veritable encyclopaedia of the entire Punjab from the earliest times till the present day. It is estimated that about a million lost their lives when men killed each other in the name of religion and a total of around twenty million were displaced. Hindus and Sikhs were forced to flee to East Punjab and Delhi and Muslims from various parts of India sought refuge in West Punjab and Karachi in Sindh. The great irony is that this orgy of massacres could have been avoided had the four main players exercised caution and commonsense. Mountbatten, the British viceroy; Nehru and the members of the inner circle of the Indian National Congress; Jinnah, Supremo of the Muslim League; and Master Tara Singh who headed the Sikh Akali Dal were all equally guilty.

To make matters worse a lawyer named Cyril Radcliffe was sent out from London to draw the line of Partition. Radcliffe had never set foot in India and as luck would have it was struck down with the dreaded 'Delhi belly'. The unfortunate man could not concentrate on the maps and old census reports that were piled on his table. Auden wrote a memorable poem on Radcliffe's tortured predicament. It is no wonder that what Radcliffe produced has been called 'The Line of Blood'. The fate of Lahore hung in agonising uncertainty. A whole two days after the creation of Pakistan was it announced that the historic city had been allocated to Pakistan.



After the second World War Britain was bankrupt and depleted of manpower. Clement Attlee's Labour government therefore decided to get rid of India at any cost. The mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy was the final breaking point. Thus the British quit with undue haste in a messy panic; and if a million Indians perished in the process it was just too bad. Great empires have always been built on the bones of subject races.

The Two Nation theory was accepted, albeit reluctantly. This postulated that the Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations rather than being followers of two belief systems, and hence Pakistan ('the Land of the Pure') was necessary for the survival of the Muslims of the subcontinent. However, many noted Muslims such as the Islamic scholar Maulana Abul Kalam Azad rejected the Two Nation theory and it is worth recalling that Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, leader of the Muslim Pashtuns of the North West Frontier Province, angrily sent the following message to Gandhi and

the Congress Party: "You have thrown us to the wolves."

On August 11, 1947, Jinnah delivered an important speech to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan which spelt out his vision for the country he had created. It was a vision of robust secularism that baffled many of his ardent supporters. Interestingly, leading Indian politicians such as Jaswant Singh and Lal Krishna Advani (both of the right wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party) are convinced that Jinnah was a secularist who, as a skilled lawyer, used the Two Nation theory as a tool to create Pakistan. Moreover, in his personal life Jinnah was not a practising Muslim.

In 1971 the Two Nation theory was finally discredited when the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan and created Bangladesh with the help of Hindu majority India. The Bengali Muslims were always treated as secondclass citizens by the West Pakistanis. They were forced to adopt Urdu and their national poets, particularly Tagore, were treated with disdain. What happened in effect was that the Muslims of South Asia were divided into three parts and fragmented over Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

It is a pleasure to read the poems in this book. For after all, it is the poets and not the politicians who tell the truth. And I am glad that writers such as Manto figure prominently. The heartening aspect is that in spite of the blood letting the faint flicker of humanity was not extinguished. There were many cases of Muslim neighbours assisting and protecting Hindus and Sikhs and vice versa.

The author's interviews conducted on both sides of the border elicited interesting responses that indicate cultural cohesion. In fact those Pakistanis whose ancestors were Rajputs sport Hindu titles such as Rana, Rao and Raja to this day. Allama Iqbal, the national poet of Pakistan, made no secret of the fact that his family till quite recently were Kashmiri Brahmins. The current head of the Pakistan army has the surname Bajwa which is a respectable Sikh caste. A man can change his religion but he can't change his genes.

The chapter on Malerkotla, a small Muslim state surrounded by powerful Sikh states, is fascinating. Guru Gobind Singh had issued a firman in Persian to the Sikhs that the Muslims of Malerkotla, come what may, were to be protected. And the picture of a humble shrine in Gill village, near Ludhiana, encapsulates the true spirit of Punjabiya. Over the doorway is a simple rustic design that has 'Allah', 'Aum' and a Cross. Punjabiya advocates Insaniyat, a love for all humanity.

KALAKSHETRA AS A GOVERNMENT COMPANY

By Innamburan

“The State gets into the Arts to get the Arts into a State!”

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya

Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986) founded Kalakshetra (sacred abode of aesthetics) in 1936 with one student in her dance class. To her, Art was the very Living Style. She last danced for its Golden Jubilee on the eve of 1986, marking half a century of dynamic dedication to that institution, which had by then become a global centre of renown. We lost her six weeks later, a tragedy in more than one sense. She was no ordinary mortal. The Government of India bestowed the title Padma Bhushan (Lotus Jewel) on her. Tagore admired her. She politely declined the Presidentship of India. Google goes on honouring her.

A child-bride from a Brahmin family, she married George Sydney Arundale (1876-1945) a British scholar 26 years her senior, in 1920, much to the consternation of the orthodoxy. Her marriage to George widened her horizon. Many serendipitous influences bordering on the divine followed. The legendary ballerina Anna Pavlova introduced her to ballet dancing and motivated her to reinvent native traditions. Her witnessing a Sadir, thanks to E.Krishna Iyer, was the Open Sesame for Kalakshetra. Her alchemy transformed it into a heady renaissance of dance-drama traditions of yesteryears ranging from Valmiki's Ramayana to Rabindranath Tagore's Shyama. Generous to a fault, she

Theosophical Society, Adyar, the mother-lode that fortuitously escaped government control, was some sort of a Brain Trust. Annie Besant led the Home Rule Movement. Maria Montessori ran Besant Memorial School. Sir. S. Subramania Iyer sowed the seed for the Indian National Congress. Rukmini Devi's debut dance for the Society set the tone for Kalakshetra with its galaxy of eminent dancers and teachers of that tradition like C.V.Chandrasekhar and Pushpa Shankar. She patronised éminencesgrise like Tiger Varadachariar, Mylapore Gowriamma and the like magnanimously. She was a prudent manager as well spending only Rs.4.6 lakhs on the School in 1985-86.

Her formal quest of 1985 for ‘a suitable machinery to preserve, promote and manage the trust in perpetuity...’ still remains elusive. She petitioned the High Court for dissolving the unwieldy latter-day Kalakshetra Society and to induct three more lifetime trustees. Approved though, it was rejected on appeal on the ground that government approval was a prerequisite, in S.Guham And Ors vs Rukmini Devi Arundale And Ors in 1986. Trouble lay ahead.

As R.V.Ramani put it ten years later, ‘...when Rukmini Devi died, we had to fight ill-wishers

from within and without, and predators who wanted to take over the institution’.

The centenarian Sankara Menon, her conscience keeper, safeguarded and nurtured Kalakshetra as its Director after her demise. The next Director S.Rajaram steered the institution through many crises and changes. He welcomed his successor Leela Samson with warmth and affection. There is no director for ten months at the time of writing and Kalakshetra had been through the trauma of needless controversies for long. Revathi Ramachandran will become its director shortly.



Kalakshetra was taken over as an autonomous unit by the Ministry of Culture of the Central government in 1994. Autonomy is a mirage. Four IAS top dogs rule the roost in the governing body with a sole alumni member clutching at the last straw. Free spirits like dancers and musicians are overawed by rules, regulations, gazette notifications, tenders, sanction, audit and more officialise. It did not help anyway. Twelve years later, Director Leela Samson bemoaned that Kalakshetra's place in the world of dance had slipped, the government's corpus funds lay unused and that teachers' unions held sway.

Leela Samson, a direct disciple of Rukmini Devi was the Director of Kalakshetra for seven years in two spells, from 2005. She would have been, to my mind, Aththai's choice. [Yes. Rukmini Devi was fondly referred to as Aththai (aunt) by all.] Two years after Leela's stewardship, violin maestro Lalgudi Jayaraman, a board member, commended her for adding new vistas and dimensions. Her taking a dance troupe to USA in 2011 (the earlier one was in 1936) won global acclaim and friends. She faced animosity, mean nit picking, slurs and litigation from many directions, as she was not of a compliant disposition to undue intrusions. She had to resign because the governing board brushed aside her plea that as the artistic director, she leaned on the team of specialist former bureaucrats to deal with administration. A government auditor myself, I am pained to find most audit criticisms lacking a sense of perspective, while judging an art centre like the Metropolitan Opera House/ Shantiniketan of Tagore days. A groundswell of

global protest led by the eminent dancer Anitha Rathnam led to Leela withdrawing her resignation and getting reappointed, the board heartily recommending it on the rebound. Humiliation followed. As VR Devika intuitively put, ‘Things will not be the same for Leela Samson even if the board's decision to bring her back does culminate in her coming back.’ She was above sixty, the government retirement age. The high court stayed her reappointment in the interim on a writ filed by some staffers. The counter filed only by the Gopal Gandhi, the Board Chairman was eloquently vague, if not silent. The Government neither filed a counter nor appealed, in time. The resurrected Director paid the penalty for prevarication elsewhere. Aththai was at the helm of affairs in her eighties; she might have been thrown out two decades earlier under such a silly dispensation. Sadananda Menon recalls Aththai saying, ‘...My best dance and music teachers become ‘best’ after 65 and 70. I would be a fool to retire them at 60.’ The real problem for Leela was the change of guards in the remote control called Central Government. The Congress government appointed her; the successor BJP government threw her out.

After a gap of about one year, Priyadarshini Govind was the Director for four years from July 2013. She is not from the alumni, an aspect dear to veterans like Anita Ratnam and a host of others. After a gap of ten months, Revathi Ramachandran has been chosen as the Director for three years. A disciple of Mangudi Dorairaja Iyer, she belongs to the Melattur style, its genre being very different from the unique Rukmini Devi traditions. While one would certainly wish her well, it cannot be denied that she would be treading on thin ice, as she would be constantly on the radar of the famed alumni, spread all over the globe. I hope that the next Director would be from the alumni and the job descriptions of the administrative personnel will ensure smooth division of responsibilities.

Gopalaswami, the present Chairman is a seasoned administrator known for his open mind and love for music. There is evidence of his admitting to mistakes, when they occur. I hope he would value the alumni's potential, remembering that Rukmini Devi Arundale knew better than the mandarins in New Delhi about embedding aesthetic living styles in institutions.

Srinivasan Soundararajan (Innamburan) is a Tamil scholar with degrees in Economics, Applied Sociology and Tamil Literature. He has long retired 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.



RACISM

By Devi Rajab



A South African estate agent Vicky Momberg was caught on video verbally abusing a black policeman. She used the word 'kaffirs' repeatedly during her tirade against men who were trying to assist. The word is deeply offensive and considered the most racist in South Africa. The state brought a case of *crimen injuria* (a crime under South African common law, defined to be the act of "unlawfully, intentionally and seriously impairing the dignity of another") against Momberg and a court has sentenced her to three years in jail (one suspended). This makes her the first person in the country to be jailed for this offence. The implication of this judgement in a colourful case of white offender, Indian magistrate and black victim sent an unequivocal message that racism is not just inappropriate, but it is criminal.

While legislation will certainly curb verbal abuses it cannot change the hearts and minds of people. We have to search for the underlying motives of racism. So the question arises as to why a sane person would use a swear word 48 times and why would she get so ballistic about a smash and grab, a constant crime in our daily lives. Commenting on Momberg, the magistrate Pravina Ragoonandan said: "She's anxious and self-doubting but has managed to cover this over the years."

There are elements of the South African society who are threatened by changes in the new country and are unable to cope with their diminished status. Social conditions such as unabated crime, affirmative action and corruption are fuelling this negativity. There is a basic faulty premise on which they rest their negative feelings. Firstly they believe that all people of a certain racial group are stupid and bad. Vicky Momberg is one such person. Would putting this person in jail help? It is difficult to think of a punishment to suit the crime: A punishment that would require introspection, insight and

appeasement. Prior to this case there have been several others that have come before the equality court but the crime of *crimen injuria* is generally not considered a serious offence in SA. However if a particular person's dignity has been impaired then the offence is considered seriously.

Racism is everywhere. There is the promise that there will not be any racism on the moon but this is a tall order. In fact it is so endemic to society that we cannot find a place without it. However surviving it, is what matters.

The first lesson I learnt to deal with racism was as a 11 or 12-year-old girl. I was living in a multi-racial neighbourhood on the Berea and had to walk to school past the Mansfield Boys high school reserved for white children only. Sometimes if I was lucky our neighbour Professor Devi Bughwan and eminent academic of English and Drama Studies would drive us in her Vauxhall to school. She was one of the early pioneers of women drivers and so wherever she went she was the focus of all eyes. Besides being an exceptionally beautiful woman she spoke the Queen's English. So it was not surprising therefore that she was considered to be a woman of great stature. She taught me how to hold my head high and deal with everyday racism on the double decker bus going to ballet lessons or in shops when trying to buy an outfit without being allowed to try it on. One day as we were driving to school a little white boy from Mansfield Boys High School shouted out without any observable provocation "Hey you coolies"! Devi Bughwan stopped the car and told my brother to go and sort him out with a resounding clout. He then got back into the car and not much was said after that but I never forgot that lesson. She taught us to deal with racism instead of wallowing over it.

Another lesson I learnt was from my mother was how to rise above racism. On one occasion when she walked into a white butcher shop and was addressed as "Mary" in the derogatory designation of "Coolie Mary" often given to Indian women, she replied with her head held high. "Can I have a pound of lamb chops please Jane?" To which the woman replied "My name is not Jane," and she retorted "Well, my name is not Mary."

At home we were taught to respect our white teachers and to learn as much as we could from them. But the subtext of our socialization was an engagement with who we were as a people. I recall the long discussions on cultural heritage of a people which the late Dr Monty Naicker taught us. "Don't believe their stereotypical labelling of us a people", he would say. "When they were rubbing two stones together to make a fire we were busy writing philosophies of life". True or not, narcissistic or otherwise, we had to learn to protect our ego. In a similar vein *Négritude* was a cultural movement launched in 1930s in Paris by French-speaking black graduate students from

France's colonies in Africa and the Caribbean territories. The *Négritude* movement signalled an awakening of race consciousness for blacks in Africa and the African Diaspora. This new race consciousness, rooted in a (re)discovery of the authentic self, sparked a collective condemnation of Western domination, anti-black racism, enslavement, and colonization of black people. It sought to dispel denigrating myths and stereotypes linked to black people, by acknowledging their culture, history, and achievements, as well as reclaiming their contributions to the world and restoring their rightful place within the global community.

Later I learnt that racism was an elusive concept and it could be so subtle that it would be difficult to pin point and yet our emotions never let us down. We felt it in our very presence. In my life time I experienced Afrikaner racism and English racism when I worked at different institutions of higher learning. The former was very different to the other. The one made you over visible and the other made you invisible. What I experienced was that the Afrikaans on Salisbury Island found it easy to put people into racial boxes. If you were an Indian you had to be like all other Indians. So they had difficulty seeing the individual. The English fought for equality and human rights but they could not easily embrace the people they fought for. So they invariably always kept their distance. Often I would sit at board meeting with white male colleagues and they would barely greet you. Somehow they never felt how lonely you felt in a sea of their own kind.

Post-apartheid has raised a different kind of racism which has unleashed a plethora of racial slurs that cannot be easily solved. Anti-black sentiments are steadily growing. And why should this be when every one of us welcomed a new non racist society. I listen to a white mother disappointed that her son was not given an opportunity to play for his school cricket team on account of the racial quota. "I understand" she says, "but how do I explain this to my son whose friendship traverses the colour line". I listen to a young talented girl at a private school who was born post 1994. "I don't like history", she says "because it lies. It tells us only of black struggles. What about the Indians and the Coloureds?"

Fighting racism is a long process of reconciliation and understanding. But the onus is on individuals to bolster their own egos and never be diminished by another's slurs. Indeed as the saying goes "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me".

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

A LONG AWAITED TRIP

By Uma Phalke

Nepal has had a special place in my life since childhood. Relatives crossed borders to get married, study or simply spend time with family. They were charming, engaging as well as elegant and graceful. I so longed to be like them. But life had big changes afoot for me and when marriage took me out of India and onto England, Nepal slowly faded away, until 2004, when our son went trekking in the Himalayas. This spurred me on to reconnect with my family and I was able to trace my cousin. A bond was established.

Last November, after fourteen years, my dream came true and we set off for Kathmandu. We were met by a very helpful porter who took us through the visa process in record time enabling us to have a smooth and welcoming entry.

Our driver and guide were waiting outside and in half an hour we were standing in front of our hotel, 'Annapurna' in the centre of the city.

Patan City in the south was our first port of call the following morning. We explored the Museum, soaking in the architecture, the fine wood carvings and stunning artefacts, all beautifully displayed. We visited the spectacular Durbar Square, a world heritage UNESCO site, housing a collection of temples and palaces with outstanding workmanship.

Our next stop was Nepal's oldest Hindu temple, "Pashupatinath", seat of its national deity, Shiva. It is a huge, guarded complex of temples, ashrams, images and inscriptions raised along the Bagmati river. The main temple is in the Pagoda style with its imposing statue of the Nandi bull to greet you. Later, we headed for the 12th Century city of Bhaktapur which lies on a prosperous trade route between Tibet and India. The palace with its 55 windows and balconies, intricately carved in wood is a tribute to its artisans. Having walked for hours, we needed sustenance and, at our guide's recommendation tried, "Ju Ju dhau"- a fragrant cool yogurt set in terracotta pots. It was a lovely respite. I sat in the shade looking at the dusty streets and the square partly covered in scaffolding for the renovation work following the aftermath of the 2015 earth- quake and



wondered how it might have looked during the reign of the Mulla Kings. We were then tempted to sample the steaming "momos" - a favourite Nepali street food.



It was almost dusk when we reached Boudhanath, the 1500 years old Buddhist Temple on the trade route between Kathmandu and Tibet. We took blessings from the monk and after spinning the prayer wheels we experienced a feeling of calm.

The following morning a seven-hour journey took us to Pokhara, the base for our hike and were delighted with our hotel, "Shangri-la Village Resort" with its tranquil gardens, a fish pond and a temple. Our balcony had clear view of the Annapurna range and the Fishtail mountain. Rested and refreshed, the next day we went through Tibetan villages on the way to Seti River Gorge and Devi's Fall followed by a boat ride in the Pehwa lake, admiring the stunning location and its laidback atmosphere.

My daughter and I braced ourselves for the Dhampus Hike, a six-hour trek taking us to an altitude of 1425 metres. We drove up to Kande to start the first leg of our ascent. It was hard work and our guide, Mr. Khetri kept my spirits up with tips and encouragement throughout. We stopped at the observation point for the sunrise. It was just after 5.30 am when the rays cast their magic touch on mountain peaks. It was a spiritual experience. Nothing prepares you for this. We watched the changing hues hitting different parts of the mountain range in silence and in wonder at the splendour of nature. The sky was crystal clear and the views overwhelming. Our ascent took us through forests and villages to the Australian Camp, a resting place for trekkers where a delicious Newari Thali was waiting for us – food freshly prepared to perfection, thanks to the meticulous planning of our guide. We were served by the chef's young wife who was also keeping an eye on her baby, peacefully sleeping swaddled in her crib and a cute rosy cheeked toddler sitting on a swing.

Nourished and vitalised, we started our descent through meadows and valleys to Dhampus. We encountered a group of friendly Nepali women on their way to a festival. With a little encouragement, they sang and danced for us – a great photo shoot opportunity as our guide also joined in.

As they continued on their way forming a vibrant red and blue chain, we watched in amazement at their speed. In Dhampus we said goodbye to Mr. Khetri and left for Pokhara. We had planned a day of rest but the desire to see Annapurna Base Camp was overwhelming. So, we took the only option left to us and went on a helicopter ride. It was an amazing experience with exceptional views of the mountains.

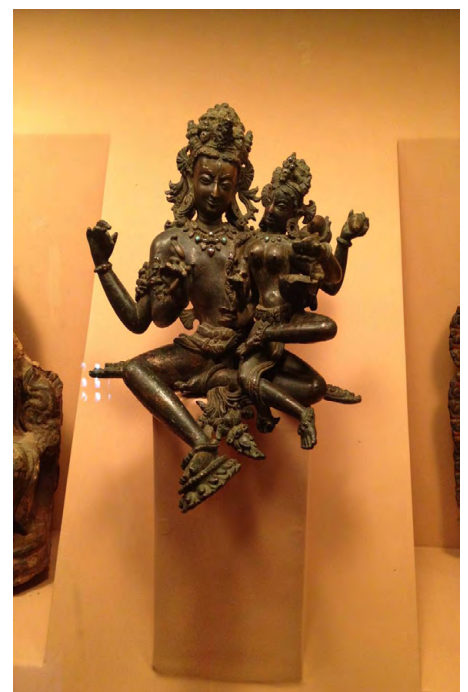
We had some free time in Kathmandu which enabled us to see The Palace Museum, and the Garden of Dreams, an oasis of tranquillity in a busy and dusty environment. In the evening we explored Thamel, a shopper's delight, all within walking distance from our hotel. These two days gave me the opportunity to spend precious time with my cousin and his charming wife.

I have just scratched the surface in my attempt to get to know Nepal. The hospitality of the villagers, the kindness of our driver

and guides were second to none. Brothers and cousins I grew up with in India have passed but I have gained another in Nepal whose kindness, warmth and thoughtfulness were most endearing. I will return.

India's Big Brother attitude towards Nepal has troubled me in the past but talks and pacts made between the two nations during the recent state visit of Nepal's Prime Minister is encouraging. We have so much in common and share such a rich heritage that a friendly relationship based on mutual trust and respect is imperative.

Uma works part time for Cambridge International Examinations as an Examiner and Vetter for Hindi Language and Literature. She retired from a career in education, initially working in Swindon for multiple disciplines and later from Gloucester College of Art & Technology as a teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages in an Open Learning Centre.



MUMBAI EXPRESSIONS

By Anju Makhija



Till the bleeding feet of farmers showed up at Mumbai, after a 180-km, 5-day walk from Nasik, government officials were sitting with their legs up! This was a wake-up call and most people in the city supported the farmers who wanted a better deal for themselves. In the past, despite innumerable suicides taking place, their demands have been largely ignored. The wounds on cracked feet spoke volumes for their desperation. After few days of negotiations, many of their demands were met: transfer of forest land to tribal cultivators, loan waivers and rural areas for development to be acquired through consent rather than force. In a race to catch up with technology, the government is spending crores of rupees for setting up a network of 'bullet' trains across the country. We live in times when faster is better, even if the destination is unknown! The protest was organized by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) along with other unions. This march saw farmers make up new songs of resistance, even as they sang the 'old' favourites. Some of these attacked businessmen directly: Tell us where our corporates have reached? / Tell us where they hold their stock of wealth / tell us our share in it? There has always been a legacy of poetry and, despite no access to the written word, Dalits and Adivasi tribals have kept them alive orally over the decades.

The urban-rural divide has widened and political parties have chosen to stray far away from the Gandhian model. As the world hurtles toward rapid progress (and violence), India seems anxious to follow suit. There have been attempts, such as establishing International Yoga Day, but these have failed to make impact. Sri Aurobindo Integral Life Centre has formally launched Auro

University : a modern day gurukul to spread the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. This organisation marks a significant milestone in the history of higher education in India. Never before has a university been dedicated to the realization of the work of a seer. The university plans to preserve our deep spiritual roots in all aspects of life and bring it back to the nation's intellectual and social mainstream.

This year's Padmashree awards, were given to many unsung heroes who served the poor and popularized the arts. Lakshmikutty, a tribal woman from Kerala, who prepares herbal medicines and helps people survive snake bites was among the awardees. So was internationally-acclaimed Gond artist, Bhajju Shyam, famous for depicting Europe through Gond paintings, a tribal style of Madhya Pradesh. His London Jungle Book sold 30,000 copies and it was published in five foreign languages. 80-year old Nouf Marwaai has taught yoga to students for decades. She was born with an auto immune disease and fought it by practicing yoga and Ayurveda.

Children, who have been ignored up till now by many Indian publishers, are getting their share of attention too. Unusual subjects are being tackled, such as the lives of people with different abilities. New sites area also being launched: Pratham Books Story Weaver has thousands of tales in over 30 different languages for anyone to download. The city recently saw a literary fest dedicated to youngsters. Bookaroo LitFest had 22 writers, illustrators and storytellers to mesmerize 4 to 14-year-olds. Many discussions revolved around conflicts: youngsters felt they have a right to know about the dark side of their world. Vatsala Kaul-Banerjee, Publisher-Children, Hachette India, felt that young ones these days were attracted to a host of other media and usually took their cues about what to read depending on what was popular abroad.

One of the most innovative fests in Mumbai (and there are many) is the Gateway Litfest. The theme this year was Women Power in Indian Literature with over 50 women authors from 17 languages participating. Finding myself to be the only English writer in one of the multicultural sessions, I felt quite alienated and could not follow most of the languages being spoken around me. Regional literature is not introduced in schools and many of us grow up learning just English and Hindi. The multi-faced festival had some unique personalities like Nalini Jameela, a sex worker in the streets of Thrissur, Kerala. Nalini entered the

literary world with her biography, Njan Laingika Thozhilaali (Autobiography of a Sex Worker). Her upcoming book, In the Company of Men: Romantic Encounters, is also extremely revealing. Rana Ayyub's, The Gujarat Files: the Anatomy of a Cover-up, based on the sting operations she had undertaken as a journalist to bring out the truth behind the 2002 anti-Muslim program in Gujarat, was another eye-opening book.

New festivals continue to sprout. The Le Sutra Poetry Festival had poets from all parts of the country attending. As I participated in a session, Dismantling the Master's House, which had readings from the work of Sylvia Plath, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou and others, I realized that American and British poetry influence us much more than our regional literature. A sad state of affairs indeed.

Books related to Indo-Pak relations and religion are also published quite regularly these days. Pakistani journalist, Mehr Tarar's, Do We Not Bleed?, has short essays on various aspects of contemporary Pakistan incl. religious oppression, honour killings and violence. Why I Am a Hindu by Shashi Tharoor begins with the Vedas, going on to elaborate the views of prominent thinkers. In the second part, he chronicles the making of Hindutva and tells us about his own practice as well. Indian Cultures as Heritage: by Romila Thapar deals with the concept of culture which has changed over the last three centuries.

As I write this column, the big story is that a Jodhpur court has sentenced Bollywood superstar, Salman Khan, to five years in jail for killing two blackbucks during an outdoor shoot in the Rajasthan district. Blackbucks are an endangered species of antelope, protected under Indian wildlife law. This has caused turmoil in the industry. His last release, Tiger Zinda Hai, raked in Rs.340 crores in India at the box office. He has several films in the making and there is bound to be a huge loss for producers. So enthralled is Mumbai with this Bollywood star that thousands of people gathered outside his residence on hearing the news! Indian films weave dreams and, many in this city, live vicariously through the life of actors.

Anju Makhija 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.
anjumakhija17@gmail.com

IT'S ALL A MATTER OF GOOD TASTE

By Suresh Subrahmanyam

Mary Quant, the iconic British fashion designer, widely credited with the introduction of the mini skirt and the hot pant during the heady 1960s famously said, 'Good taste is death; vulgarity is life'. A contrapuntal male viewpoint is provided by another British fashion guru, the late, lamented Alexander McQueen, who opined that 'Menswear is about subtlety. It's about good style and good taste'.

While there can be no debate on the proposition that good taste marks out a civilized society, what constitutes acceptable taste appears to be subjective. Ergo, the diametrically opposite views expressed by two of the foremost fashion designers of our times. Notwithstanding, it is instructive to note that Quant has introduced, quite apart from the 'vulgar' mini-skirts and hot pants, some of the most elegant dress wear that a woman of refined taste would die for, in a western context. In contrast, many of McQueen's fashion shows have striven to startle, shock and bewilder onlookers, leading them to redefine 'taste'. Unpredictability and keeping one off kilter is the cutting-edge designer's métier. Though McQueen tragically taking his own life was pushing the envelope on the unpredictability scale.

While the world of fashion is one unflinching marker for determining how refined taste can be measured, the method suffers from a distinct western orientation in the way in which fashion, as a subject, is treated the world over. In India, that assumption is largely true, even with our designers going the extra mile to introduce an Indian aesthetic into their designs. The ramp, the wine and cheese, the presence of Bollywood and fashion divas, closely followed by the storied fashion magazines, the ubiquitous air kisses – they are all a throwback to how the fashion capitals of the western world have dictated the style agenda. Why, even the Prime Minister and Rahul Gandhi take sartorial pot shots at each other's penchant for international fashion brands! One is consequently seeking urbanity in a number of other fields, offering scope for originality in an Indian context. The Performing Arts, through music, dance, drama and fine art offers just that scope.

Take music. Indian popular music is primarily represented by film music across many languages that a polyglot India necessarily demands. Some decades ago, the likes of S.D. Burman, Naushad, Shankar Jaikishen and Roshan amongst others, regaled us with effulgent melody primarily inspired by Indian classical ragas. Though they were not above pinching

tunes from the west, if the context warranted it. Ditto for composers in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali et al. One could discern a yearning for melodies that stood the test of time. The same cannot be said of recent film music, barring exceptions, where elaborate bump-and-grind dance sequences and double entendre lyrics have dictated a type of loud, rap inspired fare. Instant thrills perhaps, but instantly forgotten as well. Vulgar? Maybe, but who are we to judge? Mary Quant didn't lose any sleep over vulgar!



Indian classical music – Hindustani or Carnatic – has an inbuilt DNA of good taste associated with it, even if that view is a result of decades of conditioning. If you truly understand the grammar, and the performing artist does full justice, you can be transported to an ecstatic realm. In pursuing this line of argument one can be held guilty of promoting a kind of elitism that the Cassandras find anathematic.



To counter this, we have observed some classical musicians attempting to take the art form to a wider public in some shape or form. Well known Carnatic musician, activist, columnist and Ramon Magsaysay awardee T.M. Krishna, takes the classical arts to railway stations and fishermen's villages by the seashore in Chennai, performs with transgender communities, startles bus travellers by clambering on unannounced and proceeding to essay his brand of egalitarian Carnatic rock! He cocks a snook at 'tradition'

and unapologetically plays footsie on stage with the revered, time-honoured concert format. A zealous disruptor out to jerk people out of their comfort zones. The jury is clearly out as to whether all this does anything to further the cause and widen the audience base for Carnatic music, or if it is just a passing fad – a subject that embraces caste schisms and broader sociological issues in its discourse, too long to engage in here. While opinions for and against Krishna's experiments have been vociferously expressed, we'll let the chips fall where they may.

'The 3 Tenors', Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras attempted to take Opera to the masses by belting out Sinatra's gold standard 'My way', along with 'Moon river' and 'Singing in the rain', amongst other Broadway hits, delivered operatically in a thick Spanish / Italian brogue, leaving the classicists squirming and the masses delirious. For myself, I would prefer to hear Placido Domingo's 'Granada' any day. The late Pandit Ravi Shankar's forays in attempting to popularize Hindustani classical music to the west were equally short lived, even 'with a little help from his friends', The Beatles.

British satirist Howard Jacobson hits the nail on the head. 'Appreciation of a piece of art necessitates more often than not, unless it is itself inchoate, a sophistication of sensibility not to say an education of judgement which is not available to everybody.....it is not for the art to stoop to the inchoate, but for the inchoate to rise to the art'.

In the final analysis, what precisely do we mean when we applaud a person with good taste? In my books, it would be someone who shows refinement in thought and speech, though the dividing line between refinement and snobbishness is thin. Perhaps we should leave the final word to George Bernard Shaw, who can unfailingly be counted upon to provide an ornery twist to an unresolved subject. 'He's a man of great common sense and good taste – meaning thereby a man without originality or moral courage.'

Suresh Subrahmanyam is an advertising and brand communications consultant with close to 40 years' experience in the field. A regular columnist in various Indian publications, his forte is humour and satire. Unsurprisingly, his favourite author is P.G. Wodehouse.



PRIYANKA JAIN: GRABBING LIFE BY THE HORNS

by Rashmi Sahi

The first thing you notice about her is her megawatt smile, a smile that seems to originate so deep within her soul that it radiates in everything inside her and around her. Yet, looks can be truly deceptive as in her case. Beneath that innocent, unassuming charm, lies a phenomenal woman, whose life is as interesting as her conversations.

Born in Kolkata, India, to an extremely conservative family where her only contact with the outer world was through the window of her chauffeur-driven car, it is difficult to imagine that this powerhouse of a woman sitting in front of me was once not allowed to cross a road on her own. Her life has seen an astonishing transformation. She refuses to be defined by just one aspect of her. Truly 'containing multitudes' as Walt Whitman would have said, this dramatist, director and producer of stage-plays, an actress, a radio- programme producer, an MD of a consulting firm, all rolled into one, is a far cry from the housewife she was being groomed to become.

One thing she has in abundance is immense passion for life and hunger for exploring her limits.

How many people do you know who would dare to pack their bags along with two kids under the age of 1.5, and venture on to pursue their dream of getting a Masters in a different country, away from their usual support system? Priyanka did exactly that. One day while visiting her husband's Alma Mater, Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, on a whim, she sent her application for the Masters degree in Urban Planning. As fate would have it, she was accepted in the programme on a partial scholarship. And she grabbed the opportunity. She

dedicated a year on her self-enhancement and growth, all because she wanted to give herself a chance that she thought she deserved. She would send her older daughter to a playgroup on her campus. The younger daughter who was too young for the playgroup was put into a stroller and went to class everyday with her. Oblivious to the complex concepts

helping her carry the stroller when she would be on a fieldtrip. Her hard work paid off. Not only did she obtain her Masters in record time, she obtained a whopping 3.95 GPA.

She eventually returned to Hong Kong but continued her studies. Here she got into a doctoral programme and got a degree in three years. Now she was Dr Priyanka Jain.

Life was rolling on blissfully. She now was successfully managing a career, a family and an active social life.

Yet, there was something amiss, something that was strongly tugging at her heart and making her restless again. This time it was a personal calling. In the early days of their marriage, the young couple had

mutually agreed upon something. They both wanted a larger family but through adoption. They already had their two biological daughters, and it was now time to adopt. In a conservative Indian context, where social pressure is a reality of your everyday life, even floating the concept of adoption was sure to send ripples through any family. The Jain family was no different. Not only were Priyanka and her husband determined to adopt, they were looking into adopting a local Chinese baby. The pressure was immense, but once again the strength of their spirit and conviction came through. Listening to their guts, they adopted a boy, despite serious advice from doctors to not to adopt this baby. Today that baby boy is a happy thriving lad of 16.

And it was because of her son that she accidentally started dabbling into acting. Priyanka had been observing that his son was a hyperactive child who lacked focus and that the conventional



her mother was trying to master, this little child would blissfully play under her mother's table. As they say, when you are hell bent on succeeding, the universe and everything else around you align things in your favour. It happened in her case. Her classmates and people around her helped her at each step, sometimes



childrearing methods were not helping him so in the evening, when the family would gather, she would invent acting games and activities to help him. In those days, the family had relocated to India. One day while she went to watch a play at Sri Ram Centre of Performing heart, she saw an ad for an acting course. The age limit was way beyond hers, but as always, she decided to send her application and lo and behold she got a call. And so began her creative career. After completion of the course, she decided to apply her skills

to the benefit of children and she started teaching acting to young kids. Her enterprise, Matchbox Theatre was born and soon was a big hit and she found herself much in demand.

Unfortunately, just after two course sessions, Priyanka had to move back to Hong Kong again. Here she decided to replicate the format of her Indian venture and started the Teacup Productions, an innovative company that focused on helping ethnic minority students, espe-



cially girls by empowering them through skills training and acting based activities. Not only that, she also conceived and produced a radio programme, 'Cultural Dim Sum' a show in collaboration with RTHK. The one-hour programme aims at celebrating diversity and unity

through common Indian and Chinese cultural themes.

And there is no stopping her. It is difficult to confine her into any miniscule parameter. Her eyes sparkle and shine with the glitters of unfulfilled dreams, dreams that she knows would be reality once she will put her mind to it. Literally grabbing life by its horn, this unstoppable woman has come a long way.

Maya Angelou must be talking about someone like her, when she wrote:

*"I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me."*

*Rashmi Sahi lives and
teaches in Hong Kong.*



INDIA'S SHAME

By Malathy Sitaram

The savagery of the rape, torture and murder of a little Muslim girl child named Asifa, in Jammu, Kashmir in April, 2018, by eight men all of whom are Hindus has shocked the world. Apparently, this was a deliberate crime committed by members of a Hindu fundamentalist group whose motive was to terrorize the Muslim population into leaving the predominantly Hindu area. Most shocking is that several police officers have been charged and arrested! Can the disease of extreme religious nationalism lead to such horror?

The men who tortured the child for a week before killing her must be devoid of even the smallest shred of humanity, decency and morality. They cannot claim to be civilized and their Hindu fundamentalism disgraces the religion that they claim to espouse. When and where do the much revered heroes of our two great Hindu epics plan and perpetrate such crimes on women and children? I have long been an opponent of the death penalty but this brutal crime deserves it. Such men pollute the earth. To add to the horror of this crime, it seems the rapists included a government official and two police officers. What has happened to my beloved country?

This has not been a single event. It seems there has been what the London Times newspaper calls an "epidemic" of rapes and murders of young girls in the past few months which have resulted in nationwide protests in India even as Prime Minister Modi arrived in London on the 18th of April for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. The newspaper goes on to say that more than 100 rapes every day are reported across India and "40% of them are attacks on children".

I remember that a few years ago I was shocked to read in The Times that a council of village elders in India had passed a sentence of 'rape' to be perpetrated against a young girl who had run away from home with her boyfriend. I do not remember who the rapists were to be - possibly members of the village council! It made me aware then of the extraordinary fissures in Indian society. City dwellers in India would have been shocked to hear of this but at the same time villagers seemed to be living in the Stone Age. Rapes of women who belong to the lower castes have increased. It brings home to me the precarious position of women in India who have to face such benighted acts of oppression. This

also brings to mind the fact that the appallingly high rate of the abortion of female foetuses has led to a huge gap in the proportion of numbers of men and women in the population. In some regions such as Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh men outnumber women to such a degree that they cannot find marriage partners!

This is not the India I grew up in at the time when great men like Gandhi, Nehru, Vallabhai Patel and Dr. Ambedkar fought in the most civilized way for independence from Britain. They were highly educated and refined men whose leadership inspired millions of Indians. Gandhi was admired for his moral principles, courage and tenacity and above all for his championship of the principle of non-violence. His tenets won him the admiration of people from all over

The killing of cows was banned in states ruled by the BJP party which is an extraordinary ruling in a democracy! Christians and Muslims in those states have been deprived of the democratic right to eat beef which they had done for centuries.

I grew up in an atmosphere of secular beliefs which were the norm. In my convent school the girls came from families of different religious persuasions. Such differences played no part in choosing friends. I left India quite a while ago and am sad to learn that secularism is no longer the norm. Hindu nationalism and violent sectarianism prevail. Modi's government has done nothing to stem the tide of violence in the name of Hindu orthodoxy. Last year we were shocked to hear of the murders of a journalist and a doctor who criticized such orthodoxy. Prime Minister Modi is the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party which is a deeply conservative and predominantly Hindu organization. Prior to the election which the BJP won a few years ago family and friends in India wrote to me about their fear that the BJP might win, bringing to an end the prevailing secular values. The right-wing party did win however and as predicted secular ideas have been under attack by Hindu nationalists. The anti-Muslim stance is sadly back in some circles.

I find it hard to believe that the child's Muslim parentage could have led to her appalling death. Can such twisted cruelty exist in this day and age? Such an act is the antithesis of religion and most right-thinking people would expect the maximum punishment within the law to be delivered. Once upon a time I was against the death penalty and especially of the way it is practised in the American South where many black men have been electrocuted over the years. I never thought that one day I would approve Prime Minister Modi's quick resolution in the face of national outrage over the recent multiple rapes of children, to obtain the President's approval by signature for the introduction of a new law carrying the death penalty for the rape of children under the age of twelve.

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



the world but led to his murder in 1948 by a member of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sangh) which was an anti-Muslim and strictly Hindu organization. Gandhi's friendly attitude towards Muslims was inflammatory to the members of the somewhat fascist organization which wanted to promote Hinduism and could not tolerate Gandhi's multi-cultural beliefs.

As a distant observer of India today I wonder at the strange political developments that have taken place. I am thinking of the RSS which now enjoys considerable power and recognition within the present government. Prime Minister Modi belonged to it in his youth and must have been influenced by its ideology. At the time when India was under imperial rule by the British, the RSS adopted military training for its followers who could be seen marching up and down in uniforms but its prime goal was to promote Hindu nationalism. Fighting the British was not its agenda. Last year there was a spate of violence against people who ate beef - namely Muslims.

SHASHI THAROOR'S "WHY I AM A HINDU"

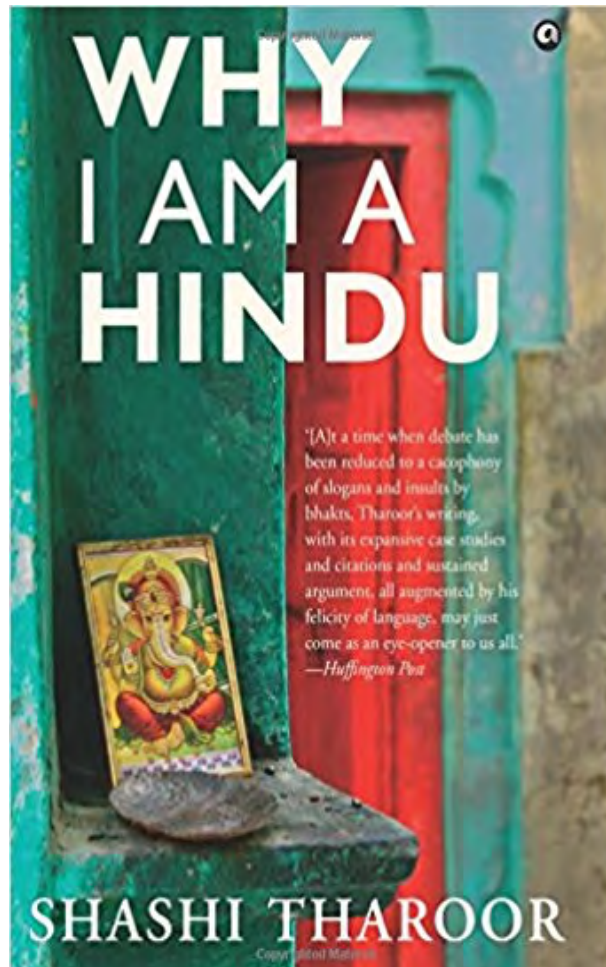
Reviewed By Anjana Basu

This is a book whose time has certainly come given the atmosphere of Hindutva and the use of religion as a political tool. Shashi Tharoor's *Why I am a Hindu* restates the basic openness of Hinduism, a religion which is rather a way of life with interpretations and practices left open to the person in question. Hinduism could be an open religion. Most people prefer to practise their faith and choose the deity they relate to. In the manner of an academic, Tharoor states the basic premise of Hinduism, starting with his own home and how he picked up whatever he knew from his family. His father was simple in his beliefs and never forced his son to join him in prayers.

From the personal, Tharoor's world of Hinduism expands to the public, or to society. He writes about how Hinduism has the capacity to take in other faiths if required and how there is no one theory. He also mentions the fact that the rigidity of the caste system was imposed by the British in the bad old days of colonial rule. Something that was done to make administration easier. This was taken up as valid writ by later generations of Indians who lacked interest in their original traditions. To highlight the fact that Hinduism was not casteist, he brings up the story of Adi Shankar Acharya and the Chandal.

To strengthen his argument, Tharoor goes on to talk about various reformers down the ages. He reserves his admiration for Swami Vivekananda who spoke to the world about the openness of Hinduism. As time passed, the religion had to adapt. There was no particular problem during the Mughul era since many of the rulers had Hindu warriors in their armies and married the daughters of Hindu kings. Nor was there any move towards conversion, even in the dreaded Aurangzeb's time.

As time passed Hinduism began to adapt to take in external influences, in keeping with its history. Raja Rammo-han Roy created the Brahmo Samaj in an attempt to appeal to the Colonial rulers who could not take in the thou-



sands of deities and were convinced that there was something vaguely savage about the 'Hindoos'.

Following a logical timeline, Tharoor winds down through gradually changing theories of Hinduism leading up to the almost rigid set of principles that Hindutva has begun to dictate – turning, Tharoor says into something like a football team with a rowdy bunch of fans. He goes through the theories of VD Savarkar, MS Golwalkar and has praise for Deen Dayal Upadhyaya who said that nationalism could possibly encompass all religions provided the basic tenets of Bharat Mata and Hindu superiority were accepted.

The final section of the book discusses political Hinduism of the kind that has been prevalent for the last few years. Tharoor is very clear that according to him the Hindutvavadis have no knowledge of Hinduism and are following a model close to an almost monotheistic puritanism. He talks about Ayodhya and Godhra and emphasises that Narendra Modi is trying to establish a legacy for the Hindutvavadis because the BJP has no lineage like that of Jawaharlal Nehru. The fact that Tharoor is essentially a liberal is clear, as is the fact that he is a member of the UPA.

Hinduism throughout the ages took in popular opinion and adapted accordingly. When the core belief was losing its appeal, Hindu philosophy broke into splinter groups like Buddhism and Jainism to offer a wider approach. Tharoor uses a lecture approach to his writing with phrases like 'as I said above' or 'I will expand on this' so that the book sounds like a conversation between student and teacher. What he does is describe the state of Hinduism as it was and as it is, supporting his theories by quotes and stories. However, what is missing is a concrete suggestion as to what Hinduism might become and how it could rise above the current scenario. For a practice that has shape shifted over time there must be some kind of solution within its core.

Publisher: Aleph, Price: INR 699/

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



VERSE JOURNALISM

By Yogesh Patel

Against the Frame by Azad Ashim Sharma, Published by Barque Press (without ISBN)

A recently published pamphlet of poems, *Against the Frame*, by Azad Ashim Sharma, declares itself in its first short poem:

I am a muslim not a terrorist
you see it is the recitation of discourse.
Your speech is free
mine is expensive
the sugar on my tongue becomes
a felt phenomenology of rotten lime.



Azad tells me, "I work within a specific and unique tradition of Experimental Writing and have a good knowledge of this scene, both historically and in the current moment because of the 6 years I spent studying literature, critical theory and avant-garde aesthetics at the University of Sussex. I've also been studying Arab Surrealism and Trauma Theory, which were perhaps the epistemological touchstones for my debut book."

Azad's debut pamphlet achieves some good poems too:

The sea is so deep and majestic
swallowing us in admiration and fear.
Take me to the bottomless depths
of a person I wish to meet and to become.

Azad Sharma is angry but he is not angry to the point of becoming an idiot. His approach is more measured as a poet than the self-righteous poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy in her politically charged poem, *Campaign*. The way she savaged Theresa May personally by crossing the boundaries of decency in her poem published in *The Guardian* on Saturday 10, June 2017 sounds more like hysterical vitriol than a considered approach found in Azad Sharma about his struggles to understand his place in context to politics we live in. If Carol Ann Duffy's poem were written by any lesser poet, it will be a laughing stock and consigned to the bin, let alone crowned with good publication purse which I suppose she did receive. Shows also how our media is corrupt to the core. For the copyright reasons, please read it here: <https://tinyurl.com/WordMasala10>

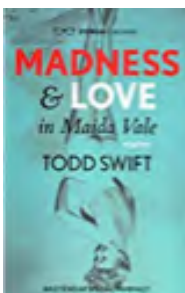
It is a great pity that not many of our diaspora poets are bold politically in their voices. This is where Daljit Nagra and Phinder Dulai win my vote for their candour on racism. I welcome Azad Sharma's debut pamphlet as voice of defiance, but this pamphlet requires of us also to re-examine the premise of 'verse journalism' and 'political poetry' as we live in the era of the democracy hijacked by the people in a die-hard denial powered by the 'gang' social media and journalism.

Writing political poetry is always a risk as they often slip into the rhetoric of journalistic statements. Journalists are not neutral - however much they pretend - and carry a huge baggage of personal views, often being selective in presenting the facts in a context of justifying their personal take. Dabbling in politics the amplified articulation of passion or expression in poetry can overdress itself as a cliff-edge viewpoint.

A Shit Show

ISBN9781911335030,
Madness & Love in Maida Vale by Todd Swift, Eyewear Publishing

There is much to learn from Todd Swift's collection *Madness & Love in Maida Vale*. A scholar, activist and publisher in his own right, he still is the master of verse and his wonderful poem, *The Shit Show*, is colourful, simple, with the repetitive statement leaving a profound impression on our mind, albeit with the over-tone of opinion, but as an accomplished poet deploying it to great effect as a useful poetic tool rather than a droning noise. Most astonishingly, he is able to say plenty without saying much at all! There is no other poem I have come across that is a great example of a tabloid journalistic headline hammered into our heads with a successful message, both political and moral, though completely tacit as any good poem does. Here are a few lines from that poem:



Basically, Captain, it's a shit show.
It's a shit show of epic proportions.
A real shit show, from the neck down.
*
Grade A shit show.
The mother of all shit shows.
The shit show to end all shit shows.

After reading this poem in full, one is left wondering about all kinds of political or moral mess around us. In anger, we don't say much but repeat our frustrations. The poem and poet's technique, therefore, work here impressively.

However, he has a warning for all budding journalistic poets. Nothing is simple, not even what we call a truth. The caveat is served to poets practising 'verse journalism', a word coined by the Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks, who has observed a poet as 'a fly on the wall'. In *'April Snow'*, his other poem, Todd Swift unravels that reality precisely. He wrote this before Trumpism gave us the *'Grade A shit show'*. Maybe he had Blair, Bush and Saddam Hussein in his sight!

Truth is always under reconsideration, has
a revolving door policy.

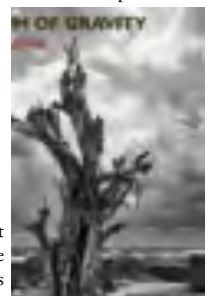
A celebrated fire-brand poet Bukowski is blunt about it too in his poem, *Counsel*:

history has chance after chance
to prove men fools.

Yes, we do not learn anything. Recently, I ran into Nick Makoha, the award-winning Ugandan poet, at our Royal Society of Literature event. He has chronicled his exile from the Idi Amin regime with some extraordinary poetic feat, avoiding the rhetorical aspects, instead, capturing the narrative of the details to invoke the experience of displacement. Here are lines from his *'Kingdom of Gravity'*

ISBN 9781845233334, Peepal Tree Press

Even the coffee I brought back in hand luggage
when poured in a cup is an eye, a past dark,
itching for light. So, since I cannot be the memory
of your death, let me bend the way a river does,
all shadow and sound, around a hill, towards a village
I once recognized. There are days
when this unplanned landscape speaks its music



Cavafy, Neruda, Yehuda Amichai, and many other past masters have been political, but with the observed discipline of the art making them a compelling reading. While journalists always will be extremely opinionated and will use a platform for a personal dogma, a poet will deploy various mechanics through the social lens or some other experiments to present an opinion within the universe of the poem written, which will not be a journalistic direct narration.

The maxim of art lies in an indirect narration. The dictum of journalism lies in reporting; both are subjective. So, both warp the truth. The good poets engaged in 'verse journalism' or a further metamorphosed form of 'political poems' hold the megaphones but avoid speaking in their poems as an activist. Poetry as an activist's agenda may get its moment as propaganda, perhaps sell volumes, but will fail to last as a poetic art form if it is just an articulated journalistic rant. The fallout is also due to the trivial versus the profound.

The greatest protester of them all was Sassoon. He protested against war, as in his famous short poem, *The General* (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57217/the-general-56d23a7de4d1c>). There is no direct tirade here to bear as reader to force you to take a shelter from poet's froth. Sassoon achieves the message with simplicity, but effectively, through the art of narration! That is why Todd Swift's poem mentioned above also works. It is even more distilled to create a great effect.

I get worked up about the abuse of the Freedom of Speech by the media. So, do explore Benjamin Franklin's (1706 – 1790) take on the Freedom of Press in the eighteenth century here: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/freedom-press>

Yogesh Patel is a poet from the UK. A former editor of *Skylark*, he currently runs *Word Masala Foundation* and *Skylark Publications UK* to promote the diaspora poets. By profession, he is an optometrist and an accountant.



IMMIGRANT BLUES THROUGH A FLASH FICTION AND A POEM

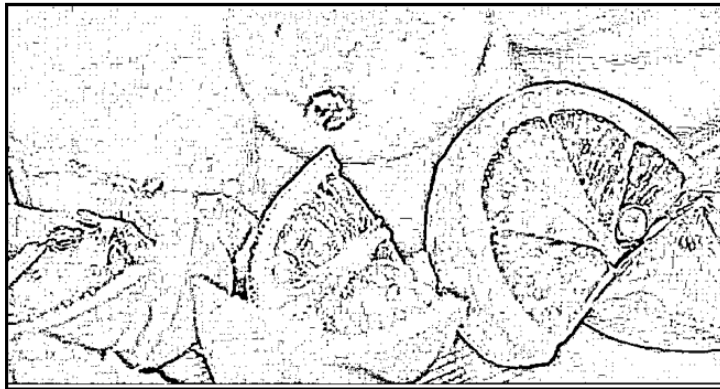
By Anita Nahal

The Lemon Cut

It was a hot day for the Washington DC metro area, being the thick of July. Priya, sitting in her car, air conditioning in full throttle, was far back in a long line of cars, in the exit lane towards 395, taking her home, in Arlington. Since it was a day before July 4th, her university had announced a half day. It was almost 3 pm, and her stomach was feeling quite rebellious! Earlier, she and her colleagues had gone to a restaurant near the campus, food from which obviously did not suit her tummy! She yearned for her mom's home recipe of squeezing a lemon or two in a glass, and drinking it neat up. As she thought of that, her thoughts wafted to the various romantic relationships she had had in the US till then. All short, quick to come and go, gave not much, cut to the chase, expected a lot in bed, not much in "hard to squeeze emotions". "I love you, but am not in love with you." What does that even mean, she would wonder.

She watched the stately Jefferson memo-

rial on her right, stoic and quiet, offering no answers. The moment she crossed the Potomac River, over in to Arlington, she went to a restaurant she often frequented in Crystal City, adjacent to where she lived. A chic, large space, though not very expensive. "Would you mind, if before I order, you could get me an empty glass, no water in it, and a couple of cut lemons, please?"



"Yes, sure!"

She came back soon enough. "Here you go, honey! You need anything else?"

"No, thanks so much!"

"Sure, honey! Just let me know when you are ready to order."

Priya sat for long in front of the cut lemons, trying to squeeze them. In the

US, at least in the North-East areas she had frequented, she had come to understand, lemons in restaurants were cut top to bottom, and not diagonally, the latter which allowed for more juice to be squeezed out. She signaled to her server, and requested for more cut lemons. And then a few more, a few more, a few more, and then a few more!

By the end of it, she had about the amount she would get from one reasonably sized lemon, cut diagonally by her mom. She gulped it down with her now very sticky hands!

"Hi, honey, you ready to order?" the server said, eyeing the mountain of cut lemons.

"You know, in India, the lemons are cut diagonally, not from top to bottom. More juice comes out the other way. Why do you think in the restaurants here, lemons are cut top to bottom? One can hardly get anything out. It's like cutting to the chase without any lasting effect."

"Not sure, honey. That's just how they do it here."



Would you like to try on my hat, please?

Yes, I had a stylish hat on today
A bit fancy, if I may say, I was trying to be
When I ran into the wind by the edge of the bay
"Where you going child, the wind's blowing your disjointed attire...can't you see?"
It said to me, chidingly, rather grimly
That I couldn't just hold myself lightly
And compelled I was to adjust layers
Of my diverse clothing, so as the soothsayers
Would not feel slighted
As I tried a walk
They could not talk
Making sure my wits were not blighted.
Somehow, we, ourselves, refuse to accept
An immigrant can have many a layered aspect!

Anita Nahal, poet, flash fiction writer, children's books writer, dancer and diversity & inclusion consultant, has also served as Assistant Provost for International Programs at Howard University, and Associate Professor of History, Sri Venkateswara College, New Delhi, India



CHETTINAD

by Sampath Kumar

Chettinad is the abode of wealthy Chettiars, who were once globe-trotting merchants and money-lenders with a fondness for flaunting their opulence. The name Chettiar derives from Setts or Chettis, who were by caste money-lenders. They were so rich by the 7th century CE, that the South Indian kings would borrow money from them, whenever they were in need. The kings in return, ceded to them many villages in the Sivaganga and Pudukkottai districts of Tamil Nadu, the Southern state in India, which was commonly called Chettinad or the land of Chettiars. It finds nomination in UNESCO for sites of historical and cultural value. Recently I paid a visit to the area.

Chettiars were philanthropists who worshipped the Hindu god Shiva primarily and carried their cultural and religious traditions wherever they went, building temples, schools and colleges. They created rest-houses for pilgrims in most sacred spots in India and abroad as well as in places they went to on business. They were also known as 'Naattukottai Nagarathar,' loosely translated as 'Townsmen of Naattukottai,' for their frequent travel away from their own villages. They even went so far as to explore new sea routes in search of further trading possibilities.

As seafaring merchants, they achieved rapid success. When the British

learned of their business acumen and their wealth they nominated them as middlemen to trade with the Burmese with whom the English banks had declined to do any business because of the risks involved. Chettiars were noted bankers, and after getting a foot-

Chettiars contributed greatly to the rise and spread of literature in Tamil Nadu.

Sir Harcourt Butler, the then Governor of Burma, now Myanmar, wrote to the Chettiar representatives in 1927:

"You represent an important factor indeed in the life of this province...Without the assistance of the Chettiar Banking system, Burma would never have achieved the wonderful advance of the last 25 to 30 years..... A Burman today is a much wealthier man than he was 25 years ago, and for this state of affairs, the Chettiar deserves his thanks".

The Chettiars' honeymoon with Burma lasted a century and a half, as Her Majesty's Government instituted a Provincial Banking Enquiry and found Chettiars to be oppressive against the ignorant and rural poor. In Ceylon too, the locals protested against Chettiars and similar enquiries were conducted. Here also, the government found that rules were flouted with impunity in the money lending business that victimized poor peasants. The Chettiars however, managed to hold on until the First World War broke out as there was no alternative system in place in these countries. Many returned to India voluntarily, and those who stayed behind were thrown out of Burma in the

early sixties with the rise of a Communist government which nationalised



An intricate woodwork at the entrance of a mansion



The huge outer hall and entrance of the Aathangudi mansion

and bringing back valuable timber and gems to India.

all landholdings of the Chettians and confiscated their properties after seizing power in a coup.

Chettians had for a long time brought back to South India the best of building materials: Burmese teak, Italian marbles, Japanese tiles, Belgian mirrors and African ivory to embellish their grand mansions. Their homes are much admired for their frescos and murals and intricate woodwork depicting Hindu Gods. The often two-storied homes run long with large open-to-sky courtyards in lanes to the front and the rear of their mansions. Their villages too were well-planned with well-connected roads. Water saving systems were also present to mitigate the perennial shortfall in the arid, dry districts of Sivagangai and Pudukkottai.

The mansions around Karaikudi are some of the greatest private residences that I have ever seen in any part of the globe. These homes have stood the test of time for more than two centuries. Walking through the towns of Kanadukathan, Pallathur, Kottaiyur and in Aathangudi, the epicentre of Chettinad, one can see substantial palatial mansions with very few occupants. Declining income and lack of opportunity have made their descendants move to towns and cities after obtaining their degrees, with many emigrating to the USA.

More than a hundred years ago, male Chettians went about seeking fortune in foreign lands leaving behind matriarchal rule in the households. 'Aachi,' as the eldest lady

is reverentially addressed, wields the stick of power. There would be six or seven mud ovens in the rear portion of the house. This was not for cooking simultaneously. Each married son and his family respectively owned a separate oven for their daily cooking. Sons could pursue vocations of their choice, which often created disparity in earnings. The idea of several independent ovens was to let them live independently accord-

their homes for a small fee which may cover a minuscule portion of salaries for their maintenance staff.

Some families have been brave and have let their mansions on lease or have rented them out for civil ceremonies. Movies are often filmed where the mansion suddenly emerges in a false resurgence for merely a few days. Some others are breaking up their houses piece by piece to trade off the abundance of teak and artefacts accumulated centuries ago. The line of antique shops in Karaikudi's Muneeswaran Koil Street silently reflects the burgeoning costs of the upkeep of palatial mansions and falling revenues, resulting in the dismantling and dismemberment of the great Chettiar legacy.

I met an owner lady in a mansion, sick and severely malnourished. She stretched her hand for some alms, ensuring that the watchful caretaker was busy elsewhere. I obliged as she hurriedly hid the note under her seat, which I guiltily thrust in her hand. She is the inheritor of the title and a magnificent mansion worth crores but living in destitution. Like in the words of poet James Casey, "Water water everywhere and not a drop to drink."

I felt exalted entering Chettinad but left with a very heavy heart. The lady was merely an example of falling on hard days. Her misty eyes will continue to haunt me now, and every time I think of Chettinad!



Ornate Burmese Teak pillars and the spacious foyer



The beautiful inner hall of a mansion, with walls inlaid with Italian Majolica tiles and floors with Carrara marbles

ing to their means. Much of Chettinad villages now seem like ghost towns, save an occasional moped or a bicycle

caretaker was busy elsewhere. I obliged as she hurriedly hid the note under her seat, which I guiltily thrust in her

parked at a few gates to indicate human presence somewhere. The silence in the villages is eerie. A few owners willingly allow visitors to walk in and explore

THE SECRETS OF THE SECRET DOOR

By Meenakshi Mohan

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mystery . . . that stands at the cradle of true art . . .

Albert Einstein

Art for me is like driving without knowing the direction where I am going. My art evolves as I submerge myself completely in it, and with it – it takes me to new realms of ideas, imaginations, and possibilities – it is a melodious whisper that guides and directs me. I am so enraptured in its allure that I find it quite difficult to answer the questions:

How long does it take you to complete a piece?

What inspires you?

How do you describe your paintings?

I consider art for art's sake – a process! When I am painting, I do not count hours, and as Thomas Merton said, "Art enables us to find ourselves, and lose ourselves at the same time," I simply enjoy, being totally unaware of how long it takes me to complete a piece.

Eurie Bronfenbrenner said that we are all products of our micro and macro environment. I developed my love of art as a child. Since the time, I learned to hold a pencil, figures of people, central to my life, with hands and legs sprouting from their heads, were the protagonists of my childhood imagination. My mother, who was an artist, was my first inspiration. I grew up learning the basics of art under her mentorship. My husband, a physicist by education, with a thorough understanding of art, and literature, not only encouraged me, but also prompted me in how I can advance in my understanding of art. He admired my primitive works of Bengal Village Scenes, and Santhali Women. My children, friends, and the artists I have come to know are my inspirations as well. The workshops, and art organizations I am involved with now – all have extended my appreciation and knowledge of art.

My paintings are varied in styles. I do not label them into constricted categories of "isms," or "ists" – I do, however, admire the paintings of Impressionist, Postimpressionist, and Expressionist artists. I love bold-



The Secret Door (Oil on canvas 24X36)

colors, and like to play with lights and shades in my paintings. Some of my paintings are inspired by special moments in my life or from a vision soothing to my mind and soul, e.g. in Solitude, and Towards Eternity. When I walk on the wooded trails, I am fascinated by trees – some friendly, stretching their limbs to reach out; some solemn philosophers, standing tall, and aloof; some with their leaves drooping down in sorrow – all knitting silent, secret stories! Perhaps, my enchantment with mysticism gave birth to The Secret Door – what is hidden behind the shrouds? Diane Arbus said, "A picture is a secret about a secret . . ." This painting invoked different emotions and reactions in different people, each one with its own flavor.

I think, in the realms of our hearts, we all have a "Secret Door," and we all have a key to that door – it is up to us "how" and "when" we use it.

Meenakshi Mohan has taught for over two decades in America, having earned a Doctoral degree from Chicago in Educational Administration with a focus on Early Childhood. She has published papers and books and has been included twice in the Who's Who among American Teachers.



TWO POEMS

Poems By CA Joseph (1910 - 1994)

The Loudest Colour
White is the loudest colour?
Go look
at the white bright lotus bloom
as it peeps out
from its promiscuous bed of leaves
green and grey,
poised
against the lake's heavenly blue;
and who will not agree
that white is the mother
of all her seven lavish children ?

On Seeing A Shooting Star
The sky was startled;
the air there had a shock of light;
my eyes were all astare;
my heart paused wondering for a moment.

Though there it had been
from all eternity,
none gave thought to this star,
till suddenly it bounced into mortal vision
and rolled like some ball of glory.
As it blazed it flashed a thought:
we become manifest by the dissolution of self
when, torn from the trammels of gloom within us,
the good is melted
and hurled to destiny
like a torrent of light.

He himself translated his Malayalam poems into English and published them in Illustrated Weekly of India, Thought, Indian Literature, Indian Express etc. mostly during 1950s and 1960s. He translated and published poems of other Malayalam poets too. His poem appeared in Bharatiya Kavita 1958-59, an anthology of Indian poetry transliterated in Devanagari with translation in Hindi, and a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru.



9 SHILLONG POEMS

By Ananya S Guha

1
In a milestone;
spanning sixty years,
the whitish hair
spells some forecast
only there is no dandruff.

2
Did you hear the guns?
there was a sound -
In Syria children
belch fumes

3
This is not the hill town
I have known,
this octopus city -
the policeman whistles;
the direction of his looks
going sideways
as the drunk, wobbles across.

4
I am not an artefact;
nor, a typology of
the obvious

I am....
and spurn the dust
ingraining my feet
5
stereotype: an academic
discourse
me: a stereotype

6
Lit hills,
that is not a bonfire;
sun's rays setting
on these ancient
hills even as the
monoliths, the rocks
are slumbering

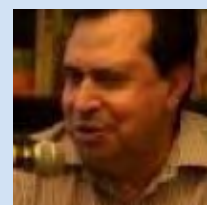
7
Call those children
out of the field
it will soon rain
and I will pluck mangoes
out of these emerald trees;
plums ripening play

truant with childhood
memories-

8
Lying on winter's bosom
like a bee droning
then, stinging

9
In Shillong why do
I think of Syria?
I revisit it in dreams

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.



KD VERMA'S UNDERSTANDING MULK RAJ ANAND

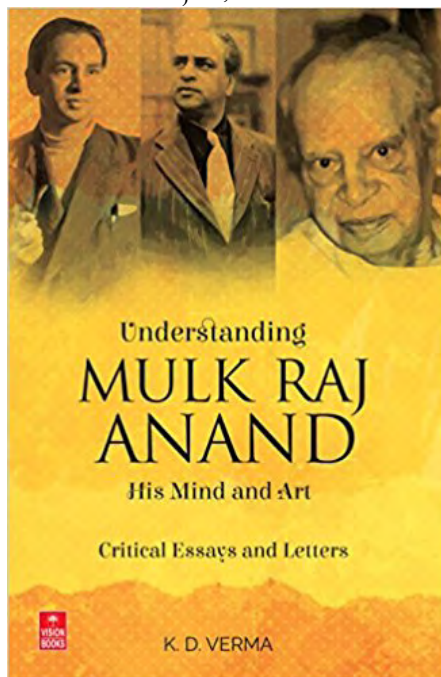
By Malashri Lal

To any question about why Prof. K.D. Verma's book is important for new scholarship on Mulk Raj Anand, I have an unhesitating answer that this is a transnational and intercultural reading that is pertinent to our times. The old pieties about the three doyens of Indian writing in English: Anand, Raja Rao and RK Narayan, and the old assumption that Marxism shaped Anand's social thinking will have to cast aside. Kamal Verma opens a fresh perspective when he declares in the opening chapter, "It is utterly erroneous to suggest that Anand is a Marxist or a communist, one who has lost his faith in the capacity of the social organism to bring about change. Anand's sympathy for and commitment to the cause of the unfortunate poor, the disinherited and the victimised—the Bakhas and the Munoo—is rooted in the tradition of liberalism and English social thought." (21) And, I would add that the liberalism derived from England was modified substantially by Indian experiences when Anand thought about social hierarchies in India and finally returned to the country in 1946 to engage with Gandhian philosophy on ground. To this end, Anand writes in *Apology*, "As an Indian, I am conscious of the need to help raise the untouchables, the peasants, the serfs, the coolies." (Anand 1975). Kamal Verma's readings show the issue is much larger than the specific narrative of two fictional characters named Bakha and Munoo and I fully endorse Prof. Verma's viewpoint they are "universal metaphors of human suffering." (30)

I will now focus more closely on the problem of inclusion of minorities projected in this book, remembering the long gap in years between the original novels, and Prof Verma's post colonial reading. The novel *Untouchable* (1930) dwells on the frustrations and hopes of the young harijan boy Bakha. Caste discrimination was an unfortunate reality then but is against the law now. Anand presents a single day in which Bakha experiences the deep humiliation of caste prejudice as also the redemptive vision of Mahatma's Gandhi's call for removing the stigma of untouchability. KD Verma reminds us of the specific nature of the discrimination which is based literally on the trope on a "forbidden touch"—Bakha is slapped by an upper caste man who bumps into him. Verma also reminds us of Bakha's sister Sohini, who is, most ironically, sexually assaulted by the high caste priest though she is branded as an untouchable. One may claim that this early novel has a socio-historical context and correc-

tive action has followed in that untouchability has been outlawed in India, and the dalits have emerged as a strong political lobby. But I ask, have the laws assured actual social justice? News reports show that caste based dissemination continues, and sexual exploitation of women is unfortunately on the rise.

From caste let's move to labour, the topic of Anand's novel *Coolie* (1936) that KD Verma describes, in conjunction with *Untouchable* as "a moral essay on humanism." (43). The destitute orphan Munoo is a Kshatriya by birth and therefore, theoretically capable of rebellion, but he cannot act against hegemonic power. He is constantly moving in search of menial jobs, as a domestic worker,



factory labour, circus employee, and rickshaw puller. As Dr. Verma summarises, it is a life of "poverty, exploitation, hunger and disease." (57). Munoo is only fifteen when he dies of tuberculosis in Shimla.

Can one argue that the conditions are different in India, eighty two years after this book? Looking at the provisions in law the answer is affirmative—child labour has been banned, the Right to Education is expected to place all children in school, and the Public Distribution System is supposed to provide adequate food for a poor family. In reality, we know things are different and far from the ideal. Children displaced from work in carpet weaving and jewellery making factories, where their deft hands created intricate designs, are today roaming the streets and begging. School enrolment has no doubt improved

at the primary level but the retention older students is proving difficult. Law gives us the framework for human development but society has to adapt to the new opportunities—and we are lagging behind in integrating the underclass into the mainstream. What is needed is a rethinking on education curriculum to include hands-on learning that promotes dignity of labour. Social inclusion can be actively practiced in schools through teachers who are enlightened.

This brings me back to Prof Verma's book and its emphasis on Anand's neo humanism. That feeds straight into the development debates in which education is a key.

For a last point on inclusion, I turn to the letters from Mulk Raj Anand to Prof Verma, which comprise a remarkable archive. On January 4, 1997, Anand says, "Agony, agony, dream and ferment are of course, the background of every creative writer." (218). By then Anand was 92 years old, living in India, a famous author. Was the agony caused by the impossibility of reconciling the liberal English and the humanistic Gandhian in him? In a sense, he had worked his way through the inner split in his novel *The Bubble* (1984) in which the protagonist is a thinly disguised mask for the author, and the global plot leads finally to the Sabarmati Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi. And that's where I rest my comments today. Social inclusion was Gandhi ji's dream and even if one were to differ about accepting his methods, the vision is indisputable. In such a world, Bakha would not be an untouchable, Sohini would not be sexually violated, Munoo would not be condemned to childhood labour, and materialism would not be equated with success. Legislation in India has sought to ensure equality of gender, class, caste and ethnicity, and taken positive action on Reservations. What we need is a change in social attitudes to bring about a sustainable condition of equality and inclusion. Towards this Prof. Kamla Verma's book makes a valuable contribution. Malashri Lal is a ret'd. Professor of

English and the Dean of Academic Activities at the University of Delhi.

Malashri Lal is a ret'd. Professor of English and the Dean of Academic Activities at the University of Delhi.



IMPULSE

By Subhash Chandra

Total risk aversion is coded into my DNA. Flight has always been my response to danger. I've always shunned messy situations. But at times, a bizarre impulse takes hold of me and I metamorphose into somebody totally the opposite of myself. I begin to behave differently and get into scrapes.

#

I am taking my morning walk along the boundary wall of our colony where I live.

Suddenly a blur of a human figure whizzes past me and races into the car park. The next minute, a group of five colony louts, notorious for idling and ogling girls are upon me.

"Uncle ji which side has he gone?" one asks huffing.

"What happened?"

"He is a dangerous fellow, Uncle ji" one of them shouts while dashing into the parking lot. After a few minutes they emerge and frenziedly rush in the opposite direction.

I complete my walk and head home.

#

As I am climbing up the stairs, I freeze. He is sitting on the landing of the first floor -- I live on the second. We eye each other suspiciously, neither making a move. These guys are armed, generally. He might attack me, if he feels threatened. Should I turn back and walk a little more?

But truly speaking, he does not look dangerous. Probably twenty-five or six years old, he is bony, shrunk, and scruffy with a sallow face, lustreless eyes. He looks terribly famished and seems to need a substantial meal. No, he could not be a criminal.

Feigning ignorance, I ask him in a casual tone, "Who're you and what're you doing here?"

He only stares at me. Not wanting to show I'm scared, I go up a couple of stairs. When he does not move, I squeeze past him and say mildly, "Don't sit here. Go home."

"Uncle ji I have done nothing." His voice is fragile and tearful. "Please save me. They'll kill me."

"Who?" I continue, shamming.

"Those guys chasing me," he says and pulls out his trouser-pockets. "See, I've nothing on me."

I can't decide whether he is speaking the truth. Instinctively, I take out my wallet and give him two hundred-rupee notes. "Here, go and eat something."

He gawks at the money and me alternately.

Then I hear myself say, "Behind the car park, there's a small gate with no guard. You slip out from there. Quick."

I go up, enter my house and close the doors. But before long, I begin to wonder whether I've helped a criminal escape.

#

Around 11:30 AM, I'm going to the Mother Dairy booth to buy veggies.

"Bhaisaab, do you know what happened yesterday?" Rattan Lal walks up to me eagerly. He's known as the Breaking News of the colony.

"What?"

"A chain snatcher entered the colony. He pounced on a woman, pulled the chain so hard it cut into her neck, leaving her bleeding."

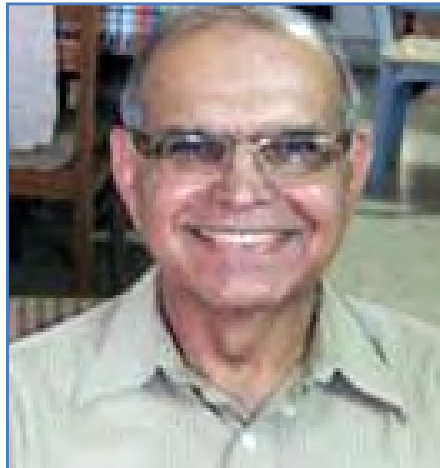
"Oh."

"The colony boys chased him, but he vanished into thin air," he says and adds, "I ask 'was the guard sleeping?'"

"Rattan ji, a guard is human after all. He too has to attend to calls of nature."

"Terrific! It's people like you who spoil them. No wonder there is lawlessness in the colony."

I move on.



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. His latest collection of stories 'Not just another story' has been published in January 2017 by LiFi Publications New Delhi.

#

A few steps ahead, I run into the owner of 'KnowAll Coaching Centre,' being run from inside the colony.

"Sharma ji, be careful about your grandchildren."

"Why?"

"This morning, a child-lifter was seen trying to waylay a small girl."

The story is mutating each time a different person narrates it.

"Really?"

"Bad times. The criminals have become emboldened. Police are in cahoots with them."

"You're right."

#

The next day whilst I am on my way to the nearby market, I notice a crowd, around a motor cycle, with a Sub-Inspector and a constable sitting astride it with its engine throbbing.

I hear the SI telling the crowd, "They were two of them. One has committed two murders, and the other four robberies. We have caught the robber, but the murderer is still at large. We'll get him soon."

I miss a heartbeat. "What does he look like?"

The SI gives me a dirty look and says, "Hmm, listen. He has a long scar on his left cheek, one eye and two horns."

"Young man, you don't have to be sarcastic," I chide the SI.

He grows red in the face. "Where do you work?"

"Why? Rest assured, I am not the one you are looking for," I tell him.

"But to me you look fishy. The likes of you shelter criminals for money."

Suddenly, I get back to my normal self. Now, the Sub-Inspector looks threatening to me. I know very well, messing up with the police can be dangerous.

"I did not mean to offend you, Beta," I say trying to make amends.

He doesn't appear to have heard me. "What do you do?"

"I retired as professor of Hindi."

I think that should make a difference. It does not.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Prof. G.P. Sharma."

"Address?"

"Well ... I live here," I smile amiably.

"Full address?"

I had offended the inflated ego of a police official. I comply.

"We will soon catch the murderer, for sure. You will see him in the court."

I curse myself for inviting trouble. He will surely make my life difficult. He will make me a witness in the case involving a murderer.

"Beta, don't get angry. I am sorry, if I upset you."

His expression continues to be grim and sullen.

I continue with my attempt to mollify him. "Life of policemen is really tough. On festivals like Diwali, Dussera, Holi, when we are enjoying with our families and friends, the police are out protecting us."

"Move on," he barks at the constable who is on the driver's seat.

#

It is one month since the episode. My sleep is disturbed. Every now and then, I have nightmares. My blood pressure has shot up and I now take a double dose of the medicine.

The nightmare comes true. One day, I get a summons from the court to appear as a witness. I know I will measure the rest of my life in kilometres between my home and the court.

INDIAN LINKS

by Lincoln Seligman

INDIAN LOVE AFFAIR

It's in my bones, so I'm predisposed to love what it offers me as an artist.

It was hard to avoid becoming entangled in India as it beckoned from both sides of my family. My father's mother, Hilda Seligman, knew Gandhi well, and entertained him in London. But her first lengthy visit to India had been forced on her by her parents in a bid to stop her marrying my grandfather, a banishment that failed. She painted extensively, and brilliantly, in the Himalayas. Her bronze sculpture of Chandra Gupta, shepherd boy who founded a dynasty in 275 AD stands in front of the Indian Parliament to this day.

On my mother's side Kipling was a close friend of my grandfather. Indeed he was my mother's godfather. The Jungle Book and Just So stories were very much part of my childhood.

In my earlier life as a shipping lawyer, which lasted six years, my work took me frequently to Hong Kong, and I would make sure I left time to touch down in India to paint and travel on every trip. By good fortune one of my school friends was the son of the Maharaja of Jaipur, so that added a unique angle to visits to the Rambagh Palace, one of his family homes, now a hotel.

Over the years I have realised that India provides so much that I enjoy – visual stimulation for my work, spiritual histories, monumental architecture (religious and royal) and landscapes of unparalleled beauty.

Magnificent cities and deserts, ebullient people who are almost invariably warm, and so much subject matter for a painter – the colour of clothes, from plain textiles to absurdly ornate costumes. Clothes in India are an explosive celebration of life, for both sexes. And for children too.

The temples offer the sharpest contrasts in light and shade, again grist to the artist's mill. Monks and locals in bright apparel shine determinedly in the peaceful shadows.

In the deserts bright turbans leap off the sandy page – the richness of colour perfectly set off against a background of dust. Even the camels dress up.

As for the more spiritual and contemplative offerings – one has a sense, not logical but still compelling, that one is part of a continuum of timelessness. This means that living encourages one to ignore watches and clocks, and just absorb the moment in all its richness. And if a painting emerges, so much the better.



Guard with cheetah, 20x20, acrylic on canvas



Maharaja at speed with boy and cheetah 40x30, acrylic on canvas

TRAVELLER'S TALE

LINCOLN SELIG-

MAN'S JANUARY

SOJOURN IN INDIA

My forthcoming exhibition was inspired by a journey to Rajasthan, fairy tale India, the land of Kings, and Gujarat where merchants rule. I begin thinking about each January trip to India in July. It takes the next five months to plan the itinerary, with endless recalibration to include new places that emerge as

unmissable. The problem always being to spend enough time on the ground in each place to allow the unplanned, and indeed the unknown, to leap out and bite you in the leg – in a good way. I have to confess to always being on the lookout for material for paintings. There's always an abundance.

To paraphrase Kipling (my mother's godfather) IF you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs – drivers, hoteliers, guides et al, you'll enjoy India. IF you can avoid being mown down by ambling ruminants – the omnipresent sacred cows: IF you can protect your picnic from marauding monkeys; IF you can cope with malevolent camels coughing all over you with

trophy room with hundreds of stuffed animals, some probably caught by his grandfather's cheetah.

We had to leave Ahmedabad in a hurry as a new film, depicting a Hindu heroine in a bad light, had caused riots on the streets.

So our next stop was the desert at The

The most soothing day, counter intuitively, was a long trek on a camel through the scrub and palm trees of the Thar Desert (Manvar). One needed to master the manoeuvre of mounting the animal, i.e. getting into the saddle. A high risk manoeuvre involving avoidance of the stiletto thin pointed pommel aimed at one's tenderest parts. But once aloft the



Cavalryman and horse, 20x20, acrylic on canvas



Rajasthani leading his horse, 32x24, acrylic on canvas

storm force – you'll enjoy it even more.

You'll then have time to take in the true splendour of the landscapes, the architecture, the temples and palaces, and the warm of the people you'll meet.

The sheer scale of centuries' old building works and the meticulous artisan skills involved never ceases to amaze. From the vast Ellora cave temples hewn from rock to the subterranean stepwells, the size of cathedrals. At one I was approached by the Imam's ten-year-old son, whose delightful begging was phrased with charming sophistication. "Might I enquire as to the availability today of some pounds sterling?"

My more light-hearted paintings of 'maharajas at speed' in their Rolls Royces, sometimes with a hunting cheetah in attendance, found the perfect client in Dungarpur. The prince not only had a beautiful and extensive collection of classic cars in his palace, but also a

Rann of Kutch – cracked earth all the way to the five mile horizon. And a sunset that might just make up for the risk of dying of thirst.

The Darbargarh Palace at Pochina was another one for any Good Palace guide. Delightful maharaja who spared no effort to entertain us, including a lakeside picnic, a day on a Rabari tribal farm, and his splendid and unstoppable palace drummer – who combined the drumming ferocity of Ginger Baker with the military tailoring of Corporal Jones.

I had time to have a coat made in Udaipur – on exiting the tailor's shop a grumpy shopkeeper opposite said I'd just come out of the city's worst tailor. When the coat arrived, it turned out that he was indeed right. I can only make it fit by standing at 45 degrees and not breathing, swallowing, or moving my arms. The buttons are already history.

camel's gate proved to be rather soporific and most conducive to mind expanding reverie than travel on the District Line never seems to encourage.

The paintings that emerge for the exhibition in May and June, will I hope, bear testament to my abiding love of the place.

Website: www.osg.uk.com



CHILLING IN SALT LAKE

By Neil McCallum

Sunday. West Bengal at the end of January and it's abnormally cold. The chilliest winter for 50 years, people say. On Saturday we had enjoyed the privilege of being introduced to Kolkata by journalist and author Soumitra Das. We understand why his serenade to the city's architecture is called *A Jaywalker's Guide* as we dash across roads and into traffic in his wake to see yet another glorious building. 'Don't worry,' he calls back over his shoulder as he strides out confidently and buses and lorries swerve around us, horns blaring 'They're not allowed to knock you over.' With him we explore the somewhat sullen colonial grandeur around Dalhousie Square and wonder at the massive, decaying Bengali mansions in North Calcutta. A glorious, thrilling glimpse of a truly remarkable city.

what constitutes attractiveness. But what about wheaten complexion and convent educated? They too feature regularly but seem peculiarly Indian requirements. I don't think I've ever heard that description of skin colour outside India. And certainly in the UK, probably influenced by too many 1960's sex romps, the expression 'convent educated' prompts smirks and jokes about promiscuity and unusual sexual experiences, which I'm absolutely sure isn't the intention here. I assume for the readers of this newspaper 'convent educated' implies a sound educational and moral grounding. For the prospective grooms' description of what they're offering in return, handsome, well earning, working in the UK or better still, the States seem strong selling points. Sounds like the description of a hero in a not very imaginative romcom. I preferred the blunt honesty of one advert which succinctly cut to the chase: 'Afflu-

me. I'll give this chap a call.' Somehow, I don't think so.

I smile at 'Demandless handsome groom seeks within 25/5'3" fair, pretty, slim non-Mangolik, min Honours Graduate, homely Brahmin bride.' Demandless? Sounds like quite a detailed list of demands to me. Then I realise the term probably has a more specific meaning in this context, related to money and material goods. And I'm left contemplating 'Doctor 33+5'7" fair handsome no addictions.' What stories does that final caveat hint at? What an interesting thing to choose to highlight. If you were writing a list of your attributes, real or embellished, what would you put after profession, age, height and appearance? Achievements perhaps? Interests? Does this suggest crippling past addictions finally conquered and heroically overcome? Or a past



But today, we're in Salt Lake, a modern, green and prosperous suburb. It's cold, it's quiet and it's a day for drinking tea and reading the newspaper. I check out the headlines: A bomb in an ambulance in Kabul kills 94. Demonstrators disrupt the opening of the movie *Padmavaat*. Male voices proudly declaim that their Rajput honour is so sullied by this fictional tale of a fictional queen that Rajput women will need to kill themselves because of the disgrace. We try to get tickets, in part to make a stand for freedom of artistic expression in India, in larger part to see what all the fuss is about (isn't it great when you can make a stand for decency and have a good night out at the same time?) Unfortunately, all shows are sold out for days to come. I guess freedom of artistic expression in India is doing quite well, thank you, without any effort on our behalf to support it.

I turn to the Brides Wanted/Grooms Wanted pages, and marvel at how much information aspiring spouses manage to squeeze into a few short words. It's like deciphering a code. Patterns emerge. What might convert a total stranger into an appealing bride in the mind of her prospective life partner? Fair, pretty and slim appear regularly. No surprises there. That's probably a fairly international set of requirements in a world where

ent upper middle-class family, only child.' Now THAT's putting your best cards on the table!

There's a similarly impressive practicality about many of these notices, particularly when compared with lonely hearts columns in western publications where coyness and fake levity don't quite mask an undertone of disappointment and desperation: 'Fun loving guy looking for cuddles, long walks and who knows?'

I become increasingly focused on what people choose to prioritise in the few words and brief space allotted: You can't help but suspect you'd rather like someone who stresses his family is 'cultured, liberal, open minded, well educated.' Or the clarity of specifying 'Same caste doctor.' I guess it pays to know what you want. Like the groom looking for a 'pretty, working ,aristocratic family bride.' Bit of a stretch perhaps, but what the hell? You don't get if you don't ask. Hope it works out for him. By contrast others seem a significantly less picky, suggesting perhaps earlier attempts with more specific requirements have been unsuccessful: 'same/other caste general bride' has a world-weariness about it and it's difficult to see quite why anyone would be prompted to respond. 'General bride? Yeah, that sounds like

relationship destroyed by booze or drugs? And the fact that he's a doctor... Call me naive but I would have taken for granted that a doctor would be free of addictions. Makes me think a little bit more about my own medical advisor. I thought all that yawning in the surgery and the tremor in his hand was the result of being up all night saving a life somewhere.

Inevitably, over another cup of tea, I contemplate what I would say if I had to summarise myself in six short words. What would you? It's no trivial thing to summarise who you are and what you are looking for in the person who more than anyone else can make or mar the rest of your life. As I put aside the newspaper I'm left struck by the courage and honesty of many of these notices. Because I realise I'd struggle to be so straightforward and I become a little more sympathetic for those 'Fun loving older man seeks...' and 'Bubbly lady, 50+ looking for...' in papers back home.

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



A SLICE OF INDIAN CULTURE: NATYA BHARATI FROM VISION TO REALITY

By Meenakshi Mohan

Play is a piece of art . . . a blue print to explore and develop

Alan Ayckbourn
The Crafty Art of Play Making

There is a Portuguese word, Saudade, which means a state of deep emotional nostalgia. When you leave your country, this deep nostalgic state is like a fish bone clamped in the inner depths of your rib cage – you miss everything about your country, its people, its food, and its cultural scene that you have left far behind. Was it saudade – this deep nostalgic feeling to bring a “slice of home” to the Washington DC Metropolitan area that Natya Bharati was created? In 1984 a few theater enthusiasts met informally, and over a cup of tea -- scribbling notes on a napkin -- the seed of Natya Bharati was planted. Today it is a thriving, non- profit organization with its own Executive and Advisory Committees, Board of Trustees, and many other torchbearers -- producers, directors, actors, stage specialists, costume designers – all part of the cadence. The Indian diaspora is more than enthusiastic, and willingly awaits every new production. Natya Bharati started off with a twofold mission:

- To bring quality Indian theater to the DC Metropolitan area.
- To encourage younger generation to participate both backstage and onstage.

1984 was a milestone year for Natya Bharati when the curtain rose for the first time – Kasturimrig, with a cast of culturally diverse group, was launched as a pilot project. Dr. Srikantaiah, aka Kanti, one of the founding members of Natya Bharati said, “ . . .this was only the beginning. We received a standing ovation from the audience . . . The community . . .showed their support by becoming patrons in large numbers and pressing us for more plays.” Manju Gupta, a board member of Natya Bharati, reflected that it was an emotional experience for many in the audience. She herself was moved to tears to have this piece of her culture.

Some of the earlier plays were Kiski Baat, Sabse Bada Aadmi, Surya ki Antim Kiran se Surya ki Pahlvi Kiran Tak, Pasina Pasina, and Ekalavya etc. Dr. T Srikantaiah stated, “The strength of Eklavya’s character, and his philosophy of winning by sacrifice had a lasting impression on

me from my childhood days. I wanted to share the impression, and the rich cultural heritage with the youth of our society . . .” Natya Bharati soon adapted some of the plays to be in English to include younger generation.

As Natya Bharati moved on further in its venture, it became apparent that play, as one of the core genres of literature, is the mirrors of society – it documents happenings, then reflects



on societal/cultural norms, intricate family relationships, political issues etc. It educates, and empowers the audience, e.g. in Kasturba V. Gandhi we knew very little about Kasturba. Kasturba was the epitome of women, who stayed behind the scene, but was iron strength with the whole independence movement!

The Final Chapter touched on the very basic human instincts – one starts off being idealistic, however, when it comes to fame, and making



money, the later part wins -- the question remains, does it really make one’s life a “whole”? A prolific writer Vishram Saigal faced such a dilemma when he reached the pinnacles of fame. Iktara looked into human relationships -- we are involved with our own preconceived notions, however, we must move beyond “us” to understand others.

Adarsh Gupta, the current President of Natya Bharati, stated that Natya Bharati’s growth was not restricted to local talents exclusively. Natya Bharati had the honor of working with well-known theater and film personalities as well. A huge credit goes to her for widening the scope of Natya Bharati by including the younger generation, and by bringing plays for them, and by them. Bachchon ki Adalat was my real favorite. It looked into the issues of our modern Indian generations in this country -- the message was cleverly presented to adults through children’s court.



Natya Bharati is all prepared for its move forward. Soon, there is going to be a play based on Munshi Premchand’s novel Godan. Another forthcoming highlight is, Music in my Blood – it explores the world of classical Indian music through drama, and how the new generation carries on the tradition. I find this play quite metaphorical with Natya Bharati’s philosophy in passing the baton to the newer generation with their newer, refreshing ideas, and taking this organization to wondrous new heights. Pramud Rawat in his Tribute to Natya Bharati emphasized that to enliven the dramatic scene; we should bring forth new ideas by including poetry, music and painting . . . After all, “ Play is a piece of art . . .to explore and develop.” A huge kudos go to those who dreamt of bringing this slice of Indian culture to this new land, they made home, and to all those theater enthusiasts for their seamless efforts in making this vision into an ongoing reality!

Meenakshi Mohan has taught for over twodecades in America, having earned a Doctoraldegree from Chicago in Educational Administration with a focus on Early Childhood. She has published papers and books and has been included twice in the Who’s Who among American Teachers.



A JAMAICAN BOY

By Cyril Dabydeen

"You have an accent," he says, with aplomb and ease, and it's his declaration no less. Does he really know? French-Canadian Mauril is absolutely devoted to his wife, I must also know, which is why he's here—waiting for Sylvie to finish her art class. "Yes, my wife," he affirms, like a boast, looking at me intently.

I imagine Sylvie to be a striking woman with artistic finesse in her special art class in this community centre. Diligently Mauril drives her home, back and forth twice a week. Now he waits for her—here, being with us at the fitness club. Yes, here with my accent and all. "My wife wants to do well before it gets worse," Mauril adds.

"Worse?"

"She's blind."

"How blind?" I am curious; never mind my accent.

Sylvie wants to see everything before she loses her sight entirely. "She only sees a chink now," Mauril explains, making a small space with his fingers—indicating a chink, and an arc forming. Sylvie has a real sense of colours, you bet. Abstract, surreal. The sauna's temperature rises; and, he's indeed here after the swim, usually in his plodding style. Now it's about my accent with my swarthy complexion and all. He quotes some words to me. An Indian language?

I shake my head. No comprendo!

He tells me he'd been to India as a Canadian consultant on electronics, and he loves the food there, the fiery stuff! How fiery? The food in Kerala is the best, he says and laughs. I also laugh, being agreeable. Masala in the air, I sniff and make a face. Nothing more exotic? Now he and Sylvie regularly eat Indian food in Ottawa's restaurants.

How am I taking him? He taking me? Am I not really from India? North...or south?

"How many children d'you have?" I try.

Family, yes. "None," Mauril says, "but my wife has." I wait to hear more. "Seven children...from her first marriage," he tells me.

And she's blind?

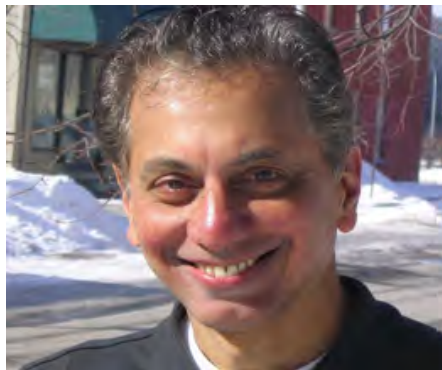
"My wife wants to do things before she fully loses her sight," he adds. But he and Sylvie still want to travel, everywhere—to see the world before her sight goes completely. Really to see the world?

India: as the entire world, traversing a

vast plain to Kerala, then up to the desert state of Rajasthan, indeed. How much more authentic can you get being in Jaipur? Maundering along...to far north past the Punjab and going as far as Shimla in the Himalayas. Not go East to Bengal? Calcutta, here I come!

East India Company, Lord Clive. Whoa!

Winding rivers beyond the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, then north again, in Meerut worshipping in sacred waters and paying homage to Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva. The sacred Ganges winds along, as worshippers are everywhere. Sanctity, with holiness. How far, or near? Then to Agra to see the



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 Guyana Prize and was nominated for the 2007 IMPAC/Dublin Literary Prize. Contact—cdabydeen@ncf.ca

Taj Mahal. Am I also a devotee, than in another incarnation?

Mauril looks at me with awe, if also anxiously.

Lakes, lagoons in my ken with coconut trees leaning at the water's edge, our being in south India again. Water-lily in green clusters, pothos. A river-boat moving along; the cook mixing pungent masala, his fish-curry culinary fare is the best. Crunchy chick-peas thrown in for good measure.

Mauril takes in my dark-complexion, see. From India? Where do you really come from? Dialectal words, a vague idiom: with an Indian inflection—what's now contrived.

No, not Sanskrit! India's origins long before the Mughals and the British Raj.

Not just the French in Pondicherry? India's a country to return to, Mauril says, with his own francophone origins. Ah, Canada with vast empty spaces somewhere in the background.

Where else must we go? Where Sylvie indeed wants to go before she loses her sight, I know.

What Mauril really knows.

We meet again, like what's preplanned: as Mauril and I talk about more travels, then about his wife's art lesson, which will soon be over. He won't come here again; he chortles, adding that he adores wife with her seven children. "She's really a good artist," he emphasizes.

"With poor eyesight?"

He nods.

She will continue putting more bright colours on canvas, I must know. Oil, acrylic, and water-colour. "She's an expressionist, like Gauguin," Mauril tells me with new emphasis. Not going to Tahiti, same as Gauguin did? How really exotic the world is.

And where am I from exactly? From somewhere in the Caribbean archipelago, with islands in-between. Tell him! Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, islands never being the same, in my ken, and as I'm layered with an indenture and plantation past.

Coastal Guyana next. Music: soca and calypso; chutney music also, in the background with new immediacy. Mauril winks an eye at me, sort of. And yes, he and Sylvie love the fiery Indian stuff; and he's now more convinced about me. How much more Indian, eh? The sauna becomes hotter, as we gravitate to more foreign and exotic places.

Farewell! I say my goodbye to him, and he takes his leave with a new familiarity. "Now I've met my first Jamaican boy," he says to me, with glee. Really me?

Caribbean, you see.

_END

A FILIAL JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY AND CROSSING BRIDGES

Reviewed by Hema Nair

Works of non-fiction are rarely heart wrenching. This one, though is an exception.

In 'Stranger to History', author Aatish Taseer, attempts to explore - in the physical dimension - the Islamic lands in the Middle East, while delving into the layers in his psyche to uncover what his religion meant to him. Until that point in time, it was only an inheritance from a father who was a stranger to him.

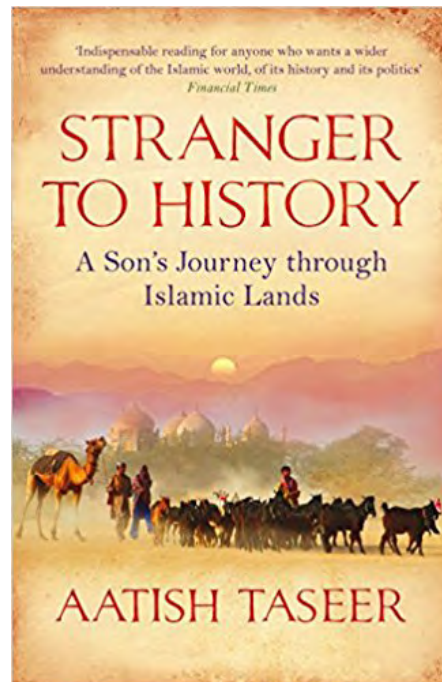
"As the crow flies, the distance between my father and me had never been much, but the land had been marked by history for a unique division, of which I had inherited both broken pieces. My journey to seek out my father, and through him, his country, was a way for me to make my peace with that history.....But then there was the futility of the empty room, rupture on rupture, for which I could find no consolation except that my father's existence, so ghostly all my life, had at last acquired a gram of material weight".

Son of a Pakistani politician and Indian journalist, Aatish Taseer was born on the one side of a great divide and spent some time of his adult life in pursuit of bridging that chasm. This book is about a son's journey of discovery - of his father, and their shared religion, but ends on a note of disillusionment. The relationship went from being non-existent to strained. The reasons were personal and ideological, so profound and complex that neither the players, nor the voyeurs have quite plumbed its depths. To borrow the words of one critic, because its starkness is undeniable - "Stranger to History shines when Taseer concentrates on what he knows best: the scar across the subcontinent, and across his own heart". As we travel through the pages with him, we see that those scars are ragged and ugly - born of deep wounds that never quite heal but act up at the end of tired days and cold winter nights.

Aatish made his journey across Turkey, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia to end in his father's homeland, Pakistan. There, welcomed by his father's other family, he finds a place for himself in their home. Hesitantly at first, but with increasing surety, they forge a bond and spend some happy moments together before ideological and political differences tear them asunder. With his journey, he does succeed to some extent in understanding Islam and its place in the present day world, but the fracture between father and son remained and that is how the book ends. The story of this healing fracture between Aatish and his father, Salman Taseer continues.

Salman Taseer was the Governor of Punjab Province in Pakistan, when he was gunned down on a street in Islamabad by his own radicalized security guard on 4th January 2011. His crime? He had appealed for clemency for Aasia Bibi, a Christian lady sentenced to death for Blasphemy.

Aasia's story finds no mention in the book because it unfolded two years after its publication, but it is relevant here to understand the equation between father and son and to see how the fluidity of their relationship was distilled into something more potent by its happening. Aasia's case, a lamentable illustra-



tion of Pakistan's Blasphemy law, played out at a time when the winds of moderation were blowing across the land in the wake of renewed attempts at Democracy. The nation was still largely in the grip of a confining socio-cultural milieu that was put in place by the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq.

Asia Bibi's family was the only Christian one in a small village in the Punjab Province. She was out berry picking, when she drank water from a common source. When the other women heckled her for contaminating the water because she was a Christian and therefore impure, she retaliated by saying that her Prophet had died on a Cross for her, and questioned what their Prophet had done for them. What was merely a trivial altercation between few women turned into something

dreadful and she was awarded a death sentence by the courts. The public outcry against her and her family was so intense, that their very life was under threat. When Salman Taseer appealed for clemency for her from the President, their ire turned against him. There were death threats, protests in the street and intense media backlash. He knew that his life was in danger, something he stated during one of his last recorded interviews. Although he was a patriotic Pakistani and a highly respected politician for the Pakistan People's Party, he made no secret of the fact that he could not abide by this decision of the Judiciary. Aasia Bibi's death sentence still stands today and despite numerous appeals in the courts and pressure from International Human Rights activists - even the Pope - Pakistan government seems unlikely to buckle on the issue. Salman Taseer stood firm for something he believed in, and paid the price with his life.

Aatish himself does not see the connection inherent in the timeline, and maybe I am reading too much into things that are not there. But I cannot help but believe that the brief and turbulent times that he was in his father's life changed both of them forever. I believe that it was because of Aatish that Salman Taseer stood up to fight against the establishment in his beloved homeland, against the clerics and the fanatics - in spite of the tremendous odds and a clear threat to his very life.

This book is a love story like no other. A love that sired a son while straddling two countries constantly caught it the crossfire of misunderstanding. The love for a country and its ideals, however flawed they may be. But mostly it is about the love these two men shared, the love denied at every turn, snuffed, buried, unacknowledged. This love is the hero of this story - because history shows that it survived in both those hearts. It shows in the action of the father who acted in a manner that would make his son proud. It only remains for the son to see, when all the dust has settled, that he was loved, that he inspired in his father the desire to reach for a higher ideal. And that is the purest kind of love.

Hema Nair is a cardiac anesthetist working in Nanayana Hrudayalaya, the world's largest heart hospital, well known for its philanthropy. In addition to medical writing, she enjoys writing prose and poetry on anything that catches her fancy. She's also a movie buff, avid reader and enjoys cycling.



SAROSH ZAIWALLA, FOUNDER OF FIRST ASIAN LAW FIRM IN LONDON, WINS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



SAROSH ZAIWALLA WAS HONoured FOR HIS DISTINGUISHED CAREER AND PIONEERING FIRSTS

Mr. Sarosh Zaiwalla, Founder & Senior Partner of renowned international law firm Zaiwalla & Co. LLP, has been awarded the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award at the Society of Asian Lawyers Annual Awards & Ball 2017, in association with the UK Solicitors Regulation Authority.

Held on Saturday 28th October at the Lancaster Hotel, London, the highly esteemed event recognised the significance of British South Asian individuals within the legal profession who have excelled in their chosen fields. The awards honour rising stars within the profession, successful lawyers and lifetime achievers.

Mr Zaiwalla was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award for his distinguished

career and pioneering firsts. The first person of Asian-origin to establish a law firm, Zaiwalla & Co. LLP, in the One Square Mile of the City of London in 1982, he has represented a number of high profile clients over the course of his 35 year career ranging from the Gandhi family, and the governments of India Russia and China to Indian Oil Corporation.

Zaiwalla & Co. LLP has since grown into a specialist arbitration and litigation practice. With a strong international team, including specialists in the laws of Russia & CIS, China, India, Middle East and Iran, the firm has built a strong reputation around the world.

Sarosh Zaiwalla has been involved in 1200 International Energy, Maritime and Construction Arbitrations and been involved in over 115 cases that have made a substantial development in English law.

Some of Mr Zaiwalla's most notable achievements include both facilitating a dialogue with the Government of the Peoples Republic of China, at the request of the Dalai Lama, in relation to the resolution

of the Tibet dispute, and being consulted by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon on issues relating to World Order

Speaking about his win, Mr Sarosh Zaiwalla said: "I am extremely honoured to have been recognised by the Society of Asian Lawyers. I have had phenomenal years in the legal industry and it's exciting to see how the legal system is evolving. I am grateful to the team at Zaiwalla & Co for their support. It's been an honour working side by side with all of them"

More.....

HOGAN LOVELLS DUMPED IN £300M OLIGARCH DOMICILE BATTLE

<https://www.thelawyer.com/hogan-lovelles-dumped-300m-oligarch-domicile-battle/>