

## In The Path Of India's Election Juggernaut

By Raymond Whitaker

The 2019 election in India, the world's largest democracy, would inevitably be seen as a referendum on the charismatic Narendra Modi, who took power five years before in the most "presidential" poll in modern Indian history.

A distinguished panel, chaired by CJA-UK president Rita Payne, reached this consensus when the election was discussed at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on March 17, a few days after the Indian polling juggernaut began rolling. With 900 million people eligible to cast their ballots, voting was taking place over seven phases, with the result due more than a month after the start of the process.

Despite the fact that Indian voters tend to overturn the previous election result more often than not, most of the panel expected Modi to retain power. Louise Tillin, Reader in Politics at the India Institute, King's College London, pointed out that the Prime Minister did not gain an overall majority five years ago, however, and she did not expect him to do so this time.

The make-up of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition could be very different after this election, Dr Tillin added. In 2014 the party swept the "Hindu belt" across northern and western India, but had since lost support in this area. It would have to break new ground in the other parts of India, where regional parties tended to hold sway, accounting for about 180 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament).

John Elliott, a journalist who reported for more than 25 years from New Delhi for the Financial Times, Fortune and The Economist, among others, saw the election as a crucial turning-point. India had to decide whether it was a primarily Hindu nation, in line with Modi and the BJP's Hindutva ideology, or a secular state in the tradition of the Gandhi dynasty and the Congress party.

In 2014, voters had hoped that Modi would be as effective as he had been at the regional level in Gujarat, and that his Hindu nationalism would take a back seat, said Elliott. (Continues on Page 3)

## BREXIT: TAKING STOCK

By Shanta Acharya

Almost three years after the EU referendum, the UK remains divided as ever over Brexit. One is reminded of W.B. Yeats' *The Second Coming*:

**Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.**

Parliamentary paralysis over Brexit has damaged decision-making in both the private and public sectors of the economy, affecting a wide range of critical issues. Let's not forget that Brexit was driven by disenfranchisement of a large segment of the population. Income inequality in the UK has been growing for decades. The bailout of the banks in 2008 did not benefit the less well-off who ended up bearing the brunt of job losses and expenditure cuts. A more equitable economic, political and social system may have had a different outcome.

The democratic deficit in the UK's electoral system has not helped. We keep hearing about 'the will of the people' with regards to the 2016 EU referendum. To clarify, 33.57 million people cast their vote from among the 46.5 million eligible to vote in the 2016 referendum – of which 17.4 million (52%) voted to Leave and 16.1 million (48%) voted to Remain. The Leave vote hardly reflected 'the will of the people'. The success of the Liberal Democrats (a Remain party) in the local elections on 2 May 2019 indicated otherwise.

Brexit was always going to be undeliverable as there is no way round the Irish border issue. A hard border violates the Good Friday Agreement; the division within Northern Ireland has already generated unease and violence. Scotland voted to remain in the EU and may still elect to leave the UK if there is a no-deal Brexit. Most parliamentarians do not want to leave the EU without a good deal, but there is no consensus on what that deal should be.

(continues on page 4)

VIDEO FILES: 1. PRESS FREEDOM IN INDIA

2. AN EXCLAMATION - POETRY READING

3. BISHOP OF COLOMBO ON SRI LANKA



## Editorially Speaking

Dear readers,

I write this editorial with mixed feelings. Firstly, I am very pleased to bring another issue of Confluence amidst many constraints upon us, the editors. This is something the entire publishing world is undergoing in the modern days, but our situation is a unique one. We hope to surmount it with your encouragement and support only.

The ultimate shape of a magazine is very much determined by many factors but mainly the writers and readers. We are lucky that our writers and readers are progressive thinkers and they largely welcome the changes that we implement from time to time. Changes are inevitable, but those changes should be with a reason. As you all know online video contents are fast becoming part of our literary life. Bearing this in mind and the way publishing technology is moving forward, we have introduced some video contents on the front page of this issue. We would love to receive your feedback about your experience and how we could improve this further.

Unfortunately, any technological advances come with a price tag. Considering the benefits these advances could bring in the long term, we would kindly welcome any support from our readers. Please send an email to discuss how you could support us.

Many events, including the tragic events unfolded in Sri Lanka on Easter Monday and the aftermath are deplorable. Elections are taking place in India, the world's largest democracy but all the indications are that status quo there, won't see much change. Human rights, education, religious freedom and free press are the cornerstones of any democracy but sadly we see this is not the case anymore in many countries of South Asia. Hope our contributors too will take a note of these in their writings. For those of us living in Britain the major disappointment during the last three years is the Brexit, but I very much hope we will see the end of the tunnel before our next issue.

We would like to have your submissions for the next issue starting from the beginning of next month so that we will be better prepared for our August issue. In the meantime, as always, we welcome your feedback through letters to the editor and we will strive to maintain a high standard.

Happy reading and enjoy summer!

Vijay Anand

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| PAGE      | CONTENTS                           |                             |
|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>1</b>  | <b>India's Election</b>            | <b>Raymond Whitaker</b>     |
| <b>1</b>  | <b>Brexit: Taking Stock</b>        | <b>Shanta Acharya</b>       |
| <b>2</b>  | <b>Editorially Speaking</b>        | <b>Vijay Anand</b>          |
| <b>3</b>  | <b>Poem: Grandpa</b>               | <b>Harshit Nigam</b>        |
| <b>4</b>  | <b>Brexit</b>                      | <b>Shanta Archarya</b>      |
| <b>5</b>  | <b>Review: Poems Grow With You</b> | <b>Deepa Agarwal</b>        |
| <b>6</b>  | <b>Two Poems</b>                   | <b>Cyril Dabydeen</b>       |
| <b>7</b>  | <b>Progressive Islam</b>           | <b>Ameen Izzadeen</b>       |
| <b>8</b>  | <b>Evergreen Memories</b>          | <b>Prithvijeet Sinha</b>    |
| <b>9</b>  | <b>Matwaala Poets</b>              | <b>Zilka Joseph</b>         |
| <b>10</b> | <b>Book Review</b>                 | <b>Anjana Basu</b>          |
| <b>11</b> | <b>Dusk – Short Story</b>          | <b>Subhash Chandra</b>      |
| <b>12</b> | <b>Mumbai Expressions</b>          | <b>Anju Makhija</b>         |
| <b>13</b> | <b>On Education</b>                | <b>Meenakshi Mohan</b>      |
| <b>14</b> | <b>Reginald Massey's Book page</b> | <b>Reginald Massey</b>      |
| <b>15</b> | <b>Book review</b>                 | <b>Gitanjali Chatterjee</b> |
| <b>16</b> | <b>Memories</b>                    | <b>Malathy Sitaram</b>      |
| <b>17</b> | <b>Through the Poetic Lens</b>     | <b>Yogesh Patel</b>         |
| <b>18</b> | <b>Book Rendition</b>              | <b>Mandira Gosh</b>         |
| <b>19</b> | <b>Poetry</b>                      | <b>Zilka Joseph</b>         |
| <b>20</b> | <b>The First Step</b>              | <b>Innamburan</b>           |
| <b>21</b> | <b>Naxalbary</b>                   | <b>Tapan Sen</b>            |
| <b>22</b> | <b>Solo Exhibition</b>             | <b>Lincoln Seligman</b>     |

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India's Election Juggernaut .....Continued from Page 1



Mihir Bose, Deepak Lalwani, Louise Tillin and Rita Payne

But he had let Hindutva supporters run riot, while his economic achievements fell far short of the claims made for them. The Prime Minister had failed to create new jobs, reform the banking system or privatise public sector enterprises, and his “demonetisation” exercise – removing all 500 and 1,000-rupee notes in an effort to drain black money from the economy – was a “disaster”. While Congress had produced a sensible and coherent manifesto, the journalist added, the opposition alliance had no obvious candidate for prime minister. Rahul Gandhi, the latest scion of the dynasty, had “never proved himself”.

Deepak Lalwani, an Indian-born, London-based stockbroker and investment consultant, also expected Modi to gain another term – the favoured result, on balance, of the business world. The BJP was likely to win fewer seats, however, making it much harder to push through economic reforms. Lalwani took a more positive view of Modi’s economic record, crediting him with having improved “brand India”. The ease of doing business had greatly increased. Inflation and interest rates had dropped, while the stock market was at record levels, demonstrating foreign confidence. Though demonetisation and the chaotic introduction of a general sales tax had depressed the jobs market – India needs to create a million jobs a year to absorb its youth population – there were positive signs as well, such as the creation of 340 million new bank accounts under the Aadhaar system.

The fourth speaker, Indian-born author, journalist and former BBC TV sports editor Mihir Bose, focused on the political and cultural impact of Modi and his Hindutva philosophy, which “made the [Hindu] majority feel like a threatened minority”. It was a reaction against the militant secularism of the Nehru era, which in Bose’s opinion had gone for good. Even in traditionally left-wing areas such as West Bengal, the BJP was now the main opposition, and the city of his birth was becoming segregated by religion.

The panel did not see foreign policy as prominent in the election campaign, though the recent clashes in Kashmir had enabled Modi to “play the strongman”, in Lalwani’s words. The Prime Minister’s extensive foreign travels consisted mainly of “ego trips”, said Elliott. In Bose’s view, anti-Pakistan sentiment had never been higher in India, making Indian Muslims more fearful as well.

All in all, the outcome of the election was likely to reflect a more sober view of Modi and the BJP than in 2014, when there had been unrealistic expectations of a landslide, according to

## Grandpa

### By Harshit Nigam

The umbilical cord  
Knots me to that sleepy small town,  
Recognized on the sphere  
Through Lakshmibai, the warrior queen.  
For me, however,  
An inexorable  
Reservoir of childhood reminiscences.

Those evenings  
Clinging my fingers  
To the deity’s temple,  
On the hillside,  
Climb random, hundred  
Or more stairs,  
Regardless of the  
Diabetic limbs;  
You willingly, unwillingly escorted.

The vintage steam-engine,  
Outside the railway station  
That satiated  
The infant’s techno curiosity;  
In days devoid of cell phones  
Was an understated bonanza  
You planned every vacation.

Much has changed  
Since you left,  
Only the savor of  
Ravalgaon Toffees  
Wrapped in silvery,  
Red, blue, yellow,  
Purchased in bulk  
From the corner shop,  
Across the three wheelers halt;  
The moment you get to know  
About my visit,  
Remains untarnished  
Somewhere in the maw.

Lalwani. And Dr Tillin said Congress should not be written off. Although it had no answer to the BJP’s successful identification of Hindu nationalism with economic development, it had exceeded expectations in regional elections, especially among rural voters.

Congress was still the only pan-Indian opposition to the BJP, the academic concluded. “There is still life in the old machine.”

RAYMOND WHITAKER is a freelance writer, editor and commentator, specialising in international affairs, aid issues, and travel. He is also an Executive Committee member of Commonwealth Journalist Association. A version of this article appeared in their website. <http://www.cja-uk.org/2019/05/in-the-path-of-indias-election-juggernaut/>

# BREXIT: TAKING STOCK

By Shanta Acharya

Continues from page 1

Theresa May's 'Withdrawal Agreement Bill' with the EU has been rejected thrice, yet parliamentarians have failed to come up with an alternative deal. With no-deal off the table, the EU holds (always had) all the cards. The chances of the UK negotiating a favourable deal with the EU under such circumstances were slim. May's minority government missed the 29 March 2019 exit date, and while the EU has extended the deadline for the implementation of Article 50, a delay does not help in delivering Brexit. The options available are severely limited:

*A Managed No-deal: the default position, but it has been rejected by parliament.*

*Revoke Article 50: remain in the EU. While the UK is participating in the forthcoming EU elections, many Brexiters would prefer leaving the EU on World Trade Organisation terms instead of delaying the process.*

*Customs Union: this option has garnered support except it does not deliver Brexit.*

According to many, a permanent customs union would be the worst of all options. In the words of Vernon Bogdanor, Professor of Government at King's College, London, 'the UK would have to continue contributing to the EU budget, accept freedom of movement and the jurisdiction of the European free trade area court, which would make Brexit pointless. As if this were not bad enough, we would also have to open up our markets to third countries with which the EU had trade agreements, but the markets of such third countries would not be open to our exports since we would be outside the EU. And such third countries would have few incentives to sign trade agreements with us since their goods would already enjoy free access.'

A permanent customs union with the EU clearly fails to empower the UK to determine her destiny, which is fundamental to Brexit. As far as taking control of one's destiny is concerned, in light of an emerging new world order it is not evident why the USA, China, Japan or India would rush to invest in and trade with the UK. Japan has already withdrawn some of its major investments. It may or may not have anything to do with Brexit. But once outside the EU, it is not clear why the UK would be seen as a superior investment destination in terms of its market size, productivity, value added services, transparency and ease of conducting business?

Even in the financial services sector, where the UK has a competitive advantage, assets have fled the country. More worryingly, central banks signal reluctance to hold sterling after the UK leaves the EU. The economic case for Brexit is unproven. The UK might attract investments if it becomes a low tax, low pay, low skilled and lightly regulated place. That too is not guaranteed. But is that what Brexiters voted for? The 2016 EU referendum did not provide a realistic vision of Brexit, or comprehensive and unbiased information on the subject.

Parliament is reluctant to go down the path of a second people's vote. While it would be democratic to do so, a second referendum on Brexit will not resolve the Irish border issue – unless the vote is to Remain and is unequivocally so. A Tory leadership change is inevitable, but a general election will not resolve Brexit. Whatever the outcome, the UK will remain divided for years to come, its influence on world affairs will continue to diminish. Is it nemesis that having exploited and torn apart other parts of the world, the Empire having shrunk to its current state of exhaustion, confusion and powerlessness, has struck a near-fatal blow at itself?

We may think we have a better idea of what Brexit means, but we've only seen the tip of the iceberg. The truly unacceptable face of Brexit will be revealed when negotiations begin in earnest and the UK grapples with its future relationship with the EU and the rest of the world. Whether the UK will rise like a phoenix only time will tell. Sadly, time is that precious thing we do not possess.

21 May 2019

**Shanta Acharya is a writer and investment specialist. Born and educated in India, she won a scholarship to Oxford and was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy for her work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English and American Literature and Languages at Harvard University. The author of eleven books, her latest is *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (HarperCollins India; 2017). [www.shantaacharya.com](http://www.shantaacharya.com)**



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## Book Review

## Anju Makhija's 'Poems Grow With You'

Reviewed by Deepa Agarwal

Anju Makhija's *Poems Grow With You* is a rare collection of poems for the young that calls out to you in an authentic child's voice. The verses resoundingly echo what the poet states in her brief preface: "Every adult is a child inside...Since I strongly believe this, I often call myself a chadult." In this slender volume, the chadult expresses herself eloquently in a variety of voices. Not only does she probe the mind of the middle-class child deeply, but also brings you the plaintive cry of the exploited underprivileged one.

Most poets tend to fantasize about the untrammelled joy of being young, innocent and carefree. However, you will not find childhood idealized in this book. There is less of fun and more of protest here, because these gritty poems honestly express what being young and powerless actually means. Anju has shared the experiences of children at various stages of growing up along with their responses, as they uncover the realities of existence and come to terms with them. Common childhood experiences like stepping into the judgmental world of school from the pampered cocoon of home, the grief of losing a pet and the transient nature of cherished relationships are portrayed in verses that are sometimes haunting lyrical, at others playful or mischievous.

The book is divided into four sections titled "The Smart Buddha", "Festive 'n Feisty", "Young Voices" and "Stories in Verse". The first poem "Little People, Big People" has a beguiling rhythm and images that conjure up the spirited world of childhood imagination. It pithily sums up the wisdom that often emerges from the mouth of babes in a comical, impish tone. As the last stanza proclaims cheekily:

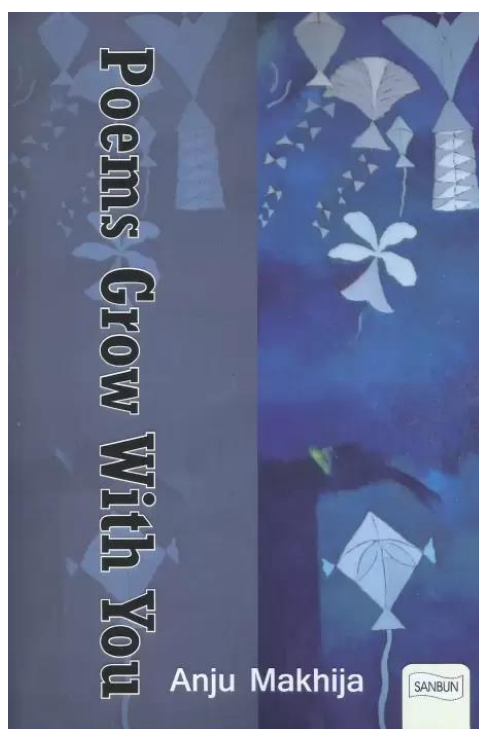
**So if you're older than me  
or I'm younger than you,  
remember, there's a  
teeny weeny  
difference between us two!**

"Hair you Go Again" is one of my favourites because of the very real situation it describes—a child venting her frustration with the hair grooming routine girls are compelled to suffer. The "pins and clips" that rein in the girl's hair become a metaphor for the

restrictions within which adults bind youngsters, particularly girls.

As she plaintively implores:  
**Don't pull it back  
in a tight plait, Mom.  
let it hang loose  
like a horse's mane!**

The same theme of restraining free growth continues in "The Creeper and the Flower" when the gardener cuts



down the lonely creeper reaching out to befriend the champa flower. "The Stooeping Tree" comes across as a somewhat chilling reminder of the way critical adults destroy self-esteem in those who cannot fit in with their notions of the model child.

The section "Festive 'n Feisty" is about making discoveries as you grow up. Poems like "Festive Tricks" use the metaphor of celebrations to demonstrate how a child develops an understanding of life's complexities. "First Crush" and the "The Little Prince" deal with the process of learning to accept the fragile nature of relationships. Lines like: "Trouble is, prince, many friends become foes, when they begin to grow," are a poignant articulation of the heartbreak of broken friendship and the trauma of betrayal. Also, the wide gap between the perfect world of our dreams—the prince's "asteroid" here, and human fallibility.

The poems in "Young Voices" are inspired by the lives of under-privileged children. These thought-provoking verses act as a moving reminder of an uncomfortable fact, how poverty compels many children in our country to shoulder adult responsibilities. In "The Train Vendor" the repetitive words, "One rupees, one pin, two rupees, two pin" sharply recall the cries of the underage vendors we have all encountered. The rhythm echoes the movement of the train and lines like, "She smiles at me: black teeth jagged like stones under the tracks," vividly sketch the harshness of the young girl's reality. Similarly, in "Zari Sarees" we come face-to-face with a stark depiction of a child labourer's routine. The exploited kid, whose nimble fingers stitch gold wires on glamorous saris, lives "like a frightened deer" and chews zarda to keep hunger at bay. The glitter of the saris that adorn Bollywood beauties becomes sadly tarnished when we hear the chilling refrain: "My body is covered with sweat n'shine, shine n'sweat." Even more heart rending is the anguished appeal of the child trapped by his crook of a boss in the last line: "Someone, stop him, please!"

"The Runaway" depicts the plight of an abused child and "Hiding in a Night Shelter" throw brutal light on the predicament of the homeless girl who prays: "God, please make me a boy!"

It is worth noting here that the closing lines of Anju's poems invariably drive her point home with resounding force.

The last section, "Stories in Verse" contains two long poems. "The Proud Garden" is a story with a moral. Nature is neither benign nor beautiful here, and the boastful, envious and complaining plants in the garden come to an unfortunate end. "Ganesha's Escapade" is just that, a whimsical tale about the god's entertaining adventures.

In closing...Anju has indeed, projected a unique vision of childhood in this outstanding collection. While showcasing her calibre as a poet with an exceptional voice, she has given us a book that will appeal to readers both young and old.



Deepa Agarwal has over fifty books published in the genres of fiction, poetry and translation. *The Begum: A Portrait of Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan*, Pakistan's Pioneering First Lady, is one of her latest titles.

## Politics and Press freedom in India



### Reported by Martin Lumb

(with Video highlights on front page)

The traditional freedom and diversity of the media in India is under threat as never before from Hindu extremists who support the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and his Bharatiya Janata Party, the BJP.

This was the conclusion of a panel of leading commentators on modern-day India who addressed a meeting organised by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at London University. The meeting, chaired by Commonwealth Journalists Association-UK head Rita Payne, was told that intimidation was increasing with the approach of national elections.

Professor James Manor, former Director of the ICwS, described the situation as “a war on the media”, with vigilantes characterising criticism of Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, as “anti-national thought”. Pressures included concerted campaigns of threats and character assassination on social media, defamation suits, arrests on sedition charges and physical attacks, even murder, most notably the shooting of the editor, Gauri Lankesh, in Bangalore.

Modi had not held an open press conference in five years, according to members of the panel. “He just picks his favourites,” said Nupur Basu, an India-based TV journalist and documentary maker. Salil Tripathi, an Indian-born journalist now based in London, where he chairs PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee, said the Prime Minister believed he could communicate directly with the public, bypassing traditional media.

Tripathi said that oppressive laws, many of them dating from the colonial era, such as the sedition law, had always been on the statute book, but now they were being used without restraint. The “most dangerous aspect” was that the state, instead of upholding the right of the person who spoke, tended to look the other way when the person who claimed offence went after the journalist or writer. In the worst cases this meant violent retaliation.

Basu pointed out that the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked India 14th in its latest global impunity index, with 18 unsolved murders of journalists. She said the ruling party had set up a “war room” to monitor the media, described in more detail by Manor. He said over 250 BJP monitors tracked journalists, editors and participants in televised debates, dividing them into supporters and critics, with some monitoring the number of times Modi’s name was mentioned.

The information ministry also had some 200 people scrutinising TV channels and compiling dossiers on how, and how much, Modi and his leading associate, Amit Shah, were covered. Proprietors and editors were pressed to improve their coverage, even to the point of telling them which of Modi’s statements should be re-broadcast.

While journalists in the main centres had some protection from attack, Basu said “smaller fish” at the regional level who sought to report on corruption, pollution and illegal exploitation of resources were particularly vulnerable. Manor, who spends much of each year in India, recounted numerous instances of intimidation in BJP-run states. In one, police often arrested reporters critical of the local authorities, and telephoned journalists to threaten them.

Tripathi conceded that public sympathy for journalists was weakened by the media’s own failings. Low standards of accuracy and impartiality had eroded public trust, giving “fake news” greater currency. But even if the BJP was defeated, Tripathi concluded, the norms had shifted when it came to the treatment of journalists: “I am not optimistic.”

## Two Poems by Cyril Dabydeen

### THE SIGHING SEA

--after Dom Moraes

Early in the morning,  
men and women  
who have known each other  
for years interrupt their  
leisurely stroll and talk at length  
about nothing else  
but the recently dead among them  
and will contemplate their  
contemporaries as they walk  
along Marine Drive.

They dwell not only on their  
usual exercise but on  
social contacts they make  
convincing themselves  
in Mumbai they’re still  
alive as they take  
one step at a time, steadfast,  
or simply stoic,  
about their fate being here--  
nowhere else.

### THE MUSE

--for Meena Alexander

The poet  
flutters her eyes  
under the tent

in Providence,  
Rhode Island--  
I keep watching.

The poet  
flutters her eyes  
with Allen Ginsberg  
in her mind  
in Central Park,  
New York City.

The poet  
flutters her eyes  
and trills her r’s  
for emphasis  
as I think of a Bali  
dancer in South Asia.

The poet  
flutters her eyes,  
affecting me with her  
poise at this reading,  
bringing me closer--  
to a global village.

The poet  
flutters her eyes as  
images form, and now  
it’s nothing more  
to convey, but only what  
words signify.

(May 6, 2000)

## SRI LANKA

# Restoring Progressive Islam is the need of the hour

The confusion about Islam has been explained by this scholarly article

**By Ameen Izzadeen**

The Easter Sunday terror attacks have opened the Pandora's Box of questions on various aspects of Islam, its teachings and commands, amid an avalanche of Islamophobia, hate speech, distrust and scorn.

When the 9/11 terror attacks happened, a similar wave of Islamophobia swept the United States and the Americans began to ask questions about Islam and its alleged association with violence. Some white supremacists went to the extent of promoting nuking the Muslims.

In Sri Lanka's mainstream and social media, a topic that was being discussed with much interest and the ridicule it rightly deserved is the reward of 72 virgins for the killers of hundreds of innocent people, including children. Does Islam preach this? Religious scholars will not be able to answer this question.

The best they could say is that the Quran, the primary source of Islamic teachings, does not say anything about 72 virgins. True, it is not found in the Quran, which, the Muslims believe, is a compilation of the messages the Prophet received from God throughout his 23-year ministry, during which he and his followers suffered persecution, ostracisation, attacks and exile.

But the promise of 72 virgins is found in a book of Hadeeth, a term that refers to the sayings of the prophet and his traditions. Some Ulemas or religious preachers will not have the intellectual courage to admit this. This is because they still believe that Sunni Islam's six main Hadeeth books were compiled by 'infallible' imams, even after modern-day Hadeeth scholars have dismissed thousands of ahadeeth — plural of hadeeth — as fake or falsely attributed to the prophet.

The so-called reward of 72 virgins is found in a hadeeth book called Jami' al-Tirmidhi, also known as Sunan al-Tirmidhi. Notwithstanding the presence of fake ahadeeth, both the Sunni and Shiite streams have their own canons. The Sunnis have six and the Shiites two.

It must be said here that in Islamic history, one of the biggest scandals is hadeeth literature. Islam's first four Caliphs, who assumed leadership of the Muslim community after the prophet's death, opposed attempts to compile the sayings of the prophet.

The first to compile a book of hadeeth was Imam Bukhari, who was born in Bukhara in Uzbekistan some 200 years after the prophet had passed away. By this time,

Islam had been highly politicized with rulers misusing and misinterpreting religious teachings to consolidate their hold on power.

From the people who he met, during his 16-year travel through the Arab-Persian region, Imam Bukhari began collecting the sayings correctly or falsely attributed to the prophet. The process began when he was only 16. He collected some 600,000 ahadeeth and, sifting through this large volume, he selected only about 7,000. His students claimed the selection was made on strict criteria such as the reliability of the chain of narrators or Isnad which usually goes all the way to the time of the prophet. Imam Bukhari's compilation came to the public domain through a disciple's disciple, after his death.

Following Imam Bukhari, several Hadeeth collectors appeared. They claimed they adopted a similar method to select or reject the sayings attributed to the prophet.

Today, the hadeeth literature is analysed by intellectuals who say some hadeeth are fake and incompatible with the Quran. An enlightened and famous ahadeeth scholar was Sheik Muhammad Nasir-ud-Din al-Albani, who died in 1999 in Jordan. He opposed extremism and did not associate himself with any school of thought. He spent his scholarly life identifying thousands of fake ahadeeth found in the so-called canons.

The learned sheikh had classified the hadeeth on 72 virgins as 'Munkar' which means it needs to be denounced. Hadeeth scholars acknowledge that fake ahadeeth were the creation of the Zanadiqah or the heretics, sectarian fanatics, favor seekers, storytellers, ignorant ascetics and hyper-zealous preachers.

Using modern research methodology, Muslim academics have deduced that some ahadeeth do not conform to the text and the spirit of the Quran while some contradict each other. For instance, they point out that hadeeth literature about the punishment in the grave after one's death was contrary to the Quranic teachings, just as the carnal claim of 72 houris for the martyr.

It needs to be stressed here that, according to the Quran, those who kill innocent people while killing themselves are not martyrs, but serial killers of humanity as a whole.

Suicide bombing is a late 20th century innovation or bid'a and it needs to be rooted out from Islam, though a handful of theologians have taken pains to endorse it

strictly in the context of a fight against an occupying force or an invading army.

Given the damage ISIS and its followers have caused to Islam by their un-Islamic acts, the priority for Muslim theologians today is to gear Islamic learning towards intellectualism and rational thinking.

Intellectualism demands respect for opposing views and ideas, while reason or rational thinking will enable to weed out false ahadeeth, such as the myth about the 72 virgins.

Rational thinking and intellectualism are not new to Islam. Described as the Mutazila or the rational school of Islamic theology, it flourished from the 8th to the 10th century in Iraq, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate. It was during this period that the Muslim world reached the peak of learning, making major strides in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, law, philosophy and literature.

The fall began with the emergence of the Ash'ari theology, named after its founder Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari. It grew as a counterforce to the Mutazila and soon dominated Sunni Islam, producing in its wake Jihadi Imams such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Abdul Wahab and Syed Kutub.

These imams' teachings have become a manual for modern-day terror groups such as ISIS.

To address the multiple problems the Muslims of this country face, mainstream Muslim scholars, both religious and academic, representing different groups, need to unite to bring about a progressive Islamic theology based on the rationalist and traditionalist foundations. This is perfectly in tune with the spirit of Islam.

In the wake of the Easter Sunday massacres, the need to de-radicalize those who are romanticizing with a dangerous and inhuman suicide ideology has become not only a security priority but also a religious responsibility upon every right-minded Muslim theologian and civic-conscious Muslim in Sri Lanka.

In Singapore, I understand, the de-radicalization process is carried out with the help of local Muslim scholars. Singapore's state policy and surveillance systems aimed at communal harmony have also helped that nation to curb hate speech, inflammatory preaching and avert terror attacks.

The article had appeared in Daily Mirror, Colombo under the title: Mainstream Muslims must unite to bring about a progressive Islam on May 10, 2019.



## Essay

# LUCKNOW: THE LAND OF PLENTY AND EVERGREEN MEMORIES

by PRITHVIJEET SINHA

Some places absorb a large share of our personalities based on the simple fact that we have lived there for a great part of our lives. My own city, Lucknow, endows its inhabitants with a kind of graciousness that few world class locations do. Its evolution and historical past, now settled in a constantly dynamic present, are present in its food, simplicity, elegance of language, embroidery and architecture. Cynicism and apathy may creep in every now and then in our chaotic urban lives but home is truly where my heart is. So, it's a privilege to reveal examples of its eminence to loved ones visiting from different parts of the globe which affords a personal satisfaction. In sharing their positive reactions to their discovery of the city.

I have to add that I have a multicultural family spread across the world. Firstly, Geoffrey Kaka, a dignified presence, is the great grandson of one of my great grandfather's cousins who eventually settled in New Zealand and it's such an honour that he and his siblings carry the family surname Sinha. Then comes Paul Kaka, son of my own grandfather's younger brother, the beloved and avuncular Shambhu Dadaji (grandpa); his mother was English and his lovely soon to be wife MO Kaki is Asian but has been brought up in England. Lastly, there is Rohini Bua (aunt), the soft spoken daughter of my grandfather's youngest sister, the graceful and ever endearing Uma Dadi who belongs to the illustrious Phalke family of Pune. Rohini Bua was born and brought up in England too. Lucknow is secular hotbed where all religions have co-existed for centuries. As a beacon for tourism, its classical pedigree draws a great many visitors from four corners of the world and I am pleased that my own family history attests to that plurality.

Talking about their visits to Lucknow, Geoffrey Kaka (uncle) first comes to mind. On his perhaps maiden trip to India (and Lucknow) in 2015, I was thrilled to have him explore the city. I made sure to let him know about its important place in terms of culture. Unusually, the first days of March were unnaturally rain soaked and so on the Sunday we had planned to go visiting certain monuments, the rainy spell could have ruined the day. But I was persistent and though the rain clouds hung over us we enjoyed ourselves.

I first took him to the Residency, an important cultural landmark in Lucknow, owing to its position in the post-colonial pantheon. It housed the residential quarters of senior British officers and their families, a fortified sanctuary which was encircled and attacked by local revolutionaries at the height of the first war of Indian independence in 1857. It was

a feat achieved by sheer will power and the zeal to attain liberation by the brave denizens of my city and its surrounding areas at a time when other parts of the country including major cities were languishing in apathy under a foreign power. The Residency's bombed ramparts and remaining quarters still retain a melancholy vestige of the weight of collective histories. There are parts that



provoke an elegiac aura and the cemetery preserves the echo of personal wars that were pitched on both sides of the fence. Our visit to the memorial museum housed within the building revealed the rich, varied aspects of the city vis a vis royalty, architectural designs and famous figures. This is a place marked by bloody fighting and anarchy. It is also a romantic destination for couples. Is it the silence that allows them the privacy to coo sweet nothings under gloomy interiors? Geoffrey Kaka even good-humoredly greeted a couple who were whispering in the relative obscurity of a seating place resembling a mini dungeon.

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The first destination completed, I took him to the former royal palace and mausoleum of the many kings who graced the city, the Bara Imambara (big mausoleum). It is a marvel of architecture and once struck by its beauty, it is difficult to forget it. Right from the intricate gateway, the surrounding area that is blessed by the looming might of the Rumi Darwaza (doorway), the ton-tonking horse drawn carriages, the throng of excited faces encompassing all age groups, the atmosphere is a revelation for a first timer. Beautiful gardens, shops selling trinkets, miniatures devoted to the city's artistic oeuvre and an open sky with the great building and a legendary mosque on the right complete the picture. Bara Imambara is known for its upper floor galleries and labyrinths popularly known as Bhool Bhulaiya, the placement of handmade tazias (religious exhibits) commemorating the Islamic faith's high points with chandeliers and the transparent sound

echoes that make even the lighting of a match from one distant side boom throughout the other side in amplified clarity. The tourist in Kaka (Uncle) discovered the distinct spell of the place which emphasized the profound influence of the kings who defined Lucknow, especially Wajid Ali Shah, the official last ruler who encouraged poetry, art, dance and syncretism. As we finally exited the building, the majestic Tile Wali Masjid, a pure white structure of breathtaking beauty, sitting on a citadel opposite Bada Imambara, invited us to salute Lucknow's liberalism, a seat of Islamic pride and later secularism. I could see Kaka was mesmerized by every detail described by me, the native son.

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Our last stop (and a must on every visitor's itinerary) was my alma mater, my school LA MARTINIERE COLLEGE FOR BOYS. As majestic as its name, this is another feather on the city's cap, a labour of love by its founder, Major General Claude Martin, a notable administrator and architect of French origin who introduced to the city a Gothic structure that retains its sheen to this day. Geoffrey Kaka took in the sights and gently suggested that it would be a great idea if I could teach here someday, being the able educator that he is. Again, we could not tour the whole premises but it was nevertheless worth it.

He is yet to visit us a second time but memories remain with me, fresh as the sky that had cleared up that day to allow us to enjoy the city. I remember his graciousness, how he feared a distance in communication, thinking English was not our first language and then being pleasantly taken by surprise by our fluency in it. I told him how essential the universal language of English is to an average Indian. Out of the blue, he complimented me as a great host. I was lauded for managing a sightseeing experience on my own. Besides he was impressed by my knowledge of the city and all I could say then was that it was my duty to be well versed in its panorama and history as a citizen.

The trip with Geoffrey Kaka around the familiar spots of Lucknow continues to occupy my mind. I hope he returns soon, with his family, so that more time could be devoted to attending other attractions of this city. Also, I will address my trips with Paul Kaka and Mo Kaki and Rohini Bua in other parts, in what I would like to become an ongoing series on Lucknow, as seen through my eyes for Confluence.

The writer is Prithviyeet Sinha from Lucknow. He has recently completed his M Phil from the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow. He has translated his love for poetry to the art of creating poems of his own.



# Matwaala Poets Make History

The Matwaala Festival, New York, April 3-5, 2019

Zilka Joseph

This year Matwaala, a collective of South Asian diaspora poets, held its annual festival in New York, from April 3 to 5. Events were held at New York University, Nassau Community College, the Red Room, and Hunter College. Matwaala's founders, Usha Akella and Pramila Venkateswaran, won some hard-fought battles as a collective that works to promote inclusion and visibility of South Asian descent (no matter where they are in their careers) who may have not received the recognition they deserve, and their efforts came to fruition as we witnessed at this festival. On April 3, Matwaala launched their e-anthology called MAPS: Matwaala Anthology of Poetry by South Asians on their website. Ananya Akella, who designed the elegant covers, and Usha Akella and Francisca Li who worked relentlessly on the website deserve our deep gratitude.

The opening event kicked off at NYU where Yogesh Patel, was described by Pramila Venkateswaran as 'as a sort of living history', and was felicitated as the Poet-of-Honour in the presence of Sir Salman Rushdie. Patel, then, launched Kavita A. Jindal's new chapbook titled 'Patina'. On April 5, the festival celebrated the life and work of Meena Alexander at a memorial poetry reading. She was a much-loved professor at Hunter College and an award-winning poet. The festival was honoured in having Meena's husband David Lelyveld at this reading. A framed copy of "Poem for Meena" written collectively by several poets was presented to him. Later Usha Akella's new book published by the Sahitya Akademi in India, *The Waiting*, was launched to much applause.

Matwaala, the "poets intoxicated by words", began with a small gathering in 2015, to celebrate the poetry of the diaspora. Subsequently, members began a tradition of honouring a poet who actively works in the community and who offers visibility to South Asian writers wherever they may live on the planet. Past poets of honour have been Saleem Peeradina (Saline, Michigan), Keki N. Daruwalla (Mumbai, India), and Ralph Nazareth (Stamford, Connecticut) who have all contributed to their communities. This year's Poet-of-Honour, Yogesh Patel is indeed a warrior.

Soft-spoken and sincere, he is vocal, extremely active in his approach to serving the under-served, and works selflessly to bring to light the lesser known South Asian diaspora poets: Hence, it is no surprise that the Matwaala founders awarded Yogesh Patel with this honour. You have only to read about Patel's work,

images of nature and the animal kingdom often in my own work, Patel's poems resonate with me since they explore issues South Asians (especially those who were not born in the country of residence or immigrated later in life) often face on a daily basis. He writes *I am a damned foreigner/If released in the wild/It means a*

*fresh*

*alienation/Returning home as someone else.*

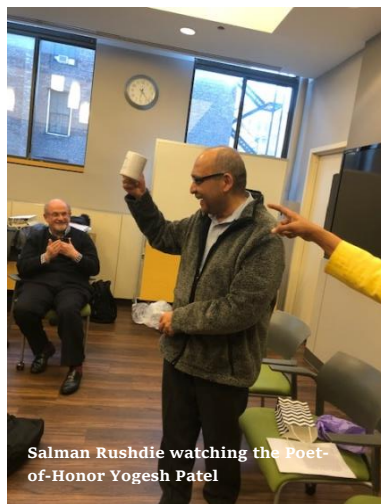
It is this "Damned foreigner" image that the Matwaala collective is working towards changing by embracing all poets and by engaging them in this important conversation. Each poet's work was unique: Jindal's sharp observations and satirical style, Venkateswaran's deep and honest sketches of human existence, Shankar's language acrobatics and use of form,

Vivek Sharma's unique and heart-warming family stories, Nazareth's powerful and heart-breaking monologues, Sophia Naz's use of Urdu and complex language play, Yuyutsu Sharma's evocative images of the Himalayas, Akella's unflinching searches into life and the soul, and Indran Amirthanayagam's clever turns of phrase and startling images. As Venkateswaran writes in her foreword to the MAPS anthology, "Place, textures, smells, sights, and sounds entice us, as does the silence between the lines. The voices, fractured and full, whispered and full-throated awaken us to the unity-in-difference that is South Asia. The diaspora joins in the chorus against the fragmentation of peoples; instead of the narrow confines of communalism, the poets in the diaspora find in poetry their strongest democracy."



R-L: Tim, Zilka, Ralph, Kavita, Ravi, Sophia, Usha, Pramila, Indran, Yuyutsu, Yogesh, and Vivek

the services he offers on his own time and mostly with his own funds and his battles to make poets welcome at the table of British poetry; a table at which he had to



Salman Rushdie watching the Poet-of-Honour Yogesh Patel

fight (and still has to fight) to be accepted. In Patel's recent collection of poems, *Swimming with Whales*, he reveals the deep conflicts and homelessness we feel as immigrants. The commemorative Matwaala mug features these sentiments with engraved lines from his poems. In his interview with Akella, he says, "Whales can allow us to juxtapose their world with ours through the poetic eye, allowing an inventive experience that can manifest into human sentiments". (<https://www.matwaala.com/yogesh-interview.html>). As someone who uses



**Zilka Joseph** was nominated for a PEN America award and a Pushcart for her chapbooks—*Lands I Live In* and *What Dread*. Her book *Sharp Blue Search of Flame*, (Wayne State University Press, Detroit), was a finalist for the Foreword INDIES Book award. She has an MFA from the University of Michigan. She teaches workshops in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is a freelance editor and manuscript coach. [www.zilkajoseph.com](http://www.zilkajoseph.com)

## Book Review

# Preti Taneja's 'We that are young'

by Anjana Basu

Random House, INR 599

Shakespeare lends himself perfectly to Indian cinema – the broad sweeping canvas, rolling dialogue and larger than life characters – none of them larger than Lear perhaps who has inspired actors from different countries to essay his magnitude. Rituparno Ghosh directed *The Last Lear* not so long ago and *King Lear* was first acted in Calcutta in 1832. Proving yet again that *Lear* is made for India Preti Taneja takes the grand old man and shunts him to Modi's India.

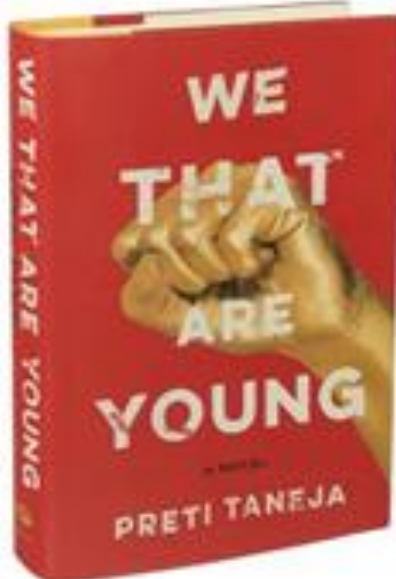
Devraj Bapuji – the last Maharaja of Napurthala – has reinvented himself as the modern Maharajah, the head of a conglomerate known mysteriously, or obviously as *The Company* – corporate worlds are good stand ins for kingdoms. In Taneja's script we meet Bapuji as an ageing megalomaniac with three daughters Gargi, Radha and Sita. He has a farm where he has been killing off peacocks in one of his grand tantrums and expecting his daughter the dutiful Gargi to remove the corpses which proves that he is already beyond reasonable control. He also throws parties there for his group of hundred elite corporate honchos.

His ace in this book is to divide his business empire or metaphorical kingdom between his three daughters. Money is the new power and everything in this book centres around money, whether it is spiritualism or the setting up of a hotel in Kashmir to exploit the state as much as possible.

Bapuji's daughters are frankly all against him and Gargi the eldest decides to take over the reins of the company in a rebellious turnaround that brings about a change in Bapuji. From being an industrialist who exploited underpaid daughters, *Lear* becomes a fighter against corruption, using the masses in his cause to battle his two daughters. Even the storm has its present day context – a freak result of global warming that drives Bapuji into the slums to deliver his expected rant.

*We that are young* is written in the present tense seeming to lay Taneja's characters out – especially the women – as if they themselves were commodities

up for sale. Gargi is aware that as a woman she has been dealt a losing hand in life's game – her sister Radha in fact knows that better than she does. Taneja would like to be feminist – her sympathies are with the daughters and especially with the Cambridge educated



green activist youngest, Sheila but the plot of *Lear* acts a spanner in the works with its bleak ending. 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*.

Taneja throws in bits of the *Mahabharata* and Bollywood to augment the Shakespeare in a manner reminiscent of the recent film *The Hunger* which takes similar liberties with *Titus Andronicus*. Taneja's dialogues tell us what to expect as well – 'Out vile jelly' becomes 'I could take out his eyes for the trouble he's causing,' and pages later the eye actually comes out in the expected burst of blood and thunder. Sticking to Shakespeare's plot does occasionally make things seem forced but then that is part of the game.

She makes up for this with her dialogues that give Shakespeare a modern twist while making it obvious that Taneja is a NRI – references to

*Slumdog Millionaire* for example or the sun compared to a 'melting gulab jamun'.

Divided into five parts, the story of *We that are Young* is told by the members of the younger generation, the three daughters and Bapuji's right hand man's two sons, the legitimate and the illegitimate. Bapuji's demented dialogues flit in and out of these narratives and ultimately come together in the reader's mind as the bleak expected end approaches

## For Jallianwala Bagh By Anjana Basu

*Dyer apt name for one whose dye of  
choice was red  
or perhaps for one who summoned death  
and other dire proceedings  
with one colonial command as spring  
filled the fields  
with swaying golden grain  
and families gathered to sing and  
celebrate  
death knows no language  
certainly not that of the iron heel  
which recognises spring's scarlet  
moment  
as a chance to change the colours of joy  
to a crimson sea  
the dyer's art a study in scarlet  
Overhead a limp flag raised a flutter  
then slipped slowly into sunset*



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*.

## Short Story

## Dusk

By Subhash Chandra

Dusk dissolved into darkness and the electric poles came to life in the lane. I was walking back home from the Metro Station lost in a story plot, oblivious of the man behind. Or maybe he was treading softly. As I inserted the key, entered and turned to shut the door, I noticed him facing me. "Yes?"

"Sir, can you leave your shadow outside?" "What?"

"I've been holding hands with it," he said. "Please come in."

I indicated a chair.

"Thank you."

#

"A cup of tea?"

"Thanks, yes, with a couple of bread slices, if you don't mind."

I checked the refrigerator. No bread. I gave him a plateful of cookies which he polished off.

#

The story plot I was engrossed in was not working out. I'd been going through creative drought for over six months. An idea would flash. I'd work on it mentally and at times even write out the full story. But soon I'd roll up the paper into a ball and chuck it into the dustbin. It was hackneyed stuff. And suddenly, here, a riveting story had walked into my house!

Little did I realize it would turn out to be a sliver of reality.

#

For a long while neither of us spoke. One could hear the breathing rasp of silence. Then he mumbled, more to himself, "Strange, somebody has asked me in."

"Why strange?"

"This is the worst cruelty life can inflict."

"Pardon me?"

"Loneliness."

I was not unfamiliar with the situation. Once in a while an overwhelming fear gripped me and I felt utterly lonely. I had colleagues at college. Some friends too. But there was nobody in this wide world I could call my own; nobody to whom I could confide my fears.

"Why do you feel lonely?" I asked.

"Nobody treats me as a human being. I am a creature from some other planet, as it were. When I try to talk to someone, they avert their face. At the walk-in interviews, I am turned out before I can sit down."

"Do I look repulsive?" he asked raising his woebegone face for the first time.

The lines around his mouth were etched with sadness. His eyes were lifeless and despairing, his neck layered with grime. It seemed he had not bathed in days. A wave of pity swept over me.

"Not at all," I said emphatically.

"Finally, I have given up. I don't talk to people. They have spurned me; now I do the same to them. Instead, now I befriend their shadows. I talk to them, and they are very nice to me."

Was he a psycho or a Tantric, I wondered?

"But in the day, there are no shadows," I probed.

"I keep on the lookout for sunny spots. I generally find one. The electric poles are my friends."



Subhash Chandra retired as Professor of English from Delhi University. He has published two collections of short stories, *Not Just Another Story*, and *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles* and about fifty five short stories in foreign and Indian journals. Also published four books of criticism and several research articles.

My heart went out to him. Perhaps, a traumatic event had unhinged him. He needed psychiatric help, urgently."

"Are you married?"

"Adultery, betrayal, and backstabbing!"

Suddenly, he asked me, "Do you believe in Love?"

A rancid sensation flowed in my blood. "It is a damned myth used to embellish lust."

His eyes lit up. "We are brothers in grief."

I looked at him questioningly.

"You, too, have been betrayed in love."

That jolted me. Uncannily he had hit the mark.

Silence reigned in the room again. I gave him another cup of tea.

"Where do you live?"

"Nowhere. Mostly I sleep in front of Hanuman Temple in Connaught Place. When the police shoo us away, I go to a park."

"How do you survive?"

"You know General Dyer's fate. Sikhs are generous to a fault, fearless and brave."

"What do you mean?"

He did not explain. He was making abstruse remarks. His mental health seemed shambolic. There was a disconnect with reality and his thinking seemed muddled.

He grew reflective before he resumed in a low tone.

"I loved her to distraction. I thought she was the greatest gift to me from God for my devoutness. I bathed, visited the temple every morning and prayed before leaving for the office. I doted on her and did everything possible to please her to make her comfortable and happy with my limited means. Our marriage was a lark. Both of us floated in an euphoric world. But she was a good actress. She was enacting a drama. She had been carrying on with somebody who worked in Delhi and visited his parents in Meerut periodically. One day, she left me, just like that. No good bye, no nothing. Divorce papers came by post."

#

I felt an acute pressure in my chest which felt on the edge of bursting.

"I am the culprit," I told him.

He looked at me blankly.

"She repeated the story," I said. "She fell in love with a fashion designer who took her to Mumbai where her dreams lay. I did not realize she would do the same to me as she had to you."

He did not respond.

"She was a social climber and knew her assets."

It was now late in the evening. "Why don't you join me for dinner?"

He nodded.

I ordered a vegetarian dinner for two from Bikaner. Care for a pint?

"No, thanks."

"Would you mind if I had a little?"

"Not at all."

I downed four large pegs, neat. Then I told him, in a maudlin way, that I felt infinitely guilty for having stolen her from him. At times I had felt like coming over to Meerut to apologise to him. But more than that I wanted to travel to Mumbai and finish her off. "One day, I am going to do that, for sure."

"That won't be necessary," he said.

I was sloshed and it did not sink in immediately.

"I have been to Mumbai recently."

He got up to leave. "And you are safe."

Then he moved towards the door. In a trice, he vanished, but the door had remained bolted.



## Mumbai Expressions

By Anju Makhija

### Are people in India generally unhappy?



Are people in India generally unhappy? A recent survey seems to suggest this. In the 2018 *World Happiness* report, India ranked 133<sup>rd</sup> in place. According to an *Oxfam* study, in the same year, it was

stated that almost 75% of the wealth generated went to the richest, while the poorest part of the population increased their wealth by a mere one percent. India has plenty of billionaires with Mukesh Ambani of *Reliance* Industries ranking among the 10<sup>th</sup> richest people in the world! As I write this column, elections are underway and political parties are promising a rich harvest to the underprivileged sections of society, in both urban and rural areas. The prime minister has launched a 'Chowkidar Modi' campaign on social media in which he promises to be the guardian of all. This light-hearted approach, many feel, is diverting attention from important issues like the current trend of Hindu revivalism which instills fear in those of a certain caste or in people practicing a particular religion.

The 'surgical strikes' and violence in Kashmir is making matters worse. Fear looms everywhere in our country as it does in the rest of this globe. The literary circle is responding to the situation in diverse ways. *Nayantara Sahgal's* new novel, *The Fate of Butterflies*, revolves around a professor, a rape survivor, a Muslim chef—all caught in a wave of Hindu extremism. The veteran writer, now 91 years, remains outspoken. In an interview, she stated: I think it's very obvious to any observer that Hindu extremists are ruling the country. *The Gateway List Fest* reacted to the escalating tension between India and Pakistan by including sessions for debating political issues. About 20 young *Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar* winners, in regional languages, were able to voice their opinions. Books which reflect regional voices, have also been gaining ground. Jayant Kaikini bagged the *DSC Prize for South Asian Literature* this year for *No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories* (translated by Tejaswini Niranjana). It thus became the first translation to win the prestigious award. *Pratham Books* has been working on translating children's books into various regional languages for many years. Recently, they launched their 'Freedom to Read' campaign, an initiative that commemorated UNESCO's day dedicated to our mother tongues. Their digital platform, *Story Weaver*, has opened up access to 800 books for children in 24 languages.

Another 'war', this time a positive one, is being fought by children. As we know, it began with the

weekly sit-in by a young girl by the name of Greta Thunberg outside the Swedish parliament to raise awareness of the climate crisis. It has inspired Indian youngsters and publishers here too; many have announced environment-related books. Events, like the upcoming *Pondicherry Poetry Festival* are focusing on 'Earth Awareness'. Alas, climate changes do not appear to be high on the agenda of most political parties. 'Let us all choke to death as long as we move towards development', seems to be the motto here!

Child care is also a pressing issue. 'Mapping of Establishments', a report by the *Ministry of Women and Child Development*, revealed that only 46 percent of the institutions had adequate number of care givers for young ones. Interestingly, it was recommended that they modernize using digital technology. This attitude of recommending hi-tech as a solution for all problems is getting out of hand! The human element is completely lost. My maid servant found her chawl razed to the ground to give way to a new super-speed highway; many in this city have been rendered homeless. As the infrastructure is growing, the quality of our lives is deteriorating; there are hardly any creative or open spaces left around the city. On a positive note, a new children's museum's was recently-inaugurated. It launched the first exhibition, *Footsteps--Framing the Future*, curated by a group



Jyoti Dogra in *Black Hole* of 25 youngsters who were engaged in an immersive experience.

Theatre artists are also choosing to address environmental issues. Jyoti Dogra, writer/director, in her solo performance *Black Hole*, comments on topics related to nature, our cosmos and human survival. It's a fascinating mix of the real and surreal. The minimal storyline is of a woman with a deep interest in the idea of black holes, grappling with the impending death of her terminally-sick mother. Theatre is growing at a steady pace here despite the shortage of venues. This is partly due to the funding that is coming in from by huge corporate such as Birlas and Tatas. Awards too are adding to the excitement surrounding this art form. *Dhumrapaan*, a dark comedy set in the competitive corporate world, won the *Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Award* for the *Best Original Script*, '18.

To celebrate World Theatre Day, *National Centre for Performing Arts* and the theatre group, *Rage*, joined hands for *Drama Dhamaal* that brought *theatre-wallahs* together for one night of celebration. More than 50 Mumbai artistes and students from the *Drama School* were part of it. The event also felicitated women who have enriched our dramatic scenario with their creativity energy; these included Vijaya Mehta, Shanta Gokhale, Dolly Thakore and Rohini Hattangady. The city recently remembered Mirza Ghalib, a prominent Urdu poet in the mid-nineteenth century, by commissioning a mural at Nagpada, a Mumbai suburb. Several other noted poets have stayed in the vicinity. The memory of Dom Moraes continues to live on as well. *Under Something of a Cloud* and *Where Some Things are Remembered*, both edited by Sarayu Srivatsa, have just been published.

Due to the Kashmir violence, more poets from the valley are writing, and importantly, being heard. Recently, I came across a book, *Green is the Color of Memory* by Huzaifa Pandit. Like other writers living in troubled areas, Pandit's poems reflect his plight: *Green is the color of memory specked with shades of yellow grey. He asks: what does one do, when dead flowers sprinkle / expired adhesives over faded dreams?* Another book of verse which caught my attention is Gayatri Majumdar's *I Know You are Here*. The series of poems about Pondicherry appealed to me due to my connection to the place. In the first poem, she writes: *While I was curled up on a black rock nursing this emptiness; / how would I have known you were waiting for me all that time? / And all that I was waiting for, was you.* This long poem ends with these touching words: *And so the sea... / is my mother! And the waiting to catch a glimpse of her sweet smile is all.*

Poets often make you forget the practicality of life. However, films like *P.M. Narendra Modi*, which is slated for release shortly, bring you back to reality. The opposition party has raised objection with the Election Commission (EC) as they feel this political film should not be shown during the campaign period. The recently launched — *Namo T.V.*, has also run into problems. The E.C is examining the complaints made by the opposition parties. The election, like so many other things here, has become a *tamasha*! Still, our democracy continues...

Anju Makhija is a *Sahitya Akademi* award-winning poet, playwright and translator based in Mumbai. She has co-translated *Seeking the Beloved*, the Poetry of sufi poet: Shah Abdul Latif. She has also co-edited anthologies related to partition, women's poetry and theatre. Her new book, 'Poems Grow With You', has just been published. She is currently working on a volume of her 'Collected Plays' [www.facebook.com/anjumakhijawrites](http://www.facebook.com/anjumakhijawrites)

## Education

# Education and its Significance

By Meenakshi Mohan

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,  
Where knowledge is free,  
Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. . . .  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action,  
Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake!

Rabindranath Tagore  
Gitanjali

### Introduction

These lines by Rabindranath Tagore have been a constant source of inspiration for me since my childhood – only now, I look at it more broadly, I want the whole world to awake. The world is more global now; something that happens in one part of the world affects the whole world.

Looking at the current situation, we find it sinking deeper and deeper into a black hole with so many issues -- counting just a few – brutality, terrorism, destruction of cultures, racism, biases of all kinds, religious fundamentalism, political and environmental issues. We stand at the Abyss at the steadily approaching threshold of unimaginable chaos, calamity and destruction. Education is supposed to be the greatest character builder of humanity. We need to relook, and revamp the education system, perhaps then and then only we can bring the awakening of human mind. Tagore said that a lamp could only light another lamp when it continues to burn its own flame. This brings us to the question of, "What is education, and what is its significance to life?"

### What is Education?

What is education? This has been a controversial issue for a long time. Is it something that one acquires and confines to the faculties of one's brain and then treasure it as a precious jewel or is it something that transforms one to become a reflective learner and facilitator? Education has always been related to the significance of life. Society and life have evolved since the primitive ages, and social institutions and goals of life have thus been changing complexions and assuming new faces. The goals of education thus have been changing.

Going back to the primitive ages and the earliest Chinese and Indian cultures, one finds conservation as the aim of education – the preservation of the society and its culture, which requires resignation and docility. Then we find the Greek view, which marked a progress from conservatism and citizenship as the aim of education. We find that the advent of science broadened the goals of education embracing, as Francis Bacon, an English Philosopher, held, all human knowledge as its domain. Locke and Rousseau recognized the Panasophic view and said, the aim should be to open minds for learning.

History records revolutions – industrial and political. The French and American revolutions gave recognition to the dignity of the common man. In England, nationalism linked the future of nations with the education of their citizens and the aims of education meant the cultivation of the physical, intellectual and moral faculties of the individual, thereby, contributing to the improvement of mankind. Emerson was the spokesman of this view in America. In the 20th century Spencer introduced the survival aim in education and Dewey the progressive educational aim. Spencer emphasized self-preservation, including the ability to earn a living as well as social and political competence. Dewey emphasized that such aims are to be viewed as intrinsic aspects of the process of problem solving.

The aim of education is, therefore, related to the significance of life. What is its significance? Does it mean achieving distinction, getting better jobs, becoming more efficient, dominating over others? It is true that at present our education is geared to these targets – one learns a particular technique or profession which could lead to ruthless competition. Our lives are full of fears, struggles, and discontent, all at the individual, national and world levels. So, does life give us happiness? Isn't happiness the aim of education? Can one get happiness in life if one does not have freedom, if one has fear, if one has to conform to a pattern of life by society? What good is education



Painting by Meenakshi Mohan

if it does not cultivate the spirit of adventure as opposed to a sense of security, independent thinking as opposed to conformity, consideration for others as opposed to false respect for social traditions and authority?

### Conclusion

The aim of education has to be to cultivate an integrated outlook on life. Man is made of different entities and education should bring about the integration of these separate entities. In the absence of integration of these, life cannot give happiness and life is full of contradictions and conflict. The aim of education must be the full development of the personality of the individual – one's intuitive, cognitive, and creative faculties. It is a process of learning of life in full, not merely one of its aspects.

Life is a well of deep water. It is through education that one is able to draw plentiful water to nourish and sustain a happy, and peaceful life. In today's world with many of its grave issues, we need education which would inculcate goodness, compassion, honesty and wisdom in people's lives. Let schools be the soil in which a child could grow without fear and in due course become a facilitator, leader, learner, researcher, and a better member of a community, society, and of the WORLD as a whole. Let's together light the lamp of awakening, and live with HOPE in making this world a better place.

Meenakshi Mohan is an educator, freelance writer, art critic, book reviewer, children's writer and a painter. Most of her paintings are in private collection





## Book Review

**Reginald Massey's Book Page****By Reginald Massey**

When Lord Macaulay wrote his Minute on Indian education in 1835 his purpose was purely utilitarian. His aim was to create a class of Indians proficient in English who would help the British to rule the subcontinent in an efficient manner. In 36 hard hitting paragraphs he demolished the Orientalists such as Sir William Jones who advocated the continuance of Sanskrit and Persian in India.

The governor general Lord William Bentinck backed Macaulay as did Raja Ram Mohan Roy who is now regarded as the Father of the Indian Renaissance.

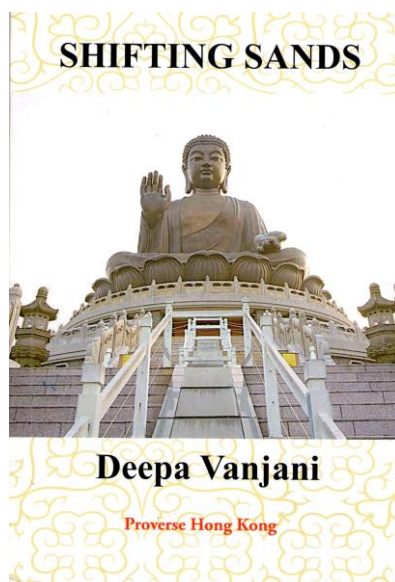
However, what happened in a course of time was that upper class Indians were exposed to European ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. The seeds of nationalism were sown and English speaking Indians began demanding autonomy and even independence. It is no coincidence that men such as Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru were London trained barristers.

What is surprising is that Indian poets began writing 'nationalist poetry' in English much before ideas of nationalism were articulated by India's politicians. Henry Vivian Derozio (1809 - 1831) who was partly European attracted young Bengalis and fired them with patriotic zeal. His poems sang the praises of his motherland. Later, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824 - 1873) and Toru Dutt (1856 - 1877), not related, were important poets who wrote in English. Both were linguists who initially wrote in Bengali. The former introduced the sonnet form to Bengali literature and when he was living in France wrote a poem in honour of Dante which he translated into Italian and sent to Emmanuel II, the king of Italy. The monarch was grateful and wrote to Dutt saying, 'It will be a ring which will connect the Orient with the Occident'. The latter wrote in English and French and the critic Sir Edmund Gosse was impressed by her talent and versatility. Her poem Our Casuarina Tree is required reading in many Indian colleges. It is a pity that she died so young.

It was much later that the poet Sarojini Naidu (1879 - 1949), like the others also a Bengali, became a leading political figure. She was elected president of the Indian National Congress and after independence was appointed governor of an Indian state. Her admirers included Aldous Huxley and she, it must

be recorded, admired Jinnah. She was called the Nightingale of India and once memorably observed that the poor people of India had to pay a heavy price to keep Mahatma Gandhi in poverty.

Today there are many more South Asian poets who write in English and some of them are known all over the English speaking world. By pure coincidence the work of Deepa Vanjani has been brought to my attention and I am surprised that she is not better known. She is head of English at a college in Indore and Shifting Sands is her collection of poems published by Proverse, Hong Kong (ISBN 978-988-8228-37-9).



The poems are grouped in six sections: Satori, the Japanese word for enlightenment is the title of the first section; the second section is Natureza which describes nature as a manifestation of the divine; the next is Urban Diaries which concerns the chaos of urban life; the fourth section is Love Et Al and deals with betrayals and egos; Shh...Tete-A-Tete is the fifth section and has poems about the lessons that flow to us if only we listen; Raw, the final section, has poems about our joys and sorrows, female foeticide and rape.

What appeals to me is the utter honesty of her poems such as the moving piece titled My Flesh:

I am the mother of your dead baby, The weight of whose body crushes my soul.

*I am the mother of your dead baby,  
The weight of whose body crushes my soul.  
I carried you in my womb for six weeks,  
A piece of flesh, a speck of blood. You  
didn't let me hear its heart beat or  
Its hands and legs kick against me.  
You got it tweezed out  
And flushed down the toilet  
I saw the water carry away the lump,  
Carry away my dreams, my hopes, my  
trust.  
But I can still feel your flesh in my womb  
I can hear it sobbing at night.  
Haven't you heard the crying?  
Could you ever feel connected to my flesh?*

Her poems confirm her claim that they are outpourings from the soul.

They transcend culture and country and her terms of reference are wide ranging and impressively international. She can draw lessons from a blade of grass and can listen when silence speaks. Often while savouring her verses I was reminded of Khalil Gibran. The world has changed since the time of Macaulay.

The poet Yogesh Patel has informed me that the Word Masala Foundation in association with Skylark Publications UK has honoured Reshma Ruia with the First Collection Award. The judges were Cyril Dabydeen, Debjani Chatterjee MBE, Pramila Venkateswaran, Yogesh Patel, Saleem Peeradina, Lord Parekh and Lord Dholakia. A formal ceremony will be held at London's Nehru Centre in August.

My friend Chaman Lal Chaman was an accomplished broadcaster and poet who wrote in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. Over the years he had interviewed many celebrities and politicians. He had started to transcribe many of his poems into English and I was helping him with his project. Unfortunately he has passed away. May his soul rest in peace.



**In September 2015 one of Reginald Massey's poems was awarded the first prize in the all-British Forward Poetry competition. He has been writing a regular**

**Book Page for CONFLUENCE for years. Most of his books are available from Amazon UK.**



## Book Review

# Mandira Ghosh's Mahatma Gandhi: Tryst with Satyagraha

Reviewed by Gitanjali Chatterjee

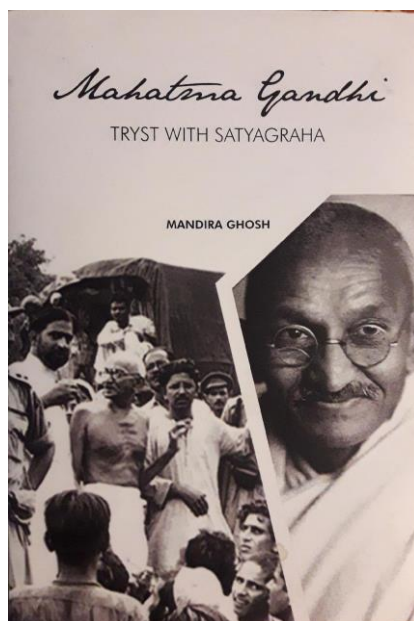
Mandira Ghosh's fourteenth book titled, *Mahatma Gandhi-Tryst with Satyagraha* envisages and gives details of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of truth and non-violence and his methods of Satyagraha, or truth force to combat the forces of evil.

According to the author, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, is respected all over the world as the most inspiring and transforming person. Throughout his life in South Africa and India, Gandhi was a fearless crusader for the rights and dignity of all people and also his steadfast and unwavering promotion of non-violence as a tool to win over hearts and minds of all even his opponents. With truth, non-violent means and morality as his weapons, Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi, loved all even his enemies and that is how he could defeat his opponents. The book highlights Mahatma Gandhi's tryst with Satyagraha the truth force, and also teaches the world about the values of truth and non-violence in a violent world. His extraordinary life reflected in the books transformed as a laboratory where human emotion of love becomes the most significant as according to Mahatma, "Hate the Sin, not the Sinner."

The book deals in, Mahatma Gandhi's best innovation as a new method of combating the British. Never before, the author thinks, that the British could believe, could dream that the peace loving Indians, could resist in a non-violent manner, with non-violence as their weapons. Napoleon had said that the nature of a weapon decides the outcome of the war, its art and organization.. And Non-cooperation movement, Salt satyagraha. Quit India movement, as methods as the weapons won at the end. In his life, Gandhiji won the final war against immoral, unjust and untruth.

A very humiliated Gandhi, at a South African railway station, shivering instead of taking revenge in a violent manner as is the norm invented a very new method of combat-Satyagraha. The book includes 15 chapters that

include, Spirit of Mahatma, Experiments in the use of Satyagraha, Mahatma, in India, Champaran, Bihar and others. Champaran transformed Gandhiji and in the process transformed India's destiny. When a young Gandhi in South Africa declared an award for the title which eventually turned to be Satyagraha, - Indian Opinion, on that very moment he may not have realized the significance and what exactly it will lead to -the atrocities of a mighty empire combated brilliantly through civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and above all through truth force. Passive resistance is oxymoron, truth force is the term for Mahatma Gandhi's



response to the socio - economic and political affairs of his time that created an India's contribution to a great Political theory. Undoubtedly the greatest political activist the world, has witnessed and he who chose an alternative to war, and through the method of satyagraha, in a gentle way he was able to shook the world. The book begins with the chapters like Atrocities, War and resistance to the unknown chapters like Nil bidroho or Indigo revolt which according to the author, was the forerunner of Champaran revolution which taught even the peasants of India, to become self reliant and progressive.

**Pages:180, Hardbound**  
**Publisher: Shubhi Publications,**  
**Gurugram, Haryana, India Price:**  
**695 INR**

Mahatma was not just an activist, but a leader with an unparalleled vision and in this present scenario, when the world, is witnessing unprecedented violence, he is the most relevant. Revered by friends and enemies alike, Mahatma realized that political democracy without social democracy is not a democracy at all. His policies and ideas, as an alternative to the socio-economic crisis of modern era, that is in crisis due to excessive violence, materialism, greed and lust for power. The book deals in the various stages of Mahatma's life where even when disillusioned he could overcome disillusionment . Fasting as suffering reminds the author of the brilliant poet T. S. Eliot's verses from the *Murder in the Cathedral* where he pens,

You know and do not know

what is to act and suffer

You know and do not know

that the action is suffering and suffering action

He left for the heavenly abode with prayer in his lips, and at the end of his life through suffering he taught the world, the futility of greed and materialism and above all violence

Finally the book talks about Mahatma's spirit and methods of Satyagraha, as peaceful means of protesting against the unjust, corruption and an alternative to war.



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**Secretary at Sahitya**  
**Akademi(National**  
**Akademi of Letters),**  
**New Delhi. She is a**  
**translator and editor**  
**and is currently with**

**Manohar Publishers, Delhi.**

## Malathy's Musings

# Memories

## By Malathy Sitaram

Thinking of India and my home town/city, Bombay or Mumbai as it is known now. I find it difficult to use the latter name as in my time there in the fifties, it was in Bombay that I grew up though I was born in Delhi. I cannot remember much about Delhi. We left when my father who was a Civil servant was posted to Bombay which was a wonderful place to be.

My elder sister and I attended a Catholic convent school for girls in what is still called the Fort area. The headmistress was a French-Canadian nun whom we all feared. I remember how her blue eyes would flash if she caught us talking during Assembly time or when walking up the stairs to go to our classrooms. It was an excellent school and my elder sister and I fared very well there. I remember my parents beaming proudly on the annual Prize Giving Day when prizes were awarded to pupils from Year one to the final Year eleven. The prizes were usually books. I looked forward to the annual Sports Day too when I participated in a couple of races. I always took part in the three-legged race in which two girls had a rope or long kerchief fastened tightly round the two adjacent ankles and the pair would then run as fast as possible with an arm round each other's waists. This was called the three-legged race and it was great fun.

Convent schools were well attended as the teachers were good and the medium of instruction was English. We had a wiry Maharashtrian lady who took the Mathematics classes and who was very strict. It was heads down and no talking throughout the lesson. I liked Algebra and Geometry but found Arithmetic dull. My forte was English as well as French. Both subjects were taught by two Goan ladies. One was Miss Joseph and the other was Miss Roderick. There were two different English classes each week. One was devoted to Grammar and Composition and the other to Literature. I enjoyed the two subjects hugely. A close second was History. I recall that I found Geography lessons dull. I was hopeless at Drawing and was amazed at the artistic skills of some other girls.

The school years were the happiest part of childhood. At Lunch time we had rice and chapattis brought to the school in a tiffin carrier by our servant who walked to the school from our home. We had specific rooms for dining and lunch hour was fun as we would be sitting with friends on a bench. We were vegetarians and I remember scrutinizing the food that non-vegetarians

were eating. The Parsis and Goan Christian girls would be eating fish or chicken or mutton. We may have been offered some morsels but probably did not take them. In later years Tandoori Chicken made its appearance and my sister and I were given a taste of it by family friends and we found it was absolutely delicious. All the restaurants were selling it along with delicious 'roti'.



Our father had eaten non vegetarian food in his student days and was not averse to the children eating meat, but my mother did not want that food in the house. But finally, we persuaded her to let us try non-veg food outside and some time later, she allowed us to order some tandoori and consume it in the house. She was generally very modern in her outlook and we were lucky in having a pretty modern upbringing. She made sure we completed our homework. Some of the women who were our neighbours would come to her for advice including matrimonial upsets! She was probably the only woman in the building who had had a college education. My mother subscribed for two Tamil magazines which she enjoyed reading. I never learned to speak Tamil fluently as most of the time my nose was buried in an English story book.

My mother was a good cook and she would learn recipes from magazines. We always had a cook but they were usually North Indians. We loved eating daal and chapati and I love it to this day. She was also good at knitting and sewing. She would follow knitting patterns in magazines and make some excellent sweaters though we did not need these in Bombay which was not cold even in winter. The exciting part of the year was mid- June when the annual monsoon would begin, sweeping up the West coast from Kerala with howling cyclones and non-

stop rain that sometimes-caused flooding. My enterprising father took us to a shoe shop which sold excellent galoshes or gumboots as they were called and we wore them when needed. The start of the monsoon season was always exciting with its thunder and lightning but later, boredom would set in when the rain seemed to be ceaseless, preventing us from going to our friends' houses. We lived in a first floor flat in a five-storey building and invariably during the monsoon the long verandah would get flooded. So once again my father found a shop that sold very heavy canvas blinds and had them installed in the verandah. Even sunlight could not penetrate the thick canvas and we got used to a dark verandah in the day time during the monsoon season which lasted till early September. On Marine Drive which runs parallel to the Arabian sea, the waves were sometimes over 10 feet high and would fall over the parapet onto the road. Monotony set in by mid-July and by end of August we were fed up with rain. I remember that our school holiday in summer was about six weeks long from May to mid- June. Our final examination results would arrive by post during the summer holiday and usually our parents were very pleased with us.

Bombay was probably the most Westernized city in India as it was home to the Goan community of Catholics and also to the long-settled Parsi community. We had some very plush cinemas which ran the latest American films which we loved to see and talk about. My sister and I fell in love with some of the male stars. I still remember how excited we were to see "Gone with the Wind" which had Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable playing Scarlett O'Hara and the dashing hero, Rhett Butler. Even my mother had a crush on the latter after seeing the film! We discovered the charm of Audrey Hepburn, the heroine in 'Roman Holiday' and so many other stars. There were very few films from Britain (if any) at that time. Those were the days-----.



**Malathy Sitaram was the first Asian teacher of English in Wiltshire schools. Also she was the first Asian to be appointed to the Swindon Bench of Justices of the Peace.**

## Through the Poetic Lens

## Diasporic poetry values and the classroom

By Yogesh Patel

I have been recently in New York to take part in a panel discussion chaired by Pramila Venkateswaran. She asked me to reflect on the values that South Asian poetry can bring to the classroom. I recollect some points here.

One often hears that the English do not learn other languages readily as it is a universal language and it comes with the laziness in learning other languages. Maybe that filters in the curriculum selections. We need to ask, 'In the absence of relevant literature from other languages, can students truly formulate an idea about their fellow diasporic classmates?' In contrast, those in diaspora are not only looking into the linguistic culture of the host nation but also embracing it and making it their own, while not giving up own cultural traits. It may be because the burden of integration is compelling on them. Experience of integration encapsulated in Debjani Chatterjee's poem about a diaspora child entering the classroom for the first time is a fine example of it!

#### An Asian Child Enters a British Classroom

**Before she stepped into the classroom:  
she removed coat, mittens and chunni;  
mentally undid her shoes for entry  
to a temple of secular mystery.**

**She also shed her:  
language, name, identity;  
donned the mask of neat  
conformity,  
prepared for lessons in cultural  
anonymity.**

Debjani Chatterjee

Talking about the traits, the tone of the English language is anchored in the iambic meter. The emphasis often is not in the beginning. The Indic languages are spoken crisply in syllables while the English language is based on stresses. Hence, a diasporic writer, not being native, brings in a variety, maybe as an additional dialect. The way the writing is discharged – the way the narrative is delivered – can reflect shifts in stresses. Most Indic languages I know talk in the Trochaic tone with the first syllable stressed. This does not affect the born-abroad generation of diaspora poets. The white children attuned to iambic tone

may find the trochaic tone socially emphatic or aggressive. In addition, a celebrity culture that prevails in poetry may limit the curriculum selector's choices assuming one or two poets represent the whole diaspora. Unfortunately, some diaspora poets enjoying celebrity status shy away from being identified with the diaspora. Many do not even write about the experiences of the diaspora as Debjani Chatterjee's poem above indulges. The curriculum selectors



**Yogesh Patel has received the Freedom of the City of London and many awards as a poet with his work appearing in many journals. His recent book is *Swimming with Whales*. He has written children's books, films and recorded songs. His non-profit enterprises Skylark and Word Masala Foundation promote diaspora poets.**

would not be aware of this fact! Human migration quickly equates itself to racism. However, it need not be focused on the colour-hatred only; the struggles and adverse experience make up a great narrative too. My poem Bottled Ganges delves into both of these factors where a narrative is also about how the revered values migrants linger on to turn hypocritical in the complex process of integration. Are such subject matters not worth to study or included in any literary curricula?

"Speaking from my current experience, I have not seen much evidence if any of South Asian or diaspora poets are being taught in full; maybe the occasional poem or a poet? Anecdotal, I know that my book Ticker-tape is being taught on the University of Birmingham creative

writing course(s)," writes Rishi Dastidar.

Our celebrated poet Daljit Nagra tells me, "At Brunel University, where I teach Creative Writing in West London, we have a diverse curriculum to reflect our diverse cast of students. I'm not sure diversity of text is presented to students at most universities where English and Creative Writing are taught. From my experience, white English students in the largely monocultural course are taught literature that reflects their own heritage, so they are not sufficiently challenged to consider a broad cultural diet."

We still see the racially motivated murders, yet diaspora poets are not affected by it: Why? Many poets think racism is an obsolete theme. Is it? Love is even an older theme! How can what is current is irrelevant in poetry? How is it that what destroys life is irrelevant? Hence, our poets are also a part of this problem. Both sides are in need of retraining.

What poetic elements do we see in South Asian poetry that could be like an aha moment for students or an example of craft, like form or language?

It is said that poetry is a celebration of language. If lyricism is one way to do it, inventing a special lingo for a special expression is another way to achieve that. In my view, Daljit Nagra has created the unmatched wow moments in his poems in his books: Look We Have Coming to Dover and Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine. The first one has bagged multiple awards and has become a classic in its own right. 'Straightforward English in the Larkin or Orwellian sense is not easy for everyone. Especially for some of my speakers, it is hard, so I want to explain all that,' he says. On the other hand, the wow moment can come by using our own mythology at the cost of being esoteric. You have tools from your own Indic mythologies, no less important than the use of Greek mythological references. For example, my poem A Slipped Hand (2) works as a wow moment only if you know the incident in Mahabharata. To make Arjun undefeatable, Drona as Guru's right demands a final gift; he orders Karna to cut his thumb. In my poem, God is Karna!



## A literary Evening



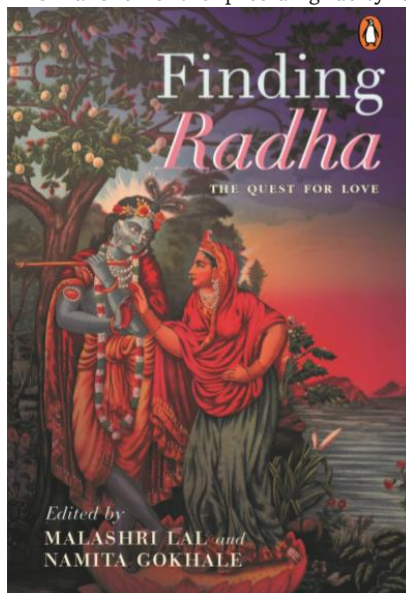
### RADHA'S ETERNAL ROMANCE

Reviewed by Mandira Ghosh

Recently, the India International Centre, New Delhi, organized an unusual and highly effective 'book rendition' programme for *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love*, (Penguin 2018), edited by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale. The host, Dr. Usha Mujoo Munshi, Chief Librarian of the IIC welcomed the large gathering and introduced Dr. Sonal Mansingh, Padma Vibhushan and Member of Parliament, and renowned classical dancer, who had agreed to present a *Natya Katha* or a 'dance narrative' on Radha. It was a mesmerizing performance on a dark stage glowing with her pink and gold *mekhala chaddar* attire.

Sonal ji began by chanting 'Om'--the reverberation of cosmic power-- and described Radha as *Tapta Kanchana, Hari Priya, Rasheshwari* and other names and said that Shri Radha is a concept in Indian history, mythology and Hindu philosophy as seen in the deepest meditation. She went on to say that though Radha's story is located in Vrindavan, she remains in the heart of her devotees at all places and all times. Radha's ancient heritage was traced by Sonal Mansingh from the *Upanishads* and the *Vedas*, with a special mention of the *Radhopanishad*. Her name connoted *mukti* or liberation from the cycles of birth and rebirth. Shri Radha is known as Krishna's 'Lladini Shakti' or "Power of Loving" and she is associated with *Adi Purush* or primordial energy. She is simple girl from a cow herding community; hence power can reside among the so called ordinary people. The word 'Gopi' is also resonant with

meaning. Apart from 'go' meaning 'cow', the term 'go' also stands for incandescence and light. And 'pi' refers to the act of protecting the earth from dire problems. As a *gopi* Radha and her divine lover Krishna engaged in cosmic play and show the path to bliss and eternal joy. The erudite speaker said *Radhopanishad* has twenty eight names for Radha. As the beloved of Lord Krishna she is the presiding deity of



Vrindavan and, in many ways, more important in folk imagination than the God. Krishna is addressed only in relation to Radha, as Radheshyam, Radhakant, Radhamadhav, and the common greeting in Vrindavan is 'Radhe Radhe'.

Within such a context of primacy to Radha, Sonal Mansingh performed charming and powerful *abhinaya* capturing the many moods of Radha. For example, Radha naughtily ridicules Krishna that he is referred as the mighty upholder of Govardhan Hill but she is not recognized for bearing the weight of Shri Krishna himself when he seeks solace in her love. Sonal ji turned to the famous lyrics of Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* to illustrate *shringara rasa* and the aesthetic erotica of the legend. She enacted the opening

verses reminding us how the young Radha was entrusted with the child Krishna and their dalliance began in the forest of Kadamba trees. Later, when Radha, who is married to another, wants to leave her home for a tryst with Krishna, her *sakhi* or friend advises her to wear a dark saree and take off her tinkling anklets which would reveal her whereabouts. Sonal ji also beautifully portrayed the famous scene of reconciliation when Krishna, who has been in love play with another *gopi*, begs Radha for forgiveness and lowers his head before her feet. Radha's hurt melts at the sight of such abjection from her divine lover, the lyric being one of the most poetic of Jayadev's *ashtapadis*. The influence of Jayadev's 12th century poem impacted many traditions, said Dr. Sonal Mansingh, and referred to known as well as less known texts such as from Sikh literature. She concluded the *Natya Katha* on Radha by chanting Om with a deep resonance. (continues on page 19)

This was followed by a panel discussion on *Finding Radha* with the speakers : Shri Pavan K. Varma, diplomat, author and public intellectual; Renuka Narayanan, columnist on spiritual and cultural texts; Namita Gokhale, author and co-director for Jaipur Literature Festival and others; Sonal Mansingh, scholar and danseuse, and Malashri Lal, academic and author. They followed up several strands from the *Natya Katha*. Pavan Verma spoke of the four *purusharthas* in Hinduism *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* and wondered why Radha Krishna's erotic play is often given a spiritual orientation when *kama* is an acknowledged path to liberation. Renuka reminded the audience of traditions of Radha in South India and specially mentioned an instance of an annual celebration of Radha-Krishna's wedding in a small village. Sonal ji spoke of the research that is crucial to understanding the power of Radha. Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal, the editors, recalled their inspirational moments as well as the challenges in creating this volume. The research into Radha lore had led to some archival retrieval that may be important for literary historians, they said, pointing to the section on "Songs of Radha." This book is the first authentic and scholarly compilation of the legacy of Radha from the *Bhagvat Purana* to Bollywood films, tracking the highs and lows in Radha's reputation in classical literature as well as the popular renderings. Vidya, Surdas, Vidyapati, Chaitanaya Mahaprabhu, Chandidas, Bihari and many others were captivated by Radha. In modern times, she touched the imagination of Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Ramakanta Rath and Dharamvir Bharati among others, and is never far from lyrical compositions of the film world.

With such a rich repertoire of dance, narration, storytelling, academic viewpoints, and performing arts, the evening ended with a thundering applause and a long line for book signing. Radha and Krishna's spirit of love seemed to fill the air of the IIC auditorium. *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love* is an important book with a significant commentary on Indian mythology and its contemporary relevance.



**Mandira Ghosh**, is a poet, journalist and freelance writer who covers important book events and cultural programmes in New Delhi. She is the Guest Editor of the Poets of India, Special Issue of The Seventh Quarry, The Swansea Magazine from

Wales. She is awarded with a Senior Fellowship of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. She has received Editors' Choice Award, twice by the International Society of Poets, and has been elected into International Poetry Hall of Fame.

## Slow Karma

By Zilka Joseph

Slowly, slowly, a haze comes  
with the setting sun, the waves  
of camphor smoke from home pujas  
ebb. My eyes smolder. I splash  
cold water on my face, change  
into a white cotton salwar kameez.

So soothing to my eyes—tired  
from a day of teaching.

My tongue burns as I gulp down  
my garam ginger chai. In a few  
minutes my students will arrive

for a coaching session with me.

I reach for my workbag, pull  
out my dog-eared notes. Arrange  
them on the coffee table in the living  
room. The beige Formica top has split, even  
the wood slab below has chipped. Splinters  
spear my fingertips every time. I suck  
at my bleeding finger tip. The doorbell

rings, my students are here. Final  
exams are two days away. The dreamer  
who is always late arrives  
just as I pass a plate of nolen gur sweets  
that our Bengali neighbor  
brought us this morning—fresh palm  
jaggery sandesh from Nabalok  
Mishti Dokan across the street. His son  
just got a job at State Bank! Imagine!

How hard he must have studied to pass  
those difficult entrance tests. Just think!

All those interviews he had to clear.

Brave *dada*, they say, and what good  
fortune. So clever he must be to get  
in so soon after college! Our heads spin  
with thoughts. In a few years, he will pass  
the officer's exams. Then, he will draw  
a big salary. Ah, soon, they will find him

a bride. Sitting in a jagged circle, with used  
copies of *Macbeth* in our laps, we lick  
the creamy lumps of sandesh  
from our fingers, and wonder what  
is written in our fate. For now the board  
exams loom. We debate whether  
what Lady Macbeth did for her husband  
was driven by ambition

or devotion? How does she compare  
with Indira Gandhi? But we don't  
dwell on blood and death for too long.

We turn to the pieces of sandesh melting  
on the plate, hope as we devour them  
that a kernel of that lucky fellow's  
karma will bring high marks, change our lives.

# THE FIRST STEP

by Innamburan

“You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step”

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

This is about a First Step that got regrettably stopped in its tracks though it had a grandstand view of all the steps to the top of the Tower. India boasts of tertiary-care hospitals that lure medical tourism. On the other hand, her rural poor fall prey to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, strokes, chronic heart/lung/kidney diseases as prevention advisories and timely primary care elude them. Most do not know what ails them. The frustrating medical circuit could ruinously eat into their daily wages; they stay off. Many die a premature death. This grim scenario calls for a paradigm shift, that of the medical fraternity reaching out to them with friendly solutions. One such model is Chennai's Kidney Help Trust (KHT), “...the best low-cost method of preventing the ravages of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).”, according to the International Society of Nephrology.

KHT started with the premise that half the cases of kidney failure could be prevented. It did exactly that and more in the miniscule target population of 23,000 people in 26 villages near Chennai since 1997. It tackled diabetes and hypertension also, as they damage kidneys. Renal disease can be detected only through testing the urine and blood samples. Trained local girls administer a simple questionnaire on sugar intake and blood pressure, collect and test urine samples then and there for sugar and protein content and record the blood pressure of all individuals over the age of five. Apollo Hospital did all the tests free throughout the life of the project. Its estimated cost is about Rs. 4/- per capita per year.

Those having high blood pressure - over 140/90, or who had sugar or protein in the urine were examined by a KHT doctor. Diabetes was treated with glibenclamide and metformin, and hypertension with reserpine, hydralazine and hydrochlorothiazide - all low-cost, yet efficient drugs. Blood pressure was monitored weekly; diabetes was monitored with the glycated haemoglobin blood test every three months, adjusting the doses to achieve good control. Among those who cooperated for the treatment, blood pressure was controlled to ideal levels in 96 per cent, glycated haemoglobin was brought to the normal level in 52 per cent and it was significantly improved in another 25 per cent. The total cost amounted to just Rs. 31.26 (£ 3.47) per capita of the population per year. After 10 years, the programme was expanded to cover the adjacent area with a population of 21,500.

A comparative survey brought out that against 28 persons per 1000 with subnormal kidney function in the new population, only 11 per thousand were so affected in its original group. Around 60% of chronic renal failure had thus been prevented at a pittance. The benefit to the individuals, family and society was enormous. This model, which should have been expanded multifold, had ground to an abrupt halt, starved of funds.



Padma Bhushan Dr. MK. Mani, founder of KHT and who was awarded the prestigious John H Dirks award of the International Society of Nephrology for this work, could not get the State and Central Governments of India interested in adopting this proven model despite his persistence. They are seemingly interested in funding visible vote-catchers like dialysis, transplants and free supply of immune-suppressives. Ayushman Bharath, one of the world's largest state-run health insurance programmes, is the ambitious initiative of the Government of India. It covers 30 million individuals. Even such a bold initiative has no space for the likes of KHT.

When the kidneys fail, toxins accumulate in the blood, poisoning the patient. His blood pressure rises, he becomes anaemic and weak, and the bones become brittle, causing pain. He gradually succumbs to a miserable death. A fresh lease of life is possible only through life-long dialysis sessions or renal transplantation at the earliest. Related expenses are exorbitant and vary wildly from hospital to hospital. The waiting lists are long. Most patients die.

In sharp contrast to the indifference of the governments in India, the United Kingdom's approach is refreshing. The Food Standard

Agency's successful approach reduced average salt intake by 11% between 2003 and 2011. It was expected to prevent 9000 cardiovascular deaths and 9000 non-fatal cardiovascular events per year. The UK government's sugar reduction programme 2019, which followed that approach, could possibly reduce obesity by 0.9% and prevent 20 000 cases of diabetes per year.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK came out with a draft Guideline on 'Hypertension in adults: diagnosis and management' in March 2019. Thousands of heart attacks and strokes across the UK could be prevented by diagnosing and treating more people with high blood pressure, if its lowering of thresholds wins a consensus. New guidelines in U.S.A and China also lower the threshold levels.

Viewed from a global perspective, the writing on the Wall stares at India ~ 'Do or Die'

I espy a glimmer of hope this day, when the legendary Aravind Eye Hospital goes to Africa.

Disclosure:

I had liberally borrowed sentences from Dr.M.K.Mani's Letters from Chennai (2016) and I thank him for the same. I donated a kidney under his supervision on September 11, 1986; he looks after my renal health ever since. There is no conflict of interest. References are many, taking space; A list can be given, if desired.

Citation:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/aravind-hospital-takes-eye-care-to-africa-aravind-eye-hospital-isphani-islamia-eye-institute-and-hospital-queen-elizabeth-diamond-jubilee-trust/article26975598.ece>



**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.**



# My Naxalbari

## by Tapan Sen

1972. Then the 1970's decade, the decade of freedom. There was new vision in the eyes of the young Naxals. An extraordinary courage in their hearts – a dream of leaving a rotten society and its beliefs and value systems behind.

At that time near Calcutta's Beckbagan neighbourhood there was the long wall of the gigantic CESC godown. Empty. It was as if this wall belonged to Naxalbari, waiting for new dreams, new ideas. At midnight a group of Naxalites set out from the Ballygunge Place house belonging to the martyred Comrade Sujit with buckets, cans of paints and brushes in their hands, in the direction of that wall. Slipping past the Black Maria van filled with armed police. One of us was given the duty of warning the rest the moment he saw any signs of police activity. That night these words were written on that long wall: 'India will be free by 1975'. In Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. In huge letters. So that commuters in passing trams and buses could read this new language easily. On either side were pictures of Chairman Mao and Charu Mazumdar.

Today that wall does not exist anymore. Nor does that slogan. Instead, there is the shiny dazzling new Quest Mall, signs of this millennium's entertainment loving youth who love to lose themselves in crowds of loneliness. Filled with the entrapment of foreign brands. I do not go to that mall. Instead, I hold up a firewall of memories in my mind. People try to reason with me – it is all childish idealism. The old always gives way to the new – that's the way things are. My mind will not accept it. Is this the new? Is this the liberated India? I keep thinking it would perhaps be wrong if I stepped inside.

Since 1975, the state of my country has not improved any. Divisions and inequality have increased. However, the cement, sand and lime washed construction that is Quest Mall cannot erase the dream we dreamt. The truth of Naxalbari is the truth of every decade. Today Vietnam is a much coveted travel destination. Nevertheless, the truth of Vietnam, the essence of that guerrilla warfare against society, that has not been lost.

Let me go back in a flashback. When I signed up with Naxalbari, I was in the first year of college. My best friend from school, Ajoy was studying at St Stephen's in Delhi – he would come home for the holidays. Our house was in North Calcutta's Garpar Road and theirs was ten minutes away on Harinath Dey Road. I remember Ajoy gave me a book to read 'The Curtain of Ignorance'. It was written by Felix Green. One of the chapters was about India – The Politics of Poverty. I learnt that India's poorest people lived on 12 paise a month. I was startled. This was the first time I had read anything outside storybooks and textbooks. I read about poverty and exploitation. Later, one summer holiday, I went to stay at St Stephen's Hostel. There I encountered Naxalbari in the shape of Sanjay Basu Ray, called Bublú and known later undercover as Nanda. We became friends. He had left the Marine Engineering College for the politics of Naxalbari. Returning to Calcutta, we met again by accident in a Gol Park bookshop. Sanjay became my close friend and comrade. With him, I began my journey to Naxalbari.

On October 1, 1973, the police shot us both outside the gate of Alipore Central Jail. He was shot in the stomach, his intestines were torn to shreds. And I was hit in the arm and neck. From outside the gate, dripping blood, we were lifted into a police van. Just for a few seconds we were alone inside. Sanjay told me, "Listen, I probably won't survive." Then he cried, "Fight on, Boss!" I can still remember that voice. Our journey together had started on the fields of Naxalbari. But it did not end together.

On October 3, the doctor at PG Hospital told everyone that Sanjay was no more, he had been martyred, leaving behind the dream of liberation with us all.

To make sure that the message of the revolution was spread we would climb to the top of a double decker bus and throw leaflets down. We would climb to the roof of the USIS building on Chowringhee and throw down leaflets from there on the sea of humanity below. At the Gariahat crossing from the roof of Jasoda Bhavan we would release gas balloons used in advertising with Naxalbari Zindabad scrawled on the sides.

A storm rose in Calcutta with the statue breaking movement. Charu Mazumdar had said that we needed to reevaluate our cultural tradition and our history. Saroj Dutta had said that we needed to re-examine the roles of Vivekananda and Ram Mohun Roy in the context of the British. Whether they said to destroy statues or not – that debate still goes on. In the spirit of protest, in the quest for newness, to question, the Naxalites beheaded many statues. There were storms both for and against this among the intellectuals and the thinkers of the city. However, there was a wave of writings about the sages and a reexamination of old values. That was Naxalbari's demand from history.

A little while later, I dropped out of college to become a 'wholetimer' for the cause. I worked for some time among the bidi makers of Rajabar. This was the first time I had escaped from the wrappings of middle class life to experience hard labour and the lives of the underclasses. A face-to-face encounter with poverty, grief, hard times and exploitation. With me was Mao's Red Book and the Three Articles written by Charu Mazumdar.

Time passed, we of the Ballygunge-Tiljola local community decided that on October 1, 1973 we would storm Alipore Jail and free the Naxalite prisoners held there. We held a secret meeting in Vivekananda Park. The subject was how the comrades on the outside were to maintain contact with the comrades on the inside. How and when action would be taken. We had revolution in our eyes and hearts and never thought it was time for the asylum alarm to ring. Actually, perhaps, none of us was scared of death. That is why we believed that the jailbreak would be possible. This was what Naxalbari stood for to us.

Of the Naxalites from the decades of the 60s and 70s, many are still here, many are no more and of those many were martyred and fact of their martyrdom weighs as heavy as the rocks of a mountain. Fifty years after Naxalbari I salute with alal salaam those whom I came close to and discovered Naxalbari through them – Arijit Mitra, Dilip Banerjee, Baren Bhattacharya.

Those who remain are all senior citizens. Together with today's democratic struggles, they combine the history and experience of Naxalbari – a knowledge the youth of today can take forward with a new steadiness on the world stage. My Naxalbari will become everyone's Naxalbari. India will become free. Naxalbari's message will become true.

Tapan was the editor of the socio-political Bengali tabloid 'Lok Samachar' from 1978 till 1985. Later on since the early 90s till today he is on the editorial board of the Bengali cultural magazine Nabanna—where he writes from time to time. He is also interested in photography and specialises in landscapes and children and some of his works have been published in The Telegraph, Jetwings and Lonely Planet. Tapan can be reached at [tapan.senomatic@gmail.com](mailto:tapan.senomatic@gmail.com)

# LINCOLN SELIGMAN - SOLO EXHIBITION AT OSBORNE STUDIO GALLERY BELGRAVIA,

## THE ARTIST'S REFLECTIONS, INSIGHTS

### AND A RETURN TO INDIA

Lincoln Seligman's paintings attract important collectors for their luminous quality and joie de vivre. Names of consequence include the New York Public Library, the European Parliament, Royal Palace at Riyadh, international brands Chanel, Tiffany, Laurent Perrier, Flemings Bank and Standard International Bank, and the collections of Dukes of Devonshire and Roxburghe.

In the manner of one of his heroes, Paul Gauguin, Lincoln left a 'boring City life' to become an artist in 1980. He has been commissioned to create monumental abstract sculpture for atriums, murals for hotels, and painted backdrops for ballet at Sadlers Wells and Covent Garden.

He has an enduring passion for India, finding new inspiration on every journey. Last year his exhibition was an exploration of Rajasthan for 'colour, palaces and flamboyant people, Gujarat for deserts, fortresses, and displays of textiles.' A connection with India, and with art, may have been a legacy from his grandmother Hilda, a successful artist and sculptor who lived in the Himalayas. When living in Wimbledon, Hilda's close friends were Mahatma Gandhi, the Emperor of Ethiopia, the revered Haile Selassie. Another link with India comes from his immersion in the Jungle Book stories as a child, Rudyard Kipling his mother's friend and godfather.

**This year his show is based on a more idiosyncratic approach, not so much a travelogue, but more time on the ground, in fewer places. In Lincoln's words: 'The people I've painted are those I have chosen, considered and analysed in more depth. I hope this makes the paintings themselves more exciting for the viewer.'**

Lincoln's own sympathies translate into such paintings as 'Father and Child' and his love of the English countryside in a Cotswold landscape, 'Dog Walk'

On his latest Indian journey this month he will spend days in the Udai Bilas Palace, where his friend the Maharaja of Dungarpur, has invited him to stay, absorb and paint in tranquillity. The Maharaja, a motor car fanatic, has collected his series 'Maharajas at Speed' which Lincoln describes as 'fanciful paintings of old cars, transporting hunting parties with a Cheetah on the back seat.'

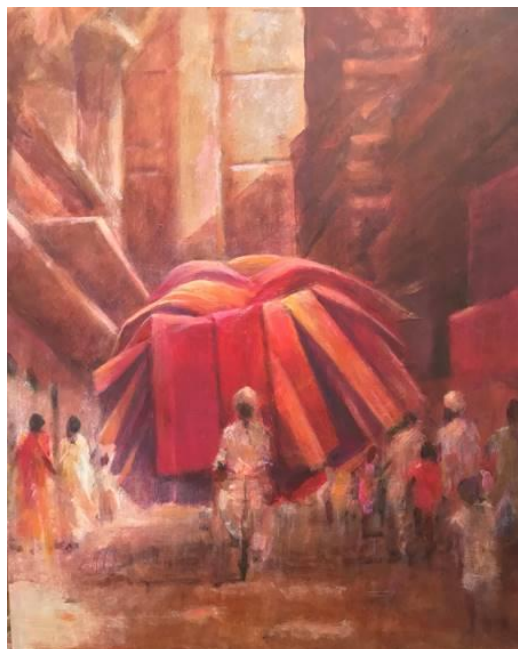
A connection with India, and with art, may have been a legacy from his grandmother, Hilda, a successful artist and sculptor who lived in the Himalayas. Her sculpture of the shepherd boy who founded a dynasty, Chandra Gupta, still stands in front of Delhi's parliament building. When she lived in Wimbledon her close friends were Mahatma Gandhi and the Emperor of Ethiopia, a cult figure, worshipped by his people, Haile Selassie.

#### FACTBOX:

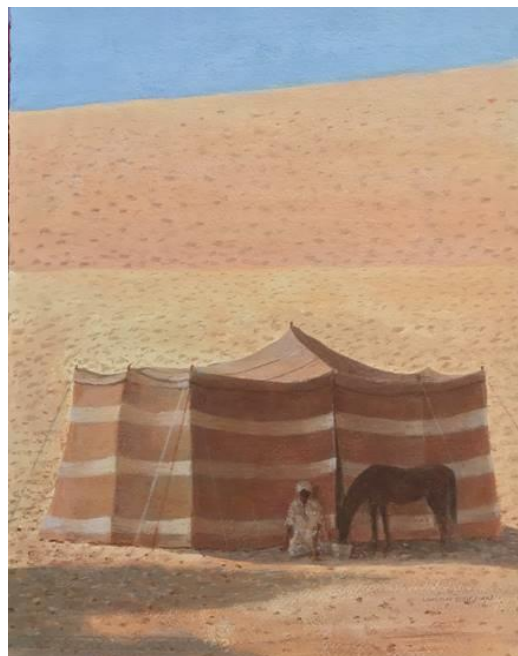
**Artist:** Lincoln Seligman

**Dates:** 14<sup>th</sup> till 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019

**Entry:** Free admission to the gallery **Website:** [www.osg.uk.com](http://www.osg.uk.com)



Rugseller, 20x16, acrylic



Tent and horseman, on paper 15 x 11

