

# KAVYA BHARATI

THE STUDY CENTRE FOR  
INDIAN LITERATURE IN  
ENGLISH AND TRANSLATION

AMERICAN COLLEGE  
MADURAI

Number 13  
2001

*Kavya Bharati* is a publication of the Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, American College, Madurai 625 002, Tamilnadu, India.

Opinions expressed in *Kavya Bharati* are of individual contributors, and not necessarily of the Editor and Publisher.

*Kavya Bharati* is sent to all subscribers in India by Registered Parcel Post. It is sent to all international subscribers by Air Mail. Annual subscription rates are as follows:

India Rs. 125.00  
U.S.A. \$15.00  
U.K. £ 10.00

Drafts, cheques and money orders must be drawn in favour of "Study Centre, *Kavya Bharati*". For domestic subscriptions, Rs.15.00 should be added to personal cheques to care for bank charges.

All back issues of *Kavya Bharati* are available at the rates listed above. From Number 3 onward, back issues are available in original form. Numbers 1 and 2 are available in photocopy book form.

All subscriptions, inquiries and orders for back issues should be sent to the following address:

The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*  
SCILET, American College  
Post Box 63  
Madurai 625 002 (India)

(e-mail: [mdu\\_scilet@sancharnet.in](mailto:mdu_scilet@sancharnet.in))

Registered Post is advised wherever subscription is accompanied by draft or cheque.

Editor: R.P. Nair

## FOREWORD

The past year has been a good one for Indian poetry in English, according to many journals and critical opinions. *Kavya Bharati* agrees. So we have included in this issue a bumper review section, surveying many volumes of new poetry from a wide variety of publishers and locations in India.

As a spill over from this rich harvest, our next issue will include a section of essays on individual Indian poets who have written in English: several older and traditional ones, others who are more recent arrivals on the scene, and deserve to be better known. *Kavya Bharati* will be glad to consider additional essays it receives that are focused on specific poets of India.

This issue contains a number of poems by citizens of other countries who have spent time in India. Several of them have lived in this country from birth or childhood. Others have traveled extensively in India and have recorded their impressions here in verse. *KB* may not always subscribe to these impressions. But we publish such radically diverse pictures of our country in the hope that our readers will be interested to see ourselves as others see us.

Beginning with this volume *Kavya Bharati* will now be packaged in a brand-new wrapper, in response to several readers who have requested a change from our more traditional “dust catcher”. We are indebted to Ravindran Solomon for designing and helping to produce our new wrapper.

*KB* continues efforts to bring its issues back to schedule. We regret the belatedness of this issue, which has produced the anachronism of a poem welcoming the 2002 New Year in our 2001 Volume. That New Year’s poem, however, voices the hopes of so many readers for the year ahead that we have included it here despite the chronological contradictions!

**KAVYA BHARATI**  
*a review of Indian Poetry*

Number 13, 2001

**CONTENTS**

**Poetry**

1	New Year's Day 2002 (Poem)	Rebecca S. Erb
2	Poems	Cyril Dabydeen
9	Poems	Ranjit Hoskote
13	From <i>Into Grander Space</i> (Poem)	Sonjoy Dutta-Roy
23	Poems	Smita Tewari
32	Poems	John Alter
41	Poems	Keshav Malik
45	Poems	Jhaffur Khan Azad Darakth
47	Poems	Hoshang Merchant
53	Poems	Darshan Singh Maini
56	Poems	E. Lynne Harris
59	Poems	Pratap Chahal
63	Poems	Durga Prasad Panda
66	Poems	Christopher Levenson
69	A High-tech Heartbreak (Poem)	T. M. Raghuram

**Translation**

73	Poems	Jagannath Prasad Das
83	Poems	Sitakant Mahapatra
90	Poems	K. Siva Reddy
93	Poems	Asharaju
95	The Nowhere House (Poem)	Prem Kumar
97	Sufi Poetry	

100 Poems	Paavannan
105 The Boy Who Sold Butterflies (Poem)	Na Muthukumar

### **Essays, Reviews, Interviews**

109 The Language of Indian Poetry in English	Tabish Khair
118 The Literary Text: A Threatened Species?	Krishna Rayan
123 Ramanujan's Remains	John Oliver Perry
131 Mahapatra, Paniker and Others	Krishna Rayan
146 Effects of Distance: Hoskote's Dreamscapes	K. Narayana Chandran
155 Home Remedies	E. V. Ramakrishnan
160 Bibhu Padhi: Voice of the Threshold?	Lingaraj Mishra
165 Five Journals	Prema Nandakumar
171 Roughhewn Poetry: Some Modern Voices	P. Radhika
182 Rethinking Indian Poetry in English	K. Srilata
189 "Silence" Broken: Jayanta Mahapatra's <i>Bare Face</i>	Sanjukta Dasgupta
194 The Poet at Work: Interviews with Hoshang Merchant	Susheel Kumar Sharma

### **General**

205 Contributors
209 Submissions

**REBECCA S. ERB**  
NEW YEAR'S DAY 2002

Sun-drenched Arctic chill  
Greets this new year,  
Its slate swept clean  
Across the landscape  
of our lives.

Midnight's pristine starbursts  
Rise from the watery bay,  
Touching that full moon expanse,  
Waking the senses  
To the old year's transforming:  
2002 is birthed.

Last year's losses remain.  
Those tragic events  
Etched in hoarfrost  
On the windows of our souls.

Today, our losses  
Wear a new cloak,  
Ermine white--  
Bringing warmth  
To our wintry grief,  
Fillings its crevices  
With epiphanies of light.

**CYRIL DABYDEEN**  
**FLYING FROM FRANKFURT TO BOMBAY**

There's anxiety in me, as I'm going to India for the first time  
with stories, myths and legends intact--  
all in the books I'd read.

And my own origin I contemplate,  
my Indianness no less, you bet.

In the plane I sit next to the handsome youth from Mumbai,  
who's returning home from London after attending  
a commercial college. A thick bangle decorates his wrist,  
his arms well rounded. His jacket looks easy on him  
--all in the latest style. And his father's a millionaire, isn't he?  
He nods, quietly agrees.

He fiddles with his passport on the small table  
pulled out before him as the Lufthansa stewardess  
does her rounds. Swarthy-hued she is, and she tells him to fasten  
his seat belt, please. "Pull up the table," she adds--  
Soft spoken as she is.

"No, wait awhile," he says. Then, "Are you from India?"  
She smiles with professional ease.

"Pull up your table, please."

He still fiddles with his passport, while I consider origins...  
far overhead, clouds moving by.

Now I express anxiety about going to India for the first time.  
Where do I come from?

He is surprised at my birth-place.

I tell him I expect to be greeted with a billboard  
with my name on it, written in large letters.

He smiles and says he will help me find my way.  
The stewardess walks by...maybe also noting my anxiety.

The air steamy, humid at the airport in Mumbai.  
I go through the Immigration lineup. Customs next,

all quickly done. I look out for the billboard  
With my name on it. I see a hundred signs, and everyone jostling.  
People everywhere at two in the morning.

My travelling companion, the same youth, says:  
“We’re finally in India,” as he glances around  
for the stewardess next--  
all with his own welcoming smile.

### FOR A STUDENT AT THE DELHI COLLEGE OF ARTS AND COMMERCE

Who does he think he is? He comes here and talks of  
places: the Caribbean and South America where he was born,  
or yet believing all worlds never far apart.

I am now keen on Pink Floyd;  
and let other British and American rock stars  
come to mind. I know my place  
in a world full of hope. All ways of crossing an ocean  
in a dhow: it’s not just tea or poverty, my going  
beyond the TV image, or simply imagining a future  
far more than a bearded astrologer could tell,  
or listening to mournful notes on the harmonium  
and sitar--the same old man hunched in a corner  
in a sidewalk in Delhi.

*Listen well!*

My poverty, your richness. My caste system, too--  
dare I tell...Brahminic days coming to an end?  
The Dalits are now making loud noises: the Parliament  
echoes with boasts, or mere flattery.

The 60 million tribespeople coming from the mountains, too;  
and do you know the Himalayas are still growing?  
How I’ve longed to travel, recreating Marco Polo--

not just John Cabot heading for the Newfoundland coast  
as the *Titanic* founders, a still-moving iceberg  
being more than magic realism. A rock speaking from the crevices.  
Real sirens, if you must know!

History of the East India Company in Calcutta yet in my ken,  
or a Viceroy in Shimla trying to avoid the summer heat,  
while Gandhi talked about a country with religious fervour  
despite an imminent partition because of intolerance  
between Hindus and Muslims.

At last I sense a nuclear-bomb hysteria: Kashmir  
yet making strides, or again a Pakistan military government's threat.  
Try telling me of that, too, instead of about Blackbeard because  
of the seductive Caribbean.

Indeed a rock n'roll revolution everywhere, I hear.  
An upstart, it's my turn to bring you other truths,  
despite Kipling and his unbelievable Mowgli--  
or the jewel-in-the-crown test once again,  
still more than music of the spheres  
while you simply want to sustain a tryst with destiny  
with Nehru and other Congress Party stalwarts  
who faced greater odds than I could ever imagine--  
as I try to come to grips with your Canadian ways,  
like exchanges of our common heritage, really.

### RAJASTHANI/MAHARANI

You, beggar girl,  
you who stand before me  
as I am here sitting in a rickshaw--  
and the sessions have ended at the University  
of Rajasthan, in this desert province, in Jaipur.

Gotten out of the museum with ancient Rajput faces  
still with me, as I note your arresting stare--  
    you not more than seven or eight, smallish,  
yet determined with your shape or style,  
personality being all with time long ago--  
    your hands now outstretched.

And my denial (in a fashion) studying your  
centuries' fold of skin, dark-hued, pale,  
    eyes large, and truly hollow--  
as I yet address you as a *Maharani*,  
    wishing you to reclaim what's only lost  
because of ancestry deep in us--  
    and what I must also learn to reclaim  
despite poverty, or a failing tradition.

    "I am not maharani," you say, eloquent--  
in your style; and maybe you know about an elusive  
destiny, or inkling of a maharajah's pretence long ago,  
    yet keep asking for alms.

A crowd is now around us, other children moving about,  
and I wish to give you a few rupees,  
    or a mere *paisa*, despite others shouting,  
"Don't give her anything. You will only spoil them.  
They will just keep asking for more!"  
    *My own wanting, Indian-style.*

## OTHER WARS

### I

In Ottawa, the nation's capital where I have lived  
for centuries, as I've come to believe;

Slabs of stone and concrete amidst the gothic,  
as I consider myself a fixture, sort of,

Seeking after fortunes, if you must know:  
gifts really in the market area. Where else?

Now a time of war as I balk at tragedy,  
with everything coming down on my side.

In my bunker or hideout moving along the street,  
a gulf of silence, or distances no less.

## II

Tourists, shoppers or hawkers all, as a wayside beggar  
suddenly demands money from a poor sucker like me.

Do you have a quarter? he says, taking me by surprise.  
Coming to my senses I mutely reply, "No."

He quickly snarls, "Do you have a camel instead?"  
I walk on, in this Egypt or Kalahari in me no less,

Being in my capital city for ages to come--  
because of places I must keep carrying in me like emblems

All in one life-time, or what's yet forgotten because of concrete,  
Slabs of stone, all acting on the self...in one glance back--

And said a government official later, "You should have laughed!"  
Humour being never what I contemplate best at such times,

As I remind myself, my style akin to importuning others  
Walking around, the Gulf War truly making memory longest.

## REMEMBER THE LIGHT

### I

You forsook the sun  
and the planets  
came out of their blaze...

stars brittle, whole moons  
diminishing without dullness.

I take you with all  
the old dreams gone astray,

twisting and desiring--  
to be with you.

Lips puckered, wishing  
to laugh with you,  
to make amends.

What is yet to come?

A meteor is what I think about  
all there will be--  
over time.

### II

Wishing you familiar strides,  
I turn upside down.

Longing for the bough body,  
exchanging fruits  
    heart and lungs.

Resinous time again,  
as you come to grips

with half a heart,  
sand in my eyes;  
the obelisk...  
lengthens over time.

Wishing to speak with you  
with a leaden tongue,

leaves falling,  
becoming vowels,  
the wind consonants.

The lungs' own fire--  
my solid breath or salted  
brow, a crescent moon

keeps burning  
in solid light.

III

Becoming a bag body,  
I'm febrile again,  
aloof,  
but rampant,  
galloping hooves.

Solid wedges,  
my skin,  
a rainbow really.

Desire is all  
in an ice-time...  
freezing at the limits.

A liana--  
with cactus flower,  
sweltering grace.

## RANJIT HOSKOTE

### TRYING TO FLY

For Chandra Hoskote

I wish to stand on the flat roof of a house  
in Bilaspur or Borda:  
places picked from a lime-yellow map  
for their sound. They sound to me like places  
where palm fronds still wave, a pond still crowns  
a hill with mirrored sun.

To stand on the flat roof of a house, trying to fly,  
is to court ambition: this year I shall be  
the king who winters in exile, sails back as a kite  
sprinkling the land with a ferment of flowers.  
This year, I shall be spring's revanchist kite  
come home blazoned with chrysanthemums.

In midflight, telegraph wires trip me up.  
My streamers rip and flutter on the poles;  
my even course in tailspin, I am impaled  
on the nose of a cardboard MiG taking off  
from an Air Force hoarding. Gravity and a pair  
of snapped vanes: a dirge for my essay at aeronautics.

\* \* \*

You can botch an effort, or risk little  
by sitting in a tower room, counting the passing flights  
on strands of golden hair.  
You can wait for the dull clouds to lift,  
for the tide to come crashing at the drugged moon's command  
through the high windows.

\* \* \*

Having been spectacled son to horse-borne conquerors  
and sceptred father to wastrel sons come home  
with messages of peace and squandered kingdoms,  
I can do with a back broad enough to take  
an objective view  
of the sun's daily scourging, the tramp of soldiers' boots,  
the pelting tropical rain, the drought from the blue.

Broad in the heat, a back that is a continent  
whose jaguar hungers beat hidden, or prowls  
its lime terrain, do not abate.  
Come now, history is names. Yet finally the name  
hungers for the formal indifference of scale:

I wish to *be* the flat roof of a house

## SMALL COUNTRIES For Maria van Daalen

You came from a flatland held in trust  
by dykes against a brooding sea

to this open plain where blizzards drive  
the snug, wood-slatted houses

before them like ninepins.  
When you go back in spring

will Carnival have won the war, or Lent?  
Would the peasants be dancing to the tin-pan tune

Of obscene proverbs, smashing pitchers of ale  
at long tables, toasting the bride?

Or will the blue china reflect the low horizon  
and wait for the laconic painter to fix

the soldier in his red coat, the laughing girl  
against a map torn up by vengeful duchies?

And will the lens-grinder be whistling a madrigal  
as he polishes the universe into a rose?

These are small countries, our hearts:  
in them, women read letters or tell their rosaries

by open windows framed in frost,  
waiting for the poplars to grow.

## WOLF

A wolf snarls in the sumac-striped darkness.  
Across the snow-driven prairie that is  
a famine of trust, a man  
steps from his cabin, cocks his rifle  
in reply. His boots sink and the ice  
swirls around him. The wolf  
wades into his eyes.

Teach me to cleave the steel-jawed pain,  
take my words, give me memories of smell:  
charred pine, first blooded fur, dying elk.  
Time gets the hunter in the end,  
freezes his bones among the stars  
but you will never be flouted,  
a trapper's crippled exhibit:

a fanged hunger, you will survive.

## TRAILING THE HORSE-TAMER

I stumble into a widowed wood  
where trees born of women  
have suffered the knives of drought.

Flinty comets score points across a blacked-out sky,  
their bird-of-paradise tails streaming  
behind them.

From the steaming belly of the sacrificed ox  
the augur pulls the looped entrails:  
at their end dangles

the future of the tribe.

\* \* \*

Horse-tamer, I have followed you from the chalky cliffs  
to these lakes gridlocked  
in ice.

I have crossed the pyramids of skulls you built,  
eaten mulberries among the lean-hipped corpses  
of fishermen driven south by winter.

Now I flag. I feel my days  
with the nectared resin that bears snatch  
from claw-punctured maples,  
warm myself in pungent furs.

Horse-tamer, ancestor, kindler of fire,  
fix my bridle, tighten my saddle-girths,  
sharpen the frost-bitten stumps of my language.

**SONJOY DUTTA-ROY**  
From *INTO GRANDER SPACE*

*Into Grander Space* is a long poem with two parallel narratives running. In one, a father speaks to his adolescent son, carrying his own earlier selves into the narrative, trying to come to terms with conflicting emotions (passion, jealousy, violence, solitude, loneliness...). In the other narrative Vyasa speaks to Janmejaya, who wants to know about his ancestors and what led to the great war. The following excerpt is from the first narrative.

First, you became lonely,  
disturbed by your inability either  
to follow the beaten track,  
or blaze out a new trail.  
You slowed down, lagging far behind  
till the crowd vanished beyond  
the far turn ahead.  
God! How you cried bitter tears  
as you were forgotten,  
blurred into anonymity,  
having failed to make the required grades,  
not knowing the clever ways of tilting  
the scales in your favour.  
Far away you heard the applauses  
with a catch in you throat.  
Then you fell asleep,  
a deep long sleep,  
where you dreamt up  
a neglected power and a lost glory  
lying dormant like a seed.  
It moved into you quietly,  
unobserved, like the dawn  
softly glowing on your face  
as you woke up.

And you trod the deserted trail,  
vanishing unnoticed into the blue.  
You came to like this feeling  
of being able to become nothing,  
of fading into insignificance.  
You gradually mastered  
the magic act of the invisible man,  
as you keenly observed  
undisturbed, for you were unobserved,  
the pompous clowning and tragic gestures.  
Later you would practise  
in front of the mirror,  
slowly perfect your masks  
for all seasons and situations,  
laugh your guts out at the seriousness  
of your enterprise  
and unleash your tricks on  
an unsuspecting world.  
Words, clay, paint, stone,  
you would not spare anything,  
leave no stones unturned  
as you created a perplexing barricade  
around your weak vulnerable core.

The slow and steady tortoise  
tired after a race,  
tucked his weary head  
into the subterranean comfort  
of his subtly patterned shell  
and disguised as an exquisite rock  
refused to stir  
till the fox and the hare  
had moved beyond  
the hill further north.  
Then he quietly reclaimed his land,  
and with determined steps  
moved to the patch of green

where the leaves waved like victory flags,  
disappearing into the undergrowth.  
Where will he go from here?  
That is another story  
and I have yet to discover the end.

And of course you know  
about that beautiful swan  
who swims alone,  
proud, head held high,  
staying mysteriously away,  
enigmatic, in proud isolation.  
Scorned as ugly, spurned by companions,  
he chose the sunset as friend,  
flew towards it  
at an impossible angle  
till its departing glow  
filled his body with a grace  
a curve and an arc.  
At dawn you saw him  
there far away, gloriously different,  
remote and inaccessible,  
gliding over the reflections of sunlight  
soundlessly.

The spider spins his cunning web,  
intricate designs catching the dew drops  
that split the rays of the sun and the moon  
as they filter through its subtle gaps  
hiding the fine film of threads,  
clever traps for the unwary moth and the wandering fly  
drunk with the intoxicating dance of light and shadow,  
hypnotised by the geometric patterns  
as they whirl around their crazy erratic flights.  
It is art with a purpose, you say,  
and a sly, insidious one.  
But what about that spider,

who, refusing to spin  
run off the mill cobwebs,  
is known to have spun web after web,  
useless, priceless gems,  
each more delicate than the other.  
Another one of my parables,  
you say. As futile as the webs....

-----

Years later, plucking wild strawberries  
in a Shropshire hillside,  
your mind will roll down the green pine slopes  
in a quick rewind, passing milestone cottages  
and gates with year dates sliding backwards  
in a blur, faster, faster,  
till it slows and comes to a standstill  
in the ruins of an ancient brewery  
overgrown with blueberry and gooseberry shrubs  
surrounded by a dense oak forest.  
Your mouth full of berries,  
hands sticky with their juice  
you will climb up the hill  
your ears alert for the sound of water  
till you come to the clearing,  
hidden by the tall deodars.  
You will rush through the gap,  
dip your face and hands into the sweet, clear,  
swiftly flowing water, blurring your image  
till you come to the pool  
where for a brief space and time,  
the waters slow down, move in ritual circles,  
and you see a face, long forgotten,  
shocked in recognition,  
before it tumbles in a cataract  
down its steep mountain stream.

Some months prior to this,  
driving up Highland road, Baton Rouge,  
you stopped at this junction  
displaying a divorce sale.  
A cartoon of a heart, torn into two,  
dripping blood and tears,  
makes light of a tragedy  
that would haunt the furniture  
wherever they go.  
Or perhaps it is not that serious  
after all, and you make too much  
out of it. And you think back  
about the baggage of collected relationships  
that you have accumulated over the years,  
filled with little, precious mementos  
that you could not discard.  
You thought you had left them miles away,  
in different lands, different times,  
and started from scratch every time,  
with a new empty suitcase.  
As you filled your freshly painted vacant house  
they crept in stealthily, unnoticed,  
through unguarded nooks and corners  
and assumed their legitimate places  
in arrogant defiance of all your efforts  
of banishing them....

-----

Cross-legged at the sand island  
at the centre of the river  
as the waters swiftly flow  
under the connecting pontoon bridge  
your eyes closed  
you see the burning pyres  
far out on that other shore.

“Oh my teeming millions  
flocking this shore  
under the influence  
of the moon’s magical shapes,  
from Makar Sankranti to Shiv Ratri,  
reflected in the flowing current  
swirling with myths,  
electric and alive,  
how can I reach out to you  
lost, alienated, disconnected  
from my own past.  
Snared in history  
my own myths elude me.  
Trapped in rituals  
you speak in another tongue  
and science is magic to you.  
So how do we relate.  
Yet you take me in your boat,  
ferry me across  
and over an earthen cup of tea  
tell me of your village  
far away”.

Though your lives touch  
you engage the gear in your car  
move back to the city,  
the wheels turn full circles,  
round and round the daily rounds.

It has been a long journey  
that began, you have been told,  
(memory fades and trails off here)  
from the other side of a river  
that still flows in your blood,  
across the border and the barricades,  
in a westward migration.

Somewhere the waters of the Thames  
flooded into your land  
in an eastward journey  
through the undercurrent of sea routes  
swallowing the rich soil  
and carrying it back in the return artery  
in a mad dance of inundation.  
But quietly the waters merged  
and the thick alluvium of receding rivers  
quicken a renaissance  
where the fertile depths of an ancient earth  
responded to the touch of a strange water  
born in a far off land  
and borne through the centuries  
for this destined embrace.

As you sit on the turret  
of this Department of English Studies  
of the Oxford of the East,  
with “Quot Rami Tot Arbores”  
written under the shade  
of the spreading Banyan tree,  
you realise how revolutionary  
some fated encounters can be.  
When two lives touch,  
two cultures intersect,  
blend and coalesce,  
none can remain the same.

How far do the germinal ideas carry?  
The ghost of a bearded poet  
looks you in the eye,  
deeply introspective,  
and his songs still stir your soul.  
A schoolboy elocutes  
a famous speech delivered  
to an entranced Chicago audience

in impeccable English.  
You examine your bifurcated tongue  
as Yeats and Eliot stare at you  
from your table top  
and you receive an email  
from a British friend  
immersed in the intricate sweetness  
of the Bengali tongue.  
You realise  
that your Bengali  
gushes into your English,  
seeking perfect consummation.

The sap from the root of the original tree  
surges into the graft  
merging perfectly as the scars heal  
and fresh green leaves  
flutter around the hybrid flower....

-----

Thinking back, you will decode the veiled script  
encoded in disaster.  
The land hides its system of nerves  
from the skimming eye of the tourist.  
As you bounce from one  
“Hello, how are you doing today?”  
to another, the polite smiles  
fade into an airy fairy nothing,  
the key to the control room eludes you  
and you grope for the pulse of this land.  
The colour of your skin,  
neither black nor white,  
places you in no man’s land  
as you are confused for a Hispanic  
and a Red Indian taps you on the back,

“Hey, Columbus went looking for you  
and found us”,  
and you meditate on the wild beauty  
of a lonely American Bison  
dreaming of the thunder of hooves  
over vast sloping plains,  
as you converse with your computer  
in the closed confines of your perfect working room.  
After five days of uninterrupted work  
you emerge bleary eyed  
into the weekend sunshine  
and the reckless madness  
of a wild Friday night  
hits you bang in the solar plexus.  
An alien land nurses you,  
as you lie gasping for breath,  
unfolding its intimate recesses,  
holding you in the warm depths  
of its life support systems  
as the private doors open  
to let you into the secret corridors.  
The stiff, robotlike, mechanical movements  
relax and start flowing  
as human faces emerge  
from behind the white masks  
and your frozen, homesick heart melts  
to the soft embrace of a tender passion  
as life returns to your chilled limbs.

Your vulnerability at calamity time  
opens you to relationships  
that have a strange intensity.  
A close knit family of friends  
grows around you,  
gravitating through an inexplicable logic  
that you only half perceived then.  
What do they seek in you,

or you in them,  
to make them return  
long after the crisis is over?  
Scattered over the globe  
they come back to you now  
through cyberspace  
from dot com addresses  
beyond the constraints of geography.  
From behind the standardised  
electronic format,  
Times New Roman, font size twelve,  
faces emerge, some lost, some found,  
some retained,  
rearranging themselves in your inbox  
in an ever changing order of preference.  
But somewhere in the grey cells  
an older story remains,  
persistently harping a relentless tune,  
goading you to sing it  
to the mutable beat of a changed time.  
Now that you come to think of it  
none of you had gone  
to grow your roots there.  
You were all in various stages of transit  
and sought surrogate relationships  
to fill the aching vacancies  
that gnawed within.

**SMITA TEWARI**  
**HOME-COMING**

I asked the heavens, I asked the winds  
about you and your whereabouts,

They had no answers; and my queries  
began to appear meaningless,  
even to myself.

When you appeared, suddenly, out of the blue,  
returned to me, to the folds of our love,  
returning to me what had seemed to have been lost forever.

Returning to me, my life.

And yet I was waiting, jerked out of my reverie,  
waiting for a nowhere to go, for a no one to arrive.

Despairing at times, at times joyous,  
despairing at your weariness, joyous that, now, you were only  
a phone-call away.

Promising to give you your space,  
your freedom and your home.

**STREET-SMART**

I wish I could be street-smart, like others,  
neither go overboard with joy, or feel overwhelmed,  
nor slide into a bottom-less pit, an abysmal void,  
they would, then, stop considering me a manic-depressive.

I wish I could be in with the times, in  
with corruption and bribery,  
taking everything in my stride,  
with a put-on composure, a stifled yawn.

I wish I could go around with mobiles destroying  
the equilibrium,  
pretend to be a computer-literate,  
familiar with the latest software,  
in with the games people play, politicians work out.

I wish, too, that I could de-sensitise myself  
to all that hurts all around me,  
and I could numb myself to pain,  
to the insensitivity of go-getters, of sycophants.

I wish I could be just street-smart.

## LOYALTY

Ideas, concepts, value systems  
we learnt and grew up with,  
have all been shelved;  
for now, there is no place for loyalty.

And bereft of so much  
we continue to survive,  
for now, we have learnt to live with things,  
not persons.

We have learnt to live, to overlook,  
to resign ourselves to a fate  
where there is neither love,  
nor the cool breeze of the mountains we loved  
nor place for emotion.

Except, perhaps, in the happy welcoming bark of a dog,  
its unconditional love, its need for you,  
where the feeling of unwantedness, of alienation  
Disappears in the wake of

Loyalty.

## UNFAZED

Was it a dream, or a vision, or both  
for awakened out of sleep,  
the silence seemed too unreal, the darkness too soft  
for a dawn, drawn out of its nocturnal shell, to be born.

No matter where inner strength or resilience resided,  
unknown territory remained to be explored,  
with taps running dry, queues unbroken,  
harmony, without further calamity, becoming elusive.

Trust in the new millennium, amidst deteriorating conditions,  
of faces unfazed, believing in their own promises,  
yearning for a something before it becomes soul-destroying,  
like reaching out to touch the sky.

Having hours turning into longer days,  
an intolerable wait for a phantom to emerge out of somewhere,  
which would make everything worthwhile, meaningful,  
breaking the ennui, the boredom, the indifference.

## THEN AND NOW

Walk with me, or walk past me,  
In your body language lies your indifference,  
Through your eyes, I sense an entire world.

Strangers we were even then,  
When golden flowers nodded their heads  
In fields green with envy.

There's now no escaping our pasts,  
Even when we are living the present,  
Or looking towards a different future.

We had stood sharing a sense of one-ness,  
Weaving patterns out of our separate lives,  
Amidst winds we were unable to hold.

A tide was breaking on to our shores,  
With the certainty of the one promise,  
The one promise we failed to keep.

The gold flowers continue to nod their heads,  
The winds remain uncaptured, free,  
So was it then, so is it now.

## HOME REVISITED

The locale is the same, this had been my home,  
for over a quarter of a century.

But now there was no warmth exuding from the surroundings,  
no familiar smells, no soft breath from old walls;

Where had the chandeliers, decked with little lamps, from  
high ceiling, the Persian carpets' delicately woven work gone?

Where had disappeared the ducks around our little pond,  
the mango groves, the guava orchards, the neem trees?

I wondered as I gazed at the beautiful grounds,  
even as I stood, a stranger, to my old home.

The tears held back on their own,  
words remained unspoken, stifled,

As family members, friends came and went,  
with an indifference which hurt more than the house.

### ORBIT

Do not move out of my orbit, my radius,  
A little movement, and I shall be lost;  
You do not have to come closer,  
Just remain where you are.

I need you there, to be in touch with myself,  
To reach within me, to feel my still centre,  
To know nothing has changed between us,  
In an ever-changing world ranging deep within me.

With so much around to deal with, to discover,  
Coping becomes that much easier,  
I can mull over my failures and my weaknesses,  
Just with you, waiting round the corner.

I was weaving a basket of creepers,  
To carry flowers to the feet of your God,  
Asking him to make you happy,  
Just when you turned away.

At some crossroads, somewhere, somehow,  
I hope to have a glimpse of you again,  
To return to me my faith, my hope,  
Of you, on my orbit, that never fades away.

## IN SEARCH OF HOPE

The night remains with us, nothing is born  
out of its nocturnal shell, neither hope, nor time;

The moon hangs around like a stranger to the skies,  
to the stars, to the loveliness of the night;

There is nothing, except its beauty, to keep us here,  
nothing to bring us back again to the wilderness;

Not even emotion or landscape lures us anymore,  
there is a wish for emotions to last longer like trees;

On the banks of a time-less, sparkling river,  
struggling to come to life, like the magic of the waves;

In an unfocused, unguarded moment,  
when silence becomes more eloquent than words;

When we are numbed by an unconsciousness,  
an unawareness of the meaninglessness of things;

We shall, perhaps, then find a mirage, a hope,  
a space within the fragility of the night.

## A VOICE IN THE MIND

From across the bridge, a voice, close to touch,  
came across a clear blue sky spread over  
the city in which I live.

From across the mirror on the wall,  
drifted across to me a whisper  
close to the isolated reflection, to the desolation.

Distanced from an ideal world, a white coast,  
without a childhood or a future,  
knowing that the present too shall pass,

Into a wind that shall blow the rain away,  
blow the dust and the leaves away,  
and I shall have borne up with the summer heat.

I heard the voice again today, it seemed  
so similar to mine, so close to my heart,  
left me wondering if it was really not my own.

It continues to linger around, repeating itself  
from time to time, eluding me its identity,  
but haunting me with its fervour, its urgency.

It's only in my room, the other rooms shut it out,  
the world goes on the same outside, too,  
as the trees stand, grow green, brown, then bare.

## UNCERTAINTIES

I can only take everything in small doses,  
The darkness of the night closes in upon me,  
Throwing its long dark shadows all round.

The need to break away, even from myself,  
The urge to be re-born, as another,  
Who does not live in a world of lingering shadows.

Steeped in uncertainties, a soft prayer escapes me,  
Towards a hope somewhere, for someone to listen perhaps,  
And help me come to terms with myself.

Finally, amidst hopes and uncertainties,  
Something emerges against the moon's face,  
Out of this strange decay, out of these sunk silences.

Walking on the morning dew of last night's grass,  
Our usual thoughts untouched by the day,  
With no fierce imaginings, no suspended fears,

I moved over the wheels of time, wondering  
Why the uncertainties were so crucial to the  
Understanding of human tenderness, in the iron of our lives.

### A SILENT SPACE

In a silent space, I weave a private world of my own,  
a protective cocoon.

An instinctive, unknowing denial of a world  
which threatens to engulf me.

An infinite ennui, a natural progression away from  
the naivete of childhood.

In the hours of isolation, I give vent to my feelings,  
to my fears, fantasies and creativity.

Languishing in my alone-ness at some point  
when the world takes over,

I have yearned for these moments of space,  
of these hours hanging heavily around.

Wanting to be one with myself, away from it all,  
away from the meaningless lies.

Whatever else, the thought or the idea remains unborn,  
inspiring me to live on.

For someday, a larger vision may emerge before me,  
and add to life that special flavour.

Even to be able to discover a nuance or a beautiful cadence,  
a silent space is needed;

A space in which one can breathe freely.

## MIND OVER MATTER

But surely there is a victory of mind over matter,  
and yet a weeding out of the irrelevant remains,

Of the human need to belong, when I lost mine,  
I turned my back on the world and all it stood for;

On the demons within me, trying to subjugate, to repress,  
on the perils and pleasures that attended on me.

In a compelling manner, I held control,  
losing a part of me with both hands;

Through biodata and xerox machines,  
I was living my life, 'going places';

Not even stopping, for a while, to take a break,  
to seek within for answers waiting to be heard;

Steadily and surely, mind gained over matter,  
leaving me feelingless, absent and hollow.

**JOHN ALTER**  
**THE EARLY BIRD/SINGS**

1.

The early bird  
sings  
in a language you and I once knew  
an urgent song. There is nothing  
absurd in the idea that once Orpheus heard  
such exaltation he turned his heavy head  
to find her gaze turning away already.  
We lie in bed as if it were the grave.  
The early bird sings as if it were somehow  
brave to expect that the sun will rise  
& not just dumb luck or--in her song there  
is such sweetness!--a surprise so rare words  
fail. Frail,  
absurd, the early bird sings.

2.

A rainbow rose  
from the rock we later  
swim to, blessing a stormy day as poetry  
does prose. Hate  
dwindles. We know each other as the pine  
tree and birch tree know the storm as something  
like their fate & recline in its arms and  
sing with a glad voice and from our  
understanding there on the blessed rock  
mercy erupts like a rainbow. New,  
miraculous as a flower... In your sweet small arms  
you rock me then. It is all the rainbow can do  
to rival your charms, blessing a stormy day  
as poetry does prose.

SUNSET, SOME SONNETS

1.

I walk out onto the roof  
facing where the sunset prepared  
its proof that if nobody truly  
cared it would not care but, un-  
ruly a little inclined to  
fun a little, would obey the only  
true law of its nature & give some comfort  
to the lonely man who walks out onto the roof  
facing the port the harbour eager  
for proof that you are there  
across what love makes a meagre  
pond. Where you are his  
heart is. No despondent sonnet departs  
today, headed your way.

2.

With a small flourish he displays  
a map which has on it the two continents.  
The rays of the moon, he argues to himself,  
cannot prevent

that distance which divides us but does not  
equally grow dim with some kind of lunatic displeasure.  
Rather, like a perfect knot  
it ties us to each other and in that measure

shapes a globe on which, with a small  
flourish, he displays two continents & knows  
that, whatever may befall them tonight, the full moon  
grows

more real as he imagines her on the other side  
watching it rise, riding its tide.

THE PRAYER SONNETS

1.

Our father  
who art in heaven  
why do you bother with us at all?  
Our leaven has lost its savour.  
We have fallen so flat we cannot lift  
our heads . We have no  
flavour. Sifted we are the tiny stones  
the chef rejects. If we wake up at all  
it is to hear around us discontented  
swine. Our father who art in heaven why  
do you call us then? Why do you pitch your  
tent here beside us? Why do I hear at  
my door a knock both firm & gentle? flat  
on my face feel forgiveness in your touch?

2.

In your touch  
there is forgiveness as on the lake  
the wind dances or (such is the music  
your mercy makes) a merganser brings  
her brood to frolic in our cove.  
Your mercy rings true,  
    like that, it drove through  
today like the prow of the best  
canoe,       firm gentle, it  
confessed such jubilation as when  
in her room sitting alone the lover hears  
him knock & rises to greet him then  
joy banishing each of her fears...  
There is such forgiveness in your touch.

3.

Prayer is not unlike  
the way the full moon rises across

the lake or how our youngest learned to ride  
her bicycle. The shadow of an earlier event  
falls

like the tide. There is nothing I can do  
to prevent her from having at least one minor  
accident or to hold back the moon as she  
crosses the lake from east to west.  
Prayer then is

clearly blest when it rises across  
the lake, full, luminous or, awkward at first  
masters at last the challenges of  
locomotion.

4.  
Prayer like the wind  
like the weather crosses  
even when we have sinned  
& helps us cut our losses,

unruly unpredict-  
able blowing away  
the edicts of righteousness,  
having its say

in spite of whatever the self  
in its business imagines  
it has carefully stacked on the shelf  
in its shelter--all the graven

images! Prayer like the weather  
is often a close shave.

5.  
Prayer is not unlike a kind of spying  
on us the universe does a benevolent

prying in our affairs if you will & is not  
meant to do harm (although its presence

is fraught with danger  
to all the attempted security measures  
taken, the pretense of control presented).  
It takes, if you like the story, the manger

into account as a source of power,  
it disregards many of our pleasures,  
can appear demented, prefers a flower  
to a, let's say to be contemporary,

personal computer. Its contempt  
does not refute but merely overlooks.

## A DAY/PASSES

A day  
passes  
through us the way  
sunlight through glass refracted

grace in your touch  
enacted            changes  
how much we can see, as grace  
rearranges

me when you touch me  
when the light of your fingers refracts me  
there is then all the beauty we require  
. We

are how the day passes  
through as sunlight through clear glass.

2.

Small bass  
explore our toes.  
The glacial lake is clear as glass.  
Nobody knows

how old this boulder  
on which we rest is. Under  
our feet it is like the shoulder  
of a kind giant. I wonder

if he knows at all  
who these aging strangers are.  
We fall in love, he  
lies in wait, watching the night stars.

The honey  
moon rises. You and I and the moon: we three.

3.

I sit in the little house  
pants down around my knees  
not feeling much like a louse & read  
what I please until turning the page

I look up and it is like a creed how  
not showing their age at all my grandparents  
are peeking over a boulder now  
here as if this moment had been carefully planned

decades ago.  
They are not spies.  
I know them by name.  
We need no disguise or excuse

but face each other here  
in this simple place. Today, so much is clear.

4.

A glad company of loons invade  
our cove.

Jove's forehead could produce  
No lovelier sight. For a long hour they play  
together, diving, spreading their wings, spruce

up, clucking encouragement. It is their right  
as it is the right of boulders, birch trees  
low-flying storm clouds, frolicking children  
to please us

who sit, on forgiveness' porch, rocking.  
A glad company of loons--their warble  
cleanses our hearing, enlightens our talking  
it is  
more noble

& humorous richer in real news  
: the surest cure for the "woke up this morning  
angry at the world"  
blues...

5.

I woke up this morning  
reached for my water shoes.  
Without a warning  
the day relieved me of my ordinary blues.

You were there.  
First light illuminates water lily  
mountain range, the bare beauty of your back.  
I feel for a moment, silly  
like a school boy on track for his first kiss

until  
like celestial clockwork the loons prevail

& bliss steps over the sill  
curing what ails me.

If this hyperbole disturbs you  
my darling, you know what you can do.

6.  
You do it. You know you do.  
Together we enter the realm of dark water.  
Our day is like a canoe in its shapeliness  
today it is like a daughter in its loveliness

how brightly it steps  
across the windowsill of our inhibition.  
Obstreperous at times, to be sure  
& well beyond any prohibition we might insist

upon today sweeps us  
off our feet and out beyond the safe snug harbour.  
It is the bus of bliss, today is  
it is the barber of pure joy.

If this hyperbole disturbs you  
my darling, you know what you can do.

7.  
Well beyond any prohibition we might insist  
upon today sweeps us off our feet. I cannot  
resist the combination of granite & water.  
Knots unravel,

we swim through the waves of today  
like porpoises we soar through the currents of  
today like eagles...  
Above us, summer sky storms

below us, granite. Caught between  
rock & the loon's cove we do not then  
admit defeat. The moon's sheen  
on water: today writes with a pen

of disappearing ink.  
Alone in the dark I try to think.

## ORPHEUS

Waxing poetic  
He slid  
downhill. Crash!  
Prose  
grabs him by the  
ankles, trips  
him up,  
he falls  
head over heels down  
love's sudden  
cliff, & gone he is  
gone into grace  
gone.  
Where he was now  
some monument  
stands, dumb-  
founded  
dabbled with bird  
shit, rapidly  
aging.  
So, all that said, a  
flute plays, dust  
slowly settles.  
Let him go. Let him go.

**KESHAV MALIK**  
**OCCUPANT**

I see in your eyes the spokes  
of a wheel revolve!--  
what are they, where heading?--  
And I see in a corner of one eye  
a light peep in!--  
how come, what its source--  
what are these things?

Your eyes slowly shift  
from side to side,  
and still those spokes revolve--  
tell, if your head swims?

Take off those specs,  
I would I looked into you close  
with an oculist's torch--  
but first to pour drops of optrine  
on each eye lens.

And so, as the pupils dilate,  
how ample the worlds  
that then open up  
even in so small a space!

For there, behind, are years--  
the road from birth forwards,  
and there too byways  
as those that ray out  
from a spinning hub!

But pray, what are these hooded figures--  
as those in sombre landscapes--  
doing over here?

Yes, I see I see, I see in there  
mountains, seas, and burning cities--

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

see and hear sounds of laughter and tears,  
of words long since done with.

Yes, I see I see, see and hear  
for here is no surface mind alone  
but an enormous room  
that grows in size and dimension  
with the growing urges of its sole occupant.

Yes I see, in it I see, and hear  
those deep organ sounds  
which too grow in volume  
by the ticking seconds.

But I must look closer still--far within;  
and looking, am almost sucked in--  
for it is those turning wheels--  
too dizzying for words!

But, and at length,  
even as I once more see clearly,  
I see, as I said, no sign of surface mind  
but the fanning out in all directions  
of a making being  
with all its wandering impulses,  
the pulsating wishes,  
the twitchings in the plexus,  
the movements in the body's clock,  
the growing and falling of hair and nails  
the inhalings and exhalings.  
In sum, the coming of a man.

Lift though you may the curtain here anywhere,  
there is only the fabulous everywhere.

A world not to catch on wholly,  
but only to wish well.

## APPARITION

I saw an apparition nigh  
in the dim light before one dawn;  
saw a shape, dark, somehow like an X,  
tower high up in the air.

Who was it there stood thus  
astride a man-sized earth--who?  
Siva was it, Shakti--or what other  
great god or goddess of yore?

I could not tell, I could not,  
and yet knelt down low  
beneath this so overmastering a force  
on bended knee like a Z--

A knight commanded  
before a faceless Sire.

## ROUNDAABOUT

Your point of departure  
no other than yourself,  
so the point of eternal return,  
yours a queer, circular, life-argument!--

the pursuing arrowhead  
burying its nose  
into its own achilles heel.

## STRANGER

The mercurial blood streaking--  
its suspense mounting--  
and swallowed up is my innocence.

The flood that sweeps within each being  
is at times shot to an inch  
of the vastitude,  
past the patient plodding senses,  
to stagger along a miraculous scene;  
from ripples to waves to tides rising--  
seeking, spreading, and bounding  
over towards an unbounded sea.

There dwells, within the solitude  
of a too dumb soul's deep well,  
a stranger, ready to pounce upon  
a bluey immensity.

## WARP AND WOOF

The warp and woof of the world  
pure vibration,  
what pulses at the barred center?

As if, there a gigantic cyclotron  
quicken the particles,  
and they relayed the ever-widening sonic waves--

the bosom spread-eagling the hapless intruder  
upon a sheer backdrop  
of enormous space and savage sparks.

O, thus to be hurled beyond  
a mapped universe,  
and into wheeling circles!

In the inexorable swirl caught,  
eyes involuntarily closing--  
the head bowing.

**JHAFFUR KHAN AZAD DARAKTH**  
**MONSOON OPIATE**

It's a cloud drugged day  
heavy with the heady scent  
of cloying frangipani.  
The soil is steaming,  
milled in the musty,  
dank foetid mixing--  
the muddied anaerobic sweat  
of the earth's pores,  
flushed to the breathing surface.  
The air is alive and seething  
thick with composting ideas,  
bursting like acned fungi  
from sordid old humous.  
I smell the back-breath  
in a choking dog's throat,  
the rank and turgid fleshiness  
of moist guilt and the green  
the gangrenous mildew  
of rotting matters set beside  
wet thoughts and moldy laundry.

And in the pressing stillness  
hot with the threat of rot,  
a single sensual drop  
of cool releasing rain  
lands lightly on my lip,  
licked and licorice kiss,  
as if to bring to steadiness  
the satiated senses  
lashed in repugnant revolt,  
and stamp with a liquid seal  
washed promises of new clarity.

## RAILWAY STATION MATKA CUPS

Railway station matka cups  
for the drinking of tea,  
are hot, grainy and earthen.  
Tongues touch memories  
of mud borne on donkey back,  
touch fingers turning clay,  
a halflife of wood smoke,  
a child at village play.

Railway station matka cups  
used once today,  
are crushed on the tracks  
and remain to decay  
back to unmuscled mud,  
with a memory of tongue  
and the wet, grainy feel  
of sweet hot milk tea.

Now styrofoams  
and plastics compete,  
and the mud world  
turns into solid concrete,  
and the memory of tea  
on the railway of time  
flows hard on the heels  
of the asphalt night.

## HOSHANG MERCHANT

### REQUEIM FOR AGHA SHAHID ALI (d. Dec. 2001)

“Esenin was a lyrical poet but the times weren't lyrical”

- Trotsky

1.

You prod me into speech  
I wipe the dusty writing pad  
to scratch this  
as autumn's red scratches a leaf-vein  
in your poem As in life  
A tumour itched your brain

2.

It is Eid  
The season of feasting after long lament  
Today in Kashmir, no one will feast  
The river frozen this December  
Will thaw in spring  
They will bury you in a strange graveyard  
Your exile complete  
Your dust will mingle with Dickinson's dust

3.

Dickinson, that strange spinster of Amherst  
Who went round and round her attic  
A strange shape  
Who went round her own poems  
You wished to let her enter your poem  
Now you two are one with dust

Agha Shahid, let me be your spinster nun

4.

Akhmatova was condemned  
as half-whore / half-nun  
Esenin wrote his last poem in blood  
before he hanged himself







LETTER TO A HOUSE WITH NO ADDRESS

‘Every letter reaches its destination’

- Lacan

1.

I wrote a letter  
to a house with no address  
And since I carry it in my heart  
I came searching it in tears  
the ascent to the hill was bitter  
the sea was blocked out  
I heard the martyred matinee idol’s laugh  
And the heroine’s: dead of a hole-in-the-heart  
The heiress schoolmistress had moved on  
And where the Green Castle stood  
only ramparts remained  
I scaled them again with a child’s eyes  
and heard the echoes of an ancient tongue

2.

There stood the 100 year old tamarind  
Tall yet much reduced  
the house itself had shrunken  
to the size of a man  
As if a pharaoh sighting his valley-pyramid  
from a height would berate his monument  
His folly  
The cavernous house’s doors stood flung open:  
a heart emptied of all emotion  
My mother’s garden was transplanted  
But the magnolia was now only a memory of a fragrance  
There is a fire in the heart  
which is inseparable from it  
as fire is from heat  
And when the childhood house’s walls cave in  
the fire moves in

to douse it with molten tears  
My mother's blood is mixed with this earth  
    though she was only its tenant  
And each tear is blood  
And blood is rubies  
crushed into the earth with all of a woman's anger  
I picked up some earth  
And packed it lovingly in a poem

3

The neighbour is now a spy  
The servant is now a master  
But poems have no owners  
Like hearts which are devastated  
The sea has receded  
It will put out no fire  
The fish in the sea are thirsty  
And what to speak of the rains!  
To the exile even seabreeze of home  
    is an admonishment  
The garden is grass  
The hybrid will inherit  
My mother's blood is mixed with this poem  
My letter had arrived though the address changed  
My poem, my letter to the world, had arrived

**DARSHAN SINGH MAINI**  
**TRAGEDY OF THOUGHT**

He was a Hamlet  
Of the provinces, an overheated  
Thinking reed caught in  
A vice of viper truths,  
And burning out his brains  
To vindicate a vapour!  
There're some truths no head  
Can hold and remain whole,  
For the longer or larger  
Thoughts are but tigers  
That know no pity, no vision,  
Blindness is what shines in those eyes!

**INITIATION**

Weaving soft, silken dreams  
Into the fabric of her nubile heart,  
She felt each day the pulse  
Of mystic love as though lost  
In a sweet delirium of delight.

As the heat of womanhood  
Rose in her restive loins,  
And in her dove-like breasts,  
She couldn't decode the buffoonery

Of a body washed in lyric pain  
Except to feel that the blue flowers  
Of her fancy could burst  
Any time into that bed  
Of dark, purple truths  
Which brought the seed to fruit.

## ALIENATION

You may in mind or thought  
Retreat to the farthest lairs  
Of your soul to secure retreat,  
A sanctuary for your vagrant dreams.  
But distancing's not a thing  
Of one's will or volition;  
It needs a signature in blood,  
And a heart that's willing  
To be snuffed out at last.

No, not even when you've  
Turned your 'dove' face  
To the wall and starved  
Your self into submission  
May you purchase peace,  
For the harlot heart could  
Still surprise you with a song!

## TEMPTING YOUR FATE

Do not tempt your fate,  
She's more a vamp written down  
For a movie-script,  
A wanton dreaming of romance.

It's not a game of numbers,  
Or of odds and evens,  
Such leaps from the ledge are  
For the doomed Russian counts.

We live out fictions day by day,  
The novels catch only  
But a hem of the truth  
That withers away into reality  
Before we see the plot  
And the cunning consummate the dream.

**E. LYNNE HARRIS**

Memory Vignettes  
Two Trips to India

**ROADSIDE IMAGES**

En route

Plague scare,  
    no other tourists,  
    ensconced alone  
    with driver,  
on road from Delhi to Agra.

Superb skills,  
    horn honking, rushing down,  
    carts, cows, cycles,  
    slowly moving.  
Shall we crash?

At final hundredths of a second,  
    all give way.

It gets to be a game  
    after awhile.  
    We'll always make it.

Fatehpur Sikri

A dead city,  
Magnificence,  
    But no life.  
No water,  
    It went away.

God's Love

(On entering the Temple in Madurai)

Festooned by an elephant trunk,  
    given a garland,  
        embraced by it.

Shah Jehan

Youthful pranks,  
    to island in lake.

Powerful ruler.

Imprisoned  
    in tower,

But from window,  
    hovers memorial to love,  
        Taj Mahal.

Three Houses of Worship

The Temple in Madurai--  
    Astonished at the intensity.

The Cathedral at Koln, Germany--  
    I thought the side door was the main door.

The Offertory in Montreal, Canada--  
    Piles of abandoned crutches.

Two Southernmost Points Visited

of India,  
    thousands of years  
        of high culture,  
        deep insights,  
        beauty, vitality  
I got sick on my way home,  
        briefly.

of South Africa,  
    thousands of years  
        with barbarisms,  
        two bombs,  
I got sick on my way home,  
        not briefly.

Shopping

Accustomed to browsing,  
I admired a bracelet.

He kept lowering the price.  
I said I couldn't afford it.

I said I didn't have any money with me.  
He said I could take it  
    and pay him tomorrow.

I resented his pressuring me,  
so I made him wait  
    an extra day.

But I love the bracelet  
    and wear it constantly.

**PRATAP CHAHAL**  
ECHOES OF A REALITY SUBDUED...

I: *“Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.”*

Here the flowers are dirty,  
not of the smells of lust.  
Here a soothing fire burns  
within the space of a simple glance.  
And the morning rises and falls  
quicker than the life of a cigarette.

Here, it is real.

Here, tonight, we will learn the story of Being  
from many lessons past.  
The many times we run; the times when  
glances do not speak; the times we learn to reason  
in doubt or hasty justification.

We grow old.

In the heart of a bitter land, finding comfort,  
because it is real. And we are sure.

Sure of our mistakes, the awful learning.

II. *“And youth is cruel, and has no more remorse.  
And smiles at situations which it cannot see.”*

Come, for a moment, for that is all there is,  
to be silent.  
Because we have spoken often, gathering revelations  
this silence holds,  
we may leave without speech.  
In the silence reached, the passion heard will carry.  
The words mean nothing.

And many roads away from home,  
We shall embrace in quiet stillness;  
needing no words. We have seen it all.

And therein lies the memory.

### III

Is there a hope for the potency  
of expectation?  
I will remember  
the chaos of the room where the face  
of an alarm clock and notes of  
soothing music threw sleep  
behind prophesies of time.

And, afraid of awe,  
I gather up my humility.

Choosing to bear the minute with its  
collective tick-tock philosophy,  
reverse the words and lead me to sleep,  
expect the sun to rise and decisions to be precise.

Thrice the thinking man tired,  
holding his bouquet of silences;  
saw his words with wearied sighs  
and in his stillness, quietly cried.

How do we proceed to be bold,  
how shall we proceed to Be?  
what is the shelf life of a society  
not believing in frailty....

## THE ROOM OF CRACKED BLACKBOARDS

Faintly on the classroom wall,  
the innocent subject whimpered,  
“love is blind and friendship  
shuts its eyes”.

Love may be blind  
friendship may have  
closed its eyes,  
yet cracks still remain  
and life pours her stories

Of woes like  
a distressed beggar  
asking for a second chance  
under the broken umbrella  
of an abandoned hope;

The relationships like  
silk woven in a romance  
with colours of bloody years  
under the weaver’s careful eye;

And hatred like  
blind curses of forgotten  
reason, measured in circles  
murmuring death upon memory.

Of joys like  
an expedition unfolded  
in the truth of its mission;  
the tender recollection;

The beauty like  
crippled sorrow laid

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

out in unselfish products  
of an underrated imagination;

And confusion like  
religion thrashed  
mercilessly as a placebo--  
broken trophies of tender woe.

Even in blindness,  
a reality does not disappear.  
And brutal flashes of paparazzi  
still sting behind shut eyes.

And unaware of cracks,  
we shall not find answers,  
because we are always  
never the same.

*The two poems above as a unit were given First Award in the  
M.M.Bhalla Poetry Prize Competition of St.Stephen's College,  
Delhi. They are reprinted here with permission.*

**PRATAP CHAHAL**  
ECHOES OF A REALITY SUBDUED...

I:    *“Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still.”*

Here the flowers are dirty,  
not of the smells of lust.  
Here a soothing fire burns  
within the space of a simple glance.  
And the morning rises and falls  
quicker than the life of a cigarette.

Here, it is real.

Here, tonight, we will learn the story of Being  
from many lessons past.  
The many times we run; the times when  
glances do not speak; the times we learn to reason  
in doubt or hasty justification.

We grow old.

In the heart of a bitter land, finding comfort,  
because it is real. And we are sure.

Sure of our mistakes, the awful learning.

II.    *“And youth is cruel, and has no more remorse.  
And smiles at situations which it cannot see.”*

Come, for a moment, for that is all there is,  
to be silent.  
Because we have spoken often, gathering revelations  
this silence holds,  
we may leave without speech.  
In the silence reached, the passion heard will carry.  
The words mean nothing.

And many roads away from home,  
We shall embrace in quiet stillness;  
needing no words. We have seen it all.

And therein lies the memory.

### III

Is there a hope for the potency  
of expectation?  
I will remember  
the chaos of the room where the face  
of an alarm clock and notes of  
soothing music threw sleep  
behind prophesies of time.

And, afraid of awe,  
I gather up my humility.

Choosing to bear the minute with its  
collective tick-tock philosophy,  
reverse the words and lead me to sleep,  
expect the sun to rise and decisions to be precise.

Thrice the thinking man tired,  
holding his bouquet of silences;  
saw his words with wearied sighs  
and in his stillness, quietly cried.

How do we proceed to be bold,  
how shall we proceed to Be?  
what is the shelf life of a society  
not believing in frailty....

## THE ROOM OF CRACKED BLACKBOARDS

Faintly on the classroom wall,  
the innocent subject whimpered,  
“love is blind and friendship  
shuts its eyes”.

Love may be blind  
friendship may have  
closed its eyes,  
yet cracks still remain  
and life pours her stories

Of woes like  
a distressed beggar  
asking for a second chance  
under the broken umbrella  
of an abandoned hope;

The relationships like  
silk woven in a romance  
with colours of bloody years  
under the weaver’s careful eye;

And hatred like  
blind curses of forgotten  
reason, measured in circles  
murmuring death upon memory.

Of joys like  
an expedition unfolded  
in the truth of its mission;  
the tender recollection;

The beauty like  
crippled sorrow laid

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

out in unselfish products  
of an underrated imagination;

And confusion like  
religion thrashed  
mercilessly as a placebo--  
broken trophies of tender woe.

Even in blindness,  
a reality does not disappear.  
And brutal flashes of paparazzi  
still sting behind shut eyes.

And unaware of cracks,  
we shall not find answers,  
because we are always  
never the same.

*The two poems above as a unit were given First Award in the  
M.M.Bhalla Poetry Prize Competition of St.Stephen's College,  
Delhi. They are reprinted here with permission.*

**DURGA PRASAD PANDA**  
**THE SULLEN MUSE**

In the dark, lonely walls of my mind  
there is this window  
through which light enters  
like a thief.

For years I have been trying  
to hold it  
in the soft, bare hands  
of my conscience.

For years I have been hearing  
the groaning voice  
of the distant drums  
echo beneath my delicate skin.

For years I have been trying  
to lift it up  
like my son's timid face  
and to call it my own.

**SHADOWS AT NIGHT**  
(For Bibhu Padhi)

Night  
sits upon my outstretched palm  
like a weight.

Even shadows  
have a weight  
of their own.

I try hard  
to touch them  
hoping they would touch me back.

Is the night  
that sits upon my palm  
mine?

Or, does it sleep far away  
in someone else's  
insomniac eyes?

## EVERYDAY

Everyday,  
like a slithering fish  
the meaning of life  
keeps slipping out of my hands.  
The day opens up  
like a new wound  
on the mind's hard surface.

Everyday  
the newspaper comes all bloodsoaked  
heavy with the loads of falsehoods;  
and I see the blurred face  
of death  
standing still at the door  
of my mind.

Everyday  
we grow up  
to become perfect strangers, more distant  
like the forgotten faces  
of our dead ancestors.

Everyday  
we start afresh  
our journeys  
only to know  
that we have not moved at all.

### PURI: A REFLECTION

Over the denim-blue sea waters  
sunlight  
breaks into peals of laughter.

Shadows grow darker  
and lengthen like rubber  
only to stretch back to a stupid silence.

Inside the dark sanctorum  
the incense smoke floats up  
vaguely from the priest's hand  
like loose strands of faith.

Wearing his plastic smile  
the dark God  
looks pitifully embarrassed.

The sultry voice of the wind  
shuffles through  
the shimmering branches of casuarina.

The tumultuous sea roars like a tiger  
to frighten us away  
into the secured emptiness of our lives.

## CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON

### LONG DISTANCE

At all hours I try to call you, to  
restore contact. Under the ringing tone,  
porous, a mesh of voices  
in tongues I cannot make out--Marathi? Gujarati?  
in a city I have twice visited. How in this Babel  
will I get through?

Who knows what's happening there? Newsclips  
don't tell it all. Maybe,  
since you last wrote, private disasters.  
I calculate, half a world away,  
Ten and a half time zones, how you will be  
asleep or, already in your tomorrow,  
leaving for work, relaxing after a meal.

I hoped I had found a friend  
for the long haul. Tell me it is so.  
Yet till we meet face to face  
we can never be in synch,  
our long distance voices like beggars  
working the night.

### NEW DELHI STREET THEATRE

An updated Mystery Cycle, they come in a mini-bus  
to the back entrance of the Presidential Palace,  
this tiny troupe Alope had scoured from the streets, as is,  
and trained. In seconds they are ready,  
with sound system and lights festooned from the trees,  
and start to the beat of a single drum,  
tumblers and acrobats, dancers and clown, performing  
to a sprawl of laughing children of chauffeurs, gardeners,  
in a shaded yard far from official India.

In white-face, speaking Hindi, they assume  
in turn the urgent masks  
of crack dealer, junkie, landlord.  
Now a bridegroom's family holds out for a larger dowry.  
They strut, threaten, entreat, collapse in pain.  
The children, squatting, look on,  
their bright circle of faces puzzled, amused,  
but for me, also in white-face,  
the body language translates easily  
into dangerous truths. On edge behind washing lines,  
the mothers stand in doorways, unsure what it is  
their children are absorbing. Is this disloyalty  
they are too young to handle, will these scenes outsmart, or lead to,  
communal violence? The children are caught up  
in the drama of their own lives, today, tomorrow.

The tableau ends suddenly, props disassembled, stowed.  
Like units in a guerilla war, the actors depart, melt back  
Into the urban forest, no victory certain.

### HORN, PLEASE!

On the road, all equals, we take our chances  
with local buses, trucks passing on bends, bludgeoning through  
in fanfares of horns and dust.  
Or sometimes not: too often we ride by  
crushed skulls of truck cabs like insect husks,  
surrounded by stones, instant shrines  
and sacrifice to Kali, their drivers,  
drunk or high, are nowhere to be seen,  
already disposed of.

Bullock carts lumber on  
as we blur past donkeys, somnolent dancing bears

(and off in the distance women  
balance brass pots of water on their heads,  
tend herds of goats, or walk the parched fields, veiled  
in turquoise, saffron, maroon).

A few miles before Jaipur  
three dead camels lie by the roadside, straddling  
their loads of grain, the gouged sacks spilling  
how many livelihoods? We, though, are just passing through  
and after our crash course in highway survival,  
shall rise again.

## THE RAW MATERIALS

Anything grows in that dark, infested earth.  
What a scavenger's paradise, a delirium of colours!  
In the temple's shadow pigs wallow in garbage;  
on the four-lane airport highway an elephant suddenly  
crosses before us, tusks laden with bamboo;  
under trees shot through with parakeets long distance trucks  
are rigged like circus acts with crimson plush.  
They share their magnificence  
with mildewed palace hotels and Rajasthani forts  
rampant with history, while in market stalls, scooter taxis,  
film stars and gods are interchangeable.  
At Sikandra, keeping their distance, the silent order  
of langur monkeys, mini-Hanumans, watch as we pay  
homage to a long-dead emperor's tomb. The formal gardens  
are burdened with imperial dust.  
In this rank beauty homes are not built but emerge  
from whatever makeshift earth is near at hand--  
beauty, heat, squalor totally entwined.

**T.M.RAGHURAM**  
**A HIGH-TECH HEARTBREAK**

Darling, you were true to me  
across the seas,  
faithful as the Fax  
that brought your love messages across  
in your very own beautiful hand  
instantly (without your fragrance);  
your love bits you fed  
into my website on the Internet  
and I saw your heart go wild  
and scintillating on the monitor.

Darling, smart and agile  
as only electromagnetic waves could be,  
you breathed your love-ions  
into the mouthpiece at your terminal  
and left digital love prints  
on my floppy heart--  
too fine for the MRI  
or the Colour Doppler to scan.

Darling, you perhaps lolled  
in the shade of plastic trees  
inhaling the aerosol fragrance  
of a make-believe breeze  
where the rustle of metal chiffon  
mingled with the beep of the cell phone  
and sent kiss-angles riding satellite beams  
in a wave length, your very own,  
setting the ICs in my transponder aflutter.

But one day, one fateful day,  
totally unprogrammed,  
you chose to walk out, fadeout,  
with just cold parting notes  
in the voice-mail and the answering machine.

That was when I cried out in pain,  
cried for real, with real warm tears,  
to the real winds,  
the real moon and stars,  
poured out my sorrow, deep and real,  
too real for the push button gadgetry  
that had all along been  
living out our life for us  
in electronic exchanges  
of virtual reality.

## JAGANNATH PRASAD DAS

Jagannath Prasad Das (1936- ) brought a new dimension to Oriya poetry, through imagery that effortlessly brings together the ordinary and the magical. The language of his poetry is close to the rhythm of the spoken word, but the mystery and wonder of life resonate through the lines. His collections of poems include *Pratham Purusa* (1971), *Anya Sabu Mrityu* (1976), *Je Jahar Nirjanata* (1979), *Anya Desha Vinna Samaya* (1982), *Jatrar Pratham Pada* (1988), *Ahnika* (1990), *Sthira Chitra* (1991), *Sacharachar* (1994), *Smritir Sahar* (1996), *Parikrama* (1998).

Although known primarily as a poet, he has written a major novel *Desh Kala Patra* and several volumes of short stories. His five plays have been translated and performed in different parts of the country.

Born in the Puri district of Orissa, Jagannath Prasad Das was educated in Utkal University and University of Allahabad. He served in the I.A.S. for many years but took early retirement from his administrative assignment to devote his time to writing and research. He did his Ph.D. in Art History. His books on art include *Puri Paintings*, *Chitra-Pothi* and *Palm-leaf Miniatures*.

Jagannath Prasad Das lives in Delhi.

### THE POST OFFICE

When I stand here  
Disembodied images from long ago  
Come fluttering like scraps of paper  
And scatter in my mind.  
The distance of time gets tinged  
By an unearthly shade of red.

Old voices arrive by the morning bus  
From the darkness of forgotten villages.  
Secret desires blow in to open long-locked doors,  
My lips savour the taste of boyhood.  
Touched by my lost days  
The nerves and sinews come alive  
With the spark of an unexpected thrill.  
Forgotten magic words suddenly return to memory.

What sound is it that blows my mind,  
Whose form gets reflected in my eyes  
What sighs benumb my body?  
Someone has come back to break down all restraint.

One by one they come to stand before me:  
Shades of relationships carefully preserved in letters  
Sent safely to distant addresses,  
My destitution muffled in the stillness of years,  
The sudden sadness of homecoming  
Borne on the inert wings of evening birds,  
The dilemma of waiting, doubt and agitation  
Wrapped in a dream.

As I search my pocket for the key,  
A frayed despair pushes me from behind.  
As I turn my face to leave,  
The pictures splinter into many pieces.  
The shadows divide themselves  
To enter the predetermined slots of various addresses.  
Dream-like remains of a strange red colour  
Blurs all in a smoky haze.

*(Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet)*

## SAMRAAT

Emperor, take a walk round your palace for the last time  
During this interlude of history,  
Before the restless mob on the streets  
Devour you.

Remember now  
The day of your anointment as a king  
And the duration of your reign,  
The killing, the pillage, the bloodshed  
Between the coronation and your dubious end  
Between the throne and the inner quarters.

What more do you hope to see here?  
Your coffers are empty.  
You have plundered your own treasury  
Your pleasure garden is scorched by the sighs of the virgins  
You had abducted to disprove your impotence.  
The corpse of your favourite bird lies in the cage  
Killed by the touch of your own hand.

Look at the spears in your armoury  
Do you remember these were once trees in a forest?  
The sticks of dice scattered on the floor  
Are the broken bones of martyrs.  
See the grinning skull on the shelf.  
He was your court jester  
Executed by your order.

.....

Your biographer, brought up on your left-over food  
Now lies paralysed.  
Your ministers and counsellors have abandoned you

To go with the new colonisers in search of fresh pastures.  
Your soldiers have found shelter in the war-mongers' arsenal  
Your favourite queen is now a prostitute in the leper colony.

Looking behind is no use now. Emperor, proceed now  
Before you and your kingdom get obliterated from the screen  
Through the secret doors of the queen's quarters  
Go into the dark by-lanes of history  
After throwing your rusted crown  
Into the begging bowl of the sentry at the gate.

*(This is part of a longer poem. Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet)*

## PARTING

When the ground beneath my feet  
was slipping away,  
leaning on a few words  
from your lips  
I got the strength  
to stand before you.

The fleeting warmth  
of your fingers  
upon my torpid hand  
wiped off the darkness  
gathering below my eyes  
and restored my sight.

As the train pulled out,  
your waving hand  
traced the map of my fate  
which enabled me to find  
my way outside the station.

The telephone number  
you wrote down for me  
will descend  
from the centre of my being  
to the blood and sinew  
of my forefinger  
with the life-giving promise  
of your voice  
during the passing moments  
of your absence  
until you come back  
once again to me.

*(Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee and the poet)*

## THE DAFFODIL

Neither the teacher  
in the classroom  
nor his confounded pupil,  
nor the westward looking scholar,  
has ever seen it with his mortal eyes;  
yet the daffodil,  
fluttering and dancing  
in the breeze  
in its golden arrogance,  
flashes upon their inward eye.

The empire may have ended  
like a short spring,  
but the daffodil lives on.  
The empire may have dried up  
like the rain  
or as the pearls of dew,

but the daffodil lives on  
tossing its head  
in a sprightly dance.

As lively and fresh now  
as in the golden age of imperialism,  
its glory remains untarnished  
in the ruins of the empire.  
In the emptiness of lands  
ravaged by cultural invasions,  
the daffodil shines and twinkles  
like an eternal star.

Through the open windows of the mind  
winds of subculture  
from upstart foreign lands  
rush in and blow us off our feet.  
The daffodil shines as ever before  
in its shameless arrogance  
in the inward eyes  
of our very own intellectuals.

*(Translated by the poet)*

## CURFEW IN THE CITY

With nostalgia in my heart  
and longing in my eyes,  
I dream of my city.  
I cross the river of my innocence  
and take the road to my childhood;  
I stop at the crossroads of growing up  
and make my way  
to the city of my happy memories.

Addresses written in familiar hands  
show me the way  
friendly faces beckon me;  
fragments of memories  
nudge me on.  
And, there, suddenly before me  
is the city of my dreams.

But everything seems strange  
in the city I knew so well.  
Everything seems to be in ruins:  
the roads deserted,  
the houses dejected and forlorn.  
There is no warmth  
in the crowd of posters;  
no invitation in the peeling walls.  
I come face to face  
with the harsh ironies  
lying in wait for me.

Unwanted sights crowd around me:  
friendly knocks rebuffed  
on the neighbour's door;  
thirst returning from the dry tap;  
childhood crying on its way  
to an orphan future;  
modesty hiding her tears in shame;  
innocence caught between flying bullets;  
amity falling down in pieces  
from the broken domes.

The day retreats in disgrace,  
night comes weeping  
in the completeness of its shame.  
Bewildered, I look at  
faith stuck on the knife's edge,  
dharma blasted in explosions,

conscience drowned in blood,  
and justice burnt down in arson.

I have a dream in my eyes,  
there is a city in my dreams,  
and,  
there is a curfew in the city.

.....

*(Translated from the original Oriya by the poet)*

## GODDESS

Your whereabouts  
are known to me;  
you are far away  
is all I know.

You are like  
the Supreme Being,  
you are everyone's;  
mine alone  
you will never be.

You are the ordained goddess.  
In the fragrance  
of incense and camphor,  
you are the luminescence  
of offerings and prayer;  
in the rising crescendo  
of sacred hymns,  
you are the divine joy  
of deliverance.  
For the penitent  
prostrate at your feet

you are the precious boon  
bouncing off your  
many flashing weapons;  
for the ardent acolyte  
who has never set eyes on you,  
you are the bond between  
this and the other world.

You are the letter box  
and the dead letter office;  
you are all the letters  
written for you  
and their torn drafts;  
you are the wrong addresses  
where the letters cannot reach.

In the close confines  
of domestic happiness  
in the living room,  
with relative and pet dog,  
you are the family's tradition  
and also a wild exception  
to its suffocating mores.

You are the deathly discomfort  
of disturbing words  
tormenting the innermost mind;  
you are the pointed meanings  
of an abstruse poem;  
you are the life-giving balm  
of the prayers which hurt;  
you are the unique irony  
of the many sufferings  
not spoken of in the poems  
written in your honour.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

You are the benediction  
of a displeased goddess;  
you are the wrong address  
on an unwritten letter;  
you are the intimacy  
of an empty house;  
you are the simple meaning  
difficult to grasp.

How can I find you--  
in which house, which temple,  
which post office,  
what book of poems,  
within what limits  
of how many worlds?  
And on whose dreams  
shall I trespass  
to ever find you?

.....

*(Translated from the Oriya by the poet with Paul St-Pierre)*

## JAGANNATH PRASAD DAS

Jagannath Prasad Das (1936- ) brought a new dimension to Oriya poetry, through imagery that effortlessly brings together the ordinary and the magical. The language of his poetry is close to the rhythm of the spoken word, but the mystery and wonder of life resonate through the lines. His collections of poems include *Pratham Purusa* (1971), *Anya Sabu Mrityu* (1976), *Je Jahar Nirjanata* (1979), *Anya Desha Vinna Samaya* (1982), *Jatrar Pratham Pada* (1988), *Ahnika* (1990), *Sthira Chitra* (1991), *Sacharachar* (1994), *Smritir Sahar* (1996), *Parikrama* (1998).

Although known primarily as a poet, he has written a major novel *Desh Kala Patra* and several volumes of short stories. His five plays have been translated and performed in different parts of the country.

Born in the Puri district of Orissa, Jagannath Prasad Das was educated in Utkal University and University of Allahabad. He served in the I.A.S. for many years but took early retirement from his administrative assignment to devote his time to writing and research. He did his Ph.D. in Art History. His books on art include *Puri Paintings*, *Chitra-Pothi* and *Palm-leaf Miniatures*.

Jagannath Prasad Das lives in Delhi.

### THE POST OFFICE

When I stand here  
Disembodied images from long ago  
Come fluttering like scraps of paper  
And scatter in my mind.  
The distance of time gets tinged  
By an unearthly shade of red.

Old voices arrive by the morning bus  
From the darkness of forgotten villages.  
Secret desires blow in to open long-locked doors,  
My lips savour the taste of boyhood.  
Touched by my lost days  
The nerves and sinews come alive  
With the spark of an unexpected thrill.  
Forgotten magic words suddenly return to memory.

What sound is it that blows my mind,  
Whose form gets reflected in my eyes  
What sighs benumb my body?  
Someone has come back to break down all restraint.

One by one they come to stand before me:  
Shades of relationships carefully preserved in letters  
Sent safely to distant addresses,  
My destitution muffled in the stillness of years,  
The sudden sadness of homecoming  
Borne on the inert wings of evening birds,  
The dilemma of waiting, doubt and agitation  
Wrapped in a dream.

As I search my pocket for the key,  
A frayed despair pushes me from behind.  
As I turn my face to leave,  
The pictures splinter into many pieces.  
The shadows divide themselves  
To enter the predetermined slots of various addresses.  
Dream-like remains of a strange red colour  
Blurs all in a smoky haze.

*(Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet)*

## SAMRAAT

Emperor, take a walk round your palace for the last time  
During this interlude of history,  
Before the restless mob on the streets  
Devour you.

Remember now  
The day of your anointment as a king  
And the duration of your reign,  
The killing, the pillage, the bloodshed  
Between the coronation and your dubious end  
Between the throne and the inner quarters.

What more do you hope to see here?  
Your coffers are empty.  
You have plundered your own treasury  
Your pleasure garden is scorched by the sighs of the virgins  
You had abducted to disprove your impotence.  
The corpse of your favourite bird lies in the cage  
Killed by the touch of your own hand.

Look at the spears in your armoury  
Do you remember these were once trees in a forest?  
The sticks of dice scattered on the floor  
Are the broken bones of martyrs.  
See the grinning skull on the shelf.  
He was your court jester  
Executed by your order.

.....

Your biographer, brought up on your left-over food  
Now lies paralysed.  
Your ministers and counsellors have abandoned you

To go with the new colonisers in search of fresh pastures.  
Your soldiers have found shelter in the war-mongers' arsenal  
Your favourite queen is now a prostitute in the leper colony.

Looking behind is no use now. Emperor, proceed now  
Before you and your kingdom get obliterated from the screen  
Through the secret doors of the queen's quarters  
Go into the dark by-lanes of history  
After throwing your rusted crown  
Into the begging bowl of the sentry at the gate.

*(This is part of a longer poem. Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet)*

## PARTING

When the ground beneath my feet  
was slipping away,  
leaning on a few words  
from your lips  
I got the strength  
to stand before you.

The fleeting warmth  
of your fingers  
upon my torpid hand  
wiped off the darkness  
gathering below my eyes  
and restored my sight.

As the train pulled out,  
your waving hand  
traced the map of my fate  
which enabled me to find  
my way outside the station.

The telephone number  
you wrote down for me  
will descend  
from the centre of my being  
to the blood and sinew  
of my forefinger  
with the life-giving promise  
of your voice  
during the passing moments  
of your absence  
until you come back  
once again to me.

*(Translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee and the poet)*

## THE DAFFODIL

Neither the teacher  
in the classroom  
nor his confounded pupil,  
nor the westward looking scholar,  
has ever seen it with his mortal eyes;  
yet the daffodil,  
fluttering and dancing  
in the breeze  
in its golden arrogance,  
flashes upon their inward eye.

The empire may have ended  
like a short spring,  
but the daffodil lives on.  
The empire may have dried up  
like the rain  
or as the pearls of dew,

but the daffodil lives on  
tossing its head  
in a sprightly dance.

As lively and fresh now  
as in the golden age of imperialism,  
its glory remains untarnished  
in the ruins of the empire.  
In the emptiness of lands  
ravaged by cultural invasions,  
the daffodil shines and twinkles  
like an eternal star.

Through the open windows of the mind  
winds of subculture  
from upstart foreign lands  
rush in and blow us off our feet.  
The daffodil shines as ever before  
in its shameless arrogance  
in the inward eyes  
of our very own intellectuals.

*(Translated by the poet)*

## CURFEW IN THE CITY

With nostalgia in my heart  
and longing in my eyes,  
I dream of my city.  
I cross the river of my innocence  
and take the road to my childhood;  
I stop at the crossroads of growing up  
and make my way  
to the city of my happy memories.

Addresses written in familiar hands  
show me the way  
friendly faces beckon me;  
fragments of memories  
nudge me on.  
And, there, suddenly before me  
is the city of my dreams.

But everything seems strange  
in the city I knew so well.  
Everything seems to be in ruins:  
the roads deserted,  
the houses dejected and forlorn.  
There is no warmth  
in the crowd of posters;  
no invitation in the peeling walls.  
I come face to face  
with the harsh ironies  
lying in wait for me.

Unwanted sights crowd around me:  
friendly knocks rebuffed  
on the neighbour's door;  
thirst returning from the dry tap;  
childhood crying on its way  
to an orphan future;  
modesty hiding her tears in shame;  
innocence caught between flying bullets;  
amity falling down in pieces  
from the broken domes.

The day retreats in disgrace,  
night comes weeping  
in the completeness of its shame.  
Bewildered, I look at  
faith stuck on the knife's edge,  
dharma blasted in explosions,

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

conscience drowned in blood,  
and justice burnt down in arson.

I have a dream in my eyes,  
there is a city in my dreams,  
and,  
there is a curfew in the city.

.....

*(Translated from the original Oriya by the poet)*

## GODDESS

Your whereabouts  
are known to me;  
you are far away  
is all I know.

You are like  
the Supreme Being,  
you are everyone's;  
mine alone  
you will never be.

You are the ordained goddess.  
In the fragrance  
of incense and camphor,  
you are the luminescence  
of offerings and prayer;  
in the rising crescendo  
of sacred hymns,  
you are the divine joy  
of deliverance.  
For the penitent  
prostrate at your feet

you are the precious boon  
bouncing off your  
many flashing weapons;  
for the ardent acolyte  
who has never set eyes on you,  
you are the bond between  
this and the other world.

You are the letter box  
and the dead letter office;  
you are all the letters  
written for you  
and their torn drafts;  
you are the wrong addresses  
where the letters cannot reach.

In the close confines  
of domestic happiness  
in the living room,  
with relative and pet dog,  
you are the family's tradition  
and also a wild exception  
to its suffocating mores.

You are the deathly discomfort  
of disturbing words  
tormenting the innermost mind;  
you are the pointed meanings  
of an abstruse poem;  
you are the life-giving balm  
of the prayers which hurt;  
you are the unique irony  
of the many sufferings  
not spoken of in the poems  
written in your honour.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

You are the benediction  
of a displeased goddess;  
you are the wrong address  
on an unwritten letter;  
you are the intimacy  
of an empty house;  
you are the simple meaning  
difficult to grasp.

How can I find you--  
in which house, which temple,  
which post office,  
what book of poems,  
within what limits  
of how many worlds?  
And on whose dreams  
shall I trespass  
to ever find you?

.....

*(Translated from the Oriya by the poet with Paul St-Pierre)*

**SITAKANT MAHAPATRA**  
**A DEATH IN THE HOSPITAL**

There, all my days leave me  
their refusal to play absolute;  
there all my thoughts leave me  
their silence final,  
and I sit on the dark abyss.

My morbid eyes re-open  
on the bright colours draining from the sky  
to the shadows of a winter night  
that devour the middle-aged man  
a meagre mass of earth on the next bed.

Two exotic eyes pierce my soil  
discern the seeds of death  
dormant below my thin earth;  
in their sudden dark rain  
they sprout;  
some clumsy words climb to my throat  
and die.

My pale leaves strain  
towards the dark sun  
across the frail, insipid, echoless floor  
and its criss-cross geometry of pain;  
beyond the open window  
where a flower's brief whimper  
expands to an enormous terror.

The landscape of grief  
the syringe, the stool, the red blankets  
a magazine falling off a tired hand  
hushed words, Time's whispers;  
these demand humility  
I sit Buddha-like pretending unconcern



And when you return home from the field  
in the rain-tired evening  
the soaked rice would be delightfully sour  
the fried greens still warm and tasty  
the *mrundanga* beat would resound  
in the village street,  
as orphaned sons of God  
say their prayers and open  
the torn primers before  
dying hurricane lamps.

Through gaping holes in the roof  
the midnight moon would scan your face  
and you would be ever installed  
on the throne of misery  
even after the sun, the moon  
the stars and the planets are no more  
even after there is no more history  
with its copper plates, inscriptions,  
its hired historians, scribes  
and the minstrel poets  
singing their last panegyrics.

## THE VILLAGE CREMATION GROUND

Name, parentage, age  
day or date of arrival, departure  
no mention of them anywhere;  
The lonely wind and sand  
suck away everything,  
leave nothing to chance.

Pretending ignorance, unconcern  
the blue sky vacantly stares;  
the bright sun keeps polishing

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

sand and the slight blades of grass  
the wind occasionally wails  
like the dove at noon:  
as if there could be nothing simpler  
than arriving and leaving.

A little ahead  
paddy fields as far as  
eyes can reach,  
at times two or three vultures  
circling as messengers of death,  
above them the soft floating kites  
and still beyond  
clouds massed on clouds  
and the blue dome of the sky.

The sky and the burning ground  
they look so much alike  
in their expanse  
their stars and tiny flowers  
with all these around  
it is not easy to comprehend  
someone is not there anymore.

The sky and the burning ground  
are no way inferior to death  
in their detachment, their mystery and cruel guile  
and what similarity between them!  
almost twin brothers!

A week  
a month, a year  
sometime before, or a little later  
some one comes there  
not for a walk but forever  
and not to return.

Name, parentage, age  
day and date  
nothing is inscribed.

### TEST YOURSELF, DEATH

Pause a second and see  
how I am totally lost  
in the soft fragrance  
of the *malati* flowers  
of this April evening,  
my eyes glued to the clear sky  
my ears drinking  
the tune of a flute  
coming from afar  
and my soul  
groping to face  
the challenge of  
a unheard melody  
that calls out sweetly to me  
to merge into nothingness.

Once you see that, I am sure  
you may not feel like  
lifting away this  
good-for-nothing creature  
more insignificant than  
a blade of grass  
and, in any case, already half-dead.

May be you would go back  
with your head bent  
with a hint of tears in the eyes.

Once you left behind Satyavan  
in the lap of Savitri;  
today test yourself afresh, death.

## PSALM

So we have continued walking  
Step by tired step  
from Harappa to Hastinapur to Kigali.

Nothing changes; even words tire out  
desperately seeking substance.  
We have jumped over the dead to survive  
and partake of the stone's blindness  
its hunger and unending hypnosis.

Beyond survival, somewhere inside,  
we still long for the furious ecstasy of summer  
the cool fragrance of the rain  
the magical horizon once again to slowly unfold  
the rainbow of our cruel destiny.

What is this day that refuses to end?  
At least the night could be a bliss.  
When river banks long for the boat  
the bees seek out the night flowers.

The fecund earth still quickens;  
there is still the ancient reign  
of fruits and flowers in the trees  
and new leaves flashing as sword.

Lord of the Blue Mountain,  
Lord of our oldest grief  
give us back the sparkle in the dying words

let the procession of terror melt  
into the thirsty desert sands  
and columns of living water sweep over us;  
let the soul once again,  
twine along simple words.

(Lord of the Blue Mountain is another name for Lord Jagannath of Puri)

*(Translated from the original Oriya by the author)*

## K. SIVA REDDY

K. Siva Reddy (1943- ) has nine poetry collections including *Bharamiti* and *Ajeyam*. He is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Mohana O Mohana*, Free Verse Front Award and Best Poetry Anthology Award for 1978.

### A TREE

They are cutting down trees to expand a house  
A torture intense sorrow  
My bond with trees  
is as deep as that of my bond with people  
Human beings  
now love stones instead of trees things instead of people  
On either side of the door is a pole  
what's the harm if there are trees instead of the poles?  
For fifteen years growing up with me and sharing me—  
Its mornings its sunsets  
the moonlit nights bathed in mist--all, mine too  
Isn't it an eye witness of my many sleepless nights?  
It too has a name like a person  
What's in a name, isn't it only something we give?  
It can't move but it grows, it spreads like the sky  
Amazingly immeasurably it displays the beauties of the season  
It cradles the wind-child onto its lap and rocks it  
Hasn't it stood quietly behind me and called the poems into  
memory?  
Hasn't it silently groaned  
when I was hiding within myself the silent anguish and  
dependency which was beyond poetry?  
Four walls and a door--a unit  
A wife and two kids--that too a unit  
In this world of calculations  
leaning against this 'still-river' tree

I will catch hold of the moon sliding through the branches  
Even as the anklets jingle  
Who is it that invisibly draws circles around me?  
Who is it that sings songs I alone can hear?

The benumbed heart melts like moonlight  
Once in a while a sweet ant slips out of its hands  
and gets caught amidst the words I scribble  
Even that turns out to be amazing diction  
It seems if you don't fell a tree the front yard wouldn't  
look beautiful

If you fell it  
sensitive mental activities will disappear  
something you couldn't understand something you couldn't  
experience  
will become self-evident

Gradually  
an unnatural cannibal-like figure  
as if sitting at my feet  
my natural rural sensations of joy arising from objects of  
beauty  
gentleness, tenderness--all, all  
one by one becoming extinct

As if all the ties I had made  
From childhood are loosening--  
When times are changing  
a turmoil, a struggle

You think  
that trees grow out in the open  
No, they grow within me they blossom  
from the three fingers which hold my pen  
you'll pluck the fruits.

Come a little closer  
Do I not smell like a tree?  
How wonderful it would be to embrace me!  
Don't you know how ecstatic you'll be?  
From me



## K. SIVA REDDY

K. Siva Reddy (1943- ) has nine poetry collections including *Bharamiti* and *Ajeyam*. He is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Mohana O Mohana*, Free Verse Front Award and Best Poetry Anthology Award for 1978.

### A TREE

They are cutting down trees to expand a house  
A torture intense sorrow  
My bond with trees  
is as deep as that of my bond with people  
Human beings  
now love stones instead of trees things instead of people  
On either side of the door is a pole  
what's the harm if there are trees instead of the poles?  
For fifteen years growing up with me and sharing me—  
Its mornings its sunsets  
the moonlit nights bathed in mist--all, mine too  
Isn't it an eye witness of my many sleepless nights?  
It too has a name like a person  
What's in a name, isn't it only something we give?  
It can't move but it grows, it spreads like the sky  
Amazingly immeasurably it displays the beauties of the season  
It cradles the wind-child onto its lap and rocks it  
Hasn't it stood quietly behind me and called the poems into  
memory?  
Hasn't it silently groaned  
when I was hiding within myself the silent anguish and  
dependency which was beyond poetry?  
Four walls and a door--a unit  
A wife and two kids--that too a unit  
In this world of calculations  
leaning against this 'still-river' tree

I will catch hold of the moon sliding through the branches  
Even as the anklets jingle  
Who is it that invisibly draws circles around me?  
Who is it that sings songs I alone can hear?

The benumbed heart melts like moonlight  
Once in a while a sweet ant slips out of its hands  
and gets caught amidst the words I scribble  
Even that turns out to be amazing diction  
It seems if you don't fell a tree the front yard wouldn't  
look beautiful

If you fell it  
sensitive mental activities will disappear  
something you couldn't understand something you couldn't  
experience  
will become self-evident

Gradually  
an unnatural cannibal-like figure  
as if sitting at my feet  
my natural rural sensations of joy arising from objects of  
beauty  
gentleness, tenderness--all, all  
one by one becoming extinct

As if all the ties I had made  
From childhood are loosening--  
When times are changing  
a turmoil, a struggle

You think  
that trees grow out in the open  
No, they grow within me they blossom  
from the three fingers which hold my pen  
you'll pluck the fruits.

Come a little closer  
Do I not smell like a tree?  
How wonderful it would be to embrace me!  
Don't you know how ecstatic you'll be?  
From me



## ASHARAJU

Asharaju (1954- ) has published three volumes of poetry, *Nepadhyam*, *Disha* and Oka Tadi Geetham. He has been awarded the Free Verse Front Award and CI-NA-RE Kavita Puraskaram. He has been fascinated by the poetry of Sri Sri. He says that K.Siva Reddy taught him the fundamentals of poetry.

### WHAT'S THOUGHT

You can imprison a human being  
You can ban speech  
Through laws and orders  
You can handcuff  
But  
How can you constrict human thought  
Thought is fire isn't it  
Thought is the ocean's roar isn't it  
How then with your pistolled hands  
Can you bind a volcano  
Thought eludes the grasp of everyone  
Thought prostrates not before anyone  
Thought is the entire earth  
Thought is the engulfing cyclone  
Thought is a human being transforming into a deluge  
How can you stop a deluge  
Thought is not a momentary doze  
Thought is not a walk on wooden stilts  
Thought is a flying bird when the sail is torn  
Thought is the vision of the opening eyelid when the  
compass is broken  
Thought builds life thought saves life  
Thought is a burning lamp  
When darkness engulfs  
Thought is a weapon that helps  
When a person is defeated in life

Thought cannot die  
Thought lives as a battle  
Thought becomes the forests of Srikakulam  
Thought becomes the hills of Adilabad  
Thought becomes the hamlets of Karimnagar  
Thought spreads out  
Becomes Indravelli dance  
Thought uttered loud  
Becomes the Gond women's song  
Song too is thought sport too is thought  
All fiery songs spitting blood are thoughts too  
Who can proscribe fiery songs  
Thought is Sri Sri  
Thought is Mahaprasthanam  
Thought is an alphabet turning into a weapon  
Thought is a sentence turning into a missile  
How then can you restrain missiles  
Thought is a person becoming a thunderbolt  
Thought is a person becoming a flame  
You can imprison a human being  
But how can you contain flames....

*(Translation from the Telugu of Asharaju's "Aalochanante" from  
Nepadhyam by M. Sridhar and Alladi Uma)*

**PREM KUMAR**  
**THE NOWHERE HOUSE**

By that there road  
this here house  
A speck on the horizon  
was a universe to us all  
On its smoke-tainted walls  
memories we etched grew  
like spring into summer  
autumn into winter  
Bells rang by mornings  
winds sang by nights  
tales of castles and goblins  
of ships and pirates  
until lured by sirens  
we slumbered in the songs....

This here house  
by that there road  
that no one knew or cared to know  
where it came from or went  
When birds flew their nests  
till the cattle came home  
we walked by laughter  
stumbled by pain  
Danced by harvest  
swept by rain  
The walls kept us warm  
The windows fed us dreams  
of snow capped peaks  
rivers of gold, silvery streams....

Far away in which whose land  
that house by nowhere road  
like its own ghost stands  
lost in the childhood maze  
When we miss those dusty trails

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

we sit in air-conditioned rooms  
(munch metaphors, sip cognac)  
and talk of global colonies  
of greenhouse effect  
unbuilt dams, riots, epidemics  
faces of hunger, unburnt rage  
broken wills...lingering hopes  
Then someone screams  
I have nowhere to go but home....

*(Transcreated from the original Punjabi by the author)*

**PREM KUMAR**  
**THE NOWHERE HOUSE**

By that there road  
this here house  
A speck on the horizon  
was a universe to us all  
On its smoke-tainted walls  
memories we etched grew  
like spring into summer  
autumn into winter  
Bells rang by mornings  
winds sang by nights  
tales of castles and goblins  
of ships and pirates  
until lured by sirens  
we slumbered in the songs....

This here house  
by that there road  
that no one knew or cared to know  
where it came from or went  
When birds flew their nests  
till the cattle came home  
we walked by laughter  
stumbled by pain  
Danced by harvest  
swept by rain  
The walls kept us warm  
The windows fed us dreams  
of snow capped peaks  
rivers of gold, silvery streams....

Far away in which whose land  
that house by nowhere road  
like its own ghost stands  
lost in the childhood maze  
When we miss those dusty trails

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

we sit in air-conditioned rooms  
(munch metaphors, sip cognac)  
and talk of global colonies  
of greenhouse effect  
unbuilt dams, riots, epidemics  
faces of hunger, unburnt rage  
broken wills...lingering hopes  
Then someone screams  
I have nowhere to go but home....

*(Transcreated from the original Punjabi by the author)*

## SUFI POETRY

### I

Allah Mohammed four friends are they  
Hazi Khwaza Qutab Farid  
Singing their name time and again  
The believers are sure to find  
A place in Jannat or Paradise

Beyond them there's no greater succour  
Beyond them there's no one dearer  
I alone don't say, the world says it, too  
Lowering your eyes before Baba is lowering them before God, too  
Allah Mohammed four friends are they

### II

No pain hits as hard as the pain of parting  
May lovers or friends never drift away

Night leaves stings as deep as a snake's  
And the rains appear as falling leaves  
Forever stringing a garland of tears  
The eyes shed pearls when people smile  
So what if the world is lost, no lover may ever be lost  
May lovers or friends never drift away

The canker of parting eats from within  
Not a breath of joy does it ever bring  
Sadness makes its dwelling in the heart  
And the darkness spreads its wings apart  
So what if grief comes trailing behind  
A sharer's presence is enough to comfort the mind  
May lovers or friends never drift away

Deserted by the friends and left all alone  
People often lose their wits around  
Even someone as love-sick as Ranjha  
Just became a jogi, piercing his ears  
A hundred thousand times do we all pray  
May lovers or friends never drift away

III

If you refuse to sit before my searing eyes  
Then O Biba, return my heart, I pray

Thinking it was you alone I could trust  
I lost my hope, my faith and my heart  
If parting is to be everyday  
Then O Biba, return my heart, I pray

Every moment shall be a burden I say  
If you choose somehow to stay away  
All I desire is to see your face  
And if you can't ever grant this humble plea  
Then O Biba, return my heart, I pray

You must lay your heart open and bare  
We have several joys and sorrows to share  
If you can't ever sit with me for a moment spare  
Then O Biba, return my heart, I pray

Now if you go away from me and spurn  
I'll simply seek my own death in return  
O jogi, my pain was too much to bear  
If that's how you'll make me suffer, I say  
Then O Biba, return my heart, I pray

IV

I'm small and my Murshad great  
Our meeting is the meeting of the great and small  
Blessed be the great who keep the small company  
And mingle freely as if it's no agony

Upon the threshold of Murshad's resting-place  
Let us kneel down to sing songs in His praise  
In defence to the status of a lover eternal  
Let's push our way into His dwelling place  
The world is friendly only to those who're friendly so  
That rarely do they ever turn friends into enemies or foes  
O friend, without 'Mohammed Baksh' this house is nothing but a  
Wilderness

Leaving me behind has my lover walked away  
Pushing me into a pool of confusion  
Like a tattered cloth hanging off the peg on a wall  
Right in the middle of a keekar grove  
When the enemy dies, let's sing no songs  
For the friends too shall fade away, one day  
On the day of the Great Flood, O Mohammed, all shall float away  
I'm small and my Murshad great.

*(Translated by Rana Nayar)*

## PAAVANNAN

Born on 20.10.1958 at Pondicherry. Currently working as Sub-Divisional Engineer in Department of Telecom at Bangalore. Author of eight short story collections, two novellas and one collection of poetry. Recipient of Ilakkiya Chinthanai Award, Govt. of Tamilnadu Award, Govt. of Pondicherry Award, Katha Award for his various works. His works are translated into various Indian languages and English. Translated two novels, three dramas, collection of short stories, two Dalit autobiographies from Kannada into Tamil. Compiled and translated an anthology of Kannada Dalit writings and modern Kannada poems.

### FORSAKING SPARROWS

Why haven't the sparrows  
come home yet?  
Could it be  
They have become tired of me  
And my dwellings?  
Now it is the usual time  
For their return.  
Without their caressing,  
Their songs and love making  
My room is empty now.

Could it be that  
They lost their bearings,  
or lost each other?  
Did they depart for somewhere else  
in sorrow or merriment?

There was nothing unfriendly  
in their looks this morning.  
Even when they hopped about  
From their nest to the table,

From table to window  
From window to the bed  
I didn't show any annoyance.  
I had never complained  
About their noise  
or the messes they made on the floor.  
Now it is dusk  
no use to expect them any more  
My consolation at this moment  
Is their abandoned nest.

### FOLLOWING THE CHILD

My little son  
gazes at the brimming lake  
with an excited heart.  
His legs are restless with a longing  
to walk to the water's edge  
and get the feet wet.  
He wants me also  
to go with him.  
His eyes intently move  
with the rhythmic beat  
of the waves lashing and receding.  
Whole body throbbing with pleasure,  
He scoops up water  
in his palms  
and pours it on the shore.  
“When did all this water fill up,  
and which way did it come?” he asks  
“Why hadn't it come  
up to our door?”  
He is worried  
whether the plants and bushes  
submerged in water  
were destroyed.

“I know a trick of magic” he says,  
“I’ll roll up the water like a sheet  
and lead you all  
to a brand new place.”

### LIFE NOT RECOGNIZED

His image as a drunk  
Walking with tottering steps  
is deeply etched in my mind.  
And he sleeps beside  
A discoloured earthen wall.

He was my boyhood friend,  
become an addict now,  
I don’t know how.  
His eyes, flaming  
a hazy red,  
Will they never again  
long to look at his dear ones?  
And his heart  
caught in the ecstasies of drink,  
Will it never more fill with love?

“How could you!” I ask  
and beg him to stop.  
“An embittered wife  
and three children  
burnt themselves to death.  
Even this  
hasn’t sobered you?”

He shakes his head  
And hastens to protest:

“It isn’t like that.  
You don’t understand.  
The tasting of liquor  
is not an escape  
into oblivion;

Nor is it a flight  
into a heady world.  
It is life--  
Another kind of life.  
Why doesn’t the world  
recognize this?”

## THE CITY OF POSTERS

I never could understand  
the psychology  
behind these posters,  
either lauding a person to the skies  
or condemning downright

Be it a challenge, or a declaration,  
an appeal or a thanksgiving,  
A welcome or a send off  
For everything they print  
multi-coloured posters.  
How did this happen?

Nowadays, no walls  
in their original colours  
are visible. Only the posters  
offend our eyes

These meaningless words!  
Shameless fawning!  
Blatant flattering!

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

Every letter is like a dog  
lolling his tongue,  
wagging his tail  
to please his master.

By and by, the city itself  
is turning into one big poster.

*(Translated from the Tamil by M.L. Thangappa)*

**NA MUTHUKUMAR**  
**THE BOY WHO SOLD BUTTERFLIES**

I saw him there,  
by the bridge,  
looked hardly thirteen.  
At the flower stalls  
yesterday,  
at the market lane  
last week  
his life's purpose  
seems to be just this transition  
from place to place.

He had spread his wares  
on an inverted umbrella  
and the butterflies lay there  
with their waxy underbellies,  
without losing colour  
at the buyer's touch,  
their wings  
robbed of  
all naturality.

He cries hoarse  
And manages to sell away  
One or two occasionally.

The buyers stand proud,  
Having captured now  
What had always slipped away  
From their hands  
In younger days.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

Cupboard or wall,  
Now the lizards back home  
Are sure to approach eagerly  
And remain rudely disappointed.

*(Translated from the Tamil by T.M. Raghuram)*

TABISH KHAIR  
**THE LANGUAGE OF INDIAN POETRY  
IN ENGLISH**

Language, as more than a medium and less than transparent, is a problem that any Indian writing seriously in English has to face with a greater degree of self-consciousness than that displayed by some of the best *young* British poets today. For example, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, as poets of a post-modern generation writing about an Anglophone High Capitalist world, can afford to take the *surface* of language largely for granted as the site of their 'play'.

In spite of its dependence on a kind of reduced negative theology, post-modernism makes a positive statement in favour of (what else?) the surface. As Baudrillard indicates in his writings the surface is arguably the main concern of post-modernism. But this--we are often told by post-modernists--is not a surface that goes beyond. For a surface that goes beyond will embroil us in matters of depth, history, causality, not *grand* perhaps but definitely *sustained* narratives. This concern with the surface is not just an item of belief for post-modernists; its existence can be discerned in much of contemporary criticism and some of contemporary poetry. Though, like everything that post-modernism claims as fact (or non-fact), the situation is much more complex than it appears on the *surface*.

Among the 'new' poets, Glyn Maxwell comes as close as anyone else to satisfying post-modern expectations of a largely depthless surface. His poems present a conscious playing around with language. But what is largely missing is the deep suspicion of language that one comes across in Tony Harrison or the sense of language-as-history in, among others, Seamus Heaney. For Maxwell--and to an extent Simon Armitage<sup>1</sup>, Don Paterson, Ruth Padel and talented younger poets like Sophie Hannah--language



and Armitage, the language of their generation and 'standard/poetic language' provide equal surfaces. One can move between them without any real friction.

Indian English poets are in a position that is *similar*--though *not* at all *identical*--to that of a poet like Harrison. Unlike the Maxwell generation of post-modern citizens of High Capitalist countries, the Indian writes about a world that is neither uniformly post-modern nor significantly High Capitalist. Moreover, it is a world that is not even uniformly Anglophone--only about 4 per cent of India's population speaks and writes English, and even most of these speak English along with one or more other Indian languages. Because of both her social positioning and her personal circumstances, the Indian writing in English works, of necessity, on a fissured surface. The Indian English poet cannot take the surface of his or her language for granted as a site for 'play'.

There are, as is evident, two main reasons for this. They can be dubbed 'linguistic' and 'social'. Linguistically speaking, the Indian English poet is confronted by other languages and these languages often vary from poet to poet. As Mehrotra puts it in his introduction to *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, most Indian English poets' "idiolect is constituted differently: Ramanujan's is of English-Kannada-Tamil, Kolatkar's and Chitre's of English-Marathi, Ali's of English-Urdu, Mahapatra's of English-Oriya, and Jussawalla has in an interview spoken of 'various languages crawling around inside [his] head'."<sup>4</sup> We can keep on adding to this list: the Indian English poet whose idiolect is confined to English-pidgin English is extremely rare. In his introduction, Mehrotra lists only one: Eunice de Souza. Bruce King's extensive study of modern Indian English poetry reveals that only four out of the 32 main poets studied list English as the *only* language spoken at home.<sup>5</sup> What this implies is that words from across languages clamour to be included in Indian English poems. Not only words, even scripts can play their part--as is obvious from Sujata Bhatt's "Search for my Tongue". The words brought in across languages

are obviously not transparent and, hence, Indian English poetry can seldom take for granted the surface of its own language.

And the social aspect adds to the fissured nature of the language of Indian English poetry, highlighting the fact that language is always more than a medium and less than transparent. Just as different linguistic surfaces make for a kind of tectonic underplay in Indian English poetry, acute social and economic differences ensure that the words of Indian English poetry cannot be taken as transparent across discourses. It is not that social and economic differences do not exist in, say, England. But the rhetoric of post-modernism, globalism, embourgeoisment of the working classes etc. combine with the realities of universal Anglophone education and High Capitalism to obscure the depth of these differences at times. But in a country with people speaking dozens of languages and obtaining official education in more than a dozen different scripts, in a country with modes of production ranging from ancient hand-held plough agriculture to silicone valleys, in a country like India social and economic differences make themselves glaringly evident. To this is added the fact that English is spoken only by the Indian cultural elite--that is, 4 percent of the total population. Of course, 4 percent is not a meagre proportion in India--it accounts for 40 million people, which is eight times the population of Denmark, for example. But the socio-economic and educational gap between this English-educated, middle and upper class elite (henceforth called the Babus) and the rest of India is glaring--especially if one refers to the bottom 60 percent or so (henceforth called the Coolies) that lives in conditions of poverty or semi-poverty and of illiteracy or semi-literacy. Even when words are common between the Babu and Coolie classes, they present sites of intense discursive conflict or come inflected with different discursive meanings. The word 'Babu' is a good example. While the Coolie classes use 'Babu' as a term of respect for the affluent and educated classes, Babu intellectuals often find the term offensive. Not because it reminds them of their privileges but because it reminds them of discourses that the Coolie classes are

not even aware of--English-language colonial discourses (echoed and subverted in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, for instance) portraying the Babu as a manipulating, unreliable, effeminate coward and comparing him unfavourably against 'unEuropeanised, pure, manly martial races' such as the tribal Afghan and the mountain Gurkha.

As is evident, the word--even within the circumference of English and/or Indian English--cannot be taken for granted. The language of Indian English poetry refuses to present an even surface for 'post-modernist' *play*--the words constantly call attention to themselves as sites of discursive *conflict* and to the realities *behind* the surface of the page.

A heightened realisation of discursive conflict--rising from socio-economic and educational differences--throws up a number of problems for the Indian English writer. And particularly the Indian English poet, for the Indian English novelist, for example, has more space to operate in because of the very nature of the novel genre. The Indian English novelist, because he or she has more space for manoeuvre, can construct a linguistic universe that either sets its own rules (as in Desani and Rushdie) or explains and interprets across discourses and languages. The latter process can be embedded in the text of the novel (such as Seth's *A Suitable Boy*) or be accompanied by footnotes and other paratextual devices (as in the novels of Raja Rao or R.K. Narayan). However, before we move back to Indian English poetry, it is necessary to dispel the common assumption that writers like Rushdie have managed to "capture the English spoken on the streets of India", as Anita Desai (among others) has claimed. Rushdie's language is *not* the English spoken on the streets of India because English is not spoken on the streets of India. English, when spoken, is spoken in the offices and drawing rooms of India. Rushdie's fascinating language is a consciously and artificially constructed linguistic universe that *pretends* to be Indian English by employing *some* Indian English elements and *creating* many others. Even the Indian English elements employed are turned to face an anglophone readership--

for example, Indian English compound neologisms like ‘lathi-charge’ (baton-charge) include two different words, one of them with a somewhat untranslatable meaning, yoked together to describe a third thing or event. The ‘lathi’ that Indian policemen wield is not really the same as a ‘baton’, just as a ‘roti’ is not the same as ‘unleavened bread’. But Rushdie’s compound words are self-explanatory and render the indigenous calque redundant: ‘di-lamp’, where ‘dia’ means lamp. Such language use is a brilliant continuation of the colonial tradition of *staged* Englishes. The fact remains that Indians who speak English out of choice speak accented but textual and ‘standard’ English. And other Indians do not speak English at all and definitely not unless confronted with a tourist or a Babu like Rushdie. Once we become aware of this situation, we can go back and address the dilemma of the Indian English poet. One can put this dilemma in the shape of two related questions:

- 1) What is Indian English poetry?
- 2) How does one make non-anglophone Indians speak English?

As has become evident from the above discussion, Indian English poetry cannot be written in ‘spoken dialects’. The English spoken by Indians who speak English from choice (the Babus) varies in its accent and is inflected upon by the ‘idiolect’ of the speaker. But it remains a largely textual and ‘standard’ English in its vocabulary and syntax. On the other hand, Coolie Indians do not speak English at all. Non-Babu middle class and lower middle class Indians may speak English when forced to do so, but they seldom do it from choice. The English of such non-Babu Indians may be very different from textual, ‘standard’ English and may display many of the peculiarities that Rushdie, for example, reworks to create his linguistic universe. But, of course, such Indians never speak English to each other or to Coolie Indians. On the other hand, the Indians who do speak English--the Babus--speak a largely textual and ‘standard’ version of English.

What this means is that Indian English is not a *spoken* 'dialect' (like, say, Jamaican English) which may or may not be transcribed into or as 'literary language'. The relationship between primary speech genres and secondary speech genres<sup>6</sup> in English-speaking-and-writing India is *not* the same as it is in Australia, England or Jamaica. But English is still a *genuine* language of communication and creativity used by 40 million people in India. It is a largely *textual* language in India, but that need not disqualify it. India has a long tradition of rich literatures being written in largely textual languages employed by the elite. Sanskrit was a largely textual language in ancient India--describing a consistently elitist trajectory from socio-linguistically regulated and fixed oral *texts* to standard written texts. It was replaced to a large extent by another textual language in the medieval period--Persian. In *some* ways, English followed in the footsteps of Sanskrit and Persian. In order to be itself, Indian English poetry will have to be aware of its own peculiar position--and work with its strengths instead of trying to assume the nature of, say, Jamaican English or the English of Glyn Maxwell.

While English remains a 'genuine' language of Indian creativity, its peculiar situation explains why Indian English poets cannot take language for granted. One of the problems Indian English poets have to solve is that of narrating non-anglophone Indians in English. Or of making non-anglophone Indians speak English. Usually not having the large canvas and rhetorical freedom of a piece of long prose fiction and being more bilingual than novelists like Rushdie or Anita Desai, Indian English poets cannot create a hegemonic linguistic universe that *stages* Indian English. They are forced to work with Indian English as it exists. And Indian English as it exists is largely a textual, 'standard' language used extensively for reading and writing by the middle classes but spoken only by a minuscule minority. That, finally, is the reason why Indian English poems portraying Indians *speaking* broken English or pidgin English are so rare and so unconvincing. The only such poems that succeed partly portray situations like a

Christian Ayah speaking to a highly anglicised metropolitan family. On the other hand, one of the few poems that succeed completely in portraying the broken English of the non-Babu classes is Nissim Ezekiel's "Irani Restaurant Instructions". That this poem is essentially 'light verse' further underlines some of the problems involved. Here is the entire piece<sup>7</sup>, part of a sequence of poems titled *Very Indian Poems in Indian English*:

Do not write letter  
Without order refreshment  
Do not comb  
Hair is spoiling floor  
Do not make mischiefs in cabin  
Our waiter is reporting

Come again  
All are welcome whatever caste  
If not satisfied tell us  
Otherwise tell others  
God is great.

(Irani Restaurant Instructions)

This poem succeeds in presenting a convincing transcription of non-Babu Englishes largely because it works with the knowledge that the owner of such a small restaurant would not speak English from choice but--in a place like Bombay--would have to paste up his rules and instructions in English. The English of this poem is not staged in the pseudo-oral tradition of Rushdie and Desani. It is Indian English with a particular and exact social location, the *broken* English that the *non-Babu* classes in *North* India use only under *some* circumstances. It does not depend on the myth of an equal surface of language or of the transparency of words across classes, languages and discourses. It takes into account the *textual role* and *prestige* of English in India. Finally, it

is play on the surface of language, but it succeeds only because what is below the surface of language has also been taken into account<sup>8</sup>.

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>In spite of his ‘Northern’ background.

<sup>2</sup>Tony Harrison, “Working”, Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1984) 124.

<sup>3</sup>Sean O’Brien, The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998) 246.

<sup>4</sup>Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992) 6.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce King, Modern Indian Poetry in English (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987 (1994)) 277-284.

<sup>6</sup>See, M.M. Bakhtin (Trans. Vern McGee), Speech Genres & Other Late Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Nissim Ezekiel, Collected Poems 1952-1988 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989 (1992)) 240.

<sup>8</sup>This paper is based on a shorter article that I wrote for *P.N. Review* (England) and a talk at the “World of Local Voices” conference in Saarbrücken, Germany.

KRISHNA RAYAN  
**THE LITERARY TEXT  
A THREATENED SPECIES?**

The centrality, by definition, of the text to the literary process --the process from the author to the text to the reader--is obvious and has been widely acknowledged as such down the centuries, and so has the dichotomy between literary and nonliterary writing. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century both assumptions were authoritatively reaffirmed, the first by the New Criticism and the second by Russian Formalism. The New Criticism described the text as a solid entity, a container for intended determinate meaning which could be accessed by close reading. Earlier on, Russian Formalism had asserted the difference between poetic and prose language (or literary and standard language) in terms of the devices of foregrounding and defamiliarization.

Both the assumptions have since been interrogated. Postmodernism has sought to erase the opposition between literature and paraliterature on the same grounds as the opposition between “high” and “mass” or “commercial” in cinema, music, painting and the other arts and media. This breaking down of barriers is distinct from the other new position in contemporary thinking, which is that the category “literature” has no ontological standing and that all is writing which can be read in any preferred way. In this essay, however, “without prejudice,” as lawyers say, we will continue to use the term “literary” if only for the severely practical purpose of keeping apart, say, Jorg Luis Borges’s *Collected Fictions* and Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence*.

The other major change in recent thinking has been the reaction against Derrida’s concept of deferral and undecidability and his scepticism about meaning having a context. Contesting this, Foucault emphasizes the need to attend to the conditions of origin of texts and to the forces that control the meanings which

they have produced. This has led to the development of what may be called political poststructuralism.

The New Historicism, which was heralded by the publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in 1980, is based on the assumption that the text is grounded in the historical context of its production. It reproduces or contests the relations of power specific to its time. The New Historicists have tested the assumption on several Renaissance texts, analysing them with reference to the ruling power structures of the period. Jonathan Dollimore's interpretation of *King Lear*, for instance, is that the play's main concern is not with the human condition, but with power and property. Similarly, in *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, edited by G. McMullan and J. Hope, which is a collection of essays showing how several plays of the time are concerned to present alternatives to the prevailing power systems, David Norbrook demonstrates how *The Tempest* has hints of an ideal society which challenge the power structures of the time. The play is thus read not as a work of literature but as a dramatized political treatise on contemporary power relations. If figurality is regarded as the defining characteristic of literature, then the New Historicist approach to the two plays declines to treat them as figurative presentations of the human predicament and classes them not as literary texts but as literal texts presenting ideological issues factually.

There have been other attempts in the 1980s to interrogate, roughly from the same premises, the liberal humanist definition of the text as a literary work offering aesthetic (Croce) or moral (Leavis) fulfillment; and more recently, to reject Derrida's concept of the infinite play of plural meaning. Catherine Belsey, for instance, in her 1983 essay, "Literature, History, Politics," describes the text as "raw material for the production of meanings" which "produce practices and generate behaviour"; and to her, discourage-as-knowledge being identical with power, the history of meanings is a political history, a history of the contest for power, a

contest for “meaning in its materiality”--a history, in short, of the struggle for power and of the resistance to power. The texts should be read not for their literary value but as criticism’s raw material for constructing a political history of the present. In Belsey’s leftist view, the history of the present is a history of the struggle for power, which legitimates radical political action now in the cause of race, class or gender. Catherine Belsey, whose ideas and phrases I have borrowed above, sums up her thesis thus: “The text is no longer the centre of a self-contained exercise called literary criticism. It is one of the places to begin to assemble the political history of the present.”

Catherine Belsey emphasizes the “substantial political ends which replace the mysterious objectives of aesthetic satisfaction and moral enrichment.” Ethical value is now passé, but aesthetic pleasure, I think, continues to be the drive which takes readers to literary texts as it has done in all cultures and all ages. In India, rasa (the reader’s aesthetic response) continues to be dominant across the board in the arts. However, there may be circumstances totally unrelated to training in the literary response that draw students to schools of English, at least in India; circumstances such as failure to obtain enrolment for a more worthwhile subject, or faith in an English major as a passport to employment in an advertising agency. But what is important is that despite these motivations, a student’s continued intense exposure to literary texts can breed taste (to use an old-fashioned word) where none existed before, as it indeed does in the other arts. Therefore there should ever be “a text in this class,” generating pleasure and understanding while it is being read and fostering interest in independent reading. But this has always remained a utopian scenario. Devices like continuous or internal assessment have failed to make a dent on the hegemony of the examination system. As Sudhakar Marathe has shown in his *Read First, Criticize Afterwards*, examination questions which are stereotyped, predictable and put a premium on the use of undigested material recycled from critical works make the text itself redundant and

irrelevant. As Marathe says, "...students and also many teachers read cribs or 'guide-books' (often in language which is simultaneously outdated Victorian and non-standard enough to call Pidgin) instead of prescribed texts." The poison is fed back into the system and regularly replenished, as most of the graduates in English, having missed more attractive careers, become teachers of English. The practice of marginalizing or wholly ignoring the literary text is thus perpetuated.

Jonathan Keates, writing in *The Spectator* recently, refers to the belief among some in "the impending death of books as we know them" and in "a future of screens and scrolling, of laptops and CD-Roms purchased from stores set out along the lines of present-day record shops with their browser troughs and user-friendly labelling." But Keates is certain that the book is not on its way out: "Only deliberate pig-headedness rejects the various blessings of information technology, but the demise of the book is surely not among these." Keates specifies two properties of the book which he is convinced will ensure its survival. The first is its nature "as an object, a physical construct of paper, cardboard, cloth, ink and glue... as something sensually understood, in the texture of its pages and their noise and above all their smell, indefinable save perhaps to an analytical chemist, but equally unforgettable in its potency of association." The second property of books is that they "are the only artefact whose diversity of aspect and anatomy comes near to replicating the enormous range of difference among the species which creates them. They are also, more significantly, the things we make to satisfy our sense that such difference still matters." Whether the book can be said to be threatened with extinction or not, the literary text is a different case. It originated as oral tradition and then was in the form of manuscript on leaf and later on paper. It is only since the invention of printing that it has existed as book, but it can be trusted to function just as happily on the monitor.

If the literary text today can be said to be endangered, it is not so much by the ground realities of the education system or of information technology as by the currency of certain reading strategies, inspired by theory, which treat the text not as a piece of literature but as a product of ideology, as a document of contemporary power relations and even as an instrument of political action. Whether there will be more changes in the theory of the text and the practice of reading and whether these will be such as to arrest the decline of the literary text or accelerate it is more than one can say, chiefly because the rate of obsolescence and turn-over among contemporary theories is almost as great as the pace of reproduction and mutation among the simpler organisms.

JOHN OLIVER PERRY  
**RAMANUJAN'S REMAINS**

A.K.Ramanujan. *Uncollected Poems and Prose*. Ed. Molly Daniels-Ramanujan and Keith Harrison. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. pp.109. Rs.325.

It is, no doubt, more than a bit churlish to complain about the long delayed publication of the literary remains of the much beloved and desperately missed A.K.Ramanujan (1929-1993). Yet, ready and anticipated since 1995, the present *Uncollected Poems and Prose* is a disappointingly thin volume. Only 100 pages are by Ramanujan himself to which are added--by, respectively Keith Harrison and Molly Daniels-Ramanujan, the editors--a slender four-page tribute and a four-page final note on the unpublished poems.

The extenuating circumstances are spelled out by the latter editor quite briefly in the acknowledgements given to especially Helen and Milton Singer, who were prime movers in AKR's academic and publishing career and in making various of his remaining works available, all his papers now being stored in the Regenstein Library, Chicago. It is good to know also that friends, particularly Girish Karnad, are translating his Kannada works into English, and that Norman Zide suggested adding the two interviews to the single nearly finished essay on "The Ring of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Indian Literature" and the brief eulogy for Barbara Stoler Miller (who died even younger than AKR just two months before him) that constitute apparently all the "uncollected prose." In the final note we are told that the 32 proffered poems "were chosen because they could be re-read" while others were considered mere "surface verses, mostly writing exercises." Molly Daniels lived with AKR intimately and long enough to know his poetic practices and what is appropriate to print now--but it might have been enlightening about that always mysterious process to have some samples of the rejected work. In daughter Krittika Ramanujan's "Preface" to the posthumous

*Collected Poems* (OUP, 1995) we learned that 148 poems were found in 1993 on three disks, of which 60 were then published as *The Black Hen* section then and there. Soon some enterprising researcher will surely pursue further whether the remaining 56 are just quick notings of a passing image or little occasional poems or some unfinished experiments in various directions. Any of these might reveal something more of “The One Self Within the Many Selves” that his wife traces in the opening four-stanza poem, “Invisible Bodies” and “[t]he poem ‘Turning Around’ included at the last minute in *The Black Hen* in *Collected Poems*.” Presumably, therefore, many fewer publishable poems remained for this final volume.

Now that these poems are published, they reveal an unsuspected depth of darkness among AKR’s many selves, a deepening and darkening of his poetic vision having already been noted in the *Black Hen* poems. He apparently dealt “almost every day” with “acute early morning depression which followed him well into his waking and working hours,” as he reported to Keith Harrison “[n]ot long before his death.” Molly must have read and approved her co-editor’s words, and they may indicate a more or less later condition rather than a fact of his entire life like President/General DeGaulle’s fabled daily decision from his youthhood onwards not to commit suicide. In any case, the word “depression” occurs twice in a 1991 poem, “Anchors,” which begins: “Why is blue so blue and not turning green/as my moods do?” After a stanza figuring forth some “greening” processes--which ends: “grasping at the corpuscles/in the amniotic sac,/the first word pressing towards/the last.”--the poem concludes:

Depression weighs  
an anchor in shallow waters,  
the mud has forms of life.  
I cannot talk to  
ladies in white hats  
around the swimming pool.

Chlorine blue,  
depression stirs slow coils,  
a python hungering for days,  
stomach juices  
eating its walls.

Girls turn into trees  
in folktales.  
Trees turn into girls  
when I hug them,  
at fourteen,  
wanting that girl in the bus  
sitting three rows out of reach  
wafting smells of jasmine and sesame oil.

In isolation it is not astounding to read here that AKR's "moods" were not always so solidly companionable, courtly and generous as they seemed to those of us fortunate enough to know him, however briefly. Keith Harrison (who expresses surprise at AKR's liberal democratic politics) thinks that the poet may have been overwhelmed by a variety of academic and translating burdens, but that seems too dismissive of his capacities for work. As readers, we easily distance ourselves from the unapproachable "ladies in white hats" and sympathize with the speaker's depression by the poolside, especially as this attack of "the blues" is framed by greenings--not only the consolations that "mud has forms of life" but also the consequent memory of a specific, touchingly naïve instance of early adolescent sexual frustration. (This could well be an instance jostling with or even precipitating one insight in "The Ring of Memory"--that "to remember is to love or rather to love is to remember.") The poem draws parallels between the two "blue" occasions, making the present one a minor, if significant, passing "mood". But the central image of the python stirring ulcerously in the speaker's stomach indicates a more serious, indeed continuing condition.

I do not want to make too much of this contrarian or “deconstructive” interpretation, but looking in the thirty-two poems for this pattern of depression with or without some sort of consolation, I found the majority are more or less pointedly not merely skeptical about life in society (versus in memory and in desire?) but quite distinctly pessimistic. Chosen to open the selection, “Invisible Bodies,” certainly for me, though not for Molly Daniels, becomes increasingly negative in its first three stanzas imaging the horrors of gutter life encountered by “he”, “she” and “the boy” on “Turning the corner of the street.” The fourth and final stanza reaches into a depressing void: “Just any day, not only after a riot,/even among the gamboge maples of fall/streets are full of bodies, invisible/to the girl under the twirling parasol.” I cannot think that the twirling girl expresses a positive, consoling innocence. One expects (positively or negatively?) that, like the desperate yearnings of the frustrated fourteen year old adolescent, her self-centered mood too will pass and she will see the terrible bodies.

In the very next poem, “1951” (composition undated), “[a] green snake crosses the road” moving from camouflaged “safety to danger to safety.” The comment: “Maybe a lesson there, but/I don’t learn it as I scurry/from safety to safety, camouflage/to camouflage.../.../cowering under the mythology/of an imaginary sword/hung by a horsehair over my head/in sleep and waking.” A couple of pages later in its superficially consolatory argument “Figures of Disfigurement” lists a set of sick, disabled, arthritic, dyslexic, and epileptic persons whose various “disfigurements” gain them admiration, a positive reputation, even ecstasy “sometimes; amnesia may/open memories of past/lives. Timely death/may give away a heart/or an eye.” (The poem is dated 13 January 1992; “The Man from Hope” was just assuming the Presidency of the United States and helping to engineer the longest economic boom in U.S. history!) The next poem (dated 8 July 1991) is “All Night,” full of yelling men, thunder and lightning, hands playing “on bodies in several houses/heat wrings rivers of sweat/and it doesn’t rain/it doesn’t get dark//and it’s grey/not even

dark/between them.” “Many a Slip” follows with a list of family celebratory days: “Resentment festers/on such days./ On New Year’s Day, people make resolutions/to break them by evening...” and ends: “Brothers and mothers written into the calendar,/time grows on the family tree and waves in the wind/like beards of Spanish/moss, shaking fingerbones as we look/for alligators in Florida keys.” The inter-stanzaic hesitation between “Spanish” and “moss” makes almost physical the feeling of not quite despair, but certainly depression. “However” begins “however we say it/we’re always wrong/when we say we can say it/right” with two examples of failures to console friends or acquaintances for their miseries. “Backstreet Visit” to a “maybe Thai” young prostitute ends when “She flinched/I left in a hurry and he, he [i.e., the other, desiring self, libido to ego] vanished/in my sweat and shudders.” In “Love 10” (undated) “Love poems, he says, are not easy to write/because they’ve all been written before./ Words play dead. The seasons are trite.” After a brief development of this motif the coda: “Turning over and over tomorrow/and yesterday, day is already night./ Love, unwritten, cataracts his sight.”

Eight further poems I have noted as ultimately in a depressed mood. Their titles are often telling enough: “Time Changes,” “Daily Drivel: a monologue,” “Lying” (the last example: “The newborn was ugly, moist,/hairy all over like a wet rat:/every visitor said/she was a beauty,/had her mother’s eyes.”), “Suddenly” (“money and pity do not cure/the pang, milk and Tagore/no longer fill the hollow”), “Becoming” (where animals and finally Olympic runners all become commodities for sale), “Computers Eat [Words at] Fingertips.” In the last of these “[What’s] He to Me or Me to Him” AKR begins, “when I was translating/twenty years ago/the saints who sang/ten centuries ago about Siva/without any thought of me/I didn’t have any/thought of a young man” who attempted suicide, “leaving behind poems/for me to read/and to translate this week/without a thought/of him who had thought//of me and the saints/who spoke through me/to him yet had told him/nothing nothing at all.” The lack of a pause between the “nothings” sharpens the unuttered pain. The theme expressed in the title is

taken up also in “Turning Around” from *The Black Hen*, which Molly Daniels quotes, finding there “a Hamletian thought” of feeling people’s separateness and as a poet making “self-sustaining” connections through, she says, “the power of words.” But I suspect the failure of words was also AKR’s experience, perhaps the more basic one felt in the gut, not the one T. S. Eliot complained about as an intellectual or imaginative challenge. Still, I must admit that my reading may be colored by other events than these poems, perhaps mainly the hint from Keith Harrison.

Looking back over the *Collected Poems* and focusing on those in *The Black Hen*, perhaps the consolations of memory for frustrated desire predominate over the sense of loss--e.g., in the last three poems there, *Death in Search of a Comfortable Metaphor*, *Pain* and *Fear No Fall*. However, Molly Daniels argues in her concluding note there: “For example, in the title poem, ‘The Black Hen,’ a *maker* (poet) looking at what he has created becomes terrified. This idea is further extended in the [there much adumbrated] poem, ‘Museum,’” and Daniels ultimately explains: “The making of a painting [or a poem] no less than the making of a dream shares a terrifying obsessive destructive power in the life of the *maker*”, concluding, nevertheless, positively: “Poem speaks to poem, and we eavesdroppers begin to develop yet another layer of meaning.” (pp.279 and 281)

*Collected Essays* appeared soon after *Collected Poems*, which explains why so little prose remained for this volume, fortunately occasioning the first-time printing of the two interviews. Transcribed from tapes, the first is with Chirantan Kulshrestha at the University of Chicago in 1970 and the other with two University of Michigan faculty members when AKR taught there in 1989. Kulshrestha, aged 24, raises with AKR, still a youthful 41, the then standard questions about the cultural bifurcations of Indian English poets, particularly those who write their poetry abroad, as the more adept largely did at that time. CK, accepting that poets do not choose their language, asks for another of AKR’s admittedly passing opinions about the supposed “problem of conveying a

certain native sensibility in a foreign language,” and again AKR demurs that a poet aims “to be oneself in the language one uses, even in the second language, to find a voice which is one’s own, however cracked or small, sick or normal....If only one can be in touch with this level of linguistic unconsciousness, this wholeness. True language use is unconscious in this sense.” Finally he says, “I think the [better regional] language writers have greater density, greater range. ...But, on the other hand, if you look at the middle standard....There are proportionately more competent second-rate writers in English....The purely statistical claim [about the dominance of English in India] has more to do with market research than the quality of writing, though it might affect the quality of a writer’s food.” The humor in that last recorded remark balances the practical wisdom of the perception, more accurate today than ever, although the consequent threat to a living tradition of literature in the regional languages was then not discussed.

In the 1989 interview the focus is on the modern writer world wide as some kind of exile. (“Hybridity” had not yet become the cant term.) AKR deftly deflects the false victimization, rejects forced exilic or even expatriate status, and points out that “about 10 percent of India is bilingual,” with many a one an “internal alien,” as he was, teaching away from his Tamil home from age 20 onwards. Thus, “my interest, my unconscious agenda, has been to diversify our notions of Indian civilization. To take it away from the purely Brahmanical” Hindu and hierarchical one.(55) It is on such evidence that Keith Harrison properly sees AKR’s unsuspectedly deep political sentiments emerging. Connecting with the previous decade’s interview, AKR explains,

I have never translated the Vedas. My interest has always been in the mother tongues, not Sanskrit, because I have always felt that the mother tongues represent a democratic, anti-hierarchical, from-the-ground-up view of India. And my interest in folklore has also been shaped by that. I see in these counter-systems, anti-

structures, a protest against official systems. My work in folklore represents the [oral and non-literate] world of women and children. (55)

Later, about believing in Sanskrit, “For most of us, that is simply not there,” and “I suppose I’m ideologically radical towards Sanskrit...partly my reaction to the Hindu caste system.” (60 and 61) And finally, of the “folklore, even what we call self-expression, ...found in...three thousand dialects,” he dramatically affirms: “I want the diversity!”

There are also in this extended interview a number of witty and sombre insights about the work and the nature of his marvelously communicative translations, always a compromise needing the assistance of explanatory notes and introductory background, never seeking the dream of seamless perfection or of ventriloquism: “Ultimately the language you translate into comes from yourself. As hard as you try, you just cannot get away from it.” (pp.67-8) Hearing these words from the interviews and the many other comments Ramanujan has made not only through his poems and translations but in his incisively instructive introductions, explanatory notes, and exploratory essays (like the famously indecisive “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?”) we can only be grateful for what remains in our diverse loving memories and our equally diverse interpretations of the life and work of this decent, thoughtful, and deeply self-aware person. He remains for us all a sensitive human being whose every sentence and poetic fragment carry us deeper into complex understandings of our own multiple selves.

KRISHNA RAYAN  
**MAHAPATRA, PANIKER AND OTHERS**

Jayanta Mahapatra. *Bare Face*. Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2000.  
pp.79. Rs.100.

Ayyappa Paniker. *Days and Nights*. Trivandrum: National  
Education Research Centre, 2001. pp.250. Rs.200.

*A New Book of Indian Poems*. Ed. Gopi Krishnan Kottoor. Kolkata:  
Writers Workshop, 2000. Rs.300 (hardback)/Rs.100 (flexiback).

The Poet, the Prophet, and Society

“...Poetry makes nothing happen....” said W.H. Auden. Jayanta Mahapatra would seem to disagree. Several poems in Part I of *Bare Face* have a different thesis: it is not that poetry by its nature cannot influence the course of events, but it would rather try not to. The mea culpa that is loud and insistent in *Bare Face* is that poetry has chosen to remain an idle spectator, a silent witness, to the evil of our times, content in the complicity which this entails. Poetry is now lame:

Perhaps the lines of my poem  
will be lame for a long time,  
losing their fight against  
the pain of the screaming, frightened girl  
in Kosovo, or kicking vainly  
at the anger of a boy on the West Bank.  
Or because they have been unable  
to bear the weight  
of years of poverty in this land.  
Any time my Government  
breaks its promises, a line of the poem  
is dragged along the wide streets

of New Delhi...  
Today a line of this poem  
has lost the use of its healthy legs,  
trapped like a sparrow  
which has strayed inside,  
beating its wings against  
the bars of the world's conscience.  
It slumps pitifully  
on the floor of the present.  
(“The Lines of my Poem”)

Metaphors of a child and a girl powerfully reinforce this effect  
of criminal neutrality and passivity:

The poem is like a lost child wailing  
near a lamp post, uncomforted by the coin  
thrust into its fist by a passer-by.  
(“The Tame Ending”)

Sometimes I see the poem  
as one who stands  
with her arms folded,  
as if holding herself for control...  
(“Not in Defence of the Poem”)

The poem has no place to hide.  
It is no longer a journey to somewhere  
but a thrust into some wild killing ground...  
This poem becomes a girl growing up,  
while keeping her legs pressed chastely together,  
looks around shyly,  
as another set of January deaths  
when a father and his two children were burnt alive  
(just because they had another faith)  
sees the murky recesses of her shredded heart...  
(“For Days Together”)

It was there, friend, this poem,  
its hands folded, eyes shut,  
looking down at those three charred corpses  
of a father and his two young sons  
in the middle of a long journey to nowhere.  
(“Progress”)

Linked to the turning-the-blind-eye, shrugging-off, bowing-out temper is the keeping-mum practice, so that silence, which elsewhere in Mahapatra’s work is a potent, almost mystic, force, becomes in *Bare Face* an ally of acquiescence in evil.

Yet the ironic thing about the poem  
is that it easily says farewell,  
shuts itself up in silence,  
leaving one alone  
with an obligation  
and a pretext of unconcern.  
(“Not in Defence of the Poem”)

At times poetry pushes its way unceremoniously  
to the entrance of life, life’s lies at its heels.  
The silence that falls then is ominous.  
(“The Tame Ending”)

You are certainly not mute,  
but silence is because of poetry.  
(“The Trail of Poetry”)

Poetry today has moved away very far from the poetry of the past, and whether mutely or otherwise, whether by commission or omission, it has become evil’s accomplice:

Once upon a time there were words  
that knew better than the secret doubts  
of a faith that had faced abandonment and defeat...  
Once they bore the smiles of God,

nameless manuscripts on palm leaves  
in a dead language of aborigines  
and gracious of growing things.  
Those poems do not belong any more...  
For all its intellectual appearance, this poem  
of mine is sealed in a layer of glass,  
forbidding, unearthly.  
Like the hesitant flowering scarlets  
of *palas* every January,  
or the malevolent wind rising off the Ganga,  
and a country puts up its forgotten Death  
on display once again on a gilded stage.  
(“For Days Together”)

An angry anguished consciousness of this change in the nature and function of poetry as an institution has occasioned a change in the concerns and imagery of Mahapatra’s poetry; the transition occurred in the very early 1990s. From inwardness and grave meditateness, his poems moved away to a preoccupation with the external scene--and he has been a humanist horrified by the excesses and brutalities of politics today.

“Requiem”, the title of Part II, is richly ambiguous; at the end of the day the reader can’t decide whether the sequence of twenty pieces is a lament for the death of Mahatma Gandhi half a century ago, or a lament for the death of the cause and ideals he lived for. Some of the poems would point to Part II being an elegy for the saint. They present his teachings, the vivid symbols that he invented for his belief system, the high moments of his life, which are also the defining moments of modern Indian history:

The spinning wheel whirred on,  
measuring the heartbeat of an old man.  
As though the shadows in the room  
held a bazaar of quick sunbirds.  
His hands

move the morning on  
with memories.

(VIII)

The history books say:  
When he quietly stooped and picked up  
a handful of salt,  
the gentle English countryside far away  
was lit by a silent old firefly.  
Still, the grass was not ready to die inside.

(IV)

You toyed with the idea of trying  
that God would refuse you nothing.  
What did you cry?  
Remorse and fasting. Perhaps prayer.  
It is a world in itself,  
this *ahimsa*,  
with its mysterious shadows  
lurking under ancient places,  
that assumes the clear, self-sustaining light of suns:  
a redefinition of beauty.

(XII)

And then, the end:

And the poem of a mere two words  
is drawn to its own beauty,  
born in the cool January air,  
ending in the fullness of fire;  
*He' Ram.*

In these two words  
was the briefest of silences,  
a touch of the silence of immensity.

(IX)

But there are several other poems which mourn not the death when the assassin's bullet felled the saint but the other death which has been taking place since, by a process of gradual bleeding, of Gandhiji's religion of non-violence and love, and alleviation of poverty and disease. The first poem of the series asks:

What help are the proffered rose petals  
which open up a half-familiar fairyland  
that we cannot understand  
or care for one another or for anything at all?  
(I)

(The hollowness and hypocrisy of laying flowers on Gandhiji's grave are pointed up in the penultimate poem:

Today the voice that points a finger at you  
floats over the breath of discarded ideals,  
the breath of dead flowers day after day at Raj Ghat....  
(XIX)).

The last poem of the sequence is an explicit requiem for Gandhiji's legacy of faith:

What you have left behind are  
faded pictures on bare office walls. A day  
every year as a national holiday.  
Growing, seething leper colonies.  
Especially for us  
the thought to ignore  
what the underprivileged live for.  
And the ghost who walks the villages  
that have lost their children before they were born.  
The old watch, the worn clogs,  
the soul that at times  
quivers with the scent of the country's blood.  
(XX)

The message, thus, of Part II is that social behaviour today rests on a cynicism, callousness and unscrupulousness that constitutes a total abandonment of Gandhiji's philosophy and practice. It is the same kind of pursuit of success, devotion to power and profit and indifference to deprivation that, according to Part I, poetry, by its failure to protest, has tacitly connived at. It would thus be wrong to think that *Bare Face* is actually two faces; the two Parts have been made organically one by a subsurface process of conceptual integration. The skill with which this structural organization has been carried out matches the mastery of pregnant phrase and vivid image for which Jayanta Mahapatra has no equal in Indian English poetry.

### The Flesh and the Spirit

*Days and Nights* makes available to the English reader for the first time Ayyappa Paniker's poems of 1969-1981. It presents him approaching the height of his creativity and versatility. In this collection he is seen to be, more than ever before, a veritable Puck, with an enormous wardrobe of guises. The heterogeneity of his oeuvre is extraordinary. In their loci the poems range from the Nandana garden in Heaven to the Kirukiram panchayat office on the earth, and from Mattancheri in Kerala to Moskva in Europe and farther, to Manhattan in America. The themes range from love, death and such concerns as in the "Days, Nights" sequence all the way to Uncle Indan wiping the dirt off his feet. The language can be highly charged or even obscure at one extreme, and light and conversational at the other. Altogether, the diversity and multifacetedness of the poems make it impossible to attempt generalizations. It would be a more realistic approach if we focus our attention on a single poem; and for reasons that will become apparent in due course, our own choice shall be "Urvashi"--a play with the format of a script for a Kathakali episode, and more importantly, an explicit message enshrining an important teaching:

Seeing love and desire separate:  
That is the vision of truth.  
When the cobweb of desire goes,  
Love becomes the cause of joy...  
Love that is free from desire.  
That alone is true immortality.

To chart the journey from carnal love to the final realization spelled out in these lines is the central conscious concern of the play.

It opens with the temptation scene. Narayanamuni embarks on his tapas (penance), chanting, “O...O...m...m. Open my eyes and grant me vision...” Soon,

Like the bow, strung by the pride of the god of love,  
Looking for the arrow,  
The arrow of sensual passion,

Urvashi, the dancer in heaven, appears before the Muni, displaying the attractions of the body and detailing keen delights of sensual love. The Muni, angered, pronounces on her the curse that she be “Born on earth in human form”. Urvashi’s retort is that that indeed is what she would like to happen, as she longs to unite with the best of men. Sure enough, the best of men, the illustrious King Pururavas, on his way back to the earth after a campaign to rid heaven of demons, arrives in Nandana, the celestial garden, in time to rescue Urvashi from the demon Keshi. Pururavas and Urvashi fall under the spell of each other’s beauty, and he is led to the moonlit bank of the Ganga where, soon to be locked in passionate love, they meet for the first time on earth. Next they meet in Pururavas’s palace where they unite. However, during a visit by the Gandharvas, Urvashi disappears and is back in heaven. Pururavas is disconsolate, but Urvashi reappears, to utter the words that form the final message of the play:

If desire inheres in love,  
Desire is the cause of grief.  
If one's grief can be turned  
Into the cause of others' happiness,  
That transformation is love;  
If you expect it back, that is grief.

On hearing a transformed Urvashi preach a love free from physical passion, Pururavas is converted and prays that he too achieve non-carnal love, and the play ends with Pururavas moving to the bank of the Ganga to commence tapas in order to be vouchsafed a new vision.

The stylized presentation of events thus moves to the final enunciation of a love that is above the fever of the flesh. The concept of "pure" love or a "spiritual" love has insistently recurred in various cultures, perhaps as a reaction against the turbulence and emotional futility of sexual activity. In Malayalam poetry itself there is a complex and richly nuanced portraiture of a relationship that is free of the physical and sensual, in Kumaran Asan's *Nalini*. The devotion presented there is ambiguous at its deepest level and trembles between the physical and the spiritual ever so imperceptibly. The girl's achievement of an uncertain sublimation and the ambiguity with which it invests her language and behaviour are one of the most moving situations in Indian literature. In *Urvashi*, however, spiritual love is presented not as a difficult condition which a frail young human aspirant is struggling to attain but as something enjoined by ascetics and celestial beings, something identified with the divine and with heaven. To exalt love without desire, it is equated with the privileged term in the established hierarchical oppositions: divine/human, heaven/earth, light/darkness, joy/grief and truth/illusion. This is the burden of all authoritative utterances in the play. Narayanamuni says:

Keep away, desire, I know  
You are the cause of grief.

A converted Pururavas prays:

The love that is free from desire  
Pour into my blood!

And Urvashi's final statement, which has already been quoted from, is an elaborated and more emphatic setting out of the same principle.

This is the overt, explicit, ostensible meaning of the play. But if the meaning of a text is defined as what the reader responds to, then the parts of the text or the levels of the text that he or she responds to deeply are, I think, other than those that we have concerned ourselves with above. These parts or strata of the text which are other than the pronouncements of the good and the great form a dimension which generates a different meaning which is clearly at odds with the declared meaning which we have summed up above.

Thus at the end of the play, an Urvashi, readmitted to her celestial provenance, advocates a "pure" love:

Seeing love and desire separate;  
This is the vision of truth.

But the speech fails to be convincing--the words ring hollow beside the bold forthright words spoken by her to Narayanamuni in response to the curse:

To forget your body and foster your soul  
You drowned yourself in your penance.  
Truth is incomplete, accursed and powerless,  
Bereft of the secret of muscle and marrow.

In an attempt to seduce the Muni, Urvashi had recited a veritable hymn to the beauty of the body and detailed the delights it offered:

In my waist slumbers  
The heaven of happiness.  
Discover the blessedness  
Never found in meditation.  
Pluck and strike the strings  
Of the tamburu hips...  
The heaven you seek  
Is at my fingertips.  
The creativity you look for  
Is at the joints of my thighs...

From irresistible enchantress to priestess of the creed of non-carnal love is so radical a conversion that it must have taken some powerful causation to occasion it. But there is no sign of any such an event. Urvashi's final homily thus lacks dramatic credibility.

On the other hand, the dialogue is alive with physical pleasure and passion when Urvashi and Pururavas meet for the first time, and in the second encounter Pururavas is bolder and exalts the joys of earth above those of heaven:

Do you have in heaven  
Days and nights like this,  
And evenings such as this?  
This love that like steam  
Fills up every moment:  
Tell me, is it there in heaven?  
The leaping breast of hill,  
The folding narrow stream:  
Tell me, do you have these in heaven?  
The deep slumbers one has  
In beds of dream, embraced  
By the hands of cool moonlight,  
Tell me, do you have them there in heaven?

Urvashi and the King proceed to witness a pageant of seasons, and each of the six passages spoken by them imaging the loveliness of

the season is a lyric. The sensuous beauty of nature is made to parallel the sensual attractiveness of the human body. Thus spring, the first of the six seasons:

Jasmine blossoms, ilanji blossoms,  
Bees fly around the creepers,  
In the veins of youthfulness  
Flows the honey of passionate love.

The two--body's rapture, and the loveliness of the landscape--exist in a relation of symbiosis.

While the voices of the high-minded necessarily carry authority in the scenes they dominate, the rest of the play is a celebration of the beauty and delights of the earth--whether guilty or innocent, whether of human beings or of nature. The language of these parts of the play has resonance and vitality--that is in sharp contrast to the limpness and rigidity of the hortative passages--and throbs with the pressure of a meaning that is additional to and at variance with the official or superficial message of the play contained in Urvashi's peroration.

In an important contribution to literary theory, Ayyappa Paniker has enunciated a novel concept--that of "Antassannivesha". Antassannivesha is the phenomenon of one text carrying within it another text. The inserted or interior text mostly originates by an unconscious process: and it mostly exists in a state of opposition to the outer meaning. This inner meaning always has ascendancy over the conscious explicit meaning. Paniker has tested this theory and its ramifications on several Malayalam classics, generating a whole range of invaluable insights into the texts and the authors. His own work, as can be seen in the play we have analysed, can reward significantly this new approach. If *Urvashi*, either as a written or performed text, is responded to in the light of Antassannivesha, it can prove as contemporary today as it did three decades ago when it was written and can illuminate the substance of a controversy--"...the fierce dispute/Betwixt damnation and

impassioned clay,” as Keats called it--that is as heated today as ever in the past.

Postcards to Parents

A group of poems which stands out in Gopi Krishnan Kottoor's anthology, *A New Book of Indian Poems in English*, consists of pieces to or on the poet's father or mother. Of the two pictures comprising Dom Moraes' "What Mother Left", one is a collection of her relics wrapped in brown paper and the other, reproduced below, is the tomb itself:

Too many women share one tomb.  
A curious squalor, for their bones,  
Carius with time, have come apart:  
Femurs and ribs so intermixed  
God only knows which ones are whose.  
And mixed with them is someone else...

The passage is a vivid evocation of the schizophrenic multiplicity and disconnectedness of his mother's personality. Meena Alexander's "Elegy for My Father" is similarly preoccupied with bones and opens thus:

Father, when you died, your bones  
were brittle, fit to burn.  
They stretched you on a teakwood bench.  
Light etched your cheekbones...

The sun when it splashed  
into the Arabian Sea  
made candles gleam in rows  
all along your ribcage.

What is unique about the poem is that the bone, which is almost an archetypal symbol of mortality, is used by Meena Alexander as a conduit for significant meanings. In recounting her experiences of her living father, knuckles-- "clenched fists"--appear twice: Once thus:

I caught you at the dining table,  
fists clenched,  
forward bent in darkness.

Then again:

Smoke poured from your cigarette.  
I learned to read a kindness  
in your clenched fists...

In an unusual exercise, the same image presents itself on both sides of the mortality divide. The ribs, which will glow like candles in the setting sun while the body lies awaiting burial, perform a very different function while the person is alive:

'In those hills  
You feel God is so close'  
you whispered, sitting up in bed.  
In your rib I heard  
the thud-thud-thud  
of an animal heart  
that means to keep pace  
with the terrible light of God.

In the neighbouring poem, Tabish Khair's "To My Father Across the Seven Seas" the emblem of paternity is the newspaper, either loosely held by the father or lying loosely in his lap. It can represent either of the changes that can overtake an ageing mind: print media representation, which had once been firmly grasped, now becoming a substitute for reality; or reality which had once been tightly grasped, now losing its solidarity and fading to the thinness of paper.

In Kottoor's "Sailing with Father" we revert to the bone image:

The night stirs hunched  
Gremlined to our wet bones.

Kottoor's poem is an obscure utterance. In contrast, Mamta Kalia's "Goodbye Papa" is lucid and limpid.

You could say things so directly  
Whereas I still struggle with pen on paper.

The poem, however, proves that she is very much like Papa. But by "direct" we only mean here transparent and easily accessible. But in the case of Kympham Singh Nongkynrih's poem "Lines Written to Mothers who Disagree with their Sons' choices of Women", directness connotes aggressive plain speaking.

For managing to love  
an object of scorn,  
they place around my neck  
a garland of threats...  
Leave cherries to winter, mother,  
love to seasoned lovers.

Since Sylvia Plath's poem on her father and Philip Larkin's lines on his parents appeared several years ago, fence-mending between generations has made good progress and poets' criticism of their parents has been gentle. Nongkynrih strikes a different note, but it is not an attack but a plea for autonomy.

Kottoor's anthology has variety and range, and one method of picking one's way through it is to identify, as we have done, thematically, cohesive groups.

Note: Grateful acknowledgement is made for permission to reproduce my comments on *Urvashi*, from the Journal of Literature and Aesthetics, Kollam.

K. NARAYANA CHANDRAN  
**EFFECTS OF DISTANCE:  
HOSKOTE'S DREAMSCAPES**

Ranjit Hoskote. *The Cartographer's Apprentice* (with drawings by Laxman Shreshtha). Bombay: Pundole Art Gallery, 2000. pp.75. Price not stated.

Ranjit Hoskote. *The Sleepwalker's Archive*. Mumbai: Single File (Dadiba Pundole), 2001. pp.152. Rs.180/- £9.00 \$12.00.

It ought to go without saying, but perhaps does not. The language of poetry is neither language quite for its own sake, nor that which simply names and shows a world. Further: there is the language that traps you in one when you desperately want to be in the other. Schools thrive on such magnificent confusions of intent, but a good poet will not, as an expedient, create a thicket of verses for the fawn of sense to go in and hide. Ranjit Hoskote's two recent volumes give us no misleading picture of the events that shape his language. He does not mistake dreams for a part of his environment and, as George Santayana once feared, "so spoil our silence by making it fantastic, and our dreams by making them obligatory." But there may be other difficulties for the reader when a poet chooses to be difficult or, as seems to be the case here, when the poet writes about the difficulty of writing poetry in an age of medical transcription. Between Ambition and Acme, again, is a good hard mile!

On the road to those heights there are challenges: metaphors that simply occlude ("the spoor of a maple, the trace of a tune", "enthroned between the kerosene streams/of dull speech and diligent policy"); epigraphs that do not quite know what to make of themselves as diminished things; a distracting parataxis now and then that works rather like teasing attachments to an email you can't open; and, perhaps, a reader's incapacity to raise an

immediate wall to bounce the poet's "significance" against: "This room is a pose/of glass nouns", for example. And then, there may have been a couple of times when I wasn't quite in a mood to split the lark to hear its music, but couldn't help noticing something curiously amiss about a word, a phrase, or its awkward placing:

You walked through the glass door towards yourself  
many times after, stride longer each time

and your hair grown darker beneath the sun  
of a lath-and-plaster country....

(*The Sleepwalker*, 31)

Is that *stride* a noun? If it is, it had better be qualified.

Why, Francis Ponge was once asked, does one love being a poet? The poet, said Ponge, can conjoin *raisons* and *résons*--reason and resonance. Hoskote can achieve this rather effortlessly in poems where his private reason is not quite at odds with the bardic resonance he manages to create. His poems generally ask us to be very attentive to finely modulated voices, to musings staggered ceremoniously into details: colour, texture, grain, gist, pith, surface, depth. There is no devious language game here that yields instantly to a lyric password, but a plainspoken round off (as in "Alibi", for example) is a courtesy in which this poet is never wanting. Some poems, like "Figures in a Landscape by Doppler", however, demand specific knowledge of scenes, or exact memory matching the poet's own; they somehow fly off our interpretive handle, leaving us clueless:

Where did we pick up the art of hedging,  
of plucking the ice-moon fruits of fate? You tell me  
the heart of growing is learning to stay  
in infinite provinces you used to hate;  
is learning to stay in a kind of leaving,

and leaving, be everywhere ruled by the game;  
to put seas and suns between ourselves

and us,  
till distance is a railroad dividing our freight  
between China and Chile.

(*The Sleepwalker*, 43)

On paper print and drawing appear discrete; but curiously interfaced, their surfaces form a common boundary, every figure gratuitously configured in tandem. One *language* beside another makes for neither sequence nor series, although *correspondence* here may now be, in turn, exchange, interchange. Directness, as always, has its shadow side, and that may be where the meaning lies. *The Cartographer's Apprentice*, poems interleaved with drawings, carries a "Foreword" by the poet who is reluctant to tell us who of the two is the Cartographer, who his Apprentice. "The only answer I would essay here," says Hoskote, "is that the title speaks for all those of us who have committed ourselves to charting experience through the media of images and words. None of us would lay claim to being perfect mapmakers...". This is indeed what we began with, the language now with the poet, now with someone else who the poet wouldn't willingly deny as not-him. Who may be lying? Certainly not the poet who knows that his language can better do that, and further that, for all his earnest efforts, his words, aiming referentially at certain specific targets, may well overshoot them. The larger the scale, the better the map. The best map, logically, would be identical in size to the topography it charts. Lewis Carroll, who often pushed logic over an abyss, thought so.

Of course Hoskote's cartography is not half as ridiculously ambitious or accurate, as Carroll had proposed in jest. It is parabolic, somewhat after Dylan Thomas, "Treading on fault lines," as he says, "slip[ping] in the ruins" (*The Cartographer*, 64).

Short meditations punctuate tantalizing asides; occurrences swell allusive significance in epic minds:

A bird that followed me three days and nights  
was struck by lightning.  
It fell

and lodged, a rock,  
in the sheer rapids  
of my growing old.

*(The Cartographer, 65-66)*

The verse does not run up or down steep terrains; sometimes it takes leisurely walks down familiar lanes, now in wonder, now in plain boredom. It tends to linger longer between stairs climbed in haste, and landings repented at leisure. Never, mercifully, does it tumble all the way down, as we fear. Circling back to its metaphor, and Dylan Thomas, it steadies itself with such reassuring lines as these:

Among his smudged visions,  
the mapmaker forgives the illusion.  
He knows himself betrayed  
by the look of things.

*(The Cartographer, 71)*

Another way to read Hoskote-Shreshtha is to sample the objects they gather, remember and dismember, the objects they elevate *as* artifacts in their work. Let us take Hoskote's "An Archaic Torso of Apollo" as an item in his collection. Far from being a "new" translation of Rilke's "Archaischer Torso Apollos", Hoskote is a *version*, a record, that is, of a reengagement with an "object", always treasured as a fragment, a piece lodged securely for generations in the mind, itself a large museum whose organization and management electronic technologies now seem to have taken over from us almost entirely. Heads and limbs broken

off, and “archaic”, the torso of Apollo is a missing narrative. Its original language and context had dissolved within the museum walls even for Rilke. If a piece on display in the museum transcends human time, geographical space, cultural meanings encoded by an artist of this country or that, an anthology piece, Rilke’s famous sonnet, juggles competing styles, directs mental traveling across texts by presenting the real (“archaic”) as contradiction: through the German, the bilingual translations, now in the English collection of an Indian poet. And how does it fare among *The Cartographer* poems? Very well, indeed. “You must change your life” speaks at once to the two artists, “life” and “line” being synonyms in their narrative cartography. The fragment is always in excess of the collection that means it.

The arts may seem to speak in different tongues, but their effort to run together is worth observing. While Shreshtha’s charcoal-on-paper copies on pp. 23 and 24 ought to “go with” the poem called “Snarl”, the poet’s collection there includes “cardinal and wart-hog...sewn in one itching”, and “a plate, a cradle of bones.” Where have we seen them before? In a tribal art gallery? A road show of ethnographic bric-a-brac? Hoskote’s Bureau of Missing Persons in “Decree” is another collection; its subsets are a warehouse and a catalogue. Its “companion piece” by Shreshtha appears on p. 28, an assemblage disbanded of usual geometrical proprieties, a bid against coherence, collection. The eye will nevertheless alight on what looks like the rear wheel of a vehicle in disarray, but will soon be struck by the answering eye of a “creature” which the whole figure resembles, against the ground it creates. “The Last Annal [*sic*] of Alamgir” is strewn with rocky objects and shades in a seemingly endless seriality. Now collections are hierarchies, values on some scale, clearly marked and linked territories of the self. Also taste, so intimately allied to practices we call art.

The poem and the drawing are not, however, two but three: the poem, the drawing, and the two together. Art keeps faith with

such prodigality evolving, as it always does, ahead of the words to describe it. Shreshtha has not, in other words, drawn *for* Hoskote. True to its nature, the charcoal celebrates the primacy of vision. The drawings assume the autonomy of visual images, an autonomy against which the pen cannot promulgate an ordinance. “Effects of Distance”, the opening poem of this collection, is placed between two drawings no way marking distances from and towards mind’s clutter: shapes, figures, lines resisting neat form, thwarting sense. What one sees is, and has, *no* language in the sense some literalists think of language. One need not, therefore, force any linguistic analogy for the painter’s effort. If that much is clear, Shreshtha might go a step further to show us figures that arrive at the cost of disregarding “subject matter” upon which so much verse depends. Alfred Barr’s “impoverishment” only meant that a visual image must have purely visual terms to redeem it. We can’t, in other words, have the visual in other words.

And now, all words: “Effects of Distance”. I hang out at home on a working day, *not* watching television but things that lie about me. I hope something might lend that region some enchantment, but distance won’t; I wonder, therefore, whether I have been, after all, recruiting my eye for less honorable jobs lately:

A telegram on the rack spells hands that burn  
because you did not reply, did not realise  
that some words are too proud to remind you they came.

*(The Cartographer, 8)*

From blue to blue the exasperated spirit turns, not knowing quite the shade or the distance it shades off into. Why, one wonders, have most of us turned eye-freaks? The Eye masters all, lords over Selkirkian plains and hills--the world, the wide, the web. Whatever happened to the other esteemed members of our Sensorium? Shreshtha has given his version of their senescence; now Hoskote gives his. It’s time we went to Montessori all over again. In a bid to challenge the politics of image nations, of the Imperial Eye,

William Blake wrote that famous line: “I must create a System, or be enslaved by another man’s.” From which, we happily recall, another poet summoned *A Vision*.

“Effects of Distance” closes with two rather cryptic phrases: “this heart’s unease”, “this heart’s unanswered wilderness”. What may they be? Hoskote writes first-rate notes on contemporary Indian culture for weekend magazines. One might sample some of these for a detailed answer, but the one that I can appositely recall at the moment is a “Ripple Effects” note he wrote for *The Hindu*, June 3, 2001 (Magazine Section, ii) entitled “Bring on the empty orchestra”. It is a Baudrillardian / McLuhanesque reflection whose basic argument is as good a gloss on “Effects of Distance” as any one might access elsewhere: “In the contemporary situation,” writes Hoskote, “... in which technologies of delegation and surrogacy act as distancing devices to promote and sustain an extreme privatism[,] the two modes of the doer and the witness have been strangely fused. So that the act of reflecting on experience has itself become a way of savouring experience, relishing it from a distance without oneself in it.”

A dozen poems from *The Cartographer’s Apprentice* reappear in *The Sleepwalker’s Archive*. Some day a youngish adventurer in textual interpretation is likely to base his thesis on the propriety of transferring poems across volumes so fussily christened, volumes whose respective landscapes ought to matter, given their suggestive titles. That apart, the second volume’s eight divisions do not seem incremental to me in terms of logic, theme, or “growth”, but there is surely some care to make good instabilities, minor lapses of order or scale, or just plain dithering, one is apt to sense in the early poems. In “Apollo and Daphne” the urgency of a loving address is never in doubt: “Your silences/congealed in resin, clothed you in bark” (*The Sleepwalker*, 146). The quality of that address seems to me considerably different from that of “A Letter to Ram Kumar” where the poet is speaking up to a pedestal:

We lurch downstream, churned by the tempest,  
our sail thrummed, funnelled around its rigging.  
But you have rowed through floes,  
thwarted avalanches and cliff-falls,  
left the feldspar ravines of despair behind.  
These are notations for a landscape  
that you will throw away once you've climbed  
into the hills, like Wittgenstein's ladder.

(*The Sleepwalker*, 133)

Is Wittgenstein's ladder to be kicked away in the mean-minded spirit of a corporate triumph? I don't know. Here, for the record, is that famous passage, *Tractatus* #6.54: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" That last phrase, rather its cautionary insistence, suggests something propositionally risky, were the climbing to be real/physical. To the mind inured to metaphor, it speaks the language of plain sense. You cannot, in any case, climb the same ladder twice.

Among *The Sleepwalker* poems is "Questions for a Biographer" which connects somewhat tangentially with the poet's plea in the *Cartographer* poems not to "judge distances by milestones". Nothing goes by luck, the poem seems to tell us, in writing about life devoted to writing. A far too closely examined life may not, after all, be worth writing. Further, there is that reasonable fear, more endemic to poets than to other stylists, that the space of biography will be a jar with no lid, that its subject will finally turn out to be like some lousy character in a novel:

But in the end, you cannot char the heartwood.  
Spurning the genteel syringe of tact,  
you tighten the gauntlet till it chafes  
the bare wrist to bruising, till you say:

He was a damned shabby sort of man  
but I loved what I knew of him.

*(The Sleepwalker, 107)*

*Small Presses: An Annotated Guide* has not yet listed the Pundole Art Gallery or Single File. Too small to mind other business, small presses seriously mind theirs. This is no small gain for poets like Hoskote, and for that increasingly neglected constituency of small readers of good poetry generally treated to haranguing formats by big presses. Digital cramming is sin against nature. Pundole and Single File know this. Dry organic fertilizer to fair buds and blossoms: they exchange vitalities.

E. V. RAMAKRISHNAN  
**HOME REMEDIES**

Keki N. Daruwalla. *Night River*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2000. Rs.95.

Tabish Khair. *Where Parallel Lines Meet*. New Delhi: Viking, 2000. Rs.195.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra. *Lips of a Canyon*. Mumbai: Allied Publishers, 2000. Rs.150.

Darshan Singh Maini. *The Aching Vision*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000. Rs.250.

The year 2000 has been good for Indian English poetry, with both established poets and younger poets bringing out new volumes. Keki N. Daruwalla's *Night River* is one of the best volumes by him. It illustrates the depth and range Indian English poetry is capable of. Tabish Khair's volume, *Where Parallel Lines Meet*, marks the arrival of a mature poet. Prabhanjan Mishra's second volume perfects the subtle art of suggestion to enhance his poetic range. Darshan Singh Maini, a distinguished academic, offers his musings on life in general and pain in particular.

Daruwalla's *Night River* communicates a pervasive sense of loss and solitude, occasionally relieved by the redemptive vision of human nobility and grace. The poet uses a contemplative tone which is relaxed and agile. The opening poem, "Exile and the Chinese Poets", sets the pace for subsequent poems. Wang Chien, Tu fu and Su Man Shu are haunted by memories of home as they live in exile: "Wherever they went / melancholy hung around them / like a curtain of rain." But in the thickening gloom of the exile's uprooted life, they remain attached to "reed and river". The poet asks "And those who are not exiled from their dreams, / are they really far from home?" Nature for the poet is a source of regeneration. One of the best poems in the

volume, "Bird Eclipse", credits the birds with superior knowledge which man lacks. Long before the eclipse begins, birds clamber into their long tendrillous vine and turn deathly quiet "like children cowering / As father enters blind with drink".

Night river, a recurring image, signifies the oppressive burden of time. The last day of the millennium cries out "like the last bird of a species / moving into extinction." This sense of apocalypse is negated later in another poem when a shepherd girl calls out to her flock in her own inimitable way "That call is older than the Dead Sea scrolls, / older than Zarathushtra. / The river's flanks light up, / an almond tree flowers with love / and sheep bells move towards me / through the open gateway of the dream." 'Dream' is a word the poet uses often to suggest states of mind which offer insights into the mystery of the world. In the sequence on the islands the poet says "A dream is also an island, / surrounded by the swirling waters / of myth-memory." In "Small Space" we have these lines: "Just one small dream somewhere/ like nocturnal fish / adrift in a grotto. / Just one dream / not a shoal of dreams." At best, poetry is only "a forgery of the ideal". If one does not have the earthly innocence of the shepherd girl or the melon-merchant, one has to cultivate the stoicism of a Meursault who asks "Life, was it worth living, friend?". The poet will not judge the archetypal outsider unkindly: "He'd lived his life in a certain way--/ upfront and with no disguise. / He might have lived it differently, / if he had felt. That's all there was--/he'd acted thus, not otherwise."

The two sequences "Stalking Mandelstam" and "Island Poems" record some of the finest meditations on life and art. Mandelstam's poem on Stalin sealed his fate. There he had described the great dictator as an assassin and a peasant-slayer. Daruwalla provides a free translation of the poem. In "Poem 8" Mandelstam speaks in the first person as he is being transported to Siberia: "Knowing what is coming/ is worse than not knowing it." In the notes attached to the sequence Daruwalla tells us how he was moved to write the sequence after reading Nadezhda Mandelstam's book *Hope against Hope*. In the Island poems, a journey to the Nicobar islands becomes a journey to one's own interior. The island instills a dream-like stasis where one loses one's sense of time and space. It returns the poet to the basics of

language and existence. He says “Sail, mast, the lookout perched on the masthead; / the helmsman. This is human heritage. / May all this be always around. // Don’t let them be turned into symbols. / Symbols become dead words and slow down a language.” One of the functions of poetry is to alert us the fictionality of the worlds we inhabit. Daruwalla’s poems do it admirably well.

From “Light Verse and Much Worse”, Tabish Khair has moved on to more sublime themes. His volume, *Where Parallel Lines Meet*, is characterized by subtle precision of language. Still, he has not fully outgrown certain weaknesses of expression which primarily manifest themselves as clever usage of language. The opening poem “Ganesh Stuti” is a good example of what I mean by clever usage of language. Its wit does not really sparkle though an occasional stanza stands out, as this one: “Four-armed, elephant-trunked, the great Indian dilemma, baksheesh, / Was born with him: how to attain merit you have to bribe the gods, / (Him, that is) how having bribed you cannot go to heaven.” Khair is good when he evokes relationships. “Amma”, “The Boarsi”, “Their World”, and “To My Father, Across the Seven Seas” effortlessly convey understated emotion. The last mentioned poem ends with the lines “I faced the West, you faced the East. The silence/ Lasted until an unseen muezzin called you away.” At the core of this volume is the remembered moments of another world which refuse to fade away. The one-legged bird in “Bird/Memory” becomes emblematic of the difficult balancing act the poet is attempting to achieve in several poems: “One-legged bird pecking criss-cross / My grandmother’s yard embroidered with weeds, / Finely knitted grass facing padlocked rooms / Of a house grown bigger with farewells.” Some of the poems begin well but the inspiration seems to have left the poet midway. I have in mind poems like “Circus Act in Gaya”, “Arrest of the Metre-Reader” and “Rope”.

A major theme that echoes through the volume is history in its various shades. “Unhybrid”, “The Immigrant Maometto to Dante”, “Three Tribes”, “History”, “mohenjodaro: bric-a-brac”, “The Vanished Dravidians”, “Blood and Gore”, “Ancestral House”, “The Other Half of Kabir’s Doha” and “Kitchen” have in common a sense of passage of

time as a remorseless forward movement. These poems are packed with several layers of meaning and the lines bristle with energy and urgency. Every moment and scene seems to be slipping into memory or history and can only be retrieved as an act of language. This inevitably involves a loss and a gain as words never coincide with things or experiences. Grandfather's wordless cook completes a doha which the poet is unable to remember. Poetry, here, merges into everyday language. "Kitchen" celebrates that meeting place of dialect and creative language where differences of gender, class and generation melt into stories: "Stories are pasts we might lose and the future / As we would have it remember us". In "Three Tribes" the poet describes himself as a gatherer of "unstopping time and space". In "History" he speaks of the ironies of history which do not spare anyone. These are poems which one would like to re-read quietly. Though this cannot be said about all the poems in this collection, this book is a valuable addition to the growing body of Indian English poetry.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra's second volume of poetry establishes him as a major voice in Indian English poetry. *Lips of a Canyon* is characterized by an introspective idiom. Several poems may appear as riddles to the uninitiated. But once we immerse ourselves in the flow of images and gradual pace of rhythms, meanings begin to emerge. In his introduction, Mishra says "I have always felt that poetry should be like hieroglyphs, laconic yet luminous symbols with a generous eloquence. A poem in its totality should reflect its meaning. A hive of words arranged in a matrix to impress a picture, an image touching the cortex of the mind." A typical Prabhanjan poem very often works through a series of suggestions. "Derelict" from the first section of the book begins with the lines "I despair this morning/ thinking of all other mornings, / dry and empty / like the bottom of a derelict well". The poet senses decay and corruption all about him. The façade of the city hides its inner void: "Labelled as an event/in your tabloid life, / stashed into pages of your designer-biography, / I feel wary / of the gossip and nonsense." In a poem for his father he says "He never could settle for himself / where he belonged. He drifted / and called it his freedom".

Though this emphasis on pain and isolation is obsessive, a poem like “For Iscariot, The Most Faithful” succeeds through its luminous language. The words are carefully chosen to light your path through an undulating terrain of memories and emotions: “I return your shirt, father / to its repentant peg and rearrange / memories. The bells of reindeers / jingle from the North, their antlers rattle. / Fat old Santa may wriggle through the chimney tonight. / My faith may warm yet one more winter.” Questions of guilt, betrayal and remorse smoulder in these images relieved by only the playful tone which does not provide a redemptive vision. A similar state of complex ambivalence is articulated by the title poem which ends with these lines: “At the lips of a canyon / our parched acres / blindly pallor for a sun. / The differences, reduced by distances, are shark-teeth/ in a zoo’s indifferent skeleton.” In poems like “Leaf-Fall” and “Withered Solitude” Prabhanjan is able to evoke transience and temporality by combining images with observation. Those who love poetry as a means of introspection and reflection have plenty to hunt for in these poems. Prabhanjan also writes poetry in Oriya and a couple of poems included here are transcreated from Oriya.

Those who have read the prose of Darshan Singh Maini would wonder why his volume of poetry lacks the same wit and vigour. It cannot be said that he has mastered the art of thinking through the medium of poetry. However, there are rewarding moments here for those who know him as a friendly, cheerful and erudite scholar. In a mood of confession he writes on his own long career as a Henry James scholar: “And now those Jamesian moments / Heap upon my hapless mind / When the winter has settled / In my old aching bones, / And old thoughts linger in the cold. / Was it, O love, a misbegotten dream / Planted in my path to torment me / For the crime of uncertain, arrant love? / Who can say, who indeed?” Several of these poems display a deeply philosophical bent of mind and are occasioned by the experiences of old age.

Many would say Indian English poetry is no match for Indian English fiction. It does not fetch huge advances, nor does it sell in thousands. Still it has its fine moments far away from the market place. It is like our home remedies that carry with them an aura of wisdom, reassurance and relief.

LINGARAJ MISHRA  
**BIBHU PADHI: VOICE OF THE THRESHOLD?**

Bibhu Padhi. *Painting the House*. Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1999.  
Rs.150.

*While meanings spread over us enormously,  
like snow in the north*

Bibhu Padhi enters as a willing hostage to an undying flame of freedom, only to come out as a winning hostage. In between, lies his poetry--vast and vivifying, flowing and flying the stretches of the living strains of a self--continuing yet in a loving bondage to freedom. If the freedom provides the ecstasy, the bondage sustains the agony.

To read Bibhu Padhi's poetry would necessarily require two qualifications: shed all the norms and tools one was trained to appreciate poetry with, and be ready to sharpen the point of direct comprehension. For Padhi's poems yield not so much to intellection as to intuition, or at any rate to a direct perception. This is what I would choose to call "Threshold Poetry", which in an earlier era could be called "The Later Phase": but not quite, in this instance.

Where then is this threshold? The zone between the before and the hence? And why are our traditional modes of appreciating poetry of little use in taking in the beatitude of Padhi's poetry?

His poetry itself, much less the individual poems, offers no answer.

But one does not have to be a Sherlock Holmes to figure out what sells Padhi's poetry and gives it an air of distinction. For instance, a poet reveals half his kingdom in the titles alone. I

scanned the titles of the poems in *Painting the House*, an act of pure faith and intuition, and the effort paid off. I scanned the titles in terms of time, place, human subjects, objects, occasions, and, above all, the verbals.

Under “place”, I had *temple, house, city, place, town, Konark, home, the other place*. Under “time”, I got *summer afternoon, today, midnight, dark, time, winter, autumn, annual, now, afternoon, year*.

The distinction--rather the opposition--becomes starkly clear: the place suggests a yearning for, or an intimacy with, a shelter, always a shelter, as well as a touch of sacredness, the holy, leading mystically to a sense of being in a *sanctum sanctorum* holding a deity swinging tantalizingly in and out of view, in a lingering disquiet, with as much of a hushed anticipation as of a sulky withdrawal. In one word, the Threshold. The threshold which holds between the familiar and protective, and the strange yet beckoning.

The time references, on the contrary, remain open: taken together the entries add up not merely to a succession of past present and future but, more, to an impending sense of eternity which attends upon all, but for convenience announces itself in terms of past present or future. Both the now and the eternal lose their identity and become instead a different dimension altogether, more akin to a transcendental eternal than a continuation of the ephemeral. This opposition between space (or place, if you like) and time is what the poet and the threshold signify: it is not so much opposition as an incongruous equation between two apparently complementary props of the stage for the cosmic play.

The human subjects add up to no more than a family--the living and the dead together. Traces of the dead and traces of the living live together within the same walls. The objects or occasions--*bed, poem, sky, things, lizards, paintings, face, portrait*,

*paper, light, kite, absences, ruins, hand, fire, trees, shore, insects, something else--also belong in the same family.*

So, it's a small world--a world of direct sensual, existential and experimental contact--indeed, a small but 'holy' town set in a timeless zone occupied by a lonely but familiar soul who wants to know whether one must necessarily paint a house if he wishes to make a dwelling in it. And what guarantee is there that both would last *together*? Obviously, Time has to blur even as the Dwelling becomes more and more focused. The bed linen is more privy to the felt whispers made on it than the 'other' other--i.e., the other besides his himself--is. Presences and absences, neglected or remembered, intermingle and blur too, as the road ahead would look to a bleary brain. This is like moving as an exile on one's own familiar territory. Such is the force of the opposition between time and space--the threshold.

Time references span a much wider range than the point in a now, whether in the present, or in the past, from which they occur. This is one of the more mystifying of Padhi's compositional crafts which pulls one back just at the moment when he has a fleeting feeling of having almost seen it...well, almost. The sweeping time sense cuts across a baffling close (closed?) and secure space-awareness, images of chosen shelters--whether those of a *temple* or a *bed*, the *shore* or the *ruins*.

What brings the two apparently asynchronic perspectives are of course the wonderfully simple yet telling verbals that contain the primary action of the poet's core sensibility: *watching, playing, hiding, dreaming, telling, giving away, consoling, crossing over*, and, of course, *painting*.

The main human subjects which lay any claim upon a spot on the landscape--whether *here* or *elsewhere*, as a living mate moving around the house or a calendar on the wall--are what populate the family: *children, grandchildren, son, they, guests, man, merchants,*

*D.H. Lawrence* (not outside the poet's family anyway) and more. The known ones, always. Even the ghosts or presences, memories or hopes. But always the known ones. And, like every earth family, the ubiquitous *enemy*, which incidentally completes the family portrait.

Strangely, though, for such a very personal and private poet, Padhi's poetry is not a poetry of paradoxes or a poetry of irony; there is neither affirmation or negation, neither faith or doubt; for, to drop anchor in one is to deny the other. And Padhi does not--cannot--deny. On the contrary, there is a feeling of timelessness in howsoever cramped or cringed a cocoon. Reminiscences are about as ineffectual here as any particular longing toward the future.

This is not, however, to claim that Padhi's poetry lacks in tone or attitude. His is predominantly a poetry of feeling, a poetry of depths, rather of the feelings felt in the depth which are so near the bottom that they wouldn't throw up ripples into the air. But as the feelings stir murmuringly in the depths, the surface draws the colour, varying in accordance with the changing intensities of the feelings. No wonder, very often, his poetry cajoles one--almost unawares--into a meditative or trancelike state, an absolute mode of prayer when things just cease to be, except for what you can cull out from the simmering haze of the simple truths of everyday existence--an existence which is at once on the skin and at the farthest point from it.

At such depths, the boundary between the sound and the sense dissolves, and one instinctively begins to realize that the art of poetry is nothing other than a successful *pranayama* of letters where matter and spirit breathe together--even when one does not recognize the other.

If the foregoing passage seems too complimentary, then read any poem in the collection. As for me, I can hear the house lizard concurring, "True, true."

Padhi began his external poetic venture with *Going to the Temple*. One goes to a temple to pray. *Painting the House* reads like an answer to the prayer. Whether it is the prayer or its eventual fulfillment, what strikes the reader as the most initial and captivating feature is the rhythm. Unfailing and sure. Line after line, line into line, but always in line. Not a syllable out of sequence, because not a syllable is accidental any more than it is meretricious. Like the notes on a music sheet. Creating the harmony. And rhythm is when the two feet walk perfectly in relation to each other. The poise. It can be so mesmerizing that sheer rhythm alone can lull one into its fold like the stylus on a moving gramophone record: one goes all the way--the full experience. Which in turn leads the reader to the other distinguishing feature in Padhi's poetry: a sense of completion, a full be-ing, a question and its answer, a longing and its consummation. Each poem is a complete experience, in howsoever calibrated a dose, but complete nonetheless--like the last line in an O'Henry story. A sense of total being, relived and relieved, is the final issue no matter how many periods or question marks punctuate a Padhi poem.

PREMA NANDAKUMAR  
FIVE JOURNALS

*Samvedana*. December 2000. ed. V.S. Skanda Prasad, Chetana Literary Group, Manjunath Associates, Raghu Building, Urva Stores, Mangalore 575 006. Price not mentioned.

*Voice of Kolkata*. 2.1 (2001). ed. Biplab Majumdar, Block-L, Flat No. 1, Surya Nagar Housing Estate, 174/A, N.S.C. Bose Road, Netaji Nagar, Kolkata 700 040. Rs.50.

*Poetry Chain*. July-September 2000. ed. Gopi Kottoor, Vilas, Vijaya Krishna, Nalanchira, Thiruvananthapuram 695 015. One Year subscription: Rs.200.

*Chandrabhaga*. 2 (2000). ed. Jayanta Mahapatra, Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack 753 001. Single copy: Rs.100.

*Poiesis*. Special Issue: 1997-98. ed. Prabhanjan K. Mishra, 28A, C.G.S. Colony, Bhandup East, Mumbai 400042. This special issue: Rs.100.

What is poetry? There have been several definitions but the pen-pusher has always managed to slip through them like an eel. As I sit with a spread of poetry magazines (a score of them) on my extra large work-table, I am astonished how one can get away with anything under the title of poetry. George Mikes said poetry is a sissy stuff that rhymes. Why, it need not even rhyme anymore. Sissy stuff is enough these days. One can only commend the editorial generosity of understanding that gives a chance for choice inanities:

The blue of the sky is empty really  
And emptiness is deathless  
Having no form no colour;  
Eternity was not birthed, won't be deathed.

*Samvedana's* editor, V.S. Skanda Prasad has brought together poets from India and from abroad. There are flowery critiques on Kazuyosi Ikeda (M.S. Venkata Ramiah, Mohammed Fakhruddin and a few others) who is apparently a patron of poetry contests and publications in the Mangalore area and is at present a Professor Emeritus of Osaka University. Ten pages of Kannada poems by student prize-winners hail the motherland in adoration.

Rosemary C. Wilkinson's poem "Use Me Lord" and article, "Poetry and Medicine" take up a good deal of space in the 32-page *Voice of Kolkata*. Meant to spread the commendable message of universal love, peace and brotherhood through poetry, the journal has inset messages that are innovative: Encourage Honest Literature! Think of us, we shall think of you!

Gopi Kottoor's *Poetry Chain* is also as thin a publication, but far richer in content. There are remembrances of a childhood past (S. Radhamani, Ananya S. Guha, Saroj Kumar Das), sneezy exploitation (Gayatri Majumdar, Turki Amir) and melancholic anxieties over the future. Arvind Gigoo recognises the terrors of Anno Bombini but realises that one man's faith can yet save the world:

dust will cling to bones  
little boy and fat man  
dance a mushroom dance  
the chime will  
rend the skies

hand on hand

but  
once more  
I shall plant  
A sapling.

Little boy. Fat man. Names given to the bombs that were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The nuclear tests go on, and countries bare their teeth too often. Wilful destruction has many faces. Give the dog a bad name and hang him! S. Faizi's crisp summation of the twentieth century in which "oppression has become a religion" reveals the executive power of diction. Has man paid heed to words of wisdom stored in man's memory?

I opened the box, it was full of words  
Words of all kinds and colours  
Words made of fire, words made of light  
Words made of soil, words made of flowers.  
I closed the box.

A remarkable poem in every way, a metaphor for our times.

With *Chandrabhaga* we enter the realms of purposive discourse on the state of Indian poetry in English. Makarand Paranjape seeks a cohesive source that holds together the Indian poet's vision, and finds the answer in nationalism. One hundred and fifty years of poetry beginning with Derozio are summarised swiftly, and the process is introduced with the image of the Kavyapurusha. Call him Kavyapersona or Kavyabalaka if you will, the Indian poet in English began as the proud expounder of a cultural nationalism thanks to the availability of a treasure-house of myths. After 1947, he felt alienated and angry in his own motherland because of our new rulers who cared nought to make the earlier dreams come true. Now he is jet-set NRI receiving the benefits of a globalisation:

"The logic of globalisation dictates that Ayemenems of the world will have to be cooked and packaged according to the tastes of metropolitan readers. The commodification of culture has come to stay, but (un)luckily, today's

poets are so marginalized that their wares are hardly a part of the international culture bazaar.”

Indeed, did Vikram Seth’s poetry ever receive the kind of advertisement glitich that accompanied his *A Suitable Boy*? John Oliver Perry, however, dismisses Makarand as belonging to the critical tribe that makes “exaggerated theoretical claims”. According to him, the history of Indian literatures cannot be studied as a single stream hooked to the solitary ideal of nationalism. A quiverful of questions are released in his arguments, questions that cannot have a “yes” or “no” answer. The fact remains that poets like Derozio (“To India--My Native Land”), Sri Aurobindo (“Baji Prabhou”) and Sarojini Naidu (“Kali the Mother”) were relevant for their readers, and continue to be relevant to the study of the Indian struggle for independence. It is not by studying these poems in isolation but by placing them in the larger framework of regional poetry of that time can we understand Makarand’s approach.

Perry does not prove any point by referring to P.Lal as “back-sliding”. We must not be ostriches in matters of literary criticism. It so happens that Indian poetry in English has vast areas other than the patch represented by a dozen names who are anthologised often, thanks to tact-contact connections. There is much that is good in these poets, though many indulge in desecratory thematics to please a foreign palate. Apart from the “I-centred” verse written by innumerable aspirants who imitate Kamala Das and A.K. Ramanujan, there are powerfully articulate narrative poets whose contribution to Indian literature is considerable. Then, there is Perry’s hiccup about the Aurobindonian group: “...far too many deservedly unknown mystical poets of the Aurobindo Ghosh variety employing Wordsworthian Miltonics”. Really? It is obvious Perry has not read Sri Aurobindo or the Aurobindonian group. Besides, Perry may still be swimming in the limiting pond of twentieth century English and American poetry and has not had time to go to the poetry movements in France and Germany. He would have then realised that the Aurobindonian writers not only

draw upon the best in their traditions, but receive inspirations from Bergson, Mallarme. World literature is their nest and their contributions to Kavyadarasana is no mean thing. In any case, I would recommend Perry to read volumes like K.D. Sethna's *Talks on Poetry* (1989) before rushing in to pass judgments that betray a *de haut en bas* view.

After placing other arguments against positing "national, racial, or even elitist-internationalist claims", Perry's confession regarding his "unsharability" of the Aurobindonian experience sounds self-contradictory as he limits himself to an anti-spiritual view. Fortunately, his concluding words themselves form an answer to his counter to Makarand and present a proper approach:

"Common ground can be found and is requisite for human social life, but the search for commonality must not be permitted to overpower more particular forms required for experiencing a diversity of social conditions, attitudes and expressions."

Plentiful poems from familiar names (K. Ayyappa Paniker, Shiv K. Kumar, Bibhu Padhi) and patches of prose (Denchanala Srinivas) apart, we have a story by Vyankatesh Madgulkar which brings home to us the familiar adage about nature being red in tooth and claw.

The special issue (1997-98) of *Poiesis* is a tribute to Rameshchandra Sirkar. All in him pointed to a nobler race. To lovers of books, he was an ideal. As Ranjit Hoskote rightly says in his memoir:

"It was emblematic of his approach to life that he never lost sight of the kerns and serifs even while attending to the titles and margins; even the moist ephemeral of his notes assumed the aspect of

a miniature treasure, for he wrote in an elegant calligraphic hand.”

The poems have been chosen with great care and form an appropriate offering to Mr. Sirkar’s memory. To conclude with Sunanda Swarup’s lines “For Archana” which somehow relate us to the irrevocable loss of Mr. Sirkar:

The silence casts a hypnotic spell.  
*Agarbatti* fumes melt  
into the dead of night.  
Time accommodates void voices  
Till its stentorian echoes die.  
The fan just whirrs,  
And the clock ticks by.

P. RADHIKA

**ROUGHHEWN POETRY: SOME MODERN VOICES**

Jagannath Prasad Das. *Lovelines: Poems of Longing and Despair*. New Delhi: Virgo, 2001. pp.77. Rs.160.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra. *Lips of a Canyon*. Bombay: Allied Publishers, 2000. pp.108. Rs.150.

Kanwar Dinesh Singh. *The Theophany*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999. pp.78. Rs.100.

Syd Harrex. *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999. pp.51. Rs.100.

“What is literature?” and “What is its *raison d’etre*?” are questions that have always provoked animated responses from literature enthusiasts and philistines alike. In spite of all their differences, however, both camps agree on one point--literature is of no *practical* value. Whereas literateurs and the sahridayas see this quality as a noble one, their opponents perceive it as an inexcusable flaw.

With every passing year, the numbers moving towards the latter group appear to be on the increase. The modern age may have instituted literary awards like never before but what it cannot camouflage is the decline in serious interest in literature among the common people. This has specially been the case with poetry.

There are many reasons for this phenomenon but the chief among them could be that few poets have anything worthwhile to say or, perhaps more probably, few are prepared to probe into life’s mysteries and share their unique vision with the readers. One inevitably draws such bleak conclusions on scanning the poetic output of recent times.

The four collections of poems under review show glimmerings of genius, but it appears that none of the poets have had the patience to extract the pure metal from the ore and polish it to perfection. The result is that the ugliness of the raw dross is just too immense for a demanding and discriminating reader. That is, the authentic poetic voice is drowned in the cacophony of aphorisms, clichéd lines, inane nature descriptions and indecipherably mixed metaphors.

\* \* \*

One of the dilemmas faced by creative writers, even the really gifted ones, is how to resolve the conflict between an awareness of the sheer inexpressibility of sensory experiences and an irrepressible urge to give them an aesthetic form. This struggle is also perhaps an exquisitely painful one as it is at once a challenge that makes demands on the artist's inner resources and a fountainhead of inspiration that draws out his/her dormant, inventive energies. Yeats may have been alluding to this phenomenon too when he wrote "out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry".

These are some of the extra-poetic thoughts that *Loveliness: Poems of Longing and Despair*, written by the well-known Oriya poet, playwright and fiction writer Jagannath Prasad Das, first evokes in the reader. In the poem "Figure of Speech", the love-lorn hero laments:

How can language ever  
touch someone's body,  
when to describe her  
all the words  
listed in the lexicon  
are not adequate?

But, paradoxically enough, it is this very medium with all its inadequacies that helps him reach out at least occasionally to his beloved. In “Privacies”, he states:

When you read the poem  
I wrote for you  
and erase from your face  
your habitual frown,  
then I’ll venture  
to write another.

*Lovelines* are the lamentations of a latter-day knight-at-arms, alone and palely loitering, pining for his belle dame sans merci. All the twenty-five poems in this collection create a solipsistic and claustrophobic world inhabited by a man who is on an endless quest for union with his elusive and cold paramour. The lady has him in thrall as she has the power to fix appointments and make cancellations (“Divination”); to appraise and judge him (“Punishment”); to abandon him (“Goddess”); to show “complete unconcern” to his “endless desires” (“This Moment”). Whether as a moving image in his fertile memory or as a static figure in photographs, she displays “undulating negations” (“Photograph”). In fact, she so overwhelms him with her silence and rejection that he is filled with emptiness!

With all these nothings  
my palms would be full  
and there would be no space  
for any more.

(“Were We to Meet Again”)

However, when the man can no longer withstand the strain of oscillating between “one hope and another doubt” (“My Truth”) and finally decides to leave her, she weaves a magical web that traps him forever in her “enchanted circle” (“Sorceress”). He realises that a perfect union is impossible and that the lovers can never fully fathom each other (“The Beyond”, “Beyond the

Senses”). Yet, the imprisonment in this “small world” (“My World”) brings no palpable discomfort because of his attitude of utter self-abnegation: “you are my endless blessing/ as I am your eternal curse” (“Never Leave Me”).

*Lovelines* invites us to enter a private and quaint world of a rejected lover’s dreams, memories, fantasies, desires, hopes and fears – a world reminiscent of Arthurian legends and exaggerated professions of love. Originally written in Oriya and translated by the author himself along with Paul St. Pierre, Professor of Translation, University of Montreal, Canada, *Lovelines* is like an ochre-tinted photograph. It builds up the sentimental atmosphere of old world values and concerns and, with its focus on a single theme, has an almost monochromatic appearance. The outside world of people and activities hardly impinges on the poet’s consciousness. Social problems do not excite his sensibility. Nature, in her infinite colours and moods, seldom captures his attention.

The poems are simple in construction and severely restricted in their range of subjects. But what they lack in experimental richness and thematic diversity is more than compensated for by their emotional intensity. There is no hollow ring about the sentiments expressed in the poems, their effusiveness notwithstanding. Autobiographical readings are highly suspect these days but when the lover/poet claims, in “Figure of Speech” that

When you come to me  
bereft of all ornaments,  
wordless, in flesh and blood,  
I’ll even stop writing poetry.  
(“Figure of Speech”)

we are led to believe that poetry writing, for Das, is no idle whim. It is a magic wand that conjures up the phantom of a lady he had

lost in life. Maybe it is a sad and sincere effort at masking a real absence with an insubstantial presence.

\* \* \*

If *Lovelines* touches a chord in the readers' heart with its spontaneity and soulful lucidity, Prabhanjan K. Mishra's second collection of poems *Lips of a Canyon* presents a total contrast both in tone and texture. This may be at least partly because of the different stances of the poets and their different approaches to the genre. Das is like a lepidopterist who uses poetry as a net to capture the flitting, diaphanous image of his lady-love. Mishra on the other hand is more like a clinician in whose hands poetry becomes a tool with which to explore and analyse a problem.

One of the most noteworthy features of this collection of poems, as its very title suggests, is that it is a virtual cornucopia of images and metaphors. There is no poem, if not a stanza, that does not carry one of these figures of speech. Some of them are highly suggestive:

The sorrows that we wear as vests  
shall live beyond our breath's spans  
underneath our festive silks and woolens,  
all hours, prickly and cold.  
(“For a Neighbour”)

and some, very fresh:

I pick handfuls of sand,  
occasional pebbles, and step  
into you [a river] with immense care,  
  
lest my footprints wet  
your pristine aridity  
for they bear the memory of water.  
(“A Boatman's Song”)

Unfortunately, however, Mishra seems to get carried away by their semantic potential and overloads his poems with them. Quite often, excessive use of metaphors results in opacity. Take, for instance, a stanza in “Carapace” which reads like this:

Life’s eerie constellations  
ambushed by destiny’s webs,  
we search for reprieves  
vainly among constipated wills  
holding back brittle ire  
with paper-thin patience.

Or a couple of stanzas in “For Father”:

Mother was his narrative device,  
abstract like a figure of speech.

Mother was his favourite metaphor.  
He filled all the blanks of his ambiguity  
with the motifs of her beautiful absences.

Similarly, the first two stanzas of “Trust’s Dark”, for all the splendid architectural imagery and splash of colour, conveys precious little:

Stooping through the black portals of mind  
beneath the dome of a frescoed past  
snores a deadened shaft of idle sunbeam

discarded on the yellow water-blue  
and pastel-green tempera  
on time’s decadent walls.

“Funeral” is a very poignant 16-line poem which conveys tender emotions in a couple of exquisitely beautiful lines. But the last stanza comes as a rude shock to the reader:

Tonight, I will remove you to memory  
From among the chrysanthemums;  
the twinkles in the inky sky  
will cloud my marble eyes.

*Lips of a Canyon* leaves its readers with the impression that Mishra has permitted language to get the better of him. There are indeed some wonderful lines such as “Griefs roost here to hatch pleasure” in “Vestigial” or “I sow the fields and wait/for the seeds to wake up and wave/from their shriveled coma,/cover me with their benign green” in “Living in Truth” or “Off your eyes/I peel a nightmare,/light your indifference/with a tongue of fire” in “For a Concubine”. But they lie hidden under mounds of tedious verbosity.

\* \* \*

In a collection of over sixty poems, it would only be natural to expect variety and Kanwar Dinesh Singh’s *The Theophany* does not disappoint the reader in this regard. From the mysterious beauty of the collyrium adorning the beloved’s eyes to the gigantic majesty of the Himalayas--the poems of this collection sweep across a vast range of concerns. From the play of intangible and insubstantial shadows to the sheer physicality of a queen of beauty--the poems present a spectrum of images. From the assertion of the self to its dissolution in the divine--*The Theophany* captures the various moods of consciousness.

But, for all the diversity the work exhibits, it is clear that the poet is at his best when he reflects on metaphysical issues. He reveres the Himalayas not for its stupendous dimensions or its awesome beauty but for its serene strength: “He stands Gitaesque/  
As a stoic seer” (“Mountain, the Awakened Hindu”). Similarly, while it has been traditional to view the moon (with its waxing and waning) as epitomizing inconstancy, the poet sees another quality in it. “The form of Luna alters/ Not the essence of her being./ ...  
Never/Affected by the growth and/The decay of her physical Self.” (“Moon”)

For a collection titled *The Theophany*, it is not surprising that a good number of the poems focus on the Almighty. The Divine Being appears in different guises: as the ultimate progenitor (“The Creator”), the liberator “yielding...moksha/ Out of this-worldly intercourse” (“Krishna”), the great lover to obtain whose company the devotee woos death (“Dying for Love”), the mystic tantric (“GUR: An Embodiment of God”), the provider (“The Theophany”), the nurse singing lullabies (“Divine Lull”) and so on.

However, the charm of the physical world and the attraction of sensual pleasures are not ignored totally. “A Country Lass” is Wordsworthian in its celebration of pastoral delights and rural lifestyle. “Goddess at Home”, with its domestic atmosphere, is an apostrophe to the self-sacrificing woman. “I’m a Man”, “Quicksand” and “For you, My Love” present the brutal and tender aspects of love.

In the poem entitled “People Change Faces”, Singh says:

With bristles of eyes, on  
The canvas of mind, I  
Sketching some lines try

Time and again, everyday  
Each and everyone, to portray  
Who I encounter on my way.

This claim notwithstanding, *The Theophany* does not come through as the creative product of a spectator or a voyeur, merely observing the outside world. It is rather a record of the observations made by a deeply introspective mind. While this posture has its definite merits, most often it deteriorates into platitudinising. For instance, in “Nostrum” we find:

Why make the moon a bone  
Of contention  
.....

Each one  
Keep a trough  
Filled with water  
At your door  
On a full-moon night

And she will descend in full  
To everyone.

Such homilies do not point to a fresh vision of life and the damage they do to the texture of the work is too well-known to be stated. Similarly, it is unfortunate that the same poet who wonders at the “essence of applying collyrium” can write a piece as pedestrian as “Poetic Justice”:

“She made me mad,”  
so complained a victim  
of Love.

“Go and madden her,”  
Said the magistrate  
of Love, “and you’ll  
never have to come  
to this court again.”

\* \* \*

Syd Harrex’s *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* is a much slimmer volume and contains less than thirty poems. But they include narrative poems like “Narroondaire and his Wives”, typographically innovative pieces like “Back from the Dead”, sonnets like “Jack” and extremely short and monosyllabic words like “Sharp Shooter”. Thematically too, Harrex is as effective in depicting natural scenery and linking it to a particular human situation,

Though winter trees are black with birds  
above the ornamental snow,

my thoughts of you take leaf in words  
which took a season's sleep to grow.  
(“Winter Trees”)

as in debunking revered icons:

And I can't help feeling Petrarch  
and Laura were not so famished  
by virtue as the tablets say,  
especially as all around  
us trout are spawning in canals  
and bees are honeying in blossom.  
(“La Fontaine de Vancluse”)

or delineating the contrast between the simple faith of a child and  
the adult's questioning attitude (“The Hand-Made Walking Stick”).

But there are also works that almost sound like Bakhtin's theories cast in poetic mould with lines such as “Laughter is radical noise”, “Laughter is difference and unity” and “Laughter punctures megalomania/ but is self-collapsing”. Some poems contain felicitous phrases like “volcanic soil worm-refugeed/ snail-tracked” in “Back from the Dead”, “Out of the waiting/corner of my eye” in “Waiting” and “the new-born/like a lotus bud/ rocks on the waves/ cupped in a canoe of hands” in “Such is Prana”. However, others are downright banal:

In the alphabets of India,  
which letter should I select  
as an entrée to discovery?  
O for om, for the difference between  
nought and zero? As I ponder  
this problem in the Gents' loo  
the answer of course is piss  
obvious; I shall start with P....

or feeble attempts at cleverness:

. . . . . in these paddy  
and palm terrains layered with ochre  
earth protruding parables, parallels,  
paradoxes; appetities (sic) for the harikatha  
man's marathon parabasis backed  
by paradiddle percussionists,  
the purana and veda paradigms  
palimpsest and imprinted in papyrus....  
("Which?")

Yeats, in his celebrated poem "Adam's Curse", speaks about the writer's profession thus: "A line will take us hours may be/ Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought/ Our stitching has been naught...". Even when he appears to be celebrating the quality of spontaneity in a work of art, Yeats does not ignore or decry the strenuous effort that may be required to create such an effect. Perhaps every writer would have to spend hours, cutting and chiseling, in order to remove the impurities of redundancy and superfluity. Many a line one reads in these four collections under review probably *is* a product of "a moment's thought" but does not *seem* so.

K. SRILATA  
**RETHINKING INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH**

K.V.Raghupathi. *Small Reflections*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000. pp.91. Rs.100.

R.C.Shukla. *A Belated Appearance*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2000. pp.83. Rs.100.

Sudha Iyer. *Twilight Rhythms*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999.

Arjan Dev Majboor. *Waves*. Trans. Arvind Gigoo. New Delhi: Natraj Publications, 1999. Rs.125.

How far can one stretch this business of “poetic license”? Sentimental excesses, ungrammatical constructions, forced rhymes, archaic words, prosaic and lengthy sentences, stringing random words together, typographical errors--can one overlook all this and more simply by seeking recourse to the concept of poetic license? Isn't rigour important in Indo-Anglian poetry? Isn't it the task of an Indo-Anglian poet to evolve and write in a voice that he/she is comfortable with? These were the questions that came to mind as I read through the first two of the four volumes of poetry mentioned above--K.V. Raghupathi's *Small Reflections* and R.C. Shukla's *A Belated Appearance*.

“I have emotions/non-aggressive and non-violent/that run like a deer in the forest/I want to give them to you/not like a preacher and a priest/but share them with you/like a lover and a babe” says Raghupathi in the opening poem “Prologue”. The lines here, especially the comparison to ‘a lover and a babe’ sound strange and forced. “Prologue” sets the tone for a series of poems fraught with an embarrassingly poor use of language. In his poem “Tomb”, Raghupathi asks rather ungrammatically:

Why unearthing this tomb of the king of the Terrible  
that lay buried behind the altar  
for four hundred years,  
most notorious for his irritated behaviour  
that led to the massacre of thousands?

In “Honour”, a soldier is handed a medal for his bravery from a brigadier. Contrary to expectations, the soldier is not too happy about this honour. “His looks sullened”, writes Raghupathi.

Also, is there a word like “Enamouring”? One of R.C. Shukla’s poems is titled “Enamouring You Are But Never Discreet”. A line in the same poem appears to be missing an article: “The Plaudit that I gave/And left me to bear pangs/Like a galley slave.” Again, I have heard of “sadist” and “sardonic” but “sardonist”? Shukla uses the word to describe someone in a poem that bears the rather strange title “We are a Nexus of the Near and Far”.

It is often remarked that the line between poetry and prose is a thin one. The question of what makes a poem a poem is a vexed one. But despite allowing for a certain amount of confusion on the issue, I would not say that a line like “No, it is a reality not only for the blacks but for the whole humanity” in Raghupathi’s poem “A Dream Come True” constitutes poetry. The poet also has a tendency to sound like a poster or a greeting card, as in the poem “Love: I”.

Love gives you  
Bargain not,  
Love adores you  
Worship not,  
Love adorns you  
Reject not...

Some of Shukhla’s poems are excessively sentimental and mushy. The style seems more appropriate to romantic poetry than to

modern day verse. Take the opening lines of the poem “The Firmament in Your Eyes is Very Dear to Me”:

The firmament in your eyes is very dear to me  
And also the moonlight of your smiles  
You are the quintessence of the depth  
Which only sirens have  
In your limpid, gratifying water  
Am I keen to lave.

No wonder then that most people tend to assume that poets are moony-eyed people, dripping in sentimentality.

Another quarrel I have with Raghupathi’s style is the manner in which he forces the rhyme in his poem, without too much thought as to whether the words he employs fit the theme of the poem. Take for example, the following lines in the poem “To a Friend”:

Your heart is in your ribs  
My heart is in my crib...

Shukla’s rhymes seem equally artificial and far-fetched, as in the poem “The Firmament in Your Eyes is Very Dear to Me”:

Very tenuous is my temper  
And also impatient for your air  
Like a sanguine suitor  
Have I this day come to your gate  
I have never been to their smell  
Let me possess your hair.

However, it is these lines in Shukla’s poem “When Priorities Change” that take the cake for poor rhyming:

The judge sitting on the sin  
Between him and his passion  
There’s not even a pin.

Raghupathi's poem "The Spinster" disappoints us with the clichéd, conservative image of a spinster who at the age of fifty-two ends up "with nothing to boast/except a sack of painful memories/to be remembered by me now and then/and not to be shared with anyone/as there is no one to marry me now". It is not political correctness one is demanding of the poet. A modicum of respect for the single woman will do! Again, Shukla is not far behind in his use of clichéd images. In his case, it is that of a cruel young woman who spurns the attentions of the speaker. The speaker declares:

You yourself would not be averse to the need  
If you had been me.  
But no complaints madonna  
Since to my desolate corner  
Am I still eager to flee.

The poor editing compounds the problems with the texts. Every other page in *Small Reflections* has a typographical error: "Mackque" for "macaque" (13), "tsaverse" for "traverse" (35), "sorrounded" for "surrounded" (41), and "acconnt" for "account" (21) in *A Belated Appearance*.

Having said all this, I must add that some of the images that Raghupathi employs are extremely inventive and show promise. For instance, in the poem "Disturbed Birds" he compares bird eggs in a nest to naphthalene balls. The poem "A Monk Lost in a Brothel" is by far the best in the entire collection. It describes the encounter of a monk with a prostitute and the enlightenment that this encounter confers on the former. Perhaps what is called for is greater "reflection" on Raghupathi's part on his own work, greater reflection on those building blocks of poetry--words. "Small Reflections" will just not do.

Perhaps the root of the problem lies with our received notions of "literature" and "poetry"--notions that originate with the

romantic period in English literature. We believe like the romantics that poetry has to be excessive, that it has to do with a flow of feeling. We seem to forget that the romantics also stressed that poetry consists of powerful emotions “recollected in tranquility”. It is this distance that one must learn.

Another Writer’s Workshop publication, Sudha Iyer’s *Twilight Rhythms* is pitched very differently. Iyer dedicates her book to “all those kindred souls who try to reach out to the supra-sensuous”. While some of the poems in this collection (“The Dome”, for instance) work, most others, while ambitious in theme, are disappointingly simplistic and cliché-ridden. In the title poem, Iyer writes,

The evening exudes a rare charm  
with blushful smile from the West.  
Golden light liberally pours itself  
all around....

Similarly, in the poem “Will You Tell Me Why?”, she writes:

Some are taken for a pleasant ride  
On Angel’s wings,  
While others trudge and stumble  
On their own feet.

For some the breezes blow gentle  
All the way,  
While others are wildly tossed  
At every step...

One wishes at times for a more original way of saying things. Another problem with her work is the awkward, lengthy constructions as in the poem “Hope”:

Hope like a foster mother  
brings us up and sustains (sic) us.  
We may at times drive her out  
but she never deserts us  
And always stays somewhere around.

The poems “In Our Colleges” and “The Dome” are by far the most interesting. I particularly like the images of “boys and girls/spread like congress grass” and “famine-struck classrooms” in the former. “The Dome” is a quiet poem written with a splendid visual and aural sense:

I was hollowed  
and became a dome.  
You rang a bell  
that ripped the long silence  
of an ancient temple  
deep in the forest.

On the whole, Sudha Iyer’s poetry shows promise, but needs a lot of work.

*Waves* is a collection of Kashmiri poems by Arjan Dev Majboor rendered into English by Arvind Gigoo. Strangely enough, one really has to hunt for the name of the translator! I found it finally on the copyright and publication details page. Majboor already has five anthologies of Kashmiri verse and a translation of Kalidas’ *Meghadootam* to his credit. In 1994, he received the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages Award for his book *Paed Samyik (Footprints of Time)*.

Majboor’s voice is a mature and deeply introspective one. “I spent my age/writing this legend./But the pages leapt towards the sky./A dusty cobweb/besieged me”, he writes in “Wilderness”. His use of legend and fable in the poems “The Fowl” and “The City” is fascinating and inventive. But Majboor’s poem “Snow-man” is my favourite:

One winter morning  
they shaped me into a snow-man.  
Now I keep standing  
erect  
and  
cold.  
The red chilly is my mouth,  
the charcoal pieces are my eyes, the staff in my right hand  
is  
my prop.  
my left hand is not empty.  
Silence prevails all around.  
They come and tell me:  
“Laugh  
and  
play  
and  
dance  
and  
walk.”  
But I melt slowly  
crack up leisurely  
and  
Drip because of the sun.  
The tendril under my feet  
watches  
this invisible shrinkage.

Majboor’s deftness of expression is a refreshing experience. I suspect his poetry does suffer a little in the English version but then translating poetry into English is never an easy task. I wonder if it is to Indian literatures that one must turn ultimately for unself-conscious expression. This makes the enterprise of translation all the more important. Indian poetry in English requires fresh benchmarks--standards towards which the poet can then struggle.

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA  
“SILENCE” BROKEN:  
JAYANTA MAHAPATRA’S *BARE FACE*

Jayanta Mahapatra. *Bare Face*. Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2000.  
pp.79. Rs.100.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s recently published book of twenty-seven poems, *Bare Face*, ushers in the new millennium. Twenty-six poems make up Part I of this very powerful and significantly different text, while Part II, titled “Requiem”, is a long poem of twenty-four pages, divided into twenty sections and preceded by a prologue. Mahapatra, who has been writing poetry in English for the past thirty years and is regarded as one of India’s leading poets, has won national and international acclaim, interestingly in reverse order. His poetry is often region and culture specific, as repeated references to Orissa demonstrate. For him however Orissa is just one face of India. He admits candidly in an interview, “India comes second. Orissa comes first: I don’t mind saying that.”

Though Mahapatra’s poetry has always represented sense and sensibility in a fine balance through a variety of nuanced images and symbols, in *Bare Face* the reader unmistakably hears the voice of a poet who is aggrieved, outraged and disenchanted as he experiences the mindless bigotry and hypocrisy of the country of his birth. In this volume therefore “India” is represented as cultural location, metaphor, icon and exploded myth. The despair and controlled rage that overpowers the caveat and lament in these poems disturbs the reader. Here we have a poet who is relentless in his exposure of the death of a dream and the collapse of a vision. In lucid lines the poet states in “One Clear Night”

the morning’s orchids bloom  
with new forgiveness as Freedom, the puppet,  
sways to the pull of unseen masters.

This is truly a ravaged land that registers the death of love, the pervasiveness of looming shadows and the steady pace of death where “our best literature twists to its tragic air.” The poem “Concerning August 1998” interrogates the educated and cultured Indian’s post-independence, postcolonial identity. It resurrects the Mahatma as the forgotten icon of truth and asks the rhetorical question,

Wasn’t the one voice who spoke of truth  
A greater force than this fleet of legislators and scholars?

The poet’s skepticism and uneasiness is unambiguous and the hiss in the word “this” in the phrase cannot be missed.

The next long poem, “The Return”, once again identifies the indifference and corrupt callousness of institutions, establishments and governments voted to power by the people--the supreme irony of all. The poet endeavours to conform to the dictates and demands of being a “good citizen” in an environment walled by “maniacal government buildings”, red glow of “bureaucrats’ eyes” and the “Minister’s Mercedes”. But despite the irony the poet is not entirely cynical, as he feels that ministers can still feel embarrassed by “people’s prayers”! However, he confesses “poems too fail to soothe my grief”, while in “The Tame Ending”, he admits that “The poetry I write bruises the page”.

The rage of resistance resonates through many lines in this recent volume wherein, as never before, I think, Jayanta Mahapatra has overtly acknowledged that poetry can be an active agency with a sense of social commitment. As an unacknowledged legislator of the world the poet’s role is not that of an alienated bohemian or a dissident intellectual. The poems in *Bare Face* register this sense of the poet’s social obligation and political position, as they expose the dehumanized agenda of the Repressive State Apparatus and the decadence of the Cultural State Apparatus. If only Mahatma Gandhi could have reappeared as the Saviour whose Second

Coming could perhaps have dispelled the encircling gloom--this is the only possibility of redemption, according to the poet.

Here the need for Gandhi, the memory of Gandhian ideals, reconstructs how the abiding earth has patiently awaited and hailed such selfless messiahs as the Buddha, Christ, Lincoln, Che Guevara and numerous nameless dreamers and visionaries, whose hearts have bled for the wretched of the earth. The poems recall how poets through the centuries have suffered, mourned and protested, how they have been tortured, crucified or annihilated, either physically or emotionally or both, by each depravity of the human race--"What poetry cannot do is to acknowledge it is mute" ("The Tame Ending"). And it is this that seems to be the ideology of Mahapatra. An ideology that does not adhere to any regimentation of party politics and other invidious agenda of vested interests. Reading and re-reading Jayanta Mahapatra's new book of poems, I feel that in *Bare Face* this senior Indian English poet has unbound himself with a candidness that is unique. I am reminded of Seamus Heaney's observations about the kinetic force and power that unleashed poetry can exert: "The achievement of a poem, after all, is an experience of release ....The tongue, governed so long in the social sphere...this tongue is suddenly ungoverned". But I feel compelled to mention that in his descriptions of women, Jayanta Mahapatra has reverted to the traditional stereotypes of a woman's sexuality, which I found surprising:

Rain, all night.  
Capacious, like the body of a woman.

Or "the immodesty of a woman bathing".

Part II of *Bare Face* is an emotional tribute to Gandhi, entitled "Requiem". It reads like an intense dirge, a song of memory and lament, resurrecting moments of India's history during the freedom movement spearheaded by Gandhi, from the Salt Satyagraha of

1903 to Gandhi's historic 1931 London visit urging freedom for his motherland:

The bare chest of hunger  
Rose and fell.  
"Freedom?"

To the poet, India is a tender and innocent girl-child, alarmed and agonized by the mindless violence generated by pride and prejudice and the intoxication of power:

India was a little girl  
who came in and stood  
at the threshold of his door.

The poet also recalls the indelible moment of shame in the country's history--"hysterics of history", when Gandhi was assassinated:

And the poem of a mere two words  
is drawn to its own beauty,  
born in the cool January air,  
ending in the fullness of fire;  
*He' Ram.*

There is an unredeemed tone of resignation and a sense of futility in the voice of the poet, who feels a terrible sense of isolation in the wasteland of "discarded ideals". And therefore the poem ends with a direct address to the Father of the Nation:

What you have left behind are  
faded pictures on bare office walls. A day  
every year as a national holiday.

*Bare Face* is not only a personal lament for a dream that has died, it is more than just Job's lament,

I keep the ashes away  
try not to wear them on my forehead.

These new poems are an expression of a poet's agonized consciousness emanating from a profound sense of frustration and futility:

I know I have never  
pulled the trigger of any gun.  
But does that make me less of a conspirator?

Jayanta Mahapatra has of late been frequently focusing on the need to recognize the power and eloquence of silence. But in *Bare Face*, the poet's cautious voice expresses his compulsion to warn his fellow folks. He feels his pain must be heard. So Jayanta Mahapatra admits, "Poetry makes me write poems with a bad heart....this heart, as it keeps on trying to hide the wounded walls of its house, and at the same time asking itself for a meaning to our lives." Poetry, after all, "while not being practically effective, is not necessarily inefficacious."

SUSHEEL KUMAR SHARMA  
**THE POET AT WORK: INTERVIEWS WITH  
HOSHANG MERCHANT**

Hoshang Merchant (b.1947), a poet by soul but a teacher (Lecturer in English, Central University of Hyderabad) by profession, has so far published eleven volumes of his poems. While one of them has been published by Rupa and Company the other ten (including *Selected Poems*) have been brought out by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. A Ph. D. degree holder from Purdue University (Indiana), Hoshang Merchant has attended the Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown, Massachusetts. He has studied Buddhism with the Dalai Lama and Islam in Iran, in addition to Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Hinduism.

I was introduced to Hoshang Merchant in 1996 in a Refresher Course in English at Hyderabad where he had been invited to deliver some lectures. I was shocked like so many others to learn in the very introductory note about him that he was 'gay' --my puritanic upbringing and morality had got a blow. But I also felt comforted and assured on later thought that I was in the company of a true person--if he was true enough to let us know his bed / bad qualities he at least would not do us any 'harm'. He soon mesmerized the audience by his poetic lecture and vast knowledge. His words started coming out like coins from a mint--bright, new, fresh, sparkling, genuine and sincere. He gave me the impression of being a sensitive reader of literature and I was proved right in my subsequent sittings with him. Here are some of the questions that Hoshang Merchant has gladly answered about his own work.

\* \* \*

INTERVIEW - I

*Susheel Kumar Sharma: Could you describe the writing process? How do you build up a poem and what are the criteria for its being accepted / rejected by you?*

Hoshang Merchant: By Epiphany. If a poem does not come like leaves to trees it better not come at all.

*SKS: Nissim Ezekiel in one of his poems says “the best poet waits for words”. For you what is more important: emotions--words--images--symbols--political--anguish--?*

HM: I do not like Ezekiel. EMOTIONS always.

*SKS: In your poems two selves tend to appear--one craving for the past and the other for the future. There appears to be no effort to grapple with the realities around you. Am I right in my assessment?*

HM: Down with reality!

*SKS: Which sensibility is more important to you: Parsee--English--Indian--Teacher's--Gay—Lover's--something else?*

HM: Indian—Gay—Lover's.

*SKS: How much is your poetry autobiographical?*

HM: 101%

*SKS: Could you name some of the literary and other influences on your poetry?*

HM: Anais Nin / Sufism.

*SKS: Does your philosophy of life have any bearing on your poetry?*

HM: I thought philosophy came after the poem.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

*SKS: For you an emotion appears to be more important than the form. Is it because of certain influences / aesthetics?*

HM: I think form is dictated by the emotion.

*SKS: How far does your role as a critic help in writing and shaping your poems?*

HM: It is a drawback to be a good critic (which I AM!).

*SKS: What is the most distinctive feature of your poetry that makes you stand apart in the Indian literary firmament?*

HM: Gayness.

*SKS: Your poetry appears to be highly personal not only because of personal anguish being expressed but also because of personal symbols and imagery. Is this 'personal' a disguise for 'political'?*

HM: The personal IS the political.

*SKS: Most of your poems are not bound by any rhythm and metre-- they appear to be prose lines cut and broken here and there to look like verses. Could you explain your position?*

HM: I talk in rhythms, metre and rhythm. The length of the poetic line is the length of breath.

*SKS: Are you aware of some critical works on your poetry?*

HM: *The Week*, 4 April 99. *Indian Review of Books* (single reviews). Review by Dr. Narayana Chandran in a US journal.

*SKS: The publication of Selected Poems is considered to be a milestone in a poet's career. What do you attribute your success to?*

HM: If I write ten books and no one reads them then I hope a Selection will help.

*SKS: Do you keep a sort of journal / diary to help you in writing poems?*

HM: I think some poems are diaries. I also think diary and lyric are two separate things.

*SKS: How would you preferably describe yourself: 'An Indian poet in English' / 'An International Gay Poet' / 'The first Indian Queer Poet' / ....*

HM: An International Gay Poet.

*SKS: What future do you see for Indian poetry in English?*

HM: Very bright  
As long as people write (rhymes)

*SKS: Does a reader need some special aesthetic tool to appreciate your poetry?*

HM: Just a tool! Seriously, Surrealism / Sufism

## INTERVIEW - II

*SKS: Please tell us something about your family, keeping yourself at its center.*

HM: My father, who just died at seventy-nine, was a rich widow's only son. He married my mother, a divorcee with a B.A. in Indian music and English literature, and a poor priest's daughter (first of five daughters of an insane mother) much against his family's wishes in a sensational love-marriage in 1940's, in Bombay. It

ended in divorce. I was my mother's boy, only son, second child. Brought up till middle school among girls at home and in a girls infant school. I sided with my mother at the divorce. My mother was crippled after the divorce. I spurned my father's wealth (he left twenty-five crores to his second wife) and went to work at sixteen for seventy-five rupees a month. I went to the States for study (my mother had saved for me). Mother died within the year. Both parents were physically violent to me.

*SKS: Where were you educated? Please start with your basic education.*

HM: J. B. Petit Parsi Girls' School until Fourth Standard. St. Xavier's Boys' Academy SSC, First in the State in History. St. Xavier's College Intermediate, First in the University in English. St. Xavier's College B.A., First in the University in Shakespeare. Occidental College, M.A.. 1968-1969. Purdue University, Ph.D. 1969-1975 (two thesis writing scholarships), Degree 1981.

*SKS: In which year did you go to the States? Why did you choose the States only, for your higher studies? I understand your earlier choice was the UK. Did you ever regret your decision of going / shifting to the USA?*

HM: 1969. I had read about New York's Mattachine Society for Homosexuals in *Pagent*. I got admission only to Occidental College in California for M.A. I wanted to leave the hard family situation. I got a full scholarship to Purdue within the year for the next six years. Cambridge did not give me a scholarship. The Pound Sterling was higher than the Dollar. I did not want our erstwhile colonial masters to patronize me. My regret was that UK had an accepted gay culture at Oxford and Cambridge. The Midwest (USA) in the 1970's was very homosexual hating.

*SKS: Please tell us something about your teachers in India and abroad.*

HM: My high school English teacher, Amy Bilimoria (a Parsi lady) taught me how to be independent of my feuding family, at sixteen. She took me to my first English play in Bombay and she taught me how to dine out in style by taking me to my first Chinese restaurant (a rarity in 1964 in Bombay).

My poetry teacher at B.A., Prof. Menezes Fernandes, an Anglo-Indian, made me love poetry. Nisha da Cunha, daughter of Janta Finance Minister H.M. Patel, married into Bombay's theatre-family, a short story writer later, inspired us to go abroad for study (she is M.A. from Cambridge). Dr. Mehroo Jussawala, Spenser scholar and unmarried daughter of my mother's Parsi solicitor, my elder sister's teacher at Elphinstone College, Bombay helped me study for Cambridge exams and taught me appreciation of European Painting.

At Occidental College, Prof. Donald Adams, Fulbright Professor at Marathwada University, who later died while on another Fulbright in Indonesia, encouraged me to do a Ph.D., but at another California school (I later learnt he was gay).

At Purdue, Prof. Virgil Lokke, American Studies Founder, ex-Navy man, popular culture expert, mathematician and musician (played trumpet in a 1940's Jazz club in Chicago) helped me to adjust to my homosexuality, to the Midwest homophobia, to my traumatic family past; saved me from the clutches of the University doctors (who asked me to become heterosexual) and valued my view point as an antidote to the stuff that passes for family values in USA. He taught me skepticism. Professor William Bache, my Shakespeare teacher, called me a 'genius' in so many words. He loved me personally. He was the first to encourage my poetry. He taught me how to read poetry, which is my mealticket even today. He taught me love.

*SKS: Did you choose Anais Nin for your studies consciously and deliberately?*

HM: After deciding not to write on Djuna Darnes, a New York lesbian novelist of the 1940's (she had one novel and no critical material on her in the 1970's) with Virgil, and deciding against writing on the sonnets with Bache I read Nin's Fourth Diary about her gay New York artist friends and decided to write on her and write like her myself.

*SKS: Did you ever meet Anais Nin?*

HM: I corresponded with her from 1973 till her death in 1976. I dreamt her death (I was in the Dalai Lama's school then). After her death I visited her fabled home in Sierra Madre, in the hills of Los Angeles. Her second husband, Rupert Pole (son of the Shakespeare theatre modernizer William Poel) thanked me for my work on Anais.

*SKS: How do you rate her as a poet?*

HM: Anais Nin is not a poet. She introduced the French prose-poem into America. In English the prose poem is more prose, in France it is more poetry than prose. Hence she is inaccessible to Americans. Besides, a background in French Literature (Rimbaud) is essential. Her diary (prose) is absolutely sublime.

*SKS: How did you come in contact with the gay movement in the States?*

HM: A few gay friends and I started the Gay Lib at Purdue in 1973 after several discriminatory experiences with the Campus Police and the psychiatric services. The work was dismantled in the right wing Reganite backlash of the 1980's. Now even our office in the student union is forfeited. I lost my immigration because of

coming out openly as a gay, after a murderous attempt on my life one night. In the 60's the personal was political.

*SKS: What future do you see for it there?*

HM: There is now 'an acceptable face of homosexuality', that is, live like the straights and what you do in bed is your business. The bourgeois gays are fighting for bourgeois rights like leasing apartments together; naming lovers as dependents on tax-returns for tax rebates, naming lovers as recipients of provident funds of the deceased partner, and, in extremis only, legalizing gay 'marriages' which would allow gay adoptions (only lesbians can legally adopt at present). The radical work of a Jean Genet who fought for gay rights along with the Black Panthers and the Palestinians (Dr. George Mabhash's Syrian Communist group PFLP) that is, gay lib's anti-white, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist face is now dead.

*SKS: Is there any 'gay movement' in India? If so, how is it similar/different from the one in the States?*

HM: In India a statute of the late 1800's once adopted from the UK (now rescinded in UK) is on the books. It makes sodomy (even with one's wife) punishable with jail. It was introduced in India after the Wilde trial to tell us colonials that our white masters were not pansies. Two people have been convicted on the basis of this statute in 100 years. But it breeds fear and makes the homosexual open to police and social (neighbour's) exploitation. The Bombay and Delhi gays (Bombay Dort) are petitioning for its removal.

'Gay' (homosexual) is a western category from the 18th century discourse of dichotomics (Cartesian). Our eastern cultures practise homosexuality at some time of life (usually adolescence) secretly. I generally hope people would come out and SAY it (In this sense, I'm a westerner. Sex is not new but talking sex is, as Foucault writes in his *History of Sexuality*).

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

*SKS: Soon after your stay in the States, I understand, you went to Iran. What were your experiences there?*

HM: They are described, in parts, in my poem “How the Revolution Was Won” from my book, *Yusuf in Memphis*.

*SKS: Your religion has an origin in Iran. And it was due to persecution on religious grounds that your ancestors took refuge in India and contributed to the growth of this country. Have you, being a sensitive soul, ever wished to go back to Iran and discover the land?*

HM: I taught Western liberalism in the face of Khoemini’s fanatical onslaught for four years in Iran (1977-1981). I took care to learn the Koran, the Hadith (the Prophet’s sayings) which is the true compassionate face of Islam. My contribution is to India as its First Indian English Gay Poet.

*SKS: Were you successful in your goal / purpose while you stayed there?*

HM: I went to Iran to rid myself of the godless materialism of the hedonistic homophobic West. Iranian society is tolerant and largely homoerotic probably because of ‘purdah’, but I personally feel Shia Islam has retained Zoroastrianism’s anti-woman attitude (menstruation is seen as unclean and death dealing because it is a failure to be fertile). The literature of Iran is also largely homoerotic (Saadi openly, Rumi / Hafiz covertly). I learnt how to write from behind a subterfuge from Persian poets.

HOW THE REVOLUTION WAS WON  
(Iran 1977-1981)

I had no time for it:  
Pulling down the window shades  
on seeing an assassination  
I continued parsing  
Five most wanted men  
dumb blind deaf unfeeling untouched  
mingled with my students  
I went along with the pretence  
So did they: complementing my teaching  
as they left  
Without a word of English.

I couldn't do that  
the day the Shah left  
My resident revolutionary  
who decided I was a Sufi  
rather than a spy  
had the intelligence to dismiss  
class for the day

I holed up  
went out at break of day  
for a milk carton, a tin  
of biscuits  
Got pinched for my pains  
the prostitutes were burnt already  
And there were men enough for me  
Getting bored with barricades  
I took an Afghan in a hamam  
but Islam had come  
to the last free bastion  
I left town for Isfahan  
And the love of my life  
And on to Kerman

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

The revolution was now eating  
away at the nation's borders  
the enemy was getting ideas  
and I, poems  
So like some Alexander I crossed Hamadan  
And back into the heart  
Of Tehran, where my lover and I  
were bored no more  
looking up into the sky  
to see death-flowers  
light up the night  
We clutched tight  
Morning we spit into the sun's face  
or a devil's on the front page  
Night again  
we screamed through the curfew  
and the power-cuts  
or cursed howitzers....

In the occupied city  
Picasso shut a window  
And painted  
At liberation hung out a tricolour--  
I under six blankets  
a Rapunzel  
was brought soup by a Cinderella  
who at three days' end  
shouted down the stairwell:  
Emerge the Revolution's won

So hanging out a parti-coloured quilt  
as homage to the 20th Century  
I emerged into the 21st  
where dead kings are reborn as poets.

## CONTRIBUTORS

*John Alter* spent the first eighteen years of his life in north India, and returned to South Asia later for teaching assignments in Punjab and Nepal. He has been Principal of two schools in East Africa, and is currently Vice Principal of a school on Long Island in New York.

*Pratap Chahal* has graduated with Honours in English from St. Stephen's College of Delhi University, and is currently beginning further studies at the University of Birmingham, England.

*K.Narayana Chandran* is Head of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. His reviews, and his translations from Malayalam into English have appeared in many journals.

*Cyril Dabydeen*, a native of Guyana, now lives in Ottawa, Canada, where he served as the city's poet laureate, 1984-87. Besides ten volumes of poetry, he has published two collections of stories, two novels, and has edited two poetry anthologies.

*Jhaffur Khan Azad Darakth* is the pen name of Jeffrey Campbell, who has lived most of his life in India and South Asia. When last cited he was working with Ford Foundation in Jakarta, Indonesia.

*Sanjukta Dasgupta*, Head of the Department of English at Calcutta University, is Associate Editor there of the *Journal of the Women's Studies Research Centre*. She has published two volumes of poems, *Snapshots* and *Dilemma*, and a study of *The Novels of Huxley and Hemingway*.

*Sonjoy Dutta-Roy*, who teaches in the Department of English Studies at the University of Allahabad, has published one volume of poetry, *The Absent Words*, and a critical volume, *(Re)constructing the Poetic Self: Tagore, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot*.

*Rebecca S. Erb*, lives in Belfast, Maine, in the northern United States. But she has traveled in India in its warm season where she visited with her daughter who worked for three years in Tamilnadu.

*E. Lynne Harris*, who has taught English at the University of Illinois in the United States, and who resides at Wheaton in greater Chicago, has visited extensively in Asian and African countries. Her poems in this volume treat light-heartedly her travels in India.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

*Tabish Khair*, born and educated in Bihar, has secured a doctoral degree at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, where he is now Assistant Professor in the Department of English. He has published three volumes of poetry, a novel (*An Angel in Pyjamas*) and *Babu Fictions*, a study of contemporary Indian fiction in English.

*Prem Kumar*, born in Punjab and educated there and at Washington State University, currently teaches technical communication at the University of Washington and computing tools and methods for the Boeing Company in Seattle.

*Christopher Levenson* has travelled in India for more than ten weeks. He resides in Ottawa, Canada, where he is Adjunct Professor of English at Carlton University and a member of the University's committee on South Asian Studies. He has published eight volumes of his own poetry, and a survey of post-1970 Canadian verse.

*Sitakant Mahapatra* is Chairman of the National Book Trust of India. He writes and translates his poetry into English (*The Ruined Temple* and *Let Your Journey Be Long*); translates oral tribal poetry (*Unending Rhythms* and *The Endless Weave*) and has published several volumes of essays (*Beyond the Word* and *The Role of Tradition in Literature*).

*Darshan Singh Maini*, formerly Professor and Head of the Department of English at Punjabi University, Patiala, is best known perhaps for his critical studies of Henry James. *The Aching Vision* is the most recent of his several volumes of published poetry.

*Keshav Malik*, awarded the Government of India's "Padma Shri" for his writing, has published most recently *Rumor*, as well as a dozen earlier volumes of poetry. He has edited several important journals, and has written extensively on contemporary Indian art.

*Hoshang Merchant* is Reader in the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. In addition to *In-Discretions* (a literary study of Anais Nin) he has published ten volumes of poetry, from which *Selected Poems* were chosen in 1999 for an anthology of his work.

*Lingaraj Mishra*, who has recently returned to India from a year of Fulbright Fellowship studies, is Reader in the Postgraduate Department of English at the autonomous SCS College in Puri, Orissa.

*Meenakshi Mukherjee*, distinguished critic of Indian fiction (*The Twice Born Fiction; Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India*), has translated poetry and fiction from Bengali and Oriya; edited studies of *Early Novels in India* and the critical edition of *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first Indian novel in English; and edited many other volumes of stories and essays.

*Prema Nandakumar* has published a novel (*Atom and the Serpent*), studies of Tamil epics and other poetry, and translations from Tamil poetry and fiction. One of India's most prolific reviewers, she has also collaborated crucially with her late father K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar in producing the monumental *Indian Writing in English*.

*Rana Nayar* teaches in the Department of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh. He has published *From Across the Shores*, a group of sixteen short stories, and several English translations of Punjabi fiction. He is currently translating a group of Sufi poems, four of which appear in this volume of *KB*.

*Durga Prasad Panda* is a statistical investigator with the Government of India in Berhampur, Orissa. He has recently published *Unreal City and Other Poems*, translated from the poetry of Jagannath Prasad Das.

*John O. Perry's* current work is with the Indian Critics Survey Team. A former Tuft's University professor, his most significant publications include *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism* and *Voices of Emergency*, an anthology edited from Indian poetry of 1975-77.

*P.Radhika* is Senior Lecturer in English at Fatima Mata National College in Kollam, Kerala. She has published *Story-Teller to Visionary*, a study of Angus Wilson's narrative art.

*T.M.Raghuram* is a practising psychiatrist at Manjeri in Kerala. He has published *A Handful of Dreams* and two other volumes of poetry.

*Kavya Bharati 2001*

*E.V.Ramakrishnan*, a Reader in English at South Gujarat University, Surat, has published *A Python in a Snake Park and Other Poetry*, and the critical text *Making It New: Modernism in Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi Poetry*.

*Krishna Rayan* has taught in universities in Zambia and Nigeria, has travelled throughout African countries and Europe, and has published significant critical volumes, including *The Burning Bush* and *Sahitya: A Theory*. A prolific reviewer, he currently resides in Mumbai.

*Susheel Kumar Sharma* is Associate Professor of English in the College of Science and Humanities at the G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar, Uttar Pradesh.

*M.Sridhar* teaches English at the University of Hyderabad. His translations from Telugu to English and English to Telugu, done in collaboration with Alladi Uma, have won the Jyeshtha Literary Award and the Katha Commendation Prize for Translation.

*K.Srilata* teaches English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at I.I.T., Chennai. Her collection of poetry, *Seablue Child*, is under publication, and she is now at work translating writings by women in the Self-Respect movement in Tamilnadu.

*Smita Tewari* is Reader in the Department of English at the University of Allahabad. Her publications include *Time Recycled*, a collection of poems, and other individual poems in journals and anthologies.

*M.L.Thangappa*, a retired Tamil lecturer from Bharathidasan College in Pondicherry, has published eight collections of his poetry, and has also made extensive translations from Sangam poetry into English.

*Alladi Uma* is Reader in English at the University of Hyderabad. She has won prizes for Telugu-English translation, has done additional work in Women's writing and African-American literature, and has taught at Wabash College in the United States as a Fulbright Fellow.

## SUBMISSIONS

*Kavya Bharati* welcomes contributions of poetry in English, review articles and essays on poetry or particular poets, well recorded interviews with poets, and translations of poetry from Indian languages into English: from resident and non-resident Indians, and from citizens of other countries who have developed a past or current first-hand interest in India.

We prefer manuscripts on A4-size paper that are typewritten, or computer printouts. We will also process and consider material that is sent by e-mail. Manuscripts of essays and review articles sent in any format whatever must conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

Manuscripts must be accompanied by the full preferred postal address of the sender (including PIN code), with telephone and / or e-mail address where possible. With the manuscript please also send sufficient biodata, such as those given in the "Contributors" pages of this issue. All submissions must be sent, preferably by Registered Post or Courier, to The Editor, *Kavya Bharati*, SCILET, American College, Post Box No.63, Madurai 625 002 (India).

Utmost care will be taken of all manuscripts, but no liability is accepted for loss or damage. *Kavya Bharati* cannot promise to return unused manuscripts, so the sender should not include return postage or cover for this purpose. The Editor cannot promise to respond to inquiries regarding manuscripts once sent. The sender is free to give such manuscripts to other publishers if he or she receives no response within one year of dispatch.

*Kavya Bharati* assumes that all its contributors will submit only writing which has not previously been published and is not currently being considered for publication, unless the contributor gives clear information to the contrary. Aside from this statement, *Kavya Bharati* cannot be responsible for inadvertently publishing material that has appeared elsewhere.

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH  
IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE  
(NIRIEL) GULBARGA**

NIRIEL (National Institute for Research in Indian English Literature) has been established with the conviction that research in Indian English literary studies can be fully realised if books, journals, and other relevant materials are made available to scholars at one place which can also eventually function as a nucleus for discussion and debate.

NIRIEL, at the moment, has a considerably substantial library of primary and secondary sources, and scholars (especially those that are doing their M.Phil., M.Litt., Ph.D., etc.) are welcome to visit it and make use of the modest facilities it offers.

Membership of NIRIEL can be acquired by paying the Life Membership fee of Rs.2000/-. Members can consult books, journals, and similar other materials at the Institute. They will also get all possible bibliographic guidance/ assistance.

All payments should be made through drafts drawn in favour of "NIRIEL".

All correspondence may be addressed (with self-addressed stamped envelopes/international reply coupons) to:

Dr.G.S.Balarama Gupta  
Director, NIRIEL  
4-29, Jayanagar, GULBARGA 585 105  
Karnataka, India.  
(Phone: 24282)

Donations of books/journals/cash are welcome and will be gratefully acknowledged.

Gulbarga is well connected by rail/road with all metropolitan cities like Bangalore, Bombay, Madras, Madurai, Hyderabad, New Delhi, Bhubaneswar, etc. The nearest airport is at Hyderabad.

## SCILET

### AMERICAN COLLEGE, MADURAI

The Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation, better known by its acronym, SCILET, has one of the largest data bases in Asia for Indian Literature in English. Its eight thousand books include texts by fifteen hundred Indian and South Asian authors. From other books and from more than seventy-five current journal titles and their back issues, critical material regarding many of these Indian authors is indexed and included in the database.

SCILET is thus equipped to offer the following to its resident members and its growing numbers of distance users in India and overseas:

- 1) Print-out checklists of its holdings related to any of the authors mentioned above, and to selected topics pertinent to Indian and South Asian Literature.
- 2) Alternatively, these checklists can be sent by E-mail, for distance users who prefer this method.
- 3) Photocopies of material requested from these checklists, wherever copyright regulations permit.

Membership in the SCILET library is required in order to avail of the above services. Current membership rates are Rs.150/- per academic year for undergraduate and M.A. / M.Sc. students, Rs.500/- per year for Doctoral and Post-Doctoral scholars and Rs.300/- per year for all others. Application forms for membership are available from the Librarian, SCILET, American College, Post Box 63, Madurai 625002 (India).

SCILET is developing a significant collection of material related to women's studies in South Asia. Its library also holds other small "satellite" collections of Sri Lankan, Australian, Canadian and Native American literatures. Membership in SCILET also gives the user limited access to materials in American College's special collection of about seven thousand books related to British and American Literature, which is housed adjacent to the Study Centre.

Details regarding any of these additional collections can be furnished to SCILET members on request.

Statement about ownership and other particulars about  
**KAVYA BHARATI**

FORM IV (See Rule 8)

Place of Publication	American College Madurai 625 002
Periodicity of its Publication	Twice Yearly
Printer's Name	T. J. George
Nationality	Indian
Address	Lokavani-Hallmark Press(P) Ltd 62/63, Greams Road Madras 600 006
Publisher's Name	R. P. Nair
Nationality	Indian
Address	C/o American College Madurai 625 002
Editor's Name	R. P. Nair
Nationality	Indian
Address	C/o American College Madurai 625 002
Names and Addresses of individuals who own the newspaper, and partners and share holders holding more than one percent of total capital	Study Centre for Indian Literature in English and Translation American College Madurai 625 002

I, R. P. Nair, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to my knowledge and belief.

(Signed) R. P. Nair  
Publisher