

PAKISTAN IN TURMOIL

By Reginald Massey

The last few months have witnessed enormous uncertainty for the people of Pakistan who have been saddled with a government that has lost its bearings. Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the ruling party, has been debarred from holding public office by the Supreme Court and a subservient nominee of his is the Prime Minister. To compound matters the country had no finance minister during a crucial period; the incumbent, Ishaq Dar, flew off in a hurry to a London hospital because he complained of a heart problem.

He is still in London and has been declared a proclaimed absconder. Incidentally he has a relationship with Nawaz Sharif: his son is married to Nawaz Sharif's daughter. They are, what are called in Pakistan, 'samadis'. Both men have been investigated on charges of disproportionate assets and money laundering.

However, the country's financial problems are much more precarious than the former finance minister's health. Imports are high and exports are low. The Pakistan Rupee has lost its value and the government is scrabbling around looking for loans. People of Pakistani origin living in the United Kingdom, North America and the Gulf States generously remit money to relatives in Pakistan and this is what helps, in some measure, to keep the country afloat. British taxpayers also fund Pakistan and it is perhaps not widely known that Pakistan receives the biggest chunk of British foreign aid. Taxpayers in the UK have therefore the right to ask questions.

It may be old fashioned to say that he who pays the piper calls the tune. But he who pays the piper must at least know what is

happening with the cash. It is claimed that British aid is being applied to education. If that is so why do Pakistani commentators such as Hassan Nisar always lament the dreadful state of education in Pakistan? Does our High Commission in Islamabad ever summon up the courage to ask where and how the money is being used? According to Jon Boone's documented and hard hitting piece in *The Guardian* (January 15) our men and women in Islamabad do not liaise with ministers or bureaucrats. They talk to the generals at Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi. But there is some method in the madness of our diplomats.



It is the generals who run Pakistan, not the civilian government. Louis XIV was honest when he said "L'Etat c'est moi". If the generals were honest they would say, "We are the State". However, the poor and the oppressed of the country are well aware of this fact. It is no wonder that the man whose young daughter was recently raped and murdered in the city of Kasur, in Punjab province, appealed for justice to the head of the army. That goes to show how much the common man trusts the police, the judiciary or the civil administration. The rich get away with murder but the poor are killed by extra-judicial fake encounters and unexplained disappearances. In these circumstances it is

most unfortunate that the intellectuals of the country have been muzzled and side-lined. In effect, silenced. Many have had to move to safe sanctuaries in the west.

The blunt Mr Trump's New Year tweet to Pakistan spelt out his stand on American aid. But what he said was nothing new. Hilary Clinton said the same when she was Secretary of State not long ago. But her language was moderate and hence did not hit the headlines. The generals have always been in denial when it comes to the many terrorist groups that are based in the country. They cleverly use these brainwashed jihadis to do the needful

for them while keeping their hands 'clean'. Consider the case of Bin Laden's safe refuge in Abbottabad, a cantonment town not far from the Military Academy. It beggars belief that the arch terrorist and his family were living there and no one was aware of it. But if that were so, the general in command of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) should have

been court-martialled for incompetence and serious dereliction of duty. However, that did not happen. On the other hand, Dr Shakil Afridi who helped the CIA to pinpoint Bin Laden was charged with treason but has not yet been tried. He languishes in Peshawar's central jail and one of his lawyers has been murdered. Afridi is a forgotten man and no one talks about him. Even the Americans who should be grateful to him have forgotten him.

Pakistan's military establishment is tightly knit and that is how it controls the country. Hamid Bashani, a Pakistani analyst based in Toronto is convinced that many senior figures in Pakistan's army have a Taliban type mindset and mentality.

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This is our first quarterly issue for 2018. As usual it comes bundled up with a variety of interesting articles and stories for our growing informed readership.

As with changes in science and technology, in the literary world too, new ideas evolve in this ever-changing world. The world of music, theatre, cinema and art industry changes and moves into new horizons that we could never have imagined a few decades ago. In this respect, Confluence too would like to find room for new ideas that our writers may come up with. Bearing this in mind, for the first time we asked our writers to take part in a team project and come up with a joint story. The result was, 'A Flight to Nowhere', a chain story. Three of our contributors took up the challenge and teamed up to produce this story that was full of twists and turns, within a month. We are very pleased with what they have produced, and I hope our readers too will welcome this joint effort.

I am also pleased to note that we have had contributions from some new writers as well as from some of our previous contributors. Our experience indicates that the number of contributions we receive fall during the winter months but picks up again during summer though there is no perceptible reason for this trend. However, this does have an impact on our scheduling of each issue and the number of articles per issue. Therefore, I would like to ask our contributors to send their contributions regularly on time at least three weeks before each quarterly issue. We may decide sometimes to hold back an article for a subsequent issue. We would also welcome your comments in Letters to the Editor for publication in the next issue.

Happy reading!

Vijay Anand

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This was not so during the early years of the country's existence because the officer class of that period had been trained by the British. The tragic fact that must be stated is the following: the people of Pakistan have suffered the most from the activities of terrorist groups. It is therefore Pakistan's law and order agencies who must be held to account. Blaming 'foreign agents' is a lame and futile excuse. If one breeds vipers, such as Hafiz Saeed who has been declared a global terrorist by the United Nations, it should come as no surprise when one is bitten by them.

It is debatable who will win the elections this year since the bargaining, vote-buying and seat-seeking is currently in full swing. Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, Asif Ali Zardari's People's Party and Imran Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) are the chief contenders and each must muster important clerics to back them. Pakistani and Indian politicians are very alike in many ways. During the last election campaign in Gujarat, for example, the Congress campaigner Rahul Gandhi suddenly became a devout Hindu and started visiting temples to pray for success. Imran Khan, the former cricket star, has gone one better. He has sent a proposal of marriage to one Bushra Bibi, known as 'Pinky', who is said to be a person of great holiness and spiritual powers with a vast following. She is divorced with five grown-up children. In the presence of men, she is veiled which is a sign of virtue.

But would any civilian government, whichever party wins, be able to tame the military? All previous governments have failed on that score. The popular Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was sent to the gallows by the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq, and Bhutto's charismatic daughter

Benazir was assassinated when Pervez Musharraf, another general, was ruling the country. Many suspected that Musharraf, now in exile, had something to do with the assassination. It was the same Musharraf who was responsible for the debacle on the heights of Kargil in 1999 when hundreds of Pakistani soldiers were sacrificed in a foolhardy and ill-planned enterprise. He should have been court-martialled and shot. But the military freemasonry let him off. The common soldier is dispensable as he is considered mere cannon fodder.

Pakistan watchers will have noticed that the media there is strangely mute when it comes to the military. Those journalists and peace activists who dare to open their mouths against the military are soon dealt with. The recent brutal beating up of Taha Siddiqui in Islamabad is an example. Siddiqui had been harassed by the Federal Investigative Agency for having published reports criticising the army. He was kidnapped but managed to escape. Over the years it has not been easy to practise investigative journalism. Hamid Mir and his brother Amir are among several who have risked limb and life in order to expose scams and skulduggery perpetrated by members of the powerful political families. Pakistan is according to the World Press Freedom Index one of the most dangerous countries for journalists.

The only *raison d'être* for the very existence of the Pakistan military is that there should be permanent conflict with its neighbours. The conflict with India is a long and tortured one, but why conflict with Afghanistan which is an Islamic country? Ironically Afghanistan has warm relations with India. Pakistan would have no need for its huge and

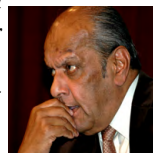
expensive armed forces if it resolved its differences with its neighbours. However, it is in the interest of the generals to maintain these conflicts at a high level and in the process, present themselves to the people of Pakistan as loyal protectors of the nation. Historically, of course, this is untrue. In 1971 when the drunken dictator Yahya Khan was in power he and his crony generals were solely responsible for the break-up of Pakistan and for good measure they ignominiously surrendered over 90,000 prisoners of war to the Indians.

Political and economic realignments are constantly changing. Till January 1, 2018 Pakistan could depend on the USA but now various question marks hang in the air. Pakistan, though isolated in South Asia, is increasingly dependent on China even though Russia has started making conciliatory statements. But the bad news for Pakistan is that both the USA and Israel have headed for India simply because India has the cash to buy their military hardware to the tune of billions of dollars.

[Readers interested in the China-Pakistan collaboration may click on the following link:

<http://www.confluence.mobi/politics/superpower-china-moves-into-south-asia>]

In September 2015 one of Reginald Massey's poems was awarded the first prize in the all-British Forward Poetry competition. He has been writing a regular Book Page for CONFLUENCE for years. Most of his books are available from Amazon UK.



Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

70 years of Indian freedom

Reginald Massey's article "Seventy Years and All That" in your last issue has brilliantly summed up both the agony and tragedy of modern India today. A poisonous form of religious nationalism, a callous disregard for differing views and a most unbalanced way the wealth of the country is being wasted away are three indictments that can be levied against those who are the masters of the country today. Despite all the pretence of being fair, neutral and constitutional by the top echelons of the ruling BJP party,

their storm troopers terrorise many of the vulnerable non-Hindu populace in remote areas in the name of Hindutva: something so un-Hindu in character. The interference with the writing and teaching of Indian history, according to international peer rules, and the silencing of all voices of intellectual dissension, will have a profoundly negative impact on the minds of future generations of young people. We are now reaching the limits of irrationality when strident demands are made for the re-writing of the history of the Taj Mahal. The resources of India are thrown away in building mighty arsenals of bombs, rockets and fighter jets, while the critical issues of public and environmental

health are ignored; primary basic education for the masses is being sacrificed in the interest of super scientific institutions for the children of the elite; and the dirt and filth of public and even holy sites is just unbelievable. India is not progressing; only some Indians are doing well. India is in fact regressing; and the lack of urgency for the welfare of the entire polity on the part of those responsible is the cause of that regression.

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RAJINI MAYAJAL

By Innamburan

"Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous. Let there be no relaxation in the face of the perils of the war."

- Pericles' Oration

William Shakespeare, for all his worldly wisdom, would have been smashed to smithereens in no time by Queen Elizabeth I in political skirmish. 'God Father' Marlon Brando would have been slain in the very first round by Putin in such a duel.

The frenzied popular adulation for 'PadmaVibhushan'

Shivaji Rao Gaekwad (67) aka Superstar Rajinikanth (Rajini), the matinee idol and political novice is boundless and his charisma is an irresistible lodestar. It is, however, a moot point whether his subsidised fan clubs would transmute themselves into a sustainable vote bank for him, his future party, political nominees and the shadow-boxers behind him, if any. As of now, neither his fans nor he himself have demonstrated political acumen.

Next Parliamentary elections are due in 2019; Tamil Nadu Assembly elections are due in 2021, which could be advanced to 2019 for more than one reason. Rajini had been procrastinating for decades, even though his potential was recognised by sharp critics like 'Cho' Ramaswamy' and reputed magazines like Kumudam and Junior Vikatan. He can no longer enjoy that luxury.

Contenders like Kamal Hasan, also a film icon with fan clubs and Stalin of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) are in the fray. Post-Jayalalitha (Amma), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) split into many coteries, amoeba-like. One such clique is in power now and will try to continue. Dinakaran from the Sashikala clique won the by-election caused by Amma's death with a thumping majority. It is widely perceived that he had shamed the 19th century British pocket borough elections, by distributing or promising millions of rupees to the electorate. He is a contender. I reckon that Kamal Hasan had shot himself in his feet by declaring his Dravidian rationalism (read atheism), which is obsolete. Karunanidhi's wife prostrated before Satya Saibaba; most DMK leaders fear God; M.G.Ramachandran (MGR) invoked Goddess Mookambike for AIMDK and Amma was obsessed with rituals, penances, astrology and mystic powers. Periyar, the iconoclast social reformer and the Dravidian mentor is passé.

MGR, the legendary thespian and politician, was the in-built magnet in the DMK. Expelled in 1972 for seeking accountability, he founded AIADMK and was the undisputed leader of the masses; he was Chief Minister till his death in 1987, in spells. He was not unblemished though. Amma succeeded him after an ugly power struggle and an election; she ruled the state with an iron hand in five spells from 1991 till her mysterious death on December 5, 2016. A judicial commission is enquiring into her death. Her confidante Sashikala is in jail for amassing wealth beyond known resources. Amma, also found guilty, was dead by the judgement day. A political three-ring circus since Amma's death has made Tamil Nadu, a laughing stock.

India Today - Karvy Insights polled a statistically robust sample in January 2018. Key findings are:

Disintegration of AIADMK;

60 percent of its block veering towards Rajini;

16 percent towards DMK;

Half the respondents unconvinced about Rajini's ability to deliver;

Stalin preferred as the Chief Minister, Rajini a distant second;

Masses mainly dissatisfied with all key economic and social parameters, including job creation, state of schools etc.



The populist reign of MGR was rent asunder by the capricious rule of M.Karunanidhi and Amma, in turns. Corruption no longer shames the culprits. Glaring evidence turned up at the time this writing (January 18, 2018). An incriminating official letter from the tax authorities about data on bribes of about Rs 400 millions to those in high places from Gutka trade, was found concealed in Amma's palace. Gutka is a banned addictive tobacco product and is sold brazenly, ruining schoolchildren. Financial skulldug-



Early days of film career. With late chief minister of Tamil Nadu MG Ramachandran(right) and late film director K.Balachandran(middle)

gery pales into insignificance vis-à-vis such outrages. Rajini has jumped into this cauldron; Periclean Perils is the metaphor for it.

I fear for the people who had proved time and again that they "could always be brought to the bidding of the leaders" (Hermann Goring, the Nazi) and had long predicted a horrifying revolution. Rajini promises a political revolution, and had skillfully sought and got endorsements by putting the Internet to good use and

mobilising support. He had even announced that he is ready for elections in six months. He had candidly announced his adherence to a spiritual discipline; you must go to his Persona to comprehend this reference point.

A staunch Hindu, he believes in spirituality, meditation and yoga. His spiritual mentors are Sri Ramakrishna, Raghavendra, Mahavatar Babaji and Ramana Maharishi; he is a product of the Ramakrishna Mutt. Once a coolie, he was a bus conductor on the 10A bus (Srinagar to Bangalore Bus Station) before joining the film institute in Chennai. He had not forgotten his humble beginnings and Raja Bahadur, the driver of the bus, of which he was the popular conductor for some years, is still his best friend, with whom he shares all his thoughts. "He has no serious interest whatsoever in politics," Bahadur says pensively. His friends wanted him to steer clear of politics. The time has come for them to support his entry to politics.

A Maharashtrian domiciled in Karnataka, Rajni knew no Tamil till my friend and former colleague K.Balachander, the renowned cinema producer, advised him to learn Tamil; the rest is history. He was ready in 20 days thanks to Raja Bahadur's coaching. His popularity has been attributed to "his uniquely styled dialogues and idiosyncrasies in films, as well as his political statements and philanthropy"... and 'larger-than-life super-hero appearance in many films, supported by gravity-defying stunts and charismatic expressions, all while attempting to maintain modesty in real-life'. Rajini was and is a man of the people. He is conscious of his Dravidian looks being his stock-in-trade.

Rajinikanth mania: Fans pierce their bodies with hooks ... - India Today

A perception is gaining ground that he is the prop of Bharathiya Janatha party (BJP). That may be only wishful thinking, given the widely prevalent animosity to that party in Tamil Nadu. Actually, the Tamil people have been brainwashed to distance themselves from Indian nationalism, though all the Dravidian parties had been, some time or other, parasites on the federal government.

S.Gurumurthy, the Hindutva Ideologue in the South and the successor to 'Cho' Ramaswamy as Editor of Thugluk, the political weekly that shapes public opinion, bats for Rajini, in the media. Ms.Tamizhisai Soundararajan, the BJP leader from Tamil Nadu had openly welcomed him to BJP.

In sum, the outcome is unpredictable. In popular parlance, Rajini may be less unwelcome than others or President's rule.

Srinivasan Soundararajan (Innamburan) is a Tamil scholar with degrees in Economics, Applied Sociology and Tamil Literature. He has long retired from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service in which he served as Additional Deputy Comptroller & Auditor General of India. He has also spent some years working in the UK as an Adviser for the Citizens' Advice Bureau.



AT THE BRINK IN SOUTH AFRICA

END OF ROAD FOR JACOB ZUMA!

By Devi Rajab



President Jacob Zuma is our Palestinian nakba, a catastrophe that has delivered our country on a silver platter to foreign nationals, the infamous Gupta brothers. Over his 2 term tenureship President Zuma and his merry men of corrupt friends and relatives have planted deep roots of poison that has systematically eroded our nation at the level of every parastatal. Jacques Pauw an investigative journalist has written a most revealing expose in his book *The Presidents Keepers* in which he exposes the darkest secret at the heart of Jacob Zuma's compromised government. He describes the rot as "a cancerous cabal that eliminates the president's enemies and purges the law enforcement agencies of good men and women". Presently Zuma is fighting for his political life following the 2017 Gupta email leaks. A series of explosive e-mails show the extent of the Gupta family's control over cabinet ministers, and state-owned companies and their CEOs and boards. The explosive evidence comes as President Jacob Zuma fights for his political life amid mounting confirmation of "state capture" and growing opposition.

Yet despite the enormous evidence of his corrupt leadership Zuma is still in denial claiming his innocence. "What have I done wrong?" he asks of his critics. As the nation lobbies for his exit so do the opposition parties within parliament gather to mobilise his expulsion through a no confidence vote. In the meantime a dithering and divided ANC are busily contemplating their next move to oust a President who is reluc-

tant to move. They have cajoled, coerced, pleaded and threatened to no avail. Weeks later he is still negotiating an extended term to dispense of unfinished business. The masses of South Africans are exasperated by the ANC's political stupor disguised as 'reasoned maturity' that favours party unity over moral action for the good of the nation.

The only hope lies in Cyril Ramaphosa who was narrowly elected the President of the ANC. There is some solace in this situation despite the shenanigans of party politics within the ANC. He promises to be a good leader. Already his election as ANC President and President of SA in waiting has excited world interest causing the rand to leap up from the doldrums under Zuma's rule.

What kind of leadership will South Africans inherit after the battle for the soul of the ANC has been won? The ANC is divided into pro and anti Zuma camps but the people deserve to inherit a leader of substance who will serve the nation and not a party. Do they know what this is? Do they know what a glorious nation could look like under such a leader? Former President of the USA the first black to hold such a

committed to leading his country in an honest way. To him leadership was a word that did not resonate meaningfully with his position at the helm. Instead assuming the mantle of leadership meant plundering and abusing his position and the people of South Africa. Did he hear our daily cries for help against unspeakable crime? Did he care that every family in this besieged nation has suffered the effects of violent crime and live in every day terror against home invasions, hijacking, rape and death. Did he hear the hunger cries of beggars prostrating in want at every street corner? Did he hear the cries of babies abandoned in public hospitals and the desperate cries of the sick and ailing? Did he care about the silence of corporates and big business complicit in hedging their bets in the murky waters of power politics? Did he question the plight of the growing homeless, the price of bread and milk for the masses? Did he hear the protests of trapped women under cultural patriarchy? Did he wonder how he could restructure the endangered sanctity of the African nuclear family as a safe haven for children of the new generation?

No our president has been blind and deaf to our cries and shut himself into a laager of ethnic insularity. We have been leaderless in a country that has not been loved. Alan Paton's *Cry the beloved country* is a legacy we seem not to be able to shed. With the promise of a better leader in Cyril Ramaphosa South Africans are hopeful once again but they are not oblivious of the battle ahead between the forces of clean versus corrupt government. South Africa is at a crossroads between good governance and corrupt loyalists. Who will survive? Cyril Ramaphosa will have to be very smart, strong and wily to win this battle between good and bad aided of course by a strong civil society. Rabindranath Tagore once said that on each nation is laid the duty to keep alight its own lamp as its part in the illumination of the world. He believed that through participation a society can build a nation it is proud of. This then is our challenge as South Africans to build our nation together.

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



President Nelson Mandela chats with Deputy President F.W. de Klerk and Constitutional Assembly chair Cyril Ramaphosa outside Parliament after the approval of South Africa's new constitution, May 8, 1996.

position may in many respects be that icon of good leadership despite obvious weaknesses in his foreign policy decisions. As a leader he often sought inspiration from others who went before him, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Jefferson. For local contemporary issues he read the works of immigrant writers like Jumpa Laheri to understand how they experienced America as a country of adoption. While he kept his finger on the pulse of his people, our President Zuma kept his fingers in the country's coffers.

From the inception of his presidency Zuma has not been able, inclined or

BEING ASIAN

By Kevin Shen

When my producing partner and I set out to produce our next play, we weren't expecting that it would bring us to India – well, not us exactly, but the characters on stage. However, as we move deeper into production of *THERE OR HERE* by Jennifer Maisel, a comedy that follows an inter-racial American couple outsourcing their surrogacy to India, it begins to make sense, as we continue to explore themes of the Asian diaspora and question what it means to be “Asian”.

I am an Asian-American (from the East Asia part of Asia), born and raised in the US but having spent nearly the last ten years in the UK. My producing partner is a white British female, and together we set out to produce plays that provided acting opportunities for our own under-represented demographics while exploring themes of race and gender in an accessible and entertaining way. Our first production was *YELLOW FACE* by David Henry Hwang, which played at Park Theatre and transferred to the National Theatre the following year. It was a pseudo-autobiographical comedy that explored what it meant to be Asian in the US – from questionable representation in entertainment to political espionage scapegoating. Yet that terminology – being “Asian” – has a markedly different meaning in the US and the UK. Our cast included four Asian actors - and here I

feel compelled to clarify – three East Asian and one South Asian, whereas our cast of *THERE OR HERE* also includes four Asian actors – all of whom are South Asian. As we traveled to this part of Asia, we brought on an Associate Producer of Indian descent, who began as an actor struggling to fit into

society's mould of Asian-ness because of her mixed race background. Both *YELLOW FACE* and *THERE OR HERE* are thematically Asian-centric stories. However, it feels that which “Asian” they revolve around needs to be noted, and this demarcation of being Asian and its difference across continents is one I am increasingly interested in.

In the US, one generally pictures an East

thanklessly built railroads during America's adolescence and India was obviously victim to British colonialism. The other Asian becomes the afterthought. As such, it feels a bit like the experience of being Asian in the US versus in the UK are analogous but flip-flopped, depending on which type of Asian one is.

In a way, it almost feels natural to be an East Asian in the UK producing a play about South Asians in America. However, I am often curious about this definitional distinction of “Asian” and its necessity. Clearly the cultural differences between East and South Asia are significant, while the cultures of countries within each of these regions are more closely linked to each other. Yet are the differences between East and South Asia more pronounced than those throughout Europe, for instance between, say, Greece and Norway (or do we refer to Scandinavia distinctly from Europe)? Or does the necessary distinction between Asians result primarily because of the difference in the colour of our skin? This distinction creates separate East and South Asian communities – both in theatre and in society in general – and these communities provide much-needed identity and visibility for its members. However, these two communities, despite being from the same continent, feel markedly removed from each other.

Regardless of which Asian category one fits into in either the US or the UK, I do believe members of these two diaspora communities ultimately share similar expe-



Manish Gandhi with Chris Nayak, Lucy Fenton and Rakhee Thakrar in *THERE OR HERE* at Park Theatre until 17 Feb. Photo by Ikin Yum



Rakhee Thakrar in *THERE OR HERE* at Park Theatre until 17 Feb. Photo by Ikin Yum

Asian when conjuring up an image for an “Asian-American”, whereas here in the UK, “British Asian” suggests someone from South Asia. Logically, it feels like perhaps these sections of Asia have stronger (and more reparation-worthy) ties to their respective western superpower: Chinese immigrants

riences, whether they are British/American-born or emigrants. Just as the character Ajay does in *THERE OR HERE*, Asians often find themselves reconciling their ancestral cultural heritage with their local one. Because of our skin colour, we are continuously ostracized or exoticised – despite the thickness of my American accent, I have still been met with surprise or incredulity that my name is actually “Kevin”. We may abandon our traditions, language, garb to assimilate and avoid bullying at school, but may also embrace them to take pride in a culture that makes us unique and to maintain our filial piety. We are still viewed as foreigners and feared as terrorists, despite our citizenship or birthplace, especially in two countries that have renewed nationalist sentiment. In the theatre world (and in western entertainment generally), Asians of all sorts are perennially viewed as outsiders, given accents and seen in numbers that don’t reflect our place in society.

Producing *THERE OR HERE* targets this, with a cast including four Asian actors (South Asian, that is) in roles with depth and character, a rarity for both East and South Asian actors. While my producing began as a way to increase the visibility of my own East Asian demographic, it feels completely natural to create work that provides representations for Asians generally. Facing these similar struggles, should these two Asian communities come closer together, at least in the theatre world, and embrace a greater Pan-Asian identity?

Since moving to the UK, terminologically at least, I have begun migrating from the “orient” into “East Asia” (well, in London if not the whole country), and in America, BuzzFeed lists of exciting Asian/Asian-American actors inevitably include the likes of Danny Pudi and Riz Ahmed. Perhaps as generations continue to dig their roots deeper into western soil, the taxonomy behind being “Asian” will continue to evolve, and we’ll find our two communities supporting one much larger one.

***THERE OR HERE* by Jennifer Maisel is produced by Kevin Shen and Lucy Fenton of Special Relationship Productions in association with Anita Singh of Anita Creed Productions and Park Theatre, supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England. It runs from 23 Jan to 17 Feb at Park Theatre, Finsbury Park.**



Ursula Mohan in *THERE OR HERE* at Park Theatre until 17 Feb. Photo by Ikin Yum



Ursula Mohan and Lucy Fenton in *THERE OR HERE* at Park Theatre until 17 Feb. Photo by Ikin Yum



Chris Nayak and Lucy Fenton in *THERE OR HERE* at Park Theatre until 17 Feb. Photo by Ikin Yum

Tickets available at www.parktheatre.co.uk. Follow us on twitter (@thereorhereplay) for details on post-show discussions around race, identity and “being Asian”.

*Kevin Shen is an Asian-American producer and actor based in London. He started Special Relationship Productions with Lucy Fenton, and together they produced the UK Premiere of David Henry Hwang’s Pulitzer Prize finalist play *YELLOW FACE*, in which he also starred, at the Park Theatre in 2013 and its subsequent transfer to the National Theatre the following year. He holds a Master’s degree in Sociology from Stanford University and an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.*



MUMBAI EXPRESSIONS

By Anju Makhija



In our media-driven environment, everyone wants to be on the social bandwagon--posts and tweets are getting shriller by the minute! Not only is the media highway over-crowded, thousands of new cars make it annually to Mumbai roads, zipping around like flies. Nerves are frayed and Mumbaikars seem more stressed than ever.

Ofcourse, one can choose to move away, but for the lower and middle-class population, is it possible? One wonders at our Prime Minister's idea of progress. Mr. Narendra Modi jumps from one development scheme to another like a restless being. We now have several I.D. cards like Aadhar and P.A.N which are linked to mobiles, bank accounts, income tax returns, etc. The government has instant access to our lives! Many are resisting this invasion on peace and privacy but the forces remain dominant. To add to the woes, essential commodities and vegetables in the city have almost doubled in price this year, making it difficult for so many to survive. Despite all, the Modi wave refuses to die down with the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) winning elections in several states last month. Alas, we do not have a strong opposition party. The Congress has a new president, Rahul Gandhi, but it's yet to be seen how he will perform.

As far as the Happiness Index goes, I would say 2017 has been a dismal year. Look at the statistics. According to the recent data from the National Crime Records Bureau, children accounted for 57% of the total number of cases registered under section 377 for unnatural offences. Out of the 2,195 victims reported, there were 1,254 child victims. Rape of minors is rampant both in cities and villages. In the past, spirituality used to be our savior, however with so many gurus in prisons, the situation is becoming absurd.

Thankfully, there are some attempts at finding solutions. Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar's latest film in the Kutch trilogy titled, *A Delicate Weave*, recently premiered in Mumbai. It examines reasons for the peace that still prevails in Kutch. Says Monteiro: Lakhpat, a village where we shot the film has 24 temples, 24 dargahs and 24 mosques. When people want to pray or sing--Hindus, Muslims and others--all go to one of these places of worship. The sufi music of Kabir and Shah Latif of Bhitai has been there in the region for centuries, helping all realize the value of oneness. Aided by some NGOs functioning in the area, the younger generation is also returning to the past values.

The recently-concluded Global Partnership Summit was another effort in the direction with a number of representatives from India, Japan and United States. The 'Think-Tank' suggested a blue print for an alternative development model of cooperation that could be a torch bearer for rest of the world. At grass roots level, friends of activist, Gauri Lankesh, (who was murdered in 2017) have formed a trust. The Kannada weekly tabloid which she edited was a platform for progressive voices in Karnataka and may it be relaunched. An annual lecture will be instituted in Lankesh's name, as well as an award for outstanding journalism. Perumal Murugan, who was threatened for his portrayal of the sexual customs of people of the Kongu Nadu region in his novel, *Madhorubhagan*, has just published a book of poems, *Songs of a Coward: Poems of Exile*. In the title poem, he writes: Misery befalls no one/because of a coward/Riots break out nowhere/because of a coward/Nothing is ever ruined/because of a coward/ A coward/ is fearful of daylight/Poetry comes forth from him.

Theatre practitioners have been persistent in their search for society's ills. Rumi Aur Manto is a one-man play in which 13th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, and 20th century writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, meet each other at a literary fest. The two masters are curious about the renewed fascination the contemporary world has with them. A stimulating conversation follows and many ideas are exchanged. Another project, *Start Mumbai*, delves into our past with the goal of connecting the most important parts of Mumbai historically and culturally. Permanent and temporary art interventions, based on the narratives of those areas have been set up. I spent time at the Sassoon Dock area, which is one of the oldest parts of Mumbai. There were massive site-specific installations, murals and audio-visual experiences that reflected the Koli fishing community. One learns about their isolated and disciplined life. These fisher folk are seldom allowed to buy flats in Mumbai. Yet, their ability to tolerate discrimi-

nation is exemplary. Never have they revolted with violence. Other communities however choose to create chaos on the streets--the Dalits staged a huge Mumbai Bandh, stoning bus drivers and pedestrians, in the very first week of 2018!

Elsewhere in India, there is revival of the past too. The library of Khaja Bandanawaz Dargah (in Gulbarga) has been renovated with state-of-the-art facilities to access its archived resources. It has some of the rarest of books on Tasawwuf (Sufism), history, linguistics and biographies of the Sufi saints of yore. The library preserves the original volume of *Awariful Maarif*, the famous Persian treatise on by Shahhabuddin Suharwardy written in the 12th century. The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) is working on a *Dictionary of History of Indian Villages*. The aim is to document historical stories and folktales dating back to the Mahabharata.

Books related to the past are also attracting readers. The historical thriller, *Harappa: Curse of the Blood River*, is on the bestseller charts. It's a tale that takes you on a mystical voyage across 3,700 years from Mohenjo-daro to contemporary Banaras and Delhi. Many unresolved issues of the great Indus Valley Civilization are touched upon: Did the fabled Saraswati river really exist? Why has the Harappan script not been deciphered till date? *Padmavati*, a historical film by Sanjay Leela Bansali, opened in the new year. The story is based on Malik Muhammad Jayasi's *Padmavat*, an Avadhi epic. The film has faced great opposition and is banned in Rajasthan where people feel it distorts facts and portrays the royalty of yore in a bad light.

New ventures are adding to the city's culture. The recently-restored Royal Opera House is one of them. Its auditorium is charming with ornamented wrought iron and a majestic decor. The city is a buzzing with events like the Tata Lit Fest, the Times Literature Festival and the Kala Ghoda Arts celebrations. Mumbaikars try to keep themselves cheerful despite all odds! Air pollution remains is a major issue for most Indian cities. While urban areas have monitors which show the air quality, rural places have no such convenience and live with pollution from mining, stone crushing, road expansion, and power production. The fight is on for a green democracy, this will surely be an uphill task unless the government decides on a new framework of development this year.

Anju Makhija is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning poet, translator and playwright based in Mumbai who has written/edited books related to partition, Sufism, women's poetry and theatre. Her articles and columns have appeared in several newspapers.
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OH FATHER! I'M LEAVING MY HOME BEHIND

By Hansa Dasgupta

A few days back I read about the demise of the last descendant of the Nawab of Avadh. It transported me to 2009 when the seed of my novel, 'The World Beyond' had just been planted in my mind. I had spent many a day that year, walking amongst the ruins of Lucknow. I would close my eyes and imagine what it must have looked like, 150 years ago - when the corridors of the Bara Imambara were covered with lush carpets, when the Parikhana resounded with the sound of music and ghungroos and when Alambagh, Sikander Bagh and Charbagh were actually beautiful baghs and gardens and not the concrete jungle that they are today.

LUCKNOW. The capital of Avadh. The city of Nawabs. The land of impeccable manners. The place that has been mentioned in the annals of history as one of the wealthiest and most prosperous cities in the world.

If you could go back in time to 1855, when the kingdom of Avadh was at the height of its glory and prosperity, I'd tell you to go to Lucknow and look at its skyline during sunset. You would notice the white palaces and mosques, bedecked with golden minarets, domes and cupolas, appear flushed and pink, as the sun set slowly behind them. Like a virgin bride, blushing in all her bridal finery. Such was the beauty of Lucknow. Historians the world over had hailed it as one of the most beautiful cities in the world, even more beautiful than Rome, Paris or Constantinople.

NAWAB WAJID ALI SHAH. The last ruler of the kingdom of Avadh and well-loved by his people. A connoisseur of music, dance, theatre and literature. A king who has often been wrongly portrayed and misunderstood. He was one of the few rulers who celebrated festivals like Holi and Muharram with equal fervour.

He was a great poet and an equally good dancer, musician, composer and choreographer. Music ran in his blood. He established the Parikhana, which is the modern equivalent of the theatre. He brought Kathak out of the confines of temples and gave it the respect it deserved. He wrote over a hundred books, many of which were destroyed after the uprising of 1857.

The city of Lucknow thrived under his rule. At a time when the Mughal court was on the decline, poets and artisans flocked to Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's court, as it had become the cultural hub of the country.

Not many of us know that the famous song, Babul Mora Naihar Chuto Jaye was written by Wajid Ali Shah, when he had to leave his beloved Lucknow, after the wrongful annexation of his kingdom by the East India Company. The British were afraid that his deposition might spark a revolt and insisted he leave in the quiet of the night. They did the same later, with Bahadur

last few years of his life, begging for food. The descendant of the ruler of the richest kingdom in India and one of the richest kingdoms in the world, died a pauper...

The above is the picture of KAISERBAGH PALACE, in 1855, where Nawab Wajid Ali Shah used to live with his family.

This is the picture of the Western gateway of Kaiserbagh Palace. This is how it looked about 150 years ago. Notice the intricately sculpted mermaids and fishes.

This is how it looks today. This gateway, as well as the Eastern gateway are ALL that remain of the magnificent palace of the last king of Avadh.

Look at it again. Carefully. Notice how it is being vandalised. Does it not make you sad, angry even, that something of such historical importance, is being vandalised in this manner?

Let's take a look at another picture. This is a mermaid at the bottom of the gateway. See how people have been spitting betel juice on it relentlessly. I'm sure if these people were aware of the importance of this mermaid or the gateway, they would think twice

before spitting on it.

Here's what Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, a writer and an authority on Lucknow, says about the palace - "The Kaiserbagh... has been undergoing demolition in a piecemeal fashion... It is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable palace complexes ever erected and had it not been especially singled out for destruction by the vengeful

British and later neglected by the people of Lucknow it would have become one of the most celebrated structures in India."

India has a rich cultural heritage. There were over 92 palaces in Lucknow in 1855. In 1858, just three years later, after the Uprising of 1857, only 12 remained. Some were destroyed during the uprising. The others were bulldozed and razed to the ground as retribution by the

British. Now, only a handful remain. The rulers of yore did their bit in destroying Lucknow's heritage. The Indians have done their bit. Let's hope they will take pride and better care of the little that remains, before it is too late.

Hansa is a writer (fiction & nonfiction), novelist and screenwriter. She has authored *Letters To My Baby*, *The World Beyond* and *After the Storm* as well as several articles, short stories and chapters for various magazines, journals, books, anthologies and online.



Shah Zafar, the last Moghul emperor of India.

A heart-broken Wajid Ali Shah, wrote these lines as he left the city that he so loved, never to return:

'Babul mora naihar chuto hi jaye
Char kahar mil mori doliya sajaye
Mora apna begana chuto jaye'
(O father, I'm leaving my home behind, four



men have gathered to lift my palanquin. My near and dear ones will soon become strangers, my home unreachable...)

These lines were later immortalised by K.L. Saigal who sang them in the Bollywood movie, Street Singer. The song became so popular, it used to be sung at most Indian weddings.

On the 2nd of September, 2017, Ali Raza, the last descendant of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, passed away. He used to live in a 700 years old ramshackle palace, which had no doors and windows or water and electricity. He spent the

A FLIGHT TO NOWHERE

By Subhash Chandra



As soon as she came out of the Exit at Heathrow Airport, her anxious eyes looked around to locate her brother. No, he was not there. She punched his number on her mobile, but the call did not go through. So she joined the Group of passengers, who were waiting to be picked up by their relatives or friends.

In about ten minutes, the waiting group had started thinning. She tried again, but this time, too, the call did not connect. She edged her way to the front, so that she would be immediately visible when he came.

He must be on his way. Nothing to worry. He was the responsible type. But she felt the tautness of anxiety inside her. She had never moved out of Delhi, leave alone foreign travel!

Twenty minutes had passed and only two passengers were now waiting. Her anxiety peaked and she started calling him repeatedly at short intervals, but there was dead silence at the other end. She got terribly worried. Where was he? Was all well with him? He knows I know nothing about this place.

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It was Vallabh who was insistent on her joining him. "Renu, now that Babuji is no more. You will feel lonely because you are so shy and don't interact with people."

"Why do you worry, Bhaiyya? Our immediate neighbours are very nice. Their daughter and I are friends. She comes over in the evenings and we chat, or watch TV together. She is a wonderful girl. I will not be lonely."

"But what about your security? No woman is safe in Delhi, least of all, single women."

"Having got back from office, I seldom go out. Occasionally, my friend and I go to Delhi Haat near Warzipur which is not far and we get back before it is dark.

She worked as an accounts clerk in a small transport firm.

"Renu, God forbid if something untoward happens at night, who will come to your rescue? I worry for you all the time."

Renu was quiet for a while and then said, "Okay, Bhaiyya. Let me think."

"I will ring up in a couple days."

#

"I don't have enough money. You know I get a measly salary," said Renu.

"You are so silly! I will arrange for your ticket. You carry just enough to reach the Airport in Delhi. I'll take care of everything once you land."

"Achha," she said hesitantly.

He instructed her about the travel, the exit gate at Heathrow, and the place where she should wait for him in case he was late. "But don't worry. I'll be there on time, most probably before you get there."

"Achha."

"Don't be nervous, Renu. If need be, you can always make inquiries. You are educated." She was a graduate from Delhi University. "You will have no trouble, okay? Brave girl."

He was only two years older than her, but had always protected her and so he did feel some unease about her travelling so far all by herself.



She had told Vallabh, she could live alone, but actually she did feel nervous. Though she was no ramp model, she knew she looked reasonably pretty even in her ordinary dresses. They were a lower middle-class family. One of Vallabh's friends, who had come to India for a week, told him that there was demand for skilled workers in England. He himself worked there as an electrician. Vallabh learnt plumbing and made his way to England. He was a freelance plumber, available on call and was earning a reasonable amount.

In a couple of days, a man from a Travel Agency came and delivered the one-way ticket.

#

After about half an hour, she was panic-stricken. She was drained of strength and found it difficult to keep standing. So, she walked towards the chairs and sat in the first row, her gaze fixed on the Entry door. Nightmarish thoughts began to pummel her. Was he caught up in a complicated job which he had to complete? Or was he stuck in a traffic jam? He lived in London proper in a

small room, as he got a lot of work here. Or was he involved in an accident and ... she shuddered.

It was nearly forty-five minutes since she had arrived, and fear was flowing in her veins. Suddenly, she burst into tears and began to sob uncontrollably.

PART II

By Anita Nahal



Passengers arriving from flights after hers, were beginning to conglomerate in the same waiting area. Some began to look at her, and whispered among themselves. A woman, in Indian clothes, sobbing at an airport, was not an everyday sight. Indian women though considered traditional, are supposed to be very strong and composed!

"Are you okay?" Renu looked up to see a London Bobby. Though she was fluent in English, her tongue failed to form the words. "I don't think she understands English," the Bobby looked at his mate. "What should we do?"

"I am here, I am here!" Renu's heart jumped as she heard her brother's familiar voice! She confidently turned towards the London Bobby pair, "Yes, thank you, I am fine...now!"

"What happened, Bhaiyya? Why are you late? And, why did you not pick up your phone? Do you know how many times I called you!" Renu was angry with him. "I know, I know, I am so sorry!"

"But, wait, why are you wearing a shalwar suit? Why did you not wear jeans or something?"

"What? All you can ask me is about my clothes!"

"No, no, I am so sorry!" Vallabh hugged Renu tightly. "I am so, so happy, you are here, finally!"

"Me, too....But you still haven't told me, why you are late? And why you didn't pick up my calls?"

"You are not going to believe what a Shakespearean comedy of errors, and tragedies, occurred with me today! But, come, let's first go get something to eat...you must be famished!!"

"I am, I am...but more than that, I am soooo excited, to be here, in stylish, elegant London... and with my Bhaiyya! I want to see everything soon!! Buckingham Palace, London Tower, Westminster Abby...and shopping on Oxford Street...and, not to forget, all the replicas at Madame Tussauds!!" "Hey, one by one, my dear,

but first, you will not believe this, but, I am going to Washington DC next week and you will come with me!!”

“What?!”

In the hustle and bustle of sibling reunion, Vallabh, chose not to tell Renu, that he was late because he'd just broken up with a long-time girlfriend, and he had left his phone at a restaurant where the two had met earlier to discuss their issues, and that when he went back to the restaurant to retrieve the phone, he came to know that a child had mistakenly stepped on it. The restaurant manager handed him back a smashed phone! That day, he'd also discovered, he had second stage prostate cancer...

#

Late that night, the euphoria of foreign travel, tears and fears, new sights, different people and food, and varying time zones her body had slipped through, had Renu yawning, heavy with jet lag.

“Wait till you get to DC...the jet lag will be doubled!”

“How will I get the visa so quickly?”

“I know someone at the Indian embassy, who knows someone at the US embassy and, tomorrow, Monday morning, first thing we go there.”

Renu was a ball of mixed emotions, but she did not fail to notice, a rather sad countenance in her brother's demeanour. “Bhaiyya, you still haven't told me why you were late at the airport? You said something about Shakespeare, and...”

“Nothing, just silly things. You go to sleep now. It's been hectic, and tiring for you. Let's talk tomorrow.” Renu did not object. She was exhausted, and she still wanted to spend a few minutes writing. She'd been writing and publishing poems for many years, and her diary was always with her. A small pencil lay inserted in its side. Vallabh, used to tease her, “...an accountant and a poet.” She smiled, and penned a poem before turning off the lights on a stupendous day, on a “flight to nowhere,” that she had with trepidation imagined, while she sat at Air India's departure lounge at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi...

I am where I least expected.
Having left all my roots
at the doors of the discarded
native pots and pans. Heavy boots
on my feet,
a duffle bag sardined under the plane seat,

with strangers around me,
and vapours of food and insipid tea.
I landed in alien lands
bellowing fresh fog and airy mists,
and folks with unfamiliar accents
As I dearly held on to my memory sands.

#

Much to Renu's disbelief, she got the US visa within a day, and the following weekend she found herself flying over the massive Atlantic ocean. Vallabh had been invited to attend a global conference on plumbing and technology. It was an all paid conference, and he did not wish to leave Renu behind, even for a few days, soon after her arrival in London. His protectiveness, reminded Renu of their parents. And she cried as the plane took her further away from India. They say, those who leave their lands and people behind, perhaps never to return, can go through many stages of moonshine, euphoria, shock, and adjustment before finally finding stability within the boundaries of integration and assimilation of the new and retention of former culture and life. And Renu, was moving within two big journeys in a span of a week!

As Vallabh sipped on the iced coke, his thoughts nudged and worried him. I hope my prostate cancer does not spread. What will Renu do then? She will be all alone in a new country. How will she manage? Go back to India? Okay, okay, relax, he told himself, you are only in the second stage, recovery from which is doable. It will be okay...it will be okay. He kissed Renu on the forehead as she lay on his shoulders, in deep sleep...her poetry diary in her hand.

PART III

By Ananya Guha



Vallabh sat pensive in his room. The more he thought about Renu and breaking the news to her, the more did childhood images flash across his mind. The playful, buoyant Renu, the laughing Renu, the studious Renu.

“Bhaiya” Renu's voice came clear over the intercom.

“What do I do tomorrow, do I accompany you to the conference?”

You will accompany me to my death. My sister how will I look after you when I am gone?

“What happened” Renu asked sharply “you are silent?”

Silence my sister is positive sign. It is death, another world. I have cancer he screamed. Cancer, don't you understand?

No, people survive cancer. I will be a cancer survivor. I know a man can be destroyed but not defeated. I will be neither.

Slowly Vallabh hung up after mumbling

“Tomorrow you come with me. Do you understand me, I can't leave you.”

Vallabh could hardly sleep and when he did he had a dream. What is a lucid dream? Vallabh understood he was in a hospital and chemo

rays were being given. No Renu, no one. Only the doctor. You are a cancer survivor the doctor laughed. Me too. The doctor was a tall fair man with languid eyes and sharp nose. He should be a poet. Do you write poetry, doctor?

London has changed with my cancer Vallabh thought. Renu had gone out shopping in the evening. Renu came back laughing.

“Oh Bhaiya, you look like a poet”.

“Renu, do poets have cancer?”

Renu burst out laughing. Oh you philosopher she thought. “Come let us drink life to the lees in this historic city of oppressors and oppressed, city of poets, kings and queens”.

Renu sat by the table. She wrote:

“Brother

I have come to

your land

but sorrow chokes me”.

She thought for a while, why should I be sorry?

The next morning Vallabh announced that he would go out, to see the doctor.

“Not feeling well” he said. “Fever”? Renu asked.

The doctor scanned the report and looked gravely.

“I am sorry” he said. “It is in the advanced second stage”

You poets Vallabh thought and walked out. You poets he said aloud. You cancer survivors, how long do you survive? How long is the stigma attached, that of living and dying with cancer. Suddenly he felt weak, he had an urge to puke.

Was this Euston Square? He took a bus back home. Can I afford a cab now? Cancer is costly he muttered. It comes with a price.

“Are you alright?” Renu was anxious. Just then her mobile phone rang. It was her New Delhi neighbour. Her house had been burgled. She should come at the earliest.

Now the cancer will go to Delhi, Vallabh thought. It spreads like violence. Why it even brings violence. “Renu I will book the tickets now”. He banged the door.

Images of Renu climbing a tree. Renu with her plaited hair in the school frock. Renu with her published poem. Then father's death, then mother's hearse.

This is going to be mine, mine alone. He spoke aloud. Mother's hearse.

Vallabh was sobbing uncontrollably. In the next room Renu continued with the poem she had started writing. The left over poem, remnants of the past and now she said stoically it has to deal with the present. My burgled shanty flat.

END

THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE: THE LIBERAL'S DILEMMA.

By Malathy Sitaram

"Where woz you born, Miss?"

"In India". I wince at the grammar.

"How can a Paki teach us English, Miss?"

"I'm not a Paki and I teach you English because I know far more about it than you ever will."

I never fail to respond irritably to this oft repeated question. Why do I get so annoyed?

"Woz you educated in this country, Miss?"

"No." Pause. "I got my first degree in India. I learnt all my English there." (Must I answer these yobbos?)

"Are there universities in India, Miss?"

The Scene: A classroom in a mixed comprehensive school in the South of England.

Characters: Myself, an Indian woman in Western dress.

My interlocutors: A group of English boys aged between 13 and 16.

Time: The Morning Break

Date: the 1970s

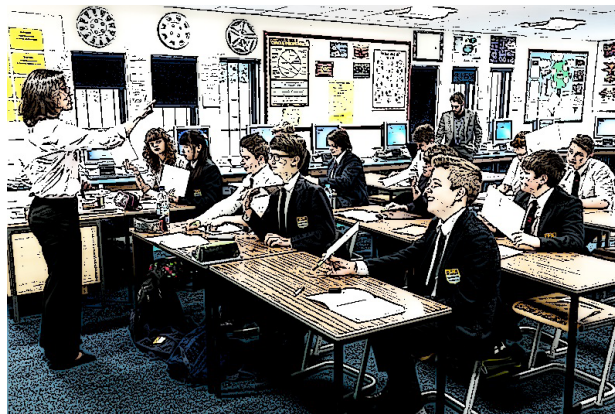
The corridors outside are full of noise. Doors bang, the furniture in the next classroom is taking a beating. Loud voices with a residual trace of Cockney, exchange foul epithets. In my classroom, the wall needs a coat of paint. Desk lids are covered with inane graffiti gouged into the wood with a sharp instrument. Toffee and chewing gum wrappers litter the far end of the room. Children's paintings and drawings enliven the walls but the room is scruffy. Outside the room the stairways and corridors are even worse. Why are children apparently immune to noise? They seem to address on another at the top of their voices. Arguments flare up for the most trivial reasons.

I had been teaching English for seven years in one of the biggest Secondary schools in the county of Wiltshire, famous for its prettiness and ancient monuments such as stone circles. It must have been sheer cussedness on my part that enabled me to survive the first two years. I was freshly out of an English Teacher Training college armed with a Teaching Certificate and a B.Ed. Degree. Nothing in the two year course had prepared me for the trauma of my probationary year, most of which was spent in a state of cultural shock.

How little I knew of English working-class culture. I had had an excellent education in India and had always been a bookworm finishing at least two novels a week. My image of Britain was based on ideas and images derived from literature about middle to upper class mainstream culture. The children I taught seemed to be obsessed with pop music and football- the two great levellers.

New pupils never failed to ask me which team I supported and viewed me with pitying incredulity when I professed ignorance.

A large comprehensive school was a tough place. The language inflicted daily on one's tender ears in corridors, classrooms or on the field would make me blench. Many children were loutish and abysmally ignorant. Peer group culture was all important and conformity to group norms more important than pleasing teachers. A shy, sensitive child would be at a disadvantage. A pupil who paid attention to the teacher and did his homework would be labelled a 'creep' or 'swot' or 'teacher's pet'. High criticism! Middleclass children tended to keep their heads down and not put their hands up too often as they would be sneered at and labelled 'posh'.



The town in which I lived was then a working-class town. Comprehensive schools had replaced Grammar and Secondary Modern Schools and for good reasons. At the age of eleven children had been subjected to a test which if passed would gain them entry to Grammar Schools which are academic in curriculum and atmosphere. Pupils who failed the test went to Secondary Modern Schools which were not academic. They were suitable for children who would not be going to university and they would be given more of a practical or technical education. No Latin or Advanced Maths here. Increasingly it was felt that working class children were not being treated fairly. The Labour Party when in power put an end to this form of discrimination and many grammar schools were closed, the IQ test ceased and schools for children of all aptitudes were built. They were called Comprehensive Schools. There are still some parts of the country where grammar schools have survived and middle-class parents do their best to get their children into them rather than have to pay for private schools. Readers of this article need to know that school education is free in the U.K. At school, there is no social

class discrimination. Rich and poor are equally welcome. Children of high earning parents often attend private schools in the belief that such schools offer a higher standard of education.

One of the long standing political issues in Britain is private education. The strange thing is that the historical, long standing fee-paying schools are called strangely enough, 'Public Schools'. Left wingers see them as the anachronistic vestiges of privilege and the unacceptable symbols of class division as well as being hothouses for the upper class. Nothing less than their total destruction would please the vociferous Left. Many middleclass parents lead thrifty lives so that they can send their children to independent Public Schools. Examples of very old and famous schools are Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Cheltenham Ladies' College which charge high fees for the 'privilege' of being educated therein.

As a teacher of English Language and Literature in a comprehensive school in the eighties I would often despair of inculcating a love of words and Literature within pupils who often came from homes where not a book was to be seen and the television screen never switched off. Can the teacher wean them from the mindless but seductive appeal of 'pop' music, football and TV soap operas? Statistics show that teachers are very vulnerable to the effects of stress.

I taught for twenty years in three comprehensive schools by the end of which I could have had a nervous breakdown. The third school was a good school, well run and managed whose pupils who for the most part wanted to learn. But this came too late for me. However, 'someone' up there felt sorry for me. The School I was at wanted to shed a few teachers in view of a low intake of pupils for the forthcoming year. I grabbed the exit door knowing that I would not have to wait many years for my pension as it was included in the early retirement deal.

Today there is considerable improvement in Comprehensive Schools. The calibre of Head Teachers is very high and their salaries attract people from other professions. Teacher training must have improved hugely as there is now an atmosphere of industry and application to work in most classrooms. School teaching is hard work but can also be rewarding.

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



REGINALD MASSEY'S BOOK PAGE

*Naseem Khan's Everywhere is Somewhere and Sunayana Panda's The Bridge of Love
(available on amazon.co.uk)*

Fifty years ago people of South Asian origin living in Britain managed to survive in the most difficult conditions.

Jobs even for the highly qualified were hard to get and racism was prevalent and openly practised. Placards declaring 'No Blacks, No Coloureds and No Irish' were often displayed outside boarding houses. The position today is vastly changed but it has been a hard fight that today's young find difficult to understand or appreciate.

Naseem Khan's graphic memoir *Everywhere is Somewhere* (Bluemoose Books, 2017. ISBN 978-1-910422-39-7. £12) provides an interesting insight into the struggles of a Birmingham born Roedean and Oxford educated woman who was born in 1939, the year that WW2 started. Her father was an Indian doctor and her mother a German who happened to be in the UK studying English. So here was a British born person with a Muslim name whose parents were foreigners. But she was white and spoke English with an Oxford accent and that complicated matters even further. Frankly the first time I met her I was confused but as time progressed my wife Jamila and I got to know her better and fathomed out what made her tick.

When Naseem was working at Faber & Faber it was she who suggested to them that a book on Indian dance would be a good idea. The result was *Indian Dances: their History and Growth* which was co-authored by Rina Singha and me with major inputs by my wife. The great Ram Gopal had started Indian dance classes in Chelsea and Naseem and Jamila enrolled there. Ram was very much the unpredictable genius and in many ways more English than the English. But that is another story.

Naseem details the progress of her career and her personal odyssey in search of herself and her relationship with the world around her. She worked closely with Black activists such as Darcus Howe and edited *The Hustler*. And apart from being theatre editor of *Time Out* she wrote for *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *New Statesman*. Her seven years as head of Cultural Diver-

sity at the Arts Council of England and her comforting connection with Usha Prashar, now a crossbench member of the House of Lords, was a formative period.

However, the carefully researched report *The Arts Britain Ignores* (1976) was her magnum opus. Her reasoning was simple: the ethnic minorities living in Britain paid taxes like everybody else hence their arts must also be encouraged and subsidised by the funding bodies. No one could argue with that. She founded the Minority Arts

Advisory Service which rendered sterling service to Asian, Caribbean and other ethnic groups. Thus thanks to her several music, dance, and theatre groups started all over the country.

She moved from Hampstead to the East End where she worked with her neighbours to improve housing, the environment and the quality of life through concerted communal activity. Unfortunately she was struck down by cancer and died a few days before she could sign this book's publishing contract. Her children Amelia and George signed on her behalf. This memoir is, in effect, a personal account of how 'ethnic arts' have become an integral part of the wider canvas of British art. I recommend it as essential reading for those connected with the arts in any way.

Pondicherry (now called Puducherry) which is located on the Coromandel, or east coast of India, by the Bay of Bengal was a French colony which France handed over peacefully to independent India. The imprint of France still exists in the architecture, the shops and the cuisine. The

best known high school is run according to the rigorous French educational system. Sunayana Panda, writer and theatre person, who lives in Pondicherry has produced her first novel *The Bridge of Love* (Notion Press, Chennai, 2018. ISBN 978-1-64249-032-9. Rs285) which starts and ends in Pondicherry. It tells the story of Mohini who runs a curio shop in a fashionable part of town and her intense affair with Paul Marteau, a teacher at the French school. They have to be discreet since gossip spreads like wild fire in the colonial town.

Paul manages to get a job in the prestigious Charles de Gaulle school in London and they decide to spend some time together in London to see how they get on while actually living with each other. In other words, the novel turns into a trial of compatibility and a sincere search for mutuality. It also becomes a tour of London through the eyes of Mohini. They then visit Aberdeen for a quick visit. Mohini also visits her friend Sylvie in Paris. And finally Paul takes Mohini to see his parents who live in a village a short distance from Avignon.

The love story explores cultural and identity issues and the broken bridge of Avignon becomes a telling metaphor of unfulfilled hopes and disconnections. But how does the novel end? Does Paul marry his Indian princess? You will have to read the book till the end and find out for yourself. Incidentally, Paul's surname is Marteau which means 'hammer'.

First novels tend to be autobiographical to some extent, and if that is so in this case the author has led an interesting life. I therefore look forward to her next oeuvre.

Readers will be interested to know that two writers reviewed on this page in the past have recently been honoured. Ejaz Rahim has been awarded the highly regarded Patras Bukhari Prize for his 1917 collection of poems *Sacred Thirsts, Secular Hungers*, thus making him the only poet to have been awarded this prize four times. And Balraj Khanna's *The Line of Blood* has been listed as one of the ten best novels about the partition of India.

My congratulations to both.

VARSHA SHAH

By Yogesh Patel

Humble potatoes enjoy not only a good history, but some strange stories, including the one when during World War II the USS O'Bannon on spotting a Japanese submarine on the ocean's surface opened a fire on it. The submarine though moved close enough for the attack. When the Japanese crew appeared topside, the US sailors pelted them with potatoes. Believing the grenades were being catapulted on them, the Japanese panicked and threw their guns overboard. It is perhaps the most humdrum vegetable with its widespread unsophisticated presence, monotonous colour, uninspiring dumpy roundness, and dull inconspicuous affirmation, yet boasting some intriguing history that demands a poetic rescue. In her 2016 poetry pamphlet, *Voices*, Varsha Saraiya-Shah takes up this challenge to delight us with potato's pigtails.



Photograph by Dr Krishnan J. Saraiya
ISBN 9781635340235

A long fat potato, sweet and meant
to be eaten, stays idle
for weeks in my fruit bowl.
It grows pigtails and ivory beard
over threads of moustache.
My friend says, it needs change.
(from *Change Does It*)

Don't we all when we are stuck in doldrums, feeling dejected, while the whole world is having fun? At least the poet here plucks up 'its sweet limbs' and leaves them in 'a glass with water on window-sill to befriend the sun.' As humans, hope is in our hands to conjure up, sometimes helped by our creative streak. A marvel through a child's eyes rescues us with someone's helping hands. This all happens in this poem against the mundane routines of doing dishes, dancing, singing and 'drinking the sun-splashed water' and watching the new leaves 'winding their way around' hopes and new life. With the humble potato delivering us to the distilled elucidation:

We know what change does, how change rubs on
those who think they're alone or scraping by
or can't make sense of what seems ugly—
it grows new seeds of sweetness,
an assurance.

Poetry in general mopes into melancholy. Or at worse is self-indulgent and an intellectual, linguistic celebration. So, the poems in this collection are a rare outing into hope. Like Saleem Peeradina, Varsha celebrates everyday ordinary. In her poems published in the 2016 Fall Issue of *Border Senses*, even the passing of her father adopts the celebratory journey however doused in sorrow. Remembering the lost ones with fondness and love reassigns us to joy making the sadness redundant.

In *Voices*, Varsha discovers her wide-ranging playful articulation (matching her infectious smile she tells me is a permanent fixture!) exploring the depths and rescuing precious moments. The simplicity fools us as it is warmly inviting, connected to our daily experiences and not teasing us into puzzles of ambiguities. Yet it always unfolds into an epiphany. Her poem 'What I Take with Me' is a fine example of this. She goes to drop off her son at the airport and watches 'the sight of my son being swallowed/by two giant doors sliding back and forth'. While the indifference of the son and the mother's protective love for him are juxtaposed, and the son disappears even without looking back, the traffic cop's leading interpolation, "Lady, keep moving...keep moving..." is a real life's lesson about moving on. The loved ones and things that imprison you move on without a second thought while we forget we need to move on too. Again, there is no whining here, but a positive message handed to us in the most unassuming poetic feat. Examine the playfulness stung with 'bleeding' feel of things in these lines in her poem, 'Dreamscape'

I marry the grass to my chair,
offer my blood to honey bees, and
become the laughter of whispers
the size of leaf's sighs.

In her poem 'Voices' – assuming the title of her collection – poet's feminism is not shying away but dares to commission some fun

Forget all harassing noises
A voice says.
So I quit the crowd to model in sari
draped over a miniskirt.

Like many diasporic Indians living the American experience, but preserving the past values, this poet also lives with the Upanishads.

The speaking trees say nothing, but
Murmur to the wind, what
The Upanishads tell us:
Love and Work.
(There is Nothing Wrong with us...
Says the Sky)

Further on, the poem also offers some wisdom on the Shakespearian scale:

'Your name is not you'

Poems are not poems if they do not present to us everyday lacklustre objects, occurrences, sentiments, beliefs, and politics in fresh images and contexts reviving their essence. So Varsha not only offers us 'breast sucking winds', 'In the driveway, join the stars' gossip', 'sketching hope with broken pencils', 'Something to create from room's silence', 'crushing the acorns' pointy breasts', and more metaphors to hail a new meaning, but evokes scenes to derive the unobvious reality. This poet is keen to meet you as explained in her poem, *This Knowing*.

I have met you and you and you
but can't tell Ponderosa from Lodge Pole.

So, don't be disappointed if poet fails to recognise you, but you will meet yourself in these poems. That is what counts.

When the dark sweeps and silence lifts something beyond
You tiptoe still asking,
Have we met yet?

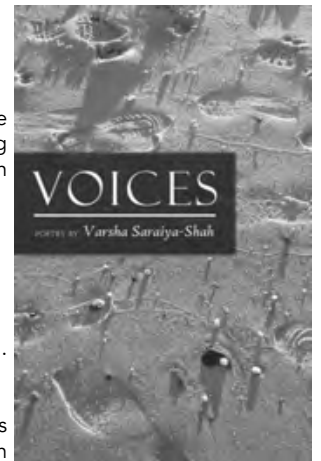
If you are still looking for the poetry that holds your hand and does not hammer your head, then the answer to the question posed in the last line above is, an emphatic yes.

A correction: With reference to my article in the last issue please note that Saleem Peeradina suffers from Parkinson's, not Alzheimer's.

*

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

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FOR BONDS OF HEARTS WORDS ARE MERE PRETEXT YAVAR ABBAS AND I

By Rashmi Sahi

This is my strong personal belief that the intuitive bonds of hearts can never be grasped through the rational chords of intellect. And why should they be. When heart is put under the magnifying lens of a logical microscope, all the poetry and art leaves it. The intrusiveness and obtrusiveness somehow sully the essence of the relationships that defies words and language. After all, not everything can be boxed in clear, structured boxes, definitely not my relationship with the 98 year old, Yavar Abbas, the Indo- British Documentary Filmmaker, poet, marsiya singer and much more.

I met Yavar Saheb as I call him back in 2010 in London through one of my very close friends, Lalit Mohan and Kusum Joshi. I had gone to participate in their South Asian Cinema Foundation's event and there he was, this magnetic young man in his 90's, all handsome, suave and dressed to nines. I was mesmerized. His old world charisma, his refined taste in poetry, his impeccable urdu, his impressive dressing sense, he was too much for me to handle. The introduction to him felt just a formality. Our conversations had just begun. I was eager to learn about this fascinating man.

Mundane lives seldom make interesting tales.

His was far from mundane. Born in Charkhari, Bundelkhand in undivided India in 1920s, he was recruited in the army. A chance opportunity offered at the job for training behind the camera as a documentary filmmaker changed the course of his life. After the training, he was asked to make a documentary on the making of Pakistan. Those were the days of bloody chaos and rampant fury and he captured this in his documentary, *The Birth of Pakistan*, which he made for the army. Personally, he was heartbroken by the division of the country and the loss of culture and the language, and has never gotten over it. He decided to relocate with his British wife and infant son to London in 1949 to join BBC Urdu and later served BBC as a film cameraman for BBC. His documentary, *India My India*, is a historical window of the bygones, a treasure for the present times.

I kept in regular touch with him over the years and in 2014 he came to stay with us

in Hong Kong. He already was 94 then, yet his energy would put us to shame. He would sit by the window, with stacks of books from my personal collection and read straight for at least 4-5 hours each day. Some days, he would climb up four floors to the terrace with a book in hand and would come down only when called for.



Author and her husband with Yavar Abbas

It had been four years since we had last met. My husband and I couldn't resist the idea to once again meet face to face.

On this cold, wet Christmas Eve in London, we surprised him at Joshi's residence. He had dropped unannounced at their place for a little chitchat, as was his habit. When I saw him that day, after a gap of so many years,



I called his name. The smile on his face when he recognized the voice and the subsequent tight hug

nothing had changed. There he was effortlessly handsome and flawlessly dressed. He was facing the other side. I called his name. The smile on his face when he recognized the voice and the subsequent tight hug we got into dissolved the incessant passing of time. All was stand still.

I sent a silent thanks to the forces in universe, which allowed me to be where I was at that moment. I had to be here and nowhere else.

'It was worth taking the long flight for this man', I thought to myself. That evening after a long heart to heart, he drove back home, as he usually did. I was in awe. I was speechless. Age indeed was then a number.

I met him many times after that, and we would talk long and deep about anything and everything. Lucidly, he would recall facts and figures from his memory. I was envious of his mental clarity and agility. I lost count of how many times he got up from the chair while talking to get this and that, to pick up that and this, without a second thought. He talked about his creative dreams for his unfinished projects. He was raring to begin. We made plans for meeting again, either he coming to Hong Kong or I visiting London again.

On my 13+ hours flight back, I started reflecting on the past days and thinking of this unnamed relationship, which pushed me without hesitation to visit London, when I had dreamt for months to visit Spain.

I kept thinking. It was there in that crowded economy class cabin, filled with chattering and irritated passengers, a crystal clear voice came to me. It was of my beloved Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi. It said:

"Words are a pretext. It is the inner bond that draws one person to another, not words."

So once again the words of Rumi had come to my rescue. He too never failed me.

What Rumi has said some 800 years ago, I had understood now. It indeed was this nameless soul bond that had driven me to meet Yavar Abbas.

Rashmi Sahi lives and teaches in Hong Kong.



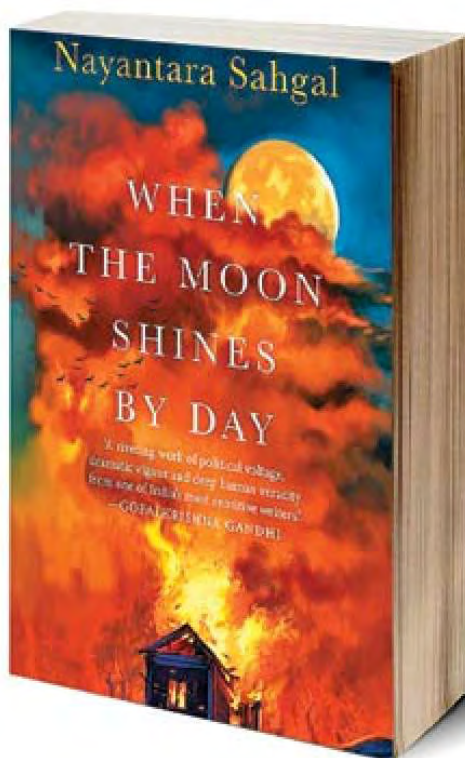
WHEN THE MOON SHINES

By Anjana Basu

After *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* comes Nayantara Sahgal's novella *When the Moon Shines by Day*. Both books are reflections of what is seen and heard in the media, a nation that seems to be on a juggernaut path intolerant of dissent and not open to discussion. Of course, Sahgal's age is a factor that may have a youth oriented nation wondering – how can a senior citizen have the energy to continue to combat these forces, something Sahgal has been doing actively since 2015 when she returned her Sahitya Akademi Award as a mark of protest after the murder of rationalist MM Kalburgi. Her action started a trend – various other writers followed in her footsteps expressing dissent in a myriad ways and languages despite Government trolls sprang futilely into action.

When the Moon Shines by Day has four members of a book club as its main characters. Rehana is the daughter of a noted historian who comes to realise with alarm that her father's books have suddenly vanished from book shops and libraries. Rehana works with a group called Asians Against Torture where she realises that the tortured are willing to agree that the moon shines by day to save themselves from inevitable agony. This is the backdrop for a setting that seems delicate and mannered fuelled by eggshell China cups of Orange Pekoe – Delhi upperclass society – but underlying it is an infernal kind of reality that threatens to shatter the gentility.

There is the bureaucrat Kamlesh who is obsessed with research into Shah Jehan's incest with his daughter, to the point of ignoring whatever is going on around him. Around him in a thousand drawing rooms are conversations about how the Mongols, the Mughuls and the Muslims have been responsible for all kinds of destruction in India many discussions presided over by the Director of Cultural Trans-



formation, this era's apparent Big Brother.

Nothing could be more harmless than a book club apparently, but that brings with it the banning of books and the underlying reasons. Sahgal's India though set in a different time, echoes the present with its parallel narratives. She introduces the Bavarian writer Franz Rohner at

a book launch. Rohner is a historian of the Third Reich and its excesses and Sahgal uses Rohner as a means by which to evoke what she sees happening in India with the authority of the failed examples of the past – book burning, art destroyed, minorities tortured, thus opening up the passage of history. She uses selections from her mother's prison diary as well to convey the message that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Sahgal's examples reach as far as Mexico - Frida Kahlo's Diego was a Communist revolutionary whose murals were welcomed even in the US – in Delhi the work of a Communist painter Nikhil is vandalised on an attack on a gallery run by Parsees, an attack in which Rehana is hurt by a flying stone.

She brings in a lynching too, someone flayed on suspicion of carrying a cowhide suitcase.

Sahgal's narrative may seem a little too straightforward and didactic but there is no denying that it is hard hitting. Whatever the time, it is certain that she is talking about now, a space in which Gauri Lankesh has been shot down, countless people lynched for alleged cow slaughter and other horrors that are too numerous to count.

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



HUMANITY TRIUMPHS

By Subhash Chandra

May. Mercury touching 44+ C. The hottest day of the season till then. The angry sky was raining fire.

"Kalka ji?" I asked. I was at Palika Bazaar auto (three-wheeler) stand. I had a chai and chat meeting with a friend at Coffee House, as it was my off day at college.

He shook his head dourly.

The second grunted refusal.

The third turned deaf.

I had to reach home before Upasana got back from school. The prospect of Upasana waiting in the murderous heat was unnerving. As the fourth one also declined, another auto crawled to a halt. The driver took in the scene and offered to take me. As he was driving away, a volley of abuses and threats from the waiting drivers chased him.

I got anxious for him. "They might harm you."

"That's all bluster."

On reaching home, as I got off, I saw his chest was heaving like bellows and he was gasping for breath. I instantly knew what was wrong. Upasana suffered from allergic bronchitis and we were familiar with her agony.

I helped him climb up the stairs to our first floor house.

"Paani," he wheezed, indicating his head.

I took him to the bathroom and dunked his head in the drum that was full of water. He repeated it twice and felt slightly better. Then, I administered him a dose of bronchodilator syrup and asked him to breathe in deeply on the inhaler. We always kept a spare one at home. Slowly, he felt relief and his eyes began to droop. I made him lie in bed.

Upasana came in and was puzzled to find a stranger in soiled clothes, sleeping in our bed. But she kept quiet. She did not want to disturb him.

"Pop, he is unwell, no?" she whispered.

"Yes, Birdie. He has the same problem as yours."

"Oh!"

Having finished her lunch silently, she sat by my side.

Suddenly a cyclone erupted. Vibha had materialised in the room. She had come home early that day as there had been a farewell party at her office which got over in the afternoon.

I took her to the drawing room. Before I could explain, she shouted in a shrill voice, "Who's he? And why is he in our bed?"

I told her everything.

"Why the hell did you have to tuck him in our bed? It's spoilt."

I kept motioning to her to calm down, but she went on. "Look at his clothes -- dirt and grime and shit. And the sewage water from his head has spread all over. Omigod what have you done?"

She was like that -- hyper and given to extremes.

"Mom, he's not well. He'll wake up," Upasana told her in a tearful voice.

"Helping someone doesn't mean bringing him

home, and ruining our bed, for God sake!"

"Look, all that we need to do is change the bed sheet."

"No. Bacteria-ridden, foul water has seeped into the mattress too."

It was no use arguing with her in her present state. All I mildly said was, "We'll buy another one. We can afford it, Vibha, can't we? But don't forget we have saved a life. Is anything more precious than that?"

"Tomorrow you would pick up a bleeding guy hit in an accident and" But she was cut short by Upasana bursting into tears and sobbing, "Mom, uncle is very unwell ... yaa" she said and went to the bedroom.

After a couple of minutes, we heard voices.



When we entered, the man and Upasana were talking. He noticed Vibha's frown, hurriedly got out of the bed and stood apologetically.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He nodded, looked embarrassed, then folded his hands and left, after thanking us and blessing Upasana..

#

After a couple of days, Vibha came over in his auto. Every evening she had a hard time getting home. During the peak hours autowallahs quoted mad sums. I always waited in the balcony, lest she needed change to pay.

He looked at the meter, got the fare and went away without a word.

Vibha told us, he happened to be passing by her office.

"Did you recognise him?"

"Not at first."

"Lucky chance for you," I said.

#

After two days, again he brought her. And then it became routine. He intentionally hovered around the building after office hours till he espied Vibha.

"But how did he find out your office?" I asked Vibha one day.

"No idea."

Upasana giggled. She had told him during their conversation.

He never lingered for a moment after taking the actual meter fare. But one day, Vibha brought him along.

She served tea and Britannia cake. He did not touch the cake. "White flour and sugar aggravate my bronchial problem."

Balraj was not an ignoramus like most other auto-drivers.

Vibha asked him about his family. His wife had died two years ago. He had a daughter, a year older than Upasana who was twelve, but was also studying in class eighth in a government school. Soon, he got up and said, "Excuse me, this is busy time. I drive only up to 7:00 PM and reach home early for Veena."

"Bring her over some time. Maybe coming Sunday."

"Okay," he said and left.

#

Again we had tea together. Upasana and Veena took to each other instantly and both went to the bedroom and spent time together.

I casually asked, "Balraj, 'do you sometimes overcharge the passengers?"

"Never."

"Why do the others?"

He hesitated and said, "Many are into bad habits like drinking, and gambling."

"Is your auto on rent?"

"No, it's mine. I'm paying back instalments on the bank loan."

I told Balraj that I was teaching in Delhi University. Vibha said, "I work for an Ad Agency." After an hour, he took leave of us.

Vibha brought a bagful of clothes. "These are Upasana's. They would fit Veena."

He said, "Please Ma'am, don't worry. She doesn't need them."

Veena stoutly refused the hundred rupee note Vibha tried to press on her.

#

He stopped picking up Vibha after about a month.

We wondered what had happened. Vibha said, "It was too good to last."

"Yes."

Slowly, he began fading from our minds. Vibha got back to hunting for an auto after office.

But after about three months, he again brought her home. We learnt that the ruffians who had threatened him had brutally bashed him up breaking his right leg which remained in plaster for six weeks.

Now two years have passed and Vibha has been regularly coming home in his auto.

Subhash Chandra retired as Professor of English from Delhi University. He has published four books of criticism, several research articles as well as short stories in Indian and foreign journals. His latest collection of stories 'Not just another story' has been published in January 2017 by LiFi Publications New Delhi.



'WRITING IS A JOURNEY'

By Deepa Vanjani

The literati look forward to this event every year. It is perhaps the largest conglomeration of authors and publishers in the world. It is the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), held between 25- 29 January this year. After having attended two festivals in 2007 and 2008, I was in Jaipur for two days (27& 28 January) of cerebral champagne at the Diggi Palace, which has been the venue of this literary confluence since its inception.

The schedule for all five days was jam-packed, brimming with writers and artists. There were parallel sessions in Charbagh, Baithak, Samvad, Durbar Hall, and the Front Lawn of Diggi Palace. Tom Stoppard, Nicholas Shakespeare, Helen Fielding, Amy Tan, Shashi Tharoor, the list goes on. Stalls of renowned publishers like Penguin India, book stores, a festival bazaar, and to end the day a musical delight at the Hotel Clark's Amer.

I couldn't get enough of the invigorating sessions in the two days I was there. I managed to attend Amy Tan's session on *The Joy Luck Club*, on adaptations of literary texts into films, the insightful session of Hindi writer Chitra Mudgal, the enlightening interactions of Nayantara Sahgal and



Chika Unigwe

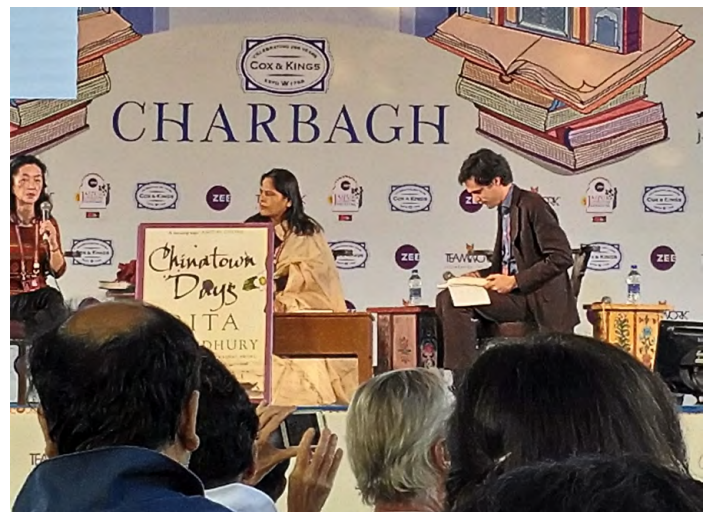
Shashi Tharoor, the candid conversation with Sonal Mansingh, an amazing discussion on women memoir writers many others as well. There was one session on the art of fiction writing with Tan, Nicholas Shakespeare, Helen Fielding, Ondaatje, Joshua Ferris, and Chika Unigwe. Since I was on the Press Terrace too, I could line up with the media team of the festival for interviews with authors, as also attend press conferences. When Chika Unigwe spoke about her book *'On Black Sisters' Street'* during the session on fiction writing, I had made up my

mind to have a tete a tete with her and soon got an opportunity for this.

As I sat across her in a room on the Press Terrace, I felt a cultural affinity, a sense of shared history of being colonized, and the struggle of the women to fight oppression. *'On Black Sisters' Street'* was written after three years of research when the author lived in Belgium, where, while commuting in the train, she observed women in the sex industry all dressed up. She visited an NGO where she talked to young girls aged 14-16 who had been trafficked into Vienna and showed them a documentary on Nigerian sex workers who were deported and the difficulties they faced. One woman had to sleep with a man just for a bowl of soup, another was forced to drink urine.

Chika began interacting with these women to know more about their lives, and found that the victim syndrome couldn't be applied to all. There were those who had bribed managers of music bands visiting Belgium and immigrated to be able to earn to pay off debts back home. She recalls how she came across some terrible stories in this process.

How did she fictionalize these raw, real stories? "I didn't find it difficult.



I turned them into realistic fiction,” she says, “starting with the last days of a sex worker who is an illegal immigrant and so she is nobody for she does not exist for the government.” At the end, Unigwe, feels, the only truth that matters in fiction is the emotional truth. The confidence to write comes from the confidence of who you are.

What made her decide on being a writer? “I always wanted to be a writer,” she says, “writing came naturally to me.” Anyone who inspired her? I naturally ask.

She reminisces that when she was in school, Flora Nwapa, the first African woman writer to be published in the West visited the school leading Unigwe to make up her mind that she wanted to be like Nwapa. The author was her first inspiration. Chika began reading voraciously. She also came across a pamphlet whose content was about why ‘Blacks’ were in a mess and why they couldn’t make it to heaven. She was flabbergasted.

At that time she had read Achebe’s ‘Things Fall Apart’. That, she says, was a “spiritual awakening”. It also made her question many things, thus bringing about counter narratives one of which was about the glorification of colonization, which she realized was false. She learned how English was the language of instruction in good schools in Africa, there being no common African language, the arrogance of the global south to global north movement, which expects immigrants to integrate, and how the

distinction is kept alive to maintain power dynamics.

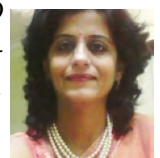
She recalls how one is boxed into identities. In Belgium when she

important, for others language is. A writer has to make sure that the link between stories is obvious and know what kind of writer he/she is”.

I asked her what aspiring writers should do to improve and extend their writing and get published. Taking up a creative writing course always helps, according to her, something she herself would have loved to do, as it opens one to criticism and inculcates a dedication to writing. More importantly budding writers should continue reading and writing every day. Publishing is a difficult task, and gatekeepers view you through a particular lens, she feels. Moreover, each book is different and so some stories sell better. Finally she adds that writing is a journey.

I could sense her own journey as a writer who has penned four novels and many short stories and essays and has obtained a Ph.D. degree. I admire how subtly she takes up issues of prejudices hegemony, and cultural marginalization. A writer with a moral vision, with something to talk about through her writing, Chika Unigwe comes across as an honest woman of substance.

Deepa Vanjani is the Head of the department of languages in a leading college in Indore, India and a visiting faculty with Educational Media Research Centre, UTD and School of Comparative Languages, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India.



Writing is therefore a calling for her. She says writers are also ambassadors and you never know, she adds “how your writing is going to speak to someone who needs it.”

How should a writer strike a balance between style and content? “That is intuitive”, she says, “and also needs of readers vary, for some readers plot is

THE FARMHOUSE LOTION

By Anita Nahal

It was a sprawling farmhouse about 10 miles from the very outskirts of Delhi. Green and lush with wandering shrubs that walked the gardens mingling with my feet that lolled over early morning damp dew. I got up around 4:45 am as sleep always evades me in new, unfamiliar areas, eager to explore unaccustomed

My hands were dry from flying nonstop for almost 15 hours. Airlines these days don't give free stuff in toilets! Fragrance of tuberose or rajni gandha as it is called in India, wafted out from the unscrewed plastic bottle. It was an inexpensive looking container, and had the word, lotion, printed on a homemade sticker. Perhaps

I thought about the cheetah and I started to walk fast towards the main building. As I neared the entrance, the bottle of lotion, still uncapped in my now sweaty hand, fell. I could hear it spinning down the slope of the pathway between the flowers and thick wilds. I had no time to stop and pick it up. And from the side of my right eye I saw the shadow of the Aravalli cheetah, slithering majestically towards its prey. A few stray peacocks began screaming their horrible calls from tree tops.

It was late in the afternoon that I emerged from my room next, and tentatively made my way down to the other building where lunch was being served. Loud laughter preceded my steps.

"What happened?"

"What time you woke up this morning?" my uncle asked.

"About 4:45 am, I think."

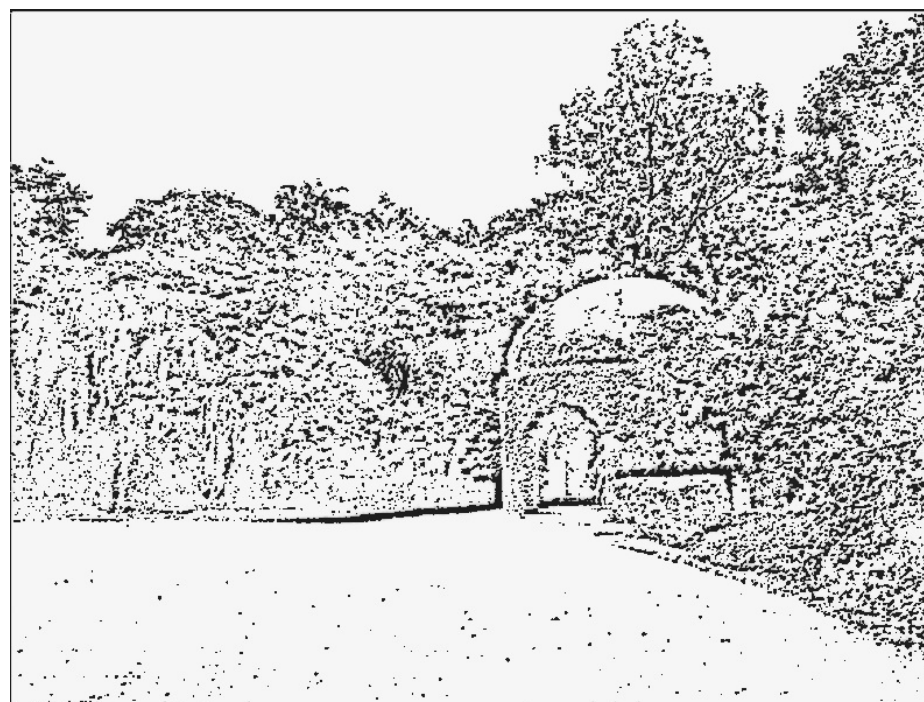
"So.... did you come out that early as you said you would?"

"Yes! Oh, is it possible to get another bottle of that heavenly lotion?"

Everyone stated laughing crazily, some even doubling up in seated positions on the carpet.

"What?"

My uncle had continued to stare at me and sheepishly grinning he said, "Oh, nothing, nothing at all! Oh, btw, the neighbor's cat was found this morning with white mushy gel around her mouth. They rushed her to the pet hospital and it seemed she had swallowed mouthfuls of our guest room lotion."



legacies. My uncle who had arranged for us to stay at the farmhouse had cautioned me that since it was located close to the Aravalli hills bordering the final outposts of the city, sometimes a cheetah is spotted in the farmhouses around this one. "After 11 pm and before 5 am, just be careful. I mean, I have not seen one in the last few days I have been here, but you never know" As I strolled, I looked at the watch. It was still ten minutes to 5 am.

The wet dew was inviting and I dug my naked feet further into the soil. Nearby was an ancient looking covered circular veranda and I sought a breather underneath. I opened the bottle of lotion I brought down with me from my room, the one the farmhouse guests received besides the shampoo and conditioner.

it was produced by a small home business, however, the fragrance was priceless. It reminded me of my mom's garden and my childhood days danced around me. How I missed my mom. That ache led me to remember that my early morning stomach was hungry for a steaming cup of my mom's strong Indian tea, and fresh oven baked biscuits. However, the farmhouse kitchen was still closed, and mom was a yearning memory now.

I heard feet near me stepping on the same grass my feet had been playing on a few minutes ago. I thought another visitor occupying one of the other rooms had woken up, and was joining me for a morning walk. No one emerged. It was still about five minutes to five am.

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



AN INTERVIEW WITH SHANTA RANGASWAMY

By Prabhakar Kaza

There are many people in this world who have worked hard to improve an existing situation and to make it what it is today. But there are also pioneers who have walked on new paths and taken the world a step further. One such is the living legend Shantha Rangaswamy, former Women's Cricket captain in India, whom one had the good fortune of meeting at Chinnaswamy Stadium, Bangalore on 31 December 2017 and had the privilege of conducting a short interview.

Q. When did you start playing cricket and what was the motivation? Did you play along with boys in the beginning, simply Gully Cricket or did you have a proper ground to play in?

A. I grew up in a joint family which included about 15 cousins. We had a big compound/open space where we all played tennis and Cricket every weekend. There was no official body then. It was formed only in 1973. Except for playing with cousins and sisters at home and on school grounds during weekends, I had no opportunity to play cricket during my school days.

Q. How did you balance your studies with Cricket?

A. By the time I started playing serious leather ball cricket, I had graduated. I had an advantage as I played Badminton up to State level and was also the first State Captain of Softball. Softball helped me in honing fielding skills besides helping in some of the batting shots. I was never much of an academic, so sports took a lot of my time and studies receded to the background. But thanks to my mother's persuasion, I graduated.

Q. Did you enjoy the support of your parents and siblings?

A. Fortunately, I hail from a sport-loving family. My father, uncle and my younger sisters were all either State level/National players. So domestic support was not lacking for me. The only difference was that all of them did well in their studies while I pursued sport in a big way.

Q. You played under the banner of the Women's Cricket Association of India(WCAI)? How did you balance your Bank life with Sports? Did you to travel by train in unreserved compartments and sleep at times on the floor?

A. Yes. I played all my cricket matches under the WCAI banner. BCCI took over the administration of cricket for women in 2006 in India

by which time I had retired. Yes, we did put up with a lot of hardships but we didn't even realise it, as the love for the game overrode all such things and made them look petty. Most e travel was by unreserved train compartments, without berths and were mostly put up in dormitories.

Q. What are the differences in Cricket both on the field and spectator-wise between your days and now?

Initially when we started playing, people were perhaps more curious than interested. The response to our International cricket was encouraging, despite being ticketed. We have played before thousands in several centres.



Author and Shanta Rangaswamy

Television came later. Of late with Television showing games across the globe, spectator interest has dwindled even for men's cricket, mainly for Test matches. Playing before big crowds gave us the ability to withstand pressure.

A. You have several firsts to your credits. First Woman 1To make a century in Test cricket 2.Captain to win a Test match 3. To get Arjuna Award.4 To get BCCI Lifetime Achievement Award for Women. To what do you attribute such an illustrious life?

Luck to a large extent and the desire to do well, not for self-glorification but to ensure the longevity of the game. We, the Pioneers, realised that we had the onerous task of keeping the game afloat. For that we had to do well and make people accept women's cricket. If there's any one reason for which we Pioneers feel proud, it is the fact that we performed well enough for people to accept the game.

Yes, winning the above awards gave a lot of personal satisfaction but the biggest satisfaction

was to have been a part of the process of hoisting the flag of women's cricket.

Q. You retired as a General Manager in Canara Bank? An achievement in itself. How did you balance your office work and sport?

A. Till 1993, I was actively playing. At that point of time, I was transferred from Bangalore to Lucknow. I grudgingly went there as I felt that though I was an all India player, the Bank had transferred me. It ensured two things. Firstly, it ended my Cricketing career but boosted my Banking career, enabling me to reach the post of General Manager. At the end ,I was very pleased that I had been able to balance both Sports and Banking careers well.

Q. Indian Women played well in ICC World Cup 2017 but faltered at the end. While this has been analysed ad nauseum, I feel that they lost because the players were not used to playing with spectator pressure. What is your opinion?

A. I was till recently the Chairperson of the Selection Committee. I know most players well and I am aware that while some have acquired nerves of steel, others display stress under trying circumstances. But I don't think it was the spectators watching that created the pressure (India has seen larger attendance in many games), but the pressure that a big moment like Lord's finals creates. Winning games frequently will eliminate this kind of pressure.

10. What advice do you have for our players playing in South Africa now?

Most players have played in South African before . BCCI has done well to send the team in advance for acclimatisation. I am positive the Team will do well. The current Selectors have done a good job of picking the right blend of experience and youth. I wish the Team all success.

Prabhakar Kaza is a keen follower of Indian Women's Cricket and the administrator of Indian Women's Cricket Fans on face book which has around 86,000 members. Prabhakar is a former General Manager of State Bank of India but currently runs his own business consultancy firm in London.

GWALIOR: A PROSE POEM

By Amitabh Mitra

Gwalior looks the same with only a few changes that reverberate in shades of darker grey here and there. Houses have silently crept closer, wild creepers shackling the fort. The fort smells a bit different too. A decaying odour has replaced the one of bats, peacocks, trees and shrubs. They all seem to have died in the eternity of this long voyage; the fort too seems to have been dwarfed in its own glory. I had scratched the fort wall so often in my childhood days. I had rubbed my cheeks to it. Only this time, that was not possible. Eyes heavy

words spoken, images inherent to much such coherence

As I continue living, growing and drowning in African renaissance of many such odours and many such poems, loving remains the same. A sparse sky has plenty words yet seething of wounds in humanitarian crisis. An African crow stares at the vastness of vacant thoughts. Thinking of you in such moments is filling the well of colours we had seen and shared long before the fort stood in all its loneliness.



with a long slumber, the violence of many suns seems to resurrect our loving in many such long dawns. The fort stays within us.

Ageing is watching many empires slowly pass by. I hear you within me, your voice being ageless. A familiar age-old Maratha surge rages, the train closing on to a life, our breathing even grows closer. Gwalior in its ageing grandeur suddenly encompasses the body, your laughter riding many dusk-dawns, I had even put charcoal lines to it. Longing a fevered noon is our closeness at Gwalior in a cacophony of such restless empires. Their dreaded departure fading in storms, birds come to rest on skeleton trees. Skies imbibe in such memories. Loving you is the wilderness, an eye recoiling to your

Screams and long sinewy days of torture takes over as trauma became an everyday word. I remember Gwalior in summers scarred in wrinkles, parched in distances of battles won and lost. Gwalior is still there amidst the rebellion of furthest horizons. A long shadow of the fort at dusk remains wounded with our words unspoken, in an autumnal lust silence reigned the ravines again.

Amitabh Mitra is a poet, visual artist and a medical doctor, based at East London, South Africa

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3 MICRO POEMS

By Ananya S Guha

LOVE STILLS

Love stills
the water
is clear
love a mirror

IN THE HILLS

In the hills
birds sway
and I see
the moving
finger
run away

PERHAPS

Perhaps
is a pause
breaking
into
dawn and
night

WHEREVER

Wherever you are
I wither into
painless death

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



'RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE' AND 'RELIGION'

By Charles Sarvan

The following essay is consequent to reading 'What the Qur'an Meant and Why It Matters' by Garry Wills. The word "Islam" means submission to Allah, and to Muslims Allah's will is expressed in the Qur'an: the sacred book is the supreme authority in Islam. The Qur'an is a fungible and fraternal text, and it explicitly states: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2:256). Even a cursory reading of the Qur'an will reveal the emphasis laid on the understanding and forgiving nature of Allah. Pope Francis wrote that authentic Islam is opposed to every form of violence. Yet in the minds of many, the Qur'an and Muslims are associated with violence, if not cruelty; with outdated, barbaric, notions and attitudes. People and groups with influence, either through ignorance or malice, distort the religion. Before we make statements about Islam; before we adopt a position, Professor Wills urges that we read the Qur'an. "Seeing is believing" but believing can also lead to seeing: if we have a prejudice about a group – be it on grounds of 'race', colour, religion or sex – then we are predisposed to "see" negatives in them. The 'Implicit-Association test' is of relevance here.

Among the several misconceptions Wills attempts to correct two are about Shari'ah Law and the wearing of the hijab. The term "Shari'ah" occurs only once in the Qur'an, and there it hasn't to do with law but means the right path. Subsequently, "the vague and sketchy elements of law in the Qur'an" (p. 147) were clarified and filled out by sunnah, ahadith, qiyas and ijma (scholars' consensus). So it is as absurd to call generally for the banning of Shari'ah law as to demand the banning of Christian law (p. 147). Where clothing is concerned, there were so many people calling on the Prophet

that it was necessary to afford the female members of his household a measure of extra privacy. The intention was to elevate - not to suppress. The word Jihad does not mean war but struggle, and struggle can take many different forms: the Prophet referred to the major Jihad as being the struggle for self-control and moral betterment.

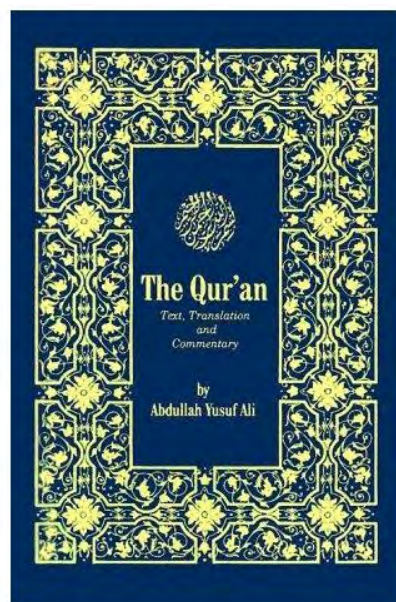
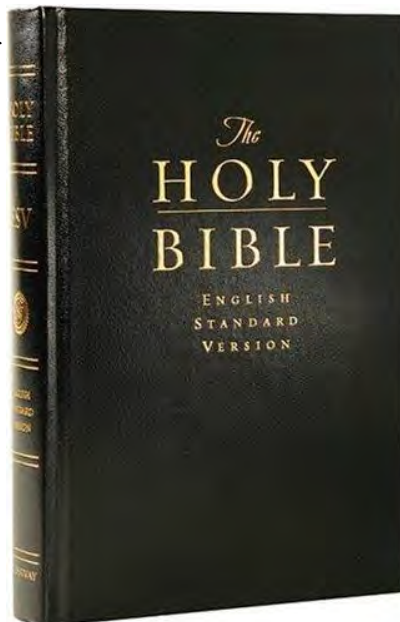
But is the equation of the Qur'an and Islam valid? For example, if we say that Christianity is a gentle, or Buddhism a

beliefs? Islam has nothing whatsoever to do with the creation of the Palestinian problem. "The crime of the Holocaust" lies entirely on European shoulders: Palestinians are paying the price for European sins over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust (Fuller, p. 303). The so-called "Palestinian problem" is one created for the Palestinians by Israel: the Palestinians are the victims and not the originators of this "problem".

To engage in 'counterfactual thinking' (a counterfactual is a conditional containing an if-clause followed by what is contrary to fact), if Sri Lankan Tamils had been Buddhists, would history have been different? Given the affinity between Hinduism and Buddhism; given that elements of Hinduism have been taken over into the Buddhist religion (in blatant contradiction of Buddhist doctrine, that is, of the Buddha's teaching), is this not evidence that ethnicity is more potent than religion? Durkheim argued that in religion the object of worship is

society itself. Abdullah Ocalan, in his Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization, argues that religion is identical with the concept of politics. Edward Gibbon The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire comments on the collusion between state and religion. Both religion (not religious doctrine) and politics have to do with power, respect and influence. So if we comment on Islam or on any other religion, we should make clear whether the reference is to religion as actually practised or as originally preached.

We make a distinction, irrespective of religion, between practising and nominal believers. A nominal Muslim may not hold to all the Five Pillars of Islam; a nominal Buddhist, unlike true Buddhists, may not be a vegetarian: since



compassionate, religion we are referring to these faiths as they were taught – not as they are practised in private and public life. Reviewing Graham E. Fuller's, A World Without Islam, I suggested a distinction between religious doctrine and religion with its rituals, paraphernalia, hierarchy, myths and superstitions. Religious doctrine has a divine or semi-divine origin originating from an exalted, exceptional, individual. Simplifying, one could say: While religious doctrine is 'divine'; religion is a human construct. 'Religion' being human helps explain why the same religion in the same country can be gentle and tolerant and, at another time in its history, be vicious and hegemonic. Is the conflict between Jews and Christians on the one side, and Muslims on the other really based on differing theological

Debate

Sri Lanka is largely (and vociferously) Buddhist, one would expect the Island to be largely vegetarian and largely free of alcohol-consumption. A nominal Christian may break one or more of the Ten Commandments; ignore the Beatitudes. But what do we mean by “a practising believer”, be she Buddhist, Christian or Muslim? It is not merely someone who attends church, mosque or temple; someone who repeats chants and prayers; bows to monks and priests, and venerates places of worship: As Gandhi said, The essence of religion lies in the practising of morality. In a message to me dated 29 May 2016, Fuller wrote: “Despite my Christian upbringing, it is ultimately Buddhism which has contributed to my personal, most basic world and spiritual views today (although I don’t claim I am Buddhist as such). I had initially tended to think that Buddhists were of course something of an exception to the bloody links between religion and violence. Yet I discovered in later years that in Sri Lanka...”

The greatest damage to the noble core of religious doctrine is wreaked not by its enemies but by its most fanatical and irrational adherents. Their behaviour in the name of religion can make a mockery of their own religious doctrine. Governments can legitimise what is unlawful but, far more potently, religion can make pious that which is unjust and cruel. As I have written elsewhere: I hate more, and am prepared to be more intolerant and cruel than you in the name of our religion. Therefore, I am the better believer; the more pious follower. Hate, and not love, becomes the measure of religious piety.

Karl Marx, with reference to a group of French socialists said, if they are Marxists, then I myself am not a Marxist. One can well imagine the Buddha, observing acts of violence, cruelty and domination perpetrated allegedly on his behalf, saying: "Not in my name! If that is what has been made of Buddhism, then I am not a Buddhist". And "Gentle

Jesus” seeing what Ulrich Beck in *The Metamorphosis of the World* notes as “the alliance between the sword and the cross”, would weep tears of pity and say, “If this is Christianity, then I’m not a Christian.” The visiting-card of the vicious Ku Klux Klan is a burning cross; the flag of Buddhist Sri Lanka is a lion with a raised sword! As my wife wryly observed, “If ‘religious doctrine’ were turned into ‘religion’, this world in which we briefly sojourn would be a far more beautiful place”.

Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan obtained his M.Phil and PhD degrees from Univ. of London. His specialisation was Commonwealth Literature. Now retired, he lives in Berlin, Germany with his German-born wife, a published poet.

