

Contemporary Indian-English Poetry: An Australian Perspective

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This article is a critical discussion of Indian-English poetry written approximately over the past five years. It does not claim in any way to be a comprehensive survey of all the Indian poets writing in English. I recently reviewed (Harle, 2013) a wonderful anthology, *The Dance of the Peacock*, edited by Dr. Vivekanand Jha (Jha, 2013). This book alone presents the works of over 150 Indian poets, some expatriates included. Clearly it is not possible in an article of this size to mention or discuss the works of all the Indian poets I have read over the past few years, apologies to those not mentioned.

The poets that are selected are the ones that I have a reasonable familiarity with, either through a close reading of their work, reviewing their individual poetry books or having included their work in anthologies which I have edited. I feel they are fairly representative of Indian-English poets in general. In no particular order they are: Vivekanand Jha, Sunil Sharma, Jaydeep Sarangi, Ratan Bhattacharjee, Vinita Agrawal, Aju Mukhopadhyay, Archana Sahni, D.C. Chambial, Gopal Lahiri, K.V. Dominic, Jayanta Mahapatra, P.C.K. Prem, Ranu Uniyal, Manohar Biswas, Shujaat Hussain, Sangeeta Mahesh, Mamang Dai, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sangeeta Sharma and Santosh Alex.

As with poets the world over, all matters are 'fair game' for Indian poets, however, one thing which stands out above all else in much contemporary Indian-English poetry is an 'activist element'. In some cases it is brutally confronting, in others more subtle and gentle, but nonetheless the poetry still comments on important and urgent social issues including—destruction of the natural world and environment, subjugation of women and young girls, capitalist greed, political violence and corruption, and the plight of refugees and poverty stricken individuals and groups. I suggest there are two reasons

for this—firstly, India has moved out of the suppression and oppression brought about by British colonisation and the poets' gaze is turned more inwards than on external factors; and secondly, because of the huge population and the ancient but long practised caste system, there are numerous and massive social issues, which do not exist as such in many other countries.

In some cases a poet may have a small number of poems on these themes but in others a whole book may be orientated this way. Manohar Biswas' latest book, *The Wheel Will Turn*, is a 'no holds barred' attack on the suppression and inhumane treatment of the Dalits in India (Biswas-Sarangi, 2014). The Dalits have been oppressed and denied the chance of rising above their birth origins for centuries. Relegated to extreme poverty, extreme hard work, with little chance of education, and even dying from starvation has been their lot. The first poem in his book, 'Reverence', (p. 17) sets the stage, so to speak, for the rest of the book. I will quote it entirely:

*If I am called an untouchable (Sudra)
The fractured veena within
Spreads fire instead of tears
Your masks of conspiracy
Are ripped off and crash on the earth.
Reverence just continues clapping its hands and declares
This "is an insult to mankind"
Nothing else.*

Even though in Sangeeta Mahesh's book, *Ocean of Thoughts*, the subtitle—*Poems about Social Issues and Human Values* (Mahesh, 2014) gives a good indication to the general theme, the first poem 'Invocation To Lord Ganesha' (p. 17) is exactly that, an invocation. Something unlikely to be included in a Western book of poetry, this gives the book a distinctly Indian feel:

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*O Lord Ganesha! God of happiness and joy
I worship your holy lotus feet
I invoke you to visit and bless this nursery
Of multicoloured flowers of poetry
Sprinkle on it nectar of spiritual thoughts
And embellish it with the beauty of simplicity.*

The poetry of K.V. Dominic in all his books recoils at the injustices and unnecessary subjugation of millions. He attempts, through his poetry, to expose these injustices so as to raise awareness in others with the hope of making the world a better place for all. For Dominic no unjust societal action or situation is immune from attack by his penetrating and confronting poetic mind. He is especially outraged by the harm done by the various *mafias* to animals and females. Numerous poems speak for the animals and nature who cannot speak for themselves, and also for young girls who, also because of caste or other social situations, are often rendered voiceless. A poem in his latest book *Multicultural Symphony* (Dominic, 2014) titled 'Child Labour' (p. 36) tells the story of a young girl, Dhanalakshmi, sold to a young advocate and his wife who live in a luxurious house, they then work her beyond endurance, torture her, then inflict an injury so horrible that the girl dies. This poem about true circumstances published across the nation, is heart breaking and 'unbelievable' and so disturbing that it will make an indelible mark on the readers' mind, and so it should. A few lines from the poem:

*Woke her up very early morning
burning her hand with cigarette ends
Starved her for sluggishness in work
Poor lass helpless and crying
None in the world
to share her sorrows
Longed for her parents call
to take her back home
Dreamt of a day
lying on her ma's lap
caressed by the loving hands.*

In contrast to these two poets mentioned above, the poetry of Vinita Agrawal has a more gentle power. This is made all the more poignant because of her juxtaposition of soft gentle imagery with very serious important themes and subject matter. She is a master of the use of metaphor, a skill and sensibility often lacking in contemporary poetry. In her book *Words Not Spoken* (Agrawal, 2013) in the poem 'The Refugees Are Here' (p. 32), she highlights the plight and suffering brought about by the unforgivable destruction of Tibet and Tibetan culture by the Chinese invasion:

*The enemy has ravaged modest dwellings at gunpoint
the way swords demolish cobwebs
can guns talk for sixty years*

and then the last verse:

*hungry, empty
the refugees are here
only to keep alive the stories of their land
through chapped, charred lips
that dried up kissing loved ones
goodbye.*

A further characteristic of many Indian-English poets is the use of day-to-day language; this does not come from a lack of poetic sophistication but is an attempt to communicate with the widest possible audience. Sunil Sharma is one such master of simplicity in his poems. Simplicity is not to be confused with naivety, and the use of everyday words that "don't send the reader to a dictionary" is a skill to be cherished and respected. Many of his poems bring a tear to the eye, if this was all that the poems did even that would be absolutely enough. But they are far more than emotionally satisfying—Sharma exposes the human condition on many levels—love relationships, work situations, life in the big city, especially Mumbai, and also peoples' relationships with the world of nature. Powerful imagery that confronts reality is characteristic of many of Sharma's poems:

*She sits, holds lunch in her thin hands
And eats slowly,
Surrounded by hard stones everywhere.
Morsels swallowed hard
Washed down later with
Polluted water
From a plastic crumpled bottle.*

These lines are from the poem 'Lunch' (p. 15) in his book *Golden Cacti* (Sharma, 2012), a poem about the 'lowly' job of stone breaking in India—the juxtaposition of a peasant's meagre lunch with the brutal, unforgiving hardness of stone is heart rending. This poem is haunting!

Another Indian poet who tends towards the use of everyday words is Jaydeep Sarangi. His poems have an ethereal and at times enigmatic quality which is difficult to nail down. Perhaps this is a characteristic of all good poetry. Sarangi juxtaposes simple commonplace items and events with complex human situations from the gentle flow of an insignificant river to the plight of women and Dalits in India. His gentle manner makes these poems even more powerful than a heavy handed approach. The activist purpose is often present in much of Sarangi's work, especially emancipation of the Dalits.

*Brutal within is voiced
When her innocent body crumbles
She bleeds
As the nation under a colonial rule.
Our youth is touched
With blood at their mouth.*

This stanza is from 'A Rose is a Rose' (p. 20) in his book *Silent Days*. (Sarangi, 2013) Like all accomplished poets, Sarangi utilises metaphors in surprising and fascinating ways. His poems are like the sun's rays warming a cold heart—not emotionally heavy—just a gentle warming of the heart. This paradox—of gentle power—is the best way to describe Sarangi's beautiful poems. These lines from 'Homeless In My Land' (p. 40) are indicative:

*I sit under a banyan tree
I read Arjun Dangle aloud!
How nice it is to think, time is ripe
Things to follow as history completes the full cycle.
My silent pen becomes my sword.*

There are two interesting characteristics, specific to Indian-English poetry, which are worth noting. The first is, Indian-English usage is not quite the same as, say, Australian usage. The word, *the*, technically a demonstrative adjective or definitive article is rarely used, especially in poetry, this takes a little getting used to but adds a special, subtle Indian flavour to the writing. The second characteristic, which fortunately does not occur that often, is the attempt to write rhyming poetry, that is, where the last word of each line for example rhymes. This, in many cases, results in poetry which appears strained or which draws attention to its superficially attempted rhyming. The common English style of iambic pentameter poetry is difficult enough to write well when English is the poet's native language, so the difficulties increase considerably when English is a second or third language. This comes across as childish and mars an otherwise good poem.

India in many respects has been significantly influenced, changed and challenged by British colonialism, this includes the influence of English poetry. Most poets and scholars are very well versed, pun intended, in the history and nature of English poetry—Keats, Wordsworth, Eliot, Yeats and so on, to a lesser extent they also have a knowledge of American poets, but there is a dearth of scholarship concerning French, European and Australian poets. Fortunately in post post-colonial India, the dominant English influence is waning and a unique free-verse Indian poetry is emerging. Consequently most of the contemporary Indian poets that I am familiar with generally write in the free-verse form. As we know, free-verse does not mean 'free-for-all', care to maintain rhythm and cadence is essential to create good free-verse. Fortunately it seems most Indians have a natural ear for music and this is reflected quite often in the charming cadence of their work.

As an example, Aju Mukhopadhyay's poem 'The Burning Lamp' (p. 53) in the anthology *Poetic Connections* (Lonsdale, 2013) has a subtle, charming cadence:

*The lamp was burning golden-brown
In my dark room steadily, alone
No one was there around.
Flowers bloomed of a mystic hue
Radiating my obscure chamber
When you came to light the lamp
No one knew
No tread, no flash, no sound.*

This poem has obvious mystical connotations, which is one of Aju's concerns in his poetry. The other dominant concerns are a love of nature, especially birds, and an abhorrence of the destruction of the natural environment. He is an astute observer of the way those in power and control—bankers, developers and politicians—influence the natural world, generally to its detriment. These themes are all present in his latest book with the rather unusual title *Manhood, Grasshood and Birdhood*.

Many of Aju's poems are concerned with the big issues of environmental and life destruction such as the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and then the nuclear disasters of Chernobyl and Fukushima.

*Those who were wiped out from the earth scene instantly
Due to the dropping of atom bombs wantonly
Had their sufferings mitigated by God's bounty*

He sees 'nuclear' as an evil force (p. 23), with no match in previous history. These poems stand in quite stark contrast to some of his shorter poems such as 'Mili'. (p. 38) This wonderful, gentle poem comments on the timeless and inevitable transition from innocent childhood to adulthood. I found this poem very moving and the line, "forgetting her lollipop days" captured perfectly the passage from the carefree innocence of childhood to the responsibilities of adult life.

In contrast to some of the poets previously mentioned, Ratan Bhattacharjee's main poetic theme is love. His delightful book, *The Ballad of the Bleeding Bubbles* (Bhattacharjee, 2013) is divided into two sections: Part One—*Melodies of Love*, and then Part Two—*Maladies of Love*. This is an appropriate arrangement as love is often bittersweet and contains within its glorious pod, the seeds of elation and ecstasy on the one hand, and potential sorrow and sadness on the other. Bhattacharjee uses metaphors beautifully in many poems such as in 'A Boat of Words and an Ocean of Feeling' (p. 69):

*A small boat of words and the vast ocean of mean
A meadow of passions with the letters raining
On the reader's mind, in the writer's heart
All genuine expressions and no feigning.*

The line "...meadows of passions with the letters raining" is exquisite poetic imagery. And again in, 'My Days Are Silent' (p.60):

*Like the dark monstrous cloud.
The sweat drop by drop writes the daily gospel
On the canvas of our dull and sombre life.*

Poets are truly, brave souls—they craft their poems, often putting themselves and their feelings right out in front of the firing line, not knowing how the readers will respond. A romantic poet such as Bhattacharjee bares his soul, fearlessly for all to see. This takes great personal courage, but if the poems are written with the conviction that love is supreme then really the poet has nothing to fear because the reader will resonate with the poems and poet.

In contrast to these love poems, both Vivekanand Jha and Sanjukta Dasgupta, in many of their poems, lament the treatment of women, young girls and widows. Jha's poem in the anthology *Voices Across The Ocean* (Harle-Sarang, 2014), 'Stigmatic Widowhood' (p. 88), confronts the reader head-on with the absurd and distressing treatment of widows. The first verse is as follows:

*Customs curse for widow
and blessings for widower
widow, a horse with bridle;
widower, a tiger without fetters.*

Then in Dasgupta's long, narrative poem in the same anthology, 'Malini's Role Playing' (p. 70) she brings powerfully to the reader's attention the whole 'clichéd' lives of women in India. The first six lines start with the unfortunate birth of a girl child:

*A speck of infant shame in the scared mother's arms
The newborn daughter curls and curls
Yearning voicelessly to re-enter the darkness
Of the uterine home that seems safer
As sighs and weak smiles of resignation
Infect the unhappy air around.*

It must be mentioned here that many Indian women rise above this abominable sexist regime to become world class poets, academics and writers. Many of the male poets mentioned in this article also abhor this regime and write strongly, proudly and powerfully in defence of equality for females in India.

Archana Sahni in some of her poetry moves the importance of the feminine from the purely personal to the powerful metaphor of mother as birth country. Her brilliant poem 'Tibetmata' in the anthology *Voices Across The Ocean* (Harle-Sarang, 2014) sees Tibet as the mother of Tibetans and combines this with an activist's abhorrence of the invasion and consequent destruction of Tibetan culture. Below are a few lines:

*Not only babies
are born, out of people,
nations too –*

*As I saw women in modern chupas
with babes on their backs
Spoke broken English with monks
in sunglasses
And inhaled Potala incense
amidst the Dhauladhars,
something was conceived ...*

In a similar vein to both Sahni and Dasgupta, Mamang Dai's poetry describes the conditions and fears of women with a sense of hope and future empowerment, 'The Sorrow of Women' (p. 57) in the anthology, *Building Bridges* (Harle, 2013), is a poem which is full of hope and which contrasts the condition of men in war situations with the fear felt by the women not directly involved, the first verse, sums this up:

*They are talking about hunger.
They are saying there is an unquenchable fire
burning in our hearts.
My love, what shall I do?
I am thinking how I may lose you
to war and the big issues
more important than me.*

In general, Indian-English poets write about issues, "more important than me" as Dai says, as a colleague once noted poetry is all the more powerful when it has visionary aspects. Even though many of the poets discussed in this essay comment about different conditions in India, the underlying problems have global relevance and hence a visionary quality.

Sangeeta Sharma's poem 'An Evening In Mumbai' (p. 180) in the anthology *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (Sharma-Harle, 2013), even though it is observing a day in the life of Mumbai (previously Bombay), the gateway to the India of Shiva and Krishna, could be located in any big metropolis in the world, a few lines will illustrate my point:

*Corporation vehicles coming driving
Sending the road-hawkers scurrying with their wares
On the other hand,
Audi, BMW, Toyota, zooming past
Pretty women in lavish and chic outfits
Oblivious of the poor,
Giggling and excited
Entering MacDonalds, Pizza Hut and Dominos
Celebrating birthdays.*

What city are we in—New York, Sydney, Mumbai, London? In contrast to Sharma's poetry about external conditions and the peoples' habits that haunt our cities, many of Jayanta Mahapatra's poems tend to look inward to understand our universal human condition. Mahapatra is a very well-known and respected senior poet and I find the mystical quality in his work astonishingly beautiful

and an absolute joy to read. Even though some of his poems refer to specific Indian situations such as his poem 'Mother Teresa', his work is universal and profound. The second verse of 'The Scream' (p. 95) in the book *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* is haunting:

Like a dark stubborn child, the scream.
Like its mother, cold, aloof.
It is inside my head all the time,
as days and shadows pass by,
till it wakens me to a different reality,
till it dislikes me for its throne's sake.

Ranu Uniyal is another poet who often deals with inner human conflicts which have both a personal and universal presence. Below is her delicate, partly bittersweet poem—'Call It Freedom' (p. 69) in *Building Bridges* anthology (Harle, 2013)

I am blissful in earnest
In me are the many petals
Of memories
Of life
Folded gently as if
It would be a sin
To unfurl
The grief, the longing
The loss and the love.
I am the flower
I am the leaf
I am the bud
I am the stem
Pluck me
And I will be dead.
Let me grow
And I will be
Smiling
Forever

In distinct contrast to Uniyal's poems, Shujaat Hussain's poems are quite hard hitting. Most of the poems in his recently published book, *Tolerant India* (Hussain, 2014) have a kind of internal urgency and latent energy. Hussain does not tread softly or 'beat around the bush'—he tells it straight. The first verse of 'Demonic Diplomatic Webs On Drives' (I love this title) is a perfect example:

Century is lying on the heap of nuclear
Why do men look ferocious?
Why does darkness prevail in the hearts?
Why does limited light exist?
When sea-shore is in their possession?
Reason of this intense thirst gives no clues

Throughout the book Hussain repeatedly questions the unreasonable ways of human beings; this has the effect of raising the questions in a rhetorical manner in the reader's mind, and making the questions more powerful

and engaging. Although Hussain's poems are specifically about India, they like many of the other Indian poets' works, are globally applicable.

Interestingly, some of D.C. Chambial's poems are very similar in subject matter to Hussain's, though his style is different with a staccato type of cadence that moves the poem along nicely. This form, I suggest, is quite unique and comes from English being the second language. Here is the first verse of 'We Are Living' (p. 64) from the anthology *Voices Across The Ocean* (Harle-Sarangi, 2014):

We're living in a land
that abounds in
wolves, hyenas, and jackals
care for none
save for their own selves and broods;
proficient in pilfering
the share of hen and lamb;
concern confined only to clans.

As one of my favourite Western poets Charles Simic has said, "What they forget is that a poem is an instant of lucidity in which the entire organism participates. It may not make shopkeeper's sense. This is what haunts, a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic, where imagination is free and truthful." (Simic, 1985)

This quote aptly describes the poetry of P.C.K. Prem. There is an illusive mystical quality to his poems and overt spiritual and humanistic concepts are quite evident. His short poem 'Relation' (p. 287) in *The Dance of the Peacock* anthology (Jha, 2013) illustrates this perfectly.

It will do justice
at a time in estranged relations
to vocalize feelings
with the tinkling of coins,
that live with hanging hands
on feeble bloodless palms
of thoughtless heads always desiring
to connive and concoct
another relation on equal terms
with no balance to distribute
in this crude age of devaluation
where computers evaluate Gods
and forget men.

The poetry of Gopal Lahiri addresses spiritual matters in a similar manner to Prem's but also adds vivid imagery to paint colourful pictures in the reader's mind. Simic's metaphor and magic indeed excites us in Lahiri's poems as he explores silence, darkness and the unknown recesses of the mind. The first verse of 'We Lie Empty' (p. 146) again from *Dance of the Peacock* is illustrative:

In a quiet room with no window
Exploring the forms of life in darkness,

*A search for strange and unknown depth,
We move our dreams and destinations.
We fall for the inner mysteries and Shadows.
A speedy river flows into our veins and arteries,
We hear the flapping sound of the marine birds.*

Santosh Alex's poetry is similarly infused with magic and metaphor and at times is almost like an invocation to higher powers. Like many other poets mentioned in this essay, he bemoans and abhors the bribery, corruption and poverty that are characteristic of our world. His poem 'Obligation' is written as from within his mother's womb which he is reluctant to leave. Can we blame him? I will finish this appraisal with Alex's poem 'Search' (p. 187) from the anthology, *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (Sharma-Harle, 2013). It is most appropriate as poets are always searching for answers, searching for clues to make a better world. Some do this in a direct confronting manner, others use mysterious metaphors and weave magical imageries to convey their visions. Always the poet is concerned with saving the world from crass brutality and inhuman acts of barbarism that so characterise much of mundane existence, indeed, "poets are the legislators of the world." Indian-English poetry has secured its rightful place alongside the poetry of all the other nations of the world, and perhaps leads the rest of us in metaphorically legislating for a better world.

*I searched for you
on the dining table
You were distributing bread
to the multitudes.*

*I searched for you
In the church
You were shining
on the farmer's body in the field.
I searched for you
in the goat shed
You were tending*

*the lost sheep
I searched for you
at the border
You showed me a world
without borders
I searched for you
in the bed
You danced as flowers
in the mountains.*

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