IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS...

*7*

There is a tendency among some of our scholars to pin down

mainstream Indian culture to the two great epics Ramayana

and Mahabharata in a facile manner. What they intend to convey

could be that in every nook and corner of the country, the live

traditions of these epics can be found in its latest form, adding

colour and vitality to people’s religious expressions. But they

seem to forget the fact that these epics, from the earliest times,

had tended to become localized, giving rise to vibrant local

cultures, which had personalities of their own. True, they would

have sprung from the ethos of the epics, but the cultures were

individually different and reflecting local aspirations. The variant

versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in many major Indian

languages and tribal languages, and in several foreign languages

of the Indian subcontinent and all over South East Asia bear this

out.

Along with these have to be viewed the many cultures

of the north-east which do not contain the elements of influence

of these two epics, but have incorporated myths of Tibeto-

Burman and local origin. So is the case with the myths and

customs of many cultures in the north-west, especially northern

Punjab and Kashmir. I remember one of my friends, Mr.Satish,

an associate of M.S.Sathyu, describing the marriage customs of

his north-Punjab village before Partition. I was startled to find

so many close similarities between his descriptions, and the

details of a paper presented by a Pakistani delegate from Swat

Valley, Dr.Jan Abasindi Talib, on “Marriage and Associated Customs

in Indus Kohistani Culture,” during the recent 4th International

Folklore Congress in Kathmandu from 17 to 19 August. There

were more than a hundred papers presented over nine sessions,

excluding the opening and the valedictory sessions, by delegates

from the SAARC region, the larger South East Asia and a few

from the First World, and several from Nepal. Each paper revealed

different aspects of the various sub-cultures of Nepal and the

SAARC region predominantly.

I was also excited to find papers in Maithili, Bhojpuri and

Avadhi being presented by many of the Nepali delegates. But

these are our languages! Of course, they are. But they also extend

from our Gangetic plains over the north and north-eastwardascending

foothills of the terai, and naturally spread in a contiguous

manner into Nepal, much like the terrain. Back home when I

discussed this phenomenon with our Deputy Secretary Brajendra

Tripathi who hails from a Maithili background, he said that on

both sides of the border, these and some other languages had

always been thriving in an organic manner, oblivious of the

national boundaries. Somewhat similar are the cases of Gujarati,

Sindhi, Urdu, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Pashto and other mother tongues

which India and Pakistan share, Bengali shared by Bengalis and

Bangladeshis, and Tamil by Tamilians of India and Sri Lanka. (This

is not including the Hindi vastly prevalent in Mauritius, Fiji etc.,

Tamil in Malaysia and other Indian languages of the great Indian

diaspora all over the world. I am dealing mentioning here our

languages right across our borders.) How true it is that man-made

borders cannot block out languages and cultures! The Nepali

surnames that were read out in the course of the various sessions

included Pathaks, Pandas, Sharmas, Joshis, Thakurs, Sahus,

Tripathis, Upretis…! From the beginning of my sojourn in Nepal,

I had found the country to be throbbing with the same cultural

ethos as any north Indian region would.

✩ ✩ ✩

The all-time great Malayalam fiction-writer Vaikom Muhammad

Basheer is featured in our Masters section this time. His 18th

death anniversary was on 5th July, quite accidentally coinciding

with the present issue. One of the earliest to participate in all

early manifestations of pre-modernism, romantic realism, and

at the same time, on another level, author of some other texts

which remain timeless as years roll by, Basheer remains head and

shoulders above everyone else defying genres, movements and

phases, perhaps with the sole exception of Madhavikkutty (nom

de plume of Kamala Das—she had changed her name as Kamala

Surayya during the last decade of her life— internationally

renowned poet and fiction-writer who wrote both in English

and Malayalam with equal ease, and pioneered impassioned

writing in both languages in the modernist and after-modern

phases.) who is there along with him visible on the horizon.

Basheer’s present story, “*Jeevithanizhalppaadukal*” (The

Shadow Patches of Life) written 73 years ago (serialized in the

literary journal *Navajeevan* in 1939 and published in book form

in 1954), portray the unsettling dazzle of a false sense of optimism

followed by the inevitable fall that visit upon the consciousness

of a naïve young man, and the dichotomy between a daydreamer’s

world and harsh realities, and the theme of finding a life-partner

from among the ‘fallen’ (which in itself was utterly revolutionary

at the time when the story was written; added to this was another

extremely inflammable factor—the hero was a Muslim and the

heroine, a Hindu!), not condescendingly, but for the simple

reason that the hero realizes the power of true love only belatedly.

However, one gets the feeling that the sheer poetic truth of

early Basheer’s tragic tales like *Balyakalasakhi* (*Childhood Girlfriend*)

outshines the positive resolution he brings about in this story.

Even a master-work like *Ntuppuppakkoraanentaarnnu* (*Me*

*Grandad ‘ad an Elephant*), seems to please the reader readily, at

the same time leaving him/her with the doubt, “Can he, with

all this suffering behind him, bring it all to such a fine tied up

end?”

Indeed, he had himself undergone similar experiences and

even worse during the bleak phase of his wanderings all over

the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and North Africa. He

had run away from home while studying in the 9th standard to

join the Indian National Congress and the nationalist movement,

courted arrest taking part in the Salt Satyagraha (1930) at the

Kozhikode Beach far away from his native Thalayolapparambu

near Vaikom, suffered torture in the police lock-up and

imprisonment for three months in the Kannur Central Jail. In

the prison he was influenced by the fascinating accounts by senior

political prisoners about the heroic deeds of patriots like Bhagat

Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru, Chandrasekhar Azad and others. When

he was released from prison, he returned home and started a

fiery patriotic journal *Ujjeevanam* inciting the public to revolt.

He was charged with sedition and, to escape imprisonment, had

to leave his home and travel far and wide for nearly ten years.

And yet, the present story that took shape towards the end of

that sojourn, is strangely rancour-free and ends happily. Another

work he wrote about this time, *Premalekhanam* (The Love Letter,

1943) remains as iconoclastic and futuristic, and definitely

contemporary as if it was written today! The truth is, to my

mind, Basheer is far too gone into the ocean of experiences,

that he seldom seems to want to come back. He is wont more

to reach a Monistic or sometimes Sufi-like distance from all the

‘here and now,’ at the end of it all.

Professor Indira Goswami who passed away on 29th

November 2011, was very close to *Indian Literature*, and to me

personally. I remember the time when she was awarded the

Jnanpith. There was a talk then among Delhi literary circles that

O.V.Vijayan, the Malayalam fiction-writer who all by himself had

created a new language to express the modernist sensibility

through his first novel *Khazakkinte Itihasam* and followed it up

with towering works that brought into their ambit the idea of

the Indian nation as a larger concept than the regional concerns,

would get that year’s Jnanpith. Naturally, the whispers had

reached Indiradi (as I used to call her) too. It was around this

time that I had reviewed her *Moth-eaten Howdah of the Tusker*

for *The Hindu*, as I remember. She had

phoned me and thanked me when she

had read the review. One of those days

she came into my cabin and

straightaway broached the subject of

the Jnanpith, saying that she too was

really, truly sorry that such a great

writer as Vijayan did not get the award,

and it was she who got it! I was stunned

for a moment; she was speaking from

the bottom of her heart, as a sincere

and sensitive writer! I assured her that

I personally thought her works were

throbbing with an intensity rarely seen

in our writers as I could feel it come

across even through indifferent English

translations and that she richly

deserved the award; I added that

greatness of a writer at such heights

can be too subjective a matter for

discussion in an award committee like

the Jnanpith’s. She smiled at that, and went away with the relief

of having been able to bare her heart to me.

Later, whenever she called me, it was to introduce me to

some wonderful writer from the north-east. She informed me

one day that a young lady from Assam, who wrote in English,

would soon come to Delhi to settle down, and I should take

a look at her works. I agreed. Indiradi paid me a visit soon after.

She said the young lady had come, and she would send me some

of her writings for consideration. “She is very beautiful,” she

told me as a parting shot, with a mischievous twinkle in her

kohl-lined eyes, and her typical closed-lipped smile. She was

pulling my leg!

After a couple of years she introduced to me a young man

from the north-east studying in Delhi University, who, she said,

wrote beautiful poems in English. I sought him out; yes, he was

a fine poet! Then again, she sent me the work of a young shortstory

writer, who, she insisted, was like her own nephew. He

too, I discovered, was very good at his art. I understood Indiradi.

Those young minds were her own *manasaputras* and *putris*! Like

an ideal guru, she was blessing them all with possibilities for

a wider reach!

As she got involved with the peace process in the northeast,

I used to wonder how a sensitive soul like her could be

a part of this largely political and bureaucratic exercise. Yet, she

plunged into it wholeheartedly, for the sole reason that she loved

her people and region passionately. She sincerely wished to see

an end to the senseless bloodshed there, and was prepared to

take any risk to see her dream fulfilled. I personally believe that

the recurring bouts of her final illness and eventual end would

not have come this soon, had she not got bogged down in that

morass.

Amritjyoti Mahanta has written an objective and yet sensitive

obituary, assessing and appreciating the contributions of the

writer, as well as celebrating her human qualities like her

compassion for the suffering, the marginalized and the

downtrodden. Her long-time colleague in the Department of

Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of

Delhi, Professor T.S.Satyanath, has brought our attention, in an

almost deconstructionist vein, to a very interesting narrative of

hers. Though written and presented much before her passing,

actually in 2002, the paper throws light on the inner workings

of her writerly persona and emotional world. Her story “Journey”

which Manjeet Barua has translated, clearly presents the master

at her best.

We regret that we are able to commemorate her in our

In Memoriam section only now, for various technical reasons.

May 31 was the third death anniversary of Kamala Das.

In his personal tribute, her ‘child’ Irshad Gulam Ahmed tells us

of his last visit to the writer at her Pune residence, and gives

for us one of her last poems addressed to Irshad and his wife

Lalita, which an ailing Kamala had mumbled as a parting blessing,

and which Lalita had taken down in her notebook. (This piece

was originally scheduled for the May-June issue; we had to shift

it to the present one due to space constraints.)

Our Special Feature is Gopalkrishna Gandhi’s perceptive

essay on the relationship between Gandhiji and Kerala. This is

in fact a paper he presented at Thiruvananthapuram late last year.

The author has brought out, with unusual clarity and precision,

the occasions when the Mahatma specifically dealt with Kerala

and its people. We are grateful to Gopalkrishna Gandhi for this

contribution.

D.Vinayachandran, the noted Malayalam poet, has written

a play, *O My God,* touching the heart of the composite culture

of Kashi, India’s eternal city. The inevitably grim future we all

are heading towards, if fundamentalist forces are not reined in,

is presented in this play.

Professor Gopi Chand Narang has presented a strikingly

new reading of Javed Akhtar’s poetic ouvre. At the very outset

Narang Saheb takes care to establish a distinction between the

Javed Akhtar of filmdom and the persona of the gifted poet.

He then traces the poet’s ancestry to his illustrious great

grandfather, grandfather and father who were the outstanding

poets of their day, and to his maternal uncle Majaz who was

a renowned poet of his generation and a leading member of

the Progressive Writers’ Movement. Then he strives to single

out the poetic voice of Javed Akthar as different from that of

his contemporaries and immediate predecessors and analyses it

and effectively pegs it down to the peculiar style of his Nazms,

which had moved away from the Nazm-tradition set down by

Aktar-ul-Iman, Majaz, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Makhdoom, Ali Sardar

Jafri and Kaifi Azmi; he had indeed opened up his own path. For

this purpose, Narang Saheb takes into account the poet’s

psychological make-up, tempered by his real-life experiences early

on in his youth, as attested to by Qurratulain Hyder in her

Introduction to *Tarkash*, the collection of his Nazms published

several years ago. Narang Saheb’s perceptive observations and indepth

analysis of the individual Nazms of this collection make

his essay memorable.

Our congratulations to Narang Saheb for the Sitara-i-Imtiaz

(Star of Excellence), the third highest civilian honour of Pakistan

bestowed on him for his contribution to Urdu Language and

Literature along with greats like Saadat Hasan Manto, Josh

Malihabadi and the ghazal king Mehdi Hassan.

Rajendra Prasad Pandey’s insightful essay on Acharya

Ramchandra Shukla’s creative and critical assimilation of western

literary concepts, though tempered with a measure of opposition

and resistance as well, throws light on the natural process in

which diligent Indian intellectuals opened their hearts and minds

during colonial times, in order to equip themselves with modern

knowledge systems, yet trying to preserve the great traditions

of our literary past, comparing and contrasting them with the

newest available knowledge around the world, and validating our

own.

I stand before you with apologies once again for overlooking

the graphic part of the journal—this time, it is my omission by

oversight to mention in my Editorial of the previous issue, IL269,

the photo-essay by the late Raghubir Singh. He is a singularly

unique lensman India has produced, one of the very few who

epitomizes Indian photography of the last several decades. He

is specially known for his landscapes and portrayal of people of

the country in different moments and postures. He captures

moments, freezing an action for eternity in extremely exquisite

frames, sometimes reminding one of Henri-Cartier Bresson’s

descriptions of photography, (“To me, photography is the

simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the

significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of

forms which give that event its proper expression.” … “I suddenly

understood that a photograph could fix eternity in an instant.”)

and his method (“I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strungup

and ready to pounce, ready to ‘trap’ life.”) He is also remembered

as one of the pioneers of the renewed use of colour photography

in the early 1970s by reintroducing it when it was not considered

favourably in mainstream photography.

In this issue we

present the paintings of

Durgabai Vyam, an

artist from Bhopal,

Madhya Pradesh. She

belongs to the Gond

tribe. Most of her

paintings are narratives.

The deities of the

Gond Pardhan

community find

expression in her

paintings, along with

the folktales of the

tribe. She began

learning the art when

she was just six years, with the initiation into painting dignas

or traditional designs on the walls and floors of the houses on

special occasions like festivals, weddings etc. Beginning with an

exhibition in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, in 1996, she has taken part

in exhibitions of Adivasi art in several important centres all over

the country. Recipient of awards and honours from home and

abroad, she makes it a point to take her three children along

wherever she is invited. In our selection, we present some of

her rare narrative paintings which are so utterly evocative and

capable of connecting us up to a multidimensional reality of

which the luckiest amongst us maybe able to have but glimpses

in rare moments of intuition.

In our What Are You Doing in the Attic? section we have

Khushwant Singh, who requires no introduction to the readers.

However, the fact that he keeps writing regularly without losing

focus at age 98 is in itself not a small miracle. Born two years

after the foundation stones were laid for New Delhi, Khushwant

Singh practically grew up with the Imperial Capital, and is its

most prominent ‘biographer.’ The two books on Delhi, one he,

and the other his daughter, Mala Dayal, edited (*City Improbable*

and *Celebrating Delhi*) carry his pieces which demonstrate his

emotional attachment to the city. Author of about fifty novels,

short story collections and humorous pieces, he is certainly “the

grand old man of Indian Letters.” His novel *Delhi*: *A Novel* (from

which “The Untouchables” is extracted in *City Improbable*), is a

rambling history of the city from its origins in the hoary past

till contemporary times, moving back and forth in time in its

narration, in an irreverent, trenchant vein. *Train to Pakistan* (1956)*,*

his early novel on the theme of Partition, is rated as one of

the best of its kind. His “With Malice Towards One and All”

is the longest running, most widely read fortnightly column in

Indian journalistic history. The perennial wit had said two years

ago during a public function, “I don’t know how long I can carry

on. I am trying to learn to do nothing. If I make a century, I

will be happy.” He had then quoted Hillaire Belloc, “I hope when

I am dead, it will be said ‘his sins were scarlet, but his books

were read.’” From his comment about himself and his column

that appeared in its latest edition (17 September): “I have been

writing them for over 70 years without a break. The truth is

that I want to die. I have lived long enough and am fed up with

life. I have nothing to look forward to and whatever I want to

do in life, I have done. So what is the point of hanging on to

life with nothing whatsoever left to do?” He was elected a Fellow

of Sahitya Akademi two years ago. It is indeed an honour to

have him in these pages.

A.J.Thomas.