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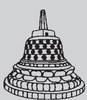
EDITORIAL

The Summer 2021 issue of *margASIA* is getting released at a time when the world in general and Asia in particular have witnessed significant changes– Afghanistan's efforts to build democracy have been brought to naught, China has surpassed the US as the world's richest nation and the long-drawn-out battle with COVID is yet to be won. In these times of flux, we have been fortunate to receive the love and unstinting support of our friends, patrons and subscribers. We remain grateful to them.

The current issue of *margASIA* offers glimpses into the colourful cultural kaleidoscope that is Asia. Countries featured in it include India, Japan, China, South Korea, Israel and Myanmar. Tripti Deo's article on Charanas insightfully explores the history of courtly bards of North-Western India. Prafulla Mohapatra reminds us of the relevance of Confucian thought in our troubled times. Writer Nadia Kalman of *Words Without Borders* explores the Korean testimonies of discontent that are often overlooked by popular narratives of aspiration. Daniel Gallimore's fascinating autobiographical piece on 'Tea and Shakespeare' is a fond recollection of his enthusiasm for the Japanese Tea ceremony, and the ways in which it reminded him of the elusive subtleties of Shakespeare's craft. Abasar Beuria's account of his sojourn in Myanmar rendered in Aditya Nayak's felicitous translation presents a compelling story of the Odia diaspora in the land of pagodas. Lev Aran's interview brings to us the untold story of the Jews of Northeast India and their search for the promised land.

We also have three reviews. John Creyke's review of *Thoughts on Education* is a crisp and judicious evaluation of the Odia nationalist Gopabandhu Das'trenchant critique of colonial education policy and his remarkable prescience. Diskha Chandra presents Choo Nam Joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*as a moving account of the unspeakable miseries of Korean women. Shaswat Panda's review of Pandey Kapil's Bhojpuri classic *Phoolsunghi* (translated into English by Gautam Choubey) vividly evokes 'a world elsewhere'.

margASIA warmly congratulates the Nobel laureates of 2021. We felicitate translator Archana Venkatesan, winner of the Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize. We express our sincere appreciation for Naveen Kishore, founder of Sea Gull Books for receiving the Ottoway Award for the Promotion of International Literature.



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Wisdom of the East

P. K. Mohapatra

What is the true way, which can guide us to live a good life ?, Confucius was asked to state in one sentence. He answered in one word: *reciprocity*. It is no wonder that Confucius has been regarded as the best teacher of Chinese philosophy and in fact of East Asian culture and philosophy of ethics, society and political life. Indeed, he is widely acclaimed as one of the most influential individuals in human history. When I say this, I have in mind the fact not only that his teachings formed the basis of East Asian culture and social life and continues to be influential across China and East Asia, but also that it has left a significant influence on multiple western scientists, philosophers, writers like Neils Bohr, Benjamin Franklin, G.W.Leibi niz, Robert Cummings Neville, Ezra Pound, Alexander Pope and the great British humanist F.C.S.Schiller.

Reciprocity is the essential element of morality and moral life. Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself, Confucius pleaded. Don't do to others what you would not wish done to you. Conversely, do onto others as you would be done by. This in fact was his golden rule which he used to put into action, his cherished idea of loving others. This is the idea he called "*ren*"in Chinese, which played a central role in his philosophy of humanism .The Indian counterpart of this rule is fairly well-known: *Atmanampratikulaniparesam ma samacharet*. Confucius's social philosophy was based primarily on *ren,* the principle of love and compassion for mankind.

According to *Records of the Historian*, written by Ssu ma Chien sometime in the first century B.C., Confucius was born on 28 September in 551 B.C.in the royal family of the Chou dynasty in Lu in the Shandong province of China. Some other sources reveal that, despite his royal connection Confucius had to live in poverty during his growing up years. As he grew up, China was undergoing an ideological crisis. The Chou empire, which had held dominance for over 500 years, was under severe threat by competing states,and with this traditional Chinese values began to deteriorate. As this meant the advent of a period of moral decadence, Confucius felt obliged to reinforce the social values of compassion and love for humanity. This achieved some success in his life time through numerous aphorisms and moral pronouncements, which were propagated by his followers. These aphorisms and quotations were later on compiled as *Lunyu* (one of the four books of Confucius), which was published as *Sishu* by the Neo Confucian Chinese philosopher Xhu XI in as late as 1190. But the original collection *Lunyu* was

translated into English as the *Analects of Confucius* – briefly referred to as the *Analects* - which became the principal source of Confucianism.

Confucianism is a world-view on ethics, politics and education that was taught by Confucius and his disciples in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. It prescribes rules for thinking and living stressing love for mankind, respect for elders and ancestors and emphasizes righteous living,integrity and ritual propriety. It also stresses self- discipline and conformity to rituals and traditional Chinese values, which he believed to be a great unifying factor in social life. Confucius's philosophical teachings lay emphasis on morality at both personal and governmental levels, desirable social relations, justice,kindness and sincerity.

Although Confucianism has often been regarded as a religious world-view and Confucius himself has been regarded as a deity worshipped in temples, the master wanted it to be known more as an advocacy of secular morality than as a religious system. He of course did talk of 'religious' ideas like after-life and heaven,but he conspicuously avoided any mention of the soul and of spiritualism. With exemplary humility, Confucius calls himself "a transmitter who invented nothing". (*Analects*).In primarily ethical spirit, he stressed the superiority of good behaviour at personal and governmental levels . Typical of the eastern ideal of examples being better than precepts, he pleaded for exemplary behaviour and skilled knowledge to be more important than citations of laws and rules of behavior. Both at the individual level and at the level of the government, good behavior must be practised and emulated for promotion of the greater good of the people. This may be called the Chinese version of *humanism* and *virtue ethics*.

Confucius aimed at formulating no systems and no formal theories, very much in the way modern analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein and several other western philosophers have been doing after almost 2500 years. And very much like the Buddha in India he sought to avoid extremes. He pleaded that virtue is the mean between the extremes of moral absolutism and ethical relativity. Buddha pleaded for a middle path – a mean between these extremes. Confucius's principle of "*Yi*", which is based on the idea of reciprocity in public life, is meant to tell us to do what is ethically the best to do in particular situations. Virtue, for him, is doing the right thing for a right reason. It is balancing between maintaining existing norms to perpetuate an ethical social fabric and violating them, or some aspects of them, wherever necessary, in the interest of ethical good. Moral rules thus may be said to be normally objective and inviolable but *defeasible* in some demanding situations, where another competing value deserves preference. Obstinate adherence to the absoluteness of moral rules is thus to be moderated, considering the demands of the context as mentioned above. There is a detailed discussion on this subject in my book*Ethics and Society: An Essay in Applied Ethics*.

Confucius' ethics, which guides his political philosophy and philosophy of education, takes care of three things, namely (1) importance of ceremonies to be performed with rituals, which he thought to be a unifying factor in inculcating traditional Chinese culture and social values, (2) preservation of social and political institutions and (3) etiquette of daily behavior. His political philosophy stipulates the best government as that which rules through rites (what he calles "*li*") and in accordance with people's natural morality. If people are led by laws, he said, they would avoid punishment, but they would not be having the sense of shame. But if instead they are guided by virtue and rules of propriety, they would certainly have the sense of shame and would tend to be good;because having the sense of shame is to internalize the sense of duty.

This sort of approach to politics is not to be construed as conservatism; because a closer look at his ideas would reveal that Confucius used- or

twisted, if you like- past institutions and rites to push for a new political agenda – a revival of a unified royal state where rulers must rule on the strength of moral merit rather than heredity or dynastic origination. Morality is a constraint on conduct; so Confucius' ideas contained a number of injunctions to limit the power of the ruler and provisions for the subordinates to advise the ruler when he went wrong. If the rulers/leaders rule correctly, orders accompanied by force or punishment would not be necessary. We are reminded here of the eminent sociologist Emili Durkheim who several centuries later argued that if norms are strong, rules are unnecessary. Confucius' emphasis on democracy is fairly implicit in this sort of political vision.

Confucius' philosophy of education stresses value-based instructions; he urged the teacher to teach people to live with sincerity and integrity. He strove to resurrect the traditional values of benevolence, propriety and ritual practices in Chinese social life. Following the victory of the Han rulers over the Chou regime, Confucius' thoughts received official recognition; and by the end of the Han tenure, *Analects* emerged as the central text of Confucianism. Thereafter , during the Tang and Song regimes - the years spanning from 618 to 1279 - Confucianism developed into a system known in the West as Neo-Confucianism.This fulfilment of Confucius' lifelong dream to be of use to society and the body politic happened long after his death on November 21 (some say, April 14), 479 B.C. His humanistic philosophy of "*ren*" attracted attention of many European scholars, who praised him as a moral philosopher whose approach was explicitly in line with rationalism and humanism. In the eyes of some late 19th and early 20th century reformers, the moral teachings of Confucius had the potential to play the same role in Chinese and Asian philosophy which Christianity had in the modernization of Europe and America. Hu shi, in his influential *History of Chinese Philosophy,* compared the apparently conservative aspect of Confucius' thinking to the thoughts of Socrates and Plato. Since then, Confucianism remains central to most histories of Chinese and Asian philosophy.

Affandi: Wisdom of the East, 1967

Bards of Rajasthan

Tripti Deo

Rajasthani society represents a distinct system of values, norms, institutions and patterns of hierarchical relationships. Different groups and communities contribute to the making and unmaking of different traditions prevalent within the Rajasthani society. By and large, caste and clan have played a crucial role in shaping the polity and society of Rajasthan, webbing the society into fixed and rigid spheres within which different communities function. The role of kinship and caste in legitimizing every deed of the ruler or a layman was so crucial that it was pertinent to maintain a specialized group of people who could maintain clan histories and genealogies of castes to avoid any kind of dispute and to reassert their position at every juncture. In many parts of Rajasthan professional bards and genealogists were attached to communities of varying status. These are the Charans and the Bhats—genealogists and makers of a distinct literary form. Rulers with great and sometimes not so great lineages, had to be accommodated and legitimized through myth making, and the Charans fulfilled this task.

The 19th century British official and historian James Tod, who himself came to be called the "modern *charan* (bard) of the Rajputs", studied the writings of the charans– *bats*, folklore and poems, and based a large part of his famous work *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829), on these sources. For Tod, bards may be regarded as primitive historians since, before fiction began to engross the attention of poets, before history became a distinct discipline, the bards recorded real events and commemorated real personages. Despite being open to all kinds of criticisms of the bards, Tod reiterated that their works provided valuable information. He frequently cited the oldest authentic bard known to history Chand Bardai, a Brahmin Bhat and the famous bard of Prithwiraj Chauhan's court.

The aim of this paper is to briefly introduce this very distinct and specialized Charan community by highlighting various facets of their lives, thus attempting to throw light on their role in the social formation of the region. They were the closest associates of Rajputs of Rajasthan, therefore, most of the sources on Rajput history and their literature bear an indelible impression of the Charans. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that, what we know of the Rajputs of Rajasthan is primarily because of the rich oral tradition and the vast repository of literary sources composed and preserved by generations of Charans.

The emergence of Charans as a distinct caste, which acquired a position equivalent to that of the Brahmins in Rajput society must be understood in a certain context— the changing needs of the Rajputs, who sought Brahmins of a 'different sort' to legitimize their conquests and military activities. For the Rajputs, neither a Brahminical religion nor the Brahmins as the interpreters of the sacred law had much relevance. They needed a value system that was military in nature and principles. The Rajput attitude towards basic principles of life was different. For example, for a Rajput, salvation was not attained through good deeds, charity, or taking dips in holy rivers but by heroic death in the battlefield. They were guided by different notions of death and education. They delighted in bloodshed and offered blood and wine to deities like Durga and Kali, who were known for their martial fervour. Brahmanical literature and education were unimportant to them. They needed an education which glorified personal valour. In other words, the Rajputs needed a new 'dharma' to support their military activities and a new class of pandits to legitimize their actions and to inspire them and encourage them. A Charan was an embodiment of bravery. The religious sanctity, legitimacy, identification, glorification and perpetuation of the clans and the kind of value system, which characterized Rajput polity was assigned to the Charans who evolved a code of conduct for both Rajput men and women. Rajendra Joshi highlights 16 features of the 'Rajput Dharma'

The emergence of Charans as a distinct caste, which acquired a position equivalent to that of the Brahmins in Rajput society must be understood in a certain context— the changing needs of the Rajputs, who sought Brahmins of a 'different sort' to legitimize their conquests and military activities. For the Rajputs, neither a Brahminical religion nor the Brahmins as the interpreters of the sacred law had much relevance.

that were not corroborated by the Hindu shastras but were found in the couplets of Charans. Therefore, the Charans became the upholders of Rajput Dharma, mentors to Rajput children and valorized Rajput values through their poetry.

What is highlighted above is the reason for the emergence of Charans as an important social group in the medieval period. However, there are references to charans since ancient times. With regard to their origins, one of the versions claims celestial origin of the charans. The community thus claimed its place among the Hindu deities, declaring the Himalayan region as its original habitat. There are references to Charans in Jain literature and the Puranas as well. Surajmal Mishan, the great Charan court-poet of Bundi in second half of nineteenth century, traces the origins of the Charans back to the *Suta* referred concomitantly with Magadha in the *Mahabharta*. Others claim that Charans were heavenly beings, and they came down to earth along with the Kshatriyas. Krishna Singh Barheth has cited many references to Charans in the *Bhagwad Gita* where they are associated with gods.

The Ramayana narrates an incident in which, after setting Lanka ablaze, Hanuman worries about Sita's safety. Overcome with guilt, he contemplates suicide. Only after being reassured of Sita's wellbeing by Charan Rishis, he feels at peace with himself. Next to the Rajput, the Charan enjoyed the privilege of providing *saran* (protective shelter) under his roof. The inviolability of Charan's home saved the clan when its adults were being killed in insane feuds. There are innumerable similar kinds of incidents where the king at the time of crisis, took help from the Charan who was known for his unquestionable commitment and loyalty.

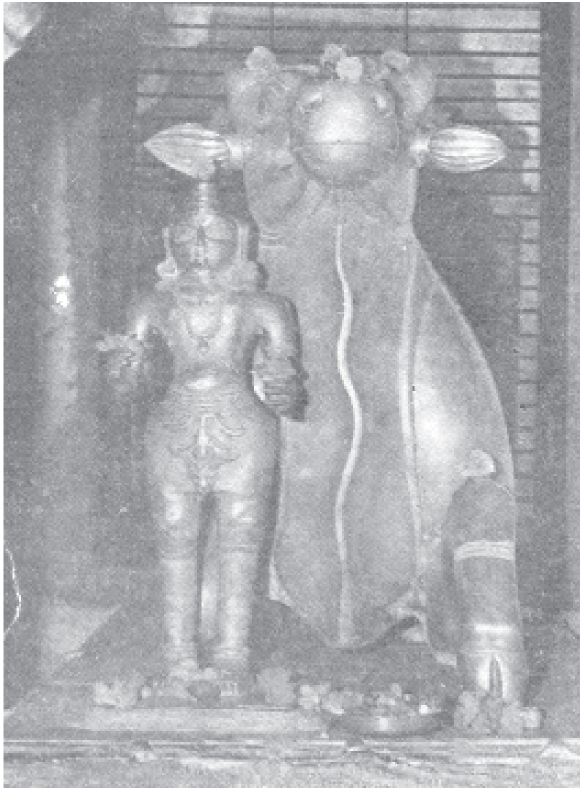
The Charan is peculiar only to Rajputana and remained inextricably associated with various Rajput clans and even the proudest Rajput ruler looked to them for solace in adversity and for joy and exultation in prosperity. They were classed into two groups on the basis of their territorial settlements— Maru Charans, who settled in Maru or Marwar region of Rajastan and the Kachhela Charans who settled in the Kutch area. The Maru Charans were divided into 120 *khamps* (clans) such as Rohariya, Ratnau, Sauda, Asiya, Lalas, Kaviya. The Kacchela Charans also had several clans such as the Balsi, Karwa, Bhojak. The most important vocation of the Maru Charan was to compose ballads recounting glories of the Rajput dynasties to which they were attached. He was also supposed to preserve and recite these in a high pitch on appropriate occasions during war or in peace to enthuse and arouse patriotic passions among the meek and the brave, exhorting them to prove themselves as worthy scions of their worthy ancestors. They wrote *khyats* (chronicles), *vartas* or *vatas* (stories), *raso* (martial episodes) and *vamsavalis* (descriptive genealogies). The *Dingal* literature in Rajasthan owes its origin and enrichment to them.

The whole class of bards were believed to be so sacred that their women and particularly young unmarried girls were looked upon as goddesses whose curses and blessings were considered greatly effective. Karni Mata, the Charan lady of Deshnok near Bikaner, was revered as a goddess during her own lifetime and her temple attracts lakhs of devotees even today. The longstanding conflict between the Bikaner and Jodhpur rulers was resolved by Karni Mata. The revered Karni Mata was a charan who was a godmother for the downtrodden. During her lifetime she gained respect because of her miraculous powers and after her death devotees fondly go to the Karni temple with a vow called *bolma*, a vow that is usually connected with the pilgrimage.

Amongst many Charan poets in medieval Rajasthan, Dursa Arha enjoys a unique place. He is known for being fervently patriotic and for coining the moniker *Hinduan Dhani* for Rana Pratap of Mewar. He looked upon the Rana as one who

unfailingly upheld traditional Hindu values. Dursa Arha had no illusions about the great might of Akbar who, he writes, was like a vast sea of unfathomable depth in which the Hindus and the Turks all had 'sunk'. Yet Pratap of Mewar, like a lotus, is floating on its surface:

akbar samand athah tih dooba hindu turk
mewrao tin maay, poyan phool pratapsi.



This brass statue is attributed to Dursa Arha at the Acheleswara temple at Mt. Abu (Rajasthan). The image is flanked by the big brass image of the bull Nandi, who is considered Shiva's vehicle. There are debates on the history of this image and by far no consensus has been reached. It is the oral traditions of the region that attribute this image to Dursa Arha.

Source: Bhupatiram Sakariya (ed.), *Dursa Arha Granthavali,* Udaipur, 1983, p. xviv.

The charans played several key roles in medieval Rajasthani society. The Charan and the Bhat bards frequently visited their patrons for updating the genealogical records and the *vahi* which in the words of A. K. Forbes was 'a record of authority by which questions of consanguinity are determined when marriages are sought and disputes relating to division of ancestral property are decided'. The bard at frequent intervals recited the genealogies and also entered recent changes in the fortunes of his patron. Many bards were skilled fighters who at times fought valiantly alongside their patrons.

Given the central roles played by the charans in glorifying the feats of Rajput men, it is not surprising to find them prescribing the norms of ideal womanhood for the Rajput women. And this they did by valorizing sati. As court bards, charans prepared the psychological ground for this by providing a suitable ideological rationale and made it a strong model of female chastity by identifying this with *pativrata.* By valorizing the act, they transformed self-immolation into a heroic sacrifice and effectively linked it to the honour and prestige of the women's natal and conjugal clans. Through their forceful poetry, the charans conditioned Rajput women from their childhood to accept and even welcome immolation by glorifying it in the name of *sati*. They portrayed it as an ideal of Rajput women, and as sacred *kulreet*. By eulogizing previous *satis*, they inspired subsequent generations of Rajput women. In one of the poems of Suryamal Mishan, a wife says to her husband:

I aspire to become sati. If you run away from the battlefield and return home like a coward, how will I become *sati*? If you have any hesitation in mind, send me to my father's house, at least then I will be saved from seeing the face of a coward.

The relationship of the charan with the state was both of conflict and of cooperation. By extolling the virtues of liberal patrons and satirizing those who were parsimonious, the bards were able to receive large gifts. At weddings, they enjoyed the privilege of demanding *neg* (a customary gift). The chief family bard in some cases received as much as a lakh of rupees (*Lakh Pasao*). The desire of the Rajputs to achieve immortality through the songs of the bhats was so strong that no expenses were spared to satisfy them. The revenue and rent-free land grants and villages that were given to a charan

as gift was known as *sasan. Dantal Patra* was given to the charan which acted as a record of the land received and would mention the name of the client who received it and that of the patron. There are also references to charans receiving gifts and high mansabs from Mughal rulers like Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan.

A bhat or charan was revered because of his identity as a Deviputra, son of a goddess. The charans devised their method of coercion called '*tragum*', '*dharnum*' and '*Chandi'* which roughly translates to 'extortion by self-torture and mutilation'. This practice consists of shedding one's own blood or the blood of some member of one's family, and in seeking the vengeance of heaven upon the offender whose obstinacy necessitated the sacrifice. When Maharaja Udai Singh of Marwar confiscated the *sasans* of the charans and bhats of Marwar, they resorted to *dharna* at Auva, a village in Jodhpur territory. In that *dharna* the charans one by one started committing suicide.

Stela showing a Charan piercing his jugular vein

Source: Catherine Weinberger- Thomas, *Ashes of Immortality, Widow Burning in India*, translated by Jefery Mehlman and David Gordon White, (New Delhi, 2000), p. 62.

The charan was the voice of the desert and the soul of the medieval history of the Rajputs. There was a prolific increase in the number of charans and their literature between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries; it is evident from the rise of *khyats* and other related literature. As Mughals asserted their dominance in the Marvara region and over Rajasthan as a whole, they felt the need to regain their legitimacy by emphasizing their traditional virtues. The mid-seventeenth century *khyata* and *vigata* of Marvara were produced in the final form after nearly a century of Mughal rule. It seems clear that these were the result of a conscious process set in motion early in the Mughal period to collect both traditions of the past and official state documents to simply support claims to ancestral domains.

However, we must understand that the charan was not an 'objective' historian, but seer, guardian of legend and preserver of tradition. As a seer, a charan was not a conscious manipulator of 'truth' or 'historical reality', but a preserver of the truth and reality of what he saw. Although the charan literary sources present many chronological and contextual problems, nonetheless they do contain a significant body of 'objective' data for reasonably accurate historical reconstruction. The writings of the charans provide insights into a range of important questions regarding caste interactions and ranking, the nature of local legitimacy and authority, the changing structure of political loyalties over time and so on. There is also a vast scope for studying charans as a community especially in the context of their socio-cultural and individual lives. By tapping into the variety of other sources like textual, literary, official, folk, and oral traditions many new facets of their lives as individuals, may come to light. Moving a way from a more Rajput-centric approach to keeping charans at the centre of discussion offers fresh insights into their social history, which will also enrich our understanding of the region and its socio-political formation.

Challenging Success Narratives

Nadia Kalman

In Anglophone news stories, South Korea often appears as a nation of strivers. A 2018 BBC article titled 'Suneung: The Day Silence Falls over South Korea' interviews students aspiring to reach the "the dizzy heights of a Sky institution" (*Sky* being the collective name for South Korea's top three universities) via an 8-hour college entrance examination known as "the infamous Suneung." On exam day, the entire country shuts down and parents of test-takers fervently pray for their success in local temples.

Thoughts of these tropes were with me as my organization, Words Without Borders, began putting together a free, online collection of contemporary South Korean literature, published alongside contextualizing resources and teaching suggestions, for use in classrooms.This project, supported by the Literary Translation Institute of Korea, drew upon writings previously published in translation in the literary magazine *Words Without Borders*, selected by editors with subjective tastes. So, it did not constitute a representative or comprehensive sample.

But even so, I was struck by what seemed to me like almost like a counter-narrative to more familiar stories of striving after academic and career success: a mood of quiet sadness, of lost-ness, with contemplative stories of young adults questioning familiar paths and falling back from ambitious plans.

Jeon Sam-hye's melancholy science fiction story "Genesis", translated by Anton Sur, takes place in an imagined future. The Genesis Corporation has pioneered the "Moonwriter" machine, allowing companies to place advertisements that are visible from Earth on the Moon's surface. With the ensuing profits, Genesis has also sponsored an elite aeronautics academy, where the top students learn how to avert the earth's collision with meteors that have begun raining down in large numbers, for unknown reasons, ever since the Moonwriter was built. It is there that the story's young narrator, Lia Yu, met her beloved friend Saeun Choi, for whom she also has romantic feelings.

But now, the friends are apart. After a fight in which she defended Saeun's honour, Lia Yu was sent to repair the Moonwriter. It was then that a meteor hit the earth, presumably killing most of its population. Lia Yu uses her diminishing supply of oxygen to make a final recording, a love letter of sorts, commemorating her friend:

The school's greatest hope, the star who passed the Space Weather Controller Level 3 exam in three years while it took others at least five. And you climbed up the ladder to Manager of Space Weather Control Division A.

Saeun's achievements are the kind often

celebrated in success narratives; however, they did not bring her happiness; instead, she cried bitterly at night,heartbroken by a romantic rejection from a supervisor. What she most wanted, what she fought for, was the happiness of the person she loved.

Many readers in South Korea identified deeply with Lia Yu.In a conversation with translator Anton Sur, Jeon Sam-hye commented that the lines below are often quoted on social media:

Here, where everyone obsessed over their work because they were lonely... The word on my mind. That word was you.

"Genesis" seems to implicitly raise such existential questions as: How long can we put aside our human needs for love in service of ambition? What is the point of gaining admission to an elite school when the world might imminently end? When all has been lost, does anything remain?To the final question, the story suggests that the answer might be love. And the title puts forward a thread of hope: that perhaps the downfall of everything we once held dear will also signal a new beginning.

Ae-ran Kim's story "Ascending Scales translated by Jamie Chang, poses similar questions,but in a more workaday milieu: amidst a working-class family that runs a noodle shop. Like "Genesis," the story is narrated by a young woman. It begins shortly after her mother's somewhat mysterious decision to enroll her in piano lessons:

Mom hadn't had much schooling herself, so she was never sure when it came to making decisions regarding her daughters' education. She was probably following what was considered the norm. You know, the things everyone thought you had to do by a certain age . . .

Her mother wants to do what is right by her daughter,to help her meet the proper benchmarks, but the only available guidance comes from "what was considered the norm:" vague ideas about what other people are doing.

The daughter does not become any kind of piano prodigy, and the lessons seem unlikely to help her advance in life. They do, however, offer less tangible rewards:

I liked the notes quickening beneath my fingertips and the melancholy I felt from the waves rising and falling inside me. The odd thing is that despite my fondness for the piano, I never felt the need to play it well.

As the narrator grows older, she begins to notice a mismatch between her parents'high hopes for their children and their uncertainty about how to achieve those hopes.If the parents don't know exactly *how* to help their children succeed, then the children seem not to know *why*. The narrator hears disjointed information, unconnected to her interests, beyond her present scope of experience, and often outside of her control. She cannot productively use this information; she can only mimic what a person might do if it were actually "vital."

The story's title, "Ascending Scales," begins to take on additional meanings. On a literal level, of course, it refers to the narrator's piano lessons, which involve endless, mostly solitary, practice on the scales. But the scales she practices also echo the family's attempt to rise in society, and the word "ascending" invites the reader to imagine its opposite: will a descent also resound?

Indeed, the family falls into bankruptcy just as the narrator is accepted into a college near Seoul. Her father co-signed on loans for friends' businesses that seemed like sure-fire successes, but instead failed.There is no clear villain to blame for this financial failure, and certainly no ascendant champion—only a series of murky losses.

In a different story, perhaps, the narrator would rise even as her family fell, escaped their fate and run headlong into university life. But this narrator is too closely tied to her family for that kind of independence—or callousness.

The narrator and others like her guess at possible outcomes, grasp at available opportunities, do their best in a system not set up to help them choose wisely. As the story ends, the narrator is

living with her sister (and her piano) in a basement apartment. Neither sister is currently in school, and the narrator is considering giving her saved-up college tuition to her family to use for necessities.

One night, the apartment floods. The narrator calls her sister and tries to mop away the water, but it continues to rise, and there is nothing she can do. What, then, to do? She plays the soon-to-be ruined piano for an audience composed solely of her sister's drunk ex-boyfriend—and herself. Even when all is gone and creation seems to be pointless, we can continue to create. Beautiful music is both fleeting and indestructible; art carries its own intrinsic value.

The final piece, a personal essay entitled "A Meal of Solitude for a Restless Heart"begins with a visit from author Jeon Sungtae to a former teacher, "the one who first planted the dream of becoming a writer in the mind of this country boy who grew up without enough good books to read." Jeon Sungtae remembers the teacher as being "serene," but the teacher's own memories are different:

She told me how lost she'd felt all through her twenties. Of course, some afflictions of the heart are rooted in historical wounds. Before volunteering on Sorok Island and becoming a schoolteacher, she'd been a college student in Gwangju—right when the Gwangju Massacre took place. As she told me about her experiences, I recalled the way she used to stand sometimes with her back turned to us, as if we'd best not approach her.

To provide some background on these references, the Gwangju Massacre is an infamous event in recent Korean history, during which troops ordered by military dictator Chun Doo-Hwan brutally suppressed pro-democracy protests in the city of Gwangju in 1980. Sorok Island is a leper colony and was mostly closed off to the outside world until recently.

One day, while out wandering "to try to ease her weary, gloomy heart," the teacher came across a temple. It made her feel better to visit, and she often did, encountering a young, silent nun who "seemed as deeply withdrawn as she was."

Commenting on this story, the teacher says, "Strange, isn't it? To cry so hard without any idea of what the other person has been through." The women seem to have formed an understanding deeper than words, un-tethered to the particular experiences that made them weep. The silence between them invites healing.

Jeon Sungtae, her former student,has his own connection with the Buddhist temple, where he stayed while "feeling lost as a teenager and suffocating under the pressure" of preparing for college entrance exams. Waking at dawn, chopping his own firewood, eating bland food in silence: at first, this routine held limited appeal. But gradually, Jeon Sungtae began to appreciate this unaccustomed way of life, particularly the silent meals.

The temple gives both student and teacher the space, solitude, and safety to look into their own souls, to consider what is most important, and to prepare to move into the future. In Jeon Sungtae's

beautiful phrase, translated by Sora Kim-Russell, the temple offers, “respite for our restless, troubled hearts.”

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For times of fear and grief, when plans have been upended and friends have been lost, these three stories point the way to new paths, suggesting that through love, through beauty, through solitude, we may yet find a kind of renewal.The stories were all published before the global Covid-19 pandemic, but they embody the kinds of existential concerns that arose for all people—and perhaps especially young people—as the pandemic stole lives, closed schools, isolated us all from each other.

Perhaps this is in part because even before the pandemic, many young Koreans had reason to question the feasibility and meaning of success as traditionally defined. The same BBC article quoted describes the isolation Korean students often experienced in schools, where they often were expected to compete against their peers, as well as a discouraged lack of connection between striving and success. An ambitious young student named Eun-suh tells the reporter: “If you want to be recognised, if you want to reach your dreams, you need to go to one of these three universities,” meaning the Sky schools, but only 2% of applicants are admitted.

Additionally, although university used to provide an upward path to working-class students in South Korea, this has become rarer in recent years, with the rise of an educational “arms race” between families paying thousands per month for private tuition on the entrance exam (something that would be far beyond the capacity of the family in “Ascending Scales.”)

And unemployment rates are such that “even if you graduate from one of the prestigious colleges, it’s getting more and more difficult to get a job,” as a professor quoted in the BBC put it. (Author Ae-ran Kim is sometimes referred to as a member of the “880 Thousand-Won Generation,” a term referring to the low salaries young university graduates are often consigned to earning.)

These circumstances might lead some young adults to become all the more driven, scrabbling for whatever scraps of success are available. But others would begin to ask fundamental questions, search for meaning and connection elsewhere.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and the attendant shutdowns, students all over the world may have been doing some of the same kind of questioning of school as a steppingstone to a bright future. How important can “good grades” be to a student who fears daily for the lives of family members, who never sees peers or teachers in person, whose college entrance has been indefinitely postponed?For such a student, school must be meaningful in itself.

Even as they experienced their own dislocation and pain, some educators responded to this need. Teacher Ujwala Samarth, at Mahindra World College in India, watched as the pandemic forced her bilingual students to suddenly return to their home countries. She gave those students an unusual assignment, inviting them to re-use the structure of a Kurdish poem about loneliness (also published on WWB Campus) to describe their current lives and emotions. Samarth comments:

We met this poem with words left out . . . spaces for our own words to fill,” she writes. “I thought that by fitting our words into the shape made by someone else’s loneliness, we would see that we were not, in fact, all that alone.

I will end this essay with a quotation from one of those poems, which could have served as an epigraph to the first story discussed here, “Genesis”:

I speak to
the one who has yet to experience
a star-filled night
I speak to
the one who has power
but has yet to use their hands...

From Tea to Shakespeare: A Reflection on My Japanese Past

Daniel Gallimore

It is a little over thirty years since I first came to Japan. The Japan of the 1980s was a noisier, dirtier, smellier place than the Japan of today, and with the two baby booms of the late 1940s and late 1960s, arguably more competitive. I had just graduated from university in England, and the first few months passed in a haze as I adjusted myself to the heat of a Japanese summer and an autumn that seemed to go on forever. To get around, I bought myself a scooter, and remember the delicious sensation as the heat of the town gave way to the cool of emerald rice fields, and waves of crustaceous insects collided with my helmet. I remember my first Japanese breakfast, that included a raw egg I imbibed direct from the shell and feeling rather pleased when I mastered the art of chopsticks in one go (though I still hold them lower down the spine than most Japanese people). I also recall the exotic post-breakfast smell of miso and soy sauce first thing in the classrooms at the boys' boarding school where I was to teach English for two years. Above all, I remember the beauty of the place, rural Saga Prefecture, with its Kakiemon porcelain that had found its way into English stately homes in the 18th century, its rivers and mountains (big but not too big), the glimpses of an ancient history that seemed at one remove from the ordered chaos of Tokyo through which I had passed on my arrival, and which was then at the triumphalist height of the post-war economic boom.

During those two years in Saga I became cocooned from the outside world in a way that seems incredible now. There was no email or social media, only the NHK news and occasional jaunts with the few local foreign residents, and while friends back in England were starting their professional training, I decided to immerse myself in the culture by learning the Japanese tea ceremony (*cha no yu*).Tea became an obsession for me in Saga, a religion even, as its Buddhist aesthetic seemed so much more interesting than my English Christianity. Most Thursday evenings I would scooter down to a temple in the middle of Saga City, finding my way along darkened corridors to a haven of light at the end, where I would sit in traditional *seiza* style for the two hours, kneeling with my legs folded under my thighs. The discomfort of this posture, which frequently led to complete numbness, was somehow compensated by the lesson itself, since every detail had to be mastered with absolute precision, and the master's technique was simply to interrupt me the moment I did anything wrong. The tea master, with the name of Tsukigata, 'shape of moon', also taught Chinese medicine at the local medical school, and exuded Oriental good

health, which conveyed itself to me as I scootered home with two or three bowls of the green stuff inside me.

The tea ceremony is an aesthetically beautiful practice that feeds into other traditional arts, such as *ikebana* flower arrangement, calligraphy, even architecture, but having had a lot of music in my education, what I think appealed to me initially about it was its distinctive rhythms: the measuring of the tea powder with the light-as-a-feather bamboo ladle that was then tapped like the clicking of a woodpecker three times on the side of the bowl. Most pleasing and rhythmic of all was the beating of the powder with hot water into a green froth, the bowl then turned three times towards the guest, one heart speaking to another.

After a year of practice, I was finally able to make a bowl of *usucha* (weak tea), and could progress to making *koicha*, 'bitter tea', more like a paste, or (as one might say) 'the hard stuff'.Perhaps out of gratitude for my efforts – since the serving of tea is always an expression of gratitude – one of the pupils invited a number of us to her husband's temple, boasting a proper old tea room that you entered on all fours through a hole in the wall and was illuminated by candle. The ceremonies were held over three Saturdays in May, June and July. By the third ceremony, I was sweating profusely in my indigo blue kimono, but what I shall never forget, besides the exquisite temple food served before the ceremony, was the sense of completeness. To the north stood Mt Tenzan, which I had climbed the previous autumn, and the city of Saga, seat of the Nabeshima domain, a powerful force in Japan's modernisation in the second half of the 19th century. To the west was volcanic Mt Unzen, to the east the smoking chimneys of industrial Tosu, and to the south the mudflats of the Ariake Sea. Around us was fertile rice paddy, reclaimed from the sea over many centuries.

As a parting present, I was given a *mizusashi*, a lidded ceramic pot used for storing cold water prior to boiling in the kettle. Every utensil, indeed every detail of the tea ceremony, is designed to appeal to the senses, and historically some utensils (especially the bowls) have been valuable art pieces.I became very attached to my *mizusashi*, which was decorated with a watery blue landscape in the Chinese style.I was saddened when it accidentally broke a few years later after I returned to England in 1990 as the necessity of starting a career took over.That was perhaps bad karma for having more or less abandoned my learning of tea.I like to think, however,that my Japanese tea 'heart' has been reborn in my interest in English poetry. Shakespeare's sonnets in particular, which were published only eighteen years after the death of Sen no Rikyu, the greatest of the tea masters,in 1591 offer one parallel to the Way of Tea as highly wrought, albeit more anxious and argumentative, expressions of human emotion.

As I recall this happy time in my life, I feel a

It is worth remembering that the very last tea ceremony that Rikyu performed was after he had been ordered by the warlord ToyotomiHideyoshi to commit suicide by ritual disembowelment. There is a place for individuality in the Way of Tea, but that comes only after years of practiceonce the technique and philosophy have been fully absorbed.

certain melancholy at the passing of the years that may have been as Rikyu intended, since his aesthetic urges acceptance of the transient and imperfect in life. I sometimes regret not having stuck with this hobby that might have made me a stronger, healthier person, but I also seek connections with what I do now, which is to teach English literature in Japanese universities and research Japanese translations of Shakespeare.

There seem to me two points of contact. First of all, as its English name indicates, the tea ceremony is a performative practice in which pupils learn to suppress their individual quirks and concerns of the moment for the sake of putting guests at their ease and offering them a decent bowl of tea. It is worth remembering that the very last tea ceremony that Rikyu performed was after he had been ordered by the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi to commit suicide by ritual disembowelment. There is a place for individuality in the Way of Tea, but that comes only after years of practice once the technique and philosophy have been fully absorbed. The teaching of literature encompasses a far wider of variety of texts than the repetitive procedures of the tea ceremony, but I hope that I treat every lesson I teach as an act of 'giving', a performance. I am embarrassed when things go wrong, and aware that it can take many years fully to appreciate what literature is and what it does for people.I have never been an actor but have seen a lot of Japanese Shakespeare productions over the last twenty-five years, and especially in the work of the late director Ninagawa Yukio,have witnessed a conscious theatricality and perfectionism that I remember from my tea days.

Secondly, and this is a more subtle point, Rikyu's aesthetic of imperfection (called *wabi-sabi*)that famously took greater pleasure in a misshapen tea bowl or a single morning glory in a vase than more symmetrical or lavish alternatives, seems to me broadly comparable to Shakespeare's love of variation and sympathy for the gamut of human experience. This point was not lost onTsubouchi Shoyo, the pioneer of Shakespeare translation in Japanese in the early 20th century(in whom I am interested), and who cited Shakespeare in his argument against Romantic idealism. He was influenced by the aesthetic of *mono no aware*, literally 'the pathos of things', expounded by the Neo-Confucianist scholar Motoori Norinaga in the 18th century. Of course, the Shakespearean stage is a bigger space – physically and metaphorically – than a tea room (typically no more than 8.2 square metres), but both Shakespeare and *cha no yu*, the one promoting freedom and the other discipline and restraint,owe much of their success to their embrace of diversity, which is also the diversity of their guests and audiences. Such connections are important to me as I reflect on my past, and (as it seems to me) in the present climate of rising distrust between East and West. ● ●

Two Poems

Mohammad Nurul Huda

Another Devotee

In this eternal abode of deities
it is but you who have kept burning
a piece of fragile fire,
now I spread it around my green heart.

Once all the veins and arteries of my heart
shall burn into ashes,
my nerves having no name or class; and I
shall rise with the vainglory of a rebirth
in the brightness of your age-old circle.

Holy fire flows instead of blood in my heart,
magnetism of lighting grows in my veins,
and one who is worthy of being worshipped
by me is but a second god.

The first illumination at the threshold of the
twentyfirst century
is indeed a noble Messiah sent by you.
I am at the back
and call of his great competitor,
I am an envelope
carrying the message of a fiery civilization
full of beauty and horror,

O earth, my mother darling,
you are of no value to me,
not worth a useless farthing. ● ●

Swimming in Waikiki

Goes on burning a flame of silver
cloudlike a girl, who is white
'I am the lighthouse'– her eyes declare
two eyes two islands in foam's quiet.

No boat no raft no nimble ship
what use swimming in foreign water
know not what harvest you'll reap
nowhere the river, safe harbour.

Cloudlike the girl stands on shore
as though a mast, erect and high
white waves in limbs, no clothes she wore
race her horses as you get by.

Weeps the cloud and waves move him far
her tears caress the brown swimmer. ● ●

Translated by the poet

Five Poems

Subodh Sarkar

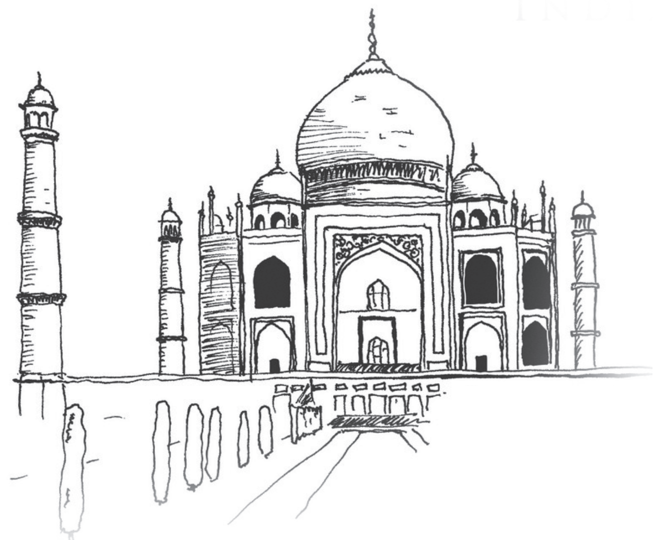
Bluff

I was awed by the wonder of the Taj Mahal.
But Taj Mahal couldn't impress me
Because that building is standing on false logic.

Standing between the moonlit Yamuna
and one citadel of lies,
I realised:
Sahajahan had seven wives
Mumtaz was the fourth.
Sahajahan had killed Mumtaz's husband
Then married her.
Mumtaz died while giving birth to their
fourteenth child
Then Sahajahan married Mumataz's sister.

Standing in front of the Taj Mahal
We never reflect over
Sahajahan's poor bio data
Even a murderer can be mad after love.

I do not believe that
Sahajahan built the Taj Mahal
Out of sheer love for Mumataz.
Sahajahan actually loved himself
He left a bluff on the site of the Taj
in this mortal world. ●●



Tista

Tista Sen, a frog has entered into your head
Tista Ghosh, you have become a lizard
Tista Roy, you have tied
Three men with the bed
And you have given them
leaf of jack fruit to eat.

Tista Guha, your heath was good earlier
Now you need phenyl.

Our Tista alters her surname
three times in one year
Actually, whenever she moves with a man
Naughty city dwellers change her surname
Tista, are you standing near the edge?
Only standing don't suffice,
you need solid base

Mati Guha, Mati Sen,
Mati Roy, Mati Ghosh
Your are even more mati than that
You are soil yourself
But a frog has entered into your head,
Outside a lizard wants to love the frog. ● ●

Note: Mati: soil

Can I Take Your Wife as Loan?

(for Graham Greene)

I swear, I will do nothing
Will not grab anything
Will not pull anything
Only for day
Can I take your wife as loan?

I swear
I'll not take her to Diamond harbour
My previous lover goes there
If she can locate me there
I'll lose my job, my smile
My monsoon will pass away.

I swear, I will not do anything
I'll not disclose to your wife
How bad you are as a husband
You walk in an odd manner,
your uncultured handling of fork
You speak poor English
Where you had been last afternoon
Promise, I'll not disclose them to your wife.

I'll not make her read
The dairy of Che Guevara
I'll not purchase bangle and handkerchief
for your wife
There is no use buying bangles.
Faith doesn't dwell in those iron bangles.

I swear, I've eaten your salt
I'll not love your wife even though I may die
For a day only
One day only, ho ho!
And ha ha!
I want her as loan, pure loan
Your wife. ● ●

Almost Kissing My Ear

Just three inches from my ear
A bullet whizzed
Last spring.

Nature wild with Palash and constellations
Today I turn around and see –
That was not a bullet
What whizzed three inches from my ear
Was your love. ● ●

Note: *Palash is a crimson red flower that blooms in spring in Bengal*

Ant Eggs

To remove poverty
from this tiny planet called earth
We have taken all measures.
I heard it thirty years ago,
what a sweet remark.
I was overjoyed
and couldn't express my happiness in words.

Today, Jim Young Kim,
the president of the World Bank, says
Chi fi nu fu nim oung fu
It means we have been removing poverty
from the earth.

I couldn't resist
I went to earth on a tour
I was surprised in India
Yadullah Kalamgulam Brahma has the key
this fascinating country is the home to
One third of the poor of the world.

I broke into a smile, one Indian
Who has the face of an ass,
colour of a chameleon and leg of a lizard?
Asked me, why are you laughing?
I replied
Even you would have smiled like me
if you had ant eggs.
We are going to launch
ant-eggs as a new food brand
In America soon. ● ●

Translated from Bangla by
Jaydeep Sarangi

My Dear One Has Gone to Rangoon

Abasar Beuria

I went to Burma in 1968. My journey began on a misty morning at the Calcutta airport, from where I took a flight to Burma. The aircraft I flew in was a Dakota. Dakotas came to be used less frequently after the end of World War II. However, Indian Airlines continued flying Dakotas for a few years. If I remember rightly, apart from me there were only three passengers in the flight, who included two Buddhist monks and a Marwari businessman, whose family used to run a business in Burma. I came to know that, on account of visa restrictions it was now difficult for foreigners to travel to Burma.

The landscape of Burma glimpsed through the window of the aeroplane appeared no different from that of India. River Irrawaddy flowed along a winding course towards the sea. From time to time, came into view patches of dense forest, small villages, green expanses, white pagodas, thatched houses, rice fields and waves breaking on the beach, coconut palms and lonely deserted stretches of land. Given the size of the country, its population is small. During the flight to Rangoon we spotted no industries. However, as the plane approached Rangoon, I saw smoke rising from the chimneys of a few factories.

When we landed at Rangoon airport, we noticed that it was different from other international airports. One saw very few people around the place and it seemed few civil aircrafts flew to this airport. The immigration and customs counters stood empty. I was received by an official of the Indian Embassy and was taken to Orient Hotel in the city. It was a holiday and the roads were crowded. Peoples' faces wore a smile in spite of all the discomforts they endured and the young women had rubbed their faces with 'tanaka' (a paste made from the roots of a tree like the sandalwood tree). After I ordered a cup of tea, a gentleman came in bringing two cups of tea. That gentleman told me that I should exercise great caution while expressing my opinions on anything as the very efficient and resourceful Burmese intelligence agency kept a close watch on diplomats. The military rulers had placed all the business organizations, large and small, factories, cinema halls and even grocery shops under the control of the government as part of their nationalization policy. It had resulted in an acute shortage of essential goods. The ordinary people had to buy these from the black market.

Happy to know that I had arrived in Burma, a few Odias who lived there called upon me the following day. They included, someone who worked as a driver, an employee in a medicine shop, a clerk at the Embassy, a plumber and the agent of a

businessman who had gone back to India. The family of Beheras from Odisha had established themselves as public health entrepreneurs in Burma. A member of this family, Shri. Bramhananda Behera is alive and lives in Cuttack. Most of the houses in a certain street in Rangoon were owned by this family. After the policy of nationalization was implemented, circumstances compelled the family to flee Burma leaving all their property behind in the 1960s.

The Odias who had come to see me, never imagined that an Odia would ever come to Burma as a diplomat and would be responsible for taking welfare measures targeting Indians who had settled there. Immediately, a small plan of action was drawn up: Gurubaria will teach me driving, Krushnachari will give me lessons in Burmese, Prushti will organize a reception in my honour and the Odia employee at the medicine shop will bring me medicines. Brundaban offered to supervise the household chores. I was overwhelmed by such generosity.

The first week flew by. After I had dinner at Krushnachari's residence, a musical programme was organized, where champus, Odissi songs, etc., which few sing these days, were sung. On the day the car festival, I paid a visit to the Jagannath temple at Rangoon. The images of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were worshipped here. It was an entirely new experience which filled me with immense delight. The local people were pulling the chariot; a majority of them included Burmese women, men and children. The chariot was pulled in harmony with the rhythmic beat of gongs. As the number of Odias living in Burma had decreased, festivals of the temple were now held with the support and patronage of local people. Seated on the chariot, a saffron-clad Buddhist monk surrounded by a few devotees gave directions to the crowd. When I enquired about the Buddhist monk, Krishnachari replied that he was U.Ho.Di, an Odia. (In Burma, the prefix U is added to the names of all men like 'Shri' in Indian names). Achari said, smiling, that he would explain the mystery surrounding U later and that we would visit his house in a day or two. While the chariot was being pulled,

U.Ho.Di got down and Achari introduced me to him. Achari and the monk talked to each other in Burmese for a while. After this, the latter flamboyantly blessed me.

One day, I paid a visit to U.Ho.Di's house at the appointed hour. He lived in Rangoon in a house surrounded by beautiful flowering plants and fruit-bearing trees. The house comprised two or three small rooms and gave the appearance of a hermitage. He had a young companion, who looked like someone from Bihar. While speaking, he used a few Hindi and Odia words. It was clear that the monk regarded him as his chief disciple. I had already learnt from a few Odias in Burma that the real name of U.Ho.Di was Haribandhu. He hailed from Ganjam in Odisha. He had spent long years in Saan and other regions of Burma. Tireless perseverance and the blessings of a famous guru had enabled him to acquire mastery over tantra and achieve considerable fame in Rangoon. Among his disciples were highly placed officers in the army and the government. Haribandhu, aka U.Ho.Di, visited their houses and offered blessings to them. At times, he also gave them charms and talismans. These were supposed to help the recipients succeed in matters relating to love, securing promotions in jobs and the welfare of their children. I was told that he possessed a special kind of perfume. If one spreads it on one's body, other people would come under his/her spell.

At U.HO.Di's house I saw large photographs featuring him in the company of powerful army and government officers. I saw a few books, notebooks, pencils, pens, slates and pieces of chalk, four or five chairs, one arm chair, a length of animal skin, a statue of the Buddha and a basket of fruits and a glass almirah carrying a few Burmese handicraft items. He warmly welcomed me with a smile and started talking to me in Odia. In the course of our conversation, he dwelt upon the pitiable plight of Odia language in Burma and the problems faced by Indians. He lost no opportunity to remind me of his close connection with the army and his clout. He assured me that he would certainly come to my rescue if I faced any problems during my stay in Burma. He told me that the arrival of an Odia diplomat like me was a matter of great pride for Odias and Indians.

At the end of the journey by train, I travelled by car to lake Inle. It was a serene body of tranquil water spreading along the foot of a mountain. Small wooden huts and mango, palm and coconut trees on its shore enhanced its loveliness. Birds of many colours flew across the sky above and one glimpsed floating gardens and villages on the lake.

At the same time he advised me against trusting people completely. I promised to stay in touch with him and expressed confidence that with his blessings I can complete my tenure without trouble. Krishnachari and others requested him to give me a talisman which would shield me from all sorts of danger. Afterwards, we met a number of times and he visited my residence on several occasions. However, I never received any talisman or enchanted perfumes from U.Ho.Di and if ever the matter of obtaining these from him arose, he evaded it. Once, when I pressed him hard, he told me that these things are to be avoided. He explained that, as these were associated with ghosts, they eventually brought bad

luck to those who wore them. While saying this, he did not forget to add that his blessings led to a military officer getting promoted and a minister being taken back into the cabinet after being thrown out of it and to someone winning a lottery. He avoided interaction with Odias because he thought they expect too much of him or would reveal his true identity concealed by his saffron robes.

I was on very good terms with U.Ho.Di during my stay in Burma. However, when I left Burma, I noticed that he was beginning to lose his clout. I got the impression that he exaggerated the extent of his influence on the government and the army.

There were restrictions on visiting different parts of Burma. One had to obtain a permission from the government to travel outside the capital city. From the point of view of security, going to many areas of the country was not safe. Since Burma attained independence, several communities such as Karen, San, Kachin, Mun, Arakanni rebelled against the government and wanted to secede from the country. Their rebellion has not completely come to an end yet. It was therefore impossible to visit many parts of the country. However, through my own efforts and taking permission from the authorities in the Embassy, I managed to visit a few such places. While travelling in the southern and eastern regions around the mouth of river Irrawaddy, I met a few Odias. They had been living in Burma for many years. Having married local Burmese women, they had raised families and were leading very comfortable lives. They made a living from farming and spoke Burmese. However, they had not completely forgotten their mother tongue, Odia. Talking to them, I learnt that they did regret living away from their motherland but they had no intention of returning to their land of origin. They led the life of ordinary farmers. It was difficult on my part to find out whether meeting me made them feel sad or happy.

The picturesque lake, Inle is located in the Shan province. This famous lake lies 900 metres above the sea level and is 22 kilometres long and 10 kilometres in width. Some people in Burma had told me that Inle is more beautiful than the Italian city of Venice. It is unique and it possesses matchless beauty. I took leave from office and headed to Inle, taking a night train. Although I was travelling first-class, people constantly kept coming in and talked loudly, smoking cheroot. From time to time they ate rice and napi (a dish made from rotten fish) which they had brought with them. This made it impossible for passengers to sleep. The air was heavy with the smell of cheroot smoke mingling with the stench of napi.

At the end of the journey by train, I travelled by car to lake Inle. It was a serene body of tranquil water spreading along the foot of a mountain. Small wooden huts and mango, palm and coconut trees on its shore enhanced its loveliness. Birds of many colours flew across the sky above and one glimpsed floating gardens and villages on the lake. Fishermen stood on boats nets and fishing gear in hand. They propelled their boats using their legs as oars, an unusual practice one comes across in this part of Burma. The floating islands in the lake are formed when a beds of water hyacinths grow hard and become arable. On these people grow vegetables and build houses. These islands are divided into plots, which are bought and sold.

While we were taking a boat ride across the lake, a boatman came and tried to sell silk lungis and sarees to us. Lungis made in Inle are famous in Burma. Their design and quality are unrivalled. When the boatman came to know that I was an Indian, he persuaded me to purchase a saree. When I held the saree and took a good look at it, I was surprised to see the similarity of its design to that of sarees made in Sambalpur in Odisha. I bought a couple of these as souvenirs. It is amazing how our techniques of weaving in Odisha found their way into this inaccessible area and were assimilated into its tradition. ●●

Translated by ***Aditya Nayak***

In Search of the Promised Land

Yitzhak Thangjom
An interview with **Lev Aran**

Itamar Ben Avi is considered the "first Hebrew child " in Israeli culture because he is the first child to be raised speaking modern Hebrew. Legend has it that you are the first Jewish boy in northeast India, is that true?

Ans: While I couldn't possibly say I was the very first but I can certainly say I was amongst the first generation that grew up with Judaism in the peripheral region of northeastern India. Judaism had just been 'discovered'. It was in the early 70s that we came to realize that there were Jews, who, like us, lived by the words of the *Bible* and followed it. My father and mother had heard about it by 1975. As soon as that happened, my mother, much like Tziporra in the *Bible*, immediately had my father and myself circumcised. It was the 20th century, so it was done at a hospital by a doctor who was a friend of my father. My father had served in the elite federal civil service in the Indian government. The first embryonic Judaic community was established in Churachandpur, a town south of Imphal, the capital of Manipur, where we lived. We often had visitors from there who brought us news of developments. There was a general spiritual thirst in everyone including my parents.

How does a community that does not know the Jewish people, and is on the periphery of the periphery of India, become a Jewish community?

Ans: The Bnei Menashe belongs to larger ethnic group called the Kuki-Chin-Mizo. Although they belong to the same ethnic group, they are separated into three political entities in India, in the two states of Mizoram and Manipur where they are called Mizos and Kukis respectively and in Burma(Mayanmar) where they are called Chins. The area came under the dominion of the growing British Empire more than a hundred years ago in the late 1800s. The missionaries soon followed, they came armed with the *Bible* and education. They had much success and soon the whole area was Christianized with the exception of the Princely state of Manipur, just to the north. Manipur was ruled by a Hindu king who objected to proselytizing by the missionaries. But after a failed insurrection by the Kukis in 1917-19 against the British rule, missionaries came in droves. Education was one very attractive incentive it offered. It offered varied venues for employment. (My grandfather was one such person: he ran away from home to get an education. He was told that he had to become a Christian to access education which he did. He went on to become the first matriculate and graduated to become the first medical doctor from the community and the area. He served the British Indian

government with distinction. For his service during World War II, he received the highest civilian award in British India, the Kaiser-i-Hind.)

As Christianity made inroads and people became more and more educated, the Bible was translated, read, studied and scrutinized. In the community, there was an overwhelming objective to worship the One True God, which still holds true to this day. Then there was a desire, a movement to live as close as possible to the words of the *Bible*. Christianity was, thus, found wanting because it did not stay faithful to the words of the *Bible* (The Old Testament). The community was still ignorant of the existence of the Jewish people. In the mid to late 50s, a man named Challa declared the people as the children of Israel. No doubt he was inspired by the Bible! He had a 'vision' in which he saw a bridge that stretched from a town in Mizoram, Lengpui to Jerusalem. There was such longing for Zion, that he led a group of men on a foot march to reach Israel. However, they were arrested by the police in Silchar- Assam. Another insurrection was in the making: a rebel group, Mizo National Front was seeking Independence from India after being devastated by a famine called 'mautam' and subsequent allegations of inadequate response by the Indian government. In the meantime, as we approached the 1970s, the quest to live faithfully by the words of the *Bible* led to a discovery that there were Jews around the world who, like us, lived by the words of the *Bible*.This led a man, T. Daniel, from Manipur who went to Calcutta and then to Bombay to meet with Baghdadi Jews in 1972 and 1974. He learnt Hebrew and came back to found the first congregation to pray and follow rabbinical Judaism in 1974. Our family joined them the following year, in 1975.

There is controversy as to whether the Bnei Menashe community is really descendants of the lost tribe of Menashe. What is your opinion on the subject? Is there anything in your family tradition that can shed light on this issue?

Ans: Controversies will always be there. What really matters, I believe, is faith. It is the singularly most important thing that really matters. There are people who question the veracity of the *Bible*, do we have to believe what they say?

By the time I was growing up, most of the old tradition had been lost or done away with. The missionaries were very successful. It took only a generation for us to discard it all. However, there were old people with memories, people who had journeyed through the years, lived though the changes that have brought us where we are now. Hillel Halkin, a very old friend and a noted writer, and I, with the help of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, have been executins an Oral History Project on the Bnei Menashe. We have been

collecting testimonies of old folks who have memories of the old ways and the old days. Since 2017, we have collected many testimonies from them.

During these sessions, lasting many hours of conversations, we have made a wealth of discoveries, like the practice of levirate marriage or the system of refuge for a murderer, for example. But then again, they cannot be considered veritable proofs on their own, unless they provide support for the hypothesis. In the end, Hillel and I decided that there were three things that stood out:

1. The figure Manasia/Manmasi: We call ourselves the children of Manasia/Manmasi, who was an eponymous ancestor to whom we call out to in times of mortal danger such as a storm or an earth quake. In the old days, when such things happened, the people called out:

We are well, we are well
The children of Manmasi are well!

According to the *Bible*, Menashe was the son of Joseph and, as stated in the book of Chronicles, the grandfather of Gilead (Hebrew Gil'ad) and the great-grandfather of Ulam. In the old Kuki-Mizo religion there was a chant, traditionally recited by the family of someone who had just died, in which the deceased's illustrious ancestors were called upon to aid the passage of his soul to the afterworld. The list of these ancestors was a long one. Although most of the names on it were typically Tibeto-Burmese, those it began with were Manmasi, Gelet, and Ulam!

This chant is verifiably old and pre-Christian. The odds against the close similarity of its names to the Bible's being coincidental are astronomical. The conclusion that the ancestral figure of Manasia or Manmasi is the same as biblical character of Menashe is all but unavoidable.

2. The Song of Crossing the Big Water: The Hmar, a Kuki-Mizo tribe, had a song, known as "the great hymn," that was traditionally sung on the occasion of a winter festival that ceased to be observed with the advent of Christianity. Part of this song went is given below:

While we prepared for the
famous big winter feast,
I tell O! of the parting of the
lurking big water.
My enemies from the time of Terah, O!

Like clouds in the daytime,
like a fire that goes by night.

O how great and determined
was their cruelty in coming to fight!
All the mortals were
swallowed by the lurking big water
as though devoured by beasts.

All of you, take the birds,
Take the water that gushes out
on the big rock.

What reader of the *Bible* can fail to be struck by the parallels between this song and the *Bible*'s account of the Israelites' crossing the Red Sea?

3. The Day of Abstention from Yeast: Another no longer existent holiday once observed among pre-Christian Kuki tribes in Manipur was called *cholngolninikho*, "the day of abstention from yeast." Though the Kuki-Mizos are not a bread-eating people (the staple food of their diet is rice), they did use yeast routinely for the preparation of a popular rice beer. Once a year, however, on a night of the full moon in springtime, there was a sacred day on which a special bread was prepared from rice flour and eaten at a communal village meal – and it had to be made without yeast! Everyone, young and old, was required to partake of it. The biblical Passover comes immediately to mind.

I am not sure that translating our heritage into Western languages can convince everybody that we are truly the authentic descendants of lost

Menashe tribe, but in the light of these facts that I have presented, I will leave it to you and readers to decide for yourself.

You decided to form a new NGO for the community. What led to this decision? What problems do you want to solve?

Ans: Degel Menashe NGO grew out of an Oral History Project, which was generously supported by Ms. Sabra Minkus and the Jewish Federation of New Mexico. Degel Menashe was formed in Nov 2017 with the stated aim of promoting education and culture, preserving its history. It was established with an emphasis on the policy of inclusiveness, which, unfortunately,was woefully lacking, even to this day. We want to prepare the younger generation for the Israeli job market, to integrate them into the Israeli society at large.

Identity forms a very important part of every person and we are no different. I have seen that many of our youngsters are in a hurry to become “Israelis”, and, as a result, lose their way. Degel Menashe wants to implant a sense of pride by imparting elements of history, culture and so on. This will give our younger generation an insight into and an understanding of who they are and thus give them the confidence which, I feel, is a significant ingredient for success in their pursuit of Israel. Currently, we lack competent leadership. We would like focus on providing the community with an effective leadership.

The Israeli labour market is not always accessible to us. You can take my wife Jessica and me as an example. We came to Israel in 2008- my wife, my three year old daughter and I. Jessica’s last job was as a Chief Financial Assistant of Medecins Sans Frontieres’ NGO (Doctors Without Borders) at their headquarters at New Delhi and I had a job as a consultant for Network Services which provided consultancy for various companies in India. We lived in Kiryat Arba (West Bank) for 6 months and could not find any job to fit our qualifications and experiences. We ended up cleaning houses to survive.

In our desperation, we headed to The Galilee where an old friend found me a job at a plastic and paper factory at a minimum salary. Jessica still had not found anything, so she stayed at home to raise our daughter who was just starting to go to kindergarten. We had no friends and it got lonely at times. It was hard to run a household on one income, that too, on a minimum salary. After years, I found a suitable job in near TelAviv and she found one with a Hi-Tech company.

You mention the issue of leadership from within the community, and it reminds me that 20 years ago, the Israeli interior minister decided to stop the Bnei Menashe immigration. He claimed that there was an Indian policy to stop immigration to Israel. And your connections have revealed the true story. Are you ready to tell what actually happened?

Ans: Mr. Poraz halted our immigration in 2000 saying that there were objections from the Indian government. We come from a family with

very good network thanks to my father and several relatives who serve in the Indian government. I was asked by Michael Freund who was then the director of Amishav, a predecessor of Shavei Israel NGO, to help out. I was sitting shiv'a(mourning period in Judaism) for my father who had just passed away. I told him I'd get to work immediately after it. I reached out to my network and was able to get an appointment with the Indian Ambassador, Mr. Ranjan Mathai. When I told him about the problem he was incredulous. He told me that if there had been anything of that sort he'd be one of the first to know. He promised to look into the matter and would go to the Israeli government himself to clear the matter.

After sometime, when the Aliya for the Bnei Menashe had resumed, I knew that Ambassador Matthai had delivered on his promise. The statement that the Indian government had a policy to stop immigration to Israel is categorically false as can be seen in the continuation of our aliya in the last 20 years. To this day, I sometimes wonder why this had happened at all. Was there someone behind it? It is a mystery to me.

How many immigrants from the Bnei Menashe community live in Israel today? In your estimation, how many potential immigrants are still living in India?

Ans: We can estimate that till date about 3,000 have arrived from 1990 to 2021. If we take into account the high birth rate and individuals who came to Israel on their own, it could be anywhere between 4000 to 5000.

Recently, due to the crisis brought about by the Covid19 pandemic, Degel Menashe, along with our partners, reached out to our brethren in India and distributed over 47 tons of relief materials to over 800 families. There are hundreds of other families we have not been able to reach. So, it would be safe to assume that the population will be more than 5,000 souls in India.

We already have some perspective on the absorption of Bnei Menashe. There are members of this small community who have been living in Israel for two decades. As a prominent community leader, do you think Bnei Menashe's absorption is a failure or a success story?

Ans: I won't go as far as to call myself a leader of the community. We, Degel Menashe, are here because there have been gaps and inhibiting factors that have adversely impacted our successful integration and growth as individuals as well as a group. Because of reasons pertaining to the complications facing us for a successful *aliya (immigration)*, most of us are under an imposed obligation to remain that way.

Ironically, it is both a success and a failure at the same time. It is a success because till date there have been no cases of people returning to India. It is a failure because the community has not been integrated well into the society and the workforce. We do not have a leadership.

This is the raison d'être for Degel Menashe's existence. We have only began our leadership work only a year ago. We hope to make a difference. It's time we took these matters into our own hands. ●●

A Prescient Critique of Colonial Education

John Creyke

Gopabandhu Das's proposed solution to the problem of "those who, for whatever difficulty, have dropped out of school", does not lack relevance at the present time when school and university careers have been disrupted for so many students by the effects of the Covid pandemic. He identifies as a prime cause of deficient education the bureaucracy which "make[s] no effort to take time, place and person into account… "in spite of the best intentions of the government", and neglects the very people who need to be impressed with the importance of education for themselves or their children.

A compulsory programme of physical exercises, he points out, is hardly a panacea for poor students who are already required either to integrate long hours of study into their village life, or worse, to adjust to an "unnatural" life in an urban boarding establishment - in either case they are likely to be suffering from mental stress and from irregular or inadequate meals, not from lack of physical effort. Nor is it necessarily an advantage for students to be accommodated in term-time in a "pukka house", with the benefits of electric light and pristine fittings and furniture, if this makes them discontented with the humbler existence of their families, and leads them to associate their educational, and later professional, careers with the acquisition and maintenance of a privileged "Western" lifestyle.

In 1915, Gopabandhu had expressed "immense happiness" at the many local initiatives in which, people educated both in the vernacular and in English were campaigning to establish free schools, for those whose opportunities to learn would otherwise be limited by poverty or by caste and sectarian issues. He predicts soon after, however, that at the then current rate of school enrolment, "if the population of India remains constant, 150 years will pass before everyone in the country will have received primary education". On the question of language, he argues that "people belonging to different races, castes, creeds" who "live in one place", due usually to circumstances beyond their control, will remain disparate, if not mutually hostile, if they do not speak a common language. Modern communications and interactions with "people in different provinces" tend only to emphasize difference - "new forms of self-interest and narrow identities are being created" - if there is not a shared "thought and culture" which Gopabandhu insists is language-based. Taking the United States of America as a template for "national unity" fostered by what he perceives as the universal adoption there of English as the primary means of communication, he presses not - as one might

perhaps have expected from his emphasis on the need of all India for a "national identity" - for the adoption of one language (English, Hindi or Urdu) for the whole of India, but rather for linguistic unity within each individual province, where the (presumably local) language will embody that province's "culture, literature and history".

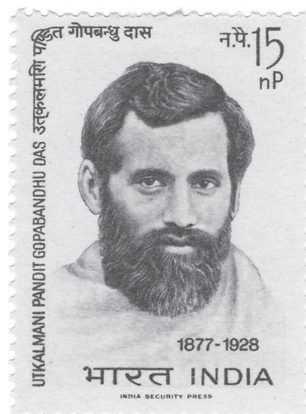
The often-maligned Princely States are seen in 1916 as having great potential for good, in that the combination of an enlightened King or Diwan with the ingrained "sense of loyalty" of the local population may permit the implementation of educational reforms which in the rest of India would be choked by colonial bureaucracy and conflicting political agendas. This is consistent with the view expressed in a later article that early monarchs, seeing "no glory in ruling over...beasts", sought to "raise their subjects above the level of beasts and enable them to express their humanity" and that throughout history, even though an underclass will inevitably have to struggle to claim its rights from a ruling elite, this struggle will be conducted with humanity, restraint, moderation and ultimately, success, if the underclass has been able to acquire education. Perhaps Gopabandhu underestimates the capacity even of intellectuals to act with cruelty and fanaticism, as well as overestimating the essential benevolence of the privileged within human society, but his approach has clear relevance to the developing concept in his time of an educated India as both deserving and capable of national self-determination after a period of colonial "apprenticeship". "The human heart is always eager to move from darkness towards light and from untruth towards truth," Gopabandhu declares, with a boldly optimistic juxtaposition of the educational interventions of Christian missionaries with the innate wisdom of India's Aryan forefathers persisting in their "path of virtue" - some might see a conflict between these two, but he decries only the obscurantist type of religious faith which sees the Tree of Knowledge as a dangerous thing.

A 1918 article on 'Women's Education' enlarges on the themes both of the pressing need to convince traditionalist parents of the value of education, and of the invalidity of the perceived religious or moral arguments against mental development and independence. Even "rich people in villages" see no value in their sons learning anything beyond basic arithmetic (and, presumably, the manual skills needed for certain crafts), the prejudice against educating their daughters being even stronger. Gopabandhu emphasizes that the objections raised to educating women and expanding their role in public life are actually not an affirmation but a negation of "the wise counsel of scriptures", since closer scrutiny proves that purdah, marriage and dowry conventions, and gender discrimination in school and workplace, are dictated by mercenary considerations (why let our daughters take their skills and earnings into some other family?) and not by ideology. The "renowned

In 1919 Gopabandhu sees the scholastic and official use of the Odia language as being under threat, less from British administrators (who in some cases have learnt the language and are clear-sighted about the "evil intentions" of certain Indian educators and functionaries) than from "fanatic subordinates" pushing agendas of their own.

Pundits of Puri...who respect our ancient tradition[s] deeply, extend their unstinted support to women's education", acknowledging that true "purity" comes through "broadening one's mind", not through ignorance and restraint.

Gopabandhu, a modernist in many respects, is nevertheless an advocate of the Sanskrit Colleges in Bihar and Odisha as standing in a tradition of "all-round education" which was provided by Indian religious institutions - long before the arrival of an Anglicized schools system which has actually lost touch with its own Greek and Latin roots and is much less suited to the "religious, social and familial life in the country". One may recall here the Victorian English advocacy, by Ruskin, Newman or Matthew Arnold, of medieval Christianity and its monasteries, in the face of Protestant and secular criticisms. Similarly, a balanced and enriching education comes, not through treating learning as the arcane process which leads to a "government job" and a "superior" lifestyle but by improved conditions which will embed the learning process in "one's mother tongue" and enable Indians to honour and celebrate their regional languages as the vehicles of intellectual development.



In 1919 Gopabandhu sees the scholastic and official use of the Odia language as being under threat, less from British administrators (who in some cases have learnt the language and are clear-sighted about the "evil intentions" of certain Indian educators and functionaries) than from "fanatic subordinates" pushing agendas of their own. It is a "year of famine", and the desire that government should act on its promises to promote university education in Cuttack must, Gopabandhu admits, be tempered by concern for basic financial needs and a sense of shifting priorities when "poor students" have so much to struggle with. Having dissented from the assumption that expensive new buildings and protracted administrative changes will be required, he advocates the prompt elevation of Ravenshaw College to university status as a means of fulfilling educational aspirations without the bureaucratic waste of effort he deplores at any time, but particularly now.

A series of short, mainly factual paragraphs on such topics as 'Education in Rural Areas' reaffirms Gopabandhu's concerns about the possible imposition of the Hindi and Bengali languages on Odia-speakers, and his conviction that there need be no conflict between the encouragement of modern education, for girls and boys, and the showing of due respect for religious traditions and observances such as those of the "Karana families". "In our country, 'peasant' is a term of contempt, but everyone in the world depends on agriculture for their survival" and he applauds the recommendation of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bombay to "enhance the prestige of farming" so that the rich and educated will not consider it beneath them.

'National Education' (1921) gives evidence of a development in Gopabandhu's thinking from his earlier suspicion that urban school and college life might promote discontent and rootlessness in the young, to a positive extolling of rural life, "plodding through muddy fields and ditches" or "spinning yarn with a spinning wheel and weaving clothes", as a corrective to pedantic book-learning and as an encouragement of patriotic and altruistic emotions. In the spirit of Gandhi, the faith which was always placed in Indian, especially rural, traditions, as being quite consistent with reform when viewed in the right way, is now clearly gaining ground over the dwindling hope that reform could come through government initiatives and well-meaning legislators. Gopabandhu is explicit in his support for the Non-Co-operation Movement and

for self-sufficiency in food and cloth production to limit dependence on "foreign countries". He does however express concern that the withdrawal of patriotic youth from "government or government-aided schools" may produce idleness and indiscipline unless "national education" can go hand-in-hand with the protest movement, and can set targets of self-improvement to replace the standards previously imposed by "the existing system". Increasingly radical in his language, he suggests that although education organized by and for rural India may fall short of perfection, its promotion of "energy and vitality" will be its saving grace, and its benefits far more widely diffused than those of any government scheme.

There may be some disillusionment at this point even with the Satyabadi School project, the progress of which between 1912 and 1918 had been hailed as the implementation of "a noble inspiring idea" and (using far more measured language than that just quoted) as a corrective to an educational system which "does not suit the conditions of the people in several particulars" despite "beneficent" intentions. Gopabandhu no longer appears inclined, as when the practical requirements for that school were being assessed, to see "the Remedy" in achieving a balance between "the advantages of a town" and the "quiet, healthy surroundings" where agriculture and family life can be maintained; there may after all be a fundamental conflict between modernity and moral and emotional health, and if so, the rural ideal must be prioritized as it was by Gandhi.

Although Gopabandhu does not appear to be lacking in confidence in his own judgements, he is clearly encouraged to find them echoed by Sir John Woodruff and Captain Pettavel, non-Indian experts addressing, respectively, the Calcutta University Commission and (following an invitation from Tagore) the Utkal Students' Conference. Woodruff agrees that the "Oxbridge" model of a university is not suited to Indian conditions and risks creating a false sense of inferiority of Indian as against Western culture and institutions, and the Captain favours the inclusion of practical, including manual, activities in education over the purely academic. During the period between these two consultations, however, the educational projects supported by Gopabandhu had met with hard times.

He admits in 'The Importance of Vocational Education' that the experiments in combining practical and academic work at Satyabadi School (comparable, it would appear, to the efforts of the Kibbutz movement in Israel at much the same period) had had limited success due to external pressures, chiefly financial; and in 'The Paisa Fund' (1927) he declares himself "heart-broken" by the recent closure of the Phuljhari and Singhbhum community schools, and by the interruptions caused to the working of the National Education Fund for Odisha (previously the Paisa Fund) as a result of his own imprisonment in 1922 for non-co-operation activism and the absence in England of former contacts within the educational system. Undaunted, however, he drafts in 1928 a new programme of study for Satyabadi, which continues to reflect his hopes for a balanced, genuinely national but also inclusive and accessible system of education.

The texts, mainly taken from the *Samaj* newspaper and *Satyabadi* journal, have been edited by Professor Basanta Kumar Panda, a former holder of the Gopabandhu Research Chair at KISS University (Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences), whose conclusion that Gopabandhu merits wider "recognition as an educational thinker" can hardly be doubted on the evidence presented here. The translation by Aditya Nayak is fluent and elegant, whether recording the author's occasional touches of asperity towards opponents or co-workers, his generous recognition of idealism in his own and other cultures, or his firm advocacy of what he conceived to be logical and right in a turbulent period of national debate and reform. ● ●

Fragile Lives

Diksha Chandra

Choo Nam Joo's*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* could be aptly described as a fine piece of feminist work, orbiting around its protagonist, Kim Jiyoung. The novel chronicles her arduous journey through the series of hurdles that she must face and overcome at every juncture of her life in order to attain her goals.The joys and setbacks of her life are set against the backdrop of growing inequalities in the Korean society. The book is divided into five major parts representing crucial junctures of her life, namely, Autumn (2015), Childhood (1982-1994), Adolescence (1995-2000), Early Adulthood (2000-2011) and Marriage (2012-2015).

The protagonist, Kim Jiyoung, is born to a father who is a civil servant and a mother who is a homemaker. She has an elder sister as a sibling and her arrival is later followed by the birth of her younger brother five years later. The disconcerting disparities between treatment of the children in the household can be traced from the very beginning of the childhood. For instance, the reader comes across a scene in which, Jiyoung stealthily eats her younger brother's baby formula. She is reprimanded for this act and the gist of what she could possibly figure from this scornful treatment meted out by her grandmother, Koh Boonsook, is narrated as follows:

How dare you try to take something that belongs to my precious grandson!Her grandson and his things were valuable and to be cherished; she wasn't going to let just anybody touch them, and Jiyoung ranked below this anybody…

The Jiyoung household shows inequality from close quarters—the younger male sibling has his own chopsticks, socks, long underwear, matching school bags and lunch boxes whereas the sisters, Kim Jiyoung and Kim Eunyoungare supposed to make do with whatever is to handed down to them. Accustomed to discrimination right from her childhood, and later to the deeply ingrained sexism in the society, Kim does not quite shrug it off by deeming it a part of being a generous elder sibling.

The preferred sex of child can be gleaned from the statistical data of the nineties, where determining the sex of the child

and abortion of female fetuses was considered a common practice leading to a skewed sex ratio. The story gives a saddening glimpse of Kim's mother 'erasing' the life of her unborn daughter (younger to Kim Jiyoung) owing to immense, crippling pressure of giving birth to a male child.

The section titled 'childhood' enumerates incidents from Jiyoung's life that make her confront ugly realities of society that subjugates women's position at every point— a society that weighs in on the potential of men and keeps the females consistently in check under orthodox tags of dress code, attitude and conduct. The misconduct of boys and men are swiftly brushed off, whereas the slightest show of selfhood and individuality on part of girls is attempted to be contained by an authoritarian school.

The financial crisis of 1997 in Korea finds its way into the story when Jiyoung's family struggles to make ends meet.As the sole breadwinner, her father, loses his job the burden of running the household falls on her mother Oh Misook. In the teeth of grave crisis, Oh Misook shows tremendous resilience and perseverance, and eventually recues her family from the clutches of poverty.

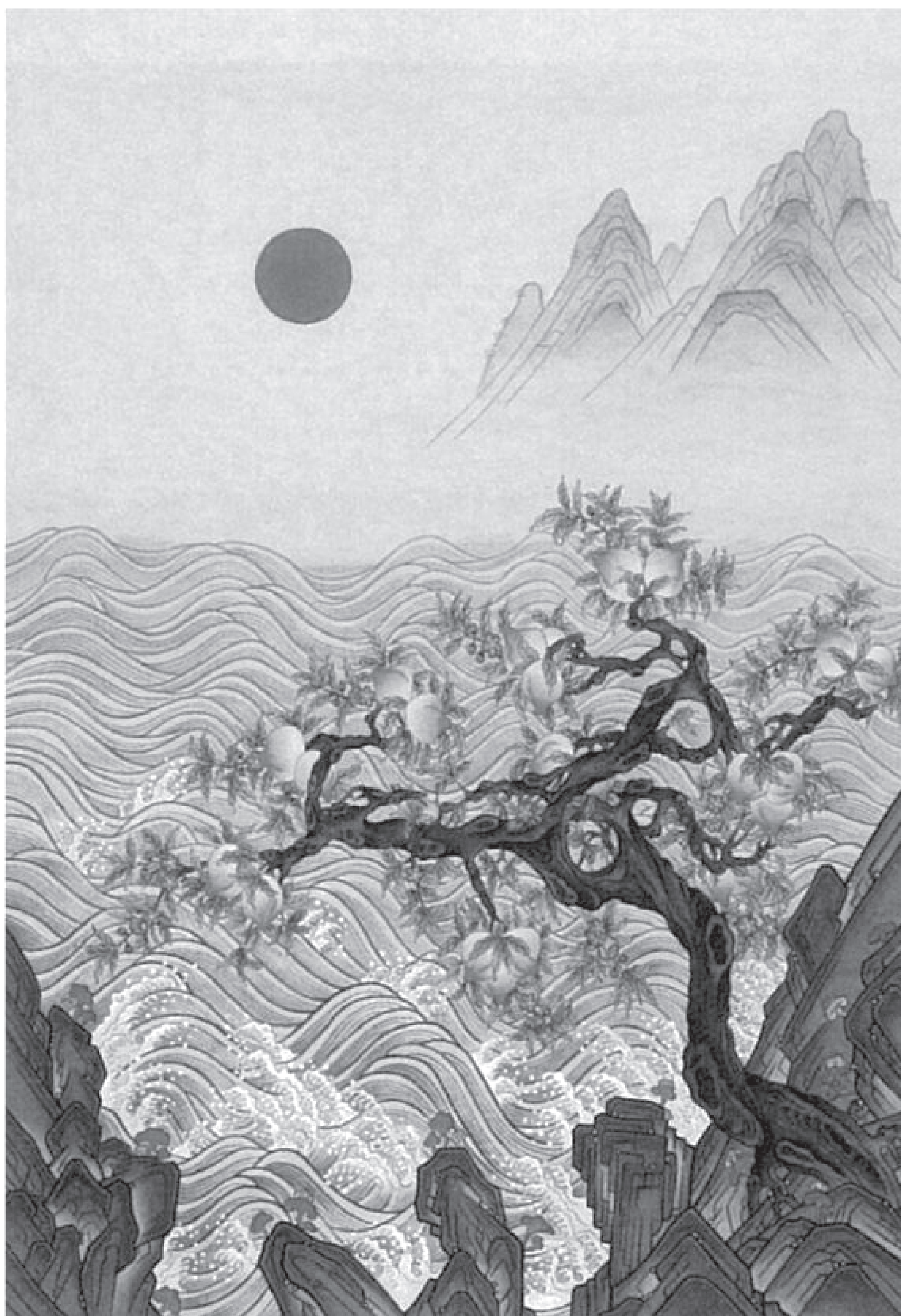
▼ Official poster of the cinematic adaptation of Cho Nam Joo's 'Kim Jiyoung Born 1982' (2019)

The prospects of jobs for the females are determined by security concerns.For instance,Eunyoung is given the suggestion to opt for a teaching position although her passion and inclination are towards journalism.Jiyoung graduates in 2005, goes on a job hunt during which an astounding survey on employment shows that only 29.6% of the newly employed at 100 companies are women. She struggles to make her mark in a male dominated professional sphere—where 44% of respondents in a survey conducted at fifty major companies prefer hiring male to female candidates with equivalent qualifications.

"Smart women are taxing" is a phrase that echoes for while in the story portraying the inability and failure of the workplace to create a conducive professional ambience for intelligent hard-working women.Instead, the 'decorum' dictates that working women be meek, passive, and docile.Inspite of a most-uncongenial workplace, Jiyoungmanages to carve a niche for herself. JiYoung represents the plight of most working Korean women; statistics reveal that Korean females only earn 63% of what their male counterparts manage to do. Not surprisingly, with Korea holds the record of having the highest gender pay gap.Real tragedy strikes when Jiyoung makes up her mind to marry Jung Daehyun.

Owing to continuous persuasion by her husband, Jiyoung quits her job in 2015. The husband sees no reason in his wife slogging every day when he could very gladly be the 'provider' of the family. Soon enough, the coupleplan a family and Jiyoung then becomes a full-time mother. Kim Jiyoung is

swamped with the endless household chores and childcare responsibilities without a moment to rest and a soul to share her woes with. The woes of this pained, exhausted mother running thankless errands round the clock is compounded by the grim statistics that discloses how one in every five married women in Korea quits her job due to household duties, pregnancy, childbirth, childcare and education of the children. The narrative, intertwined with bold facts, portrays the bitter realities of a patriarchal Korean society.The participation of women in workplaces is shown to have drastically diminished over the years— starting from 63.8 percentfor the age groups twenty to twenty-nine, 58 percent for the age groups thirty to thirty-nine. The only ever occasional progress is found in the age group of forty and above, the graph shows a rise from 58 percent to 66.7 percent.



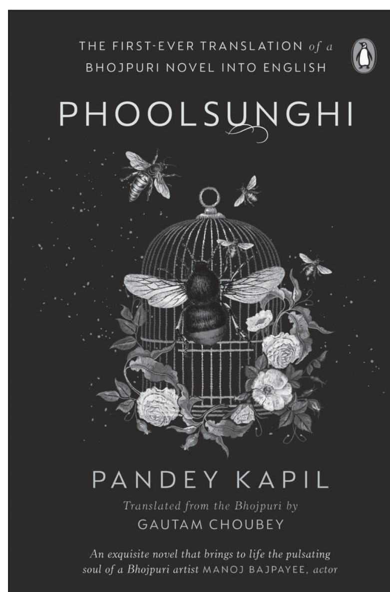
While being labelled with names such as 'mum roach' by office- goers for enjoying a cup of coffee, a Korean woman's life as a mother presents a heartbreaking picture.The plethora of suppressed emotions built up during childcare, postpartum depression,estrangement from a career weigh heavy on the mind of the protagonist.Cho Nam Joo narrates the life of her fictional protagonist while constantly giving us a factual account side by side to present a realistic if bleak picture of the ubiquitous Korean household (circa 1990-2015). The novel stands out as a bold account of a Korean woman's life and asks numerous pressing questions that need to be asked and the answers that the society owes to the countless generations of suppressed women.

A Vivid Glimpse of Bhojpuri Literary Culture

Shaswat Panda

The English translation of Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* (Penguin India; 2020) has brought to its readers two distinct yet intertwined worlds— one unfolds with the plot; the other is the rich but underexplored literary landscape of the Bhojpuri speaking region. The novel is a tempting invitation to the latter. The literary history of Bhojpuri goes all the way back to Kabir but remains sadly eclipsed by its popular forms of entertainment. The publication of this slim but gripping novel could not therefore, have been timelier.

Phoolsunghi (1977) takes its title after the flowerpeckerbird. The protagonist Dhelabai shares the spirit of the freedom-loving bird. But like the bird, she often finds herself trapped and confined. As a courtesan, she is widely known around Chapra for her irresistibly elusive charm and her mellifluous voice. But as the story unfolds, we find out that she can be equally feisty and tenacious in her struggle against a 'militantly patriarchal' society.Dhelabai's captivating personality draws towards her the powerful zamindar Haliwant Sahay, who abducts her in a whimsical move. While the mighty Zamindar uses coercion to make the unrelenting courtesan change her mind, her other suitor, the hapless poet Mahendra Misiroften finds himself in circumstances that are too unpropitious for love.

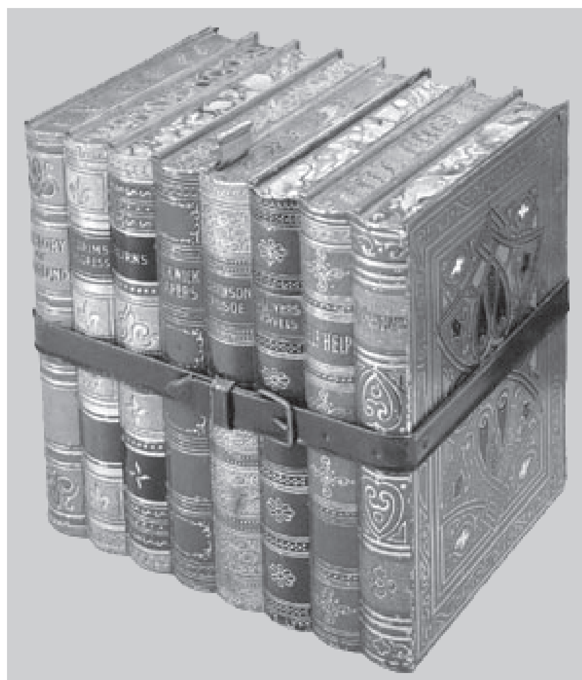


The story of *Phoolsunghi* however is not a predictable love triangle, nor just a historical romance featuring larger-than-life characters. One of the major achievements of the writer is his ability to seamlessly weave histories into a compact plot. The actions and events take place across towns and cities–Revelganj, Chapra, Banaras and Calcutta. The places are not incidental backdrops. Chhapra is identified as a town known for 'flourshing opium trade' and for vibrant social milieu created by its *tawaifs.* Revelganj is named after the astute but generous colonial administrator Henry Revel, who is also a prominent character and Haliwant Sahay's mentor. Banaras is introduced as the city of music maestros. Calcutta becomes the 'vast and unfamiliar' colonial metropolis full of alluring opportunities, and an

overwhelming sense of loneliness for the poet Mahendar Misir. As one traces Misir's peripatetic journeys from Chapra to Calcutta and back to his native Misirwalia, one witnesses a series of strange and fascinating encounters and reunions. These chance encounters occasionally lead to change of circumstances and fortunes–for better or worse.A poet thus ends up becoming a counterfeiter of currency notes. But what could be simply attributed to workings of fate may alternatively be seen as one of the unsavoury consequences of modernity.

In several works of fiction (especially those set against a colonial backdrop) modernity is usually depicted as an inexorable force, which can irrevocably alter the existing social order, lives of individuals and interpersonal relationships. Although *Phoolsunghi* has several predecessors in this respect, the novel does not appear predictably wearisome. For instance, Haliwant Sahay, who is not a traditional zamindar but a beneficiary of a colonial master's generosity, lures the naïve and wandering Doms with offers of land and employment in his opium trade. A character named Bulakna Dom, reappears in Calcutta under the alias Bulaki Lal Kayath after leaving his native Chapra for good. The new metropolis allows Bulakna to reinvent himself and prosper albeit at the cost of pseudonymity.The pervasive impact of colonial laws and the ways in which they can be manipulated subtly shape the novel. A lawsuit, thus, introduces new ways of settling property disputes and for exploiting the weak and the vulnerable.

Apart from mapping historical developments, Pandey Kapil vividly explores various facets of human character and the ability of individuals to evolve, without sounding preachily judgmental. Ultimately the novel is a poignant and powerful ode to friendship, reconciliation, and compassion. Haliwant Sahay embodies these qualities more than anyone else in the story. A friendship gone bitter is rekindled years later. An affluent zamindar relinquishes his inheritance to follow the call of his



conscience. The unacknowledged affections between Dhela Bai and Mahendar Misirfind expressions through unstinting support for each other during testing times. If Misir's story adds the element of picaresque to the novel, the portrayal of Dhela Bai who grows into a kindhearted but formidable matriarch from a popular courtesan, is equally compelling.

Translation of the text is eminently readable. The translator deserves praise for deftly handling a text which is replete with colloquialisms and folk idiom. The vibrant world of Hindustani classical music memorably evoked in the text has been sensitively captured in the translation. There is additionally a glossary of untranslated terms to help the reader. It won't be unfair to presume that outside the Bhojpuri-speaking world, Pandey Kapil is not quite a familiar name. The introduction is therefore suitably long, giving an account of the author's life and career, and the socio-political context in which the text is embedded. Except for a couple of typographical errors, the blemishes are few and far between. *Phoolsunghi* is a welcome addition to the growing body of translated Indian classics. The novel will enthrall lovers of literature, particularly those interested in Bhojpuri literary culture. ● ●

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