

now rendered foreign and incomprehensible. At its best the poetry of the Second New provides us with glimpses of a subtle epistemology which evokes this haunting and evades crass political certainties. As Cansever puts it in 'It was the Jazz Season':

And it was strange, even remembering
 Was remembering
 Borrowing from the future
 And that was a cause of happiness
 A reason for unhappiness
 As if a perfectly unique garden
 From the peak of non-existence
 Had come down piece by piece.

Alev Adil

Indian Poetry in Translation

K. Sachidanandan

While I Write: New and Selected Poems, translated from Malayalam by the poet
 Harper Collins, India; 2011
 ISBN: 978-93-5029-038-5; Price: Rs299

The Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry,

Edited by Lakshmi Holmström, Subashree Krishnaswamy and K. Srilata
 Penguin, India; 2009
 ISBN: 978-0-67-008281-0; Price: Rs499

Interior Decoration:

Poems by 54 women from 10 languages,
 Edited by Ammu Joseph, Vasanth Kannabiran, Ritu Menon,
 Volga
 Women Unlimited, India; 2010
 ISBN: 81-88965-62-6; Price: Rs395

Since Vedavyasa (author of *Mahabharata*) and Valmiki (author of *Ramayana*), poetry has formed an integral part of India's cultural life. Even the popular Hindi film songs are written by some of India's finest lyricists. The numbers of poets writing in the various Indian languages bear testimony to poetry's appeal, though publication outlets remain limited. Sales are confined to readers in the respective languages as translations are hard to come by. The publishing industry in English is growing by leaps and bounds in India. But translations of the vast treasury of Indian poetry have yet to benefit from this trend.

Indian novelists writing in English have clearly made their mark. The fact, however, remains that no Indian writer, apart from Rabindranath Tagore, has been awarded the Nobel Prize. The book that won Tagore the prize, *Gitanjali* (1912), contained his own recreations in poetic prose in English of verses from the original Bengali *Gitanjali* (1910). Tagore was not awarded the prize for his considerable achievements as a poet in Bengali. Poets writing in Indian languages often translate their work into English. K. Sachidanandan (1946-), who writes in Malayalam, is one such example. The translation scene in India today looks promising. The three books reviewed here reflect the sheer diversity, excellence and vibrancy of the writings/translations on offer.

Sachidanandan's poetry is an irresistible mix of the real, surreal, intellectual, sensual, spiritual. By way of introduction (p. ix), he writes: 'My mother taught me to talk to cats and crows and trees; from my pious father I learnt to communicate with gods and spirits. My insane grandmother taught me to create a parallel world in order to escape the vile ordinariness of the tiringly humdrum everyday world; the dead taught me to be one with the soil; the wind taught me to move and shake without ever being seen and the rain trained my voice in a thousand modulations. With such teachers, perhaps it was impossible for me not to be a poet, of sorts.' Sachidanandan read the great Malayalam fiction writers and poets, as well as translations of Tagore, Bankim, Saratchandra and Tarasankar along with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Zola, Maupassant, Flaubert and Mann among others. He also read the Bible, the *Mahabharata*, Buddha's *Dhammapada* and *The Communist Manifesto*. This 'internationalism' and awareness of world literatures and philosophy is as evident in Tagore (1861-1941) as among contemporary poets.

Sachidanandan does not shy away from asking the deeper existential

questions – of being, freedom, love, compassion, nature, language, death. In ‘Nero’s Soliloquy’ (based on his visit to the Forum in Rome), he pleads: ‘I can’t stand cruelty except my own./ I am the lyric poet,/ my lyre my only refuge./ Please don’t wrest this from me./ This city is burning like any other,/ in the fire of its own sins./ Let it burn and let me play.’ Poetry may make nothing happen; for Sachidanandan, poetry ‘is a shared mother tongue of human beings that survived the Babel. No wonder it has survived Plato’s Republic, Hitler’s Auschwitz and Stalin’s Gulag, and still whispers its uneasy truths into the human ear . . . It rises up from the ocean of the unsayable to name the nameless and to give a voice to the voiceless . . . The truths it discovers may not often be of immediate use, but it will gradually become part of social consciousness’ (p. xvii).

In ‘Mon Amour’, a poem dedicated to Alan Resnais’ film, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the impossibility of speaking about the horrors of Hiroshima is captured in the sexual metaphor set against the background of the holocaust: ‘I hug you with my eyes/ you caress me with your wounds/ I peel off your garments/ you wipe off your bloodstains/ I suck your lips/ your acid burns mine/ I taste your tongue/ your untold tales sour my mouth/ I rouse your nipples/ you mourn your estranged son/ I run my fingers across your belly/ you start as if recalling a rape/ I play on your behind/ it grows heavy with distances/ I press my lips on your petals/ you remind me of your orphaned kids/ I enter you/ you scream like an embattled city/ I raise you to the rainbows/ you climax in a rain of bombs/ I break and scatter in you/ my shrapnels pierce you// Love bleeds in prisons.’ One forgets this poem is a translation; it has all the power of an original. The language is pared down to essentials; the poem’s message is universal.

The Rapids of a Great River is an anthology of Tamil poems in translation, selected from a rich history of nearly two thousand years of poetry, beginning with the Sangam poets of the 2nd century C.E. The first poem, ‘To Tirumal’, reads like a hymn: ‘In words, you are the truth./ Among virtues, you are love.’ Language, thought and emotion come together with striking effect. In *Tirukkural*, the down-to-earth, pithy aphorisms remind us of Proverbs: ‘Good friends are like good books –/ A perpetual delight.’ They delight us with their elegance and wit, graphic metaphors and wordplay.

Between the sixth and ninth centuries, ‘Bhakti’ poetry or songs of

love addressed to God, transformed Tamil literature and society. But the directness of their poetry can be traced to Sangam times with its 'akam' (inner world/ love poetry), and 'puram' (outside/ public poetry). 'I knew nothing about love, / but you came seeking after me/ in my innocent days/ and aroused my longing for you. // I lost myself in desire/ and hankered after your grace' (Tayumanavar). This 'drama in miniature' is in the 'akam' mode, while a brilliant descriptive passage – 'There waves roar from waterfalls, scattering their pearls, / spreading along the courtyards, washing away toy-houses. / There we collect wild honey and dig for tubers, / . . . / there we pound our gathered grain with rogue elephants' tusks. / There monkeys throw and catch sweet mangoes as if they were playthings/ and the honeyed scent of shenbagam flowers explodes in the skies' (from Kuttrala Kuravanci) – with its sharpness of imagery reminds us of 'puram' poems.

It is not till the late 1980s and 1990s that we encounter new voices in Tamil poetry – Sri Lankan, women and Dalit (the former untouchables), among others. These poets are not afraid of writing with brutal honesty about their concerns – be it marriage, motherhood, sex, caste, war, power, literary canons and aesthetics. A new Sri Lankan Tamil identity is affirmed in poets like R. Cheran (1960-). In 'I could forget everything', he captures the nightmarish quality of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the deep sense of loss and violation by stacking up memories, each detail a poignant re-enactment of the horrors of war: 'I could forget all this,/ . . . // But you, my girl,/ snatched away and burnt/ . . . / as you waited in secret/ while the handful of rice/ – found after so many days – / cooked in its pot/ your children hidden beneath the tea bushes/ . . . / How shall I forget the broken shards/ and the scattered rice/ lying parched upon the earth? (see *MPT* 3/6).

Women poets too find their voice. Responding to a charge of being perceived as difficult and overtly feminist, Vatsala (1943 –) writes: 'Forgive me . . . / My poems –/ pieces of glass/ drenched in blood –/ pain you.// Tired from a day's work,/ reclining in an easy chair,/ what you need/ are lyrical poems/ that caress your heart' ('Glass pieces and jasmine flowers'). These are unambiguous, hard-hitting poems, challenging to write in a society that frowns upon such honesty.

In 'Do you understand', Urvashi (1956 –) writes: 'I am not particularly a soft-natured woman/ nor am I as naïve as I once was. / Our current state of affairs/ gives me no signs for hope. / It is certain / . . . / we must be apart. / Then, / why should I stay within this house/

any longer? / Well, / Do you understand what I write to you?' Salma (1968 –) talks unashamedly of the female body, post childbirth: 'You are much repelled/ you say, / by a thickened body/ and a belly criss-crossed with birthmarks . . .' These poems break free of tradition with immediacy and urgency, in the spoken voice, addressing the reader directly.

Interior Decoration is an ambitious anthology; it introduces us to fifty-four women poets from ten Indian languages. Apart from Kamala Das and Suganthi Subramanian (both died in 2009), the remaining living poets in *Interior Decoration* write not only about issues that define them, but collectively explore 'the nature of censorship that women face' – be it by the state, the market, community leaders, society at large, families, even themselves.

A gallery image of Indian women emerges through several sharp vignettes: 'A woman is a thing apart. / She is bracketed off, a/ Comma, semi colon at most/ A lower case letter, lost// In the literate circus./ . . . , but when she speaks/ Her poems bite, ferocious' ('Margins, Ma(i)nstream' by Rukmini Bhaiya Nair, English). Seeking a 'new language/ In which to hold her own', she is branded a witch: 'One who writes poetry in the middle of the night/ with her hair undone is a witch' ('The Witch' by Mandakranta Sen, Bengali). Women here write in blood: 'Buried deep/ in the lines of writers,/ I didn't learn/ from where/ those quills/ shed drops of blood' ('Ignorance' by Lalitha Lenin, Malayalam).

A new way of relating is insisted upon in a world where women are read 'casually/ like one reads the torn pages/ of a child's notebook/ before it is made into paper-cones'. The poet, Anamika, says: 'read us carefully/ one word at a time/...// Look at us with yearning/ as, shivering, you would look at a fire out of reach. // Listen to us/ as you would the soundless void/ and try to understand, slowly/ a language newly learned.' ('Women' by Anamika, Hindi). Such messages are aimed at men and society at large.

Challapalli Swaroopa Rani (Telugu) asks: 'When has my life been truly mine?/ In the home male arrogance/ Sets my cheek stinging/ While on the street caste arrogance/ Splits the other cheek open' ('Wild Flower'). Needless to mention, there is a lot of protest. 'Revolt flows constantly in my veins/ I am an eternally bleeding wound,' writes Saroop Dhruv (Gujrati) in 'I'; she also asserts: 'Here I am, as strong as

a foundation/ a root, a base; like grammar.' There is a need to reinvent oneself through a new language.

Shahjahana (Telugu) despairs of 'how many dreams are slaughtered/ behind each veil/ how many desires/ how many hopes/ lie smashed behind dark veils'. ('Lift that Veil') In 'Dignity' Bilqees Zefirul Hasan (Urdu) writes: 'Self-respect *is something*; but how should Dhaniya make/ Bibi Sahab understand this?' Here are two women, Bibi Sahab is the lady of the house, Dhaniya is her servant; they share a common fate – drunken, miserly husbands. Dhaniya could not live with her man; Bibi stays on for 'the dignity she attains by living with her husband'. Women do not really have choices. 'Unable to dissolve the poverty line ever/ I decided to sell my breasts. / Upon losing all other organs in an auction/ I went to shop after shop...' (Kutti Ravathi (Tamil), 'Not for sale'). These are devastating indictments of Indian society.

There is hope too. It is reassuring to read Rose Mary (Malayalam): 'Like one emperor to another,/ like one friend to another,/ come to me/ as an equal./ .../ like the question/ seeking its answer/ may your steps be/ as light/ and as carefree...' Here are poems that speak for themselves, honestly and confidently; they speak of the pain and pleasure of being a woman for 'that's when the poem writes itself'. ('Epitaph' by Menka Shivdasani, English).

Shanta Acharya