



Letter from EDINBURGH

Fariha Karim goes to the recently-concluded Edinburgh Festival--well, to the Fringe festival, which is a sort of counter festival, an open house actually, that hums, yes, on the fringes of the main one--and takes in a play about Indian immigrants in New Zealand.

FARIHA KARIM

What is worth preserving? This is the question asked by the play *Pickle*, performed at The Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, Scotland by the New Zealand theatre company Indian Ink, an affectionately told tale of love, death and immigration.

Written by Justin Lewis and Jacob Rajan, it is set in the Empire Hotel, once the finest hotel in town but now filled only with hopes as faded as the last days of the Raj itself. Three Indian immigrants explore classic themes within a deliberately modern context in Wellington, New Zealand.

Ammachy, superbly played by Jacob Rajan, complete with sponge sandals, runs the hotel with an iron fist helped by her niece, Sasha (Ansuva Nathan), who she fears will never be married because she is nearly blind. Jojo (Rajan), a heart-surgeon, works as the bell-boy who lives in a broom cupboard. The trio live in a characteristic acceptance of an obstinate situation: dreaming of a way out which refuses to open its doors to them.

Until Mr G. Reaper (Nick Blake) walks in through the door. An old English owner of a chemical company, he checks in and proceeds to fall in love with Sasha. He manages to win over the stubborn Ammachy who accepts his proposal for her niece. Jojo's heart is broken.

But as the tale unravels, the audience learns that Mr Reaper was responsible for the chemical disaster that killed Sasha's late husband and left her blind.

A climactic scene on the roof of the hotel sees Sasha about to end her life, where the audience becomes afraid of how little there is holding her back, metaphorically as well as physically. But Jojo manages to save the day.

A not-so-fairytale ending follows: Jojo wins back the heart of his beloved Sasha and the three continue to work in the hotel.

Hailed by UK critics as another offering from the recent East-meets-West tradition, *Pickle*, fortunately, couldn't be further from it. We are spared the usual tedious stereotypes of a girl with two plaits being called names and spat at in the playground, or scenes of the



The Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh

Festival Photo

second-generation children hiding their pork sausages before their brutal Asian father comes back with a partner for their forced marriage.

Pickle is beyond comparison with such a simplistic tradition; its energy is entirely different. At last a UK audience is presented with a play about immigration that would look out of place on the BBC or Channel 4. The characters are heart-warming and funny. Jojo's one-liners verge on satire without becoming officious: "I was told I would be valuable to New Zealand as a doctor, but the New Zealand medical council think they themselves invented medicine!"

The audience is made painfully aware of Western suspicions of non-Western qualifications by laughing, but without resorting to stereotyping:

"You know Giorgio? Well, he is an engineer. Here he works in a sandwich shop", says Jojo. "And Raoul is a lawyer in his country, but here he works as a cleaner. Tamaki is bus driver."

Sasha replies: "Don't tell me, in Japan he is a nu-ki-lar physicist." "No," Jojo says, "he was a bus driver. He has always wanted to be a bus driver. He is very happy he has made his dream at last, as a bus driver, playing golf at the weekends."

A subtle yet powerful symbolism haunts the entire play. The chemical disaster is reminiscent of Bhopal. Jojo carries around a pig's heart with him at all times as a reminder of his profession, close to his own heart, but made redundant.

Stylistically, the play is enchanting. An elegant magical realist jackson-in-the-box set is completed with face masks; the main characters, noses are tied around the head with the string, emphasising the odorous elements of the story. Sasha continually remarks upon a strange smell around Mr Reaper, who is later revealed as Death. And the sense of smell is an important one in sub-continental cultures, from the aromas associated with spices in food to the use of incense in religious rituals.

The characters are strongly grounded: they are not loaded by issues of belonging or acceptance. Rather, the issue is how the characters, having been through so much, are now obstructed by New Zealand authorities. Jojo, thinking of his wife back home, says: "I

have come this far, I can't go back now. But it's not home here."

At the same time, it is never a two-dimensional scenario of Indian equals good, or English equals bad. Whilst Mr Reaper is indeed Death, and is responsible for Sasha's tragic past, he is also a funny character. When trying to win over Ammachy, his Orientalist stance is made so obvious that it becomes farcical: "Ammachy, with your Persian fair skin, those eastern, almond eyes"

--and Ammachy takes the bait, making the situation entirely laughable.

It is scenes like this that allow *Pickle* to become provocative without assuming any moral high ground. The audience is never subjected to tones of moral superiority because the characters can also laugh at themselves. Ammachy tells Sasha: "Of course you are free! You are free to love whoever I choose!"

It is a play that lives up to its responsibilities within an explosive political climate. The portrayal of a family of Indian descent is genuine, focussing on the histories of the characters rather than their skin colour as a point of departure. Which is why it is much needed: immigrant bashing, which has become so popular in Western societies, neglects the history of the migrant, it refuses to look at what the migrant has left behind and for what reasons. Rather, immigration in the UK is seen only in terms of how cultural differences in the present upset fine balances within the host nation.

But most of all, it works because *Pickle* tells a story in the old-fashioned way. Writers Jacob Rajan and Justin Lewis remain true to their promise: "We marinate western theatrical traditions in Indian flavours but above all we seek to tell good stories that touch people of all cultures." The plot is ingenious. The characters are likely to be among the most memorable you come across. The writing is impeccable, mastering the gargantuan task of balancing pathos with humour. And, staying true to its name, it's refreshing, leaving you with a sweet and a sour taste, always wanting more.

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TRAVEL WRITING

Kolkata and Dhaka, we and they, are similar, yet different. The differences have similarities, and the similarities show up interesting differences.

Cricket, Communism, Consumerism and Krishna ...

Over the last decade, travel writing has emerged as a critical new genre of writing within the ambit of a much broader definition of 'literature' (yes, nowadays that particular word, like 'art', like 'beauty', is intensely self-conscious, wearing its quotes like a hotel doorman's fake epaulettes), as part of explorations of self and culture. Here Manosh Chowdhury talks and walks around Kolkata, then talks some more. About newspapers, about politics. About Them, and about Us.

As we have said before on this page, we invite our readers to submit pieces on travel, particularly those inside Bangladesh. It is time we wrote about our people and places, our selves, in English.

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

The last time I visited Kolkata, the most interesting thing I had found was a series of billboards, particularly at bus stops, by the Bangla daily *Bartaman*. Very brave, the words in scarlet red were: "[*Bartaman*] doesn't frighten anyone except *Bhagaban*." Since the Kolkata newspaper readership is a captive of *Anandabazar*, and the only recognizable challenger from the left is *Aajkaal*, those billboards were loud enough to get my attention. This time, and I don't know whether this is because of downward publicity of *Bartaman*, or my observation faculty got dull, I found much less of *Bhagaban*. Ringku and Tapash, my sister and brother-in-law, informed me that they had been taught a very good lesson. *Ganashakti*, the official spokesperson of ruling CPI(M), had written in their publicity posters, in black instead of red: "Only the cowards are frightened by *Bhagaban*." So *Ganashakti* maintains the bravery! I was indeed dying to read a copy of the newspaper, which I couldn't get for first few days. My appetite was strong because I could only get *Aajkaal* at my sister's place for the first three days.

The bad thing was that my visit to Kolkata coincided with David Beckham's transfer to Real Madrid, and an in-between tour to East Asian zone. And so even the leftwing *Aajkaal* was helpless. For four subsequent days, they were forced to give cover photos, in colour, of a dashing Beckham. I was quite happy that Beckham and Real Madrid had decided to exclude India from their trip. Talking later about this to Dilip Samanta, an activist friend, a small trader and a poet who is hardly known in the mainstream media, I learnt about his frustration: "*Bodmaash!* All of these newspapers. Do you know they all published cricket on the top during the recent US attack on Iraq?" "Oh! I don't know. Wasn't India a possible champion in the world cup?" I just replied vaguely. He was still unhappy and described how Indian presses print trash news, particularly when Indian diplomacy is in a

tension, as it was during the US invasion. "So what about *Ganashakti*?" I asked very politely. "Yeah," Dilip replied, "they demoted World Cup cricket news to second place. But you know the government press. And as for our *public*, even the regular subscribers moved towards other dailies just to hunt World Cup news, to look for Saurav and Sachin." Dilip was furious, and of course largely upon the general Kolkata-newspaper readers.

I was really curious about the general reaction in Kolkata against recent US attack on Iraq. Already I knew the critical official position of Left Front and about their processions against imperialism. I went to talk it over with Debapriya and Mou. Both of them teach English literature in college, are always reading and discussing about how Derrida's recent interview book or Spivak's recent paper stimulated them immensely. They live in a modest, nicely furnished flat near Goria, owned by Mou. Their little 4-year-old girl is now a schoolgoer, hardly speaks, and then only in English. A very tough host to encounter! Last time she had only a few words without a complete sentence and I had felt much at ease. But I was very happy to find two of their former students, both doing graduate studies in English, one in Jadavpur University, another at JNU. After a few welcoming words, I asked about the political situation on the campuses and student movements. Aniruddha said that in his first year at JNU, he had problems with the political parties and with food and all the rest. And above all he really missed friendship. That interested me. "What's that?" I asked. He explained the scenario: the BJP-backed student organization was always knocking at the door, pressurizing him to attend their meetings and always asserting Hindu solidarity; the Congress-backed student organization is cornered now, but at least, he said, they are 'secular'. Earlier when I had asked Anuruddha whether he belonged to any group, he had been critical of SFI, the left-backed student organization. Now he told me that "SFI at least has Bengali students in their

party and that most of the students from Kolkata are with them, even if all of them are not necessarily supporters." This made me curious. I asked about the North-Eastern students. Aniruddha literally exploded, "Do you know them? They don't even acknowledge themselves as Indians. They talk such a manner ... 'you Indians'... they do their closed-door meetings... they are very ferocious, mainly the Nagas ..." and a lot more. On hearing this I asked him, "Are not most BJP-supporting students from Northern India?" "Yes!" "And you SFI supporters from Bengal mainly, with a few from Kerala?" "Sure." "So why is it not normal for them to have their own political groups?" Aniruddha was very particular, "*Dekhooon*, we all are very committed about our Indian identity regardless our differences. They are not. Do you think they can run their own government if permitted? They fight each other. Even SFI doesn't think them reliable, doesn't trust their capacity. Do you know?" "Yes, I do." Aniruddha assumed my sympathies were with SFI. I was silent. Debapriya and Mou, however, knew better and took over the discussion until Shuvayan, the other fellow, a Jadavpur graduate, spoke up on different matters. Certainly though there were big smiles at the end, when those two fresh literature graduates were to depart, but I remained angry over the conversation. Even when I woke up the next morning. So next week when I found some papers, delivered earlier by Dilip Samanta, on Nagaland-India relationship I photocopied and handed them to Mou for delivery to Aniruddha.

I went by bus to CSSSC (Center for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta), which is very close to Mou's flat. I didn't have any appointment, but Anjan Ghosh, busy academic, didn't mind and offered me lunch. I found my head bubbling with a lot of issues, particularly inside a highly privileged academic institute. Eventually when asked by him about current publications in Bangladesh and their unavailability in Kolkata, I got my chance. "Since our relationship is predicated on West Bengal's superiority, Bangladesh's publications could reach you only if and when we serve these to you." I couldn't help but be a bit harsh. However, we managed to talk a little about the existing unequal relationship between two Bengali-speaking territories, let alone relationships with other ethnic groups amongst and around West Bengal, even during CPI(M) administration. I strongly wanted to have comments on the issue from well-known political

scientist Partha Chatterjee, whom I saw during our lunch sitting at the far end of a common long table, but then thought the better of disturbing him while he was eating. So I rather concentrated on lunch-time conversation between Anjan and his colleagues, which centered around Anand Patwardan's recent film on fundamentalism, Amitava Ghosh, Partha Chatterjee's visit to Kathmandu, on writing, on publications-- glimpses of a lifestyle, academic and beyond. The newly constructed bypass road marked the seam of Kolkata. CSSSC is located outside Kolkata proper, distant and calm--to me it seemed to be in outer space--surrounded by land under construction, other governmental offices, and developers' (who in Kolkata are called 'promoters') high-rises. Most of all, the cafe, a round-shaped open space with a rooftop, was a very stunning one.

So this was Kolkata! Thousands of Bengali-speaking middle class people with their cosmopolitan aspirations, an Indian identity being renewed in different forms in the streets, in English-medium schools, in the giant shopping malls, in the pubs; or watching TV, in the cricket galleries, in the *mondirs*. Everywhere were signs of a huge consumerism. What made Kolkata distinct? Was there a difference with other big cities in India--Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Delhi? That, despite the presence of ruling CPI(M), a professedly Marxist party, weren't the MNCs here with same pace and motivation steering their ventures? Wasn't Kolkata a manifestation of a globalized metropole? It was an important inquiry for me, a Hindu from Bangladesh who had experienced the severe flight of family members to West Bengal, to Kolkata in particular. On the footpaths, in the shops and crowds, all over Kolkata there are enormous numbers of migrants from Bangladesh. I walked wondering about it. Then stopped when loudspeakers on the street switched off songs and started religious talk. The songs had been *Krishna Katha*, very common in older Kolkata, probably in *Brajabuli* language--the language of Vaishnav verses. The talk seemed to have something to do with Bangladeshi [Hindu] migrants, but I couldn't make any sense of it. I merely assumed that a large portion of the assembled people in the devotional ceremony, on the rooftop of a giant, brightly decorated building, were ex-East Bengalis.

But where the Indian press was concerned I was off the mark. Advani soon replaced Beckham in the newspaper headlines. He was supposed to

attend the anniversary of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee--who had been a founding member of the Forward Bloc and had supported the cause of refugees from the then East Pakistan. An official program, with huge security precautions by the state government, especially since it was Advani, and the *Babri Masjid* case was in proceeding. And also since the Gujarat court had dismissed the notorious 'bakery murders' just then. I asked Swapan, who



International Socialists in Kolkata

owned the cigarette-paan shop in front of my sister's house, whether there was any chance Advani would get attacked. Previously, during my first days here, Swapan had asked me about the Hindu situation in Bangladesh. I had answered (which was the same answer I gave everybody there) that "I think Gujrat is of more concern." Swapan then had been shocked. So now in reply to my Advani question he answered, "Look, dada, whatever you think of us, we the Bengalis are still against communalism. We fought BJP, and will fight till our last drop of blood. Bengal could be the place of Advani's fear." However I was not convinced about a possible fear. The next morning interestingly I read that Advani preaching to the state government to be more tolerant of other opinions. CPI (M) had boycotted the anniversary program.

I decided to attend to two more matters: to drop in on College Street and look for little magazines; but more than that, to get prepared to visit my less well-off family members who in 1971 had left their ancestral village for Kanning, near the Sundarbans. Kanning is an outpost with a post office and a railway station, a hard, poverty-stricken place built mainly by refugees from Bangladesh in 1971. The whole day I had been overwhelmed by seeing notes on textbooks in College Street, but hardly any textbooks. Bangla classics were there, but not little magazines. A benevolent passer-by kindly helped me find *Patiram*'s shop on the footpath, or 'foot' as they call it there. And he had little magazines from

every corner of West Bengal, mostly the current issues. I had thought that Kolkata, and College Street especially, would have an exhibition of little magazines. Very naive indeed! The whole day I had been tense about going to Kanning, that place of marginal Hindu migrants, with their agony and their old hatred against their abandoned Muslim East Pakistan! At Shealdah, when I noticed that trains to Kanning and other places in the south



Shakti Chattapadhyaya

were on a different platform. I was almost ready to postpone my visit. Skeptically I came out from the main terminal and went to the southern terminal, which was loud, narrow, and crowded with working class people. I found out I had a one-and-half-hour wait for the train. And though I kept thinking that I should go back to the main terminal and buy some books from the large bookshops there, yet I felt stuck onto the terminal floor full of hundreds of passengers travelling southward. The *velpurivala* stared at me, something that happened all the time since I had a bearded face. Further, even my ordinary kurta-pajama seemed to be ornamental amongst the awaiting passengers of the south terminal. I asked for the *velpuri*. He asked for 1 rupee. His was a clear voice, but I asked again. Sipping the tea in an earthen cup, I tried to recall my uncle's face, now in his eighties, with *tulsi mala* in his neck, buying and selling rice on Kanning railway platform. Last time I had seen him was in 1979. Still, I, gummed to the floor, hoped it would be delayed and I wouldn't have to go...

(NEXT INSTALLMENT: KANNING)

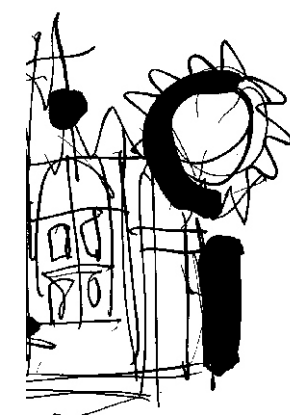
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POEMS SHAKTI CHATTAPADHYA

(translated by Jayanta Mahapatra)

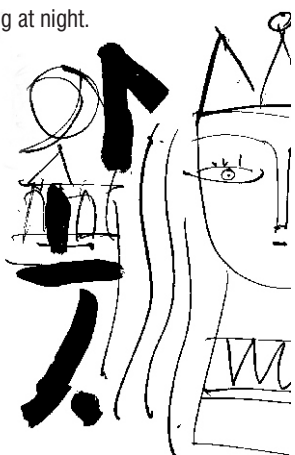
Lightness

A light breeze blows
Leaves fall from trees
A covered clay saucer holds
A little food for small hunger.
The eternal beggar of few words
Keeps on gathering honeybees,
If I cannot write any more
Make a beggar of me.



Grief's Weight Entire

Grief's weight entire is in grief itself.
Not in happiness or terror, not in enlightenment--
Grief's weight entire is in grief itself.
Under the heart lie sunlight and shadow both
The cloud is here to lie curled up like a dog
Not leaving when shooed, simply floating at night.
Grief's weight entire is in grief itself.



I Don't Want Anything

I don't want anything. Nothing at all.
My clothes too, take them off if you wish.
Conceit, hidden in the husk, behind--
Rip open my heart too with a pickaxe's thrust
Like a stepbrother does, till his desire is done.
I don't want anything. Nothing at all.
You may even dig open, remove my consciousness.
In the dark mire of passion, buried to my neck,
I cry: Drown me, O you of a thousand lotuses,
This poet is in distress, is being distressed;
Come, lay waste the music of his rhythm.