

# V P Singh: From a Traumatized Child to a Tough Politician

HE is an artist whose work fetched a higher price at a recent auction than India's top painter, M F Husain. He is a poet who writes blank verse in Hindi laden with irony and dry humour.

His adversaries say he is a scheming dodger who manipulates to grab power. His admirers say he is a messiah who campaigned against corruption and overturned India's centuries-old rigid Hindu caste system by instituting job quotas for low castes.

Beneath all that lies a child who wet his pants when confronted by an angry schoolmaster.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, an insecure, traumatised child, passing from family to family, school to school — changing homes and guardians — could never have dreamt that he would one day become a politician, let alone prime minister of India, says Seema Mustafa in biography released earlier this week.

"The Lonely Prophet" is a sympathetic look at Singh, based on interviews with journalist Mustafa, who is now a colleague in Singh's leftist Janata Dal, which led a coalition that dethroned Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party in

1989. V P Singh, still referred to as "Raja Sahab" by loyalists, was born into a patrician family in pre-independence India, and was adopted by another royal family which later became embroiled in a feudal struggle with his original parents.

In his formative years, Singh found solace in art, photography and social work as his adoptive father, an alcoholic and distant, shifted him about. "I felt very insecure inside and my problem was how to be accepted," Singh says. "I felt I had to belong."

Social work gave way to politics characterised by a combination of loyalty to then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a clean personal reputation and a tendency to use stubborn silences and resignations to score political points.

Singh, 64, says he is not seeking office again but his adversaries do not believe him. He had said he would not become prime minister when he led a campaign against Gandhi, but held that job for 11 months from December 1989.

His sulking style irked many, who saw it as a manipulative technique, but won him admiration as well in a

nation where self-sacrifice evokes sympathy. It also helped him hold sway over a coalition of egocentric leaders who loved to disagree.

Singh has even been compared to Mahatma Gandhi, who shunned office as he led a decades-long movement against British rule. After quitting the Congress party in 1987, Singh stormed to power on a high-pitched campaign which centred on questions concerning payoffs linked to the purchases of howitzer guns from Sweden's Bofors.

As prime minister, Singh implemented recommendations contained in the report of the Mandal Commission. It sought quotas in government jobs for backward castes and groups who form some 52 per cent of India's population. This was in addition to the existing quotas for the lowest "outcastes".

The decision unleashed protests led by high caste students who felt their jobs were at stake. Critics said caste-based quotas encouraged mediocrity and some angry youths even set fire to

themselves. Singh was described as being heartless. "I did not expect self-immolation but I did expect far more protest from the masses," Singh says. "History is not changed without an element of ruthlessness."

The Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party soon withdrew its support for Singh's government. He was now reviled by India's middle class, which had earlier revered him for his crusade against corruption.

The Supreme Court upheld his radical decision which is now being implemented by Gandhi's Congress party successor, Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao. "I kicked a ball and broke my leg but also scored a goal. Those angry with me see my leg. Those who like me see the goal," Singh says.

Singh's critics say he used the Mandal Report to outshine party rival Devi Lal. But I K Gujral, Singh's foreign minister, says he got to the top because he took his election manifesto seriously.

"Events that happened in those 11 months will continue to influence history now and in future, positively and negatively," Gujral added.

But Singh, praised for making history and reversing centuries of discrimination, says history is not his strength and only reluctantly agreed to the biography. "I have a weak memory," he said. "How can I write my memoirs?" — Reuter

# Truck Drivers: Softies at Heart

asian diary BY ARJUNA



TRUCK drivers are supposed to be hard as nails with intractable mentalities to match.

Not so, it seems. Despite this show of brute machismo, truck drivers the world over are the same as you and me: they are afraid to die and never see their families again.

And that makes them a superstitious lot like everybody else. They observe or practise what to them are sure-fire ways to ward off danger or keep away the "evil eye".

Lebanese truckers are no exception. Most of us have come across trucks on the highways decorated with blue heads, hands and other gadgets. Such out of character decorations are allegedly for protection and to ward off the "evil eye".

Also uncharacteristically, constantly seen are some of the white Arabic inscriptions and incantations generally found at the back and front ends of many trucks. Translated, these read: "May the envious eye be afflicted with blindness." "On God I'm depending." "Come back to us safe, Abu Mansour." "You do what you like, but I have a family and children depending on me."

"I'm going out under God's protection and returning if God wills."

When asked why he had the inscription "May the envious eye be afflicted with blindness" written on his truck, Mohammed Ramadan said: "I am a father of eight and worked very hard as a driver of other people's trucks. I saved for fifteen years until I was able to buy my own truck to drive. This of course is every driver's dream. But then, my troubles began. I hardly made any trip without something happening to me or my truck. This was very unusual, especially since as a hired driver for fifteen years, I never had any accidents."

"I could not understand why, so I consulted a specialist who said these usual and unexplainable happenings were due to the evil eye. She said that my neighbours, relatives and friends, although outwardly pretending to be happy for me after gaining ownership of a truck, were really jealous and envious."

"Besides putting some blue beads on the front of my truck, I also painted on this incantation at the rear of the vehicle."

"You wouldn't believe it,"

continued Ramadan, "but since then, it has been smooth sailing and confidence in myself has been restored."

Walid Mujajs, who also drives his own truck, is not superstitious but a very religious man. The phrase I have written on my truck 'On God I'm depending' is really a prayer rather than a superstitious incantation. Believing in God is not being superstitious, because what we are, or what we are able to do is due to God's help and God's will."

Mohamed Yassin is a hired driver, and written on his truck were the words "I am going under God's protection and returning safely if God wills."

"What you see written on the truck I am driving was there when I was given the truck to drive. I don't know whether the owner is superstitious, a believer and mosque-goer, still I do not think God is there only to look after me and see about my safety — God will not help me if I do not help myself. God will not prevent an accident happening to me if I drive crazily. So I drive carefully and cautiously and put my trust in God." — Depthnews Asia

## HARTAL LIMERICKS

By Abu Ahmed

The Queen of the land of gotmal  
Pulled her hair and banged her head against the wall.  
"Oh God," she said,  
As she rubbed her head  
"Tomorrow is another day of Hartal!"

\* \* \*

"So where are you going this Hartal?  
Maldives, Bhutan or Nepal?  
I think it would be best  
If you jumped off the Everest  
And put an end to this all."

\* \* \*

"We must, we must make the government fall,  
Therefore another hartal we must call."  
So the advisers decreed,  
And all agreed,  
That for 96 hours nothing should move at all.

## Kalighat Painting

Continued from page 9 to promote the exercise of power over the group analysed. This becomes evident in Rup's (and there are other instances) unthinking reprinting of Archer's study, the implication of which is that Kalighat painting would not exist without his discovery, that in cannot be understood without the mediation and interpretation of the "outsider" critic.

The "political" nature of Archer's criticism becomes apparent in the second paragraph of his essay where he wonders about the emergence of the Kalighat school of painting which is at once so "Indian" and yet so "modern," and sets about to answer questions of fundamental importance related to modern Indian art history which have not hitherto been answered before. How is one to explain the sudden efflorescence of the distinctive style and technique of the Kalighat patuas when one considers how different they are from the "primitive idioms of Bengal" on the one hand, and the miniaturist techniques of the Moghul and Rajput traditions on the other? Whatever the answer may be, the one that Archer provides is hardly acceptable. The English critic's initial bafflement at the presence of modernity amongst folk artists is smoothly transcended, and the apparent mystery is explained in terms of "contemporary influences of British and Anglo-Indian culture."

Archer repeatedly stresses the importance of Kalighat painting as a "new and vitally creative product of the British-Indian connection." "How can flowers bloom in desert wastes and culture take root and flourish in the swamps of Calcutta? The dominant influence must therefore be the "British models" which the Kalighat patuas somehow incorporated in their style and techniques. I quote from another later essay on Kalighat painting (1968) to clinch the point that I am trying to make: that W G Archer's main purpose is to emphasize (most gratuitously) the "Englishness" of this most Indian art. "Such painting, at once so Indian and yet so modern, compels us to face some unexplained facts, for despite its marked dissimilarity from British art of the 18th and 19th centuries, the style was actually the by-product of the British connection and can only be understood against the background."

Having made that laughable and ridiculous claim of the "British connection," Archer himself finds it difficult to develop and sustain an argument to substantiate the claim and is forced to concede from time to time that despite the "Anglo-Indian" source of Kalighat paintings, "its final character is so completely un-British." Again, confronted by the strangeness of the "powerful colors and primitive distortions" which cannot be accommodated or explained by any imperial aesthetic, Archer admits that in spite of the "many Anglo-Indian elements," the Kalighat school was so "basically un-British." One might remember the pathetically undistinguished



The Tale of Elokeshi and Mahanta, Kalighat Patas, 1880

achievements of 18th and 19th century British art, especially when it is compared to the excitement and spectacular performance of European art in the nineteenth century.

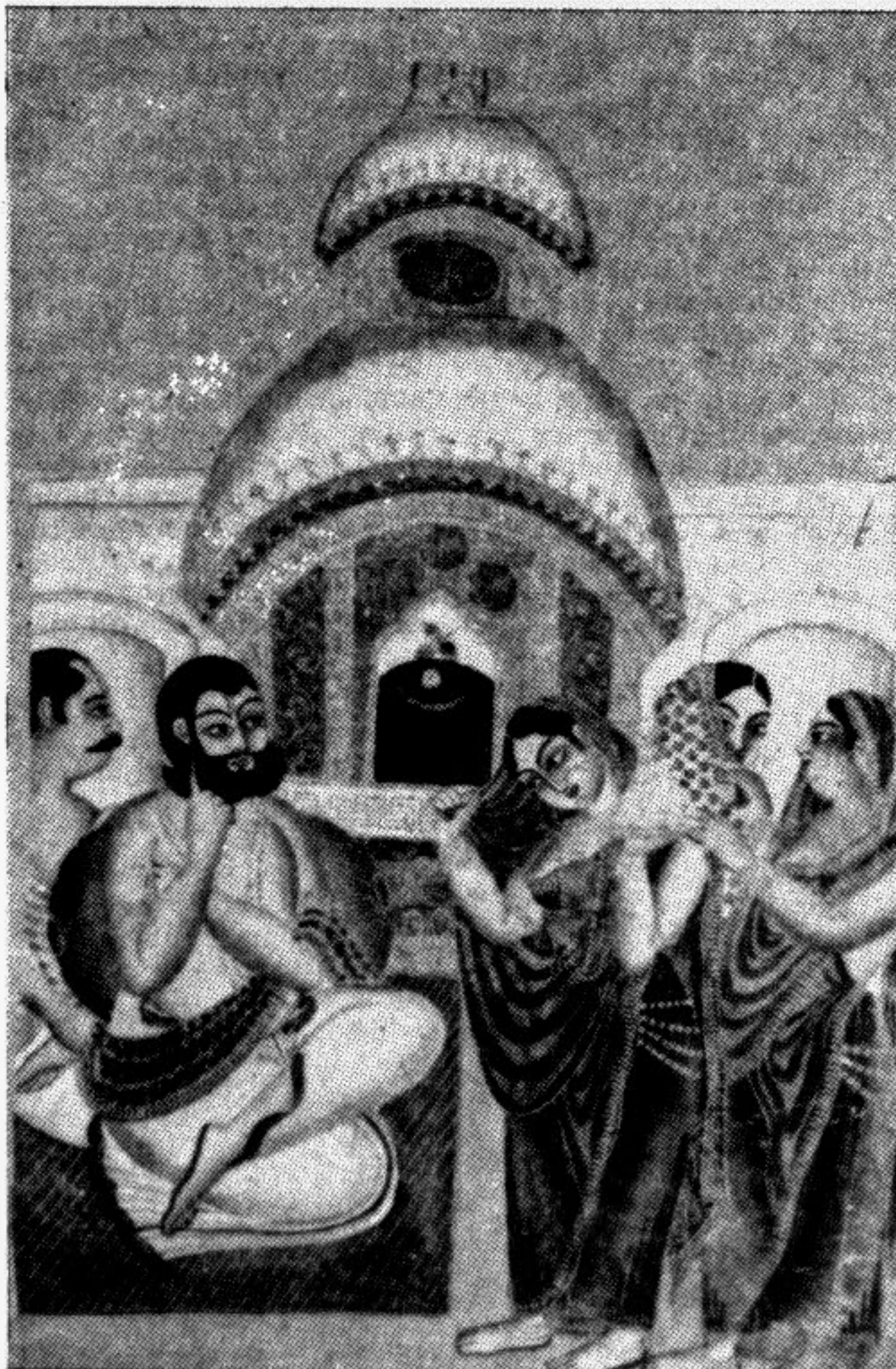
Archer's concessions to the "un-British" elements of Kalighat painting notwithstanding, his critique remains unequivocally "imperial" in spirit, intention and strategy. Implicit in

Archer's critique is the underlying Orientalist assumption that there cannot be any intrinsic value in Kalighat painting, and that which is excellent in it must be seen as Un-Indian in its origin and inspiration. Insofar as Kalighat painting has any history at all, it is part of the history given to it by the Anglo-Indian connection, the British presence in India. So what are these Anglo-Indian

elements? What is the British connection that is so crucial to an understanding of the art of the Patuas? First, Archer contends that the very existence of Kalighat painting was largely due to the availability of cheap, "foreign" paper; second, the switch from tempera to water-colour (the dominant medium for many English artists and some Indian artists working in Calcutta under European supervision) gave Kalighat painting its distinctive flavour; third, the adoption of the "British" manner of treating forms in which contours are shaded in ways utterly dissimilar to existing indigenous styles; fourth, the scale of the paintings, particularly the plant and animal studies, are comparable to those in the "Wellesley folios," and finally, the themes and subjects of the patuas carry the decisive stamp of British models. All these add up to the main thesis of Archer's critique: the inescapable foreign, specifically English influence on Kalighat painting.

Shovon Som, an art critic and historian strongly argued against this anglo-centric view in his book *Openly Bioscope*: "In reality, what has happened is just the opposite. It is Western Cubism that has been profoundly influenced by the Kalighat style; particularly Pablo Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Ferdinand Leger." Both claims are perhaps extravagant (though one cannot but marvel at how Kalighat painting anticipates some of the features of Cubism at least 50 years before this movement was launched), the latter at a predictable and, I think, necessary reaction to Archer's views. Other critics have also countered some of Archer's claims. BN Mukherjee, for instance, has written about the use of unprimed or unpolished paper which was known to the painters from an earlier period; or that the depiction of a few English gentlemen in some of the patas does not constitute an "English" theme. But the debate between the indigenism or otherwise of Kalighat painting is not the point of this piece. My concern here has been to highlight the historical insularity and smugness of Archer's critique, the imperialist confidence of his methodology.

Our indebtedness to W G Archer for his many monographs on Indian art must be acknowledged; there is no doubt that his essays provide us with a wealth of information and incisive analyses, and like the Editor of Rup we must express our gratitude. But it is also imperative that one must challenge the imperialist stance which often involves the weaving of elaborate ideological fictions; it is necessary to be conscious of Archer's "positional superiority," as Said has characterized it, and provide correctives (as Shovon Som has tried to do) wherever possible. One must learn to talk back unless one accepts Marx's opinion that we cannot represent ourselves, and have to allow W G Archer not merely to interpret and analyze but also to appropriate the patuas of Kalighat.



The Tale of Elokeshi and Mahanta, Kalighat Patas, c. 1875

## A Forgotten Anglo-Indian Poet

Continued from page 9 Smith): Meanwhile, in 1826, he had been appointed Master in English literature and history at the Hindu College; he was hardly seventeen.

Derozio conducted a conversation before and after regular classes and organised the Academic Association, which the Scottish Missionary Alexander Duff compared, rather extravagantly perhaps, to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Sadly, Derozio's lectures have not survived, among them a critique of Kant that drew eulogies from a distinguished audience. The Academy's dissemination of Enlightenment ideas, criticism of Brahmin bigotry and advocacy of reform had the force of a new faith. More than a dozen periodicals appeared to carry on the controversies in print. The Calcutta press noted that Hindu college boys were avid readers of Hume and Tom Paine and had snapped up a hundred copies of the latter's *Age of Reason* for as much as the equivalent of sixteen shillings each. Before long students began to translate dissent into epatant actions. Not content with consuming forbidden meat and drink they threw a cow's entrails over the boundary wall of a Brahmin home and called out, "Here is beef!" Nirad Chaudhuri's *Autobiography* contains the anecdote of a student dragged off by an irate father to make penitential obeisance before Kali: reason his right hand in mock salutation he said, "Good morning, Madam." Some students refused to wear the Brahmins' sacred thread; some, forcibly marched off to

prayers, recited from the *Iliad*, a set text in Pope's translation.

Prompted by the disquiet of guardians, the college warned teachers not "to unsettle the belief of the boys in the great principles of Natural Religion;" then forbade students to attend meetings outside college where politics and religion might be discussed, an infringement of the right to free association that the Calcutta press roundly criticised; and finally sacked Derozio on the grounds that his notoriety among orthodox Hindus rendered it expedient to do so.

Slander had it that Derozio was an atheist, denied filial obedience to be a moral duty, and considered sibling marriage permissible. This so perturbed a friend that he requested Derozio to set his mind at rest by formally denying the charges. Which Derozio did adding: "That I should be called a sceptic and an infidel is not surprising, as these names are always given to persons who think for themselves in religion."

Derozio now launched the daily *East Indian*, whose special brief was to speak for the Eurasian community, which was smarting from recently enacted laws that rendered its members, once outside city limits, subject to Moslem law, and debarred them from the East India Company's convented service, both civil and military. Derozio, wisely urged fellow Eurasians to consider themselves Indian. In his last contribution to his paper, a report on the annual examina-

tion at his old school, Drummond's Academy, he commended its freedom from illiberality, which contrasted with certain other schools where Christian parents objected to Indian students. Arguing on grounds of pragmatism, pointing out the dangers of a Hindu reaction, as well as humane principle — "The East Indians (an old name for Eurasians) complain of suffering from proscription, is it for them to proscribe? Suffering should teach us not to make others suffer" — he concluded it was in the "best interest" of Eurasians "to unite and cooperate with the other native inhabitants of India."

The day after this article appeared Derozio came down with cholera. After six harrowing days he died. "The death bed scenes of so-called infidels and atheists are part of the current goody literature," tartly notes his biographer. In his case the local minister and a fellow Eurasian bruted about a death-bed confession of faith, of which friends who had kept a round the clock watch on the patient denied knowledge. Derozio must have died as he had lived, a free-thinker, though not avowed atheist. Friends raised money for a monument on his grave, but the person entrusted with accounts ran away with it.

Derozio's intellectual influence remained potent till the emergence of Hindu revivalism in the 1870s. Since his death his poetry is better known by reputation than through acquaintance. Byron and Moore are the presiding influences. The more ambi-

tious pieces, including the long verse tale the *Fakeer of Jungheera*, are the least successful. Contemporary readers are likely to find the shorter poems, many of them sonnets, more congenial. Two sonnets are justly famous expressions of the ethos of the Bengal Renaissance. "The harp of India laments India's lost glory and pledges commitment to its revival: '... if thy notes divine/May be by mortal weakened once again. Harp of my country, let me strike the strain. In to India - My Native Land,' recalling 'the day of glory past,' the speaker offers to 'dive into the depths of time./ And bring from out the ages that have rolled/A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime/... And let the guerdon of my labour be/My fallen country! one kind wish from three."

Bradley-Birt Canning suggests that the "note of sadness" here reflects the plight of Eurasian, "Victims of prejudice from both sides," according to one chronicler of the Raj. The kind thought has been extended to Derozio's memory in Bengal, where he has become a culture hero.

But was there anything distinctively Indian in Derozio's sensibility? The answer is yes, as anyone who knows the shades of emotion and feeling in Indian kinship ties will recognize from the poem "Sister-in-law": A sister-in-law, my sister dear, / I'll bring thee a star from where angels are / Thy sister-in-law to be."

## The Harp of India

Why hangst thou lonely on you withered bough?  
Unstrung for ever, must thou there remain;  
Thy music once was sweet — who hears it now?  
Why doth the breeze sigh over thee in vain?  
Silence hath bound thee with her fatal chain;  
Neglected, mute, and desolate art thou,  
Like ruined monument on desert plain:  
O! many a hand more worthy far than mine  
Once thy harmonious chords to sweetness gave,  
And many a wreath for them did Fame entwine  
Of flowers still blooming on the minstrel's grave:  
Those hands are cold — but if thy notes divine  
May be by mortal wakened once again,  
Harp of my country, let me strike the strain!  
March, 1827.

## Sonnet to the pupils of the Hindu College

Expanding like the petals of young flowers  
I watch the gentle opening of your minds,  
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds  
Your intellectual energies and powers,  
That stretch (like young birds in soft summer hours)  
Their wings, to try their strength, O, how the winds  
Of circumstances, and freshening April showers  
Of early knowledge, and unnumbered kinds  
Of new perceptions shed their influence;  
And how you worship truth's omnipotence.  
What joyance rains upon me, when I see  
Fame in the mirror of futurity,  
Weaving the chaplets you have yet to gain,  
Ah then I feel I have not lived in vain.

## Yorick's skull

It is a most humiliating thought,  
That man, who deems himself the lord of all,  
(Alas! why doth he thus himself miscall)  
Must one day turn to nought, or worse than nought,  
Despite of all his glory, he must fall

Like a frail leaf in autumn; and his power  
Weighs lighter than his breath in his last hour;  
And then earth's lord is fragile as a flower. —  
This is a lesson for thee, Pridel! — thy book  
Should be the charnel; into it once look,  
And when thou'rt read it, feed upon the thought,  
The most humiliating thought, that thine  
And thou shall be unto this favour one day brought-  
Behold! this is the "human face divine!"  
April, 1827.

## Sister-in-law

A sister-in-law, my sister dear,  
A sister-in-law for thee?  
I'll bring thee a star from where angels are  
Thy sister-in-law to be.  
For thou art as pure as the lights that burn  
In the palace of bliss eternally,  
And thy sister-in-law must be like an urn,  
Containing the essence of purity.  
I'll borrow fleet wings from the visions of night,  
And when with storms the heavens are dim,  
Like a thought or a seraph, I'll shape my flight  
Until I have reached the rainbow's rim.  
And thence I'll bring, my sister dear,  
A sister-in-law for thee.  
A hue from that bow I'll bring here below,  
Thy sister-in-law to be.  
I'll shoot like a beam from the golden haired sun  
Down, down to those dark coral caves,  
Where the mysteries dark of old ocean are done,  
And the mermaid her amber locks laves,  
And I'll bring thee a gem from the rick diadem,  
On the brow of the queen of the sea:  
That jewel so rare on my bosom I'll bear  
Thy sister-in-law to be.  
On the hippogriff wing of that moon-stricken thing,  
Wild Fancy, to whom it is given  
With its flight to describe round all nature a ring,  
Will I mount up to heaven, to heaven,  
From the amaranth beds that are there I shall bring  
An odour immortal for thee:  
For it is but meet that nought but what's sweet  
Thy sister-in-law should be.