



book

From Benazir to Shobha De — Travels in the Indian Subcontinent

by Bharatendu Kabi

AMills and Boons reading Benazir Bhutto, a disco dancing Farooq Abdullah, Shobha De's flashy drinks parties, murderous Bihari blood feuds and decaying palaces of Lucknow — it's a bird's eye view of the subcontinent but from a different perspective.

William Dalrymple's new book "At the Court of the Fish-eyed Goddess" is the result of "ten years of relentless travelling around the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent" and surely throws light on several facets of the land and its people described like never before.

"This Benazir — known to her friends as 'bibi' or 'pinky' — adores royal biographies and slushy romances. In her old Karachi bedroom I found stacks of well-thumbed Mills and Boons including 'An Affair to Forget' and the other Benazir Bhutto is a very different kettle of fish... fearless — sometimes heroically so — and as hard as nails," he writes on his impressions about the then prime minister of Pakistan.

Moving from Benazir in Islamabad to Shobha De in swanky Mumbai, Dalrymple finds her work to be part fantasy lifted from a second-rate American soap opera, part marketing exercise by a

Dalrymple's journeys in the subcontinent took him to Lahore, the home town of former Pakistan cricket captain Imran Khan, also travelling with him on the campaign trail during the general elections. "Imran's bedside reading was almost endearingly austere: 'Towards Understanding the Koran', 'The Road to Mecca' and 'The Saying of Nizam ud-Din Aulia,' rubbed spines with 'The Emergence of Islam' and 'The Meaning of the Glorious Koran,'" he says in an attempt to throw some light into the private life of one of the biggest stars of the subcontinent.

clever publisher and part the deliberate creation of a very ambitious woman.

"Shobha De is a calculated construct living on the very boundary of plausibility...she has built her fortune on the stress lines of the frustrated Indian libido," he says.

"Spend a week with her, meet her friends, ride in her cars and go to her parties — at the end of it you are still left with a lurking suspicion that you have stumbled on to some sort of film set peopled with actors speaking lines from a Jilly Cooper script.

"Back in your hotel room, you look through your notes and ask yourself yet again — is this woman for real?"

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"...on the coffee table, however, by Imran's precious daggers, was one of my favourite biographies, Fawn Brodie's wonderful life of Sir Richard Burton, 'The Devil Drives'. Relieved to find something more exciting than 'The Meaning of the Glorious Koran' to occupy me while I waited for Imran to finish his epic shower, I opened the book, to discover that it belonged to

Jemima.

"On the title page had been written a 'to do' list in large, round, girly script. It read: David Frost, bikini line, chemist, gym, ring parmes — dress for Vogue.

"Such are the concerns of the rich and famous," he writes.

But the book is not only about the private lives of the rich and famous, it also contains the travelling experiences of a westerner in the Orient — his journey to Brindaban — the city of widows — then on to Madurai, Hyderabad and on to the "Tiger territory" in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

This is where Dalrymple is at his narrative best, playing with words, tossing them around and describing with immensely witty prose every little detail of his observations.

Writing about Madurai, he says "the

'gopuras' (the ceremonial gateways) dominate the city as completely as the cathedrals of the middle ages must once have dominated the landscape of Europe.

"They rise in great, tapering, wedge-shaped pyramids — each layer swarming with brightly coloured images of gods and demons, heroes and yakshis — until three-quarters of the way of their apex, they terminate in crown of cobra heads tipped with a pair of cat's-eared demon fangs."

"The astonishing complexity and elaboration of the gopuras' decoration is something you can see from far away...long before you are able to distinguish even the beginnings of its details," Dalrymple writes.

"The conscious fecundity of the temple is evident in every aspect of its deco-

ration. Spiralling out over the cornices and the finals of the arcades are a great anarchic cavalcade of mask heads, demons, demi-gods and godlings, peeping out from the angles, coming to roost under the pendentives; a great spiralling pantheon of Hindu deities that is repeated with even greater vigour over the towering gopuras.

"It is as if Meenakshi's fertility is such that every inch of the stonework is organically sprouting with supernatural forms, just as the bare desert sprouts with camel-thorn after the rains".

Then off he goes to Hyderabad.

In the chapter titled "Under the Char Minar", Dalrymple calls Hyderabad, the modern city "a pretty unprepossessing place, ugly, polluted and undistinguished, all seventies office blocks and bustling new shopping centres.

"In the older bazaars, the great cusped gateways of the old Hyderabad Havelis still stand, but now they lead nowhere, except perhaps to a half-built matrix of foundations and concrete piles.

"At first sight, there is nothing remotely charming or magical about Hyderabad today."

(About the book: At The Court of the Fish-eyed Goddess — Travels in the Indian Subcontinent, written by William Dalrymple, published by Harper Collins, pp 323, price Rs 395)

poem

The Earth — a long poem II

Written by Fazal Shahabuddin and Introduced and translated by AZM Haider

Fazal Shahabuddin's long poem "the Earth" is neither a hymn nor a psalm. Written in blank verse, it is a long poem in ten parts laying out poets emotional outcry against man's inhumanity to man and nature. A great humanist, Fazal decries that section of mankind which is piling up deadly weapons of mass destruction. He has expressed in this poem his hatred and odium for those who wage wars and seek to turn this beautiful earth into mounds of rubbles of destruction by deploying their dangerous nuclear arms. Identifying them as enemies of humanity, the poet with his iconoclastic spirit cried out man's unflinching determination to fight those adversaries of humanity to save life on this beautiful and bountiful earth. He said man's sublimest poetry, noblest pieces of paintings, and immortal songs are dedicated to his relentless endeavour to perpetuate life on earth through innumerable deaths. Coming as it does from the pen of a poet, the Earth has added a new dimension to Bengali poetry. Poets before and after Fazal have expressed their deep and abiding love for this earth which is the home of human civilization. But no one before him in the history of Bengali poetry has expressed his agony and suffering so passionately as Fazal has done against man's remorseless effort to destroy the blessed earth which has given him so much to make his life happy, prosperous, cosy and comfortable.

VI

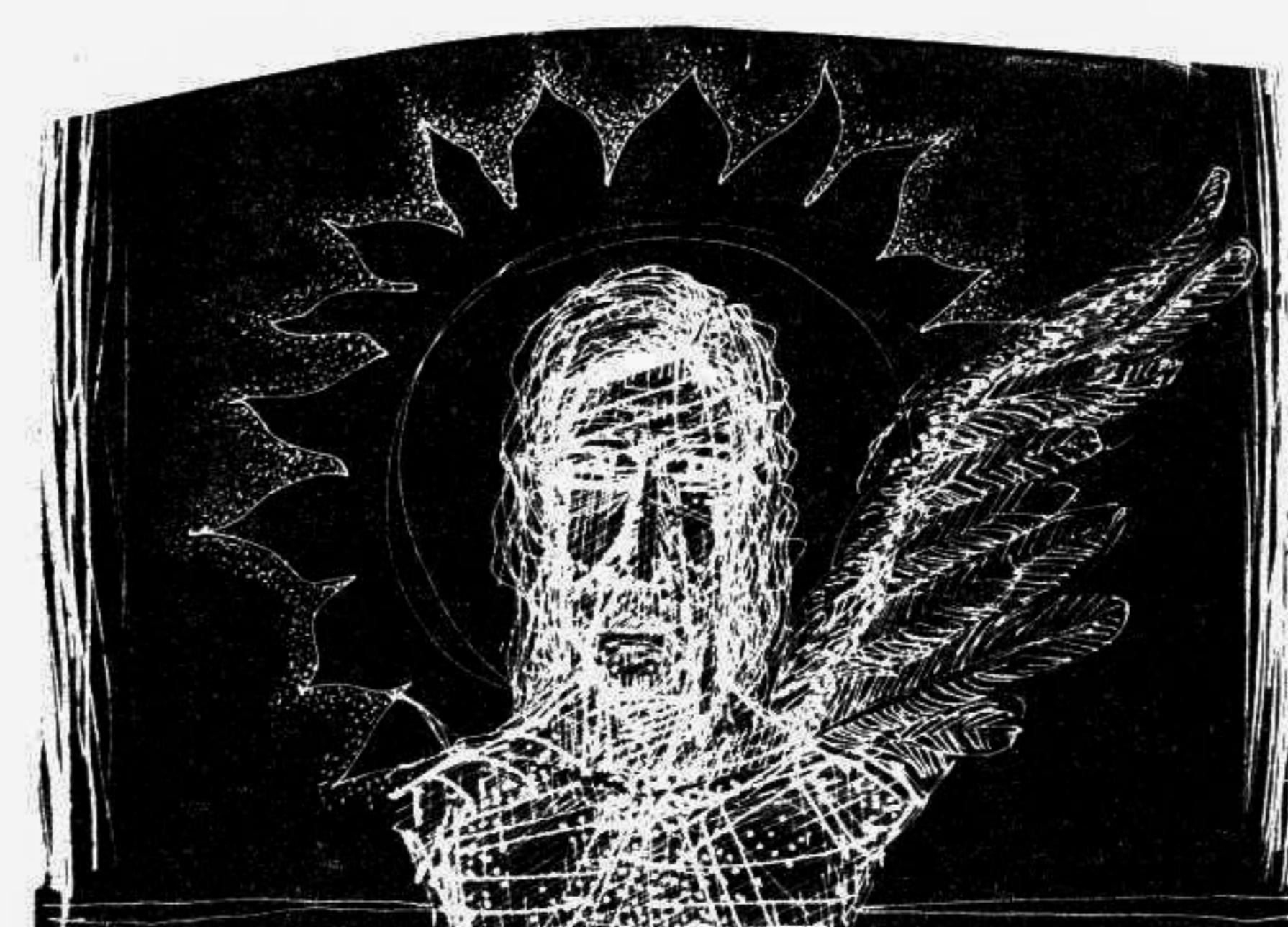
Mankind was the last to come to this world
Nonetheless man built first house on earth
brought fire under his control
and marked the inception of civilization
brought forth food from the womb of earth
told the world water is another name of life
wrenched from the sun rays
by amazing strategy
incredibly colourful magic of seven hues
From the whistle of wind, from the music of rain
from the rustling of leaves and cooing of birds
From the roar of seas
From the rumblings of clouds
He churned out essence to create
and eternal song.
He sang, He worshipped
He got lost in meditation
He burst himself with unthinkable
echoes and sounds of songs
He curved out of remorseless stones
first drawings on earth in his caves
to delineate paintings
From those depictions he created
immortal alphabets
From alphabets he created language
which pronounced eternal poetry
It helped write history of the world
Man's heart was made captive
in the wonderous palace of alphabets
Man was the last to come to this earth
But he was the first to build his home.

VII

Can we keep alive this earth
Can we keep it alive eternally, endlessly
Or at least until years equal to
those of the sun
Or until seven and a half hundred
crore years more.
Or die like dinosaur many many years ago
will man live until years
equal to those of the earth
Or will he die like dinosaur
many many years ago
Like world without wind and light
As huge trees have now faded out
As giant size birds have now been wiped out
Like them shall we also be exterminated
Long before the extinction of the sun and the earth
Shall we not remain alive on this planet
for a long time through innumerable deaths
or in perpetuity
Shall we die on day
from this lone world of ours for ever

VIII

Perhaps we will die
or may be we will have to go
another planet or near another the sun
Perhaps we may build our new nests
in light wind water fire and power
of another world
Is there any such world anywhere
Perhaps there is or may be there is none
If there is none
If we cannot transmigrate
to another world
What will happen then
What frightful is this knowledge
the tidings of destruction
What frightful is the proposal
To be expelled from this earth for ever
What terrible is this preparation



IX

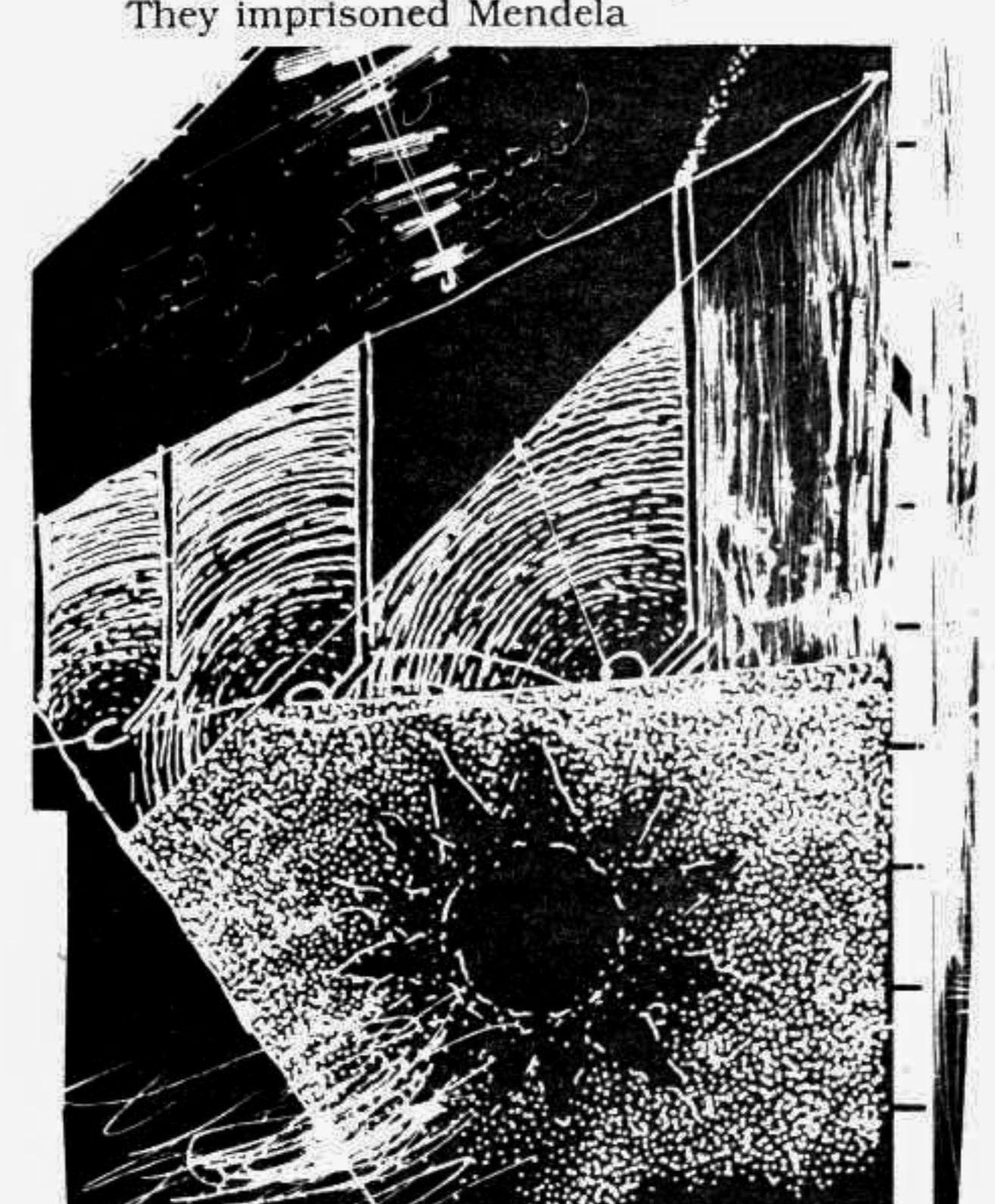
Life will exist eternally
on earth, planets and in realms of stars
Can we exist perpetually or eternally
How do we measure eternity in terms of time
To what extent eternity will extend
If man dies for ever

Who will live in this world
To extent world will undergo transformation
in land, ocean, moon light and darkness
causing extinction of man
like helpless wind
It is this universe, realms of stars,
the moon, planets and the space beyond,
round all these wind and water
in their endless splendour
Life's ceaseless sounds and reverberations
What changes will take place in them
When we will be no more
When men will be wiped out for ever
Who will occupy this world
Life form from other planets?
Will they be more civilized
developed than we are
Will they be infinitely more
civilized and developed
more intelligent, educated, wiser
and better scientists
who can live with fire and
windlessness and darkness
Will they capture this earth
from man, from all of us
They will seize this world from wails
They grab this world from tears
from gloom and agony
from love and eroticism
from poetry and music
They will capture this world
From morning, evening and night
churned out of boundless joy
Will mankind be excommunicated
one day from this earth
What a frightful truth is hanging
over our heads like killers sword.

X

Earth, my earth, O my earth
you believe me
O nature, O cosmos, O trees, oceans
and mountain
you believe
We want to live and want to let world live
Our march is towards life
Our struggle is for life
Our toil is for creation
Our conviction is against destruction
We want to live and let world live
Our song is a chorus for sowing seeds of crops
Our dance expresses joy of harvesting
Our poetry is concerted expression of mankind
Our paintings articulate indestructible
prayer for eternal life
Our science is a weapon

to help man live incessantly
Men want to live and let world live
O world, O nature, O melodious streams
of water, O murmuring leaves
Believe you me
Those who want to destroy or really destroys
are enemies of the world
They are not humanbeings
They enemies of humanity and of the world
They only wage wars at different ages
They manufacture arms of mass destruction
in different countries
They hanged unto death Benjamin Moloas
They imprisoned Mendela



They dropped bombs on Vietnam, Afghanistan
and filled air with nuclear fallout
They are enemies of the earth
They are enemies of humanity
They are enemies of nature
They want to destroy this lone world
Our struggle is against them
Earth O my earth
We humanbeings will not let them
destroy you
We will keep you alive for eternity
We will remain alive perpetually
through innumerable deaths
on earth which is the abode of mankind