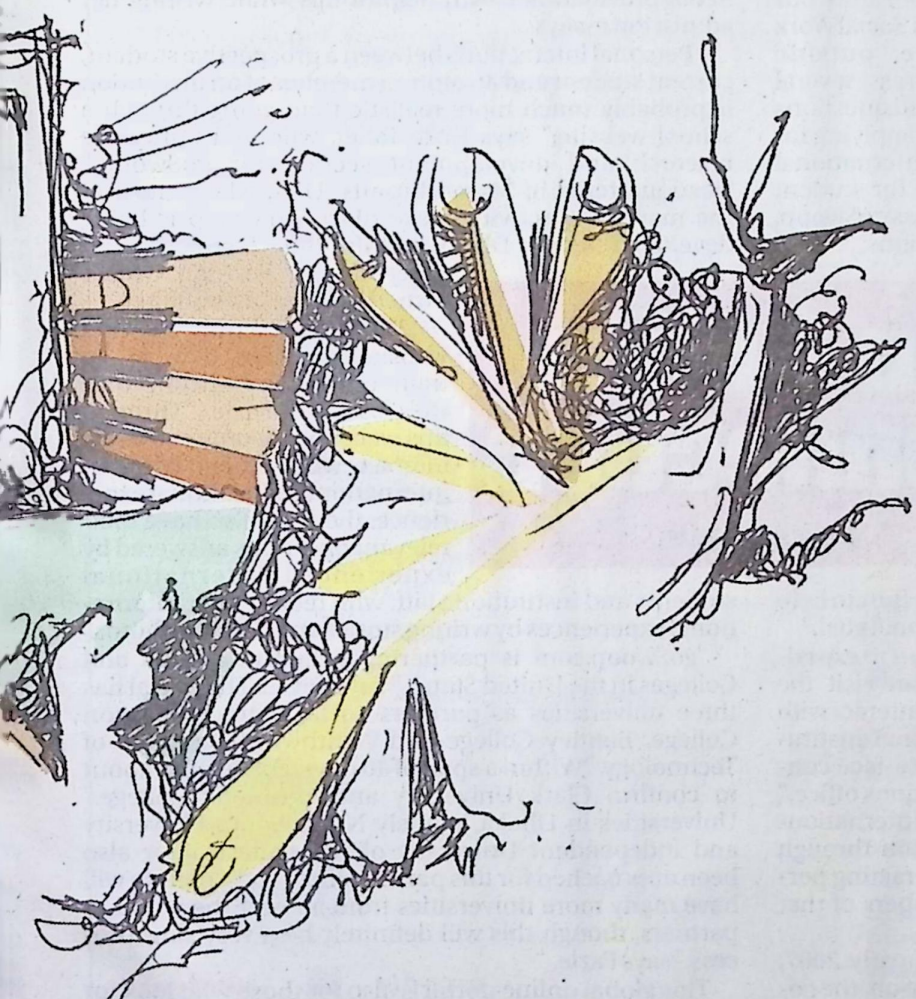
feathers of a preening, swaying Raga Jaunpuri, recognizable even to the writer's untrained and eavesdropping ears. Well, he should know by now, for he has been hearing this same raga over and over in the last few days. There it is again, the 'asthai' about the jangling anklets: 'Jhana-nana-baajey-payal-mori...'

Meanwhile, what does the sanguine singer think the poor writer is doing at his desk, if she at all knows that he



exists, and if she has any idea about how he suffers for his art? If only she knew that while she is skipping and dancing her soul away into a shimmering peacock of a song, he happens to be warming up to his art too, except that he does so quietly, invisibly. What she need not know is that his stretching exercises consist of nothing more confidence-building or 'note'-worthy than his ascending and descending the A-B-C's of some elusive string of words that hum in his mind, which when set down into written sentences transform into page after page of utter nonsense that he scrunches up and flings out, emitting only a tone-deaf expletive or two. All he has managed so far is a throat-clearing first sentence, while the neighbouring virtuoso, in her toned-up, pitch-perfect voice, is resoundingly into the concluding paragraphs of her well-articulated and properly punctuated raga.

Sigh! I don't care that the singer next door doesn't really exist; because the writer certainly does, as does the dilemma of all writers, which consists in their not having any self-affirming rituals or training exercises to help them further their craft. The blithely singing virtuoso without her moments of self-doubts may be an exaggeration, but the quietly suffering writer certainly is not. The act of writing is truly a solitary and silent job of no reassurances.

Of late, I feel that the full-throated writer warbling deep inside me has spent most of her writing life just practicing scales. Year after year, day after day, I seem to be going up and down the octaves of language, trilling awhile on a short story here or a column there; exercising the high notes of dialogue or fine-tuning a character for an unsung novel; dipping to the lowest 'sa' of the soul to emerge with a minor poem in C major; or blaring forth with an angular opinion essayed in B flat; and all, within the scales of frustrated literary harmonics.

But what else is there for a writer to do? How else is one to hone one's craft, tune-up, and tone the muscles? So, most days I continue to practice my literary scales and hum around the larger work I really want to write. Soon, it will arrive, my elusive verbal raga, sitting flighty and fleeting, at the nib-point of a distant branch. Today, I can only gesture towards it, scatter crumbs of words, toss bits of poetry and prose at it, all to lure the songster out of the leaves. I am willing to wait, chewing my pen as I gaze at that blank square window on my page where the wind sings among empty trees.

Maybe, one day as I work at my desk, practicing my scales on an article, a column, a story or a poem, I will hear the blue-green wings of my Muse come beating out of an unexpected sky and landing on my windowsill. Then, who knows, the song that seeps its colours onto my page could well be the distantly heard peacock-feathered, anklet- tinkling Raga Jaunpuri of my mind, and it would not be coming from my neighbour's garden. This time, the resounding 'antra' would emerge from the throat of my pen...

And now, back to the 'sargam.' ■