

REVIEW ESSAY

A Modern Master's Musings

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The Uncollected English Writings of Sudhindranath Datta, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri. With an introduction by Amiya Dev. Delhi: Chroniclebooks, 2008. 326pp. Rs. 650

Bengali readers passionately assert that the most hauntingly memorable modern poems in their language came out of the tormented soul of Jibananda Das. But they are also unlikely to deny that the most magisterial presence on the Calcutta poetry scene in the heyday of modernism, that is, from the thirties to the fifties, was the cosmopolitan and debonair Sudhindranath Datta (1901-60).

Born into an illustrious Bengali family -- father Hirenranath Datta was a highly successful lawyer and much admired Vedic scholar -- he was educated at Annie Besant's Theosophical school in Benares and Scottish Church College, Calcutta, but abandoned plans to follow in his father's footsteps after five years as an articled clerk, and while dedicating himself wholeheartedly to literature also ran through a bewildering assortment of jobs: secretary to the literarily named Light of Asia Insurance Company, officer in the Air Raids Protection Service, assistant editor of The Statesman, PR man for the Damodar Valley Corporation, director of the Calcutta branch of the Institute of Public Opinion. Perhaps the most congenial employment he ever had was teaching part-time for two years in the comparative literature department at Jadavpur University. Towards the end of his life he made an abortive attempt to launch "an English quarterly of Asian writing" -- *The Asian Review*, as he proposed to call it.

Even as an aspiring poet Sudhindranath attracted the attention of Rabindranath Tagore, with whom he travelled to America in 1929; this was the first of a number of sojourns in the West. Back home in Calcutta, in 1931 he launched *Parichay*, a journal modelled on Eliot's *Criterion*, which during his twelve-year association with it exerted a seminal influence on modern Bengali letters. Datta's reputation in Bengali literature rests securely on the five volumes of his mature verse and two collections of critical essays, though the forbiddingly erudite diction of both restrict his readership to highbrow circles. There is also an Anglophone Datta that should always appeal to discerning readers. An earlier volume, *The World at Twilight* (Delhi: OUP, 1970), with a preface by Malcolm Muggeridge and an informative introduction by Edward Shils, Datta's friends both, included his own English translations of ten of his poems, a lone poem written in English, plus several essays on art, literature and his native city; the title piece, a 100-page autobiographical fragment; and several critical essays translated from Bengali by others. It now transpires that the original English writings there were only a fraction of the total output. Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri has rendered yeoman service to Indian English letters by presenting the remaining pieces -- or almost all of them -- along with a useful introduction by Professor Amiya Dev. Missing is 'Tagore: The Unbeaten Pioneer', first published in the *Statesman Sunday Magazine* on 15 October 1939 and later reprinted in the paper's Tagore Centenary issue; perhaps it isn't preserved in Professor Chaudhuri's main source of material, the Datta Archives at Jadavpur University.



Together with the earlier book, the present volume should firmly place Datta among the finest prose stylists in English from this subcontinent. The title is well chosen, finely balancing the two poles of Datta's sensibility. Datta was equally a poet and an intellectual, and while his balanced periodic sentences resonate with the authoritativeness of a Dr. Johnson, they also reflect a philosophical cast of mind that may seem more Teutonic than Asian, or anything else for that matter: certainly not Anglo-Saxon, and not even Gallic, though Datta's aesthetic is derived chiefly from Mallarme and the Symbolists. Yet, the ideational ballast is exquisitely leavened by an effervescent wit, so that in scattered aphoristic flashes he sounds like a cross between Thomas Mann and Oscar Wilde:

1. '...with the passage of years, the gorgeous ideologies have grown threadbare, revealing underneath the same old lust for power as was hidden within the folds of Richelieu's red robe; and being exactly as old as the present century, I must, alas, be partial to the past and hostile to the future.' (57)

2. '...the second law of Thermodynamics does not rule the world of spirit.' (57)

3. '...post-war Europe was fantastically sophisticated, and a suicidal skepticism was the only recognized vocation for an intelligent man.' (300)

4. '...vigilance must be exercised to prevent science from taking the place of religion; and having in course of a century performed miracles, encouraged mysteries and evolved a priestly hierarchy, science, since the advent of Einstein, has become abstruse enough to sound oracular.' (120-1)

5. 'It is easy to confuse between the categorical imperative and self-interest' (162)

6. 'progress, that changeless eddy round a hungry vacuum.' (233)

7. 'should logic desert us in our hour of need, there is invective always ready at hand.'

The book's 80 odd items, which include published and/or finished essays alongside disjecta membra, are usefully divided into five sections, the most substantial one being devoted, rather surprisingly, to 'Politics and Society'. Though many of the topics may be of merely historical interest today, these will survive as *literature*, as, needless to add, will the essays, reviews and radio talks on art, literature and culture. "The Necessity of Poetry" is an Eliotesque gem, less than four pages long, eminently suitable for Critical Theory courses. Three hitherto unpublished essays on culture, "The Evolution of Durga", "Sartorial Habits of the Hindus" and "Holi: The Feast of Spring", are quite delightful, packed with information and leavened with critical good sense. My favourite is the last-named, with its celebratory evocation of the robust paganism of *Madanotsava*, of which Holi seems to be a rather degenerate descendant.

Contrary to the popular image of Datta as a highbrow elitist, he emerges in these pieces as a liberal thinker with broad sympathies and complex responses. He acknowledges that "much of what is really worthwhile in India today can be derived, even if in a roundabout way, from the days of British rule", but without Nirad Chaudhuri's brassy assertiveness; there is indeed a mood of world-weariness in his examination of "The Legacy of the Raj," for, "history", after all, "has no room for regrets". In youth he was rather enamoured of the Russian Revolution, and though in later years he could condemn Communism as "this noxious weed", on the whole his mature intellectual deliberations evince a fruitful engagement with Marxism. Datta ghosted a proposal for *The Marxian Way* for its editor, M. N. Roy, and contributed several memorable essays to it. Most readers of "The Liberal Retrospect", certainly this reviewer, will go along with him when he meets Marxism halfway: "certain though I am that economic interpretation of an entire civilization is impossible, I am convinced that no culture trait is wholly understandable except in relation to its material preconditions".

As for Datta's positive philosophy, "Freedom of Expression", gives a cautious endorsement to "the scientific attitude, which consists in recognizing that facts and their interrelations constitute the whole of reality", before registering a somewhat Emersonian caveat: "this child should be encouraged to discover for himself, and not to accept on the authority of his teachers" -- for there is a danger that science may turn into an authoritarian institution.

In an extraordinary essay, "Whiggism, Radicalism and Treason in Bengal", first delivered as a lecture at the Progressive Writers' Conference held in Calcutta in 1938, Datta delineates a critical conspectus of Bengali culture down the ages and confidently asserts the primacy of the region's folk heritage over the modern trends spawned by colonialism. Datta's own modernism is downplayed by implication -- an admirable instance of robust self-criticism. Datta

forcefully presents a number of perspicacious observations that deserve to be highlighted.

Bengali society was "naturally egalitarian" and irreverent towards authority, including religious authority, whether Hindu or Muslim. Consequently "no religious literature, in the narrow sense of the phrase, ever developed in Bengal." When Hindu myths were used, the gods were often caricatured.

The "interaction of Hinduism and Islam, throughout the Middle Ages and later was so instinctive and extensive" that the communalism rife in pre-Partition Bengal could only be explained as "the demonic irony of history". Not only was "Bengali literature... ushered into existence by the imaginative sympathy of a Mohammedan king," but "Hindus and Muslims participated in the immemorial fairs and collective festivals where, in rude verse, man sang of his community with man."

It is inaccurate to attribute mysticism in the strict sense to traditional Bengali literature, for it is rooted in a "life-religion" that emphasizes "immanence rather than transcendence, tolerance rather than orthodoxy. Thanks to the influence of "pragmatic Buddhism", Chandidas "our first considerable poet," is humanistic and "eminently rationalistic". Similarly "the term 'mystic', meaning non-logical," is inapplicable to the "Bauls, who, whether they were Vaishnavas or Shaktas, Hindus or Mussalmans, all alike went about the towns and villages of Bengal, announcing that, even in spiritual matters, independence and integrity were safer guides than authority and conformism." We might call them Gnostics.

Given these aspects of native Bengali culture, "Radicalism, with its superficial emphasis on the individual, contained nothing that was intrinsically foreign to the Bengali genius." Hence the spectacle of Bengal as "the first oriental playground of the eighteenth-century Whigs and their nineteenth-century successors, the Philosophical Radicals."

Intellectuals like Ram Mohan Roy hailed this cultural intervention as a progressive phenomenon, and initially it did release tremendous creative energy. Thus we find Michael Madhusudan Dutt, "the first progressive in British India", "recreating the Bengali epic on what at first seemed like exotic examples, but which reflection has proved to be essentially indigenous." Unlike most of his contemporaries and successors, Michael Dutt was fully aware that the idea of progress "is always teleological, implying thereby that the past is no less important than the future and the present is of no moment whatever, except insofar as it is the halting point for determination of our temporary position." This "enabled him to borrow without committing plagiarism."

Similarly, the followers of Chandidas had "imported the emotionalism of the Sufis to counteract the prevailing objectivity of the current Bengali verse." And Tagore famously imbibed Wordsworthian nature-mysticism. Unfortunately, his admirers mistakenly attributed this aspect of Tagore to the native Bengali tradition.

Datta sketches a resolutely populist view of tradition, declaring that to "the progressive... tradition becomes more important than experiment... It is a growing thing, like the climbing house of a self-made man who, with increasing prosperity, goes on adding storey to storey; and while the soaring superstructure constantly alters the appearance of

the developing building, it is the original foundation -- which all, except the humble denizens of the basement, forget -- that determines every fresh alteration. In other words, not the introspecting intellectuals but the enduring masses are the guardians of tradition and directors of progress; and whatever be the calibre of the experimenter, unless he passes the pragmatic test of his people, the facts he would fondly establish are febrile dreams, and the truths he would loudly proclaim are maniac's fancies." In his view of tradition and individual creativity, as also in his reservations regarding science, Datta seems to anticipate the powerful contemporary critique of modernity, spearheaded in India by Ashis Nandy.

Ram Mohan Roy made the error of "thinking that the British were anything but accidental in releasing the indigenous forces of progress which... reside in the masses." Datta thinks that "the common people, throughout the long years of Moghul feudalism, had been weighted down at certain unshifting points." The impact of British rule disturbed these points without "altering the substance of the burden; and the readjustment of the weight was enough to cause resurgence of vitality into the decrepit social body. That source of perennial energy has choked up again, not with decayed leaves as on the last occasion, but with weeds of foreign extraction -- the Bengali middle class."

Writers after Michael Dutt have been increasingly neglectful of the duty of maintaining a vital connection with the native tradition, with the result that the reader has become alienated from "the advanced writers of today... because we have forgotten that progressive mutation is possible only with the same genus, and disregard for this unexceptionable rule leads to sterile hybridization."

If cultural energy of the masses is tapped, "this narrowly national channel will end by bursting its particular bond -- in much the same way as Jamini Roy's intensely Bengali technique, which will remind you of Giotto and Holbein, of Van Gogh and Picasso, of the unknown sculptors of India, Africa and Mexico... he alone among his contemporaries understands that the traditional artist, being more natural than the experimental one, has, paradoxically, the greatest affinity with the Universal Man who, whether in fact he exists or not, must at least be imaginatively rediscovered in every living art." Datta admits that "the crisis in our culture is of class origin"; and places his "forlorn hope of regeneration in the people, who are permanently beyond class and thus eternally outside crisis."

Given the differences between the painter's medium and the poet's, a "Jamini Roy of Bengali poetry" may well be an impossibility, but making allowances for these differences one might venture to suggest the name of Jibananda Das. Of all the Bengali modernists he was the only one with a vital connection with our rural world and its timeless folk culture. Yet Sudhindranath Datta remained largely indifferent to his work, a blind spot in an otherwise astute critical vision.

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Indian Poets Writing in English

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Poetry volumes--especially books and publications of single poets, of new poets--now have become hard to market outside of libraries and literature classes. As editor Jeet Thayil (60 Indian Poets, Penguin India, 2008) observed ruefully in his introduction, "unlike Indian novelists, poets receive no advances; their books are usually out of print; even the best known among them have trouble finding publishers and are virtually unknown outside India." He could have been writing--excepting the very select few--about poets in general, anywhere. Poetry published today therefore tend to be anthologies, collections which cover all bases and are geared towards appealing to as broad a range of readers as possible. So it's not surprising to see that this poetry volume by Penguin India is an anthology: there are obviously market calculations that have been made. But let's not quibble: it's a welcome event to see a publisher put money and time into publishing a poetry volume.

Jeet Thayil, himself a poet, has put together an interesting, individual and eclectic assortment of Indian poets writing in English. Accompanying it is an introduction which unapologetically makes the case for such a selection. In it Jeet does stingingly engage with the "writers in the regional languages" (the "anti-English brigade" including among them Buddhadev Bose) who accuse Indians who write in English as "lacking authenticity". Is that so, Jeet asks, noting that "Nirmal Verma, the distinguished Hindi novelist, said Indian writers in English were unable to link themselves to 'the culture of their region, its real life, its metaphors and images'." He compared them, unfavourably, to writers such as himself whose 'language links me to a tradition of 5000 years, to the medieval writers, the Bhakti poets, to the Sanskrit classics and also connects me to the philosophical texts of Indian culture'. This... is a large claim, impossible to substantiate. And Verma's own novels are fine character studies of not belonging anywhere: they mine not the arguable linear heritage of Indian literature, but the decade he spent in Prague in the sixties. Like Ashokamitran's, his books have been translated into English--for an Indian readership!

The volume contains many poets that the average reader of Anglophone poets will not have heard of. Jeet's argument in favour of their inclusion is that Indian poets writing in English today "live not in Calcutta or Bombay, but throughout the world; what they have in common is English", that most such poetry anthologies "chose depth over breadth", with a resultant "claustrophobic" narrowness of the same poems by the same dozen poets. It was time for a "rethinking of the enterprise", a rethinking that obviously led Jeet Thayil to choose a wider community of sixty poets "separated by the sea" but linked by language and "my preference for craft". So one gets, along with the standard anthology names such as Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, G.S. Sharat Chandra, Vikram Seth, Kamala Das and Arun Kolatkar, poets whose names are seldom seen in such collections: Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Mukta Sambrani, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan. Not the least of the enjoyments of this volume are the black-and-white photos of the 'senior' poets sprinkled throughout the pages as well as the inclusion of two essays, one by Bruce King on Ezekiel, Moraes and Kolatkar and the other A.K. Mehrotra's 'What Is an Indian Poem'.

Quite a few of the lesser-known poets are Americans of Indian origin. It lends to the volume a distinctly American air, and may be an indication of the future shape of Indian poetry in English to come, with a sizeable chunk of it produced by Indians residing, or born, in the United States, reflecting themes, forms, and rhythms influenced by American speech, preoccupations, temperament, and perhaps academia. While that particular air and general prospect may be off-

putting to some readers, very few will deny that this anthology of poems makes for an invigorating, and bracingly different, reading.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Manohar Shetty was born in 1953 in Bombay, a city he left for Goa. The Goa in his poems is not the one of tourist brochures, but a place of unchecked development, enduring ambivalence, corruption and fatigue. Much like the Bombay he left.

May

The gardens are agog
With bougainvillea and buttercup.
Wild berries carpet the backyard.
Pepper vines blister round
Tree trunks, and pumpkins,
Fecund as eggs, fatten in the shade.
Incense in the frangipani.
Succulence in the cactus.
Dreadlocks of dates
Garland the wild palm

This, then, is your plot of heaven.
Or heaven's plot, his wry response.

Screenings from the quarry
Film the air, gas spirals
From refinery chimneys
Silvery as guided missiles.
The river is a shallow pond
Of foam-tipped buffaloes and belly-up fish.

Sugarcane, that tall grass,
Keels dryly over the paddy fields'
Brittle rectangles; starved millet
Is scarred by congress weed.
The cloudless sky is a taut mask.
Sweat drops from his eyelids.

In the far horizon, the highway
Glitters like tin.

Jeet Thayil was born in 1959 to a Syrian Christian family, and educated in Hong Kong, Bombay and New York. He has produced four books of poems in which a wide array of forms--ghazals, sonnets, the sestina, the canzone, terza rima, rhymed syllabics, stealth rhymes--map a terrain of history and grief.

The Heroin Sestina

What was the point of it? The stoned
life, the chased, snorted, shot life. Some low
comedy with a cast of strangers. Time
squashed flat: The 1001 names of heroin
chewed like language. Nothing now to know
or, remember but the dirty taste

of it, and the names: snuff, Death, a little taste,
H--pronounce it etch--; sugar, brownstone,
scag, the SHIT, ghoda gaddi, #4 china, You-Know,
garad, god, the gear, Junk, monkey blow,
the law, the habit, material, cheez, heroin.
The point? It was wasted time,

which comes back lovely sometimes,
A ghost sense say, say that hard ache taste
back in your throat, the warm heroin
drip, the hit, the rush, the whack, the stone.

You want it now, the way it lays you low,
flattens everything you know

to a thin white line. I'm saying, I know
the pull of it: the skull rings time
so beautiful, so low
you barely hear it. Itch this blind toad taste.
When you said, 'I mean it, we live like stones,'
you broke something in me only heroin

could fix. The thick sweet amaze of heroin,
helpless its love, its know-
ledge of the infinite. Why push the stone
back up the hill? Why not leave it with the time-
keep, asleep at the bar? Try a little taste
of something sweet that a sweet child will adore, low

in the hips where the aches all go. Allow
me in this one time and I'll give you heroin,
just a taste
to replace the useless stuff you know.
Some say it comes back, the time
to punish you with the time you killed, leave you stone

sober, unknowing, the happiness chemical blown
From your taste stem, unable to hear the word heroin
without wanting its stone one last time.

Gopal Honnalgere (1942-2003) is a now mostly forgotten poet. Born in Karnataka, he taught art and writing at the Oasis School in Hyderabad. He published six books, all of which are out of print. He died in abject circumstances. An enigmatic figure who corresponded with major Western poets, he was once asked by Robert Lowell, "If you use thoughts so violently to reject thoughts, why do you write a poem using your head?"

How to Tame a New Pair of Chappals

don't leave them together
don't allow them to talk to each other
they may form a trade union
don't at anytime leave them near
a wall clock, law books, a calendar, the national flag,
gandhi's portrait, or a newspaper
they may hear about
independence, satyagraha,
holidays, working hours, minimum wages, corruption

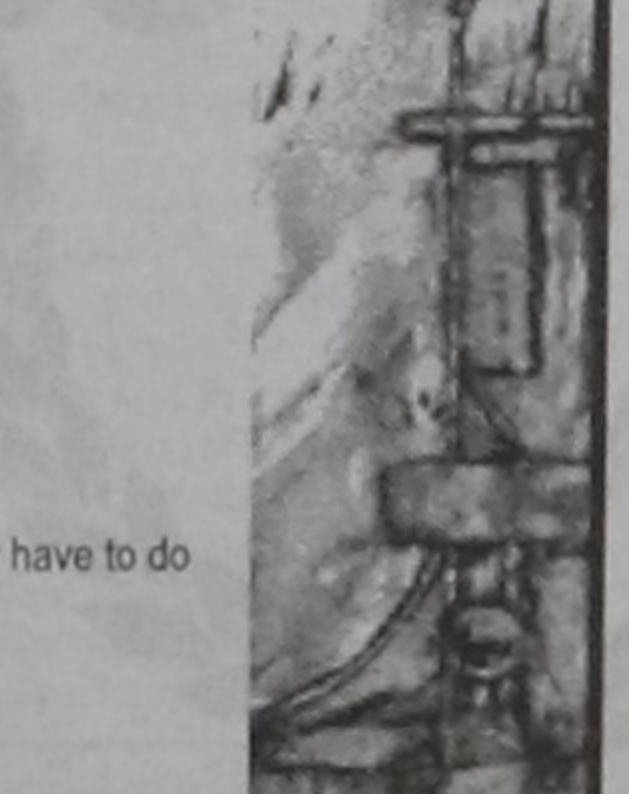
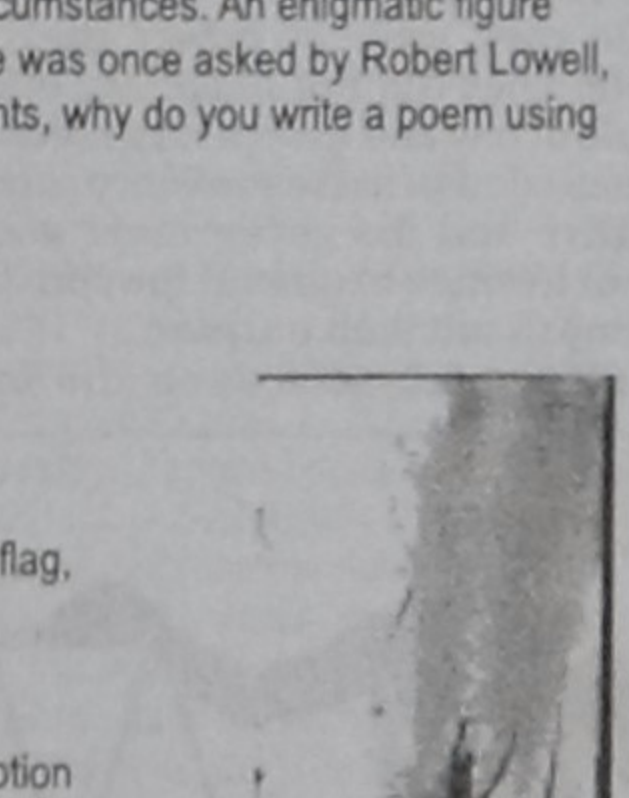
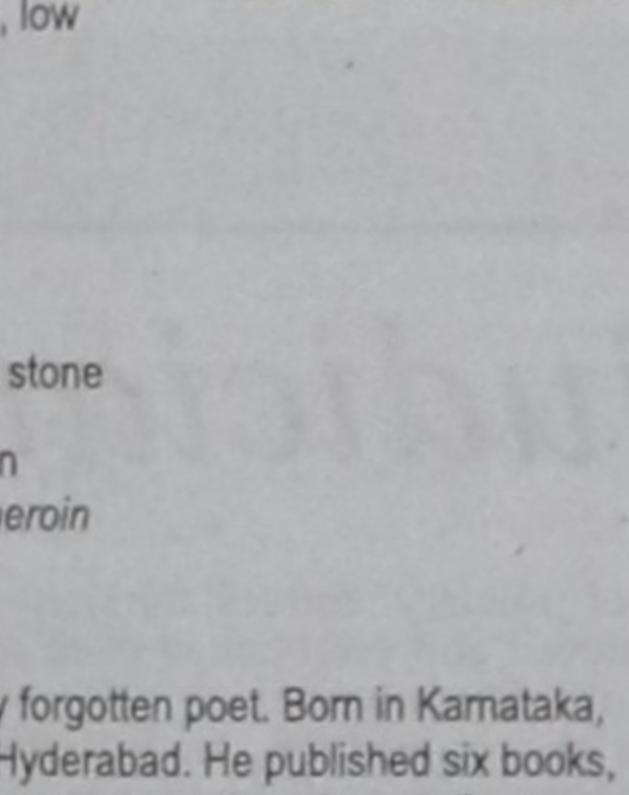
don't take them to your temple
they may at once know you are weak
your god is false and they may bite you

don't let them near your dining table
they may ask for food
or cast their evil eyes on your dinner

first use them only for short walks
then gradually increase the distance
they should never know the amount of work they have to do

pull their tight straps loose
let them feel happiness
they are growing bigger
smear some old oil on the rough straps
let them feel they are anointed

now they are good subdued labourers
ready to work overtime
for your fat feet



Marketing India

FARIDA SHAMSUDDIN

There are certain Indians who make you feel good about being a Bangladeshi, who give you a warm glow that despite all that razzmatazz and heavyweight tiffin boxes and big brains like Amartya, they too produce and consume their quota of trash. Shobhaa De is one of them. She is a writing phenomenon, whose books sell all over India, and in Pakistan too (where all the good and high society people fell over each other to fete her when she did a tour there not so many months back), and bring in a hefty chunk of change for her publishers Penguin India. Since I have never read any of her books, I only had a vague idea that she wrote romance novels. That's going by the perhaps less than solid evidence of having seen her on Zee TV a couple of times flaunting her cheekbones.

She was once a film journalist, and the style has stayed with her, as witness the writing in this collection of her articles titled *Superstar India: From Incredible To Unstoppable!* She picks a topic, any topic, Benazir Bhutto, her Brahmin childhood, old people, Dalits, cricket, NRIs, and dashes off her views. But she is most herself writing on her trips abroad, to Shanghai, London or Bangkok, which can at times be funny, but always is primed to showcase her as a tasteful, charming, older, discriminating crumpet. It is a lethally appetizing diet for the average middle-class English language reader, primarily women, running harried from day to endless day, since it provides, as opposed to the straight porn of romance novels, the more tangible, more 'real life' porn of the romance of the high life. Especially if mixed in with such musings as: "Hate creates votebanks. Tolerance doesn't. It's that simple." Underpinning all this is a not-so-subtle India boosting (witness the title, the big clue!) where the formula is to give the bad news first: Yes, yes, India is smelly with its terrible roads and lepers-beggars, and then the good news: So you think the West is so terrific with its tasteless ham-and-cheese sandwiches and East European migrant waiters with undecipherable accents? Then comes the clincher: So where would you be, in India with its silks and colours and raths, or over there somewhere?

In present day Manmohan Singh's India, with its trendy ads, its singles in 'swinging' Bangalore, its fashion world and Hindi soaps, it is Shobhaa De, not India, that is unstoppable. She's figured out how to market Brand India (40,000 copies hit the bookstores on the first day, which is a huge run for an English language book even in the Indian book market). If you're so inclined you'll enjoy the book.

I couldn't go beyond the first 50 pages, then I skimmed it, but only because the editor of this page said I had to submit a review. No thanks to him.

Farida Shamsuddin lives in the USA and is currently traveling in India.

Errata

Haste lays waste to everything, including genres and categories, and plays genius host to the printer's devil. In the last issue (September 6) of the Literature Page, 'Lunch' was published as 'Non-Fiction' when it should have gone under 'Short Stories'. We sincerely regret the error.

---The Literary Editor