

A SORT OF NATIONAL EPIC FOR BANGLADESH:
KAISER HAQ'S THE TRIUMPH OF THE SNAKE GODDESS

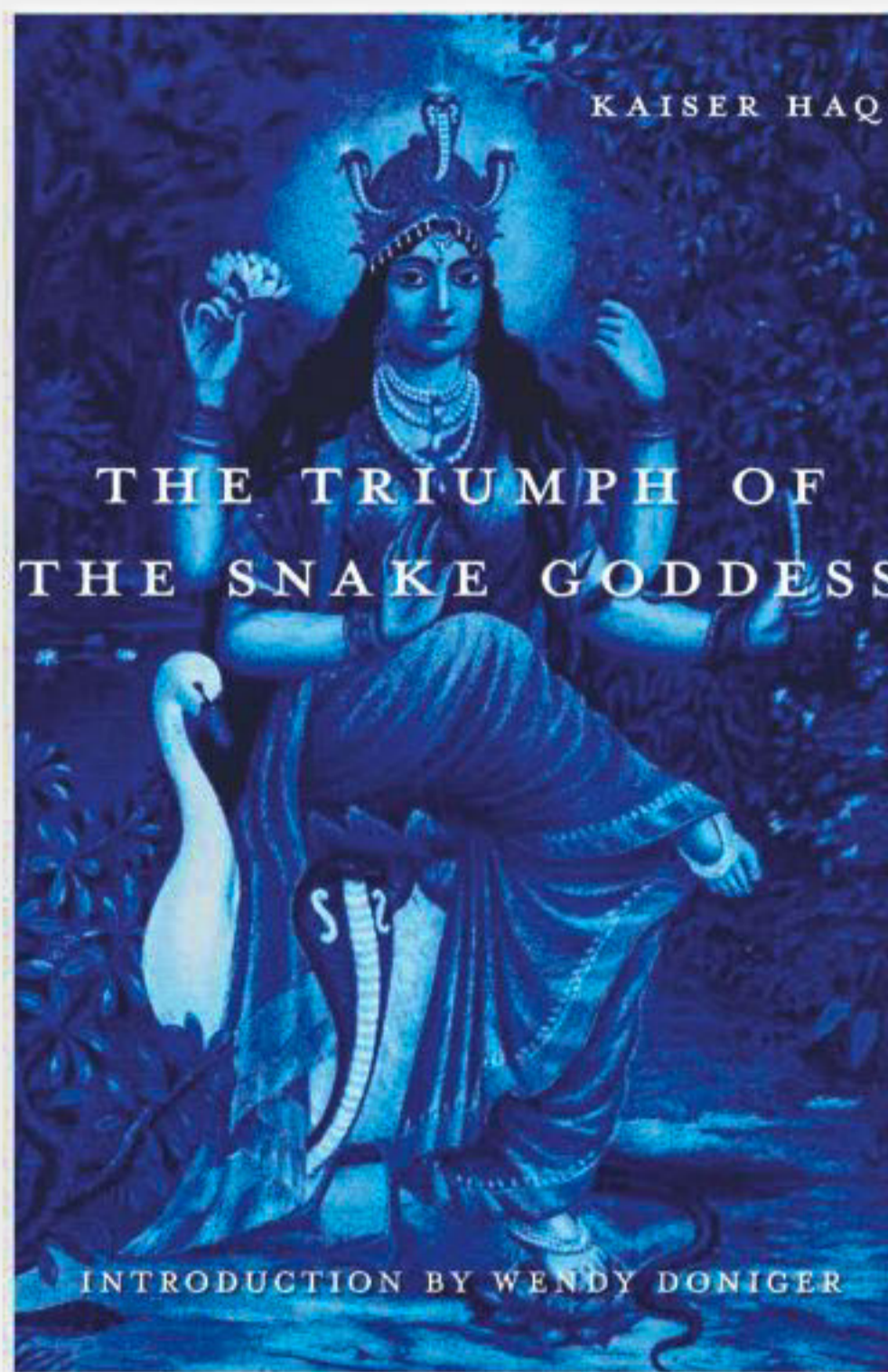
FAKRUL ALAM

Kaiser Haq, *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*.
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2015

Kaiser Haq's *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* is a delightful read. Clearly, his story of the snake goddess Manasa is a work of immense scholarship and the result of much intense study of not easily accessible medieval Bengali texts. Clearly, too, Haq had to spend hours and hours stitching together his tale of Manasa's ascension to the regional pantheon from the many extant versions of her activities. But what is truly amazing is how lightly Haq wears his scholarship and how entertaining and accessible is the story he narrates; his telling of the snake goddess's adventures is sparkling, racy, bawdy and flavored with witty moments that make the work a wonderful comic epic in prose for our times.

Take, for instance, the story of Shiva's dalliances in Part One, which is titled, "In the Divine Realm." You might think that this mighty God, fabled as "the destroyer," and as a member of the Holy Trinity of Hindu Gods (along with Brahma the Creator and Vishnu the Preserver), would be presented to mere mortals only as ascetic and awe-inspiring. But in Haq's retelling of events in the life of this divine ancestor of the snake goddess, Shiva comes off as seductive, raunchy and given to casual philandering; his bordello visits thus drive his wife Chandī to distraction. After all, "he was Lingaraj, lord of the phallus, the epitome of male potency" and Chandī has to resort to all kind of subterfuges to keep him within bounds every now and then.

Time and again, Haq adds innumerable deft idiosyncratic touches to his story of gods and goddesses so that we don't see them as denizens of ethereal realms; his narrative aims to let readers know that these are supernatural beings of a folk tradition that humanizes immortals in any which way it can. Evidently, Haq would like to continue in that tradition in every possible way. His narrative strategy, in other words, is to bring the deities down to the level of the readers; he wants us to be always aware that what he is following, after all, is an oral tradition where anthropomorphic characterizing is the rule and not the exception. Thus Padma, aka Manasa, Shiva's daughter from his second wife, Ganga,



summons the master builder Vishwakarma, famed as the "master builder of the divine realm" and offers him—guess what!—a *paan* before discussing his commission that will lead to a city of fabulous proportions. When she has that house built, Padma celebrates in the appropriate way—by having—guess again!—a "lively housewarming party with her siblings and friends."

As anyone channel hopping with a remote in our times knows, this is the era of Hindi "mythologicals"; they appear, at times, to be simply unavoidable on our television sets no matter how much you abominate them. Small wonder, then, that Haq's often post-modern retelling of the popular gods and goddesses of this part of South Asia, resorts so ingeniously and uncannily to TV serials (or Hindi films) in depicting the subterfuges of his immortals. For example, when the great God Vishnu takes on the guise of "the enchantress" Mohini to disable demons, she dresses up like the femme fatale of the sub-continental silver screen.

Eyebrows "excitingly animated," "pink lips" pouting, she has a figure that makes her a repository of "sex appeal." Indeed, so provocative and distracting is she in her sari that she can "even distract the most assiduously meditating ascetic"! In the second part of *The Snake Goddess*, which brings the narrative down to the realm of the merchant king, Chand, from the ethereal one, Padma decides to tame the hostile earthly sovereign any which way she can. One of her attempts to disable him is straight out of a Hindi film, for she becomes "an attractive flower girl, comely and curvaceous, revealing dazzling and swaying body parts, partly due to "the clinging style of her sari!" Let us miss the point, Haq's narrator underscores it a couple of pages later with the arch observation that Padma has here "all the physical endowments and accoutrements loved by writers of erotic literature." And for good measure, Haq, a poet of eminence, gives us music too to accompany the visual image, deftly describing the seductress moving to the accompaniment of "toe rings attached by the chain to anklets with tiny tinkling bells." But as Haq observes in his excellent "Prologue" it is Behula, wife of Manasa's most persistent antagonist Chand, who is "the central star" of the "folk block buster," Behula's climactic dance performance before Shiva, Haq adds drolly in his introductory pages, "has all the primal allure of a Bollywood number."

Nevertheless, Haq's narrative of the eventual triumph of the snake goddess over her foes and detractors is not unserious; his tale has its moral aspects as any good telling of divine myths—folk or not—must have. It is replete too with historically significant and anthropologically astute moments. As with all stories that deal with the gods and heroes but have their roots in ordinary moments in a nation's history and cultural practices that have left their mark on generations, we are given lessons and illustrations of way to deal with the unforeseen in any number of ways. Repeatedly, the narrative is interspersed with sententious comments about the inevitability of fate, so appropriate in a deltaic world where life was lived precariously even at the best of times. A kind of stoicism and regular prayers

to the unforeseen forces that seem to control destinies are the lessons/ practices prescribed repeatedly in the tale. Yama, god of death, is therefore admonished by Padma, albeit in Haq's whimsical telling, in the following manner: "You have your portfolio, but don't try to overstep its limits." In other words, in a world where everything is written, one must stick to one's place, whether in the divine world or the lower one. The moral pronounced to Chand's wife Sonaka by Padma, disguised as her "auntie", is typically a simple but profound one: "Where there is life, there is death, and yet life must go on"

As for history, which is the bedrock of all mythical tales, no matter how otherworldly or improbable they may appear to be, Haq notes how at one point in their retelling, the Manasa tales incorporated important episodes in the history of Bengal, such as the coming of the Muslims to the region. Indeed, Haq comments in his very incisive as well as helpful "Prologue" that not only "much can be gleaned about life in Bengal between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries from the Manasa extant tales that he used as his sources" but also that "much of what we learn from them is still true of traditional life in the countryside." Shrewdly, he instances the incident of the six sons of Chand trying *panta bhaat* after being told of this concoction by a poor classmate of this watered rice dish served in an age without refrigeration in poor households. This, he suggests archly, is both an instance of the "rich-poor divide, as well as the tendency among the fortune to enjoy slumming", as seen even now in the Bengali New Year's Day celebrations in present-day Bangladesh.

Haq points out how the Hassan and Hossein episode of the narrative he has reconstructed is indicative of the part played by some Muslim settlers in "extending agriculture in Bengal". To him the signs of prosperity that one can adduce from the Hassan-Hossein episodes reveal the opulence of Bengal in the days of the Bengal Sultans. Of sociological interest in the narrative is the synthesis of different religious traditions he has been able to achieve from the extant versions. Wisdom for everyday life also abounds as when a courtier tries to impress Chand with a truth that he knows cannot be underestimated: "Trade and commerce are the

economic backbone of a nation, the source of *artha*, wealth." Indeed, Haq states in his Prologue that the enduring as well as the syncretic nature of the Manasa tales makes it possible for him to side with someone like Professor Muhammad Shahjahan Mian, a scholar who has done extensive works on the central Manasa narrative, when he sees it as the "national epic" of Bangladesh.

Certainly, *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* has its epic moments. While in the first part we have episodes set in the high heavens and depiction of cataclysmic churning on earth, in the second part we have the epic sea voyage of the merchant king down the Gangetic delta and into the Bay of Bengal, and Behula's unforgettable river journey for her spouse's sake. For good measure, we have moments with some *mastans* or hoodlums of the underworld, for we must know that its "big boss" Yama and "his minions" forever intend to "threaten the stability of the universe as a whole." I particularly delighted in the description of Behula's bodice, for not merely is this a wonderful instance of Haq's luxuriant imagination but also a reminder—intertextually—that Manasa's tale belongs to the tradition of epic poetry so classically established with Homer's *Iliad* and so superbly evoked in W.H. Auden's poetic re-imagining of the shield of Achilles.

Kaiser Haq's achievement in *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess* is thus manifold. Deftly and ingeniously, he has written a sort of national epic for Bangladeshis that is also an updating of a traditional folk epic (if we can be generous in assessing such claims and not bigoted or pedantic) as well as a tale of gods and goddesses and mortals mired in the web woven by destiny—in other words, a work in the tradition of the major epics of the world. He has given us a work that we can delight in with scholarship that can entertain as well as edify. I can only hope that this elegantly produced Harvard University Press book will be available for readers in the subcontinent at a price or in an edition that is accessible and affordable; the effort and creativity Haq has put into his tale deserve nothing less.

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The Triumph of the Snake Goddess: an excerpt

Behula silently prayed to Padma and stepped on the walkway. Even a fly falling on it was sliced instantly. Nothing happened to Behula. Her chastity was proven; Neta continued with her toward the heavens.

Behula was delighted to see Amaravati, Indra's celestial home, once again. Neta asked her to wait at Neta's place while she went to inform Padma.

"Behula is here," Neta told Padma. "Now resurrect Chand's son and he will worship you all his life."

Padma curtly replied, "You've got things mixed up, Neta. How can I

revive Lakshmindar when he has gone to Yamapur, the underworld realm? Tell Sahé's daughter to go home."

Lakshmindar, of course, hadn't been confined in the underworld. Padma was fibbing—for a purpose; so Neta went to Behula and solemnly told her that Padma wouldn't revive Lakshmindar and that she should go home.

Behula began crying again. Neta said, "Stop crying, I'll find a solution. Go and meet your old *vidyadhari* friends, especially Chandramukhi. Then give a

performance before Shiva. If he is pleased with the performance, he may resuscitate Lakshmindar."

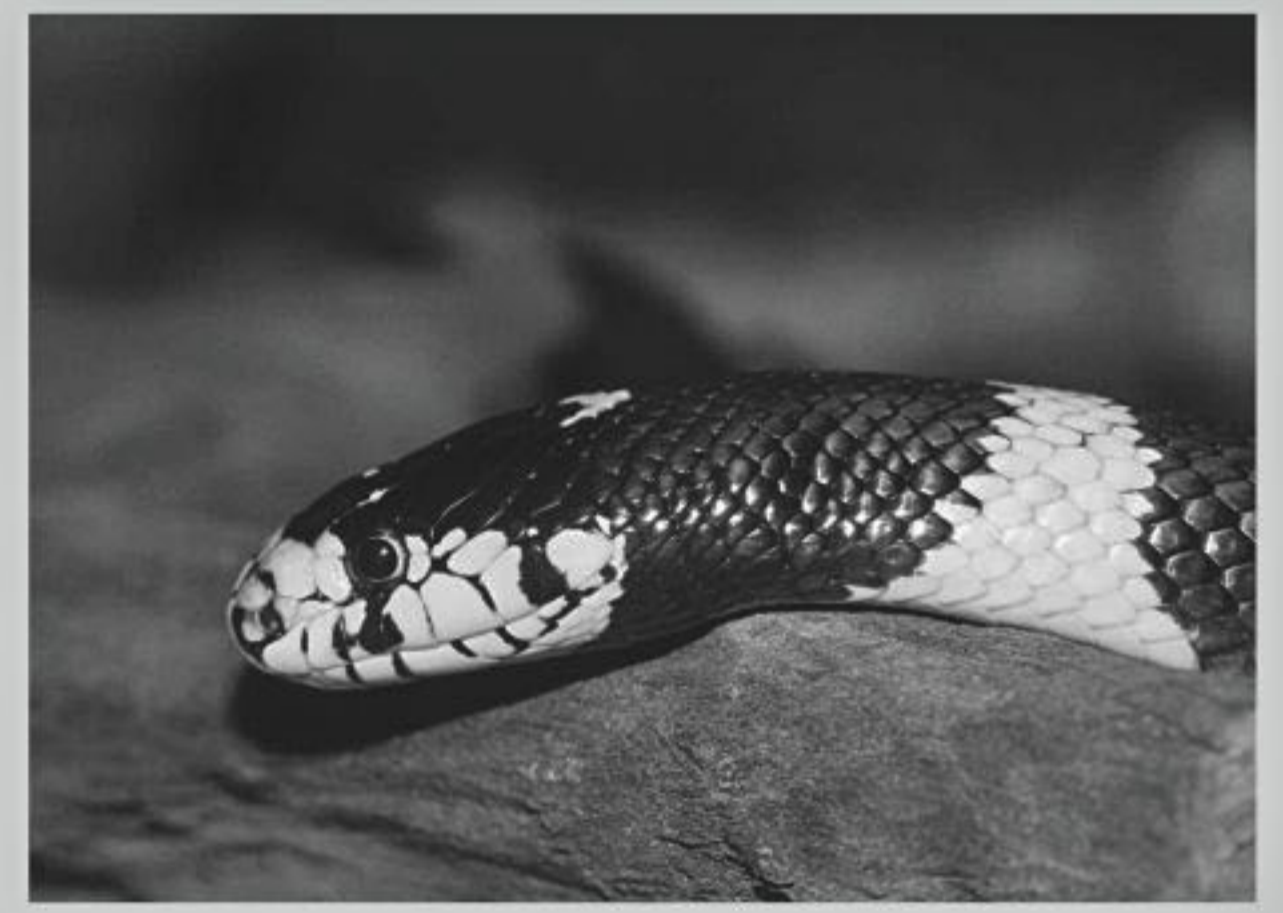
Behula went to meet the *vidyadhari* and had a happy reunion. "Usha has come home," the *vidyadhari* cried exultantly. They wanted to know where Aniruddha was, and Behula told them the whole story of their travails.

"But my sorrow has dispersed, now that I have met you, my friends," Behula said. "Only one thing remains to make everything perfect: reviving Aniruddha."

The *vidyadhari* were of the same

mind as Neta. If Behula could please Shiva with her songs and dance, he would no doubt grant her prayers.

The *vidyadhari* dressed and made up Behula in the most alluring of forms, one that would enchant all three realms. With the flowers, jewels, ivory, gold, pearls, and coral, *kajal* for the eyes, makeup for the skin, sandalwood essence, gorgeous saris, hair done up and exquisitely braided, eyebrows finely painted, anklets that sound like a chortling stream, Behula was ready to give the performance of her life.



OH TO BE IN PARIS

KAISER HAQ

My French Connection

It's over half a century since France – its thinkers, writers, artists, film-makers – became an object of fascination with me, and yet I was well into my sixties before I visited it for the first time.

The most exciting intellectual event of my teens was the award of the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature to Jean-Paul Sartre. It was a hot topic with our language and literature teachers; they brought it up in class. Of course the Prize is given every year, but that year was special because the winner turned it down. Most of us were impressed because the prize money was a princely sum. But there was something else told by our teachers that intrigued me. Sartre was the proponent of a mysterious philosophy called Existentialism. What did this philosophy teach? Our teachers couldn't explain.

Sartre's books were nowhere to be found, but when I finished the SSC at St. Gregory's High School, a classmate revealed that he had bought a copy of *Existentialism and Humanism*. I begged him to lend it for a few days, with the warning that Sartre was a notoriously difficult writer. Difficult or not, I was determined to devour it. And I did, with relish. A little later my friend also bought, and passed on, *Nausea*. My Sartrean phase was well under way.

Another friend introduced me to another mysterious Francophone thinker, featured in *Newsweek*: the Rumanian-born Emil Cioran, supposed to be even more pessimistic than Sartre. His books were even harder to get. It was another dozen or so years before I could find his books. But once I began there was no stopping.

The same was the case with Margaret Duras, whom I first discovered in a corner of the bookshelves in the English Department Seminar at Dhaka University. These three – Sartre, Cioran, Duras – became my special French connection, over and above all the others whom we all read, from Baudelaire and Flaubert to Barthes and Foucault. In my imagination Sartre's haunts, the Café de Flore and Deux Magots became hallowed institutions; the Luxemburg Gardens where Cioran took his constitutional was sacred ground.

And yet I made no effort to visit Paris. As a fresher at Dhaka University, a friend and I enrolled in the elementary French course, taught by a gentleman from Mauritius, only to drop out after a few weeks of truancy. My French connection was a thing of the mind, nurtured in solitary communion with a few great minds through the medium of English translations.

As for French people, I had met one or two, no more, and briefly. For instance, one day in the mid-eighties, a young Frenchman who taught French at the Alliance Française and was working on a doctorate in English literature turned up at the English Department of Dhaka University to enquire if anyone could lend him Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. I didn't have it but I gave him copies of *Form*, a literary magazine I was associated with.

Twenty years later, at a British Council party, I was told that the new director of the Alliance was looking for me. We wouldn't have recognized each other, but when he introduced himself I exclaimed, "You are the young Frenchman who came looking for

Anatomy of Criticism!" It was the beginning of an extraordinary friendship.

Paris at Last

Olivier Litvine, for that was the Frenchman's name, began translating my poems into French; placed one in *La Regle du Jeu*, the French journal founded and edited by Bernard-Henri Levy; and put up the translations as they were done on a website. He told me of a prestigious residency at *Les Recollets* in Paris and egged me on to apply. As a result my family and I spent three interesting summer months in Paris in 2013. Olivier and I gave a reading at a public library; and subsequently I gave two more, one at the Place des Poemes in Ivry, an attractively designed centre for poetry-related activities, and another at Sete, at the Musée de Paul Valéry, a unique institution dedicated to the poet, overlooking the Mediterranean and the Marine Cemetery that inspired his most famous poem, and in which he lies buried.

At Olivier's urging I met Bernard-Henri Levy, who surprised me by declaring at once that he had a soft corner for Bangladesh; and further, that 'Sheikh Mujib is one of my heroes.' He had covered our independence war and worked as an economic advisor to the Bangladesh government for a few months in 1972. He would revisit Bangladesh in 2014, when a Bengali translation of his first book, based on his experiences in 1971, was released. At one point he invited me to join the Editorial Committee of *La Regle du Jeu*. This would play a role in my second visit to Paris.

Olivier's translations of my poems would make a tidy little volume, especially if they accompanied the English originals. He showed

them to Florence Noiville, novelist and literary editor at *Le Monde*; she put him in touch with Editions Caractères, who readily accepted the manuscript. My friend Hamiduzzaman Khan, the sculptor and painter, contributed a couple of lovely drawings; and Erik Orsenna, novelist (prix Goncourt, 1988) and member of the Académie Française, contributed a charming postface. When the book – titled *Combien de Bouddhas* – came off the press in mid-2015, Florence Noiville gave it a gratifying review in *Le Monde* (10 July 2015).

Paris Again

But for unavoidable reasons the formal launch had to wait till March this year. On 20 March, under the aegis of *La Regle du Jeu*, a reading and discussion of the book took place at the Cinema Etoile in Saint Germain des Pres, chaired by Levy; with me reading the English poems; and Olivier, Erik and my publisher Nicole Gdalia reading the French translations and commenting on the poems. I think Erik's is the most impassioned commentary on my work I have heard so far. The entire programme can be accessed at <Kaiser haq-recontre-lecture-la regle du jeu-dailymotion>.

Three days later there was a smaller, more intimate do at the offices of Editions Caractères. To my (very pleasant) surprise, Nicole had found a Frenchman who had learned to play the sitar in Kolkata; his sitar provided a sweet accompaniment to the reading. A talented young Chinese-French violinist came and played an intricate piece by Vivaldi: purely as a sign of goodwill.

Editions Caractères, interestingly, specializes in publishing poetry and has an impressive list. It is worth mentioning that it would not

have been possible for such a venture to survive if it weren't for a subsidy from the ministry of Culture. I wonder how many countries have such a support system for literary publishing.

My second visit to Paris lasted exactly one week. More than two years had passed since the previous visit. During this time several terror attacks had shaken the city. While I was out walking my wife phoned to tell me of the latest terror attacks in Brussels. Naturally, I was anxious to learn about the inevitable impact of the violence on the collective psyche. I was staying with generous friends of Olivier's, Alain and Muriel, now my friends as well; both are schoolteachers. We spoke of the attacks. Muriel said sadly, 'There is a subtle change in people. Now if people see a stranger they wonder if he might be carrying explosives. It's very unhealthy.'

Yes, it is unhealthy. And the problem is global, and by the look of things will not go away soon. I tell myself the world was never a very 'healthy' place; there has always been one thing or another to make it 'unhealthy'. Meanwhile, we get on with our lives, pursue activities we value. It was a delight to chat over lunch with friends, Laetitia Zecchini, Bruce and Adele King, Philippe Benoit (a new friend), all of them fine scholars and critics; to meet France Bhattacharya, the *grande dame* of Bengali studies in France; to travel to Normandy with Olivier and spend the day with Gilles Perrault, journalist and social activist extraordinaire, and his charming wife Therese; to have an evening adda at Florence Noiville's. 'Only connect', as Forster said? Yes, though history will always present ruptures and fractures as well.