

# INTO THE HEART OF BENGAL

JOHN DREW

(Concluding part)

If literary delights are more to the taste than culinary, George Thompson engulfs the improvised songs of the palky-bearers taking him on this journey. A tenor sings one line, the treble another, the base a third and so on:

cubbudari.  
Trim the torches, cubbudari,  
For the road's lonely, cubbudari,  
Here a bridge is, cubbudari,  
Pass it swiftly, cubbudari, cubbudari,  
cubbudari.  
Carry her gently, cubbudari,  
Little baba, cubbudari,  
Sing so cheerily, cubbudari,

attentive auditor. The Mutiny was, of course, the grand topic. The treachery of the Sepoys - the frightful murders up the country - the frequent and terrible alarms that had prevailed in Calcutta - the finding of a man outside the Governor General's bed room, with a naked knife in his hand - poor Lady Canning, and her dreadful apprehensions at such a time! - the sudden death of the Commander in Chief - the growing insolence of the Native servants, who most certainly expected to change places with their Masters and Mistresses - the probability that we should all have to go into the fort to be defended by the big guns; but how we might be poisoned by our Cooks, Khitmugars, Ayahs and bearers before we got there - and how truly unlucky, that all this should come upon us just in the middle of the hot weather - and was I not sorry I had come to India - and did I ever expect anything like it would happen - and did I not wish myself back in old England - and did I think the Russians were at the bottom of it - and should I join the Special Constables, or the Volunteer Militia - and did I think I could fight on horseback better than on foot - and was I of opinion that we should lose India for ever - and how she always knew something of the kind would happen; for her father was an officer in the Indian Army, and knew the Native character well, and often said to her, "Matilda, these black soldiers will some day cut all our throats; when I am dead and gone, think of what I say" - and should she send for a few slices of cold boiled hump, which was good at dinner the night before &."

Thompson celebrates his birthday a week later by sending off a long letter concerning the Uprising. In the press, "there have been the most insolent and insulting libels directed against the entire population of the country..." For his part, he says, "I am astounded by the fact, that we have been able to hold the fruit of our robberies so long". Thompson lists Afghanistan in 1838, the treatment of Satara, the Sikhs and the Annexation of the Punjab, Sind, Jaitpur, Sambalpur, Nagpur, Pegu. Britain is loathed all over Asia. "We are regarded with a malignity as deep as our rule has been unjust".

The Uprising he blames on Dalhousie's policies. "The most exciting causes of the outburst have

been the bold and wicked measures of that most unscrupulous despot, the Marquis of Dalhousie". He does not however pin the blame on one person. He prefaces his journal with the observation: "You may expect to read for many mails to come, chronicles of blood - blood - blood. The foundations of our Empire here have been cemented with blood - the superstructure reared with blood - our supremacy must be again asserted and re-established in blood. Verily we are a bloody nation".

What happens to George Thompson and his Philo-Hindoo ideas? They are taken up and developed most obviously within his own family circle. His daughter, Amelia Mohan, the following year marries Frederick Chesson, a radical journalist who is about as close politically to her father as you could expect anyone to be. Chesson too is an Abolitionist who had been "almost the only white man" present at a meeting in a church in New York City to denounce the Fugitive Slave Law and is credited with keeping Britain from supporting the slave-owning South in the American Civil War

Late in 1861 when the editor of the *Hindoo Patriot* asks Thompson to become English correspondent for the paper - at 30 shillings per letter - it is Chesson who takes on the job in his stead and we find him at once sending fortnightly letters off to Calcutta and in turn receiving the paper, useful for his many articles on India. Early in the next year, he goes to hear Professor Tagore, presumably Prasanna, talking in London on Indian Law.

Amelia's best friend and close confidante is a young actress who has married Major Evans Bell, an army officer with 20 years' experience of India. Bell is an army officer with twenty years' experience of India, sacked from his post as political officer in Nagpur for exposing the chicanery of his superior officer there and championing the cause of the deposed Bhonsla Ranis. After 1857, Bell attacks "the functionaries" who govern India from Calcutta and argues nothing good can come to India from the young men arriving from Britain with no knowledge of the country and no sympathy for it.

So little faith has Bell in British India that, although an avowed republican, he thinks the only way forward towards

self-government for India he supposes will come within a hundred years, if not ten, is through the princely states, once they are subject to the constraints guaranteed by modernizing young Indian ministers. Bell returns to London to be a thorn in the side of the "functionaries" in Calcutta, writing pamphlets designed to appraise the British public and law-makers of the state of affairs in India and agitating constantly to get Indians in London to stand for Parliament. The Chessons spend a great deal of time with the Bells discussing Indian matters of the sort Thompson heard raised by his Young Bengal friends and, while writing both for the London and Calcutta papers (Bell for the *Statesman*), in 1866 they help found another of those associations Thompson was so fond of, the East India Association.

It is through the new Association they link up with Dadabhai Naoroji, who becomes a good friend and it is he in the end who will be the first Indian M.P. He carries Finsbury by just three votes and his success he attributes to the assiduous canvassing - in the face of Prime Ministerial racial insult - of Bell's widow and her daughter (whose Nanny had been Amelia Mohan's daughter). In turn Dadabhai becomes mentor to a young Indian lawyer then studying in London, Mohandas Gandhi, a man to become as well-known as Thompson remains as little known for practising non-violence in violent times in Bengal.

There are all sorts of curious twists and turns in the chain of connections that makes up history. Thompson, between his visits to first one and then the other Tagore in Bengal, had been M.P. for the Tower Hamlets constituency. He would no doubt have been as delighted as he might have been surprised to know that 150 years later the largest ethnic group, some 33% of the total population, in Tower Hamlets is Bengali.

[Source: Raymond English Anti-Slavery Archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester]

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Bengali billboards on Harrison Street. Calcutta was the largest commercial centre in British India.

Oh, what a heavy bag.  
No, it's an elephant.  
He is an awful weight.  
Let's throw the Palky down.  
Let's set him in the mud.  
No, for he'll angry be  
And he would beat us then.  
Aye, he would beat us then  
With a stick, a heavy stick.  
Then, let us haste along,  
Ay, let us haste along,  
Jump along, jump along,  
Quicker still, quicker still.

Another song, evidently a lullaby, perhaps still known in Bangla?  
She's not heavy, cubbudari [carefully],  
Little baba, cubbudari,  
Carry her swiftly, cubbudari,  
Pritty baba, cubbudari, cubbudari,

Pretty baba, cubbudari, cubbudari, cubbudari.

Happy songs ringing in his ears and in good humour, Thompson returns to Calcutta on June 9th and all the talk is of what was then called the Mutiny. His landlady is in a state of terror and he mocks this. It could almost be a portrait written and done in one of his readings then so popular in England by Charles Dickens:

"I got here soon after ten yesterday morning. My landlady, of course, came up to see me. She had a long talk, for she had much to say. I had time and inclination to listen, for I wanted rest, and breakfast, too; so while I sat in my chair and took my food, my portly guardian poured forth the contents of her pent-up stores, and found in me an

## NOTHING IS LOST

AYSHA AMIN

He watched from his window as the seasons changed. There was no yearning in his gaze, just a weary observer looking through glass at a foreign universe. From the tenth floor, Dhaka looked like she was suffocating. The clouds hung oppressively low, drifting serenely on a sea of smog. He watched the people spilling onto the streets. Ants dispersing from a disrupted task. He both pitied and envied their content ignorance. Everything was vying for its space, the buildings, the trees, the waste, all in a smooth film of dust. It seemed only apt that he should, too.

He hadn't been able to pay his bills, so they had cut off the electricity. The sun had crawled back out of the window and he soon found himself in darkness. The sun would come out, go down and come out again, and he measured his life in units of dawn and dusk.

He turned on the blue nightlight and fell back in bed, sinking into quicksand sleep. Unlike his thoughts, his dreams traveled sporadically through worlds and realms. While awake, he thought of little but death.

What being buried alive would feel like, slitting his wrists, hanging himself, shooting himself, jumping off a ledge, drowning, burning, overdosing. When he let himself really think about it, he decided it was all so futile, as futile as existence itself. Now and then he made an effort to distract himself, but his mind wouldn't oblige.

His eyes opened at some point. A few minutes, or perhaps a few years later. She was here again. In that same green dress and bare feet, looking through him. The bluish light touched her on all the same places and sat around her like a faint halo. His eyes blinked: one, two...three. This body wasn't his, these thoughts not his own. He lay claim on not an atom in this universe and that soft realization set over him like an overwhelming fog of melancholia. He became aware of his own breathing, and then a second one. Was that thunder outside? Her line of sight led to an entirely unknown time and space.

"The charm in dying is that nothing is lost."  
A lone cockroach near the nightlight caught his eye, and when he refocused after a few seconds, she was gone. The familiar sense of utter loneliness settled upon him. Eyes red and feet cold, he faded out.



Centre panel, Study for a Self-Portrait—Triptych, 1985–86 by Francis Bacon.

## VERNAL VISUAL: MELBOURNE DIURNAL

REBECCA HAQUE

The diurnal and the nocturnal gyrations of the earth, the magnetic and gravitational attraction and repulsion of the celestial spheres affect grandma's moods. Physiologically speaking, her eyes absorb sunlight to charge the batteries of her brain, but, electronically, like the alert night-owl eerily hooting in the midst of moonlit forest foliage, grandma's mind is wired to become fully functional with the energy emitted by lunar incandescence. It is now the witching hour, the middle of the night, three hours past midnight, three hours till dawn in Melbourne.

A smattering of light vernal shower hits the oblong window pane, and grandma's eyes click open. She looks at the distant vista of the sky through the glass, at the grey-blue wisps of slinking cumulus fluffs, and peers upward at pinpricks of starlight winking through the clear ether. The raindrops are whisked away in a quiet transcendental moment, and all she hears is serene, miraculous silence.

Grandma composes her thoughts with her fingertips caressing the square iPad screen. Spontaneously, rhythmically, these words well-up from the fount of grandma's heartfelt sorrow at being left bereft of her beloved father's bodily presence. His soul had returned whence it came, trailing clouds of glory, in Falgun. Two weeks and two days before Pahela Boisakh, a mere six months ago, an eternity for her, a grief-stricken final parting took place in the crowded city of her ancestors. Day before yesterday, and yesterday, on the twelfth and thirteenth of September, grandma's soul went on a seamless pilgrimage across vertical longitudes towards sunspots of joyful memory of happy days with her indulgent, dynamic, genius of a father. Fair seed-time had I, her fingertips declaim, nurtured alike by father's loving teaching and mother's guiding discipline. Perchance, too happy in that state, she broods in a swift mood-change that brought fateful disfavour upon herself. Had she unknowingly erred through forgetfulness of the misery of

those less joyous? Had she unwittingly sinned? Forgive me, Father, she taps out the prayer, as in a reveille Grandma has known divine retribution, but now her pilgrim soul knows the peace of divine grace. She has new knowledge with the gift of new eyes. All is not as it seems; there is a grand design, a greater purpose hidden from mortal eyes. She knows now that the great epic songs are true: the hero is a survivor. The hero of the thousand faces of grief and joy rises from the ashes with a new mental landscape, a new

teaching and mother's guiding discipline. Blessed indeed to have been destined to be born their offspring. Perchance, too happy in that state, she broods in a swift mood-change that brought fateful disfavour upon herself. Had she unknowingly erred through forgetfulness of the misery of those less joyous? Had she unwittingly sinned? Forgive me, Father, she taps out the prayer, as in a reveille Grandma has known divine retribution, but now her pilgrim soul knows the peace of divine grace. She has new



visual perspective. Beyond the diurnal divide, behind the nocturnal veil, grandma can see the glimmering horizon of a vernal inscape.

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