

POETRY

Disembodied

SUDEEP SEN

1.

My body carved from abandoned bricks of a ruined temple,
 from minaret-shards of an old mosque,
 from slate-remnants of a medieval church apse,
 from soil tilled by my ancestors.

My bones don't fit together correctly as they should —
 the searing ultra-violet light from Aurora Borealis patches and etch-corrects my orientation —
 magnetic pulses prove potent.

My flesh sculpted from fruits of the tropics,
 from coconut water, skin coloured by brown bark of Indian teak.

My lungs fuelled by Delhi's insidious toxic air
 echo asthmatic sounds, a new vinyl dub-remix.



Our universe — where radiation germinates from human follies,
 where contamination persists from mistrust,
 where pleasures of sex are merely a sport —
 where everything is ambition,
 everything is desire,
 everything is nothing.

Nothing and everything.

2.

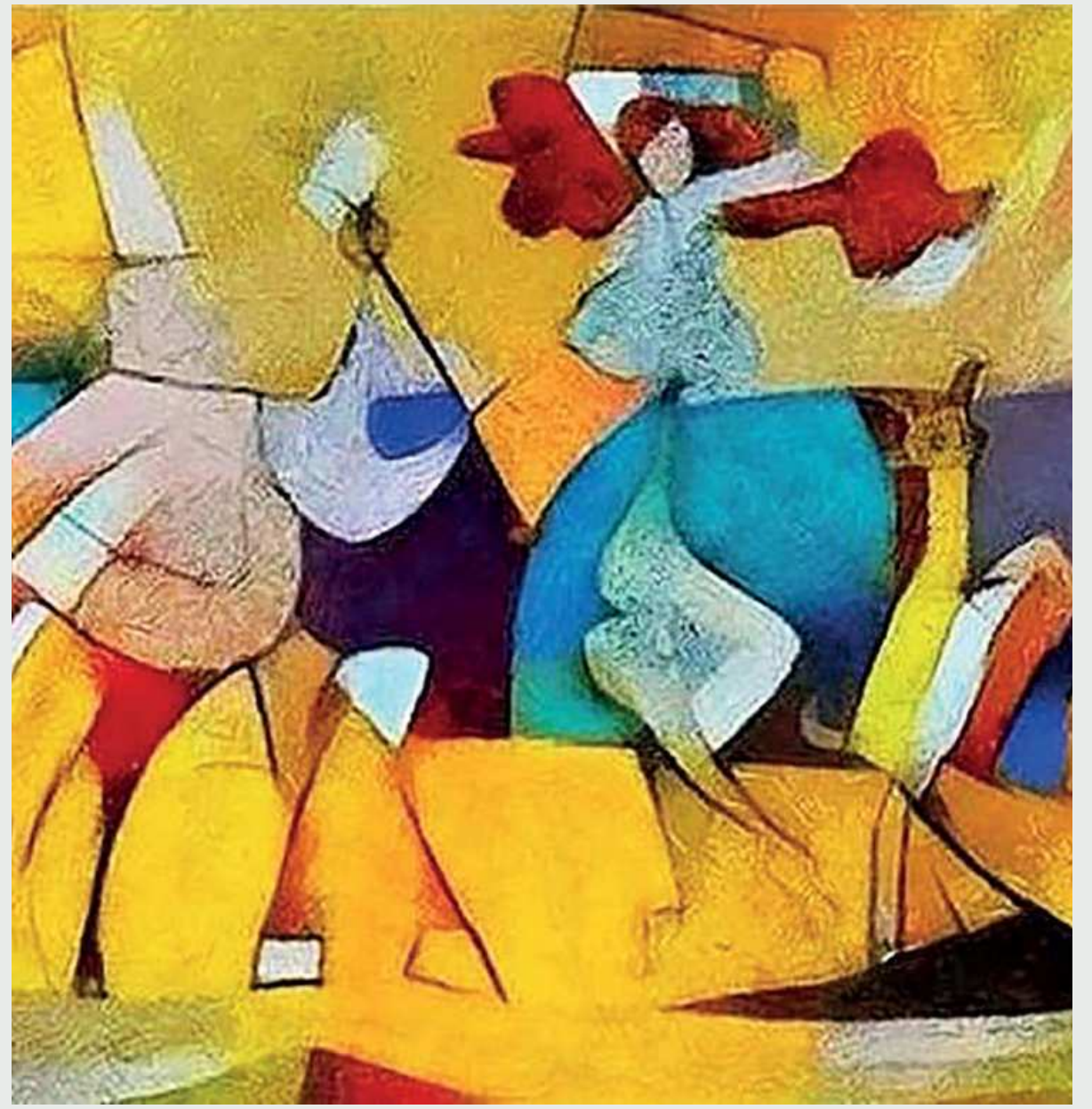
White light everywhere,
 but no one can recognize its hue,
 no one knows that there is colour in it — all possible colours.

Body worshipped, not for its blessing,
 but its contour —
 artificial shape
 shaped by Nautilus.
 Skin moistened by L'Oreal
 and not by season's first rains —
 skeleton's strength not shaped by earthquakes
 or slow-moulded
 by fearless forest-fires.

Ice-caps are rapidly melting — too fast to arrest glacial slide.
 In the near future — there will be no water left
 or too much water that is undrinkable,
 excess water that will drown us all.
 Disembodied floats, afloat like
 Noah's Ark —

no GPS, no pole-star navigation, no fossil fuel to burn away —
 just maps with empty grids and names of places that might exist.

Already, there is too much traffic on the road —
 unpeopled hollow metal-shells
 without brakes,
 swerve about directionless — looking
 for an elusive compass.



Sudeep Sen has published more than a dozen collections of poetry, including *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems* (1997), *Lines of Desire* (2000), *Rain* (2005), and *Aria* (2011). These poems are from Sen's *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* published in June 2021.

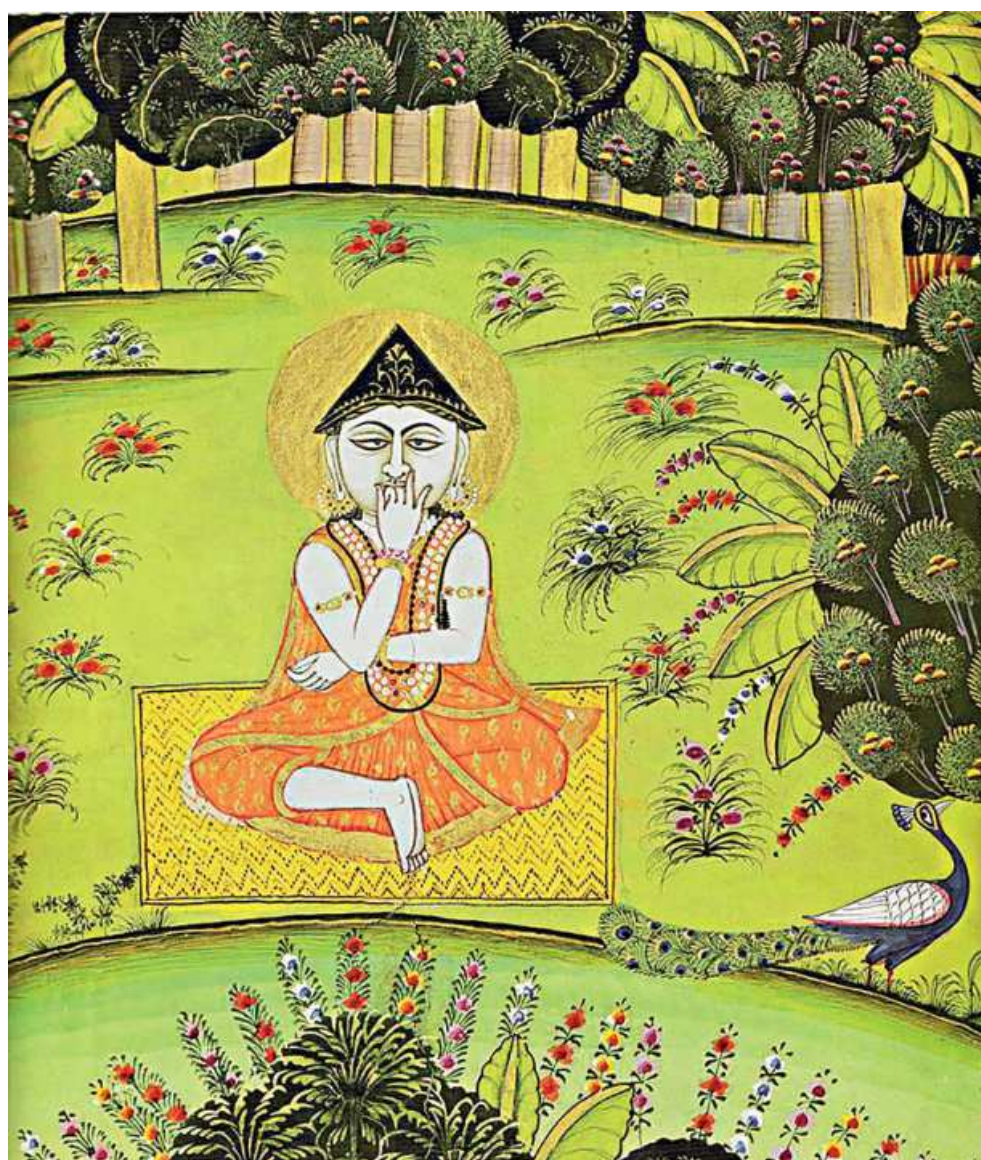
Jogabal NA Psychic Force? The Fortunes of Mesmerism in Colonial Bengal

ABHISHEK SARKAR

The antepenultimate chapter of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Chandrashekhara* (1875) is titled "Jogabal Na Psychic Force?" (Yogic Power or Psychic Force?). In this chapter, Chandrashekhara, an elderly scholar, renders his young, beautiful wife Shaibalini into a trance by making her drink drops of water and then moving his hands along various curvilinear trajectories close to her forehead and eyes. The method has been taught by his guru Ramananda Swami. Chandrashekhara elicits from the entranced Shaibalini her confession as to whether she committed adultery with her English admirer Lawrence Foster and her childhood sweetheart Pratap during her flight from her husband. Interestingly, the trance makes Shaibalini a clairvoyant. She can tell why horsemen are approaching them on the eve of the Battle of Buxar.

A story by Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay (1873-1932), published in the monthly *Manasi* O Marmavani of 1333 BS, alludes to this chapter by borrowing its title, *Jogabal Na Psychic Force?* This story features a young Italian named Sabatini, who is a hypnotist-healer by profession. He has a Punjabi and a Bengali friend with whom he conspires to get the Punjabi friend married to his Bengali beloved by neutralizing the opposition of the girl's family. This comic story reverses the dour ending of *Chandrashekhara*, using as the key to its denouement a fake hypnotic trance and healing. The terms used to describe Sabatini are "Hypnotist" and "sammohan-vidyaparadarshi." The story thus takes "psychic force" to be related to "sammohan" or hypnotism. It shows the English-educated colonial Bengali literati's fascination with trance and its mechanism, especially when imported from the West through various packages and also linked to mysterious Indic traditions.

Bankim does not clarify whether Shaibalini's lie-detector trance is traceable to jogabal or "psychic force." Besides, he does not annotate the phrase "psychic force." Bankim probably expected his audience to work out what was being discussed, if they were not already familiar with the term. Chandrashekhara was serialized in the monthly *Bangadarshan* from Shrawan 1280 BS (July-August 1873) to Bhadra 1281 BS (August-September 1874), while the name "psychic force" was coined in 1871. That year William Crookes (1832-1919), eminent English chemist and physicist with a passion for the occult, published in London a tract called *Experimental Investigations on Psychic Force*. To this Crookes appended a letter from Edward William Cox (1809-79), author and



spiritualist, which recommended the name "Psychic Force" for a yet-unexplored power inhabiting the human constitution. Another of Cox's coinages, the term "Psychic" for someone who shows a copious amount of this power, seems to have a greater longevity.

The concept of "psychic force" is directly indebted to that of "animal magnetism" as proposed by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a certified physician from the University of Vienna who took the fashionable Parisian society by storm with his unorthodox therapeutics. Mesmer used the name "animal magnetism" for an invisible force supposedly possessed by all organisms. He believed that it could be channelized for inducing trances or healing. The term "mesmerism" in the 19th century was synonymous with "animal magnetism," but now it has come to stand generally

for hypnosis. The verb "to mesmerize" now means "to hold someone's attention completely" rather than "to hypnotize."

Mesmerism had a sensational but brief career in Bengal for therapeutic use. Dr. James Esdaile (1809-59), a Scottish surgeon under the East India Company, practised mesmerism extensively at the Hooghly Imambara charitable hospital and Hooghly jail hospital between 1845 and 1848. Esdaile received his medical training at the University of Edinburgh but had never seen any mesmeric procedure earlier. Nevertheless, he successfully put his patients in a mesmeric trance for making surgical operations painless. He taught his mesmeric art to Indian assistants, who took the role of his anaesthetists. Thanks to him, his workplace got the reputation of a "jadoo" hospital where patients flocked from all over Bengal.

The Hooghly Imambara Hospital was about 5 kilometres across the Hooghly River from Bankim's residence at Naihati Kanthalpara. Besides, from 1839 to 1841 Esdaile was the Principal of the Hooghly College (now Hooghly Mohsin College), of which Bankim was later a student. Bankim was very young when Esdaile conducted his mesmeric experiments at Hooghly, but it is quite possible that he heard of Esdaile afterwards.

By 1848 Esdaile reported 95 mesmeric operations to his colleagues in England. His exploits were proudly reported by Dr. John Elliotson, who was the foremost crusader for the medical use of mesmerism at the heart of the Empire and a close friend of the novelists Thackeray, Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Esdaile gained such renown that several leading citizens, including Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, signed a petition to the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie for setting up a mesmeric hospital in Kolkata. The request was granted in 1848, but the hospital was to be funded entirely by private patrons such as the Tagores. However, Esdaile's therapy came increasingly under attack from the medical profession and the hospital was closed down 18 months later.

In an 1852 publication, Esdaile talks of clairvoyance brought about by mesmerism. Theosophists would be excited about such connections. Rabindranath's elder sister Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932), who headed the women's chapter of the Theosophical Society, published her two-part essay on mesmerism in the *Agrahayan* and *Chaitra* 1292 issues of the monthly *Bharati*, which was also edited by her. There she considers the latest developments in psychical research in the West from the believer's perspective, and evaluates the rival claims of "hypnotism" (swapnikata or "dreaminess" in her translation) as proposed by Dr. James Braid (1795-1860). She rejects Braid's psychological or neurological explanations for hypnotism and defends the existence of an extra-somatic force akin to Mesmer's animal magnetism. She mentions her direct acquaintance with a teenage Bengali boy who could put a younger boy in trance and control his cognition or behaviour. Notably, Swarnakumari does not cite Esdaile in her essay.

Swarnakumari's daughter Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) mentions her experience with mesmerism in her memoir *Jibaner Jharapata* (*The Fallen Leaves of Life*). Once, she sprained her neck in bed and was unable to raise her head. Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, cured her by the

exercise of mesmerism. After making a few passes with his hands, Olcott commanded her to get up. She managed that after initial protests. Olcott returned the following evening to assert, "You have recovered. You have no pain at all." She agreed with him. Sarala recounts that the son of one Nabin Banerjee of Bhawanipore visited them once in a while to display his mesmeric skills. He was such an expert that he could put a boy in a trance and make him start at non-existent snakes or toads, sit or stand, laugh or weep.

Sarala further recalls that one of the ladies of the Jorashanko Tagore family, Sushila, the first wife of Rabindranath's nephew Dwipendranath, used to practice the art. She used her maidservant Nirmala, whom she had brought up. The girl in a clairvoyant trance could call correctly the taste of the food taken by Sushila hidden from her sight. When Sushila commanded her to take a trip to the Himalayas and back, the girl would in a while give the impression of freezing. However, the entire family began to dissuade Sushila Devi from this reckless use of her powers as it might ruin her health. The performance of Sushila Devi's servant seems to have a precedent in the dozens of mesmeric clairvoyants all over the British Empire who claimed to be able to track the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin in the Arctic in the late 1840s and early 1850s. One such clairvoyant in Ireland reportedly had to be treated for chilblains after being with Franklin for two hours. It may be observed that Sarala Devi does not suspect the veracity of the mesmeric trances produced by Sushila. She seems to accept mesmerism as a fact of Nature.

Mesmer, Elliotson, Esdaile, Crookes or the Theosophists failed to secure scientific recognition for mesmerism, animal magnetism, or psychic force. Discussions on these generally shifted from the mainstream Bengali periodicals to those specializing in the occult, such as *The Hindu Spiritual Magazine* and *Aloukik Rahasya*, early in the 20th century. Ajitkrishna Basu in his *Jadu-kahini* (*The Story of Magic*) mentions mesmerism while referring to the alleged occult powers of a fraudulent wizard, but it is understood to be different from the phenomenon of hypnotism professionally harnessed by magicians on the stage. As foreshadowed by the elegant amateurs of the Tagore family, the (honest, legitimate) pursuit of psychic force or mesmerism now belongs to the realm of pastimes and hobby-horses.

Abhishek Sarkar is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jadavpur University.