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THE WALL AND OTHER POEMS BY JAYDEEP SARANGI.

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By Anisha Ghosh (Paul)

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it” – Robert Frost

Jaydeep Sarangi is a prolific bilingual poet based in Kolkata, West Bengal who has been widely anthologised and extensively reviewed as a poet. He is a key figure in the India-Australia poetic scene. Sarangi's poetic vision is highly philosophical in the guise of apparent simplicity. He has a Bengali book of poems entitled *LalPalasher Renu* and three collections of English poems entitled *From Dulong to Beas*, *Silent Days*, and *A Door Somewhere* which offer great food for thought to literary enthusiasts and his latest poetic anthology *The Wall and Other Poems* also follows the same literary tradition.

This apparently thin volume of poems contains forty-eight short, very short and medium length poems ranging from such four-lined short poem as “My Mother” to such medium length verses as “Growing Up Bengali in Kolkata” and “On Climbing a Greasy Bamboo” each of thirty five or more lines, the longest poems in the volume. All the poems are written in irregular stanzas and free verse. The tone is conversational reflective of the common idiom in which a common man contemplates and ruminates. The deceptive simplicity of the poems however betrays a graver philosophical content of universal human interest and significance.

There is no particular characteristic or style peculiar to the poems collected in this volume save and except the fact that they are all connected by an overarching metaphor of the ‘wall’ and seem to be fragments of a longer poem. In Sarangi's last collection of poems *A Door Somewhere* there is the recurrent image of a ‘door’ which symbolises life as a continuum. A simple image acquires philosophical significance in the hands of Sarangi as he

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presents a door as a possibility, a passage from present to future where we know not what awaits, an outlet to endless possibilities as well as unknown challenges. At the same time, it can be seen as an inlet to dig into the past. In the present volume *The Wall and Other Poems* Sarangi's poetic eye transforms something mundane and concrete as a wall into barriers, boundaries and divides between nations, cultures, classes, families and individuals.

This metaphor of the 'wall' is derived from Robert Frost's celebrated poem "Mending Wall" – it is the wall which keeps in or out intruders and as one neighbour claims "good fences make good neighbours", the other one who speaks as the poet's mouthpiece scorns these artificial divides created by man between himself and the world as something against nature, as something primitive and regressive. Sarangi identifies with this Frostian scorn for walls and goes out on his poetic mission to dissolve these barriers. He uses the first two lines of frost's poem as the epigraph of his title poem "The Wall" which is about the India-Bangladesh land swap bill which brings new hope to the "nowhere people" whom erratic lines called borders and the illusion of new nations could not give stability.

So far as partition literature is concerned, most of it is based on the partition of India and Pakistan as can be seen in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice candyman* and so on. Very little attention is paid to the partition of Bengal that gave birth to Bangladesh which has been dealt with in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadowlines*. A Bengali himself, Sarangi's imagination is caught by the pangs of separation of the two Banglas which he has vocalised in poems like "The Wall", "Friendship Beyond Borders", "Sailing Through Ichamati" etc. The wall erected between "minds, rivers and mountains" (21) need to be dissolved by sinking the history of partition into the pool of oblivion:

For once, let us forget time.

Let us wear the sari in the same way

And join Tagore

Amar Sonar Bangla

And *Jana Gana Mana*

With expressions. (11)

The poet sees cultural assimilation and assertion as a way to transcend national borders. Another 'wall' in the form of Ichamati river that separates India from Bangladesh is seen as a corridor for transnational communication through which the poet envisions a unification of the partitioned nation:

Ichamati is the corridor

Into things we can design.

We are twins.

Our veins have one blood

Even when we are separate souls on map. (13)

The wall in Sarangi's imagination is not restricted to political borders, the divides between two nations, but also between different sects and lives within one country. In poems like "The Other Side of Silence", "Stories Beyond the Wall" and "Full Story" deal with those muted stories of the socially, financially, politically 'powerless' whom we call subalterns because their voices are not heard on purpose by the power centre, the mainstream of society. There is an unseen barrier, a wall of speech and silence that separates the centre from the margin, and the stories on their lips, some of which are liked by the mainstream and some not, are narrated by the poet. They are "the other half of a lighted discourse" (16), the night that completes day, but are always foreshadowed by the mainstream and hence their songs, their alternative version of life is only known to the barrier that divides the two realities: "A wall between two of us – two separate rooms./ We narrate two histories within one country / one excludes the other. Only the wall knows the whole story"(17). The poem "Progressive Literature", dedicated to the renowned Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale, highlights the cause of 'writing back' taken up by Dalit literature.

A rickshaw puller, a refugee, a member of the Dalit community, Sarangi speaks for them all. Their marginality captures his imagination in poem after poem. In "Living on the Edge" he takes on the metaphor of the archipelago of Sunderbans where with every tide and

ebb islands disappear and reappear, where people live on the periphery, but the ‘walls’ between land and water dissolve everyday. In the patriarchal society a woman too has a marginal position and in the poem “Lakshmanrekha” Sarangi writes about a different kind of wall, a wall erected by patriarchy to keep women within confines of the stereotypical image of womanhood from male perspective. The overpowering male presence is compared with the role played by dominant castes in society subjugating the voice of the minority. Though there are limitations which he is aware of, Sarangi holds an optimistic view that this *lakshmanrekha* can be transcended when he writes:

She writes for

A sense of community autonomy,

A history, agency of the world

To gain a space in the sphere,

Love’s fires are lit –

“Women can make and women can break.”(45)

Like every postcolonial writer, Sarangi too is troubled by the ghosts of the colonial past as the wall between the coloniser and the colonised resurfaces in poem after poem along with an attempt at cultural negotiation. In poems like “Translator”, “My Dilemma”, “Who is My Master”, “Growing Up Bengali in Kolkata” we encounter the poet’s consciousness of his postcolonial identity, his Bengali ethnicity which he asserts and celebrates. Translation empowers a postcolonial writer and as he transfers “images and idioms/ from one code to another” (26) he masters language and his brown skin “dazzles in white” (26). Knowledge is power and in his “Final Call for Education” Sarangi makes a clarion call to the teeming millions to shun guns, bombs and bullets and devote themselves to “timely education” (28) which equips individuals to fight all kinds of battles in their lives:

No fight, only self development.

Education is that dress

To cover the naked bones

And a tiny lanky brownish heap of flesh

Struggling to stand in confidence. (28)

His poems smack of the fragrance of monsoon hilsa and Darjeeling tea, the sweetness of rosogolla and a Kolkata *adda*, incomplete without *rabindrasangeet* and political debate, as well as the rhythm of *chhau* dance and drum beats, the idyll of tribal life in the land of *laalmati* (red soil) in the shade of sal and mahul where different tribes “Santals, Mundas, Shabars and Lodhas coexist in a happy note” (60).

In poems like “The Poem Runner”, “Why is this Neglect?”, “Writing a Blurb” and “Poet Versus His idiom” Sarangi reflects and ruminates on the art of versification, the problems of the creative process and the role of poet and poetry in society. Sarangi’s early reading of the Bengali poets of the Hungry generation fired his imagination and shaped his poetic idiom as he feels that writing is a movement, an ongoing revolution and equates the poet with an activist and rebels strongly against the Platonic contempt of poets. All the poems in “The Wall and Other Poems” testify his belief in poetry as an instrument of social activism and the poet as a rebel who: “writes back on walls for a better society” (49).

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