

INDIA CALLS

By Bashabi Fraser

Wave on wave of humanity rolled
Through her mountain passes
Boat after boat arrived
At her ample, open shores.
Her lap was large, her cradle soft
Her arms were bountiful with gifts -
They came to take, they came for more
There was no dearth to her rich store
They loved her for her growing plains,
Expansive, fertile and well-drained.
Some returned, most came to stay
Adopting her appealing ways
Blood mingled with blood to form
This multi-ethnic vast nation
An unparalleled diversity
In paradoxical proximity
Of melting snows on mountain tops
And arid lands and thriving crops
Watched by blue eyes' startling hue
Matched by auburn curls of few
While raven locks adorn and crown
White and black toned down to brown
Her demographic clock ticks merrily on

She stands strong, past one billion
Five thousand years she has survived,
Post-empire, severed¹, she thrives
The old sits smugly with the new
Industrial smoke with the humble hoe
Spires, minarets and domes
Huts beside the rich men's homes
The Ambassador² still going strong
While Indica's³ now join the throng
Double-deckers veer away
From autos⁴ ubiquitous sway
Battery run television sets
Where electric lines don't penetrate
Kurtas vie with collared shirts
And saris rival mini skirts
The slow, sagacious bullock carts
Ambling past plush cyber marts -
So just as strangers joined the fold
New trends don't replace the old
The world has moved in once again
Calling her in her domain .

¹ India was Partitioned at the time of her Independence in 1947, to form Pakistan.

² The Ambassador car is a bigger version of the old Morris Minor, made by Hindustan Motors, whose sturdy make adapts well to Indian roads.

³ The Indica is a car made by Tata, modern, well regarded and popular.

⁴ Auto-rickshaws are three-wheelers with diesel engines, driven recklessly and aggressively through traffic jams - a popular mode of transport operating like taxis in towns and cities of the sub-continent.

INDIANS DON'T KISS

One long sultry afternoon when the neighbourhood lay still
And even the bulbuls had drooped into a dreamless stupour
Shelley's skylark seemed elusive as my mind wandered at will,
Slicing the noontide silence that encroached like a smothering creeper

I had to throw any pretense of study aside, assailed
As I was by that overpowering demon - boredom!
What could I do- I wondered. My lungs inhaled
The displaced air whirred into life at random

By whirring blades that punctuated my misplaced dreams.
My eyes swept my parents' study, and settled smugly
On the closed cabinet of their bookshelf of old albums
Which I decided to rummage through, a scattered family

Coming together in simple shades of black, grey and white
My mother's stylish bob as she sat musing on Shah Jahan's life
My father debonair in a white suit, my aunties with tight
Long plaits, my granny chopping fish on a crescent knife

While her loyal guard kept watch, her ginger cat
Who remained forever grey in those scraps of reminiscence.
And there was my grandfather, tall and jacketed
Against the Nepal Himalayas, and I knew their green abundance

In spite of their grand dark shadow that rolled incessantly

Behind him with authority, while my other granddad leaned against
His old ford, the deep shade of his hospital veranda persistently
Calling his conscientious self to dash in on a graver quest.

And then, as I turned yet another page, I found a secret
Folded in the black pages of this still life history
- A green aerogramme from another era, in perfect
Folds, fragile but true, telling a forbidden love story

That I knew, but was not meant to read. But I did -
With trepidation and embarrassment, as tender words
Of undying love were pledged by my father, which he hid
So cautiously from his family, but were now poured

Without restraint to my mother from the distance
Of a workplace away from the city where she was.
And what shocked me then was the final instance
Of his attachment, sealed with not just love, but a kiss

In fact, with many kisses. I folded the letter away
As it singed my fingers with this burning sense
Of a new revelation. I was troubled and dismayed
For I had been led to believe that Indians don't kiss.

A CROW'S SPEECH

I am the monarch of the palm tree
Meditator at the cemetery
Your twenty four hour watchman
Your super satellite disc.

I'm your black coated advocate
The activist you can't placate
Your tireless campaigner for an
Environment at risk.

Al Gore is my missionary
Obama my visionary
India my prime example
Of re-cycling sense.

I'm your unpaid binman, your efficient foreman
With my invincible, indispensable, superman presence.

THE EAGLE'S EPIC JOURNEY

The eagle-keen gaze sweeps across the widening vistas
Like a cloud surveying its playground before rolling in.
Stereophonic vision
Probing definition
That focuses on a fleck of an idea taking shape in the distance
A tale of spring-time hope, bobbing, bounding, unfolding –
The golden layered clusters of fish-scale feathers mirror the unfurling ecstasy
Of desire, which spreads its capacious wings, racing the cloud's fantasy
It's hooked beak a determined clasp
Like a seeking crane's targeting grasp
Now on a direct mission
Of deadly precision.
The intention soars, hovers and swoops - and in a trice
It scoops up in confident claws, a throbbing prize
Claimed by the king of skies
Challenging the supreme Creator
As it zooms swiftly to the zenith
The sole deliberator
Shadowing the speeding earth
Assured of fame
In an acquisitive game
Of mastery,
Holding its trophy
In a vicious embrace
With arrogant grace

Before it devours the life-beat,
Perched on the ramparts
Of its pinnacle, ready to sleep
With the deep satisfaction
Of a mission
Complete.

WALL IN > WALL OUT

Do good walls make good neighbours?
And what is good about walls unless
They belong to my home
And cocoon me in against the elements,
Keeping me storm-free or unscorched,
Blanketed and private –
A space for me with my family,
Walls that stand between dignity
And life on the pavement.

But stand them up to embody
The shadow line of a political border
Something that signifies the Other
As the intruder -
Walls that form the rampart
Of empire, of cold war, of occupation –
And create the enemy

Who is shut out, and cannot,
And definitely, should not impregnate it,
Shell it, crack it or cross it
Even if his brother lives
Or his farmland lies, or his mother's grave,
And his fishing river and playmate tree
Exist beyond what he must see
As the territory of his enemy.

So while walls shut out
Suicide bombers, harvesters, employees
Of the starving free, they shut in
The waller who cements fear
In brick and stone, in suspicion born
Of segregation that grows
Without association with the Other -
The unknown face of the foe
Which, if he had known
Could remove walls from minds
Discovering bonds in human kind
Instead of building terror zones.

Bio:

Bashabi Fraser is a transnational writer who has lived in London, Kolkata and Darjeeling and now lives and writes in Edinburgh. She is a poet, editor, children's writer, translator and critic. Her recent publications include 'Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers' (Luath Press, 2015, in press), 'Ragas & Reels' (poems on migration and diaspora, 2012), 'Scots Beneath the Banyan Tree: Stories from Bengal' (2012); 'From the Ganga to the Tay' (an epic poem, 2009); 'Bengal

Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter' (2006; 2008), 'A Meeting of Two Minds: the Geddes Tagore Letters' (2005) and 'Tartan & Turban' (poetry collection, 2004). Her awards include the Rabindra Bharati Society Honour for her work on promoting Tagore Studies in Europe in 2014, Women Empowered: Arts and Culture Award in 2010 and the IAS Prize for Literary Services in Scotland in 2009. Her research and writing traverse continents, crossing borders and boundaries with ease. Bashabi is a Patron of the Federation of Writers in Scotland, an executive committee member of the Writers in Prison Committee (Scotland) and the Poetry Association of Scotland and has been on the Scottish PEN committee for two terms. She is a Trustee of the Kolkata Scottish Heritage Trust, Director on the Board of the Patrick Geddes Trust and has been a Consultant Advisor for the Kolkata British Council's Kolkata-Scotland Connection programme. With a doctorate in English Literature, Bashabi is a Professor of English and Creative Writing and co-founder and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) at Edinburgh Napier University. Bashabi is also a Royal Literary Fund Fellow based at the University of Dundee and an Honorary Fellow at the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh.