

***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, severed<sup>1</sup>, 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 Ambassador<sup>2</sup> still going strong  
While Indica's<sup>3</sup> now join the throng  
Double-deckers veer away  
From autos<sup>4</sup> 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 .

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.