

# *Matwaala*: Birth of a South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival and Collective

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**Abstract:** This paper will convey the reason for the launch of the first South Asian Diaspora Festival, *Matwaala* via the keynote delivered at the TLAN: Transformative Language Arts Network conference, Scottsdale, Arizona in October 2019. *Matwaala's* mission is to increase the visibility of South Asian diaspora poets in the USA. Launched in 2015, the inaugural festival was hosted in Austin followed by yearly festivals in New York/Long Island as geographically the area is a hub of numerous colleges and universities. Co-directed by US-based poets Usha Akella and Pramila Venkateswaran, the festival follows a satellite model of readings on the campuses of academic institutions with the intended directive to expose faculty and students to South Asian literature.

Since 2015, *Matwaala* has executed projects and initiatives: yearly festivals; in 2020, *Matwaala* facilitated a poetry wall—24 poems by 24 South Asian poets for the Smithsonian Exhibit *Beyond Bollywood* at the Irving Arts Center and Museum in Irving, Dallas in collaboration with Think India Foundation<sup>1</sup>; poetry readings by South Asian poets in collaboration with *India Currents*; 2019 festival of five women poets hosted by Stony Brook University and *Matwaala* 2021 will feature four readings by poets of color in four categories: African American, Native American, South/Central American and Mexican.

Thank you, organizers, colleagues, and audience, for this opportunity to share a mission very dear to my heart. Early on, I risked redefining success without being conscious of it being a risk. It was not enough for me to succeed alone—one's sense of wellbeing is tied to others. This notion stemmed from the community-based society I grew up in in India. So, my work as a poet has always had a component of activism and group welfare to it. I had launched a project with community as a baseline prior to *Matwaala* called the *Poetry Caravan* in the White Plains, New York area and for a shorter duration in Austin. Over a thousand free readings have reached disadvantaged audiences in women's shelters, senior homes and hospitals via this project. The mayor of Austin proclaimed January 7th as Poetry Caravan Day in 2016.

I migrated to the US in 1993 and have been engaged with poetry formally since 1996. I am not sure how and when the idea of the festival crystallized but it grew out of a growing sense of unease. When I talked to poet friends, it seemed to most of us that the poetry industry was a gated community and we didn't have the gate code to enter. Almost all had a story of exclusion. If one had gained entry there were invisible barricades to progress beyond a point. It could never be proved but only experienced. Pramila Venkateswaran, a Long Island poet who had served as poet-laureate of Suffolk county, especially shared my concerns. We'd often talk about the need to harness South Asian poets as a group in the mainstream arena of American literature. We just didn't feel the representation is fair enough. And we strongly felt that consolidation was necessary to make worthwhile strides as legitimate American poets.

So, in 2015, over an animated phone conversation with her, I simply said, "Let's do it." I opened our home in Austin to host the first set of poets who were featured at the festival and we were beautifully supported by the community and mainstream institutions. The word *Matwaala* means *intoxicated* and we were baptized by Dr. Amritjit Singh, a senior diaspora scholar. The name *Matwaala* evokes bonding and bonhomie, fun and funk, creative adventure and freedom, artistic assertiveness and non-conformity. A Hindi/Urdu word, it was the name of a radical literary magazine edited by the Hindi poet Nirala from Kolkata a century ago. *Matwaala* is used for someone who is drunk, but the word is used more often in a transferred sense, for someone who is a free spirit. What was significant about the first festival was that it became permission of a kind. It solidified our initial enthusiasm into a belief for its existence. It also spurred the mission of making visible narratives that are silent in history such as Phinder Dulai, an Indo-Canadian poet's moving poetry read with a historical archive of photos of the horrific Komagatu Maru incident.

Since then, we host the festival out of NYC thanks to the selfless work and support from Pramila Venkateswaran. The shift geographically was made in recognition of the centrality of New York in the country as a educational, publishing and literary hub. We are co-directors leading the mission with passion and no economic remuneration.

To understand the birth of *Matwaala* I feel we must step back in time with poetic license to understand at least nominally, the relation of the English language and Indian English poetry to the Diaspora poet.

Imagine for a moment, you are marching in relentless heat under a blazing sun, one in a throng of patriots. You are in a province of one of the conglomerations of princely states in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that became a cohesive India in 1947. Spurred by nationalistic fervor, you are dressed in *khadi*, the indigenous coarse home-spun cotton, emblematic of the satyagrahis, the non-violent freedom fighters spurred by truth-force. Your feet are shod in the simplest of footwear, the sun is upon your skin and scalp, you are marching on, your heart alive bound shoulder to shoulder. You know your life might end in a lathi charge, a beating by wooden batons from the police force of the colonial rule. But you are willing to sacrifice your life to set your country free. Your soul quivers with the anticipation of freedom, *Vande Mataram! Vande Mataram! I praise thee mother*, daring to hope for the rise of a flag in saffron, green and white. You dare to rise and join your soul-force to a unique revolution not spurred by violence but by a formula the world has never witnessed- peaceful resistance. Gandhi has stirred you with his unique methods to bring freedom to the country. And from the flaming hearts around you, in that procession and elsewhere, songs and poems pour out in every Indian regional language- Telugu, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Punjabi—and, English.

The very first poems in English in India were poems of resistance, social reformation, national celebration, cultural rediscovery and cultural assertion. Paradoxically, the English language, the colonizer's language became the great tool to resist colonialism. And continues to be a language of resistance for the diaspora poet even today. During the fight for independence, the resistance movement found a new language to link the vast breadth of the land. To be expected, the first poetry practitioners such as Sarojini Naidu, based their poems on Western models and used English forms and prosody to express anthems of resistance and national pride.

### **Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad<sup>2</sup>**

SEE how the speckled sky burns like a pigeon's throat,  
Jewelled with embers of opal and peridot.

See the white river that flashes and scintillates,  
Curved like a tusk from the mouth of the city-gates.

Hark, from the minaret, how the muezzin's call  
Floats like a battle-flag over the city wall.

From trellised balconies, languid and luminous  
Faces gleam, veiled in a splendour voluminous.

Leisurely elephants wind through the winding lanes,  
Swinging their silver bells hung from their silver chains.

Round the high Char Minar sounds of gay cavalcades  
Blend with the music of cymbals and serenades.

Over the city bridge Night comes majestic,  
Borne like a queen to a sumptuous festival.

Two hundred years of colonial rule, that brought a Western education via English to India, also awakened a national awareness and till date has not fully eradicated a long stream of an ancient consciousness and sensibility. The English language in its incredible elasticity was absorbed into the country post-independence with the honorific 'link language' status. Since then, the English language has coursed through the country acquiring local flavors of its terrain. There is a long line of language politics in academia regarding English and the post-colonial writer. We do not have the time to go into that history but it is sufficient to be aware that English is a complex issue in relation to regional languages and the writer writing in English is not regarded as wholly authentic. Of course, those of us writing in English resist the viewpoint. I believe English merits status as 'Indian' in the land teeming with languages and dialects.

Many Indian Englishes in rainbow hues light the country with aplomb far from the Queens English. We find the language most morphed, "biryani-fied" and chutney-fied in prose. Here is a ravishingly humorous sample from Anurag Mathur's novel *The Inscrutable Americans* published in 1991 typifying Indian English and the literary prowess of the authors using the language. The protagonist, a student on his way to America from North India, writes a letter to his younger brother:

Beloved younger brother: Greetings to respectful parents. I am hoping all is well with health and wealth. I am fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too...Kindly assure Mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering Dr. Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits... Younger brother I am having so many things to tell you I am not knowing where to start. Most surprising things about America is it is full of Americans, big and white, it is little frightening... I am having good time drinking 37 glasses of Coca-Cola... I am also asking her for more coca cola but she is looking like she is weeping and walking away. I think perhaps she is not understanding proper English.<sup>3</sup>

Indian English poetry came of age with Indian literary modernism evolving from the 50s with harbinger-poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Jayanta Mohapatra, Keki Daruwalla, A.K. Ramanujam and others. It bloomed in the 60s and 70s with the Mumbai poets. Those were heady years, this new poetry was finding support in mainstream magazines and newspapers, literary journals, anthologies and from poetry publishers. There's a wonderful article by Saleem Peeradina about the era on our festival page.

Compare the evolution of language and spirit in this paean to his city by Peeradina in comparison to Naidu's Hyderabad poem:

**Bandra** (An excerpt)

I love the environs  
of your body  
and its many insights. I recognize  
every gesture, act, every foul thought  
though I'll never understand  
your central purpose. I do not wish to.  
To grasp you is to cease to need you. It is  
your incompleteness, inconstancy  
attaches me to you.

You were once a sea-front town  
that came up the thoroughfare  
to the railway station. And passed beyond  
its toy towers  
to colonies that grew on your hands like sixth-fingers.

Turned around and ran  
into a settlement  
of shops, cafes, cinemas, churches,  
hospitals, schools, parks.

Your mud is versatile.<sup>4</sup>

Notice how modern poetic conventions are in play: free verse, enjambment, and unseemly metaphors, from a voice in direct address to a city; it is a voice of witness capturing naked observations without the lilting romanticism of Naidu's work. Peeradina immigrated to Michigan to teach at Sienna Heights University; academics is often a trajectory chosen by many diaspora academician-poets like Ramanujam, Meena Alexander, Ralph Nazareth, Kazim Ali and Pramila Venkateswaran. Peeradina went on to be nominated as our poet-of-honor in 2017. I think I can safely state that the diasporic voice overall is reflective of the modern and postmodern voice in Western models redrafted in the complexity of immigration and complex cultural sensibilities.

The post-independence era witnessed a paradoxical phase in contrast to its historical engagement of booting out colonial rule—the wave of migrants out of the country in the fifties to the land of the colonizer and “first world.” Again, we do not have the liberty of scanning the history of migration except to say that today it is estimated that half-a-million Indians live in London alone. And about 4 million in the USA. The stream of Indian English did a roundabout and returned to its source via immigration. Which updates our story to the present.

The post-colonial space now becomes complexly redefined for the diaspora writer who has resettled himself /herself outside the home country in the land of the colonizer or white man. Added to post modernist themes of anxiety, fragmentation, identity politics, dislocation, redefining of family system and women's predicament and gender issues—exile and migration become the searing backstory to diaspora poetry. Attempting to define the self within multiple identities and cross-cultural realities is the dominant anthem. Diaspora poetry too delivers what those first English poems were doing in India—highlighting cultural rediscovery, identity and cultural reassertion but in the context of immigration. We will have a chance to sample poems at the end of the keynote.

Thematically, the sky's the limit thematically for the South Asian diaspora poet—and it is a wide sky spanning continents. The diaspora poet dares to claim the entire world as her canvas softening borders for, she is a borderless being. She leaps across the Atlantic and back merging worlds and creating new ones. She leaves her footsteps across histories and geographical spaces. A pliable soul, the ability for multiple identities, citizenships, informs her writing. For some poets, the era of unease is past and a fruitful season of integration and even bold claim emerges. Migration is perceived as a land of rich manure where much can bear fruit and multiply with endless possibilities in the creative zone. She strives to discover her own humanity in her kinship with all poets and is a cosmopolitan poet wearing layers of skin as Meena Alexander writes:

### **Cosmopolitan**

You want a poem on being cosmopolitan.  
 Dear friend, what can I say?  
 ...  
 Odd questions massed in me.  
 Who knows my name or where my skin was torn?  
 If I could would I return to Kashi?  
 And might the queen of trumps intercede for me?<sup>5</sup>

Diaspora poets write in free-verse and forms both Eastern, European and Far East, and experiment wildly. She delves into her cultural roots and rediscovers ancient Indian texts, offering new translations for a contemporary audience as Ravi Shankar has done with Andal, the woman devotional poet from Tamil Nadu, and Srikant Reddy with Kalidas's Shakuntala. Indigenous myths are ploughed to rewrite her own identity as Usha Kishore does. Her poetics are wide ranging, her political affiliations multi-varied. She can be lyrical or narrative in mode. She is engaged with the environment, nature, the domestic sphere and her emotional landscape. She understands she is both Indian and American. And her writing becomes the landscape to explore the negotiation between variant parts of her soul. A negotiation that is an engagement, dialogue or quarrel. She is involved in collaborations, publishing, teaching and participation in festivals and conferences on both sides of the Atlantic. If the English language is elastic, the quintessential Indian soul is an elastic soul that absorbs influences and transplants itself. I think at the heart of every Indian, in her very cells is the message: humanity, the world is one. So, she can root and uproot and root again—and the diaspora writer funnels all this tumult into the alchemical writing process.

The diaspora poet is also a publisher and editor, like Ralph Nazareth, Kazim Ali, Pireeni Sundaralingam, Yogesh Patel, Yyuyutsu Sharma and Ravi Shankar, and realizes quickly the need for platforms, self-reliance and resource-generation. Unique to the diaspora writer is the amalgamation of a dual identity as American and Indian. Ralph Nazareth, who floated Yuganta Press in the 80s shared this with me:

The mid-80s were for many of us an apocalyptic time with constant anxieties about a nuclear holocaust. I was active in the Nuclear Freeze Movement and also part of a group of poets who were all writing passionately and urgently about these matters. It occurred to me and Linda, my wife that we should publish our work without depending on someone else to do it. So Yuganta was born in 1986. Note the name Yuganta. Apocalyptic. The end of an age! ...We published an anthology of our work titled *On The Crust of Earth*—again highlighting the precariousness of our lives in time. The very second book we published—

in keeping with my bicultural identity and our hope to publish works that made a “movement between worlds” – was Devi by Suzanne Ironbiter... I have mostly stuck to the criterion of “moving between worlds” for selecting manuscripts having published a Croatian, a Goan, a Trinidadian, among others.<sup>6</sup>

We think the first anthology was *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian Writers*. Edited by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Westview Press, 1995. A few anthologies have emerged since like *Indivisible*, edited by a trio of editors. I share with you Ravi Shankar’s response when I asked him why he produced the anthology, *Language for a New Century* published by Norton:

We felt a pressing need at the time, post-9/11, to counter the reductive mass media view that all those from Asia and the Middle East, as well as the Diaspora, hewed to some counter-American philosophy. We wanted to humanize the East by presenting voices from the region, but also felt keenly that the venues for showcasing those voices did not exist. In fact, in my own graduate school education at Columbia University, I only encountered one or two poets of color in the entire discussion of the Western canon, and certainly no South Asian poets. Because those voices are so vital, we committed seven years of our life to bring this book out.<sup>7</sup>

So why did I instinctively feel a South Asian poetry festival was necessary in 2015? There were cultural festivals emerging like *Artwallah* in LA and *Jaqruti* in Boston in the early 2000s. More recently, Jaipur Lit Fest- USA, SALA poetry reading session, IACC, New York, and *Tasveer* in Seattle have emerged but these festivals are multi-genre or the poetry readings happen under the auspices of a larger umbrella. The mega conference on South Asia was instituted at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1971 with a focus on research and academia with categories for film, plays and performances. There is no sole poetry festival so it seemed like a vacuum waiting to be filled. But the truth is there were no statistics in my mind when I jumped in, I gave myself to an impulse, to an intuition. My co-director Pramila succinctly sums up our vision:

Writing about the cultural nuances in our experiences on two or three different continents opens up multiple questions and meaning-making as we navigate cultural gaps and hurdles. Immigrant diaspora stories are valuable as we perceive the rich tapestry of the United States that is reflected in the writing. Unfortunately, not much of South Asian writing in America is visible. Matwaala: South Asian diaspora festival fits into this yawning gap in American literature and provides a haven of meaning which is so desperately needed in our exploration and understanding of American history and literature...Heightened scrutiny of the other and the overwhelming drive to pigeonhole people of color brought on by a brutish right wing in the U.S., as well as the rigidity that has set into South Asian politics that restricts poets and journalists for their progressive views with threats and extra judicial killings. make Matwaala more relevant than ever. Matwaala highlights for folks everywhere the grayness in the chiaroscuro of our narratives. Matwaala poets are happily ensconced in the in-between spaces and from margins to centers, keeping their doors of plurality open.

The first forceful motive was representation and visibility. I graduated from Cambridge university in May 2019 with an Masters in Creative Writing. To my disbelief, our syllabus did not include a single South Asian writer while the program is actively recruiting a global studentship. How many South Asian poets are being published in mid and upper-tier literary journals? Pramila acutely observes: “Often, editors feature a special South Asian issue that is self-absolving to exclude writers thereon whilst ‘American’ writers are published

year-round.” How many South Asian poets feature in conferences, university reading series, writing residencies and retreats, and are faculty on writing residencies and retreats? *In relation* to the number of diaspora South Asian poets in the country?

Our mission was thus drafted:

To promote South Asian poetry in the American literary landscape and collaborate with other arts in North America through a festival, publications and mutual support among poets.

We have deliberately structured our festival as multi-sited, partnering with educational and cultural institutions. We want to expose students and faculty in CW and English departments to the rich texture of SA poetry. This year, our opening reading was at NYU and other readings were hosted by Hunter College, Nassau Community College and the Red Room and we were funded by Poets and Writers. In 2020, Stony Brook University has pledged its support. We feel our presence on university campuses may begin to have the power to change canon.

Earlier in the year, I looked at a number of poetry and literary journals that reconfirmed for me that the need for *Matwaala* was not the figment of my imagination. When I revisited the issue in Aug/Sep 2019, there was not much shift in statistical data. Kazim Ali’s issue on SA Poetry in Poetry magazine stood out but it raises questions of representation and editorial choice and he included Indian poets living in India. *Poetry Magazine* seems to be publishing more SA poets recently, the Aug/Sep issue carries poems by *Karthika Nair and Arvind Mehrotra*. Coincidentally, *Poetry Magazine* may have been the first or one of the first to publish the first South Asian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel-laureate in its June 1913 issue. But the South Asian diaspora community of poets is more than one Nobel laureate.

Our second reason was inclusivity and broadening the visibility of the number of SA poets who are doing stellar work but haven’t got the recognition due. Most US-SA poets are a repetitive roster of name-brand poets like Vijay Seshadri, late Meena Alexander, Kazim Ali, Ravi Shankar, and a few more. *Indivisible*, contains the work of about 50 poets and I guess since its publication in 2010, the number of emerging and established poets have gone up substantially. We wish to promote quality not elitism which has a self-defeating impact within the community. While we honor and respect accomplished names our goal is to bring more good poets to the limelight.

Inclusivity also means softening borders and we include all of South Asia as we recognize concerns and strivings are similar. We include poets from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Maldives, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. We achieved the goal of inviting the UK diaspora this year and one of them was awarded our 2019 poet of honor award. Our poet of honor award is not just to recognize talent or stature but service and support to fellow poets. I initiated the idea of a *Matwaala* mug with lines from the poetry of the poet-of-honor. We also issued our first *Matwaala* e-anthology edited painstakingly by Pramila and Zilka Joseph. We were able to pay a website designer due to collective funding from poets.

The third reason is one of voice; a term with ramifications. While our aim is to facilitate the absorption of SA poets into the American literary tradition, consciousness and canon, it must happen as a valid voice that is American. Our aim is not to isolate the SA voice but to solidify it as a thread within the larger tapestry of American poetry. A voice that should not have to alter to be accepted as American. Poets should not be forced to sound

or write a certain way and get rejected because subject matter or cultural concerns are not ‘American’ enough and variant from the Poetry Industry Standards. So, we foresee it will become necessary to establish a publishing house eventually to make a small dent into who and what is being published. We took our first step with an online anthology this year. On our *Matwaala* website, under the Press description we raise the question of voice-integrity. Our present political and social climate bespoke the urgency for the dignity of all voices in this country. Perhaps, this need was palpable at our 2017 fest in NYC when 17 poets came out to feature at the *Matwaala* Big Read.

There is another interesting facet to the concern of voice. There is no *one* South Asian voice just as there is not just one feminism. We come from a pluralistic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural country where you will find Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Christian, Sufi and Hindu Indians. All of these need a platform unbroken by narrow constraints or political agendas. *Matwaala* hopes to unify not scatter or split voices. Our four poets-of-honor for each of our four festivals have been a Parsi, Muslim, Christian and Hindu, all male—nominated by two women directors. Of this Ralph Nazareth, has joked, only women would have the heart to do so! It is true, these individuals were richly deserving and gender did not dictate out choice.

Post four editions I am confident of the validity of our vision. At each festival, I have sensed an excitement, a kinship and validation. Community and friendship is the keynote diminishing hierarchy and competition. The 2020 festival at Stony Brook University, NY was replaced by video recordings in lieu of the festival on campus due to Covid. In 2020, *Matwaala* is slated to feature four readings by poets of color in four categories: African American, Native American, South/Central American and Mexican.

Poetry is a kind of bread, it is shared and fills our bellies as a comfort food for the soul. Time and time again this unfolds experientially in the festivals. Plus, the magical moments from time to time: *Poets and Writers* supported us this year applauding our efforts and carried a write up of our festival on its blog. In 2019, Salman Rushdie turned up at our opening at NYU slipping into the room invisibly! In 2015, I can’t forget driving my van jiggle-jangling with poets to the Dialogue Institute, a Turkish organization for our first reading. We were drunk on something not alcoholic. In 2017, seventeen poets appeared to read at our big read at AAWW. It was the political climate that triggered an unconscious need for solidarity drawing out senior and emerging poets with equality. At Nassau community college, Pramila devised a session wherein creative writing students and the Muslim student’s union read poems by South Asian poets aloud. It was a moving and jubilatory moment to hear youth also recite their own poems as we sat down at a meal together.

My opening remarks from the 2015 festival are relevant:

While this is a celebration of the talent of a certain diaspora, this is ultimately the celebration of poetry. We are poets because we dare to say the unsaid and we hear the unheard. No poet is a fine or great poet only because he or she belongs to this or that ethnicity. A good poet is one because he/she is attuned to the universal unmasking itself in his/her individual sensibility. Today, you will hear voices that are rooted and yet fly. Voices that break down barriers. Voices that dare to be South Asian, American and simply human.

I summoned Gandhi’s spirit at the beginning of this keynote and end with it—altered a bit mischievously:

Be the change you want to see. Be intoxicated with it and intoxicate others with it.



POEMS BY SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA POETS (Excerpts)

**Enough!**

By Usha Akella (Austin, Texas)

People let us say it.  
Bring back our caged children to a field of sunflowers,  
open our land to people as we would our palms  
to catch a raindrop,  
bring back Aylan in blue shorts  
washed up as a fish, snuggled in sand,  
let us not say again: he did not make it,  
let children not have to tell their stories.

Let us bring back Gulsoma, seven years old,  
oil her back scarred like a cluster of sardines,  
let us hear her laughter before it was married,  
let Malala not be shot in the head,  
let Karlanot have to say 43, 200 raped.  
And bring back Asifa Bano's rosy cheeks and chirping,  
let her bring back goats bare-footed,  
and roast warm chestnuts on a humble fire,  
let her eight-year old legs not be parted brutally for  
things other than what children do,  
and bring back all the murdered girl infants  
still as stone swaddled in earth.

And the police/ traffickers/ abductors/ mothers/ fathers/ sisters/ brothers  
who kill/ sell/ abuse/ rape/ shoot their own,  
let us hang them as rotting fruit from trees.  
And people, we who know too much with our tentacles of knowing  
like octopuses with many eyes,  
how much of knowing do we need,  
before we say it?

**Dot Sale**

By Pramila Venkateswaran (Long Island, NY)

What's on your forehead?  
Those stickers come in red?  
One-size-fits-all dots  
on sale  
in Bloomingdale's  
Is that your G-spot?  
Tantra-yantra, baby?  
Your kundalini?  
...  
D'you see fuckin' double?  
Does it mean you're available?  
You're kosher, right?  
A homey girl—  
I like that...

### **Thirtha 12**

By Pramila Venkateswaran (Long Island, NY)

We are hyphens, male-female, Hindi-Tamil-English-  
American-Sanskrit, mantra-hymn-namaz, not ciphers  
as parents yelled out to kids playing hookey. You'll  
be a cipher: curse transformed; our emptiness  
ills with patterns of light;  
We imitate divinity, feet parked in different hemispheres.

I taste Cauvery in New York, glinting thinly where it crosses  
Karnataka into Tamil Nadu; a clump of cane between  
a well and a home marking the border...  
We are on both shores at once, both or more?  
Where the Indian ocean holds the Atlantic  
and the Pacific, waters wed  
cobalt and ash; the depths are emerald; tides rise  
and fall, storms rage, unconfined by borders.

### **Ferrying Secrets**

By Ralph Nazareth (*Stamford, Connecticut, USA*)

Allen Ginsberg at Stew Leonards shows...

Allen Ginsberg at Stew Leonards Shows Me the Democratic Vistas of Unending Cheeses, Walks Me Past Singing Cows, Banjo-strumming Bands and the Seven Deadly Sins Chief Among Them Gluttony and Talks to Me with Buddha Compassion at the Checkout Counter.

I need you Allen to tell me go ahead bury your head in peppers, it's ostrich-like I  
know but see what happened to our heroes  
I need you Allen to show me how to clown my way to wisdom, monkey or no  
monkey on my back  
I need you Allen to show me how to look the world in the eye while my eyes fill  
up with sorrow  
I need you Allen to tell me it's o.k. buddy you fell asleep when I'd asked you to  
stay awake and touch  
I am, don't you see, all forgiveness, see how the milk flows from my almost  
mother breasts, my Blake and Whitman breasts  
come lay your heavy head on me and drink, there's more where it came from, for  
I have a direct line to the goddess  
I wrote her a kaddish and she wrote me a blank check, drink baby drink and don't  
worry about growing up  
I need you Allen to remind me of my ancestors, like them or not, that's where the  
songs come from, and the curses  
and we must know them both and hold them in till our holy throats croak and  
our holy sphincters burst  
and there is the *pralaya* and the night will not end until we say brothers and  
sisters, we're o.k. it's not our fault  
we knew about it but it's not our fault, could've would've should've done  
something about it but we didn't

**The Hands that Lit the Shabbat Lamps**

By Zilka Joseph (Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA)

My mother's hands –what did they dream?  
Tough and weathered they are,  
heavy, thick, square-  
nailed, strong; did a lifetime  
of labor  
in a man's world; bore the weight of all our needs,  
the brunt  
of a mother-in-law's tongue, Dad's quick temper. How hard  
those pale hands slaved –  
tinted with turmeric, smelling of garlic, cilantro,  
or cloves, cinnamon and butter on high holidays  
and at night Ponds Cold Cream. For special  
times she wore  
nail polish for silk sari evenings, or gold jewelry events  
dad's official dinners, for weddings. The rougher  
her fingers grew, the more  
she slid into her shell,  
hiding her true heart. Just as her mother's  
had even before the fourth,  
the unwanted daughter –my mother,  
was born. When did her palms  
turn to steel? Child given extra  
work, less education than her sisters, even less play?  
These hands so old now, so brave,  
what did they dream? These hands that taught us how  
to light our shabbat lamps? When did they have soft  
skin? How wise these hands ...

**Sam the Super**

By Ravi Shankar (New York, USA)

You wouldn't take my bald father for a quirky man,  
since his bearing is quintessentially Tamil-Brahmin,  
a Tam-Bram for the uninitiated, with the firmest hand  
when it comes to discipline or studies. He leers at ham  
and beer alike. Believes what genes conspire within  
him makes him purer than you. Not the sort of man  
you'd ever imagine would in top hat willingly stand  
in a Chinese restaurant smelling of wet dog and Ramen  
to pull silk scarves from his mouth with his own hand,  
yet there he was, amazingly, like Borat in Kazakhstan  
but without the parody and much to my young chagrin,  
playing the part of Magician, much more than mere man.  
I was his caped and turbaned assistant who he'd demand  
tap on boxes, say magical phrases, hide in a flour bin  
he'd saw in half. If not a spectacle witnessed firsthand,

I wouldn't believe it either. Soon as he'd pull out a cyan hanky to mop his brow in the parking lot, his large grin would fade to a frown. He'd warn me not to say "man" or "dude." When I resisted, he pulled me to car by hand.

### Guatemalan Worry Dolls

By Varsha Saraiyya Shah (Houston, Texas)

Earthy, skinny thimble-like figurines  
woven with twine and jute.  
Once they tumble out of their bamboo box  
onto my bed

open-armed, wide-eyed  
I place them on my palm, a gift  
from my teenage daughter long ago, a salve  
for my worries.

Their tribal circle kind of my close family.

Black, a fallen marriage.  
The trio of Red-Orange-Peach my children.  
Dots and curly lines for eyes and brows, two  
with no frowns.

Gold hard to label worthy of study perhaps  
a comedy of forgotten errors.  
The Green promises hills of peace and  
gardens yet to explore,

I never hid the dolls beneath my pillow  
to put them to work the way  
my daughter instructed.

Together we wander through the rooms  
of legends they boast of tonight  
their faces focused on mine but seem far away

as if saying,  
take a hike to the Highlands, dear Maya  
tell them we all are myths and legends  
you've got nothing to worry.

Austin, Texas, USA

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poetry wall exhibit: [https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/blog/wall-of-poems?fbclid=IwAR0Jn2FCe2RH7z2u-kluuyW\\_v\\_L8aTy6lR4TqipSeJT4yGMEt7hv8YT1sPI](https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/blog/wall-of-poems?fbclid=IwAR0Jn2FCe2RH7z2u-kluuyW_v_L8aTy6lR4TqipSeJT4yGMEt7hv8YT1sPI) and <https://indiacurrents.com/matwaala-poetry-and-diaspora-culture/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/nightfall-in-the-city-of-hyderabad/>

<sup>3</sup> Mathur, Anurag. *The inscrutable Americans*. Rupa.Co, 1991, pp. 9-12.

<sup>4</sup> Peeradina, Saleem. "Bandra". *First Offence*. Newground, Bombay, 1980, p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, Meena. "Cosmopolitan". *Quickly changing river*. TriQuarterly Books, 2008, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> From personal email to author.

<sup>7</sup> From personal email to author.