

Devdoot : The Angel

Sudhakar Gaidhani

Translated from Marathi by Om Biyani
Translation of **Canto - I** of **Mahavaakya** (The Great Utterance),
original Marathi Epic Poem in five cantos (555 pages) O

seafaring birds hunting for pearl-feed!

Fill up your beaks
with the eternal youth of my wings
because I'll soon be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

On this isle just a few buds remain
of intoxicating flowers;
so before I too shed my petals
search out and keep my eyes -
because I'll soon be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

One hasn't yet found the caravans
of Sindbads with golden dreams
that were on this same way misled;
nor has one yet wiped
the stains,
on the stones,
of the jewels that the stars here shed.

The ruined pavilions
within a score of miles,
in this phantom's domain,
were undone by their love of tombs,
their passions yet unquenched.

It's a valley of tyrants where
all hell has broken loose and where
a war is on-a veritable wildfire -
while the waves that girdle me in chains
fornicate freely with the shore.

Fledglings!
Since He does not find on my riot-torn face
the glow befitting a prisoner
God himself is pained.

I too can hide this earth
under my wings outspread;
I too can soar can flap my wings
Like you and you; every branch here bears
The marks of my claws

It was I that gifted
This graveyard to those fakirs

To this day I cherish in my wings
the eyes of Christ
and the Buddha's smile
That's why this sea has made a captive of me.

Birds,
out at sea the boats of my agonies
are singing their sea-songs;
go and receive them please,
because even they will be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

Friends,
the tribes of hangmen-weavers
that pleat the ropes for their job
have earned a bad name here;
their only crime is this;
they are slaves to hunger.

There is so much fire still
in the kiln of their eyes
that no sooner do the rulers become oppressive
than will they reduce to ash
every dictatorial structure.

Hey, is it that you, too,
consider me a madman?

So, count your feathers in the dark,
quietly sharpen your beaks
by rubbing them on each other's
and let the night pass
And pester daylight

so much with your beaks
that night should come back fast .

It is only now that the sky
is feeling choked with compassion
and is sending down rains -
at first drop by drop
and then in torrents

The benevolent cataclysmic forces
of the universe, have burst out
shaking up all that is quick or dead.
The sun, spangled with stars
is shivering, seeking alms,
with his begging-bowl of horizon
at the gentle evening's gate.

And says in a piteous voice:
"Mother, O mother,
God will bless you -
let me spend here this night.
I'll be on my way
by break of daylight."

Beware all
A mighty rain is about to fall.
The river will be in full flood again
and my deep, lake-deep eyes

that quest for the shore
will be carried by the current
with my oyster-trapped soul.
Before this calm in me that
anticipates an earthquake
breaks loose, come, death,
and set me free.

The cry of the virgin night
scorched in a forest-fire
in now more than I can bear
The jungle of sufferings on my body
is ablaze, every cell in me
is cracking, bursting,
so remove at once these houses on the shore -
the world is in flames,

the world is in flames.

Hurry up, wash these wounds
on the earth's heart,
lest it split into two -
because this planet is all
that we mortals have got

You who can make out
a bird from a nest,
who don't my eardrums shudder,
why can't I hear the anguished chirping
of baby birds that can't find their mother?
How is it that the spirit
that pervades the five elements
has gone entirely deaf?
Or is it bootless -
the resurrection of us angels?

O merchants,
beware when you tear off the armour
on my vast captive body.
Terrified, everybody will scream and shout,
jungles of trees will rush, roots and all,
ice-forts will crumble like houses of cards,
the rivers, like cobras, will slither here and there
and the earth, like a frightened cow,
will tremble in every limb.

O oracles,
don't be so prodigal of declarations.
One has to bail a whole ocean
from its fathomless depths:
a mother has to wrench her belly
to earn her relief and to see her babe.

The parti-coloured lamps on this isle
are not decorative lighting -
they are the dropped-out eyes
of travellers who lost their way.

2

O you who dig up cobra holes
in search of cobra-gems
look how they sway
entwining sandal trees.
These reptiles with their passion-poison
dare not touch me:
the stink of my flesh and bones
is much too strong for them.

Like the earth cracked in the hot dry season
like a tree with chopped off branches
prominent in a bare wintry wood,
a terror grips your whole body,

it grips the whole jungle, all of life
the terror of shedding off the member.
Children of rishis, listen.
Don't remove the bark of these ivies,
do not undrape them:
every limb of theirs will rob you
of the power gained through penance.
Who will be accounted guilty then,
no one knows.

"The sun is my coeval",
the planets assert
I don't really know,
because an Overview of the source
is impossible to the flow.

Each cloud like lachrymose eyes
speeding along like loosening life;
this country, aged witness,
that relates entrancing tales of nights
that probe the wombs while ensuring their pleasure:
such things, you say,
should be guarded like a germinated sore.
Then why this vain temptation
to hide, under the wings, that fledgling bird?

The answers to these questions
will remain hanging like limbs
split open and filled with sand.
Long live, therefore,
the potency of my questions.

How quickly is the day ripped off ... !
How swiftly do creatures come and go ... !
Some with desires unsatisfied,
some with sorrows unconsoled.

Every conch is blowing
The tears that fly off under cover
freeze and crowd in the sky.
The molehill-mountains that chop off
the wings of the clouds
go up in flames halfway,

So friends,
when my soul was rotting in the earth's womb
I tore off deliverance and destiny,
scattering them like petals.
The vigilant guards of heaven
I transfixed on the spot .

That's how my sojourn has been happy.
In the season of ripe feathers
my face is in bloom.

Suppose you pushed the earth on-
where would you park it in space ?
Suppose you captured the sun and the moon-
where would you make their jail?

While fording the immense solitude
of a vast primeval desert
I have seen gentle waves of sand crumble.
And later, from the age of the earth
I have witnessed the murders
of those who cherished the sight
of monsoon winds
traversing a thirst-burnt desert

I dismissed in a superannuated dirge
all those defunct prayers;
while the forlorn footprints

of the directionless sailors of old
were being gently buried
in a massive drift of sand.

In the shadow of the cracked scaffold,
sitting in the criminals' tomb
when I recounted heroic sagas
they drew their swords
at my every pause.

And then when the aged vultures
patrolling the scaffold
and convulsing with hunger

made a sortie on me
I just didn't know where their feathers were
dropping in the shade.

You could see the evening thickening
in the owl's eyes -
I had no choice but to move on.
My pregnant wounds were yearning for the sun -
I had no choice but to move on.

Fledglings,
he who marches
should never lose heart.
At a certain moment
just because the Creator has stopped
he shouldn't pitch his tent.

So, friends,
here we enter, the metropolis
of Venus-eyed lust.
While crossing the thick vineyard beyond
you will succumb to the caprice of chasing
the enchantresses there.

And when birds interbreed
somehow it is the male that conceives,
so look out when you fly
over this territory.

Even now I can hear
the lip-to-ear dialogues,
from alien planets,
of rishis and of saints.

"O you who are sitting alone
here in the celestial lake in this grape-garden
quietly washing your body,
O bewitching apsaras³ of Indra's⁴ forest
won't you let me collect
in a cone of thorn-apple leaves
the sandal-rich water
trickling off your soft skin?
O lady, my wings are weary -
won't you let me land on your grounds?"

"O best among birds,
your fluttering promiscuous glance
has stung my gentle heart.
Don't you pity

this wounded lady-bird?"

"O beautiful one, O harlot of heaven,
your bright smile caresses
my ascetic effulgence -
aren't you scared of my lust and rage?

O luscious cobress⁵
of a dripping-wet lush green ivy,

why are these smelt flowers
clinging so, again and again, to the branch?
And like a virgin in heat
challenging in every way
the divine food in my bag?"

"O excellent ascetic,
every season comes of age
intoxicated by its sap.
A hungering austerity
won't beget deliverance, my dear.
O star among penitents,
rains don't fall from a dry sky,
and when the stem is desiccated
buds won't bloom.

So you say that
as a river in flood rushes
and clings to the sea,
I too should,
before these dense woods loosen the night,
cling to you? "

"But O bewitchment alive,
after giving away my body
where shall I posit my soul?

Come O rishis of lust,
sow this night in my every limb.
O stars, give me today your mantle.

Gift away, O great Vedas,
this penance-born virtue in my every cell
to the wretches condemned to hell."

Fledglings,
everybody knows
that it is injurious to scabble a sore;
and knowing this well
they scabble it evermore.
Now just as one finds a guilty pleasure
in scratching an itch,
so does an Adam hunger for an Eve
and she for him.

One such beauty there was,
very dear to me.
The stars were like jewels in her nosering;"
she had two autumn full moons on her two sides
of hue they were milky white.
Now just as she was silly
she acted like a filly.

In every childbirth
she laughed like a tamarind fat and green;
and in season she again would flirt
with admirers seventeen.
Often I saw her
getting stars tattooed in the open,
I had bought her an emerald anklet
by pledging myself with the ocean.

At last one day
I took courage in both hands
and saw how it felt this lady to address.
Quickly, for that moment, she saw how
it felt to hold me in her embrace.

*Fora worm of lust
pleasure is a must:
A crow of dandy taste-
ruin of himself*

O best among birds from far-off lands,
I applaud your seducing eyes
That injure shy maidens
bathing by the side of perfume-runnels;
applaud your heart-thrilling bursts of joy
and your dream personality
that should tickle any conceited beauty;
all these qualities that challenge a maiden
to a bed battle, I applaud.

O crown among birds,

I commend your superhuman charms,
the rule you set up over the country of tits,
and the fierce invasions of the nests
of deep green parrots in mango forests.

But it's a pity to recall, O noblest of birds,
that on that April full moon, during lunar eclipse
you refused, aware that you were winning a close battle,
those hundreds of glum but sporting ladies
of the loser's scamp.
I wish you had put down for a moment
your bloody swords
and kissed them all quickly, one by *one*.

"The sparrow and his mate fight
and this ruins their life."

*A nine days' wonder-
they say of our life
Even so the moon
adores fireflies.*

"O grandfather,
always, always, shall I act as you taught;
I'll test the virtue of my tongue
before I ever speak;
your sayings shall be royal edicts;
I shall have a sage poet
discuss every word of yours;
I shall have him sing
through a song on your life
all your dear teachings.

I shall act as I speak
but if I stumble at some inconvenient truth
I shall play tricks -
how shall I otherwise
perfect my politics? "

"Where exactly will it drop
a wisp of perfumed cotton
flying with political winds -
can you tell, O royal bird?
O royal bird,
you can foresee a storm at some stage
but can you forelist those who the storm will ravage?
For years you have sat
on your habitual throne -

but does it mean you know
the art of government?

It's easy to rule by terror -
hanging swords in city squares.

This works
as long as the people can be led
or else there are many here who
rise to sever their regent's head,
Yes, man oppresses man all around -
And it's man again that dresses his wounds.

O eminent of the land of emeralds,
I wish you the joy of your wisdom;
may, howbeit, you bury your deceit;
to the cow-peg may, at times, man be tethered;
may solace shower on burning homes;
may twenty dine off a single plate;
may barren women conceive overnight;
may a lightning death descend
on all who long for it.

Sudhakar Gaidhani
India. *Translated* from Marathi by
Prof. Dr. Om. Biyani-India

Devdoot
The Angel

Canto I

Sudhakar Gaidhani

TRANSLATED FROM MARATHI

By

Om Biyani



A
Writers
Workshop
Publication

Preface

Picture a rustic-looking student appearing for the M.A. Part I examination and attempting a question on Sudhakar Gaidhani's first collection of poems. The students is well, Gaidhani himself. Picture a boy washing dishes in a dingy village eatery who grows up to say :

Suppose you pushed the earth on ...
Where would you park it in space?

That is our poet.

"Devdoot – c'est moi," says Gaidhani in his language. Incidentally, it seems poetically fit that the creator of *Devdoot* – which word literally means God's courier (hence an angel) – should belong to the postal department.

That the experience of hutment life should colour Gaidhani's poem is understandable; what is remarkable is the way he transcends the usual limitations of the literature we associate with people of such a background.

Devdoot is Gaidhani's second and favourite work, a long-gestated long poem whose epic status is tentatively conceded by some noted Marathi critics. Its larger-than-life hero, its breadth, and the nature of the action in it are advanced to support the epithet. On the other hand, its reflective nature – reflective more than episodic – has earned it the description "meditations on the world". But it is not a chapter by chapter disquisition, it is a picaresque meditation, the link between one thought and next being associative and underground.

Underlying the poem is the awareness that external nature and human nature are sprung from a common seed, Nature images abound in the poem and its complex "message" is at places reduced to a simple appeal to seek one's identity in nature – to be like a flower, like a tree.

Devdoot is Buddha and Christ rolled into one, who has compassion in his bag but who dismisses "Defunct prayers". If the ancient lawgiver has stopped, Man shouldn't "pitch his tent".

The poem has, fittingly, the quality of eloquence. The original is a cascadingly fluent, eminently recitable free verse poem, punctuated by explosions, interspersed with echoes from folk songs and traditional hymns, parodic, sardonic, witty, aphoristic, blunt. Its one-stretch, 90 minute readings have enthralled varied categories of listeners. It is not a cloister poem at all. Within a short time of its publication, lines from it were read in a legislative assembly, scrawled on village walls, printed on invitation cards, quoted in college lecture halls, and commended by India's ex-deputy Prime Minister

Y.B. Chavan as containing the “wisdom of ages”.

There could be several reasons for the poem’s success, but a major one must be its mythopoeia nature – the pithy little stories about romance, hunger, exploitation, death.

It may be noted in passing that when UNESCO considered *Devdoot* under their programme for translations of representative works they found it a “lovely story”. Another curiosity is that the Smithsonian Institute, Washington’s discovery of a thirty-million-year-old fossil of a giant bird reminded a critic of *Devdoot*. *Devdoot*’s characteristics remarkably resemble those of the real-life giant bird: gigantic size, flying over oceans, living aeons ago. Raymond T. Rye II of the Smithsonian Institute, on reading *Devdoot*, found the coincidence “a rare occasion when science and poetry can meet with such magnificent blend of serendipity”.

The serious reader will of course be sensitive to the poem’s suggestions and nuances and resolve its paradoxes. Coded and cryptic as some lines do sound, readers avow that they have mined fresh meanings with each reading. After discussion with Gaidhani I feel the poem awaits the patient digger.

Compassion is *Devdoot*’s keynote, played allegro:

Hurry up, wash these wounds
On the earth’s heart
Lest it split into two-
Because this planet is all
That we mortals have got

Devdoot somehow assures us that messiahs can never be an extinct species. I may add the Gaidhani proposes a sequel to this poem.

OM BIYANI

.. dressed in rags
we went to sell gold-
not a soul turned to us.
Then dressed in gold
we went to sell rags-
and lo! mad was the rush.

Prologue

Devdoot, a great roclike bird, had for a whole age winged his way to upper space and in fact to the remote corners of the universe. From time to time he would come down to the atmosphere of the mortals' planet for a change of air. As the years went by, his body inevitably went through the transformations of age and grew infirm.

Once, as he was sliding along on drifting clouds, a poison-tipped arrow shot by a hunter's son, shot merely out of curiosity at the peculiar motion of the clouds, pierced through to the bird's heart. And with a mighty crash the great bird collapsed, blood-spattered, on a desert island nearby. The wound was serious.

At that time flocks of various birds were flying overhead in the course of their migration. Some of them, as they surveyed the earth, noticed the fallen bird. Curious, they landed around him one by one, marvelling at the sight of so huge a bird. A senior one among them remarked, "Oh, this is our rare ancient ancestor." On hearing this they became as sympathetic as they were wonderstruck. And they came to one decision: "This grandparent of ours and a great bird to boot, wounded by man's arrow, must not be left alone to die groaning. Rather, with our beaks we must prick him to a speedier release."

Prompted by this conventional motive they were about to fall upon the magnificent bird. But Devdoot, who had lain speechless so far, opened his mouth and said. "Wait, children, don't lance me. Spare that trouble and pain to your beaks. I'm a setting sun, half buried in the horizon. But before I go far away from you, from this world and its worldliness, let me open my heart to you. This is my last wish, just this."

At once the birds stepped back and were all ears to hear what the giant bird had to say. Like gems, like pearls, they began to glean his utterances.

Devdoot : The Angel

Sudhakar Gaidhani

Translated from Marathi by Om Biyani
Translation of **Canto - I** of **Mahavaakya** (The Great Utterance),
original Marathi Epic Poem in five cantos (555 pages)

O seafaring birds hunting for pearl-feed!

Fill up your beaks
with the eternal youth of my wings
because I'll soon be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

On this isle just a few buds remain
of intoxicating flowers;
so before I too shed my petals
search out and keep my eyes -
because I'll soon be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

One hasn't yet found the caravans
of Sindbads with golden dreams
that were on this same way misled;
nor has one yet wiped
the stains,
on the stones,
of the jewels that the stars here shed.

The ruined pavilions
within a score of miles,
in this phantom's domain,
were undone by their love of tombs,
their passions yet unquenched.

It's a valley of tyrants where
all hell has broken loose and where
a war is on-a veritable wildfire -
while the waves that girdle me in chains
fornicate freely with the shore.

Fledglings!
Since He does not find on my riot-torn face
the glow befitting a prisoner
God himself is pained.

I too can hide this earth
under my wings outspread;
I too can soar can flap my wings
Like you and you; every branch here bears
The marks of my claws

It was I that gifted
This graveyard to those fakirs

To this day I cherish in my wings
the eyes of Christ
and the Buddha's smile
That's why this sea has made a captive of me.

Birds,
out at sea the boats of my agonies
are singing their sea-songs;
go and receive them please,
because even they will be flown off
by messenger-fakirs that weep while they laugh.

Friends,
the tribes of hangmen-weavers
that pleat the ropes for their job
have earned a bad name here;
their only crime is this;
they are slaves to hunger.

There is so much fire still
in the kiln of their eyes
that no sooner do the rulers become oppressive
than will they reduce to ash
every dictatorial structure.

Hey, is it that you, too,
consider me a madman?

So, count your feathers in the dark,
quietly sharpen your beaks
by rubbing them on each other's
and let the night pass
And pester daylight
so much with your beaks
that night should come back fast.

It is only now that the sky
is feeling choked with compassion
and is sending down rains -
at first drop by drop
and then in torrents

The benevolent cataclysmic forces
of the universe, have burst out
shaking up all that is quick or dead.
The sun, spangled with stars
is shivering, seeking alms,
with his begging-bowl of horizon
at the gentle evening's gate.

And says in a piteous voice:
"Mother, O mother,
God will bless you -
let me spend here this night.
I'll be on my way
by break of daylight."

Beware all
A mighty rain is about to fall.
The river will be in full flood again
and my deep, lake-deep eyes

that quest for the shore
will be carried by the current
with my oyster-trapped soul.
Before this calm in me that
anticipates an earthquake
breaks loose, come, death,
and set me free.

The cry of the virgin night
scorched in a forest-fire
in now more than I can bear
The jungle of sufferings on my body
is ablaze, every cell in me
is cracking, bursting,
so remove at once these houses on the shore -
the world is in flames,
the world is in flames.

Hurry up, wash these wounds

on the earth's heart,
lest it split into two -
because this planet is all
that we mortals have got

You who can make out
a bird from a nest,
who don't my eardrums shudder,
why can't I hear the anguished chirping
of baby birds that can't find their mother?
How is it that the spirit
that pervades the five elements
has gone entirely deaf?
Or is it bootless -
the resurrection of us angels?

O merchants,
beware when you tear off the armour
on my vast captive body.
Terrified, everybody will scream and shout,
jungles of trees will rush, roots and all,
ice-forts will crumble like houses of cards,
the rivers, like cobras, will slither here and there
and the earth, like a frightened cow,
will tremble in every limb.

O oracles,
don't be so prodigal of declarations.
One has to bail a whole ocean
from its fathomless depths:
a mother has to wrench her belly
to earn her relief and to see her babe.

The parti-coloured lamps on this isle
are not decorative lighting -
they are the dropped-out eyes
of travellers who lost their way.

O you who dig up cobra holes²
in search of cobra-gems
look how they sway
entwining sandal trees.
These reptiles with their passion-poison
dare not touch me:
the stink of my flesh and bones
is much too strong for them.

Like the earth cracked in the hot dry season
like a tree with chopped off branches
prominent in a bare wintry wood,

a terror grips your whole body,

it grips the whole jungle, all of life
the terror of shedding off the member.
Children of rishis, listen.
Don't remove the bark of these ivies,
do not undrape them:
every limb of theirs will rob you
of the power gained through penance.
Who will be accounted guilty then,
no one knows.

"The sun is my coeval",
the planets assert
I don't really know,
because an Overview of the source
is impossible to the flow.

Each cloud like lachrymose eyes
speeding along like loosening life;
this country, aged witness,
that relates entrancing tales of nights
that probe the wombs while ensuring their pleasure:
such things, you say,
should be guarded like a germinated sore.
Then why this vain temptation
to hide, under the wings, that fledgling bird?

The answers to these questions
will remain hanging like limbs
split open and filled with sand.
Long live, therefore,
the potency of my questions.

How quickly is the day ripped off ... !
How swiftly do creatures come and go ... !
Some with desires unsatisfied,
some with sorrows unconsolated.

Every conch is blowing
The tears that fly off under cover
freeze and crowd in the sky.
The molehill-mountains that chop off
the wings of the clouds
go up in flames halfway,

So friends,
when my soul was rotting in the earth's womb
I tore off deliverance and destiny,
scattering them like petals.
The vigilant guards of heaven
I transfixed on the spot.

That's how my sojourn has been happy.
In the season of ripe feathers
my face is in bloom.

Suppose you pushed the earth on-
where would you park it in space ?
Suppose you captured the sun and the moon-
where would you make their jail?

While fording the immense solitude
of a vast primeval desert
I have seen gentle waves of sand crumble.
And later, from the age of the earth
I have witnessed the murders
of those who cherished the sight
of monsoon winds
traversing a thirst-burnt desert

I dismissed in a superannuated dirge
all those defunct prayers;
while the forlorn footprints

of the directionless sailors of old
were being gently buried
in a massive drift of sand.

In the shadow of the cracked scaffold,
sitting in the criminals' tomb
when I recounted heroic sagas
they drew their swords
at my every pause.

And then when the aged vultures
patrolling the scaffold
and convulsing with hunger
made a sortie on me
I just didn't know where their feathers were
dropping in the shade.

You could see the evening thickening

in the owl's eyes -
I had no choice but to move on.
My pregnant wounds were yearning for the sun -
I had no choice but to move on.

Fledglings,
he who marches
should never lose heart.
At a certain moment
just because the Creator has stopped
he shouldn't pitch his tent.

So, friends,
here we enter, the metropolis
of Venus-eyed lust.
While crossing the thick vineyard beyond
you will succumb to the caprice of chasing
the enchantresses there.

And when birds interbreed
somehow it is the male that conceives,
so look out when you fly
over this territory.
Even now I can hear
the lip-to-ear dialogues,
from alien planets,
of rishis and of saints.

"O you who are sitting alone
here in the celestial lake in this grape-garden
quietly washing your body,
O bewitching apsaras³ of Indra's⁴ forest
won't you let me collect
in a cone of thorn-apple leaves
the sandal-rich water
trickling off your soft skin?
O lady, my wings are weary -
won't you let me land on your grounds?"

"O best among birds,
your fluttering promiscuous glance
has stung my gentle heart.
Don't you pity
this wounded lady-bird?"

"O beautiful one, O harlot of heaven,

your bright smile caresses
my ascetic effulgence -
aren't you scared of my lust and rage?
O luscious cobress⁵
of a dripping-wet lush green ivy,

why are these smelt flowers
clinging so, again and again, to the branch?
And like a virgin in heat
challenging in every way
the divine food in my bag?"

"O excellent ascetic,
every season comes of age
intoxicated by its sap.
A hungering austerity
won't beget deliverance, my dear.
O star among penitents,
rains don't fall from a dry sky,
and when the stem is desiccated
buds won't bloom.

So you say that
as a river in flood rushes
and clings to the sea,
I too should,
before these dense woods loosen the night,
cling to you? "

"But O bewitchment alive,
after giving away my body
where shall I posit my soul?

Come O rishis of lust,
sow this night in my every limb.
O stars, give me today your mantle.

Gift away, O great Vedas,
this penance-born virtue in my every cell
to the wretches condemned to hell."

Fledglings,
everybody knows
that it is injurious to scabble a sore;
and knowing this well
they scabble it evermore.
Now just as one finds a guilty pleasure
in scratching an itch,
so does an Adam hunger for an Eve

and she for him.

One such beauty there was,
very dear to me.
The stars were like jewels in her nosering;"
she had two autumn full moons on her two sides
of hue they were milky white.
Now just as she was silly
she acted like a filly.

In every childbirth
she laughed like a tamarind fat and green;
and in season she again would flirt
with admirers seventeen.
Often I saw her
getting stars tattooed in the open,
I had bought her an emerald anklet
by pledging myself with the ocean.

At last one day
I took courage in both hands
and saw how it felt this lady to address.
Quickly, for that moment, she saw how
it felt to hold me in her embrace.

*For a worm of lust
pleasure is a must:
A crow of dandy taste -
ruin of himself*

O best among birds from far-off lands,
I applaud your seducing eyes
That injure shy maidens
bathing by the side of perfume-runnels;
applaud your heart-thrilling bursts of joy
and your dream personality
that should tickle any conceited beauty;
all these qualities that challenge a maiden
to a bed battle, I applaud.

O crown among birds,
I commend your superhuman charms,
the rule you set up over the country of tits,
and the fierce invasions of the nests
of deep green parrots in mango forests.

But it's a pity to recall, O noblest of birds,
that on that April full moon, during lunar eclipse
you refused, aware that you were winning a close battle,
those hundreds of glum but sporting ladies

of the loser's camp.
I wish you had put down for a moment
your bloody swords
and kissed them all quickly, one by *one*.

“The sparrow and his mate fight
and this ruins their life.”

*A nine days' wonder -
they say of our life
Even so the moon
adores fireflies.*

“O grandfather,
always, always, shall I act as you taught;
I'll test the virtue of my tongue
before I ever speak;
your sayings shall be royal edicts;
I shall have a sage poet
discuss every word of yours;
I shall have him sing
through a song on your life
all your dear teachings.

I shall act as I speak
but if I stumble at some inconvenient truth
I shall play tricks -
how shall I otherwise
perfect my politics?”

"Where exactly will it drop
a wisp of perfumed cotton
flying with political winds -
can you tell, O royal bird?
O royal bird,
you can foresee a storm at some stage
but can you forelist those who the storm will ravage?
For years you have sat
on your habitual throne -
but does it mean you know
the art of government?

It's easy to rule by terror -
hanging swords in city squares.
This works
as long as the people can be led
or else there are many here who
rise to sever their regent's head,
Yes, man oppresses man all around -

And it's man again that dresses his wounds.

O eminent of the land of emeralds,
I wish you the joy of your wisdom;
may, howbeit, you bury your deceit;
to the cow-peg may, at times, man be tethered;
may solace shower on burning homes;
may twenty dine off a single plate;
may barren women conceive overnight;
may a lightning death descend
on all who long for it.

If a great snake comes in the way
of a man who has consumed
*halahal*⁶, and is tempting death
Who should be scared of whom?

Just because the stream claims again and again
That since it has the same water as the sea,
it has kinship with it -
why should anyone be scared of that stream?

A sling at home
and a tree in the yard
so should you go mad
at the birds there perched?

As one scratches the hips
and generates boils,
so do these people - world - trouncers - that - be
make wars
and then those drivelling saints
tell you to rub ointment on the swellings.
Haven't you seen these chaps -
They are the ones who dream
of covering the world with a hat⁷

Young fellows,
the very horses that pull carts,
overthrow their riders
when the baffle is raging high,
and, whinnying wildly,
crash in all quarters.
and then you have to call halt
to the fighting on horseback
and send for foot-soldiers

The fighters in both camps are, by then.
severely battered
and the agonised cries of their inmost soul

appear on their lips.

“But war is war, it doesn’t cease;
no one has a plain white handkerchief;
and the war-shirts have all been
long dyed deep.”

The war-wary hope
that with the captains worn out
the fighting will subside;
the missiles prod the captains
when will you start your fight?

Young birds,
I hope you’re not such fighters as,
like horses grazing
the trembling grass of war-gossip,
fancy, suddenly, a change of place.
I hope your conventions are not
of a land of rankled leadership,
where the sword goes astray from war
thanks to the opportune mischance
of loss of sheath
when the war is ablaze.

Often the scabbards,
brave onlookers,
dangling about the fighters’ waists,
observe the clashing and sparking of swords
but not the return of the steel to its home.
And no one can rightly tell
which broken wrist grappled which hilt
whether of Egypt or of Rome.

There is no frenzy
like the frenzy of “do or die”;
Alexander may conquer a hundred worlds
but oh to be a Porus
such conquerors to defy!
So don’t be caught napping
and thereby lose a fight.

Make wars, make furious wars,
have your fill once and for all.
Test your mettle when you’re called,

The flesh may tire
but the mind does not.
The mind being tired

no war can be fought.

A war begins in the theatre of the mind
and body assaults body, toeing the line.

It's a good rule never
to start a fight;
nor to show the back
when the enemy invites;
nor ever to wait
because in stitching war-garments
the tailor is late.

To take for war habits
the bark on the skin-
such should be the warrior's resolution.
And so should he lead a rally that
the prison itself is prisoned.

Look how a murderer for dear life runs;
if caught and set at large, a bully turns;
don't take such anarchy lying down.
Don't put out the fire
even by easing your bladder
if ever such a courthouse burns.

A field that is bathed in unseasonal showers
should never cock its nose
at timely rains.
"A crop comes to harvesting
only in its season" -
from nursing such illusion
the farmer should refrain.

When will you shower, O rain,
I do want to know.
If you come at night
morning I shall sow.

If you can, do take care
never to pose tall
in a community of ciphers,
because if you dwarf the only figure there
you hurt his ego.

In a community of crows
only till suppertime should a swan

boast of his trans-oceanic flights;'
otherwise the crows will see a false dawn
and start a melee in the middle of the night.
And in that affray, someone has to suffer
and rise too early from the feast of life
as did Jnaneshwar⁹ I or socrates

So birds,
in one such law-blind city
once upon a time
there ruled a hereditary' king,
in a hurry to live his life.
His son was mute his daughter dumb,
so he would cut off the tongues
of all who opposed him
and would extract their confessions.
On lance-point he would pledge
the brains of all his thinking citizens.
And if the weather became rough
he would go and hide
under the skirt of a courtesan.
Once there rose a storm
and at that very moment, off the courtesan,
a pitch-black cobra was being born.

In this place there are so many hell-holes
that even the pathways in the flower-garden
have all been lost sans trace.
No room even to stick a pin,
so I swam about in the air;
never once did I drink off a dammed stream
I slaked my thirst with cloud-tears.
At times, dog-tired of dragging my body
I felt I should cease to live.

At such moments I would grow inclined
to stab my breast to a sieve.

And then on a sudden, the clouds -
those gold-lined silvery clouds -
would kindly rain; and my eyes would search
under my wet feathers for my wounds.

At such times,
thinking of the middle ages and their protracted wars
when men of courage would wander wide and far
looking for a niche to hide their hearts,
I too felt
like cacheing my heart somewhere.

Here, crowns are bestowed on many a Tughlaq¹⁰
who then put out old rivers for sale
and hold annual meetings to dig a new ocean;
the proposals of both kinds
are received back unopened.

How long shall we wait
trifling in the wet field
with nothing to gain but some blades of grass?
Fat hope of revolution
from those chaps sitting at the incense pot.
They light their *bidis*¹¹
and the spark in their spills is then ash.

Your evolution has a lice-ridden head.
Big and small are gambling away.
What sort of justice can there be when
complainant and defendant are both our friends?

What craze, indeed, you have for bread -
You ask for food twice every day.

Sell your flesh by the kilo, thus earn.
Go from the butcher this trade now learn.

Such wayward doing of a godless town
I got tattooed on holy stone.
Since then the priests and the prime minister
are annoyed with me.
To see the wives and children of saints
begging in the streets
even the bowls in my beggar's hand
were choked.

Of course, good and evil dwell in all
but it takes uncommon pluck
to confess your guilt.
All life we play our parts
to bring grist to the mill;
but to give away to hungry wretches
the only *roti*¹² that you've found
needs a special will.

The sun rises, from all cares freed -
Such should be the good man's deeds
And as the hoodlum goes about bold and brave
so should the saint, too, now and then behave.

A heart bitten by the bug of truth

must martyr itself on Great Friday.
You should learn to cheat because
to see a rogue even God is scared.

Sorrow, like truth, cannot be interred,
Nor, like a shirt,
be worn to tatters.
Of course, you can drink it to keep your throat wet
Drain a mirage--what will you get?

When thirsty, a man longs for a cup;
at other times the river washes his rump

Eh, those swords just graduated
from a school for murder
are marching this way en masse.
And these people are busy still
getting their mustaches trimmed,
sitting in a barber's shop.

How does it not sink into their heads
that when a sword falls
one shouldn't stick out one's neck?

O frail-hearted social workers,
you may have a pistol in one pocket
but at the critical moment
the bullets in the other pocket fail you.
And then you untrained folk
open uncalled-for fire
in Diwali¹³ tempo.

Birds,
do you see these people
trying to hold in their fists
the murmuring of the leaves?
They are clutching as many of them
as their palms will hold.

And in the stance
of holding a woman
by the hair,
they tell the onlookers
that it's their domestic affair.

Friends,
however sharp your beak
crabs are still hard to hunt
if your neck is weak.

Sea-snakes,
your envy of swans
one may well accept.
But aren't the pearls, for you,
a bit too hard to digest?

Friends,
it is an obvious matter-
living in a pond
you mustn't anlogonise water.

How very well
the churning of the ocean¹⁴ went off !
The rivals were matched
and with poison, nectar too rose to the top.

Thus some preferred nectar, some poisons¹⁵
they were gods and demons, not men.
Around their necks
was the noose of heaven.

How long will you carry on your shoulder
the phantom¹⁶ of the past?
'Let bygones be bygones.'
Hey friends, how long will you still
worship the terrestrial sun?

Liberate yourself, brave eagles!¹⁷
You who are suffocated
by the lure of that illusory joy-mist,
liberate yourself.

The torture-torn self-prisoners
that hitherto scrambled
to catch the feathers of suffering
raining from a bright blue sky,
and are struggling for the sky's dawn-fruit-
a glowing red sun.

Allow us to fight no holds barred,
to set ablaze everything around.
Give us a handful of cinders just
let us, Lord, inflame
every living thing.

Birds,
others we often immolate
once that medicine
we ourselves should taste.

Like a serpent does a rope appear;
wherever there is life you will find fear.
A cat seems a tiger, and what is more,
a little pimple becomes a festering sore.

Sharpen your beaks
and keep them ready:
you can't say how
the next day will be.

Friends,
how far can you pull a house
tied to a rope?
If you meet a miscreant
trouble will brew.
Your daughter will come of age
before you get a decree from the court -
however false, however true.

A girl comes of age,
ripe for marriage,
she suffers her first night
on the zamindar's¹⁸ bed.

O birds, when you fly over that country,
give your word to every wounded womb -
that you won't go away
till her lament is heard.

And well,
when the eyes of her own people
rove on a girl at home
her father becomes anxious
to find her a groom.
A ripe tamarind is ravished
by a sudden meteor.
A crop of ripe mangoes
is sometimes seared;
such is the fate everywhere
of orphaned village belles.
And then pleasure-hunters have a time:
"It's great fun." Ramya follows Gomya¹⁹
and one by one the village men have their turn.

*The day bid fair
but the night has robbed:
The virgin in the street
Can't speak for sobs."*

Desist, birds, from washing

your dirty linen in the street.
It's no use at all.
Onlookers offer pity
and later your honour is shredded like a kite
caught in a thorny tree.

Confide your symptoms to them -
and all your visitors prescribe their pills.
If a young lady sheds her taboos
every man dreams of a kill.

A streetwalker fumes
when you say, "You whore",
treated as an ox
a bull will rush to gore;
the foetid spice makes curry wholesome
and then is wanted no more.

So friends,
in this city's prison street
I came across many a gentle Kalidas²⁰
looking for the eyes, now promiscuous,
of his lost beloved.

And every night these same people
for sitting room on a broken pavement
pledge their wives in the market place.

Day follows day
and ages pass.
When the stores run low
she pities the husband.
And to beguile hunger
they spend their nights
in passionate embrace.

"A boil on my breast -
O what shall I do?
The child is hungry
and my husband too."

Birds,
the sun is no longer the sun
when it encroaches on shade.
But when shadows go out in the sun
they are desolate

O lady sea-birds,
O you who bathe in the innocent sea
that's suffering the disgrace

of exportation,
beware, my girls, beware

The birds wounded
while pricking my eyes
are now inflamed
and are flying your way, too
But mothers,
don't take fright at all,
breast them undaunted.
I shall grave on your bosoms
all the defeated scriptures
and in my frenzy quaff
all the poison in the world.
O mothers,
you expend the youth of your wombs
in bringing forth men -
for that reason too
I shall offer my head to some Kali²¹
or shall wander as a mongoose
on the human ivies of some cobra-forest.

- Snakes are not wanting here
who prey on young birds huddled in a nest,
nor those who cower into their holes
at the eagle's wing-flap.

Thus one day
when I had gone food-hunting
my feet led my body
to a metropolis washed ashore,
and it struck me after a while
that I was on an isle of birds
whose eggs are gems, and whom
the human beasts eat for food.
I stretched the scars on my irises,
shut my eyes tight,
and I realised
that the evening that sinks into the sea every day
and the morning that decorates
the day's drawing room -
the desires of both
are named harlots here.

Fledglings,
when a time-stricken woman arrives in the bazar
parties of merchants trade their goods:
to such civilians
the love of their country is
a thing of relish like woman and wine.

For all they care
their country can go to the dogs;
they just go about in hordes
scenting the coming of a famine
or a great war.

Compared to the itch
of bedding with a neighbour's wife
this offence is
a thousand times more foul.

Friends,
there are people who,
when the nation rises to save its honour,
recline cosily, counting their losses and gains,
curious to know."What next?"
With a "What is it to me?"
they brush aside the whole matter.
They not only deserve pity
but are victims of the consequences -
fools of the first water.

Listen birds,
not even lepers crave
the embers in the winding sheet
that an ascetic woman carries with her
roaming in the dark
questing for a handful of fireflies.

Here, the instruments for skinning bodies
are waiting the whole day
to hire the flesh
of the needles that knit bodies.

And thus,
the headman takes four brides,
each of sixteen, till he reaches sixty-four.
The young bride begets child after child
when the headman's no more.

Birds, man has vanquished
the Maker of the world; but still he lacks
the wisdom of the birds.

Pretty birds is what men like;
the hen, on the other hand, comes under the knife.

Birds what a piece of work is man!
Whether it's a man become a woman
or a woman become a man,

either way one goes through a chastity test
all one's life. And when
the hermaphrodites go in a musical band
men assert their manhood on them.

O birdkind,
if a finger's touch could impregnate a woman
maidenhood would not be ripped in the dark.
If bed-talk during union had any sense
congress with hermaphrodites
would count for something.
Mankind is like a rich harvest
overnight you find millions of insects.

*'Well, in no time at all
their foetus rankled
In the sanctum of heaven
God was tick/ed''*

On roads, highways,
tattered men passed like discarded shells.
And through this rush I ran
close along the road
like a creature escaped from dense bushes.

O you who run the world,
often have I wandered alone
in your market of merit and sin;
and often have I purchased merit
with sin for my coin.

O wise birds,
before my ripe body
falls off the branch
knock it off the stem.

No showers fall
by virtue of songs to the rain²²
O you who want to hire the sky,
rain is not a commodity
for which you may bargain.

Whom will you blame if this season
the rains aren't forthcoming?
Don't point your finger that way -
it's *your* neck that they will wring.

Of course, rains do fall every year
to gratify their own whim,
but in the process the rivers flood furiously,
and the villages clinging to the earth
are washed away, bleating helplessly
like goats slaughtered in sacrifice
to appease the rain gods.
And along with drowning life are scattered
mother-cows, bellowing,
their teats torn away
from the mouths of feeding calves.

And the villages clamber up hillocks
for dear life, living together in peace
like children of one mother.
A sage fellow declares
that for this reason crises make him glad.
The people wait
for the floods to recede
so that the fellow may be hanged.

At such times you must
whip up your rage and trap
that perfidious sky, and you'll see
that with cracks of lightnings
it makes way for you.

And before the godfrauds
drunk on the primitive brew of religion
are forced to a riotous naked dance,
birds, count your dear ones
in your nests.
Dear birds,
tears lose their voice
in a home that has lost a life.
While, after reckless shedding of blood
arrogant swords, returning home,
bully in the neighbourhood.

At such times where on earth are fled
the heavenly guards?
The grains in every anguished cob
are much too choked to cry.

Humankind is a race of villains:
keep yourself at a safe distance!

Fledglings,
beasts of prey of a primitive strain

that go scenting the semenpots of ascetics.
whose eyes are smarting from the smoke
of a sacrificial fire
lit in a tunnel of ice-these beasts
come to this dark pond for a drink.

And the royal hunters
that shoot their arrows on the sly
track the wounded maid
all the way to the pleasurehouse
right up to the bed of the queen.

They can't suffer
a poor man to have a beautiful wife,
The peahen's plumes are shed
in broad daylight

The men of rank
in their hunt for tongue-tickling virgins
scour destitute villages.
That is the way the Indoos and Sindhoos
shed their flower while still in schooldress.

In whom can you find, but in them,
beauty's connoisseurs?
They pay cash own and buy the daughters
of penniless villagers.

How many days more
shall we sing the nation's glory
with the wolf at the door?
Friends, no country is as good as
its national anthem.
You've got to chant it heartily
all the same,
calling a mountain your father
and a river your mother.

Before the king starts a Mahabharat²³
the people must ask for the reason and,
if after all the war does start,
they must watch for Krishna's hand²⁴

Hey, you clown that blah—blahs
on country, society and God,
though Karna was a great warrior
his brothers and cousins
called him a bastard.

Listen birds,
those who made a streetwalker of her
have to look after her by turns,
and if she begets a child
willy-nilly the country has to
grant him a citizen's claims.
And when the babe begins to fly
by day he has to learn of the nation's glory,
and by night he has to try
and get some clients for his mother's whoring.

In a country rent with such laments
false are honours, titles and compliments;
and if they ask you to banquets, treats,
along with that nation condemn them straight.

In fact you must go mad with rage
as when you hear
of your mother's or sister's rape.
Yes, you must explode in every such case,
so that those who sit pretty cursing the times
are also compelled to play their part
in the people's war that erupts overnight.

As the good saint²⁵ says,
"Kabir calls you from the street
with a stick in his hand -
he who can burn his house
is welcome to join his band."

You exploited folk,
the time is ripe to conquer
village after village and town after town.

Birds,
a clenched fist is a deadly arm
but remember,
you will find revolutionaries who
to the beat of a drum and the whistling of a pipe
collect a rabble in the street-
they are mere jugglers - snake charmers
who present a show with a cobra unfanged
to make ends meet.

Anyone who has two hands
can beat a chap;
and a fellow can make them do so
having the gift of the gab.

Friends, when you coat quinine with sugar
it's not to change the drug but to suit your tongue.
A million-rupee lottery will enrich one
and not a million.

Young birds,
those pilgrims in ochre robes, their faces naked,
back from a visit to a birds' holy place
chasing a spiritual mirage
celebrate every year their safe return home:
and then the children of the lowest of the low
knowing it's a feast
hold out their bowls and kick up a row.
Vexed, these devout
slang them in the names of their mothers.
To the sound of the holy conch
they rob the flowery dawn -
their dark deeds go on
unseen, unknown.

Birds,
he looks like a beggar -
a man whom life has abused
And everyone calls a pretty beggar-maid
to do her some good.

Not even the sky can glean
the gold riotously spread
by the sun on the edges of the clouds.
From clods of earth bread springs up, yes.
but however biting your hunger,
you can't eat the clods.

And look at the state of the man who chiselled
the stones, making them into gods.
Well, did the gods ever
provide for him?
His wife died untreated
and not even the dogs of the gods
threw him a coin.

Hungry child howling -
mother says, darling,
my dugs are hanging,
pluck and eat them.

When the leaf seres
the branch never cares:
such are the last years
of a poor old man.

As a mother relishes
her child's leftovers,
so do these people relish yours.
And persuade their hunger that
by eating a bird-bitten fruit one learns
that nectar is nothing but airs.

Brother,
these our birds
are simply crazy for corn.
Do not drive them away from the field -
their wings enfold a storm.

Hey, now any moment
this globe may land in trouble,
and we haven't yet sued
the world for wages and bread.

O breaths exhausted by mental copulation.
even when your days have been ravished
how is it that no warrior
has stepped up to break the evil lock?

May these words shoot from all throats:
"May the world tremble with rage
and may life keep fluttering
in my eyes."

Birds, strange are the ways of the world!

A woman tortured by her mother-in-law
and neglected by her husband -
if she conceives on some exceptional night
people raise a hue and cry
doubting her faith, denying her right.
And if a barren woman
begets a child late in life
she too is laughed at:
"Look. Oh look at the long-toothed bride."

Birds, strange are the ways of the world.

You will find in a wine shop
the statutory board "Liquor ruins your life" -
may be erect, maybe bottoms up,
and cigarettes saying
that "Smoking is injurious to health"
and similar funny admonitions.

So, when you fly over such a land
alight for a moment at some museum
and have a look at those men
walking upside down.

That's why I repeat, friends,
that strange are the ways of the world.

Once it so happened

*that dressed in rags
we went to sell gold -
not a soul turned to us,
Then dressed in gold
we went to sell rags -
and lo! mad was the rush.*

A house catches fire
on a dark moonless night
and the village dances
round the brilliant light.

At places where
such customs prevail,
sometimes at midnight.
hail should rain,

“Look birds,
such are the world's ways,
If you ask the mirror -
'They are like you,' it says.”

That a goldsmith should chase
golden plumes;
that gold birds should mind
a change in bullion rates;
that parrots should pine
in a golden cage:
topsy-turvy things -
what do you say?

However high you manage to' fly,
now and then you have to
light on a branch for a rest.

The land doesn't move, it stays in place
yet men dispute over hand everywhere.
*“It's my land to that hedge”
“His starts from the stone”-*

*with such imaginary lines
they mark the land they own.
Think of the left arm and the right
dividing the body between them.
The quarrels over land seem
equally vain.
For the ownership of land
people feud.
The earth looks on simply amused.*

A man is no bigger than his figure,
give him enough land to plant his two feet.
All his dealings, false or true,
have no more purpose than to meet his needs.

That's why I say
let the summer sun beat down ravingly
and let the lover birds perched on the branch
soak in the flaming sun.

But don't sink the sun thus at high noon.
O mother, O father, these fledglings
with hardly open beaks
are not yet used to eclipse.

Birds,
does the vast sky seem desert to you?
In the ocean's hectoring magnanimity
in the shore's infatuation with the waves
that have washed it out,
do you find anything strange?

So disguise yourself as sea-creatures-
be fishes, turtles, alligators,
let each one do what suits him or her
and lustily talking of high morals
go and quench your hunger.

When hunger grows extreme
honour-insult are all the same;
the world wanders naked
and saints give up shame.

In any case
a hailstorm only robs the poor man -
his hut is blown away like a stray piece of paper,
and like an egg roiling off a nest
on to a stone below

his skull gets cracked.

Nature plays the viper,
the trees act uppish;
the gale snaps the branch
on which the nest was built.

During the hailstorm the other day
the wind blew away my shanty,
flickering lamp' and'all,
and it landed on the landlord's mansion

I rushed after it and prayed to him,
"Father, mother, have mercy,
kindly return my hut to me."
In reply he said,
"Finders shall be keepers, finders shall be keepers.
As his laughter rose high and higher
the upper storey got engulfed in fire.

Hope is something crazy, my friends.

To recycle the handful spillovers
of their children's meals
these paupers breed chickens with great hopes
and when the eggs are hatched
they're happy, almost making
a coop with the circle of their arms.

And every night after that
they keep vigil against the prowling cat.
And yet death creeps in
and like a morsel snatched from the lips
swallows one by one all the chicks.
However they may try
they can't prevent it.
Anger wells up but
they can't vent it.

O' stitchers of hearts,
the run has been stitched;
but what to do now-
again it's ripped.

A hole in a poor man's purse -
the tears bemoan the bad to worse.
God, great is your justice;

alms in one hand,
the other plays Sphinx.

Now these people will come out in the streets
singing rebellious prayers -
they will be furious
at the way the universe functions -
they will want to set it on fire.
“When we set out we gave our wives widows’ weeds.
they will say and, like one man,
frenziedly shout slogans of war
to make the world one.

The wildfire that you are going to see
will settle accounts of suffering
from the earliest foetushood.

Like a whore’s impatient customer
is the belly-fire agog in this land.
If the people here could stretch their arms
and pluck the moon from the sky,
they would munch it like a crisp *roti*
and quench their belly-fire.

Like mutinous rocks escaped
from the age-old bastions of religion and culture
have these people been asking me of late
when will the earth be auctioned.
Everywhere they are shouting slogans.
“Friends, revolution will come one day,
revolution again will have its way,
long live the revolution, long live the revolution.”

They are clenching fists as they talk
and are challenging the whole world.
These innocent creatures, entirely clean,
are holding public meetings
for the’ right to commit crimes.
The puzzled delegations of intellectuals,
specially appointed,
are freezing grey cells in their skulls.

Birds, I can firmly assert
that festive red is mixed in this soil.
This fort too
is red from history.

Fledglings,
you are lucky to be born as birds.

Most of those who took the human form
went repenting from the world.

Men can't live with *dignite humaine*;
men can't act as is becoming to them
you have to put on the face of a god
and be a demon at heart.
You must make your way
through the mire of the lords
with a gravid woman's gait.

If the cage is left open
the parrot hops out;
but scared of its kind
hops in again.

How should we deal with this matter -
the show is free?
The spectators being all kinsfolk
you can't bar their entry?

Too well have we seen-they and we have -
the spectacle of the world.
When we blew with the breeze,
we garnered some musk;
throughout our life often we became
like flowers of the same branch-
they and we did.

We put in our heart and soul,
and those wise words became canonised.
But they-our friends-upset the apple cart
when the play was at its height,
and like spoiled children
went away in a huff.

All players play each other down.
On the stage that the world is
rarely does a superstar walk.

Birds,
you have to keep a watch on the thorn
that claims to remove a thorn.
One leg has to walk with the other,
one eye has to see what the other does.

When in a dilemma
don't multiply the possibilities-

say one-ones are one.
Peace settles on the mind
and stability on motion.

Children, you who believe in God,
and patter unshod,
your soles aren't yet used
to the thorns that are scattered all round.

Children,
just because you can take the sky in your sweep
don't dare to swallow the sun²⁶
Try to be like the seashore,
but don't rub your skin off
in hope of a swan complexion.

Glittering sand can't be
precious stones;
poor diamond scraps
ponder this alone.

A pebble disturbs the reflection
in the waters standing still,
so the prince is hellbent
on carrying home the lake
is this your prowess and skill?

You are chilled to the bone
and the sun is cloud-covered
so you hurl a stone -
is that very kind of you?

The mirror showed you as you are
and you didn't like your face
so you want to break the glass
is this what beauty comes to?

Listen, birds,
the body has two fruits, you may say:
the eyes. The agony of a stalk
that parts from its fruits
is better known to the buds than to the flowers
and to the roots underground
than to the branches.

One life doesn't suffice to find
a paradise across the horizon.

The mourners stumble at the grave

and the bier finds it fun.

The sky droops low
hold it slow
no bounds to your joy,
good friends.

All last night it snowed and snowed.
And watching the magic white mantle
on the dark of the night
the bluebird hidden in thick pine leafage
dozed off in the early hours.
The nightingale stirred,
finding itself in a moving cage.
And while the hunter's eye was still
stalking among leaves
suddenly, like a bomb on Nagasaki.
lightning hit the tree.

In the hills holy wanderers to this day
this ballad sad on harp-strings play.

“Where have they gone
the birds in my mother's home?
By death's messengers, friend,
they've been caught and flown.”

“Your pet bird has gone
on a journey far away.
Now wipe your tears, my bulbul,
look how your eyes are red.”

“A nine days' wonder-
they say of this life.
Your exit is booked
while you arrive.”

Once it so happened
that when the father died
his sons buried him in a makeshift dugout.
This was long ago
when the boys were living from hand to mouth.
Later they dug up their father's corpse
and built him a tomb
with high quality cement.
For this death-renewal,
the respectables of the town
were present.
Taking this opportunity
they discussed threadbare

this and that subject,
and placing new flowers on the new tomb
one by one they left.

Old labourers around,
smoking cheroots,
observed the whole thing.
And said to each other,
“This here is a real good spot
to sit and stretch your limbs.”

Birds,
if you borrow scars and stick them to your body
the flies will be drawn of course.
But who wouldn't know that the suffering is a show
and the whining and groaning are false'?

Grandpa,
do letters of sorrow
hang down from a line of happiness'²⁷?
Then will there be takers of a well-bound book
with only lines in it?
Tell me, who will pay for a treatise in which
no words have been writ?

Birds,
I haven't here found anyone
who claims to own the sun.
And never does nature tell
to feed this fellow
and starve that one.
Man comes in man s way-
that is how we have the play
of sorrows and joys.

Now look, it's one thing to have
real sorrows and pain,
and quite another
to mourn for mourning's sake.
Here grief has piled on grief -
the husband died and on the third day
the son too is a fallen leaf.

This is what life is, friends,
enclosed in a blood-warm skin
At times like a flower blossoming on a branch
at times like a kite that floats merrily

in the far-off skies.
All of a sudden the thread snaps off
and the kite's on its own, set free.

Friends, life is a bud
that deepens shade by shade.
Friends, life is a flower
that blooms but to fade.

A bud turns to petals, petals turn to flowers.
So it goes on over and over.

Learn to live
like flowers in a garden-
some become bouquets, some garlands. and so
Expend your life like the perfume, friends,
that slowly escapes a flacon.

Enjoy yourselves, have a rollicking time -
that is the way to live.
As you shook off the morning, friend,
so now shake off the eve.

Go and relieve the world of its wealth -
the treasure of treasures being sorrows of men.
With the ink of the ocean, on the sheet of the sky
griefs of mankind pen.

If it be a planet of humans
you will find a hurly-burly far and wide.
Pause for a moment when you pass over it
and fly at a greater height.

Birds,
today I remember again that day.
After some hesitation the executioners
made bold at last to pierce
the gentle lamb's tiger chest
with lances of their ignorance.
And not bothering
whether the wound was deep.
feeling they had committed a capital crime,
went with corpse-like steps.
In throes, the innocent master
now about to depart
was plucking away his seer's eyes
to gift them to the dark.

And like a mother
desperately anxious at evening time
he flew with a flock of heaven-birds. saying
“Father, forgive them.

Even today the sky is full -
like a flower-garden abloom-
full to overbrimming;
the heavens are brilliantly a glow;
and like the soil that is quenched with the first showers
my heart is full satisfied.
I must go now, I must go.

Listen, there is no return of abandoned breath,
nor any stopping of breath till death.

With the tempestuous winds the sky is in floodtide
no trace of shores on any side.

Out there in the waters of the lake
trees are rustling in embrace.
Birds,
think of the tree’s generosity;
all its life it provides shade;
dry bark and twigs supply fuel;
the timber makes windows, doors and sills.
So if you mean well
dispose your body through your will.
Live beyond death,
flying from one branch to another
that your bones may serve as beams²⁸
of a new house.

For fun’s sake sharpshoot
but dying speak the truth.
He that mounts a pyre
or is lowered into the earth
no more sees light.
When the mourning is done
they all dine²⁹ and say,
“We can’t swallow a bite.”

Everybody sings
hymns to himself -
and kneels before a donkey,
having no help.
A limping cat
makes valiant rats.

Birds,
we keep an account of the hurts we receive;
we need to count also the blows we deal -

Though he's not a close kin
at the final goodbye'
separation moves us
and stings the eye.

Birds,
lend a shoulder to your predecessor -
may this tradition prosper.
Leaves will fall,
leaves will sprout-
that one tomorrow
this one now.

Throughout life we fight
for winning birthrights;
we are obliged also
to accept death.

The wise don't submit to death
like tame victims of time.
If you show spirit
the killer cannot strike.

A generation is a crop,
while reaping comes the mood to sow fresh seeds.
Grains are buried in the earth -
from their tombs the sprouts raise their heads.

That's why I say, friends,
dear friends,
that before grief torments your heart
pluck out my feathers quickly.
Here is my will and testament:
don't embalm these feathers,
nor frame them like pictures.
Give them away rather -
but don't offer them to the fluteplayer³⁰
there are others already in his crown.
Give them away
to babies whom birth has trapped in a puzzle,
to children who are born-we don't even know-
to toys or to toil.
In all such homes
deliver my feathers, don't fail.
Come on now, disarm me, cut off my wings,

and distribute my feathers, my body
to all clamouring creatures -
distribute them
to all clamouring creatures ...

EPILOGUE

The birds he saw in the lake
flew off into the sky.
The handful of pearls in his bag
had been thrown their way.
“I had compassion in my bag,”
the recluse said.
The crowd that had gathered on the bank murmured,
“The fellow has lost his head.”
“This fellow is touched in the head.”
the people said.
The recluse again, “I had compassion ...”
The people shook their heads.

Footnotes

1. In Hindu mythology, whenever evil predominates in the worlds, the earth takes a cow's shape and appeals to Lord Vishnu to incarnate himself (as an avatar).
2. According to an Indian snake myth certain cobras carry on their head precious stones, highly sought after, known as *nagmanis*.
3. One of the class of danseuses of exceptional beauty in heaven.
4. The king of *svarglok* (heaven).
5. This coinage seems necessary in order to pack in a single word the impact of *nagin*, a female cobra.
6. A deadly poison thrown up by the mythical sea-churning that Lord Shiva eventually ingested. (Also see note no. 15.)
7. “Hat” is the word used in the original.
8. A ruler of north-west India who, even with a meagre force, stood up against the invading Alexander. Taken captive and asked how he should be treated, he replied to Alexander, “As one king treats another.”
9. Major Marathi saint-poet of the 13th-14th century who went into a trance unto death at 28. All his life he had been persecuted by his Brahminical detractors, which probably prompted him to give up his life.
10. A 14th century Muslim ruler of India known for his quixotic plans.

11. An object of smoking, a cigarette of sorts.
12. Indian flat bread made from unleavened dough.
13. A major Hindu festival, celebrated with lamps and fireworks.
14. A mythical event in which the demons and the gods together churned the ocean which yielded, among various treasures the deadly poison hialahal and nectar.
15. During the sea-churning no one came forward to drink halahal, so Lord Shiva accepted it (which gave his throat a blue tint). Also see note no. 6.
16. In an ancient Indian legend King Vikramaditya carries on his shoulders a vampire which has a trick of making itself unshakable.
17. The original word is "Jatayu", a mythical eagle of great prowess.
18. A big landowner. The practice alluded to prevails in parts of India.
19. Tom, Dick and Harry.
20. Sanskrit playwright who is supposed to have deserted his beloved in quest of royal honours and later to have sought her again, only to find her corrupted,
21. Goddess whom certain Hindus offer in sacrifice the head of a cock, a he-goat or a he-buffulo.
22. Amongst Hindus sacrificial fires are lit sometimes to propitiate the rains.
23. A big war. Originally an epic war between the cousins Kauravas and Pandavas in which Lord Krishna, after trying to prevent it, sided with the virtuous Pandavas.
24. In certain critical situations Krishna acted adroitly to save the virtuous side.
25. Kabir, a Hindu saint poet who stood for unity among Hindus and Muslims, quoted by S. G. verbatim.
26. The mythical bird Sampati had tried this, getting both his wings burned. Cf. Prometheus.
27. The Devnagri script (used for Marathi, Hindi, etc.) is written by drawing a line and forming the letters below it.
28. The rishi Dadhichi gave up his life and donated his adamantine skeleton for preparing the weapon "vajra" to destroy the demon Vajrasur.
29. The Hindus hold a feast on the thirteenth day after death,
30. Lord Krishna, who is often represented playing the flute and with a peacock feather in his crown.