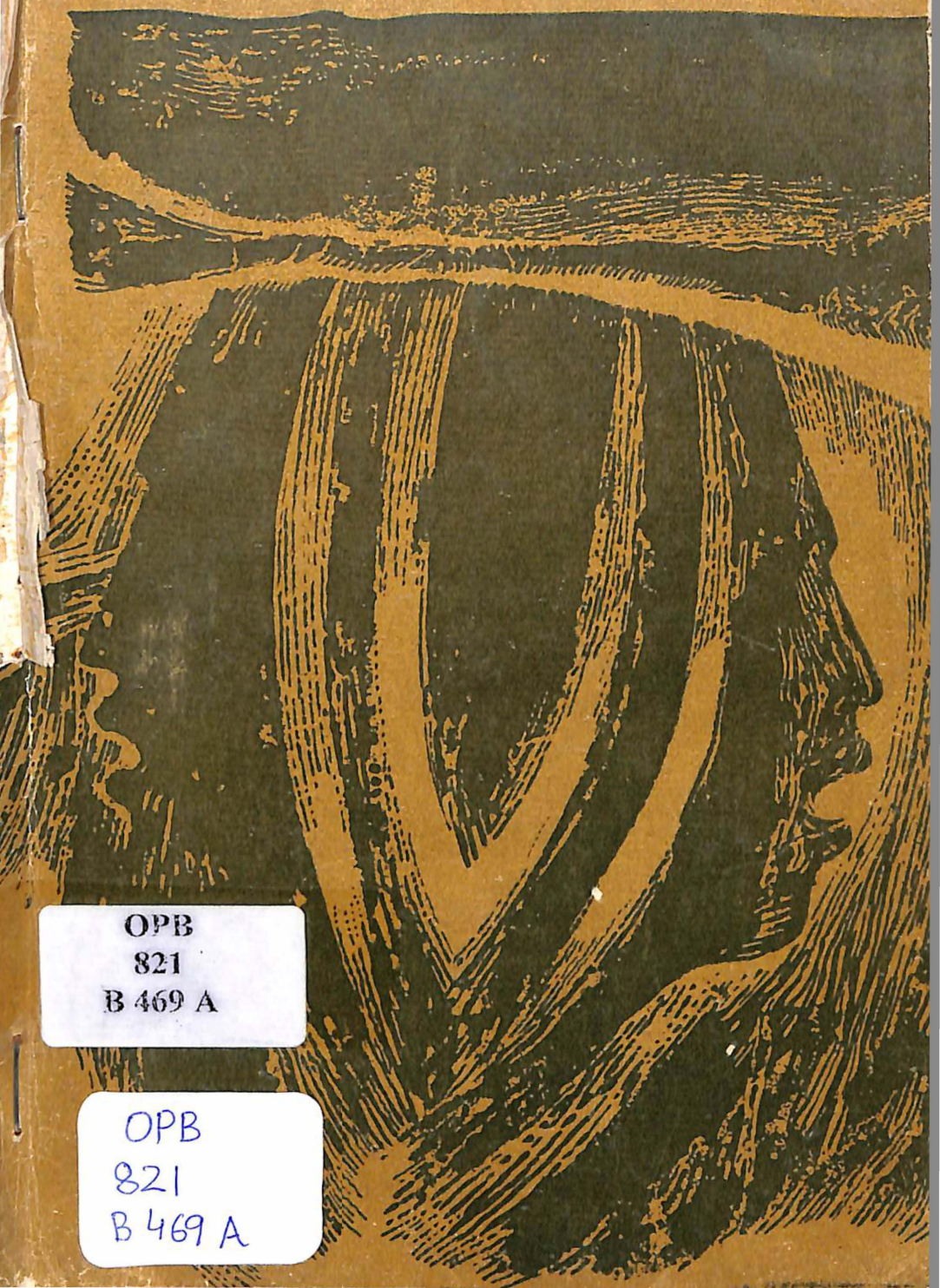


**ANGLES OF RETREAT**  
**O. P. BHATNAGAR**



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# ANGLES OF RETREAT

O. P. BHATNAGAR

**Sankaleen Prakashan**

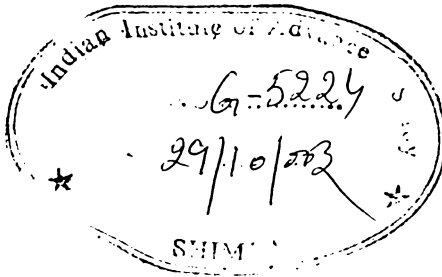
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**TO MY FATHER**

⌘(He made his life a living poetry  
of uncomplicated joys.)



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## **THE BEST TIME TO LOVE ?**

Dusk ?

When vision is blurred

Dark,

Reality faded into outline

Dawn ?

When hidden forms begin to re-emerge

Day ?

When shapes are laid bare

None knows the best time to love

Too late or too early,

Here when it is not desired,

Withdrawing when most aspired.

Then expresses it in haste

Or delays when the occasion calls.

The human is always distracted

Always awkwardly tuned

In the perpetual harmony of love

Is the child drawn

Never scaling love by time

But like water reflecting

Every ray of light

Piercing gods in heaven

Or soft waking the dead in their tombs.

**ALL BEAUTIFUL THINGS  
IN THE WORLD  
ARE CHINAR**

The Kashmir Chinars  
Come of green age  
In spring,  
Go red  
In autumn,  
Flushed  
With the feeling  
On their wintry marriage  
With snow.  
Through long snowmoonings  
In quiet surrender  
Their sensations made  
Bold  
Refresh realities  
That lithely execute  
Radiant manouvres  
In joyous-green  
Dreaming of shapes  
And shades anew.  
If dreams are to stay  
As meant  
They must be like logs, cut  
Piled dried  
Ready for burning

And if one cares  
To reach the splendour  
Of a flame  
One must be wood first —  
For all beautiful things  
In the world  
Are Chinar.

## TO DISCOVER TRUTH

Like dying stars  
Men pursue truth  
Nagging life on earth —  
Like fireflies lighting up  
Only in the dark.

By invisible breaths separated  
And all too visible light —  
In their graves they lie  
Barely six feet down —  
For believing in more true lies  
That fail to demolish  
The holy masoleum of Marx.

Silence is no truth  
Nor telling lies true,  
Break not the mirror  
Nor try light it with the dark  
For truth is as staggering  
Passing from dark to light —  
As from light to dark.

## KASHMIR AUTUMN SCENE

As they—the sons of soil  
Round up the life  
In the fields  
Gather raggy woollens  
Dried vegetables  
Fruit, fat and salt  
And all such, to deep storing yields,  
Pile up wood on house tops  
Fodder on tops of trees  
The quiet trees shed  
All their belongings  
Like  
    a  
      tre  
       k  
        ker  
          through  
           the  
            snows.

## DEATH BY LAW

Anthony was a twice blessed man  
Once saved from a sinking ship  
Next from a house on fire  
And so he carried a belief himself  
He was no man for an ordinary end.  
Death by law was long forgotten in Goa  
Till it was revived by a series of crimes  
Finding Anthony to be its easy prey.  
But it wasn't so easy to hang him  
As there were no gallows  
Nor executioners in the state.  
Panic seized the administration  
And it sent a senior superintendent of jails  
Touring the neighbouring states  
To learn fast the tricks of the hanging trade.  
An old veteran with one foot already in grave  
Was excavated to do the job for fifty rupees  
And a bottle of whisky poured down his throat  
Every day for the gallows a building  
To make hanging as flawless as death.  
All this took a year in preparation  
Giving the prisoner a long rope  
But he was amused at this mocking ritual  
And like moonlight dreaming of sunshine  
He asked if it wouldn't be easy done  
By shooting him with a gun ?

The official begged pardon and said —  
Law is not a murderer  
It has its own way of putting people to death.  
In spite of what George Orwell might say  
The newspapers carried the banner next day  
“Gallows gallop to Goa: Death by law revived.”

## **PYRAMIDS**

Stoned in our lust for gold  
We all are pyramids  
Like unseemly boils risen  
On the delicate flesh of sands.  
The first man who loved gold  
Must have been a man  
Running yellow fever  
Shrunk to bone  
Resisting everything but temptation.  
His yellow illusions  
Formed like mirages  
Must have blinded his vision  
To see things visible  
Like an owl's unseeing eye  
In the daylight's tangible.

Instead of piling up bits of yellow rocks  
Coveting the role of a Pharaoh  
I would prefer a fruit tree reared  
That bore people rest and content  
In fields beyond season's knocks:  
Or some books stacked in dusty basements  
That poured sweetness and light  
From their print fragrant pages  
To some toiling trotter after knowledge  
With searching eyes in the night:



Or some wine delved deep in earth  
By friends empassioned with warm affluency  
Of the joy spilling in expected ecstasy  
Slow maturing to perfect richness  
The distilled pleasures in liquid rolled.

## AC TRAINS

I like fishes that float or swim  
Behind cool green glass  
Radiating irenic iridescence.

But AC trains make me angry  
To see money—green bodies.  
And porcelain glazed nabobs  
Relax in conscious indifference  
Homing high in cathedral cold.

## MELTING ICE IN ANTARCTICA

As children

We longed for gas balloons  
By a thread in the air hung,  
Held tight by a hand  
Of dream-fingers.

In age

We run out  
Of all tingling fancies,  
Discover their fulfilment  
A mirage.

Hopes, dreams and desires

All disappear  
A gas balloon  
Snapped from its delicate hold  
By the thrust of some indifferent  
Jostling-go-ahead.

We have recently learnt the trick

Of melting ice in Antarctica  
And keeping our grandchildren happy  
While their parents are busy  
Staring with unseeing eyes  
The flight of their fancies fall.

## ADAM AND EVE

When Adam evèd  
He brought forth a, race of men  
Who frolicked with women  
Even in their dreams.

Once on a trip to Calcutta,  
Off the Eden Garden view,  
I saw a crowd run helter-skelter  
Revealing a young girl  
Being chased by a bull.

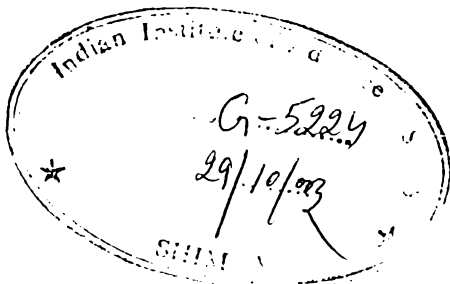
As I lifted her in my arms  
To remove her out of danger  
A snake hissed out of its hole  
And a man from the crowd  
Fixed the green moment in his Camera  
On his high speed role.

Not knowing that another bull  
Was a dream chasing me  
The man clicked a passionate wink  
And asked if I didn't feel  
Even surreptitiously moved  
Carrying that tempting fruit  
To take a greedy bite.

Someone had plucked the distant apples  
Age fermenting on eternal trees

With roots feeding on human slime  
Quiet reared by fervid satanic pain  
And I wondered the way that man  
Was still carrying the burden all the way  
I had unloaded in a far off lane  
Exposing sensuous negatives to mythical prints.

When Adam eved  
He brought forth a race of men  
Who frolicked with women  
Even in their dreams.



## TREES IN AUTUMN

Trees in autumn go bereft of leaves  
As if by a grand strategy of retreat  
To defeat the Napoleonic designs of snow.  
They lure the marauder away to jeering desolation

Where his invading vanity,  
Failing to smite Nature's glow  
Is torn asunder to floating flakes  
Clutching at vacuum in a vertigo  
Of the Conqueror's high boast sunk low

Trees in autumn go bereft of leaves  
As if by a spell of self-annihilation  
Cast in a rare show of fervent heat  
Like proud Rajpur maidens  
Plunging down the flames of fire  
To escape an outrage on their modesty  
Perform Sati leaf by leaf  
Till the enemy is frustrated on his beat  
Smearing vanity with the ashes of defeat.

Trees in autumn go bereft of leaves  
Of a Sanyasi come to sparkling wisdom  
As if by a sudden awakening  
Renounce all the snares elusive Maya weaves  
To enter a trance of blissful Samadhi

Undisturbed rest by the ravages of time  
Not moved by the goings-on of everyday grime  
Delivering soul to its glorious freedom  
Reign supreme in the majesty of their holy kingdom.

## ALIENATION EFFECT

A hall full of movie fans  
(Watching a summer matinee show  
In tropics without fans)  
Soiled with synthetic visions  
Never reach their catharsis  
Drying up emotions with incessant sweat.

As they pour themselves out of doors  
Diseased with dangling emotions  
And unsterilized dark  
They curse Aristotle in open air  
With an anarchical exuberance  
Just good enough  
To relieve themselves of their frigidity  
For a funny aesthetic end.



## **SEX IS NOT A BABY FOOD**

Of sex I had a narrow view  
Till I came by a divorce  
Whose mind made mellow  
By her minty adventures  
Could blatantly foresee  
That sex is not a baby food  
To stick to only one brand  
Lest it may cause indigestion  
To one's delicate system in growth.  
She was completely honest  
In announcing her faith  
That the best test of one's growth  
Is one's capacity to digest everything ;  
Sex should come as a Challenge  
Not as shame or consolation  
Or something to shy from ;  
It's a pleasure on which body grows  
And soul feeds like honey  
Made rich by the extracts of different flowers :  
Serving ideas with a different hue  
Causing wide stomach upsets  
Agreeable but only to a few.

## MORNING THOUGHTS FROM NIGHT

As the eyes close  
Far inside man  
Several rusty gates  
Open one by one  
Slipping stale moonlight  
on unwalked wayward ways.

Like dead men dreaming fragrance of sight  
Convulsive visions merge and emerge —  
Morning must be so fresh and beautiful  
As if someone had been painting it  
The whole night  
Lending sleep to the moon.

The dark mind  
Dwelling too much on lazy beers  
Decays in slow smokeless burning of dreams.  
The joys unfound under blankets  
Pursue Newton's wisdom  
Of the suspected fall of apple  
In Eden and on earth the same way.

Thoughts fixed like mountains get wings  
And flap away nights towards confected mornings  
Freeing emotions hopelugged  
After birds building sleep on wakings.  
Youth makes man dream free

And dwindling years memory caged  
But strong emotions seized of serene silence  
Wake and well-up like the sea  
Imprisoned in the confines of the earth  
Irradiating the still night's transcendence  
Into lighting man with his own thoughts  
Made fireflies by the sun's absence.

## THE WAY TO SEE A THING

My town is situated  
In an out-of-the way sort of way  
Where railways just hem its borders  
As if on a sari out-of-date.

Old Fords still frisk the town like Country dogs  
Cattle, fowls and donkeys keep company  
With pedestrians on their market ways.

It has only two delightful seasons  
Mud and dust  
Overpowering the four.  
Winter comes in spasms  
The hot sun sucks trees of their shadows  
Summer winds down all day-dreams  
Driving dead, dry leaves to dusty doors.  
It gets muddy for sneezes  
Turning the whole town into a mudatorio .  
Missed by Dante in his view of purgatorio.

Here time saunters like a man in Savanna  
Stopping by shades and bird nests  
Winnowing prickly cares from silken rest.  
It has an undilating beauty  
Full of rustic charms and sharp curves  
The hills around make a tempting bosom  
And to save its skin from tanning  
The trees their umbrellas hold.

The whole town wheels on rickshaws  
Stabled in hunched sleep  
In front of bus-stations  
Or pigeon cinema halls.  
Unconsciously religious  
People still perform Vrata Bandh  
In the age of remote control  
And feed hundreds of people with sweets  
To bring peace to the departed soul.

Attainig the age of sixty  
Is an occasion for public celebration  
Like the return of an astronaut  
From space in wild admiration.  
Timid in tackling the tame issues  
The menfolk meet at a greeting's distance  
Like Germans divided by the Berlin wall.  
It has strange cultural modes  
Where corrugated elders rush to listen to lectures  
And men used to staying behind doors  
Vow with their women to listen to classical music  
And watch the dull, dragging dramatic shows.  
Big business tycoons have generously turned  
All their dingy godowns into fetching theatre halls  
Where people line up for movie premiere  
Brushing teeth with treetwigs

For early morning shows.

It is a place frequented by agents,  
Salesmen and medical raps  
Who, cutting a dash with an alien culture  
Throw calculated cock-tail parties to Orange-Kings  
And clever counsels to Cotton Lords.

As evening draws a curtain over the town  
We can see more men —  
Like homeward bound hay wagons.

Presenting paradox  
Of their consummate command of despair and  
desperation

Some plucky men are drawn to Matka-booths  
Relying more on their figures than fingers  
Staking heavy sums on Langada. Mendhi or Joot.  
Glittering with much self esteem but bad manners  
Many a man frequent the card jaunts  
And stay there to grow their beards  
While their wives sleep at home with iced dreams  
Freezing frustrations with dead cheers.

The Socinians tolerate each other  
In an atmosphere of hostility  
And vie to divert the Ganges to flow into their pursæ  
Inscribing visions of windfall  
Shuffling destinies with fingertips.

To be drunk like a fish is a fancy here  
Which sends loud skolions from ourie slakes  
Turning children to a mozaic frame  
And poor women polishing their pride  
With philosophical pains.

Without any self indulgent esotericism  
I have tried to discover truth  
Whether true or false  
Exposing the transient romance of this rustic town  
With true transparency, because  
The way to see a thing  
Is to make it view most seeing  
And the more I see it  
The more I like it  
For intimacy refines perception.

## PLEASURE IN HAPPINESS

Attracted by the pink display of carrots  
In a far away land of Punjab,  
Where rivers jostle like jolly friends  
Rolling waves of joy,  
I walked up to the grocer and said —  
The carrots are so inviting  
That I feel like crunching some.

Go ahead, my boy !  
There isn't anything so Godly in life  
As the blending of feeling  
With immediate satisfaction.

Picking up a few I asked him:  
How much could I pay for them ?

Oh, for the pity of it !  
You must be an absolute kill-joy  
To barter pleasure for gold !  
What wretched creatures  
Has this modernity made of you all  
Into money changers !  
Learn to take pleasure in happiness  
Not in money.  
Came the disgusted reply.

I cleared my mind



Like birds cleansing their wings white  
And when I ate those carrots  
They were as tasty as peaches  
Sweet pecked by the sweet words of the old man.

## MEMORY FRESCOES

Going down the memory lane  
After Orpheus to underworld  
I see him coming from afar  
Like light lengthening at sundown  
To light up the cold receding quays.  
He carries his heavy soul  
Like a dead body gaining weight,  
To give it to a franion  
Willing to bear its dividing nature  
And pursue its grey illusory role.  
A berry tree badly placed  
He lived ar.d flourished like a bee  
Lifting loads with laden eye-lashes  
Hardly ever befriending his bolting soul.  
He lived to love his body like Hercules  
In the care of an athlete trying Twelve Labours `  
Or an astronaut to land on moon or mars  
Or like Icarus jump  
To wrench sun for discus-throws.  
Life so intensely lived  
That he never suspected of having a soul  
But if there was one  
He acted bold like Tiresias to Zeus and Hera.  
He found it vain and corrupt  
Fleeing body to feast funeral pyres  
Luxuriating in the spiritual fall-out of sloth

Fumigating failures with heavenly hopes,  
He knew his body to be Achilles' heel  
Which Thetis had made vulnerable  
In her search for invulnerability in Styx.  
Sick of his soul  
He felt the burden of it  
Like a bough bent with bitter fruit  
Or a maiden carrying an illegitimate child.  
Like Theseus he had scorned the easy way to Athens  
And has musing come  
All the way from hoary past  
To tell us of his woes.  
Although he is no more with us  
Struck dead like Laius by the Swollen Foot  
On the ruse of possessing the road,  
And is long past straining the sea for fish  
I can still see him  
Walking up the memory dale  
Like the last rays of sun spread on still water  
As fine dust on diamondways.

## OF ART, FACT AND ARTIFACT

Starting off with a cute idea  
Up their fanciful sleeves  
Of enlivening creative Writing in English  
Round the world in eighty days  
A group of young fervent Journalists  
Approached Raja Rao and asked —  
How do you get your ideas ?  
He said : In agitation.

They asked a Czech poetess —  
Do you think poetry is a medium  
Of controlling mental agitation ?

It's a medium of re-formation  
Of ideas under a situation —  
Stressed the young poetess.  
And they published—Reformation.

Next came the German playwright  
Accosted with the question —  
How do you reconcile a foreign language  
With native experience and sensitivity ?

You have to have high, strong feelings  
To remove all the barriers to language.  
And they publiciscd — High Strung Feelings —  
Spreading more careful fiction  
Than fact about art.

Reporting is more of a stuff  
A streaker is made of  
Stripping facts beyond nudity  
And one wonders with agonic agitation  
Whether the artifacts of Burroughs  
Or what Nabokov writes —  
Be more of apodyterium  
Than literary apomixis.

## LOOK HOMEWARD ANGEL

I don't blame my friends settled abroad  
Far off in England and Mozambique,  
America, Australia or Madrid,  
Driving cabs or trading antiques  
Researching in Physics or Aeronautics,  
But cutting the chords of country care  
Presents an impoverished image  
Of their feelings made dull by dollars  
And ideals impounded by pounds.  
Their visions have been blurred  
By night-clubs and swingers,  
Blondes and ballrooms their ethics  
Performing cultural striptease  
Or waltzing national pride  
To create self-deluding thrill and calculated space  
For their stubborn recondite selves.  
What segregation and humiliation  
They suffer to disown their citizenship  
And acquire one which fits  
So loose on their hybrid identity  
Glittering with much self esteem  
And something gone out of their soul.  
And we, like intoxicated banshees  
Flaunt the fact of our sons,  
Settled abroad with merry relaxation,  
Still solacing ourselves with Rupert Brook

That they be Indians  
In some corner of their heart.  
The country that once brought them up  
Splitting water with sun rays.  
Now scorches and repels  
Their skin and sentiments  
Like a step-son borrowing the ill name  
Of his guilty father.  
They are lost in the island of Circe  
Or the whirlpool of snow prospects  
Or having homes away from home  
Lounging through existence  
With dandy-decadent ease.  
Even birds that are forced out of home  
At the turn of every season  
Return to their land  
Traversing incredible distances  
Flapping dreams with weary wings.  
But their fancy forbids them  
To look beyond glamour and gold  
And sun-bathe their quixotic dreams  
For a sophisticated fear of tanning  
Dazzling their eyes with rays of conceit.  
Even Greece had its Ulysses  
Who brought his ships back home  
But our Heroes make no myths  
And our imagination no Homer.

## **HISTORY IS A SORRY-GO-ROUND**

The charioteers of history  
In the wanton quest of their power and authority  
Clinch light and go close to the sun  
Spoon measuring infinity  
In the opacity of their conscience.

They take several light years  
To reach the masses  
Awarding titles, licences and tortures  
In the name of national unity and security  
What passes.

Deluded and denatured  
They evolve like a Sphinx  
Or a moon never facing sunlight  
Tyrannising the awed innocents  
Puzzle failing the answers and light.

Political sycophants are their aides  
On whose beguiling predictions  
They fire eat and perform  
The Japanese fire-walk shows  
To dazzle the already dazed.

The feet that tread the galaxy of stars  
And crushed to crushing silence  
Everything that dare raise a spark  
Fail to perform the glamorous trick



And burn like camphor cubes  
In the flames fanned by the sighs  
Of the damned by the sacrificed.  
In the trail of the new quest  
Like phoenix risen from the ashes  
The crucified that have but kept  
The candle of conscience alight  
In the deserted temples of forgotten ideals  
Can now arise, cleanse and enlighten  
The stained glory of man  
In the hero worship of demi-gods.

Ruling the destiny of a nation  
Is no destitution of conscience  
From the natural right of man  
In which each is cast in the image  
Of a mutually desired freedom and justice.

Too much suppression and much politiking  
Ferments its own defeat  
Forcing the masses to forge  
In the smithy of their conscience  
The invisible weapons of their conscience  
The invisible weapons of their fall  
Crowning shame on the foreheads of tyrants  
And nailing bitter truths  
On the crossroads of times

## BEGGARS CAN BE CHOOSERS

I went with such a celluloid zeal  
To Ralegaon Camp in Parner  
To join the wave of reform  
To uproot the curse of beggary  
From the crippled face of my country.  
It was a medley of assorted people  
Disabled, diseased, dreary and doleful  
Old, young, middle aged and just born  
All in an angry resentment of order  
Releasing fluent curses of discontent.

I interviewed some of them  
Trying to probe into their happiness  
They were more sad than happy  
If sadder they could be  
Over the homelessness  
They had been rendered to  
In the houses of their own  
A feeling of vacancy had crept in  
Doing a dignified decent job  
Away from the watchers of the town

I helped the authorities distribute  
Clothes, beddings, mugs and food  
To launch a life of respectability  
For their nakedness beyond nudity  
But when I woke up in the morning

A puzzling quiet pervaded over the camp  
And I persuaded myself to believe  
That beggars were in their rest  
And all was well with our reform.

I greeted an early riser and asked  
If he was at peace —  
He said he was sorry to be late  
For all his friends had gone  
Begging in the streets.  
Explaining his position further, he said —  
We are the sons of elements  
We don't fight for our food  
We are no shallow careerists,  
Daredevil smugglers, cruel adulterators  
Or cheating blackmarketeers of today.

We have a history of no bad pre-eminence  
With all saints adorning our profession  
And all religions making provision for our roles.  
A whole day's sinning and a coin in charity  
Makes bad conscience in our country a rarity ↗  
Like the Japanese invitations to sun gazing at night  
And someone handy to wash clean the excreta of a child.  
Another one joined in and said —  
Besides, we don't suffer from any of the modern diseases  
Of alienation, tension or loss of identity

· Because we honestly believe in our lies.  
We don't run dream-factories  
Nor wait for a Santa Claus gift train hooting  
Instead we live on the indifferent waste of others  
And keep the ego of our superior society treading the stars.

A middle aged straggler  
Made me look a beggar  
And dropped a coin of advice —  
Don't make paper tigers of your social worries  
And don't reform us more  
Than you can reform a prostitute  
For we are a fall out  
From collective social sins :  
We are the crucified.  
Therefore, say your prayers to yourself  
And you shall be redeemed  
of all your sins.

I was struck by the beguiling boldness of the beggar  
And felt the folly of Socrates drinking Hemlock  
On the off-shores of irrational-highs.  
All my humanitarian approach  
Seemed a snarl to me  
And my reformist fervour a celluloid zeal  
Little realising that beggars also can be choosers

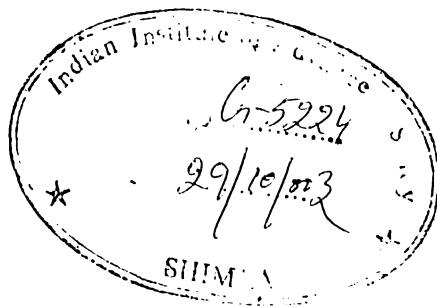
And little less apprehending  
The way we can misread one another  
To keep our irrational forms going  
That in endless deceit  
End the shapes of our destiny.

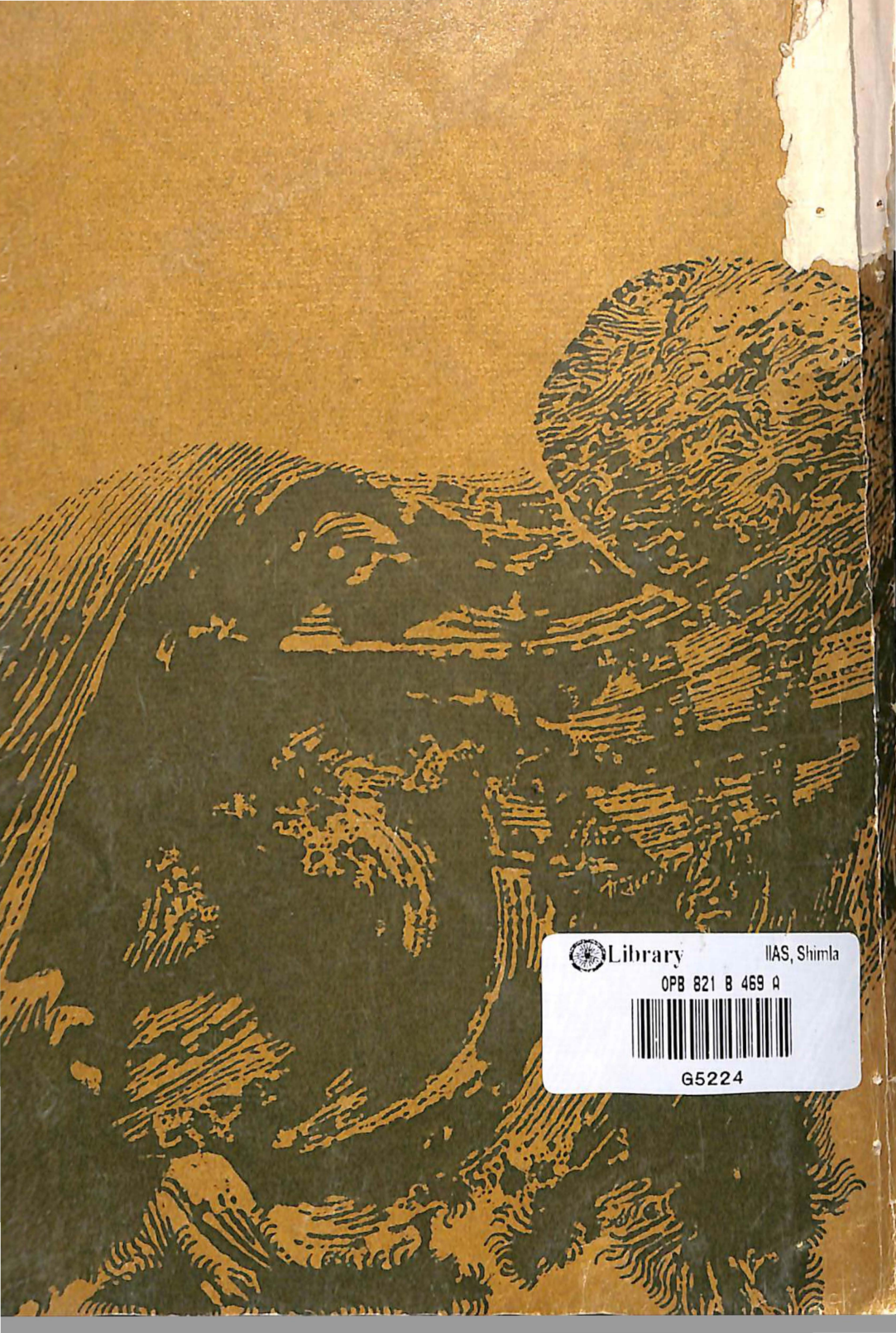
## THOUGHTS ON ELECTION DAY IN INDIA

The players at padua are stuck  
They now relax with anxiety  
Poised like crystal in glass cases.  
Election agents flit like gay birds  
Pecking at every fruit  
Sweetening the prelapidarian Eden  
Of plucky political dreams.  
The ignorant voters in their routine  
Queue up day-dreaming  
And in a passion of a second  
Get rid of their oscitant indecision  
Stamping symbols for men.  
With a handful of literates  
Sealing illiterate favours in steel boxes  
And recording the proud percentage of Poll  
A quiet reigns over the polling booths  
Like mourners retired from their obsequies.  
Speculations and calculations  
Float in smoke rings  
Breaking hopes and fears  
Into myriads of thoughts.  
Once every five years  
There would be new political miracles  
And the devotees of democracy  
Led by pert political pundits  
Would count colours in the rainbows  
Splitting conscience with sun rays.

## SOCIAL POETRY

Wrapping in smooth shining papers  
The store across the road  
Announcing its presence in bold neon signs  
Sells chocolates and icecream bars in hot numbers  
And among customers of high taste  
Enjoys the credit of an excellent server.  
But the disappointed poet  
Unable to sell his minty dreams  
Just a mile down the road  
Has set up a tiny provision store  
Called "Plato's Corner"  
And to build up his goodwill  
And give his wares a meaningful role  
Uses the emotionally yellowed pages  
Of his print fragrant poems  
To wrap up provisions  
For his indifferent customers.





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