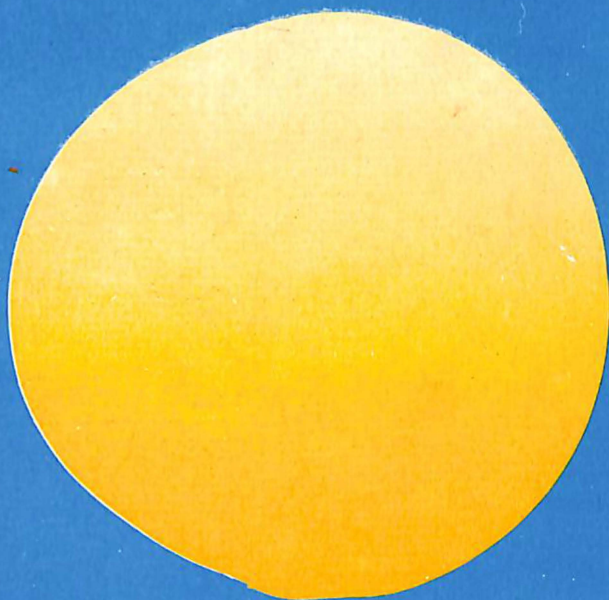


Today the Sun has appeared again



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KAMALA KANT DWIVEDI

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SIDDHARTH PUBLICATIONS

**B-2/1, Okhla Industrial Area Phase II,
New Delhi-110 020**

1987

By the same author
Daule Shah Ke Choohe

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PREFACE

Poetry, I feel, ought to be like an Indian widow of not too distant a past—clad in simple, functional attire, with no coloured glass-bangles adorning the wrists, forehead bare—with no beauty mark—and no vermilion in parted hair. With prolonged fasts and self-denial, it should become hard like dried wood. While internal combustion should be that of a furnace, the idiom should be ice-cold. Like Kabir's 'ULAT BANSIAN', expressions should be turned upside down—all the simplicity notwithstanding.

The terror implicit in the human condition can, most poignantly and trenchantly, be, I believe, expressed if, instead of the weak appealing to the strong, the rich and powerful, by a simple twist the intent behind which should be easily manifest, is made to address the poor. It is not a clever stratagem, but a dire necessity today if poetry is to remain relevant and meaningful.

It is not that I first thought what poetry should be and then wrote. These are two concomitant and intermeshed processes. The first section of the book contains my latest poems intended to be sharp thorns to pierce all that is fleshy and flabby amidst us and prick the humbug deeply.

In the second section, I have included my earliest poems. Looking at some of them again, I feel convinced that it is very easy to write the so-called 'difficult' poetry. But here too, content was of primal importance.

Several poems are English rendering of my unpublished Hindi poems as also a few from the published collection of my Hindi poems—"Daule Shah Ke Choohe". Many of the poems written in English were published in various journals. I have deliberately not indicated which is which.

I am deeply indebted to Goldy Malhotra for preparing the layout and design of the book. Besides being a painter and sculptor, she is a fine multi-lingual poet (in Hindi, Panjabi and English). I am also grateful to Arun Raj Malhotra, my printer and publisher, who is a dedicated promoter of arts and literature. My eldest daughter Pragya Dwivedi, who is a budding poet and writer herself, has greatly helped me with her valuable suggestions.

K.K.D.

7th January, 1987.

**For
Pragya, Manish, Prachi
and Pooja**

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SECTION I

Why are the Houses made of Mud

Father, why are hovels in countryside
Made of thatch and mud?

Son, when annual floods come
And these houses are swept away
And thaw,
These folks
Get the same fun –
As you do
Watching your paper-boats
Bob and sink

Or when the storm breaks
And thatched roofs are air-borne
They get the same pleasure
As you do –
Watching your kites
Hover in the air.

29.3.1983

How to Get Out of Poverty

Father, why don't they cross the poverty line?

—For them it's a charcoal-circle, Son,
Drawn by Lakshman who told them:
They would be secure till
They remain within its bounds.
The moment they step out,
They would be caught by devils,
And thrown in the dungeons of Golden Lanka.

Father, is there no way to take them out?

—There's only one way, son
And that's lowering the line
Till they automatically
Get right on top of it.

5.4.1983

Establishing a record of world's largest strike

Why do workers go on strike, Papa?
— Addicted as they are to starving —
Just as bidi-smoking or tobacco-chewing —
Two meals are too much for their digestive
systems
Through periodic strikes
They re-live their hungry days.

Why not then give them
Wages sufficient just for one meal?

— Son, machines too, get hungry
They need fleshy bodies
We have to take good care of them!

Why do they come back to work?

— Life is play for them
Work galls them soon enough
And they go on strike
They come back
When they are fed up with starvation

Papa, why didn't they return this time?

—

30.4.1983

Coal-room

Even now black though coal is —
Its property has changed
Whichever part of the body it gets to
Begins to glow

They alone are free from dark stain
And known as pucca whites
Who keep themselves not outside
But inside the coal-room.

15.2.1983

Animals don't raise the question of poverty!

Father, why are the rich so rich
And the poor poor?

- Son, poor people are
A lazy and stupid lot

But, Father, even their children of my age
Work so hard in our homes!

- If they remain poor
Even after so much of work,
Won't you call them
Lazy and stupid?
Why the hell should they slog
If they are to remain poor!

But, Papa, after all
They also wish to live!

- In that case, Son,
How are they different from the rich
The rich also do nothing
But to live. When animals
Are not obsessed with poverty,
We also must not raise this question

Like animals, Father?

-

1.4.1983

Cook the food this way!

Shake the stove well
Make sure there's not
A drop of kerosene left in the tank
And the burner
Is all clogged with soot
So that no flames come out

Ignite the stove with a match-stick
That's wet and then
Take up a kettle with no bottom
And put it on the stove

Now let the food be cooked
For a long time
And when people can no longer
Endure the pangs of hunger
Summon them
And with great affection and pomp
Lay the banquet before them.

11.9.1982

The Grand Show

Who were they, Father?

— Kings, emperors, generals

Why did they come?

— To discuss how best
Poverty can be eradicated
From the face of earth

What was the medium of their discussions,
Father?

— English, French

Are the people who speak these languages
The poorest in the world?

— No, son, It's only the rich and powerful
Who can, with complete detachment,
Analyse this problem. Moreover, these
languages
Alone have the remarkable power
To bring out the rigours
Of poverty in full

What did they decide, Father?

— That poverty can be worn out
Only by endless rounds of discussions

What was their most solid contribution,
Father?

— Gold watches, Son, they gave away to
bell-boys
When they left.

14.3.1983

You don't know how well-off you are!

Until you are able
To buy and read news-papers
And learn from the statistics
Splashed over paid, full-page advertisements
What giant strides you have taken —

You won't know
What progress you have made
And how lucky and well-off
you are!

4.4.1983

Hand over this body!

Not a Kabir, but an ordinary person—
When he was killed
Two groups fought over possession
Of the dead body, nevertheless

Said one:
We killed him and therefore,
We alone have the right
To dispose off his body, too

Other said:
Hand him over to us.
It would be good for you
He was our man
We would take him out
In a large procession, so that
Everyone learns to fear and respect you
If you cremate him quietly
How will people ever take a vow
Not to disobey you!

1.4.1983

What will happen if stomachs are full?

Why do people defecate on the roadside,
Father?

— They are poor. That's why.

Being poor, don't they have to go without
food?

— Yes, Son. They do.

How do their bowels move then

When there's nothing in? Will

There be any space left in the world, Father,
If they have their fill?

5.4.1983

Why is law blind?

- Why is law blind, Father?
- Because it can't see, Son.
- A pity! Was it born blind, or
Whether it was jailed and gangajal
poured in its eyes?
- I don't know, son. All that I know is
It keeps its doors always open for everyone
Nobody is ever turned back from its portals.
- Why is it then a sanctuary for
The outlawed only?
- May be they're a threatened species
Needing special protection. At any rate,
It can't be blamed if only they
Opt to take asylum in it.
- Any other instance of its being even-handed?
- Yes, Son. When it's aroused, its blows
Fall equally on all.
- Why then only the poor get hurt, Father?
- It's simple. The rich are very few
And the poor so many, Son.
- In that case, they must not
Go near it, if they want not to get hurt.
Isn't it, Father?
-

5.4.1983

Cure for inflation

Father, what's inflation?

— Galloping of prices, Son

Why do prices rise?

— Poor people begin to dream

Of two square meals

The moment they have a windfall

And the prices shoot up.

Papa, then what's the remedy?

— Son, we must see

They don't get any money.

29.3.1983

Why shouldn't precept and practice be different?

Precept and practice—
They are not synonyms
Why shouldn't they be different then?

I have a tongue to preach
And limbs to practise
Limbs are nobody's serfs
Why should they obey the tongue, then?

5.4.1983

Why scales of justice don't tilt?

Why is justice represented as a
Weighing-scale, Father?

— Because its scales are always even

Doesn't it remind of a merchant then?

— It does. And rightly so. It is meant to warn
you:

Once you go to it, you would be
Indebted for ever

But, Father, is it not also used for weighing
Heavyweights against gold, silver and coins?

— So what, Son! It only weighs
Tonnes and not milligrammes, for which,
You need a finer balance!

5.4.1983

Let it boil!

It's not a pot of boiling milk
That you should frantically rush
And douse the fire with water

It's just water
Let it simmer
How long will it boil?
Ultimately, it will turn into steam
And evaporate or overflowing —
Quench the fire

2.9.1982

An Indian bride's last request

I must die—I know—my Lord! For
I have failed to make you dowry-fat
But all that I ask is: Please don't
Pour kerosene over me. I can't stand
Its smell—you know it very well.
And don't burn me. I'm no Joan of Arc. Smoke
hurts my eyes.
The sight of peeling flesh, the sound of
crackling bones and the smell of
Sizzling limbs nauseate me. Unlike you —
Roasted meat—I don't relish. Lastly,
I would prefer to look my best
With make-up on, when I die and
Not look all charred, black and skeletal

Why not give me a fistful of barbiturates?
I won't disappoint you
Think of your advantages!
No dying declaration, and
A beautiful suicide note!

23.4.1983

Bread

Soil	fertile
Sunshine	bright
Rains	timely
Crops	rich
Granaries	overflowing

Children, bread you'll surely get tomorrow
If—
Grains reach the open market
And I have the money to buy!

12.2.1981

Enquiries from an Indian intellectual

At what temperature does water boil?

— At 100°C

And man's blood?

—

When does water freeze?

— At 0°C.

And tears?

—

When is the cricket heard?

— In the stillness of dead night

And man's scream?

—

When does the water-pot crack?

— When it's brimming or kicked

And the sin-pot?

—

23.9.1982

Pollution is quite natural!

Is it true, Father, that Ganga is polluted now?
— Yes, my child.

Shouldn't we worry about it? Do something?
— Why should we? Aren't all the rivers,
and all the oceans of the world polluted?

But surely this ancient and holy river

— Holy or no holy, what else is the river for?
What can you do? Can you dam it
All the way and stop its flow? Can you .
drain it out or turn it back?
You have to live with it or close
your eyes. Don't bathe in it.

Father, you had said Bhagirath had
Assured Ganga
— That all its impurities would go away
The moment a clean man steps in?
True, Son. But Bhagirath hadn't
Promised a pair of clean feet. Did he?
Be practical about it, my child.
Faeces would always be there, till
Man lives. Where else would it go
If not in the river? You see,
Even holy rivers have a purpose.
Let's go for a dip—like the rest of them.

21.4.1983

They don't die of hunger anymore!

- Do people die of hunger, Father?
- No, Son. They die because they don't
Buy grains, though granaries are full.
They can not die of hunger. They're
Forbidden to do so, for if they do
Where would we get the people—
To die in floods, earthquakes, pestilence,
War, riots and from heat wave, cold wave
And malnutrition? Will then not
The number below poverty line cease
To be spectacular?
- Do cattle die?
- Yes, Son. They do, for they are not as tough
As men. They live only to eat.
Man doesn't live by bread and butter alone.
He is a tough nut that
A mere drought can't crack
- What about famine, Father?
- What about it, Son? It's obsolete.
Like other relics of colonialism,
It's gone for ever. Outlawed.
Driven out. Droughts can never now turn
Into famines.
- What's the difference between the two!
- In famine, men also die. In drought,
only animals die.
- All those who reportedly died
Were animals then, Father?
-

21.4.1983

Agony of a Third World newsman

How weird are the people!
What an unnatural place
They choose for the Acts of God!

Take this hamlet of a hundred hovels!
They picked this spot—
Two hundred kilometres from the Capital —
To settle a thousand people!

The mackadam road
Linking the village with the dirt track—
Couldn't it have been located
Nearer than eighteen kilometres!
Did they have to settle with
A hospital sixty kilometres away!

With the dam burst, and
The village swept away
And the relief work on,
Why should I have gone to the site?
How could I have reached it?
Were not rivers and streams seething
After the heavy downpour?

Even otherwise, when the army is
Engaged in rescue work
And all the bodies are yet to be found —
What could I have done there
Except twirling my thumbs!

When the road is blocked
And people are in daze
What matter, could I
Have collected there for my paper?

Even if I had reached in time,
What use would I have been
When it was not even known
How many bodies were missing?
All those statistics—
(Out of hundred bodies—
Twenty recovered on the first day,
Ten on the second and five
on the third—thirty babies
And five women)
Gathered after the road cleared and
everything became quiet and normal—
Could the paper have got all this—had I
Gone earlier?

7.11.1983

Chhotoo

Just about eleven-year-old
Chhotoo
Everywhere you find him:

In dhabas:
Up at the crack of dawn
Bent over bhatti
Rushing steaming cups of tea
To leering truckers
And receiving snickers from them

Prodded on by occasional spanking —
Keeps on scrubbing pots and pans
Till late hours

A tiny god—Chhotoo
Keeps awake
Day and night
Slogging away

In auto-workshops:
Greasing nuts and bolts
Peering under bonnets
Burnishing wind-shields
Raising hands in salute
And chanting, "Salaam, Saab"
In the hope of small tips

When lights turn red
Chhotoo darts in, warding
Off onrushing traffic,
— A hopping sparrow — flapping
Newspaper sheets like wings against
Closed glass-windows of
Momentarily stalled automobiles.

A small coin—
He's found in fields and factories
—For that matter
Any place you name—
Save, mother's lap
Father's shoulders, courtyards, tree-tops,
Schools and playgrounds

23.2.1983

Washerman's daughters

- Washerman's little daughters
— Pinched sparrows—
Sneak in and squat before T.V.
— A plateful of rice.

Overawed and huddled together
On floor they cover
Just a fistful of space

Frail as she is, my daughter
Needs to be protected from heat and cold
Cooler and heater therefore
Are always turned towards my daughter
Washerman's girls — they never reach
In any case, they don't need.

Not a snob, my daughter suffers
From no hubris. For hours she plays with
them
Takes them on bicycle ride
At times, of course, she chides them
Fault surely lies with them!

- Very considerate and kind-hearted—
My daughter gladly shares eats with them—
— Fried groundnuts, for instance—
It's different when it comes to
Sharing ice-creams and chocolates!
Washerman's daughters don't mind
They knew well
These are not for their kind,

Clever in studies—
My little girl switches off TV
When it's newstime
Sprawling on sofa, she
solves their petty sums
And teaches them English alphabets.

Washerman and his woman
Never prevent their girls
From coming to our house
For they always bring
Freshly laundered clothes
And leave our house carrying
Head-loads of dirty linen.

12.11.1981

Black Men

Black parents invariably have
Black children. Their needs are also
not so bright. Wife, for instance, needs just
a coarse saree. Boy—an odd job
He himself—a bundle of biris

Blackie is no doubt an unhappy man
But his sorrow is that of
A sparrow that chirps in fine weather
But quietly lets itself be soaked in torrential
rains
Doesn't cry and rolls down like a clod.

Black man amidst black sorrows is
Like an overcast sky, which has
Nothing that's not black
Save a few dreams that, like stars,
Are bright and innocent

But his dreams are so —
Only at the beginning. As
The night advances and light recedes,
Luminescent images, dripping
From his dreams, progressively darken

He was a black man, too
As the morning radiance spread
Around him, his dreams began
To darken and when the mid-day sun was
Right overhead, he had shrunk
Into a pin-point.

Children, dreams, gods, roads —
Whatever he was left with now —
Had all turned black

6.8.1981

The right answer

Postmaster ji, I don't get any letter from my family!

- Where do you live?
On the pavement.
- What's the Pin Code no.?
I live on the pavement.
- What's the name of the street?
Mahatma Gandhi Marg.
- What's the house no.?
I live on the pavement.
- Does it have no number?
NO.
- Why?
It has no house.
- Why do you need letters then?
Get a house first before you come.

7.5.1983

One God, One King

What is monarchy, Father?

- There's a king, there're generals and courtiers
And the people.

What is fascism, Father?

- There's a king, there're generals and courtiers
And the people.

What is democracy, Father?

- There's a king, there're generals and courtiers
And the people.

And, what's socialism, Father?

- There's a king, there're generals and courtiers
And the people.

What's the difference, then, Father?

- The same
As among gods and goddesses
Having difference only in name
God is one
So is the king.

1.4.1983

The Alchemy

Father, why are they on walking-tours these days?

- Because, Son, it's good for their constitution
Fat would dissipate and they would become trim.
Then, travel would add to their knowledge.

Knowledge of what, Father?

- That the people are poor. They
Don't have grains in their fields and
stomachs
Nor roofs over their heads.

But it's such a common knowledge, Father!

- Not for them; they're not common people,
Son!
They are Siddharthas—these simple,
innocent
Peripatetics—who are yet to come across
A poor, ailing, dying person

Will their visits satisfy the hunger of the poor?

- Well, Son, Yes. The Poor are
A very clever lot. They
Know the secret of converting their
Visits to them into
Nutrient food and mineral water.

7.5.1983

The perfect substitution!

Brick and mortar
Must surely have
A strong, pleasant odour
To magnetically draw
Multitudes of villagers
From all the four corners
To vast construction sites
In megalopolises and even lesser cities

As swarm hordes of insects
During monsoons, pulled by
Fumes of a magical brew of light and moisture
Or as in winter, flocks of migrant birds
Leave their snow-bound home and hearth
And descend on tropical plains
In search of warmth and corn

Father, instead of seeds in their small
Patch of land, lays rows and rows of bricks
Mother, in place of curry, prepares
Slurry. Eldest daughter, instead of
Bundles of cattle-fodder, brings up
Pans of mortar. Younger one,
In place of a satchel, carries
Buckets of water, Eldest boy,
Instead of groundnuts, splits open
Grit and boulders. Younger one,
Instead of measly crops, keeps
A solicitous watch over the waiting suckling,
Drives away flies instead of marauding birds
And in doing so, acts the part of
The head of the family.

What a perfect, easy way of life!
Away from homes,
They build bee-hives around
Bricks blooming all over.
And when work is finished, they
Move on towards other rising sky-lines!

1.6.1981

The vessel of sins doesn't crack any more!

Pots may have cracked
When full to the brim!
In those days
They were perhaps made
Of unbaked earth
and the liquid
Was more fluid.

Vessels these days are no longer weakly-made
As they fill up,
Their volume expands
Even when they burst
Nothing flows out
It remains solidified.
What bursts
And what outflows
Both have now
Fused into one, and have
Turned solid and sound.

12.10.82

Why is the earth's axis tilted?

Why is the earth's axis tilted, Father?

— So that days and nights are not equal, son.

What if they were so?

— That would have been

Against the sacred laws of nature

Which can't brook

A uniform season the world over.

Man, too, won't have accepted this.

23.10.1982

You must promise...

I will certainly give you my vote
Provided you promise
To help yourself—and not us
To outspoke all others
To pump your heart
And thump your breast
Not to visit us, when
Floods or drought overtake us
And to stand aloof—not with us—
Towering far, far above
One and all.

7.5.1983

SECTION II

The village of the ancestors

That unseen village where I was not born
About which I had merely heard from Father
long ago—
Why does it forcibly come to my mind?

Why does that river surge in my mind
Which, pitying the forlorn village,
Had shrivelled up and clung to it?

Why do the emaciated boys
Driving the sickly herd of cattle,
Seem to me as if with mouths
Crammed with berries and
Bursting with laughter, the're
Diving in the sparkling river
With resounding splash?

Those alleyways that gasp and
Breathe their last in fuming sewers—
Why do they race in my mind
With the grace of a heavily-scented rivulet?

Those mud-walls that crack up
With the whiplashes of heat and drought—
Why do they look swaying like lush, greenery
In cool breezes?

Granny—
Scrounging the bare grain-vessel, or
Winnowing the empty basket, or
holding grind-stones unmoving, or
Churning butter-milk in air, lying
On a reed-cot swathed in rags, staring
With eyes dimmed by smoke at the crows
Perched on the crumbling parapet—
Why does she appear before me, donning
Bleeding skirts, baking bread on
cow-dung-cakes,
Humming and pouring in bronze bowl sweet —
rice-and-milk?

Sullen peasants in barren fields and barns—
Why does my mind draw a golden scene about
them—
Decked with ears of ripe corn,
Beating drums and cymbals and waltzing with
abandon!

Tethered to empty troughs
The skeletal frames—
Why do they appear to be
A pair of sturdy oxen
Chewing the mash of de-oiled cakes and hay
With silver bells hung round their necks!

This alien village—is it the blood of my
ancestors
That's coursing in my veins via
Arteries of my father and grandpa?

Will this flow continue in my children
And their generations or is it acrid smoke
Aimlessly wandering about in the air
That I filter and inhale!

1.7.1980

Grandpa, boys and the village

Wrote the Grandpa:
Road is complete
So is the bridge on the river
There'll be no trouble now
Reaching the village.

Ask the boys:
Where there are no roads
Nor any bridge,
Do the grandpas
Invite the children
To visit them, too?
And do the children go?

For the first time today
Boys saw their village
Eagerly waiting, like a bunch of hunched
passengers,
For the city-bus to arrive
So that they could get away fast
Ask the boys:
Will the city-bus grab the village
And scam!

Boys also saw the bridge
Adjoining the village that,
Like a crane — with its long feet dug in
In the mud —, was
Waiting to pounce, on the slightest movement,
Upon the village and swiftly
Fly away clutching it
In its beak like a fish.
Ask the boys:
Will the bridge really fly off with the village?

Boys saw:
Like calves, houses of mud
Stretched and chewing the cud,
Were shaking with fear:
Someone brandishing a staff
Might suddenly barge in, and
Untieing the tether
Drive them away.

Ask the boys:
Will the bully really get away with
All the mud-houses in the village?

Grandpa listens to them
But doesn't answer.

Before it's dusk,
When the boys, who came in the morning,
Began their journey back to the city,
Grandpa stood silent and frozen,

And merely waved hands.
He knew:
Boys won't look back towards the village.

27.2.1980

Father's letter from the vi.lage

I've got your letter, Father. In
crooked alphabet, you have written:
For months without fail, it has been
Raining heavily here. Most of the
Mud-houses in the village have
Tumbled down. The river is swollen
And keeps rising alarmingly. At
A few yards from me, water is roaring.
But with God's Grace, our thatched roof
Is safe. Lying on a cot on a high
Platform, I watch raging waters
Rush by. I get my two meals from Tiwari's
You mustn't worry. I'm quite comfortable. I
only wanted you to know what weather is like.

You did well, Father, by
Going back to the village. Looking for a job, you
Had come to this city. You slogged in the
factory
And towards us you somehow fulfilled your
duty.
Not well-versed even in urban Hindi, you
Saw to it that we absorbed English so that
We could stand on our own feet. You
Got us married and we got you grand children
You wished. As we rose in life, you shrank.

There was no point in your
Staying on when you superannuated, and
Neither the factory nor we needed you any
more

Our family went on flourishing, and
Expanded to such an extent that
In the house you had yourself built, you
Could find place for your cot
Only near the stair-case crammed
With stale newspapers and soiled linen
To make sure that when you got up early
And stepped out stealthily, we were
Not a bit disturbed, and when
For hours you sat outside meditating,
Not a sound reached our ears.

Didn't you notice how
Busy we all were: Me—in office and club
Wife—with kids and servants. Boys—
In comics and games. Who had the
Time or patience to keep you company
Even for a while and fill part of
your time with tid-bits!

Old you certainly are!
Older than you is the grandpa's house
Ancestors' village is still older
You couldn't have, I'm sure, tired
Of this methuselahian trinity.

So what—if your grandchildren are not
Aware how, with the siren blaring, you would
Close your eyes, before you left for the factory,
and
Ask, God knows what, from Him for us

While—
Wearing just a faded, fustian vest
In shivering cold, you would be turning
With shaking hands, pages of Ramayan, or,
Trying to brew tea with stale leaves, you
Would be struggling with damp fire-wood, and
Stooping over the kettle, or,
In the empty moments after
The ablution and prayers, you would be,
From the doorstep, peering at passing faces
In the hope someone will stop, and
Chat with you for a while.

At that very moment—
What will your grandchildren—going to
The public schools in shining uniforms—
Know that sprawling on your back
You would make us straddle your legs
And rocking us, sing those funny lines—
Or, marking our forehead with collyrium to
Ward off the evil eye
And hoisting us on to your shoulders,
Take us to gay bazaars on festive occasions
And on return, throw red chillies
In fire to nullify effects of any evil eye—
Through our mother.

You raised the crop
But grains slipped from your hands
And fell far away.

You went and took refuge in the village
But where will I go when the grains of my crop
Scatter and land far-off?
Will the village and the thatched roof
Survive till then and the strains of your
prayers for us reach our ears?

Well, Father, you too, needn't worry. I'm
Quite well. There's a heavy downpour here also
And, from the balcony, I watch
Your grandchildren splash about in the puddle
And put the paper-boats afloat.

1.8.1980

The village and the Pipal tree

I know—you won't stay
Until dusk—my child!

What's here?—
Low, thatched houses
Which, without bending over, you can't enter
Sparse fields.
On the ridges of which, you can't
Without slipping, saunter
Shallow, parched river
In which you can't take a holy dip
Nor is the climate pleasant enough
For you to stay on

But there's a pipal tree
Which, if you wish, you should
Look at for once
See, how its shadow becomes
A draw-bridge in the day
And a canopy at night
Day-long, underneath it, there are
Children gambolling, and tethered cows
Licking their calves

After sun-set,
Elders assemble. Hubble-bubble
Changes hands. Saga of the village
And ancestors is bandied about
With pipal as the heroic figure
That swallows all the terrors.

With each succeeding generation
It takes birth, grows, dies
And rises again
From distant villages submerged
In the floods, pipal stands out as a mast

Do take a look at it
My pet! Even if you don't stay
Look at it for once before you leave
And notice how naive it is
How it has bound the entire village
How deep in the soil for yards and yards—
Its roots hold sway, and how
Well-anchored, it keeps its head high
Looking at the sky—
Part of the village and yet
Far above it!

16.11.1980

Dear old cities

Dear are those cities
Whose alleys, bare-feet,
Accompanying the crowds of chanting pilgrims,
Go for a dip to the Ganges at dawn every day
And returning post-haste
Squat with the urchins of the neighbourhood
To have a breakfast of hot jalebis

Dear are those cities
Whose street-junctions
— Like country green-grocers —
Quarrel all day and keep awake
All night roasting and vending groundnuts

Dear are those cities
Whose terraces clinging to each other,
Cry and whimper like married sisters who
come from far-off places
To mourn together
And exhausted
Lie down to sleep clasping each other

Dear are those cities
On whose parapets wisps of smoke
Assemble like crows, for a feast of food-smell
Stolen from distant courtyards

Dear are those cities
Who, with ashes on their foreheads
And sacred fires in front,
Keep on, like ancient hermits,
Sitting on the ghat leaning
And amused, watching the river
— Like a prankful girl —
Run up and down the broken steps

2.10.1980

Today the sun has appeared again

After washing hands and feet
And rinsing the mouth from
Pond water, the sun has today
Appeared again as if
The mother — pale after a long illness —
Has come home
From the hospital

She slips down the tree-tops
Clutching branches with
Shaking hands. Touches
Boys' sallow foreheads and
Their cheeks she gently taps.

She sweeps the courtyard,
Cleanses utensils
Clears cob-webs from the corners
And coaxing out fire from damp wood
Slowly heats up the entire house

She wrings and jerks wet clothes
And hangs them to dry up on the terrace.

When the winds, like neighbours, will
Go back after a powwow with her
Anxious boys throwing their arms around her,
Will exclaim: Mother,
You won't leave us again! Will You!

24.10.1980

Mother and daughter

(On listening to a mother and daughter play violin)

Mother and daughter—
Both were on the stage
I didn't know what chord
They were playing
But, I thought, it must be
The umbilical cord.

Mother's face
—Like a mare's—
Was aglow
Seeing her little one
Keeping pace
—Like a filly—
With her tempo

From time to time
—Like a river in flow—
She would pause
And nod her head
with pride and joy
When her daughter
——Parting from her—
Would race ahead
—All by herself —
Like a rivulet—
To a crescendo

I don't remember
What I heard
All my attention was
On the mother.
But during that moment
I had banished
From my mind
All the anger and sorrow
About mankind
And had begun to hope
There would not be much to worry about
If mothers keep on watching
With pride and care
Their little daughters and sons
Growing up to find their
Due place under the sun.

25.11.1981

Pauper's burial

A foul patina formed
On the copper men
A leprous syllable
Was thrown out of music-hall
I a mere pauper
Lost my shattered name
In a street
To find a shard
in a one-eyed lane

Then one day I fell
in the battle between alms
and stretched hands
No hushed silence spoke for me
Nor did a distended pause
Howl in the public square
A speck of hunger
had been fulfilled

One day I rose
a cadaver with a veinless face
when a power-baron
was hanged and buried
By thieves of power
A special bulletin yelled out
my name
in an epileptic scream
that froze in a hoarse
supplement

A mere pauper that I was —
am now blessed with a name

5.4.1979

Rickshaw-puller

Before the lazy sun that
suffers no pangs of hunger
makes leisurely appearance from
behind the foyer of Shivalik Hills, and
the old man awakens wrinkled
Sukhna Lake with prayer and ablution,
the rickshaw-puller from U.P.
gathers his clanging bones from
the shadow of Mother Tree
with rocky memories of land
lynched by sun and wind
he left behind gasping like a shored fish;
of river with empty veins frozen in burning
sand;
of women and children cowering in
unwalled dungeons from hunger that
plunders trackless villages; and he
lights bidis with the song of Gita, and
marches on in rickshaw to his private
battle-field of Kurukshetra, looking
for his first Arjuna of the day.

7.5.1980

Moments of faith

When I saw
those two little girls
feeding two little birds
hopping on grass
wet with dew
whispering to each other
and giggling for no reason

I then knew;
there is still left
sufficient warmth in the sun
and moisture in the air
for these old roots
to survive this
or any other season.

10.11.1980

Hoarders

Times are bad.
The sky is overcast
with clouds gone mad.
These are no monsoon clouds
that come solemnly from afar
and pouring out their heart
silently depart.

These are strange clouds—
greedy and mean—
They don't spare even streams—
poor and lean.

Black, fat hoarders—
they bring ruin, not rain;
They block the light
and mock the land.

Make no mistake!
They are here to stay
unless strong winds appear
and drive them away.

5.9.1981

Song of a mushroom

With compassion you gather
primordial dung from sea and land
and moistening with time's juices, knead
me into compost of swollen appetite
you sterilise with heat of passion;
burying me in corolla of burning lust
and encasing me with clay of promise
you wait for controlled sun
to destroy weeds of cerebration.
Your space-eyes glint, when
touched by lightning-gloom,
green satyr of fungus raises head
menacing unborn vegetation.
Writhing in gravid universe
of shooting stars of pain,
I am ready, Black Magician,
in all my pure and ripe whiteness
for your crimson palate.

1.9.1980

Blatant sun in the Tropics

Blatant Sun!

There is not a day when
you don't come demanding
fiery dues of cinders and ashes.
Not a day, when after a day's hunting,
satiated, you have gone behind
curtains endlessly drawn over mountains.

Although nothing remains or moves in sea and
land

save single-minded glare of your harshness
and putrefying sand staring at your nakedness,
you persist and lurk behind the moon
and not forgetting the smell of peeling flesh
return to rotting corpses
to sink your unweary fangs in.

Like a toothless tiger
exiled by affluent woods
you come on flaming horses
prowling in burnt plantations
of ravaged tropics, looking for
easy and armless preys, and
unquenched, with tongues of blazing day,
soak up the ocean of shadows that
bangs its battered head on thirsty shores.

Fury-coiled python!
your fire-breath slithers over
plants and animals, and you
go on the rampage, and plunder
rivers of their deep and fields
of their promise and sands and
leaves and children of their will
and dreams and phantoms.

Can't you watch damp odour
dissipating in dry canals of powdered dyes
and hear scared shadows that flee
from sour haze dripping into thirsty eyes?

Can't you move over to cooler lands
and stop holding back the night-fall?

7.4.1980

Epileptoid

Stung by a gaunt ray
I implode in my muted cavern
blasting a throbbing islet
in a floundering sea inside
sinking to shadowless depth
battered by lunatic surges
devouring blinking suns.

No scalding repose for me
in the gulf of lava, that could
spiral to my riven sky congealing.

Chained by cold fire
I erupt into stasis of fury

Lightning of my eel
swallows my seething bay
leaving thunders of shadows
frozen in the void—
stalactites pointing to my heart.

Engulfed in whorls of smoke
my collapsed wholeness
screams, scattering
its minerals to the winds
snared in echoless corridors
of whimpering innards.

30.3.1981

My land and my goat

I do everything—
Sprinkle water morning-evening
But on my patch of land
no grass ever raises a hand.
And my old goat, famished since long
Still goes without food or even thorn.

Nothing seems wrong in the soil
Millions had left bones after toil
To make it, mile after mile,
rich, beautiful and fertile.
Nor is there any lack of moisture
Right here flowed the heaven-born river.

I am very fond of my poor, silly goat
Although it starves and shudders
God knows from where and when
It brings milk into its udders
and feeds me and my children
How can I then give it up to a butcher?
I'm also no gujjar
not knowing how to whistle
How can I take it up the hill?

I love my barren land, too
Abandon it to weeds—that I can't do.

Both of us are naive:
We firmly believe
Our bones will fertilize the land
and, for our children,
fill it up with grass again.

17.5.1981

The devout and their Godmen

Riding on swirls of dust
they come charging
from the bowers of earth
storming his innocence,
and blinding his youthful sun.

Armed with shears of cold piety
they strip him of his ringing silence
and burrowing into roots
of his matted nightmares
drain the sap of his desires.

Sucking his river dry
they surround him with
dunes of sand, on which
they pray their mock-prayers
and coronate him with impious shells.

From the sockets of his simple soul
they pluck out his burning eyes
and insert eyeless stars in them
forcing him into the tube of godliness.
They put out dark embers of his dreams
and raise a hermetic cellar
over his evacuated heart
in which he lies, stuffed
with yellow pilgrims crawling
in and out of his eyes and ears
with their cleft hooves
embedded in his profane cells.

3.5.1980

The Poor and the Poet

From my leprous pores
you form your crystal syllables;
consonants from my crippled trail
and vowels from my muted wail.

Words take shape from my bone-shards.

My limp is your comma
and my coma your colon;
you borrow my gasps for
your parentheses
and my broken footfalls
for your perfected rhyme.

My diurnal deaths are
your elegant pauses.

You make rhythm out of
my epileptic tremor, and
syntax from my despair, and
brighten your stanzas
with gloom of my eyes.

My hollow cheeks are
your heightened peaks
and my spindly legs your buttress.
You skewer my bare ribs in
your elliptical metaphors, and
sew up my peeling flesh
with your ecstatic images.

You batten on my emaciation
and make metaphysics
of my utter degradation.

My shocked numbness charges
you with blue electricity
and my unfed hunger courses
in you as rich juices.

My agony is your music, and
my scream your diction, and
my shrivelled skin your scansion.

You reach orgasm in my final death-cry.

6.5.1980

Word-falls

Surveying majestically
acres of scrubless wood,
Penguin Poet towers like
ancient tree he really is, and
scintillating syllables
like autumn leaves fall
from his unflawed height
on moronic wind that
snuffs out promising flame
on the wet ground below.

Meaning-heavy words like
weight-weary outcrops
crash into insentient valley where
they crackle and sputter out.

Sense-soggy sentences like
long casings of spent rockets hurtle
down traffic-dense memory-lanes
and become whimsical toys for
senile, hysterical boys.

Piquant Poet like a sharp eagle
from his craggy perch swoops
down on phantom images, and
sinks talons where no flesh is.

Pastoral Poet browses far and wide
over ranges of green pasture
filling up udders with succulence but
yielding no milk and nourishment.

War-Poet: from cramped islet
your word-horses raced over
oceans and continents, raising
foam and dust, long after
the rumble of battle-fields had
died down; those were jackasses
that returned with loads of guilt
to Empire-Builders' lonely shores.

Anti-War Poet: you leapt into
existential being, only when
white lands clashed with white lands;
outraged black, brown and
yellow lands to you, were
total blind-deaf spots.

Their words boom and bloom
but pierce no rocky soil
and germinate no seeds;
they scare timid birds
but no tyrannical beasts;
they move mountains
but no bowels;
they move heavens
but no combines.

Their word-falls turn turtles, but no
turbines and no electricity flows;
sound and fury of their cannon-balls
hurt not but camouflage the foes; with
meaning and promise betrayed, they
fail their ancient fathers

1.1.1980

The song of a blade of vegetation

You may take measure,
mocking bird of fancy, of
your infinitesimal world
of dissonance.

You may take sounding,
slimy fish of sense, of
your shallow gorges
of passion.

You may wander,
drunken beast of thought, in
dark forest of incomprehension.

I am content watching
the space fill up with
resonance of perception, and
the ocean with empathy
of ringing silence.

I watch the continent swell
with the mass of sympathy, and
mountains ascend
the height of emotion.
I see the river
ripple with feeling and
music fuelling the flight
of bird of light.

I see the sap of innocence
coursing through the
tree of violence, and
leaves awash with
green translucence of mind.

I see clouds swell with
moistening of compassion, and
fruits ripen into nectar of soul.

In this arabesque of silken understanding
linking moss of stones
with gloss of stars,
I am in unbroken truce
with hieroglyphs of quoits
and men-hirs defining
rocky shores of enisling seas
and wallow inertly in this
symphonic universe of symbion
like a blade of vegetation,
with dew daily drenching me.

1.11.1979

Creation

I saw:
lassoed by the sun, a flower
breaking out
of the cobwebs of dew
spun in the dark of the night,
only to be scattered in the
morning wind.

I saw:
a lost ray,
emerging from a seamless
tunnel of shadow, gasping,
only to drown in the bottomless
pit of slime.

I saw:
a tortured snake of river, gurgling
out of its cragged hole
only to be grasped
by the python of the sea.

I saw:
a shapeless blob of blood
hurtle down a rocking cave
grow sinews and wings
only to turn into
aimlessly wandering smoke.

I saw:
a reed-boat, fuelled
by caressing winds
clinging to the shore,
only to be gnawed by the shoal
of fish.

I saw:
the baked skin of the empty land,
breaking into mosses all over
only to be grabbed
and dragged under, by
the greedy pincers of
the heartless bay.
That was the dawn
of Creation and perdition
when dazzling gods of dragons
were carousing on goblets of
men.

24.1.1981

Prayer

Oh, my Lord!
let my eyesight
be like sunlight.
roots of darkness
—cold and deep—
I should be able to grasp firmly
and throw them out in a heap.

Passing through mountains and valleys,
ravines, rivers and shores
I should be able to reach
the darkest forests' cores
caress and light up
not only trees—tall and evergreen—
but also creepers, weeds and shrubs
on which berries are seldom seen.

Like the sun and the moon
—in its various phases—
I should spread out soon
filling up all the empty spaces.

10.10.1980

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