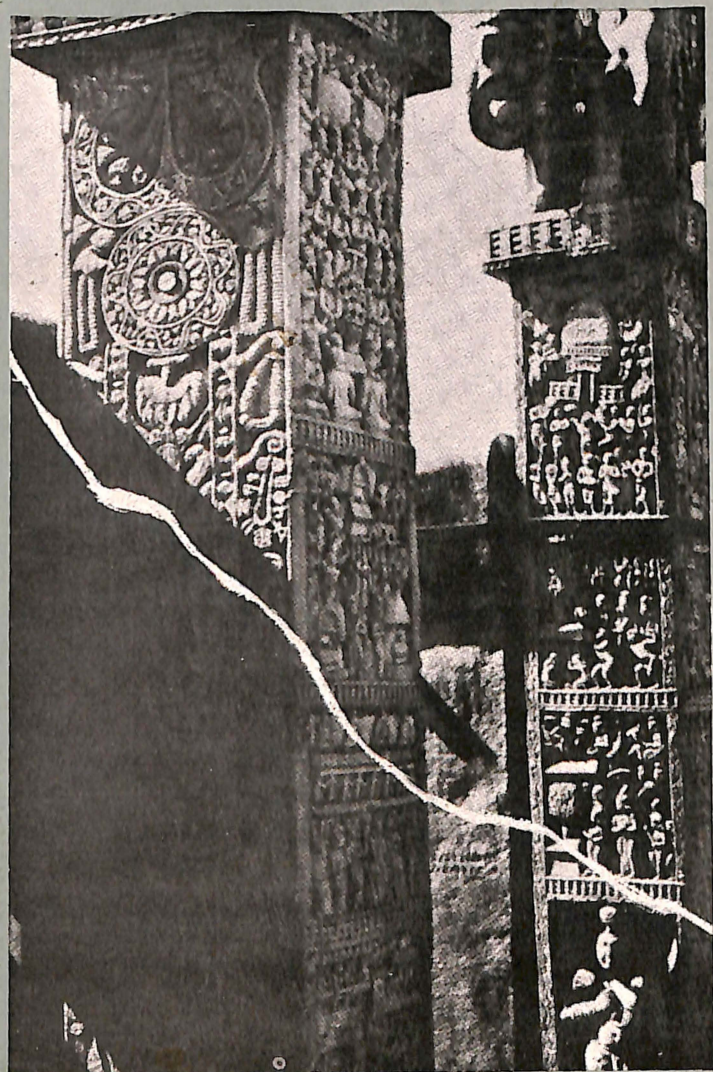


SHRIKANT VERMA'S

MAGADHA



Reduced, Translated and Annotated by

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Ajit Khullar has published three collections of poems, namely *In the Mirror*, *A Lone Bone on Fire* (Writers' Workshop, Calcutta, 1975 and 1980 respectively) and *Two Rooms* (Vikrant, New Delhi, 1988). His poems, translations and reviews/review articles have appeared in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Indian Literature*, *Art and Poetry Today*, *Hindustan Times Magazine*, *Sunday Statesman*, *Patriot Magazine*, *Thought*, *Mainstream*, *India International Quarterly*, *Indian Horizons*, *Humanities Review*, *New Letters* (University of Missouri-Kansas City), and *South Asian Digest of Regional Writing* (University of Heidelberg). His translations from Hindi into English figure prominently in anthologies like *Indian Poetry Today*, Vol. II (Indian Council of Cultural Relations, New Delhi, 1976) and *Visions and Myths: An Anthology of Contemporary Hindi Poetry* (Indian Literary Review Publication, New Delhi, 1979).

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MAGADHA

Introduced, Translated & Annotated

by

AJIT KHULLAR



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First published 1990

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ISBN 81-7023-285-6

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are ever due to Dr. Harish Trivedi, University of Delhi, for going through the translation in manuscript; Dr. Satkari Mukhopadhyaya, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, and Dinesh Varshney, a young historian, for going through the notes. All of them made useful suggestions which have been appropriately incorporated in the book.

Thanks are also due to Mrs. Veena Verma, M.P., Rajya Sabha for granting permission for translating *Magadha*.

To
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MAGADHA: AN INTRODUCTION

Shrikant Verma's *Magadha* repudiates an era of short-lived mini-movements which, all put together, made a polyphonic reaction against *Chhayavaad*. Shrikant himself was an important part of New Poetry (*Nai Kavita*) movement. Anti-Poetry (*Akavita*), a reaction against the New Poetry, saw Thought Poetry (*Vichaar Kavita*) coming on its heels. In fact each movement was seldom more than a group of writers trying to create a niche for themselves in the face of those already established. All this meant hectic critical deliberations and at times sheer casuistry with a view to steering clear of all that had existed before.

Magadha, a collection of poems, mostly written during 1984, cuts across all mini-movements and gives altogether a new turn to Hindi poetry. All this he achieves by treating history as a mere lexicon. He overcomes history and conjures up a world without tenses defying chronological order. No dream and no reality gets precluded. There is no obvious attempt at thematizing unlike the one seen in his earlier socio-political poems, yet themes emerge which strike the sensitive and precocious reader with mythical immediacy. One may not succeed in epitomizing in well defined critical terms what Shrikant was trying to do but this much is certain that he knew what phantom he was after and whose corns he was treading upon.

Born on 18 September 1931 to Rajkishore and Soumitra Verma, in Bilaspur, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Shrikant Verma was mainly brought up by his grandmother and his uncle, the elder brother of his father, in a place called Kenda. Shrikant graduated from S.B.R. Arts College, Bilaspur (Saugar University) in 1952 and did his M.A. (Hindi) privately from Nagpur University while still teaching in the Municipal High School, Bilaspur. But he had started writing before he graduated. His first poem was published in 1948.

In 1950, landlordism ended and with it the income of the family nosedived towards days of hardship. 1950 to 1956 was a period of grim struggle. That did not deter him from starting the publication of *Nai Disha* (quarterly), though he had to do some pedestrian jobs to raise funds for it. In 1953, Shrikant was introduced to Muktibodh with whom he enjoyed a lasting

friendship. But the real help needed during those days came from Naresh Mehta and Prabhakar Machwe who were working in A.I.R., Nagpur. With the meagre income he could earn at the time, Shrikant was hard put to looking after four school/college going brothers and two sisters. In spite of all these besetting problems he continued writing. His poems were published in *Nikash*, *Sanket* and *Nai Disha*.

When Naresh Mehta became the editor of *Bhartiya Shramik* in 1956 in New Delhi, Shrikant became its assistant editor and came to Delhi where he remained even when, after two to three years, the publication of the journal came to an end. To continue to be in Delhi without a job was well-nigh impossible but Minimata, M.P., from Bilaspur-Raipur constituency, helped him. She gave him one room in her North Avenue apartment, which indeed was a great favour, a godsend. After two years in 1958, Shrikant and Naresh Mehta started the publication of *Kriti* (monthly) under their joint editorship. *Kriti* too closed down after 3-4 years but not before it had made its mark in Hindi literature. For eight years Shrikant had no job but his poetic creativity continued. He created an idiom, divested of all known traits of romanticism, for New Poetry, which expressed what abounds in the world, i.e., desperation, ugliness, alienation, nakedness, anguish, self-annihilation and death. In 1964 he joined the editorial staff of *Dinmaan* and later on rose to be its special correspondent.

Interest in politics was in the family. Shrikant's father was a member of the Congress party. Shrikant too had his political inclinations. He was drawn to Marxism to begin with. In 1963, his meeting with Ram Manohar Lohia impressed him a lot. In 1969, the Congress split came and Shrikant joined the Congress led by Smt. Indira Gandhi. At the time of declaration of the General Election 1970, Shrikant was in Iowa as an invitee to the International Writing Programme. He had to come back early because of the elections. Mrs. Gandhi entrusted him with the party's publicity department. Shrikant's work showed remarkable results. Catchy and highly effective slogans suggested by him led the Congress to a resounding victory. Recognizing his extraordinary contribution Mrs. Gandhi nominated him to the Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh in 1976. In 1980 elections too his publicity strategies paid off. He was again sent to the Rajya Sabha in 1982. In 1977, when the Janata government was in power for a brief period, Shrikant

continued his allegiance to Mrs. Gandhi. Its indirect consequence was that he had to resign from *Dinmaan*. He was in the Opposition from 1977 to 1980. During this period, he was again invited to the International Writing Programme at Iowa where he edited his *Indian Poetry in English*. The last time he went to Iowa was in 1985

In 1983, it was discovered that Shrikant suffered from serious cardio-myo-infarction. The same year in July, he was successfully operated upon at the Texas Heart Institute, Houston. In 1986, he was again taken to the U.S.A. for treatment. This time luck was not on his side. He died on 25 May 1986.

The economic rigours of early life, and later on, the pulls, pressures and perfidies of political embroilments took their toll. He found himself in despair at times, but his poetry and his faith in an all-pervasive immanence sustained him. In fact his faith in his pen was no less than his faith in God as defined in the Upanishads (see his diary entry dated 24 July 1984 in *Garud Kisne Dekha Hai*). In spite of what the poet says about his faith and conscience, he could not, one feels, make the very best of it due to his deep involvement in politics which claimed a major share of his time and energy. He was aware of his political responsibilities rather acutely. This predicament intrigued many who were interested in Shrikant's career as a politician, and looked up to him as a poet too. On his visit abroad in 1985, the President of Bulgaria asked him on 28 March while he was in Sophia: "How can you ride two horses simultaneously—one of poetry and the other of politics?" The poet replied: "In fact I'm fighting a battle all the twenty-four hours within me. Nobody gets injured in it; nobody gets killed by me; I alone get badly mauled; only I bleed profusely. Sometimes politics mounts an assault against poetry, and at other times, poetry against politics. I, in my attempt to bring about a reconciliation between the two, have been left incurably wounded, not maimed though" (*Garud Kisne Dekha Hai*, p. 100). Poetry was Shrikant's soul and like the soul it remained indestructible—assaults or no assaults. In spite of the attempt at reconciliation it was the conflict that constituted the psychic truth about him. He writes in the Preface to the second edition of *Bhatka Megh* (The Cloud Adrift), 1983: "In this world I have never accepted things as they are, or the world as it is. I kept on fighting only. The fight is still on—sometimes within, sometimes without.

The scars that the incessant struggle has left . . . are all there in my later poems.”

The exigencies of political life, in addition to offering enriching experiences, taught him indirectly certain poetic virtues which become so much evident in *Magadha*. The party to which he belonged laid down, as all parties do, a particular line of thought and action in order to execute certain well-defined strategies. Such a discipline is very difficult to maintain. More so for a poet who must speak out his mind somehow. Thus by necessity of circumstances and compulsions of conscience, Shrikant's art becomes more subtle, indirect, and simple, yet scathing. His simplicity beheads his subject/victim clean. He bothers little if it stays speciously alive to wilt slowly but surely. This presents a contrast to his earlier poetry which was more statemental than subtle.

Dissent must find expression even if it was to be in a personal diary which can wait seeing the light of day. On 26 January 1973, he writes: “The Republic Day! What a conspiracy against the poor! Twenty-five years have passed since Independence, but there is just a semblance of freedom. Real freedom is still a far cry. Celebrations! Festivals! We Indians are given to festivals more than any other people. The celebrations leave no time for introspection. The celebration and festivities rob one of all loneliness needed for thought to realize its real significance. How clever is the Indian state!”

This is a frank, fearless and direct way of expressing oneself. The only caution observed by the author is deferment of publication of such material. But in poetry, the mode becomes quite the opposite—indirect, ironic, and subtle; throughout it is history made nonhistory. Kosal is not Kosal as Magadha is not Magadha. Imagination need not be confined to Kosal when the poet writes “Kosal is a republic/in my imagination,” where people in spite of the form of government are not happy. Some are given to gambling, exchanging anecdotes, feeling irritated, or gloating over Kosal's pristine past. The rest of the people doze. The right attitude, which the activities tabulated above do not reflect, can make a republic a republic, though a mere constitutional declaration of that rightness is not enough.

His political involvement apart, Shrikant the poet was instinctively given to contesting, not conceding, others' viewpoint.

It is like Whitman's "Resist much, obey little" dictum. A person who is jealous and sensitive about his inner urges and aspirations, his freedom and faculties, and who realizes his responsibility as a creative writer, would experience everywhere life-situations full of bitterness, despair, hatred, repression, faithlessness and apostasy. His pen, given to re-enactment under these nevertheless real circumstances, feels miserably piqued. Yet, a poet as an exceptionally discerning being has to distinguish between a mere situational prevalence and truth as value. Without such distinctions, search for new avenues, values, and identity itself remains meaningless. A poet thus has to tread upon situational prevalences and reach truth seen with a higher consciousness at work.

Magadha seems to be the result of Shrikant's urge to see a supratemporal truth beyond a temporal reality. The process is not different from unhistoricizing history into a perennial myth. For the poet, *Magadha* is "Time that is past" into pure time where distinction between the past and the present ceases to exist. What is achieved is an instrument to create such meaning as would steady the flux of time. Philip Rahv's words come to mind at this juncture: "In our time the movement of history has been so rapid that mind longs for nothing so much as something permanent to steady it." The historical time is engulfed by mythical imagination. This is what Shrikant writes: "Avanti, Malwa, Ujjayini, Shipra, Champa, Kashi, Kosambi, Kapilvastu, Kosal, Kalinga, Vaishali, Amrapali, Vasavdatta, Vasantasena, Chandragupta, Bimbisaar, Ashok, Ajatshatru—these characters, heroes, cities, in fact a train of remembrances come rushing. These very remembrances make poems. Their main concern is death, destruction, moral atrophy." But he looks at them less as historical landmarks or luminaries and more as items of ritualistic or totemic value. Naturally, he sees across the past ridding it of its obsolete pastness and treats the names of once-upon-a-time realities as lexical items to create studiable poetic structures.

Magadha makes the past and the present merge into one to evoke an image in and out of this otherwise undear world which surrounds us, and where even an open participation as the barest precondition to healthy becoming is missing. Some bitter truths of life are very subtly, and at times very sparsely, camouflaged with

the help of often-chanted names but completely unsyntaxed and divested of their now only bookish historicity and thus lending them never-failing validity of a myth. The poet, of course, knew well enough that what matters for the purposes of poetry is not time-constricted historicity but that abundance of free referentiality which transcends both place and time. It is thus that the time when the Mahabharata was fought is not at all important.

It's not the Magadha
you have read about in history;
it's the one you have,
like me,
lost the way to. (p. 20)

Magadha is all that was and was not, is and is not, and probably, therefore, will always be sought after as it ought to be. In other words, it was always there, it is there, and it will always be there in one's imagination with its perennial concerns with the inexorability of human predicament. The poet makes an august absence which was once a presence so evocative as to make it speak to anyone who might care to heed its voice or merely his own under its auspices. An absence becomes a presence in pure time. As with Magadha so with Kosambi. There is Kosambi always before and after Kosambi (see "Kosambi", p. 25). Similarly Mahabharata was fought before the Mahabharata and is being fought (see "Hastinapur", p. 26). This is dehistoricization at its simplest.

The style which Shrikant has used is simple, casual and conversational. The poems in *Magadha* read like monologues or dialogues often full of sage utterances of a ministerial voice. The dramatic immediacy is their hallmark. The casualness of tone impels introspection because the matters involved are of great substance. Touching another level, Shrikant subtly brings the never-fading glory of ancient (sixth century B.C. to third century B.C.) India to bear witness to the present ongoings. Irony is inherent in his often short snippets. Some fit the present situation to a T. The poet's achievement lies in the fact that through the process of dehistoricization itself, he exploits the referentiality of the ancient Indian names to serve his purpose. There are certain

satirical asides as in the “Judgement in Kashi” (p. 6). In a hollow democratic set-up where decisions are made by a powerful coterie, the so-called leaders who are lethargic, indifferent, stupid, fearful and self-seeking are left to plead patience only by circumventing, under a fatalistic cover, the real issue at stake. For them the decisions taken are to be accepted and executed as predestined inevitabilities. How and what decisions are taken in the council ought not to and need not make any difference to anyone except those who have the daring to dissent, however much anathematic it might be to the state or the power that be. Since to dissent is to think, the poet writes:

O, the people of Hastinapur
 you may
 or may not listen to me,
 But be on your guard.
 Your enemy, a thought,
 is gaining strength
 and remember
 these days thought
 spreads like an epidemic. (p. 27)

In “Kapilvastu Calling”, a similar idea is expressed without an undercutting irony:

Magadha is no longer
 the Magada it was. . . .
 None has compassion
 nor shame
 None is given to thinking. (p. 29)

At this level, the glory that was India is gone. Ujjayini, Magadha or Mithila are not the same. Even a place of learning like Takshasila presents a picture of violence and police force, which is hardly different from the modern campuses everywhere. Ujjayini, of Kalidas, the great classical poet, Kasturi, his beautiful beloved, and all those who were there to make it what it was, is gone. The poet wrote in his diary on 14 July 1984 in Leningrad: “Don’t we today feel depraved in the absence of Gandhi,

debilitated in the absence of Vivekananda and in the absence of the Buddha? Haven't we grown heartless to the extent of being beastly?"

What is lost cannot be retrieved by obeisance but by discovering a way of one's own to a chosen objective. What is needed most, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, is "creative, inventive and the vital activity."

Wayfarers! the truth is that
each way leads to Ujjayini
and that no way leads to Ujjayini. . .

. . . because we haven't trudged
those ways which lead to Ujjayini
or even those which do not
lead to Ujjayini. (p. 33)

Often the prescribed ways do not take us where we want to reach.
Each one has to explore his or her way to the destination.
Prescriptions proffer no panaceas.

Nalanda-bound friends,
often the so-called right roads
lead to wrong destinations
different from those
we wish to reach
like the roads
you haven't taken to
Nalanda. (p. 37)

Each idea or vision remains a hearsay till it is fought for, realized and discovered as a specific of a given problem. And ideas are needed to save dehistoricized Magadha, Mathura, Avanti, Kosal or anything from becoming mere relics buried with the dead. Ideas supply energy for renewal and growth. Otherwise, anything will get archivally stacked. Kosal, because it lacks ideas, will be a republic only in imagination. Shrikant attached importance to free, independent thinking. One has to be bold in doing so because new ideas are always suspect. But when an idea proves its validity, it is heartily hailed.

I must say:
He who thinks, speaks.
His words make a beacon. (p. 45)

The pity is that there have been no such words as to make a beacon in Kosal. Names of places and persons are not important. What is important is to ask questions:

Where are you going?
Who are you looking for
in Kosal or
in Magadha? (p. 55)

Man's predicament is pitiable in the face of these questions.

When nothing
strikes him,
he too joins
the questioners

buttonholing
each journeyer:
"Are you going
to Magadha
on your way to Kosal
or to Kosal
on your way to Magadha?" (p. 56)

But the question persists: "Where are you going to/from here?"
The questioner's tone is kind, cooperative, and yet often ironical.
He talks to you and me on death and life, growth and decay, rise and fall, youth and old age, defeat and victory, faith and falsehood in a world without tenses.

INVOCATION

O thou, the knower of good,
the ocean of good itself,
vast and inexhaustible,
I have come to you!

Listen, my lord,
I've brought tales
of all times
tales of tribulation
of towns
and townsmen.

Have you been able to place me?—
I'm Betaal, the spirit of the dead.
My actions
had hung me
on a decaying
branch of time.

O thou, the knower of good
the ocean of good itself,
the vast and inexhaustible,
by thine indulgence
I have been granted again
this human frame.

Bestow upon me, O Lord,
yet another grace.
Celebrating you
if my words fail me
grant me the words I need.

MAGADHA

Listen! O horseman,
Where is Magadha?
 From Magadha I came.
 To Magadha I want to go.
Which direction should I turn in?—
north or southwards?
east or westwards?
Look, Magadha! There it is!
 No, it's not, nothing
 Just a day before
 I had left Magadha.

Then the Magadhites
had told me:
“Don't leave Magadha.”
And I had promised them:
“I'll return to Magadha before dawn.”
 There's no Magadha now.
 Brethren! you too are
 looking for the way to Magadha.
 It's not the Magadha
 you have read about in history;
 it's the one you have,
 like me,
 lost the way to.

PEOPLE OF MAGADHA

The people of Magadha,
retrieving bones of their dead,
are in tears
and they mumble:

“Which ones do belong to Ashoka?
Which to Chandragupta?
No, these can't be Bimbisaar's;
these are Ajatshatru's.”

It's natural that
only the man who has seen someone alive
can recognize him dead.
How will he who hasn't
know him after his death?

Only a little time ago
the people of Magadha
had seen Ashoka
go to
and come back from Kalinga;
they had seen Chandragupta make
his horse gallop to Takshasila
had seen Bimbisaar shed tears;
and Ajatshatru thump
his thighs challengingly.

The people of Magadha
had seen them
and have not been able
to forget
what they had seen.
But now those men
are nowhere visible
despite the people's
search for them.

CORPSE IN KASHI

Have you been to Kashi?—
where the corpses
go past
just one way.

Pass over
the corpses;
their traffic
is taken for granted.

Just find out
whose corpse is this?
Rohitashva's?
No, no.
Each corpse can't be Rohitashva's!

Rohitashva's
will be recognized
from afar,
or at least
from nearness.
And even from nearness
if identifying him isn't possible,
the corpse can't be
Rohitashva's.

Even if it were
what difference
would it make?

Friends! You
at least have seen Kashi,
where corpses
go past
just one way.

And you have done
only this much:
you made leeway
for the bier and enquired,
“Whose corpse is this?”

Whosoever it might
or might not be,
has it made any difference
to anyone?

THE JUDGEMENT IN KASHI

The session has ended;
let the members of the Jury leave.

What was to happen
has happened.
Now why do we pull
a long face?
What's the problem?
Whom do you fear?

We haven't made the judgement.
Nodding one's head never does.
We didn't as much as
give it a thought.
The speakers argued.
What did we do?

How are we at fault?
We neither convene the meeting,
nor pronounce the judgement.

We come to Kashi
just once a year
merely to reiterate that
there's no need to convene a meeting.
Each man's life course is
laid down before his birth.

KOSAMBI

Vasavdatta asks:
“What was there
before Kosambi?”

“Only Kosambi.
And even now
it's Kosambi
which succeeds
the one
that was.
You can
have just Kosambi
in lieu of
Kosambi.”

Asking thus
for Kosambi
Vasavdatta
has reached
Kosambi.

HASTINAPUR

Think a while
about a man
who comes to Hastinapur
and says:
“No, no, it can’t be Hastinapur.”

Think a while
about a man
who is lonesome.
Whensoever the Mahabharata
was fought—
what difference does it make?

If possible
think
about Hastinapur
for which every now and then
the Mahabharata is being fought
and it bothers none
except the one
who comes to Hastinapur
and says:
“No, no, it can’t be Hastinapur.”

THE DONE THING IN HASTINAPUR

I again point out:

“The *Dharama* neglected is life negated.”

But none listens to me.

Taking counsel isn’t the done thing
in Hastinapur.

Those who care to listen to me
are deaf;

others have been asked to turn
a deaf ear to what I say.

I say:

“The *Dharama* neglected is life negated.”

But none listens to me.

O, the people of Hastinapur
you may

or may not listen to me,
but be on your guard.

Your enemy, a thought,
is gaining strength
and remember
these days thought
spreads like an epidemic.

KAPILVASTU

In Kapilvastu
during the day
eyes inflame and burn.
The nights
remain engrossed
in the glittering halls
of fun and frolic.

The aged
gets banished.
On the outskirts of Kapilvastu,
he gazes dazed at
the frolicsome haloes
with piteous envy.

At times
the young women
have nightmares.

The old are not
there in Kapilvastu.
Only the fear
of getting old
lurks all around.

The youth mean to have
fulfilled only one wish,
'Let none grow old
in Kapilvastu.'

Kapilvastu is yet at hand;
it's not at all
sunk deep into the past.

KAPILVASTU CALLING

Your Highness! let us go back.
The desire to rule
over Ujjayini
to my mind
is futile.

Ujjayini is no longer
the Ujjayini it was.
Neither justice
nor injustice
prevails there.

Likewise,
Magadha is no longer
the Magadha it was.
Each Magadhite is robust
None a wraith.

None has compassion
nor shame.
None is given to thinking.
Those who were
have given it up.

Kashi is no different.
There the corpses
are being counted.
None has time for the living.

Those who have, can't
know the living from the dead.

Think of Mithila!
Only a little time ago,

Videha used to rule there.
Now only suspicion
holds the sway.
None regards with awe
the tenets of religion.

Vishmamitra and Vashistha
are dead and gone;
neither is there.

Your Highness! all are born
to die. None lives for ever.

If you persist,
you should turn to Kapilvastu.
He who goes there
stays on.
He who doesn't
longs for it crying:
"Kapilvastu! Kapilvastu!!"

TAKSHASILA

One soldier
or two together
are seen going the rounds
in Takshasila
Who are they looking for?
Why are they tight-lipped?

Why do the soldiers—
one or two together—
walk upto the castle
and turn about?

They look
dazed for
nothing has survived,
nothing.

Only a lone boulder
repeatedly cries out
'Who has
created me?'

UJJAYINI

The dancing girl,
Kalidas loved,
filled Ujjayini's air
musk-like

What a coincidence
it was!
They all were there
at the self-same time—
Ujjayini,
Kalidasa, and
Kasturi, the musky girl.

At times stars
do constellate
to rare effects.

Who are these people
looking for now?

They question Time,
the Absolute:
"Is this the city
Kalidasa's heart-
throb perfumed
like musk?
Did she pass
this way?"

Wait! Wait!
Whose corpse
have Shipra's waves
borne hither?
Whose?

TO UJJAYINI

Those who desire to wend
their way to Ujjayini
are requested to attend to me.
I say:
this way does not lead to Ujjayini
and this very way does lead to Ujjayini.
Till the other day I used to guide wayfarers
saying: "Listen! this way to Ujjayini."
Today also I guide wayfarers saying:
"Listen! this way not at all to Ujjayini."

Wayfarers! the truth is that
each way leads to Ujjayini
and that no way leads to Ujjayini.

Ujjayini eagerly regards the ways
which brought people to it.
Ujjayini has shut itself up
against all the inrush.

Then
what should they
who want to go to Ujjayini do?

They should go to Ujjayini
and say: "This is not Ujjayini
because we haven't trudged
those ways which lead to Ujjayini
or even those which do not
lead to Ujjayini."

NONDESCRIPT IN AVANTI

If I say
I hail from Avanti,
not from Magadha,
will it make any difference?

Surely, it will.
You will be taken for an Avantian.
You'll have to put Magadha behind you.

But you won't
be able to do that.
You'll live all your life in Avanti.
Even then you won't know it.

Then you'll cry yourself hoarse,
that you don't belong to Avanti,
that you belong to Magadha.

None will believe you
and you'll whimper:
"I speak the truth;
I'm from Magadha, not Avanti."

Your pleas will fall through.
In Magadha,
no body will take you as a Magadhite.
In Avanti,
no body will accept you as an Avantian.

HEARSAY

Sir, just go on
listening
to what others say.

The Patliputra
we and you
are fighting for is
a mere hearsay
in others' view.

Did you hear?
Others don't deem it worthy
of their efforts
even for a short time.
They are curious to know:
"Which Patliputra?"

Sir, you answer their question
and make them understand.
For this very Patliputra,
Ajatshatru, Bimbisara,
Chandragupta,
we all and you
are fighting.

Have you explained it to them?
Sir, did you hear?
They say:
"Fools, they are fighting
for the sake of
just a hearsay".

SOME OTHER AMARAVATI

Your Majesty,
this is not the Amaravati
you lorded over.
This is some other Amaravati.

None is ready to fight for it.
None vows:
"I'll lay down my life
for Amaravati,"

Nobody twirls his moustache
challenging
"Hands off Amaravati!"

Your Lordship,
this is not the Amaravati
which was yours
till the other day.
It belongs to everyone now.

Even the memory-vistas
have been blanked.

There are no dancing girls.
There are no play-houses.
No heroes, no heroines.

Most benevolent Sir, forget
that Amaravati belonged to you.
Even if it did
nobody is going to fight for it now.

NALANDA

I'm going to Takshasila
Where are you going to?
'Nalanda.'

No, this road
doesn't lead to Nalanda.
There was a time it did,
not now.

There's
a different road
to Nalanda
these days.

If you trudged
the one you're on,
You'll reach Takshasila,
not Nalanda.

Will you come
to Takshasila?

Nalanda-bound friends,
often the so-called right roads
lead to wrong destinations
different from those
we wish to reach,
like the very road
you've taken to
Nalanda.

WHY NO MITHILA

O King, don't be tense.
Tension weakens the body,
dulls the spirit, and
enfeebles the voice.
Don't be tense, O king.

You shouldn't make
much of the fact
that there is no poet
in the whole of Mithila,
not a sculptor
in this entire republic.
Of course,
Mithila is wholly intact
but there's no musician there.

O King,
the presence
or absence
of poets, sculptors, musicians,
makes no difference.

The Wealth,
the military prowess,
the council of ministers,
make the difference.
You have to ascertain
whether the people are happy.

The musicians, the sculptors, the poets—
all are there in Avanti.
But what are they doing?

O King, it is said,
they are shaping Avanti.

By shaping Avanti
they're escaping death
since the act
of shaping itself
is never-ending.

O King,
I can't make out anything;
it's beyond me.
Why was there no Mithila?
Why is there no Mithila?

MATHURA BEWAILS

Do you hear Mathura bewailing?
This is precisely what happens.

When Mathura-that-was is gone
the people of Mathura cry
“Mathura! Mathura!!”

Mathura is just an instance—
take Avanti, if you wish,
and listen to the wails.

Did you hear?—
“Avanti! Avanti!!”
The wails are repeatedly heard.

I say,
the people bewail for Mathura
and Avanti
when Mathura that-was is no more,
when Avanti too is no more.

Maybe the people have got
into the habit of wailing
over towns turning into
mere remembrances of their inbeing.
But Mathura and Avanti,
are not mere memories.

Even if they were
would anyone believe that
Mathura and Avanti
are mere memories?

VAISHALI-1

The people of Vaishali
have only one name on their lips—
'Aamarpali!'

Aamarpali is happy;
everyone knows her.
Aamarpali is unhappy
nobody knows her.

Those who know her
come to Vaishali calling
'Aamarpali! Aamarpali!!'
The rest of them
bypass Vaishali.

O, the people of Vaishali!
Aamarpali is just a reference—
those who know others
will come to Vaishali calling
incessantly
'Aamarpali! Aamarpali!!'

Those who, due to Aamarpali,
have no desire
to know others
will pass by Vaishali
on the sly.

VAISHALI-2

If we live,
Vaishali will.
If we perish?
Vaishali will not.

Vaishali is
not a town.
It's a remembrance
of those who
preceded us
to this place

and who said:
"If we live,
Vaishali will.
If we perish?
Vaishali will not."

KOSAL: A REPUBLIC

Kosal is a republic
in my imagination.
The people are not happy
for Kosal is a republic only in imagination.

The people
gamble
day and night.
Those who don't
doze.

The people
make stories and
feel irritated
all day long.
Those who don't
doze.

The people
feel happy
over Kosal's pristine past.
Those who don't
doze.

Kosal is a republic
in my imagination.

KOSAL: NO IDEAS

Victory to the Emperor!
And felicitations!
There was no fighting;
the enemy retreated.

But we were fully prepared.
We had four military divisions—
ten thousand horses
and an equal number
of elephants besides.
Our forces stood in perfect array.
Even if the fighting had taken place,
the outcome would have been no different.

They had neither arms
nor horses,
nor elephants,
how could they fight?
They had no means.

Each one of them was alone
and each said:
“Everyone has to play a lone hand.”
Whatever they might have said,
victory is yours
Felicitations to you!

None took up the gauntlet
you had thrown.
Your aim is accomplished.
You are an emperor,
the overlord of all the neighbouring kings.
But the enemy left behind
a few questions like:
‘Kosal can’t stand for long.
Kosal has no ideas.’

KOSAL: NO BEACON

Your Majesty! I pray
you come here in the open.
Your glory is blossom-bright,
star-like.

The people are happy.
None says that he has
a plaintive word to utter
over this or that.

Has anything happened anyway?
Nobody talks of it,
none.

Overawed they speak nothing
except that they are happy.

Your Majesty!
have you ever thought of it?
How can a person be happy
without speaking at all?

Your Majesty!
your glory, no doubt,
is blossom-bright,
star-like.

What can the people
have to whimper about after all?

I must say:
He who thinks, speaks.
His words make a beacon.

It is a pity
none has spoken
so far in Kosal.
None at all.

Whatever it might be like,
Your Majesty, I pray,
you come here in the open.

The people speak in one voice:
“We are happy, all of us.”

Your Majesty!
you ought to say
as often as your people do:
“My people
may you be
forever happy!”

SHRAVASTI

Those who left Shravasti
should come back.
The mendicant bhikshus
still come here.
They always say:
“Those who terrified
of tribulations here
have gone away,
will be terrified there too.”

Kosal has
as many woes
as Shravasti has.

Those who left
Shravasti
and have settled
in Kosal
should return.

Shravasti craves
for all the emigrants
but is helpless, mute.

LICHCHVIS

Lichchvis have gone away.
Lichchvis will come back.

Palaces will hum with life.
Bangles will jingle in bed-chambers.

Shops will be decked.
Buyers will vie for goods.

There will be wishes.
And wishers too.

Then why are the windows sullen?
Why is Vaishali so dumb?

The truth is that
Lichchvis will never come.

Even if they do,
they will continuously chant:
“We are Lichchvis; we are Lichchvis.”

Uttering such an incantation
they will pass by.

Lichchvis rarely come here.
Lichchvis are therefore there.

VASANTSENA

Vasantsena is going
up the stairs.

Vasantsena,
you won't understand;
you are inexperienced yet.

The stairs
never end
whether of progress
or regress,

whether these bring us into
or take us out of
where we are,

whether these are
of death
or pride,

you won't understand,
Vasantsena.

Neither going up
nor coming down
is easy.

We ascend
the same stairs
as we descend by;
the stairs are
absolutely unconcerned.

Who is going
up the stairs
who, coming down,

whether going up
the stairs
is descension
or coming down
the stairs,
ascension,

or how many rungs
has one gone up,
how many
has one come down,

stairs don't count,
Vasantsena,
stairs don't hear.

AMBPALI

Vaishali
is asleep.
Ambpali alone
is awake.

It's dark.

Somewhere on edges
the night
concedes
steadily
to the dawning
day.

Meteors fall
autumnally
from the sky.

In Vaishali
men are born;
men die.

Vaishali is
either dormant
or has ceased
to breathe.

Ambpali is
nightmare-scared

Don't be scared,
Ambpali.

HORSEMAN

O, horseman!
what happens
to one who goes
to Kalinga?
Does he come back
the same as he goes?

What do the people
say he is—
a victor
or a murderer?

Do the women
welcome him
or does he
have to go
from pillar to post?
What happens to him?

O, horseman!
where does
this way
lead to?

SHOCK

The full moon,
the night effulgent
and a mirror
were there.

Precisely
moony was
the reflection
of the moon
in the mirror.

Having lingered on
for long
the gliding
moon had
edged off
the mirror frame.

"How quiet!"
said I.

Just then
she popped
in the mirror;

and just then
dissolved
before I
could say
"Who are you?"

Years later
remembering
that moony
night event
I started up
with a glint
in the eyes.

“O, Padmini!”
“That’s why!”
I said.

“That’s why
the shock has
cracked and
crumbled both—
the mirror
and I.”

MAGADHA TO KOSAL AND BACK

Whenever he met them
on his way
from Kosal to Magadha
or
from Magadha to Kosal,
each one asked him
only this:
Are you going from
Magadha to Kosal
or are you coming from
Kosal to Magadha?

Saying
'How does it matter?'
he tried
to evade the question.

But some questions
can't be evaded
particularly when
we often head for Magadha
on our way to Kosal
or for Kosal
on our way to Magadha.

What is most significant is:
Where are you going?
Who are you looking for
in Kosal or
in Magadha?

Whether you will reach
Kosal first
or Magadha?

The truth is that
nobody knows
why he
again and again goes
to Kosal from Magadha,
to Magadha from Kosal?

Why does he
once and again
parade
the same pageant?

Why does he
raise slogans
in favour or Kosal
while passing through Magadha,
and against Magadha
while passing through Kosal?

Why does he
unfurl
the tattered flags
of Magadha
on the dilapidated ramparts
of Kosal?

When nothing
strikes him,
he too joins
the questioners
button-holing
each journeyer:
“Are you going
to Magadha
on your way to Kosal
or to Kosal
on your way to Magadha?”

QUESTIONS TO FRIENDS

Friends,
that I've come
means little.

The question is:
"Where are you going?"

Friends,
that I'm moving
with the times
means nothing.

The question is:
"Are you changing the times
or are the times
changing you?"

Friends,
that I've come home
hardly matters.

The question is:
"Where are you going to
from here?"

THE SHADOW

After years
it was discovered.
The one
who was with me
was not a shadow.

I trampled over her.
She writhed with pain.
I beckoned her.
She felt shy.
I reprimanded her.
She stuck to
my ribs.

I said:
“Get lost from here.”
She got scared.

I stepped forward
and took my seat
in the august assembly.
She followed
and sat by me.

The assembly
was adjourned.
Men moved away
in clusters.

Surely,
one who is
still with me
can't be
a shadow.

PROPITIATION

If I wanted
I could malingere,
but how could I?
How will a malingerer create?

I got sooted first with flames,
then all aglow with fire
and then all over me
appeared the crackling tears.

I could groan
but how could I?
How will a groaner
till the end endure.

It was no martyrdom.
Nor renunciation.
Nor mortification.
Nor retribution.
Then what was it?

I could pass the buck
but how could I?
How will one who
passes the buck create?

DISILLUSIONMENT OF A DANCING GIRL OF THE BUDDHIST ERA

Just a caress
tautens the breasts.
Exciting impulses
rise from the navel.

Only virile men
mount women
stud-like
and enter
the river.

Commanders
and princes
come looking
for the dizzy experience.
Women faint
of horsey fucks.

Malti,
tomorrow
all will be over.
The breasts will be
lumps of viscid flesh.
The thighs will lie
effete like decayed
statue fragments.

Only unidentifiable
footsteps
will you be able to hear
and ask curiously:
"Who's it?
The commander?
The Prince?"

The river
of dizzy experience
will then have gone
arid.

Those men, who
till the other day
mounted the women,
stud-like
will ridicule them.
Malti, you too will
have a laugh at it.

They exhume the corpse
from the river
and leave it on
the bank saying:
“Here’s Time, the ravager!”

Nobody has known Malti.
Just a caress
tautened the breasts.
The virile men
mounted her stud-like
and sought the dizzy experience.
Women fainted.

What an irony, Malti?
Malti, even tomorrow
you’ll be
what
you have ever been.

TIME'S BENIGNITY

Half of the residents weep;
others laugh.
All live together in Avanti.
Thanks to Time's benignity!

Half of them believe:
unfulfilment is as meaningful
as fulfilment.
Others believe:
fulfilment is as meaningless
as unfulfilment.
All live together in Avanti.
Thanks to Time's benignity!

Half of them are silent.
Others debate the issues.
All live together in Avanti.
Thanks to Time's benignity!

Half of them say:
"Avanti is incomplete,
just as Kashi is."
Others say:
"Both in Kashi and Avanti,
only immigrants live."
Both the halves debate the issues.
Both live together in Avanti.

All of them laugh—
Pandits of Kashi on the wisdom of Avanti;
the people of Avanti on Kashi's conjectures.
Thanks to Time's benignity!

THE ROOT

Why are you silent, friends?
What has happened in Magadha?
Has His Majesty passed away?
Has the queen given birth to a baby-girl?
Has the war been declared?
Have prohibitory decrees been issued again?
What has happened?
Why are you dumb?
Has no solution, no antidote worked?
Is there no man left in Magadha?

At times nobody knows
what goes wrong with Magadha.

In spite of the fact that
all is as usual in Magadha,
nobody utters a word,
nobody opens his lips.

Touching the root,
only Shaktaar, the last
of Nand kings,
imagines the tree.
His imaginings make him
quiver with fear.
Friends,
whosoever imagines,
will quiver
with fear.

LADIES LAMENTING

Why are ladies lamenting
in their royal apartments?
Go
and find out.
His Majesty wants to know.

When there is
a sparkling joy
all around,

when each
is fancying
his own well-being,
why this woeful aspect?

When all opine
that that was right,
why this remorse?

When all live
in style,

when all think
before they speak,
why whimper?

Go
and find out.
His Majesty wants to know.

THE YOUNG

All will come back
but not the one
who was young —
youth never returns.

If at all he came
he won't be the same.

He will have grown old—
grey hair, wrinkles,
old age,
exhaustion.

During a journey
it is natural
for a man to grow old.
The journey may be
comfortable or not.

Why would anyone
like to be called a gerontion?
Why would anyone like
to keep tally of his grey hair?
Why would anyone like
to see his wrinkles
and be shocked?

Why would anyone like
that someone should point out
'how soon a man grows old'—
Look at yourself for instance!

Why would anyone like
that he should be an example
of old age, decrepitude and death?
All will come back
but not the one
who was young.

FUNERAL PRIEST AT MANIKARNIKA

Funeral priest at Manikarnika
addresses himself to his charge:
'Don't be despondent Manikarnika.
Despondency doesn't behove you.
There are crematories where to
not a corpse is carried.
Even if taken there
it isn't bathed in the Ganga.'

What else can the priest say?

It's the crematory priest
who can reside all alone
at Manikarnika.
Don't be despondent, Manikarnika.
Despondency doesn't behove you.
It of course besets those
who come carrying corpses
to this place, to you.
And it did beset those
whom they carried hereto and left.

Those beings
are fortunate
who carried or
got carried
here to Kashi
and who shed their woes
at Manikarnika.

Don't be despondent, Manikarnika.
Despondency doesn't behove us.

There are my counterparts,
the crematory priests,
who get stony eyed
waiting for corpses
but not a corpse
is taken there.
What else can the priest say?

RIGHTEOUS WAR

How is it possible
that casualties should be
equal on both sides?

How is it possible that
if one gets defeated
the other side too should,
that the number of spouses on one side
shouldn't exceed
the number of widows on the other?

How is it possible that
mourning in one capital should
match the mourning in the other,
that penitence and piety
on both sides be equal too
that both sides should feel ashamed,
both sides lay down arms,
both be victors?

It's not possible, I say!

To one side belongs the vanquished victim;
to the other always the murderous victor.
On one side vanity reigns;
on the other fear prevails.
On one side women get widowed;
on the other husbands survive for wives.
On one side the wails;
on the other anger.
On one side joy;
on the other repentance.
It's precisely the same
with duty and shame.
Casualties are ever uneven
across the combat line.

DESTINATION: CHAMPA

We are to go only upto Champa.

This road leads to Champa only.
Those who want to go elsewhere
should follow other roads.

They shouldn't mislead us saying:
"Does this road lead to Champa?"

Those who are to go to Champa
have no right to ask
where Champa is
or is not,
or whether there's
any Champa at all.

Nor to ask:
"Is it a fact
that there *was* Champa,
and Champa is nowhere?"

We are to go only upto Champa.

KANAUJ-BOUND HEADS

Brothers and sisters,
where are you going?

We all are going
to Kanauj,
because everyone is going
to Kanauj.

Those who never go anywhere
are going to Kanauj.
Those who go out occasionally
are going to Kanauj.

Those who love Kanauj
are bound for it.
Those who hate Kanauj
are going there too.

Those who know nothing
or those who know all
about Kanauj
are going to Kanauj.

Is there anyone
who's not Kanauj-bound?

RULES

Your Excellency!
I pray to you again
to desist from saying:
'Rules can't be changed.
What's valid for others
will be valid for me.'

There are other ways
to silence the council.
Truth is not inalienable!
It's inadvisable
to be extravagant with it.

If you must make
the council speechless,
say:
'The rule can't be violated,
it can be altered,'
And add:
'We don't break rules;
we regard them with awe.

'Compatriots,
when we feel hard
their tug against our skin
we amend the rules.
Rules can be relaxed.'

PATLIPUTRA

There's an auspicious
thumb impression made
on the forehead with blood.
That's the solemn way
to bless a crown prince
at his coronation.

Whose blood is this?
It's not His Excellency's,
the apple of Magadhites' eyes,
I suppose?

The blood may be
anyone's—
what difference
does it make?

At times
even a beloved object
irritates the eyes.

The Mauryas
don't care
for ill-omens;
they aim
only at victory.

The Mauryas
are stationed midway
between Takshasila and Nalanda.
And there's a road
between the two.

• The flag
is fluttering
in the wind.
The Mauryas
are not to be
blamed.

Even earlier
Pundits had
for Patliputra
predicted
bleaker
times—
bleaker
than
ever
before.

POETRY'S ANNIVERSARY

What was written
was of little use;
what was not,
as abuse.

QUESTIONING

All are afraid;
nobody breathes even
lest the peace of Magadha
be disturbed.

For a stable Magadha
peace is essential.
Stable Magadha, lasting peace.

All are afraid;
nobody even cries
lest Magadha
be upset.
There should ever be
peace in Magadha!
If not there
where will it be?

What will the people say?

Why bother about them?
They say even this:
“Magadha now is Magadha only in name,
not at all a worthy place urbane.”

Nobody questions
lest questioning be
customary in Magadha.
Once the questioning starts
it will never cease.

O, Magadhites
however much
you may try
you can't escape questions.
When nobody dare
ask questions,
the corpse at the head
of a funeral procession
passing through the streets
will start you with one:
'Why does man die,
why?'

PEACE HEREAFTER

I want to go to Kashi,
but I say
I'm going to Kosal.

What's there in Kashi—
there's Manikarnika, the crematory,
a constant traffic
of corpses.
I don't want to go to Kashi.

I want to go to Kashi.

I say,
he's unfortunate
who goes to Kashi
and not to Kosal.

Have you been to Kosal?
Come, I'm going there.
There is a difference
between Kosal and Kashi.
I want to breathe
my last in Kosal.

I say:
fortunate are those
who ultimately get
to Kashi
to rest forever
in peace thereafter.

SHAKTAAR

“Shaktaar! Shaktaar!!”

Shaktaar isn't here.
Maybe he has gone towards Takshasila

“Shaktaar! Shaktaar!!”

Shaktaar isn't here.
Maybe he has gone to Magadha.

“Shaktaar! Shaktaar!!”
Shaktaar is neither in Magadha nor in Takshasila.
You'll not find him anywhere.

Shaktaar comes here only
when Chandragupta comes.

Shaktaar commits homicide.
Chandragupta embraces him.
At times Chandragupta is a homicide.
Shaktaar bows his head before him.

Shaktaar is neither in Magadha nor in Takshasila.

THE THIRD WAY

Magadhites clamour that
there are in fact no rulers
in Magadha any more.
Those who are are perfunctory.
They hardly deserve
to be called rulers at all.
Thanks to their intemperance, perverted lists and inertia!

There's a similar hue and cry
in Avanti
in Kosal
and Vidarbha
that there are no rulers there anymore.
Those who are are perfunctory.
They no longer deserve to be
called rulers at all.
Thanks to their intemperance, perverted lists and inertia!

What should we do?
No ruler means
no rule,
no administration,
which means
neglect of one's duty,
which means
atrophy of society,
of individuals,
of all of us.
What should we do?
Should we violate the laws?
Obliterate our ordained concerns?
Disrupt the rule?

Friends,
there are only
two ways
which enjoin us:

‘Follow evil ways
but sustain discussion
on ideals.

‘Indulge in misconduct
but continue talking
of good conduct.

‘Breathe falsehood,
utter falsehood, and
enact falsehood

but never give up priding
in our readiness
to die for truth.

‘Don’t die
just for nothing
though all die at last.’

Friends,
there’s a third way also
but that does not go
via Magadha,
Avanti,
Kosal, or
Vidarbha.

GOLDEN DEER: AN ILLUSION

In my young days
whenever I saw
an old man
holding his bosom
with one hand
and a prop
with another
crossing the road

I used to pray:
'O, God
get me
out of here
before I grow old.'

I have grown old
and am crossing the road
holding my bosom
with one hand
and a prop
with another
and I pray:

'Not yet
my Lord.
Let me
at least
cross the road.'

Listen, O
passer-by!
Hold my hand
and help.

THE PROOF

A day after
having travelled
over the sand
people ask:
'Where are our foot-prints,
the proof of our travel?'

Do you know
what reply
they get?

'Brethren go away.
Here there's
no sand.

'Moreover,
no proof
no mark
whatsoever
stays
on the sand.
The sand
provides
no proof.'

THE RETURN

I saw him advancing
on this very road.
He wasn't alone.
There was with him
the army,
elephants,
horses,
chariots,
a band of
drums,
horns and
bugles—
it was a spectacle of royal magnificence.

In the midst
of all this
he, unruffled, was
riding a horse
in a demeanour
that showed
that the reins
of power were
in his hands, and
all others were
following him
obediently.

After twenty years
I see him
returning
by that very road.
He's not alone.
There's with him
the army,
elephants,
horses,
chariots,
a band of
drums,
horns, and
bugles—
a self-same spectacle of royal magnificence.

In the midst
of all this
he, unruffled, is
riding a horse
in a demeanour
that shows
that the reins
of power
are in someone
else's hands.
He's merely
an obedient
follower.

ENCOUNTER

No, it's not true
that seeing a shade
in the river
we startle
and shriek.

In fact it is true.

We can only console
ourselves, saying:
'It was just an illusion;
it's neither a river
nor is it that which
we see
and startle.'

We can't
evade the river.

The river will appear
in your dreams
and remind you
of the shade.
You'll startle
and shriek.

It's the same shade
from which
when I could save myself
I would say
'Thanks!'

ROHITASHVA

Whenever you go to Manikarnika,
the legendary crematory,
you'll find an old man
crouched in a corner.

Seeing you
his eyes will
suddenly glisten.
Weeping
he'll mumble
'Rohitashva! Rohitashva!!'
and wrap himself
around you.

What will you do then?—
except saying:
'I'm not Rohitashva.
Really, I'm not Rohitashva.'

But how will you
convince that old man
that you are
not Rohitashva?
He'll embrace you
harder than before
and shout
'No, you are Rohitashva!'

Can you convince
the old man
whose Rohitashva
has been killed
that you are
not Rohitashva?

WRITING ON THE WALL

As a young boy
whenever I saw
a blank wall
I would write on it
my name
with ochre.

The following day
I would find it
rubbed off totally
as if it was
never there.

I would shout,
'Who was it?'
'Som Dutt'
would be the reply.

I have grown old.
Whenever I see
a blank wall
I write on it
my name
with ochre.

The following day
I find it rubbed off
totally
as if it was
never written there.

Now when I shout
'Who's it?'
'Time, the ravager,'
comes the reply.

NOTES

AMARAVATI: A village on the south bank of the Krishna river in Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. Site of the ruins of a Buddhist *Stupa*. Amaravati was a part of a confederacy of three kingdoms, Amaravati, Andhra and Kalinga, roughly comprised of modern Telengana and South Orissa.

AVANTI: An ancient city situated on the bank of Shipra. Ujjayini was its capital. One of the seven sacred cities capable of bestowing *Moksha* or emancipation on true seekers. Kalidas the poet lived here.

CHAMPA: A river-valley state along the eastern coast of river Champa, arose in the first few centuries A.D. By the end of the 4th century A.D., this maritime state, which occasionally relied on piracy as a source of wealth, fell under the Brahminic influence and was ruled by the worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu.

KALINGA: An ancient place visited by Yudhishtira and Arjuna in connection with the Rajasuya sacrifice. Its people participated in the Mahabharata war. It was comprised of a part of present Andhra Pradesh, the whole of Orissa and the south-western part of West Bengal. It was conquered by Ashoka after a bloody war, after which Ashoka adopted Buddhism and devoted himself to the task of spreading the Buddhist faith by peaceful persuasion.

KANAUJ: An ancient city (known as Kanyakubja) in Farrukhabad district, Uttar Pradesh. The legend about its foundation finds a mention in the *Ramayana*. It was also the name of a kingdom. In the 5th century A.D., it formed a part of the Gupta empire. Later, it was ruled independently by the Maukharis and finally included in the empire of Harshavardhana.

KAPILVASTU: The ancient capital of the Sakyas, the house to which the Buddha belonged. Lumbini garden, the birthplace of the Buddha was near Kapilvastu. Two pillars record Ashoka's visit to this place. Its ruins have been discovered in the Terai region of Nepal.

KASHI: One of the most ancient and sacred places of India. Brahma himself is believed to have installed the Shivalinga in Kashi's Vishvanath temple. This temple was called *Avimukta* as it never perished. Japa, tapa, homa, dana made here always granted the wishes. There are eight *tirathas* at *Avimukta*. Varanasi is at the centre of all these. Obsequies for the dead and worship offered there ensured emancipation.

KAUSAMBI: Kathasaritsagara mentions Kausambi being built by Kusamba, one of the four sons of Brahma, of his wife the princess of Vidarbha in the middle of the kingdom of Vatsa, one of the sixteen well-known Mahajanapadas in the 5th-6th cen. B.C. It was in the neighbourhood of Ujjayini. During the times of the Buddha, it was ruled by king Udena. The Buddha lived here for two years in a nearby forest called Parililleyaka where he was attended by a monkey and an elephant.

LICHCHAVIS: The rulers who made Vaishali the capital of their confederacy. Sunakkhatta, a Lichchavi prince of Vaishali, became the personal attendant of the Buddha towards the end of his life. He remained with the Buddha for some time but felt dissatisfied because the Buddha refrained from exhibiting miraculous powers and answering his queries about the beginning of the world. He left the Buddhist Sangha and joined those who practised asceticism disapproved by the Buddha.

MAGADHA: Magadha marks the rise of the first Ancient Indian state, and the strongest of the 16 Mahajanapadas during the 5th and 6th cen. B.C. A geographer mentions Magadha as situated in the eastern division of India between Kosal and Mithila. Magadha proper was in Bihar, Patliputra (Patna) as its capital. The Puranas list the great kings like Brilhadratha, Jayatsena, etc. who ruled Magadha. During the days of the *Mahabharata*, probably thirteenth century B.C., Jarasandha was the king of Magadha. Shri Krishna made Bhimasena kill him.

To the north-west of the flourishing kingdom of Magadhas, an obscure clan, the Sakyas, lived on the banks of the Rohini river. They enjoyed a precarious independence, more through the jealousies of the Magadhas and the Kosalas, who ruled on either side of them, than through their own power. Gautama was the

family name of the royal house of the Sakyas to which Siddhartha, later known as the Buddha, belonged.

In the sixth century, B.C., Magadha got into prominence. The rulers streamlined the administration, built roads and encouraged trade. Disenchantment with the Vedic rituals made way for the spread of Buddhism. Bimbisara (537-485 B.C.) ruled Magadha when the Buddha preached his faith.

The most famous kings who ruled over Magadha were Chandragupta and his grandson Ashoka. Bindusara, Ashoka's father is comparatively less known. Chandragupta was the contemporary of Alexander the Great. For sometime, he was in the Greek camp. After Alexander's retreat, he ascended the throne of Magadha and conquered back large territories which had gone under the Greeks. For the first time in the history of India, he brought the whole of the north of India, from Indus to Bihar, under one banner.

Chandragupta died about 290 B.C., and was succeeded by his son Bindusara, who ruled for about thirty years. Bindusara's son Ashoka was the provincial head of Ujjain during the rule of his father. Ashoka came to rule Magadha and the north of India in about 260 B.C. Ashoka added Bengal and Orissa (then known as Kalinga) to the magnificent empire founded by his grandfather. After the Kalinga battle, Ashoka adopted Buddhism as the state religion. The empire of Magadha disintegrated after Ashoka. Toward the 4th century B.C., the Gupta kings renewed the glory of Magadha and spread it towards Allahabad, Kanauj and Gujarat.

MITHILA: Also known as Videha, in the north-eastern Bharata. Its modern name is Tirhut. Sita's father, Janaka, ruled over it. It owed its prosperity to flourishing agriculture. Mithila was known for puritanic virtues. The people of Mithila, besides other qualities, were known for their mural paintings of Brahminical gods. Mithila was a great seat of Sanskrit learning, especially Naya (logic and epistemology). It included modern districts of Darbhanga, Champaran, and North Muzzaffarpur. Later, its boundaries were extended to Purnea, Monghyr and Bhagalpur.

NALANDA: An ancient Buddhist university in Magadha. It was here that the great teacher-philosopher Acharya Dinnaga defeated

non-Buddhists in a debate which made him the head of Nalanda university. Dharapala Mahathera was his pupil. Hiuen Tsang studied Buddhism here.

PATLIPUTRA: At one time a stronghold of Buddhism. It formed a part of the kingdom of Magadha. Identified as modern Patna. (See also Magadha).

ROHITASHVA: Harishchandra, known for his truthfulness and integrity, had, it is said, 99 wives, but no son. He took another wife Chandramati as his first wife. A son was born to them with the blessings of Varuna and he was named Rohitashva. Varuna wanted the son to be offered as a sacrificial animal to him. Harishchandra promised to do it at the age of eleven after Upanayana (investiture with the Brahma string). The king had to bear acute sorrow and misery because of this. Rohitashva ran away just before the ceremony when he came to know that he would be sacrificed to Varuna. Harishchandra was struck with dropsy. On knowing of his father's sickness, Rohitashva, also known as Rohita in the *Rigveda*, where it means the sun as a red horse, wanted to return but was dissuaded by Indra. To keep his word, Harishchandra gifted away to Vishwamitra not only his entire kingdom but also sold his wife, Chandramati, Rohitashva, his son, and himself. Thereafter, he earned his livelihood with the wages he got for cremating corpses, and serving as a slave to a Chandala.

SHRAVASTI: It is near Kapilvastu and Lumbini in the plains below the Himalayas. Present Deoria District in India.

TAKSHASILA: An ancient Indian university, now in ruins in Rawalpindi District, in Pakistan. People from Kashi, Rajagrhā, Panchal, Mithila, Ujjayini used to come here to study. The Vedas, archery and other 18 disciplines were taught here. A physician, known as Jivaka, a contemporary of the Buddha, Panini, and Kautilya probably got education here.

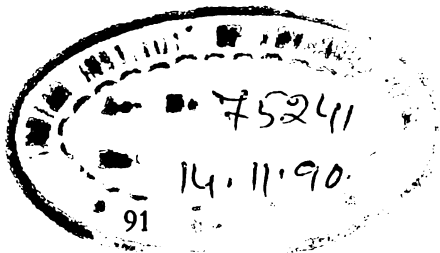
UJJAYINI: A town in Madhya Pradesh, central India. It is situated to the west of Sanchi. Ujjayini is sacred to the Hindus; it stands on the right bank of the Shipra river. It is known for a temple of

Mahakaal, described by the poet Kalidasa. Jyotirlinga of Shiva is the presiding deity in the temple.

Ujjayini is one of the seven places very sacred to the Hindus. Its ancient name was Avanti. Early history of Ujjayini is lost in antiquity. It got importance under the Aryans who had settled in Malwa. Ujjayini was mentioned historically first on the rise of the Mauryan empire, when Ashoka, later the emperor and champion of Buddhism, was sent to the western provinces as Viceroy. Again after 400 A.D., it passed to Chandragupta II of Magadha. It was a time of Hindu revival under the Guptas and there arose a well-known tradition to Vikramaditya, the king Arthur of India. Ujjayini is associated with the memory of Kalidas, the great classical Sanskrit poet and dramatist.

VAISHALI: A place to the south of the modern Muzzafarpur Dist. It was a stronghold of Buddhism and Gautama is said to have visited it three times. Patna was originally fortified to guard against the confederacy of the Lichchavis, who had their capital at Vaishali.

VASAVADATTA: Vasavadatta was the wife of Udayana, and was believed to be a goddess born of a woman purposely. Udayana was born at Kausambi. Vasavadatta was the daughter of Candamahasena, the king of Ujjain. He wanted his daughter to marry Udayana though they were enemies. A trick devised by her father, one like the well-known Trojan horse, eventually brought them together. Candamahasena took Udayana by getting an artificial elephant, as big as Nadagiri the elephant he had and filled it with soldiers. Udayana came to know of a huge elephant sighted by his men in the forest. Udayana expressed a desire to see the elephant himself. He was alone when he went near it. He was arrested by the soldiers hidden inside the artificial elephant and taken to the court of Candamahasena. Vasavadatta was drawn to Udayana. They eloped and eventually got married.



Shrikant Verma's *Magadha* a collection of poems, mostly written during 1984, is a major landmark in modern Hindi poetry. The work cuts across all mini-movements by treating history as a mere lexicon. The poet conjures up a world without tenses defying chronological order. There is no obvious attempt at thematizing, yet themes emerge which strike the sensitive reader with mythical immediacy. *Magadha* makes the past and the present merge into one to evoke an image in and out of this otherwise undear world which surrounds us, and where even an open participation as the barest precondition to healthy becoming is missing. Some bitter truths of life are very subtly, and at times very sparsely, camouflaged with the help of often-chanted names but completely unsyntaxed and divested of their now only bookish historicity and thus lending them the never-failing validity of a myth.

Magadha is all that was and was not, is and is not, and probably therefore, will always be sought after as it ought to be. In other words, it was always there, it is there, and it will always be there in one's imagination with its perennial concerns with the inexorability of human predicament.

This is the first ever translation into English of Shrikant Verma's famous work.

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