

साहित्य संसार

नेपाली साहित्य र संस्कृति प्रति प्रतिबद्ध

AN INDO-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP

DAVID RAY'S ESSAY ON YUYUTSU RD

When I was writing and teaching at the University of Rajasthan in 1981-82, R.D. Sharma, a student who was serious about literature, became a good friend. At the time he was writing fiction and criticism, but his interest in poetry was intense. Though we did not spend a lot of time together, our discussions were lively as we wandered around the sandy and colorful city of Jaipur, stopping for tea at outdoor tables. Sometimes there were no tables and no shade, and we stood watching the busy scene around us as we chatted. R.D. was amused that I carried my own cup tucked in my pocket, pulling it out and holding it to receive chai ladled from a smiling server huge terra cotta pot that probably still had a few molecules from what had been boiled a hundred years ago. As wind fluttered the manuscripts we discussed, the papers were at risk of an event he describes in a poem:

A wandering cow comes
to pick up and gulp the condemned
draft of a wailing
poem I can never finish.

Back in America where cars are held sacred despite their murderous record of carnage we often thought the Hindu attitude toward cows was silly, but as I got used to their wandering about among pedestrians and crazy traffic in Jaipur I came to appreciate them, for holding a cow sacred encourages one to hold many things sacred, and we have become all too callous and disregarding of the lives of others, be they of our species or otherwise. In the poems of Yuyutsu and the Nepali poets he translated for his anthology, Roaring Recitals, the attitude toward all nature is one of respectful fascination.

My young student talent was clearly at a decisive point was ready to plunge into a career as a writer, but foresaw that the road was fraught with perils. I did my best to inform him of the risks, the many discouragements, reminded him that Chekhov said writing was like eating sour cabbage soup, but also urged him to believe in his gifts. He did just that, and has since carved out an impressive career not only as a writer, but also as editor and translator. His work continues to impress me with its intensity, and his friendship means a great deal to me, as does my memory of him when he was too young to write as he does now:

**Where are the stars I saw
in the blazing firefields of my youth?**

After my wife Judy and I left Jaipur, R.D. like many American poets who took fresh identities with chosen rather than inherited names--took on a public persona that would emphasize his uniqueness. He became Yuyutsu R.D. Sharma, establishing himself as a poet and essayist but also by his success as a publisher. Among other titles with his Nirala Press he brought out, after our departure from India, a book of my poems salvaged from manuscripts left behind. If the attractively produced book, ELYSIUM IN THE HALLS OF HELL, proves anything about my work, it is that the discarded poems have as much life as what I have painfully shaped in a process that can only be called perpetual revision. I am grateful that R.D. saved those poems from oblivion, and even more delighted that he saw value in them.

For years, busy with my life back in the States and with professorships and residencies that took me to Australia, New Zealand, France and Italy, I lost touch with Yuyutsu's career. But fortunately the Internet with its instantaneous global publication brings us surprises as we run across an old friend's work or are reminded that ours has reached new readers. Poems and essays that might have gone into archived letters to be forgotten enter a kind of measureless limbo where the potential for immortality exists despite the peril of Delete keys. Some readers send work back to its author translated into another language--most recently, with my work, Arabic. On the web our work, like wine that may or may not age well, takes its chances, perhaps to be served in future years--to be bashed by the hammer of a rude critic--or, even worse, by indifference.

When Yuyutsu came across my poem called "O A Child of Baghdad" he wrote in The Sunday Post in Katmandu (on February 2, 2003) that it sent him hurtling back to past years in Jaipur? when he met me and was exposed to my cynicism about the infectious narcissism of the intellectuals.? He had probably become accustomed to professors who

lectured with a pause between sentences with one upward glance at the ceiling, never at the eyes of the captive students waiting for enlightenment.

I suspect he was near the point of disillusionment with what academic life had to offer. He may have been in mild shock that a rude American with grim views of intellectual pretensions should show up as a professor. How could such an oddball have slipped through the selection process for even a modest Indo-U.S. Fellow? And how could such an unorthodox poet have survived in the American university system, merely surviving, despite being an official thorn in the side of the Chancellor, who regularly excoriated campus and community activism. Yuyutsu must have seen too that I was just as uncomfortable with the academic scene in India as that of the U.S. For one thing I had been wholly frustrated in trying to secure appropriate university housing for my family because the Vice-Chancellor was playing a personal Monopoly game with empty houses. Rumor had it that he hated Americans because he had once had a bad experience in Canada.

In his article in The Sunday Post of Katmandu about reencountering my work, Yuyutsu describes his situation: prior to meeting David Ray, as a research scholar I had a dream of becoming a literary critic, a Ph.D., a Shakespeare or a Milton expert or an illustrious critic. In the Department all I could see were snooty, Oxford trained or Cambridge returned professors dabbling in the obscure corridors of literary canons. Seated smugly in their chairs of specialization, they appeared extremely vainglorious and cold. It was in one of the seminars on American literature that I had first seen David Ray. To see a visiting Professor on a bicycle was, of course, an unusual sight.

My head throbbing from the seemingly profound scholarly papers of Professors from all over India, I came out of the Seminar Hall of the Maharani college and surprisingly found David Ray standing outside in the garden observing the dramatic Rajasthani sky. My new acquaintance seemed to think I was endowed with remarkable insight when I remarked: but did you learn anything from these papers? I learnt nothing. I suspect he rarely heard unrehearsed candor.

Although the English department at the University of Rajasthan was teaching the work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and other poets whose impenetrability and difficulty guarantees overtime and tenure for scholars, they did nothing to introduce students to poetry of equal vitality that was

far more accessible and might even teach them more about English as it is spoken--the American language as well as the British. I urged the professors to add D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robinson Jeffers, e.e. cummings, and Edna St. Vincent Millay to the curriculum. But perhaps they feared there would be less to explicate, fewer symbols to point out, less complexity to rejoice in, fewer allusions to identify. Daring to incur the wrath of a thesis adviser who ordered him to write on T.S. Eliot instead of a poet of dubious worth, R.D. the graduate student produced a book-sized thesis on my work.

This sort of academic invidiousness was not surprising, for the caste system for literature (I am tempted to say against literature) that I know so well in America is a global misfortune. Each of us who writes has a calibrated awareness of where we stand in a system dominated by snobbish critics whose self-serving agenda is comparable to that of the military-industrial establishment. The goal of a four-star critic is not to find and rejoice in what is truly exciting in new writing but to secure a role as arbiter elegantiarum, deciding who is to be included among the Elect and who is to be cast into the outer reaches of disregard. Thus *Voices and Visions*, put forth by Helen Vendler as a history of American poetry, declares *Il n'est pas* to the poets named above. e.e.cummings exists only in a footnote to the work of Sylvia Plath, a poet deified, her work canonized. For as Yuyutsu reminded me in his article in *The Sunday Post*, this vision that would silence at least as many voices as it acknowledges is half in love with death, the glamour of self-annihilation. I have seen a poet driven to suicide by professors who tirelessly praise the life and work of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, as if suicide were the only legitimate way of getting society to take their work and sufferings seriously. Those who soldier on in life are all too often scorned as merely surviving, as if nothing is more contemptible than facing the same problems Plath and Sexton solved for themselves but not their survivors by death. Not to admire them sufficiently is seen as heresy, a reflection of our society's love affair with death. In Western culture it seems that Thanatos can trump Eros most of the time, as our current war with Iraq, like its Vietnam and Desert Storm predecessors' avatars demonstrate. Only a scorn for life and worship of death could fuel such insanity and abandonment of all that could lead to a good and communal life on our planet. Yuyutsu's poetry touches on concerns of global matters, acknowledging that we can never with violence create a Utopia or

Construct a gorgeous pagoda from
furious flames
and whistling winds?

Such lines capture for me the futility of the Iraq War, which I refuse to dignify with its official title, even more euphemistic and tainted with doublethink than earlier misadventures. We can build even a humble pagoda from furious flames and whistling winds.

I am proud to have played a small role in encouraging R.D. Sharma to become Yuyutsu and serve the world with his writing and translations, and his generous support of other poets through his work as an editor. In his new book he encounters another poet from America, and I am proud to be in the company of that one too:

From the golden
wheatfields beyond
Allen Ginsberg emerges pointing
toward my grandmother pulling
aerial threads from
the shimmering wheel of a milky moonlight.

That last line defines the poet task about as clearly as any I know. And whether it is better for poets far apart on the globe to meet on the Internet or in dreams or as Yuyutsu puts it in another poem I will leave for the reader to decide:

On the great Tibetan
salt route they meet me again--
old forsaken friends?

DAVID RAY
Tucson, Arizona, USA
www.davidraypoet.com
March 28, 2003

Email : info@ipatra.com
P.O.Box 133-011 Peitou 112, Taipei ,Taiwan
www.ipatra.com

इपत्र डट कम