

Letter from Mumbai

MEDICINE AND LITERATURE

Discussing poetry with Dr Gieve Patel

A few months ago, the Humanities Division of the Seth G.S. Medical College in Mumbai invited Dr Gieve Patel to discuss poetry with medical students and resident doctors.

Gieve studied medicine at my *alma mater* (Grant Medical College) and was a couple of years junior to me. I recall his pensive moods when he would 'stand and stare'. Had he been questioned then, I am sure he would have narrated from memory William Henry Davies' poem on *Leisure*:

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.*

Gieve went on to general practice, treating humble patients with care and dignity. Side by side, he practised his art to develop into one of our respected painters who has, over the years, exhibited his works in major national and international galleries. His oil and acrylic paintings now form part of the collections of many museums. He has since ventured into sculpting as well.

His talk at the medical college, however, was based on his eminence as a poet, author and dramatist. The plays written by him—and performed before admiring audiences—have featured members of his community. He draws on experiences of middle-class Parsi families and individuals and leaves his audience deep in thought on such subjects as the perversions that follow the assumption of power, the tragedies consequent to self-delusion and how man ill-treats woman.

Reviewers have classified him among mystical poets. I find him rooted in realism. His sensitively written poems tell us of the downtrodden and the injustices heaped upon them, of pain and of assaults on the human frame. Yet, as has been pointed out by many, his approach is clinical, devoid of maudlin sentimentality. He observes, narrates and leaves you to ruminate.

During the 90 minutes or more that he held the audience enthralled that morning, he did not narrate a single poem by himself. He preferred to highlight the works of such writers as Arun Kolatkar (from his book *Jejuri*) and A.K. Ramanujan among the Indian poets; Ted Hughes (Poet Laureate of the UK, also known for his life with Sylvia Plath) and Anna Akhmatova (whose real name was Anna Andreyevna Gorenko and who also wrote of the terror during the reign of Josef Stalin).

He had originally planned to read all the poems he had selected and then invite discussion by members of the audience but deferred to the suggestion of the chairperson, Dr Farokh Udawadia, to engage in discussion after each poem. This enabled a to and fro

dialogue between Gieve and members of the audience while each poem was fresh in the minds of these young students.

At the end of the session, Gieve congratulated the audience on the rapt attention and lively discussion—not a common occurrence for him at earlier similar meetings. I felt that the response of the audience was a natural consequence of the spell he wove around it.

Dr Udawadia, eminent physician and also a man of letters, enhanced the importance of the occasion by reciting extempore three poems from the works of T.S. Eliot.

Since that audience had been involuntarily deprived by Gieve, I would like you, dear reader, to sample one of his poems. I am sure he will pardon me for reproducing it here.

On killing a tree

*It takes much time to kill a tree,
Not a simple jab of the knife
Will do it. It has grown
Slowly consuming the earth,
Rising out of it, feeding
Upon its crust, absorbing
Years of sunlight, air, water,
And out of its leprous hide
Sprouting leaves.*

*So hack and chop
But this alone wont do it.
Not so much pain will do it.
The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs,
Miniature boughs
Which if unchecked will expand again
To former size.*

*No,
The root is to be pulled out –
Out of the anchoring earth;
It is to be roped, tied,
And pulled out – snapped out
Or pulled out entirely,
Out from the earth-cave,
And the strength of the tree exposed,
The source, white and wet,
The most sensitive, hidden
For years inside the earth.*

*Then the matter
Of scorching and choking
In sun and air,
Browning, hardening,
Twisting, withering,
And then it is done.*

Dr Reeta Mani

Born and brought up in Maharashtra, she is currently Associate Professor of Neurovirology at the National Institute for Mental Health and Neurological Sciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru.

Although I have been privileged by several opportunities to visit this institute, I was ignorant of her work in the field of

virology and, equally important, in the field of literature. During an interview she referred to her dream of setting up a section on the humanities in NIMHANS. This made my antennae perk up and I have since had the rewarding experience of engaging in a continuing dialogue with her through the magical medium of email. I can confirm an assessment made by a reviewer of her work: 'She is a doctor by profession and a writer by passion.' This anonymous observer went on, 'She writes to free herself of thoughts that plague her, issues that dishearten her and inequities that leave her feeling helpless.' Her success at these endeavours will be judged by those more qualified than I am but I can express my gratitude for these outpourings which stimulate thought and, with some luck, bring about much needed change.

She has started writing for the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* but has been a contributor for the series *Chicken soup for the Indian doctor's soul*, *Pulse* and other such publications for some years.

Let me provide you some references where you can access her work:

<http://ijme.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2164-5.pdf>: *Of moulds and medals*

www.new-asian-writing.com/mango-moods/

<http://neuropathsociety.in/the-wrong-right/>: *The wrong right*

<https://pulsevoices.org/archive/stories/105-keeping-secrets>.

I hope these will whet your appetite for more.

Dr Arunachalam Kumar

Dr Reeta Mani brought to my attention the life and work of Dr Arunachalam Kumar. I confess that hitherto I had been unaware of these—as, indeed, I am of so much that is worth knowing!

Here is a little of what I have learnt about him.

Son of an Indian Civil Service officer, he hails from Chennai. He came to Mangalore (as it was then called) and Manipal for his education and decided to settle there.

As a student, he is reputed to have been responsible for many sleepless nights suffered by heads of educational institutions. During his days as a senior student he was president of the Kasturba Medical College (KMC) Students' Association, Mangaluru. On a positive note, during his term as president of the All College Union he arranged for private operators in the Dakshina Kannada District to issue bus passes for students from 1972 onwards, thus helping innumerable youngsters since.

He inherited a strong urge for rationalism from his mother. He got together like-minded individuals and formed the Dakshina Kannada Rationalist Association in 1976. This group was responsible in getting such eminent advocates as Abraham Kovoor to emphasize the need to question any proposition or statement and check whether it was based on reason and experiment. Truth and not empirical claim was the chief criterion on which judgement was to be passed. Long-advocated and practised systems such as those based on caste quickly came under their scrutiny. Likewise all superstitions and 'magical tricks' such as the production of *vibhuti* from thin air were questioned and refuted.

He retired as dean of the K.S. Hegde Medical Academy, Mangalore.

Why is he being referred to here? Florine Roche provides the answer in her essay on him: '... Call him a genius, an eccentric, an exceptionally talented man, multifaceted persona, a polymath, a polyglot, rationalist, ardent cricket lover, a student leader, bird watcher, lateral thinker, popular teacher, an artist, nature lover, cryptic crossword expert, a writer, blogger, author, humanist—

and the list can go on and on...' (www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay.aspx?newsID=432591).

Besides two medical textbooks, Dr Kumar has published more than 150 medical research articles and is cited in the *Limca book of Indian records* for publishing research papers in 29 scientific specialties. Inspired by his essays in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, psychologist Allanah Furlong wrote in the same journal, 'Dr Arunachalam Kumar is a well known researcher based in Mangalore at one of India's largest medical schools. He has published five books and over 175 scientific articles and is involved in 110 research projects. He is also popular science's most successful internet bloggers. No slot is big enough to fit a man of his versatility... India's most eccentric genius...'

He has been an ardent contributor on http://rivr.sulekha.com/ixedoc_364386 for years. When I checked last, he had 1131 posts to his credit. As his writings were appreciated by widening circles of readers, they were periodically collected together and published as books. He has also written several full-length books on nature (appropriately entitled *Nature, naturally*), on the girl child and women in *Her India* and on happenings in India (called *India, in situ*). Some of these can be accessed at <https://valmeeki.com>.

In March 2015, he stopped his car to identify a snake that he had just passed. He slipped, fell on the road but did identify the snake. The persistent pain in the chest after his injury prompted an X-ray film of the chest which surprised everyone by showing a huge tumour replacing most of his right lung. A biopsy showed cancer and was followed by chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immune cell therapy.

Not surprisingly, he has posted many items on his blog site under the heading *Coping with cancer*, describing his experiences with this disease thus far. His updates on his treatment are followed by thousands of his fans on Facebook. He has also prepared and posted some of his talks and interviews as .mp4 files on the internet.

I have taken the liberty of reproducing one of his essays here. The first sentence in the last paragraph is particularly thought-provoking.

A little bird told me

Some twenty-five and more years ago, when I had just moved into a quaint tile roof house in the monsoon drenched coastal city on western fringes of Karnataka, I saw hanging from the entrance door post, an odd looking mess of webs and *bric a brac*, which I assumed to be a nest of a kind. I requested the masons, carpenters and plumbers, who were attending to getting the house working, to leave the hanging nest alone. I left for work, but upon returning for lunch, shocked to note that the nest was missing. I queried the motley crew around, all denying any knowledge about the hanging nest. I was a trifle upset at the turn of events.

After a short interlude, having a few minutes to spare before return to work, I sat down on the verandah floor, there being no furniture yet in the house. I was interrupted by a to and fro sortie of a bird, that appeared agitated, uttering, on wing a continuous chirr-chirr alarm call. I watched the bird for a few minutes before returning to my crossword puzzle of the newspaper. But the bird was determined, and continued flying all around, even diving close to my head. I understand the agitation to be of message potential, and observed the behavior of the bird, which seemed to fly towards a particular pillar on the northeast of the porch. I walked up and ferreted the area,

and found nothing. I resumed my crossword, but no way could I proceed. The infernal bird was back, zipping in circles near the pillar, again and again. I called my wife to the scene, she too was quite perplexed at the oddity of it all. I walked up to the pillar once again, where lined along the bottom were some cloth bags belonging to the carpenters, who had gone for their luncheon break, and despite her cautionary word, reached out for a bag, which had adzes and saws peeping out from its knotted end. I opened the satchel, and lo, within it I found a polythene bag, into which I found, stuffed, was the missing nest. I quickly emptied the contents, finding to my amazement, one live chick, the other dead. I walked up to my compound edge, where I placed the near adult fledgling, which then quite promptly hopped away into the thickets and shrubbery beyond, under the watchful eye and guiding chirrups of the mother bird.

The events were extraordinary in nature, but what struck me, was not that the bird was telling me something repeatedly, but that it reasoned that I would comprehend what information she was conveying. The bird, I later gathered was a purple sunbird. The incident got me interested enough in bird ethology to take bird watching as a hobby. In fact so serious that for my PG dissertation in my specialization too, I chose avian embryology. I have since written more than two hundred articles in the press on birds and their ilk, conducted talks and nature camps, published about 20 scientific articles in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers... And to cap it all, the little purple sunbird

led me to apply for, and receive, the plum post of Executive Director of BNHS in 1992, when Mr Daniel retired (due to some other reasons I didn't take up the assignment). I have met with hundreds of very nice people in the field whose knowledge and courtesy humble me. Who knew, 25 years ago, that one little bird would open so many hearts and doors; suffice to remember, that the language and lexicon of emotions, pains, sorrows, love, transcend beyond biological and evolutionary chasms and spans, and but are be understood by all creations.

The works of this author deserve wide renown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I requested permission from Dr Gieve Patel for the reproduction of his poem, 'On killing a tree'. Soon after I did so, I learnt that he was ill, in hospital. He has just returned home and has promptly sent me his permission with his usual kindness and grace.

Dr Kumar responded graciously to my request for permission to reproduce one of his essays. 'Thank you for your warm words which come as a soothing salve 24 hours after another session of my chemotherapy. I'd be delighted and honoured to be featured in *The National Medical Journal of India*. In fact, decades ago, when the journal first started publication, Dr Samiran Nundy, its editor requested me to write an article . . . which due to some reason I could not.'

SUNIL K. PANDYA

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