

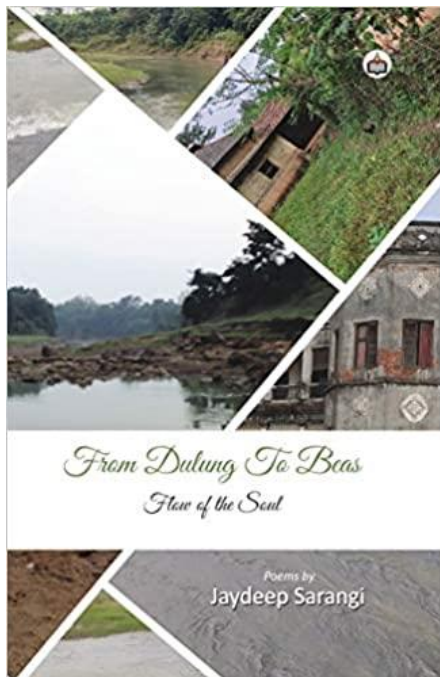
## Review Article

# **The River as Passant: A Review of Jaydeep Sarangi's *From Dulung to Beas: Flow of the Soul***

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"Poetry," writes bell hooks (2012, p. 7), "is a useful place for lamentation...poems are a place where we can cry out." Few observations, indeed, could be closer to the truth. What, however, repeatedly claims my attention in hook's statement, is the phrase constituting her first four words here, 'Poetry is a useful place'. As the world comes rather alarmingly together, thanks to networking and the pandemic, leading to a radical reconceptualization of both spatiality and temporality, and as the ethics and norms of distancing annihilate distinctions between the local and the global, much to the chagrin of the local, I find my realization and awareness of poetry as place increasingly heightened. The more one ponders over it, one realizes that poetry is not simply search, journey or exploration but also, equally and significantly, anchorage. It is a place from which one looks at the world, negotiates and relates, but simply and most overwhelmingly, poetry is a place to be.

As I read again and again through Jaydeep Sarangi's ninth collection of poems *From Dulung to Beas: Flow of the Soul*, the conviction of poetry as place becomes unassailable.

Across the fifty-one poems that constitute this immensely meditative volume, one cannot fail to locate a daunting project of poetic cartography as the poet attempts to weave in poetry the disparate locations of his existence, both physical and metaphysical. These are poems essentially about place and transcending place; about the local opening its arms to the global and the global, in turn, finding itself in these provinces as already local; about margins thrusting against the mainstream while the mainstream remains steadily unaware of its collapse into marginality. These are poems about time, the turns and detritus of history and the need to create anew, the essential brotherhood of man. These are also, as Mamang Dai writes in her blurb to the volume, poems "leaning towards the spiritual, a searching" for healing within the self and the *spiritus mundi*. Most emphatically, however, these are poems that enact a cultural and linguistic struggle for representation with a poetic consciousness that is both firmly postcolonial and staunchly ecocritical.

Sarangi's metaphor for postcolonial representation, as the title of the collection amply illustrates, is the river making its way across obscure geographies through remote hearths before finally merging into the sea. It is this riverine flow – generous, benign, nurturing, constant, and always redemptive which becomes, for the poet, a metaphor for life. The poems, one can't help noting, abound with references to rivers – Dulung, Beas, Ganga, Titas, Meghna, Triton, Wai-ti, Rio de la Plata, Murray and Darling. There are also innumerable references to places – Jhargram, Kolkata, Rotang, Bangladesh, Turin, Uruguay, Athens, New Zealand, Palestine, Syria, Egypt and more. What remains steadfast throughout the poet's zig-zag geographical leaps across rivers and cities is his attentiveness to and empathy for the everyday, the minor, the ordinary, often negligible, and the humane. In 'By Your Side', for instance, the poet (2020, p. 44) says:

The cat in the house  
Knows her tears  
Moments of futile desire  
For her man  
Who is on a distant public land.

The poem documents a delicate sensitiveness towards a woman and her daughter left alone while the husband must work in a distant city to feed his family, an experience all too common in India's rural and semi-urban regions. In 'We Exist', a poem dedicated to the Bengali Dalit writer, Manoranjan Byapari, Sarangi writes of "Have-nots struggling for a roti/ at Jadavpur Station/ like a battle for partition." (2020, p. 50) In 'Pain across the Salt Desert', "the villagers assembled near the tea stall" are huddled together listening to the tea stall owner's tale because "tea or no tea, many of them lost their job." (2020, p. 37) In 'The Tree of Life', the poet (2020, p. 29) writes:

Somewhere a naked child  
Cries out of hunger.  
His mother offers

Breasts of no milk,  
The child sucks water.

In the backdrop of the economic recession caused globally by the pandemic and India's particular misery of migrant workers and the farmers' revolution, these poems of inequality and deprivation strike the reader with startling poignancy. Sharply watermarking this collection is, as mentioned before, a postcolonial historical sense acutely aware of the intricate narratives of power that go into the official production of history and the need to integrate personal archives of memory with public archives. In 'Sap is History', the poet (2020, p. 33) writes:

I sit near the bank of Dulung  
And whisper in love lost  
Like long trees in autumn  
Barren as history books  
Where dry hard thoughts  
Write their names in black ink.

The poem '21<sup>st</sup> February' recounts the painful historical memory of massacre often forgotten in the rather exuberant celebrations of International Mother Language Day. In 'You are Re-visited', the centrality of the past is again underlined (Sarangi, 2020, p. 40):

Old faces beacon us again and again  
It is the past we fear  
Marae is the centre for  
Much of Maori community life,  
Traditional protocols and group ties.

The past, for Sarangi, is not only the keeper of what is sacred and significant in a culture but also, a repository of spiritual lessons. In 'Playing near the Banks of Dwaipayana', the poet (2020, p. 61) writes:

No Duryodhana can hide in time  
Only he grows deep as stories  
In epic premonitions. After this sunset.

Poems like 'We Need You', 'Your Identity', and 'Exotic Jhargram' emphasize, also, on the need to re-write history by taking on the establishments of power head-to-head. Here (Sarangi, 2020, p. 46):

Surrounded by tall sal and mahul  
With wild elephants and birds of various species  
Santals, Mundas, Shabars and Lodhas

Coexist in sweet tune of a song.

However, these indigenous people in Sarangi's poems, are not just involved in preserving their past. While folk songs and dances are certainly integral to their identity, they are also making large strides in education and are preparing to take on the new world with the advantage of both traditional and modern values (Sarangi, 2020, p. 26):

The river is your energy,  
 It writes your history.  
 Unfurls memory frozen  
 In cool folk dance  
 And your identity generation.  
 The college girl stands first  
 In university examination.  
 History is re-written in black ink.

And yet, as the poem 'Recent Trends' (Sarangi, 2020, p. 42) succinctly expresses, these negotiations between the past, present and future are neither easy nor infallible:

Dearest, you mustn't forget,  
 Most of the time  
 We do not speak our mother tongue.  
 We only learn the languages that pay:  
 C++, Java and English.

Suffusing the majority of the poems, here, are evocative images of nature. Noteworthy about Sarangi's engagement with nature, is his staunch eco-centric vision. In his poems, the natural and human worlds are not distinct. Rather things are as they should be and both the poet and his people inhabit a world that flows to river-time – planetary, perennial, philanthropic, and philosophic. In his extremely well-written book, *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe (2019, pp. 188-89) outlines an ethics for inhabiting our fragile, vulnerable and difficult world. He calls this the 'ethics of the passerby' and defines it as follows:

At the limit, a "human's specificity" is not to belong to any particular place, since this human, which is a compound of other living beings and other species, belongs to all places together. Learning to pass constantly from one place to another—this ought, then, to be its project, since it is, in any case, its destiny. But passing from one place to another also means weaving with each one of them a twofold relation of solidarity and detachment. This experience of presence and distance, of solidarity and detachment, but never of indifference—let us call it the ethics of the passerby.

Sarangi's poems, one would find, offers just such an ethics of being in the world – an ethics of the passerby, an ethics of both belonging and detachment, of crossing, of movement and of flow. His symbol of the *passant* is the river that stands as an ecological and historical witness to civilization. Like rivers that traverse innumerable locales belonging to all and yet to none in particular, Sarangi offers a vision of flowing through life and the world, touching all but being grounded to no singular identifiable location. In her poem, 'Small Towns and the River', (para. 4) Mamang Dai writes:

The river has a soul.  
It knows, stretching past the town,  
from the first drop of rain to dry earth  
and mist on the mountaintops,  
the river knows  
the immortality of water.

Reminiscent of the love for rivers that characterizes Alice Oswald's *Dart* and Mamang Dai's *River Poems*, Jaydeep Sarangi's *From Dulung to Beas* offers an interweaving and interpretation of river as life and life as river, the ultimate destiny and necessity of both being to flow. Seeking to nourish the places of both poetry and the world, this collection - intensely spiritual, reflective, and cosmopolitan in spirit, affirms Mbembe's (2019, p. 187) words that, "Becoming-human-in-the-world is a question neither of birth nor of origin or race. It is a matter of journeying, of movement, and of transfiguration."

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