

# The private movement of things that pretend to be still

## Mughal Sequence

By Anand Thakore

Poetrywala, Mumbai, 2012, 71 pp., Rs 200

ISBN 978-81-922254-3-2

## Elephant Bathing, Poems

By Anand Thakore

Poetrywala, Mumbai, 2012, 77 pp., Rs 150

ISBN 978-81-922254-4-9

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Anglophone Indian poets are notorious for the unpredictable arrival of new work. If we think of Adil Jussawalla and Jayanta Mahapatra at two ends of a scale of productivity, it would be as hard to top Jussawalla's record of 40 years for the longest gap between collections, as it would be to equal Mahapatra's 19 books of poetry in English in the same duration. Most poets achieve a happy medium between these two extremes, producing a collection every few years and accumulating a respectable body of work against all odds.

When a poet comes out with not one, but two collections of poetry in the same year, I tend to regard them with awe tinged with envy; in this instance, Anand Thakore's two collections of poetry. The first, *Mughal Sequence*, is a collection of monologues clearly conceived as a singular narrative; the second, *Elephant Bathing*, is – to my infinite relief – a collection of poetry written over the decade since Thakore's first book, *Waking in December* (2001).

In a review in these pages (*Biblio*, Mar-Apr 2011, pp 34-35), the poet Vivek Narayanan asked whether Anglophone Indian poets conceived of their work as *projects* (even when their work was a collection of whatever they had written since their last book). If there is to be a response to that question, it can be found in these two books by Anand Thakore.

*Mughal Sequence* is series of five monologues by figures from the Mughal period: Humayun; his youngest sister Gulbadan; an unnamed dancing girl formerly of the court of Ibrahim Lodi but now a gift from Babur to one of his begums; Babur himself; and startlingly, the Kohinoor diamond. As if in a play, each of these speakers steps self-consciously to the side of the stage at a specific moment in their lives to address the audience and invite them to witness their self-examination.

In a play, a monologue – even when not poetic in form and language – is only a brief pause for interrogation or psychological clarity. Once it is done, the action resumes and the monologue serves as a foil against which to evaluate the speaker's actions. In this collection, the monologue is all: there is no before and after; there is nothing but the present moment in which the speaker is heard. The reader is compelled to ask who, really, is being addressed.

Humayun addresses someone whose identity remains carefully unclear until nearly the end of the section. This is not deliberate obfuscation; it's not a mystery to be solved. Instead, it is an exploration of voice and tone in the tradition of the Bhakti/Sufi poets addressing the divine as beloved, friend, or master.

*Of one greater than him I dance for –*

Babur's vow on the eve of the battle of Khanua is well-known, so his monologue ought to be unambiguously addressed to Allah. Instead, what we have is a praise song for hashish, or what he called

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*I made a better career as a reader of your world.*

*But for the blinding of my brother, Who now begs, they tell me, in Mecca,*

*Your name on his lips, Absolve me.*

Gulbadan, stalled on the way to Mecca, is also addressing Allah and apologising for Akbar's strange experiments with religion: "He will have his bit/ Of what he considers to be fun", she says. As for the dancing girl, we know for whom she really dances:

*Though I have known at times a steady swirling*

*That opened my ears to rumours in the blood*

*majnoon*. Though Allah is invoked and praised several times through this longest section of the book, this is a more allusive voice speaking, invoking half-understood symbols and offering a kaleidoscope of images and events. He says:

*May the tombs of my heirs outstrip my own;*

*For Majnoon now strips me of these histories I wear,*

*And I hear the low droning of a string in a rosary of notes;*

What Thakore is engaged in, it becomes clear, is detailing the speakers' various acts of spiritual surrender. If Humayun declared that "Falling is an idea/ I have always been in love with", Gulbadan talks about the river Tapi thus: "The Tapi is adept at letting go of herself.// She

knows there was nothing in the first place/ to hold back."

What, then, of the Kohinoor? Alone among the speakers, this piece of the earth, having seen more than it can bear, hopes not for surrender or a dissolution of the self, but a simple return: "Return me to the mines./ Carry me back to the dark that scorned me." This leaves the reader with an intriguing conundrum: is surrender and salvation, metaphorised in elemental terms, only for the human? Can a vocal mineral not hope for spiritual dissolution but seek only a literal return to where it came from?

Thakore's *Mughal Sequence* shows ambition and is executed with real delicacy and skill. I left every page with pencil marks, marking out memorable phrases and lines. Thakore need never say, with Babur:

*It may be that my couplet will never form,  
Or be too simple, when it does, to remain poetry;*

There is a deceptive simplicity here but we need be in no doubt about whether it remains poetry.



*Elephant Bathing*, on the other hand, is not a 'project'. It is a collection of Thakore's work from 2001 to 2011. The question about any collection is: what holds it together? It happens that poems written over short periods of time have similar themes or ideas and there is no difficulty in finding coherence, if one should be looking for it.

A decade is a long time, however, and poems change shape and form in ways that a poet often has no control over. What a poet can do is find a way to skilfully *arrange* the work in such a way that the poems begin to speak to each other in ways that are, essentially, musical. As a musician himself, Thakore must have taken great pleasure in this part of creating the book, and it shows.

There are personal poems, poems that are narrative in intent, holding on to fugitive memories with the adult grip of words; there are explorations of form – the ghazal, the sonnet and the villanelle – but even when there is no apparent frame to hold the poem, Thakore never lets himself play tennis without some kind of net.

The strongest work is in the section 'Make me a Symbol if you Must'. The first poems are part of an extended sequence titled 'Sequence Addressed to Hanging Objects', among them a punching bag, a dream catcher and a wind chime.

Any poet stuck for inspiration will tell you of efforts to find their tongue in sequences. In the absence of other structures, a meditation on objects having something in common with each other can free the poet to write, tethered only to a very broad idea. The drawback is, of course, that many of these poems can amuse without necessarily offering up anything more than a glittering surface.

Thakore avoids this trap by looping the poem beyond what might seem to be its natural length. Each of these poems addresses the object, but reveals less about the nature of the object – “the private movements of things/That pretend to be still”, to quote from Babur’s monologue in *Mughal Sequence* – and more about the speaker, who wants to examine the effect of the object on himself. In ‘Punching Bag’, he says:

*I have wanted little more, all this  
while,  
Than to become like you,  
Sealed, as you are,  
Beyond taking offence or feeling  
abused,*

And to the ‘Dream Catcher’ in exasperation at its opacity and inscrutability:

*Grant me a nightmare, if you must,  
But do something, for God’s sake,  
Do something.*

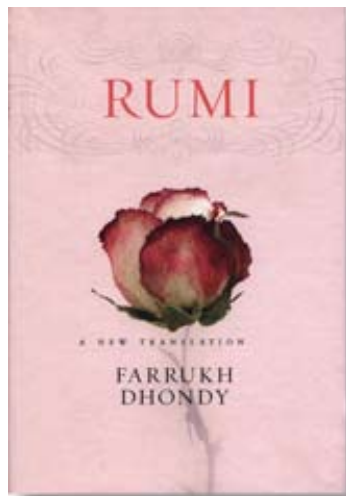
If short poems call for precision, long poems call for more than stamina: they call for a confidence in the ability of the poem to sustain that precision over a longer arc. The most ambitious poem in the book, ‘Apostrophe to a Fondue Pot’ runs over seven pages; the fondue pot attracts poets, conversations, meditation and personal history, until finally it is put back upon a shelf:

*No longer a symbol of the growing  
roundedness  
And shared surrender I thought  
worth waiting for,  
But simply a reminder of how  
foolish I have been,  
How eager to believe that words,  
When they brought us briefly out of  
ourselves,  
Could bring us closer to those  
outside us,*

The advantage that collections have over books of sequences is that it is possible to leave them for a while and return when the affect of one poem has faded and will not force an evaluation of other poems in light of what one likes best.

Nevertheless, it is harder to like the Mahabharata Sequence of poems, not because they lack skill or heart but because so many attempts have been made to reconstruct the epic that for it to be truly new or successful, it would need another, entire book to itself.

“I start things well but end them wrong”, Thakore says in the poem ‘Lament of an Onanist Bemused by the Void’ but that is too harsh an assessment and one that a poet should not be asked to make of his own work. *Elephant Bathing* and its sibling *Mughal Sequences* are offerings to savour and return to over many rewarding readings.



In *Rumi: A New Translation* of a selection of the mystic’s poems, Farrukh Dhondy elaborates on the pan-religious nature of Sufism even as it had to, for complex geopolitical reasons, align itself with Islam. He also places in helpful historical and theological context for lay readers the life of Jalaluddin Rumi. His prose essay, “Rumi, Sufism and the Modern World” (complemented by “A Personal Note” and a “Q & A with Farrukh Dhondy” in what makes up an afterword), is, ironically, the most lucid part of a book of more than 150 poems. Dhondy’s Rumi, for the most part, speaks in rhyming couplets, typically in iambic meter, and despite some variation, he is rendered laboriously monotonous in this translation, the mitigation of the humdrum not served by the length of the collection.

In “A Personal Note,” Dhondy comments on Rumi’s original couplets in the *Mathnawi* and states, “I have attempted [to reproduce this form] in most cases and tried to imitate the meter of the original.” Without further explanation and illustration from the translator, this reader might not be alone in questioning Rumi’s resorting to the most enduring metrical foot in English poetry, and Dhondy isn’t likely to convert skeptics by prefatorily stating that his “Persian is non-existent.” At the end of his note, he offers little by way of satisfactory insight into the process of his enterprise when he acknowledges “the assistance and translating skills of friends who read Persian, and occasionally, the Urdu translations of Rumi by several scholars and friends”. There’s no reason why *any* meter – if indeed metrical (rather than free) verse must be used – cannot work in a modern translation, and we must accept Dhondy’s considered choice. The devil, however, is in the detail, and the poems succumb to textbook pitfalls of the use of rhyme. Consider, for example, the startlingly infantile lines that open ‘Love Is All’, early in the volume:

Love is all there is and that’s not  
new  
I’ve heard it all my life – and so  
have you

W H Auden’s related pronouncement comes to mind: “Rhymes, meters, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice.” (W H Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* and

# Rhyme and Rumi

Rumi: A New Translation

By Farrukh Dhondy

Harper Perennial, Noida, 2011, 165 pp., Rs 299 (HB)

ISBN 978-93-5029-082-8

BHISHAM BHERWANI

*Other Essays*, Vintage Books/Random House, 1990) Dhondy’s loyalty to rhymes is a lopsided affair, a tyranny that compromises, if not subjugates, idiom (and, as a result, often enough, meaning). I wished I could get past Dhondy to the Rumi he is at pains to deliver, as in ‘The Song of the Reed’, late in the volume: “There is the story of the reed that weeps / Tears of separation as it keeps”

The memory of parting in lament  
And cries for all the pain it  
underwent

Torn from its bed, O how its  
heart does yearn  
And generates the dream of its  
return...

There’s no dearth in the volume of such slapdash perfect rhyming and ensuing odd, even cryptic, phrasing, characterised by some awkward, conspicuous combination of enjambment and inversion, resulting in ungainly syntax, elusive imagery, and diminished clarity (not helped by inconsistent punctuation, a result perhaps of copyediting and proofreading oversights and printing errors).

If giving priority to form justifies ambiguity, why undertake a translation? Dhondy has many reasons. One of these is form itself. “The accuracy kills the poetry,” he writes in “A Personal Note” in discussing his father’s attempts at translating Omar Khayyam’s rubaiyats and commending Edward Fitzgerald’s approach. Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s aphorism on translations (“if they are faithful, they are rarely beautiful, if they are beautiful, they are rarely faithful”), quoted by Dhondy, is well taken. What Dhondy appears to be saying is that he is after beauty, which to him is Rumi’s original meter, and this, in turn, means (for the most part) a parallel rendition in rhyming English couplets; however, as we witness here, form, too, can kill poetry.

If there are occasions where poems seem to circumvent the snares of Dhondy’s approach, and where his strategy is effective, they are in the short, epigrammatic verses, as in the two tetrameter lines of ‘Form’:

How futile form and harmony  
If ears don’t hear or eyes don’t see.

Of course, Dhondy may not have undertaken his translation for an audience that subjects his verses to such scrutiny (though there’s no disclaimer to that effect in his Afterword). “I am neither a Sufi nor a poet,” he admits in “A Personal

Note”. Besides, his process may not interest a general readership, to which this volume may be targeted. The compilation isn’t evidently intended as an academic contribution that might pave the path for future translations: there is no cross-referencing of poems to sources and there are no footnotes (though Dhondy does acknowledge R A Nicholson and A R Arberry). Are the poems exclusively from the *Mathnawi*, or are they also from the *Rubaiyat* (as at least one poem, titled ‘Quatrains’, would suggest) and the *Diwan*? We don’t know, and Dhondy’s intended audience, as is its prerogative, may not care.

Regardless, the analysis to which he briefly subjects other translators of Rumi can be applied to Dhondy’s own work. The “abstraction” to which he objects in a snippet of Coleman Barks is evident in his own translation. For example, in ‘Love Divine’: “The vessel of your body can consign / Your soul to the fires of love divine”

From which fires all wisdom can  
disperse  
Essences beyond all insights of  
verse.

What, among other clauses soliciting clarity, are “Essences beyond all insights of verse”?

In the same vein, while critiquing a popular New Age teacher’s rendition, Dhondy appears unaware of his own translations’ shortcomings. His verses, too, can sound like New Age prescriptions, as in his ballad-like ‘The King and the Slave Girl’, where “The doctor said the king should give / That poor girl to her lover / And thus united, let them live”

Together and the healing process  
Would contrive to resurrect  
Her body back to all its beauty.

Dhondy’s opposition with regard to the New Age teacher and to a pop musician have to do with the adulteration of the original, severe Rumi and with his presentation out of original context, reasonable objections (though the perpetrators may arguably have done much for the distribution of modern Rumi). Dhondy, with much credit to his ambition, would have a loftier Rumi, a spokesperson for Sufism, even one who might serve as an antidote to breeding geopolitical and religious resentments and entrenched pre-conceptions and aversions, as a counterforce to post-9/11 stereotyping of Islam. However, in the unlikely event that Rumi is evoked by wonks to influence foreign policy in today’s corridors of power, one doubts it will be in this translation.