

Innovation in Contemporary Indian Poetry

Edited by Mani Rao

Innovation and contemporaneity are concepts of context, and they can only be slippery in a many-centred region like India where many eras and contexts co-habit, creating many understandings of what's contemporary and what's innovative.

Nearly all contributors had trouble with these parameters; some contributors asked for a definition of the term innovative and some wondered if their writing was contemporary enough. My feeling was that perhaps the term innovation was being misunderstood as a synthetic, limited value that exists for its own sake, rather than as a creative and evolutionary tendency.

A couple of poet-friends suggested that Indian literature *per se* was not innovative – either because of the vast tradition of Indian literature both awe-inspiring and petrifying, or because of the ideal of humility converting into an outlook too timid to invent or re-invent.

Reading the poems that flowed in, I found that the innovation was less in the area of style and more in the area of content – a bold lashing out, a quirky view, a bizarre concept or an unusual juxtaposition of ideas. Language-based innovation came through mostly in the work of the non-residents. I had a momentary sense of relief, as if simply finding a trend, any trend, justified the putting together of an Indian section. After all, if one was compiling Arabic poetry, the one thing it would have in common would be that it had been written in Arabic – but here, who's to say who's Indian or not, except the poets themselves, who know best – parrots and Prometheus equally alive in their imagination.

The poets:

Jane Bhandari's geographical route is unusual. Born in Scotland, she married an Indian, migrated to India in 1967, and became a permanent resident. She has a recognizably playful style, and in her poems, while she shows what she sees, her presence does not obtrude.

Sampurna Chattarji is not entirely marooned in English like many other English-language writers in India – she is also fluent in Bengali and has translated Sukumar Ray's nonsense verse from Bengali into English. There are two poems here, a brilliant two-line flash, and a longer writing-workshop-style concrete poem from the two sides of a road accident.

Priya Sarukkai Chabbria is interested in exploring forms that existed in Indian narrative traditions and testing if they can be extended into a different language. The poem in this selection has, as a backdrop, the Tamil *puram* poetic form and is “a response to media images of the war on Iraq, the suffering of women under the Taliban regime and fundamentalism everywhere”.

NOTES: Akam (Interior) and Puram (Exterior): Tamil Akam (Interior) and Puram (Exterior) poems date from the first three centuries AD, and earlier. They are different both in content and style. Akam poems were introspective, Puram poems meant to be declaimed. Akam poems concerned love, and Puram poems were about heroism in battle, ethics, etc. Compared to Akam poems, Puram poems were simpler, straightforward, less suggestive and made less use of imagery. Akam poems were anonymous, i.e., no names were mentioned – the characters in the poems were idealized types rather than individuals. No poet speaks in his own voice, and no poem is addressed to a reader. The reader overhears what the characters say to each other, to themselves or to the moon. Puram poems however, named their heroes, who were living personages.

Mamang Dai's voice carries a romance as if from another era, and the Indian aroma in it is well-matched by an Indian diction (as when she favors the word “also”, instead of “too”, or says “can see”, “can do”). The sharp effect of her poetry comes from her choice of words (“instructed” with history and miracles) and the word combinations (my voice “is” sea waves).

Minal Hajratwala lives in San Francisco, and her work engages through the use of multiple voices. The poem in this selection impresses with its simplicity – an illustrative sketch alongside a statement.

Jam Ismail lives in Hong Kong and her ancestry is part-Indian. Her writing is attentive and precise – not a word out of place and never casual or slack – thought is adequately fulfilled in word, and the scope is sufficiently orchestral to make the experience untiring. She succumbs to the joys of language-play with the seriousness of a tea-ceremony.

Kavita Jindal, living in the UK, writes in a voice that rings true; she often writes about the struggle between the individual and society, the cry for freedom, and the burden of a role one has to play.

Smita Rajan, who lives in New Delhi, has a refreshing poem here responding to the surreal take-over of our lives by technology and computers.

Next in alphabetical order is myself; no comment.

Archna Sahni's strange concept in the poem ‘Plants Rewrite History’ is lovely because she takes it all the way, giving them an ‘attitude’. It is strange how these plants are embodied in human terms, at a physical level: hands, eyelessness.

Rati Saxena's poem was originally written in Hindi. Her imagination is on wings – the bark of a tree goes thin when cows rub their backs on it, the poet was a fruit in an earlier life and was caught by a flying parrot as she fell off a tree, and the descriptions of the sensations she felt, as the fruit in the beak! – so much detailed beauty, even when talking about the oppressed position of a woman!

Menka Shivdasani relives the trauma of the woman's role, but her style has a heightened realism that contrasts with the plain rant and blurt style prevalent in

women's poetry of anger or distress. The bizarre in the poem, by comparison with, say, Rati's poetry, less typically Indian.

Arundhati Subramaniam has clear themes and holds on to an even flow, and yet manages to innovate – so smoothly it is almost unnoticeable – as in this line: “The trick is not to noun yourself into corners”.

- Mani Rao

Jane Bhandari

Lovers on Blue Field
Return to Elephanta

Sampurna Chattarji

How Long?
Working It Out

Priya Sarukkai Chabbria

War Poems from Babylon and Persia, 2005

Mamang Dai

The Voice of the Mountain

Minal Hajratwala

The Shallows

Jam Ismail

[untitled]
lyrics

Kavita Jindal

One A Penny, Two A Penny

Smita Rajan

Man and Machine

Mani Rao

Drought

Archna Sahni

Plants Rewrite History

Rati Saxena

I, In Udaipur

Menka Shivdasani

Bird Woman

Arundhati Subramaniam

First Draft
Strategist