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## ***Land and links: Poetic connections between Kolkata/Jhargram and Canberra***

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## **New Alipore College and University of Canberra**

**Jaydeep Sarangi and Shane Strange**

### **Land and links: Poetic connections between Kolkata/Jhargram and Canberra**

Abstract:

This collaborative engagement is corresponding poems between a Canberra-based poet, Shane Strange, and a Kolkata-based poet, Jaydeep Sarangi, which explores themes like local awareness, links with the land and natural resources, and reflections on thoughts and cultural aspects of life. Taking the social and linguistic background in both poets, these poems reflect on how we both communicate with the world poetically. We maintained some principles like dialoguing ourselves with another self, with another context of life, customs, values, histories and forces and functions of the society. We wanted to imagine each other as paired and partnered, one reflecting the other. Together, we unearthed many similarities in terms of the issues we deal with to make sense of the immediate and beyond. Even though we are way apart in geography, terra firma, culture and language our engagements with words unite us within a rare fabric of proximity of thought and tuning. Expressions and images link, and bind us together.

Biographical notes:

Professor Jaydeep Sarangi is an author, editor, translator and critic of publications on Australian literature, Indian writing in English, postcolonial studies and the Dalit literary movement. He has delivered keynotes, plenary addresses, and poetry presentations at Indian and foreign universities around the globe, and is Vice President of the Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) as well as Vice President of Intercultural Poetry and Performance Library, ICCR, Kolkata.

Shane Strange is a doctoral candidate in Writing at the University of Canberra where he also tutors and lectures in writing and literary studies. His research interests include creative labour and cultural work; subjectivity and creative practice and cultural representations of the city. He is a writer of essays, short fiction and creative non-fiction who has been published widely in Australia. In 2010 he was an Asialink Literature Fellow. In 2014 he was a contributor to and co-editor of the book *Creative Manoeuvres: Writing, Making, Being* (Cambridge Scholars Press).

Keywords:

Terra firma – native – mise-en-scène – links – green – ecology

## Introduction

The connection between place and poetry is very strong, bilateral and dependable. Places have been constant sources of inspiration for poets, as reflected in books such as *Place* by Allen Fisher (1974 [2005]), and *P L A C E* by Jorie Graham (2012).

These following creative and academic exchanges between two authors based in Canberra and Kolkata deal with themes of celebration of local, land and identity and general reflections on life. The settings of the poems occur in some places in Australia and some places in India. There are three sections in this article. The first section contains Sarangi's poems and Strange's responses. The second section presents Sarangi's responses to Strange's poems. Section three then provides our critical discussion and concluding thoughts. Overall, this work signals directions for further creative research into land, identity and poetic issues in India, Australia and beyond.

### Section one: poems by Jaydeep Sarangi and responses from Shane Strange

#### *'Native Links' by Jaydeep Sarangi*

It's like green epidemic  
Green turf, green ideas  
Flowing like a rivulet  
Murmuring a green song of hope.

Big Sal trees live with history  
In the roots.  
Red soil allure ideas  
Tourists break out in numbers  
All small lanes lead to a forest  
Green reservoir of words.

The pitch dark sky smiles through the gates  
Of leaves, wondering shadows  
Ragged, rickety, forlorn

Let the moon stay for the rest of the night  
Let me now love.

My molested soft senses in a city  
Living in debris  
One night hotels  
Far away from the forest queen – Jhargram. [1]  
My friends play games,

I make love with the green.

***'My Name' by Jaydeep Sarangi***

Over breakfast, when asked  
What is her religion,  
My dear she responds:  
*May be ... may be ... not sure,  
Nana and Poppy are Hindus,  
Grams and Gramps are no more,  
Mommy doesn't care, and  
Daddy is a Muslim.  
I see a rose  
I gather lotus  
I visit churches and temples.*

My heart is a tricolour flag  
Bearing names of sages and saints  
Since ages, beyond the limits.

Rivers of the mind flood civilisations,  
Nations of no coasts. Red hearts.

***'Lake of the Mind' by Jaydeep Sarangi***

The lake  
That looks like a piano  
On it I sat  
Time whispered in the Rhododendron sanctuary,  
Amazing spirit I inhaled.  
Felt like truth flooding my thoughts.

But why is my mind yearning forever  
For the divine river?  
I had been there once, nearly  
Uncountable years ago.

They send me return tickets from America,  
For the festive October,  
Celebrating the goddess of prosperity and beyond  
But, mind knows another story  
Calm like Lachung river

Emptying into Teesta in a virgin dawn.

Men move into another space  
All move together  
Holding memories and hearts,  
Love after love, leaf after leaf.

We run down to another lake.

### **Responses from Shane Strange**

#### ***From Shane Strange's emails to Jaydeep Sarangi***

Thank you for sharing your three poems with me and allowing me to respond in kind to them. Please permit me to talk about what your poems set me to thinking as a way of contextualising my own responses.

One of the things that struck me about your poems was the way in which place became a metaphor for much more – religion, family, nation, self-awareness, love. There was a reflective richness within the poems that belied a deep connection with place, with your Jhargram, with your Kolkota. Kolkata is a land of vibrant culture and great poets. And in this connection with place comes a kind of spirituality. Whether in the shape of love, or in a sense of self, or in a sense of some higher power that perhaps your poems aim to tap into.

What they had me reflecting on is the way in which my home city, Canberra, although the capital of Australia, is one of those planned capitals that pop up in postcolonial countries – birthed from odd ideas of nation, civilisation and permanence. What lies beneath these things are a colonial history of displacement of the indigenous population who lived in this place for some 80,000 years before European colonisation (more aptly invasion). As a white Australian, and first generation immigrant (my parents were from England), I struggle with the concept that the ground under my feet is not really mine. Not in the sense of proprietorship, but in the sense that I am not of this place. As a result I feel, like Canberra, like Australia as a country, a kind of unease about where and what I am: a displacement from what is around me, a floating above the land as opposed to being *of* it.

In your poems, this question never arises. They (the poems) are unafraid to use place to *mean* something more substantial, something *of* place.

So, I'll indicate how and what I was thinking in relation to each of your poems.

#### ***Strange's response to 'Native Links'***

Immediately, I was drawn to the concept of 'green' as a descriptor, and its use as both a way of juxtaposing a critical concept of the contemporary city (green turf, green ideas) with a green of memory, of forests, less structured (raggedy, rickety, forlorn). The 'links' and 'green turf' brought golf courses to mind, and all the things they represent.

In the middle of a dry and waterless summer a few years ago, I was walking near the Canberra Golf Course, which is located near the man-made lake in the centre of our city – Lake Burley Griffin. The lake itself is usually unswimmable due to frequent outbreaks of blue-green algae which is toxic to swim in. This was one of those times. And because a drought was on through much of Australia, the discussion on water usage and water ‘security’ was very much part of a national discussion.

While Canberra was fading into various shades of brown (as it often does in summertime) the golf course (behind 6-foot-high wire fences) was a lush, almost luminescent, green. Later I found out that the golf course had rights to draw water directly from the lake to irrigate its lawns regardless of any water restrictions that may be imposed on the city at large.

So for your green, I offer my brown.

***‘Links’ by Shane Strange***  
*Responding to ‘Native Links’*

While the hills brown  
and curl back like hung  
bark on eucalypts,

While the hills recede  
into patchwork melancholia –  
ruddy yellow-brown – like the velvet  
of children’s trousers,

While skin crisps through car windows  
And the sky is blue  
like a dream that hurts the eyes,

While each lip dries and cracks like land,  
shapeless and brown and each leaf  
is as crisp as old, brown  
one dollar notes,

The golf course is pitch perfect green –  
taking water from the lake –  
and only it shall steal water  
from the deep, brown lake.

***Strange’s response to ‘My Name’***

I think this poem related directly to what I was speaking about above: a sense of place connecting to something deeper, familial, religious (a-religious?).

Here, we have a weird sense of time. We call ourselves a ‘young’ country, but the land itself is unfathomably ancient. We don’t have, for example, mountains as you might understand them, but the remnants of mountains worn down by time. Geologically, we are living in deep history. Culturally, as I mention above, this place has one of the world’s oldest continuous cultures. Nevertheless, because Australia’s European history is only a bit over 200 years old, we think of Australia as ‘young’. This is one of the weird contradictions this place brings up. Your poem brings up nation and aligns it with the body, with the heart. I don’t think I can do the same. So, I thought of geology, of striations and fractures, of the erasure of histories that seem a more promising way to talk about Australia.

***‘It is Time’ by Shane Strange***

*Responding to ‘My Name’*

Give me your hand and think about mountains.  
One needs a sense of time to understand these mountains.  
Think about millennia of erosion,  
the rubbing away of peaks into nubs and hillocks  
like knuckle bones, like the mounts beneath your fingers.  
It requires the contemplation of infinity,  
the envisioning of insignificance.

Do not tell me this is new land.  
Do not open your mouth to tell me this is new land.  
This is a land of striations and fault lines,  
Land of tens of thousands of years,  
Of slow earth layering and folding and cracking:  
Elided by time – crushed between layers,  
Written from history.

***Strange’s response to ‘Lake of the Mind’***

LBG in my poem stands for Lake Burley Griffin, which is a man-made lake at the centre of Canberra. It’s a result of damming up the Murrumbidgee river which trickles through this part of the country (I hesitate to say ‘flow’ in case you get the wrong idea of its strength).

‘Lake of the Mind’ clearly negotiates the way a lake ‘that looks a piano’ becomes a reflection of an interior life, of yearning and of movement.

With ‘LBG’ I wanted to contrast the sense of flow in your poem with the artificial construction of our own lake – the genesis of it as the concept of an architect, and to make it still like a pane of glass that doesn’t look upon anything.

***‘LBG’ by Shane Strange***

*Responding to ‘Lake of the Mind’*

A hand is like the earth.  
Hold it upwards to offer the sky  
something of yourself.

A river is like the rain caught  
in the palm of your hand.  
It falls to the lowest point.

A wall is like an explosion  
when it rains.

This lake is the dream of architects.  
A pane of glass on the earth.  
A sky falling to its lowest point.

Section two: Jaydeep Sarangi's responses to Shane Strange's poems

### **From Jaydeep Sarangi's emails to Shane Strange**

Thank you for your refreshing poems, and this opportunity to share thoughts and impressions on your poems. This poetic link is like meeting the beloved when the lover's joy knows no bounds, coming from two extreme lands of the world.

The poet's job is to put into words those feelings we all have that are so deep, so important, and yet so difficult to name, to tell the truth in such a beautiful way, that people cannot live without it. Your pen voices life's true moments, small acts of everyday living. This is where we probably connect each other. 'River', 'wall' and 'history' are common metaphors in our poetry. I always believe that there are histories within history. Chronicles are ever changing. Wall limits our motion. But we can always create doors on the walls. It's like we change a full stop to semi colon or a comma for a continuous progression of sense(s). Simple and lucid lines of your poems are a wide and varied spectrum where every artless wish is a full song in emotions recollected in solitude. Your poems reminded me of my maiden visit to Canberra in October 2012. I stayed at ANU guest house and noted many links between India and Australia. I could imagine why A. D. Hope and his beautiful wife Penelope attracted many Indian scholars and poets to their Canberra home. There is a unique serenity which calms the soul.

Reading your poems I revisit the old Indian saying, 'friendship works on mind, body and soul'.

### ***Sarangi's response to 'Links'***

Very smart and short lines communicate before it is understood. You have portrayed your place beautifully. There is a hint of satire on prosaic community with a beautiful image of



‘one dollar note(s)’. The image of brown floods the poem. This intimate poem manifests the truth through unique images from life’s dilemma: arrival and departures of colours and impressions of a place. Use of punctuation is an important poetic tool. You take highest energy out of this. It also creates motion within a sentence to reflect love as a continuous form. It is linear.

***‘My Baggage’ by Jaydeep Sarangi***  
*Responding to ‘Links’*

On the days of the falling old leaves  
I see your face  
my thought hangs in the air  
to see you again and again.  
You craft my vision, afresh.  
My boat is to sail in the dark.

On the pages I write, cry  
my dreams in your absence.

My poems are souvenirs of my faith  
ghosts of the half moon night,  
prayers, hands folded, eyes shut  
rain tips it wings.

Heart is frisking the light in abundance.

***Sarangi’s response to ‘It is Time’***

It’s an amazing poem which reminds me of A. D. Hope’s masterpiece ‘Australia’. The invitation is always there to transcend time. You make things happen with vibes and it resonates in the mind for a long spell. It spills over white pages and glitters with dignified cadence and rhythm.

I find a hint of irony in the line, ‘Do not tell me this is new land’. Your poem is an act of reviving memory of silence, land and people.

***‘It’s Political’ by Jaydeep Sarangi***  
*Responding to ‘It is Time’*

At times, even a flight  
of a pigeon is political.

A bird’s beak of tears  
is the popular trade of blood.

The shore keeps me awake.  
where are the refugees of the world?

I try to wear this weight of living  
singing a song of the door.

Of many doors, the dark one  
chronicle, making no secret of lies.

***Sarangi's response to 'LBG'***

Waiting is like the seed imagines its further growth. Your poem makes our sense organs feel the earth. Your images like 'walls', 'hand', 'river', 'the sky', and so on make the reader feel for the land and its uniqueness. Walls limit our motion. Here lies the juxtaposition of conceptions or shifting ideas. Images rain in our mind. You don't worry about sounding contemporary. The soft focus is life, human life with its myriad hues, their substance, liquefied in dappled tones.

A good poem is a contribution to sensibility. Your poem leads us to that.

***'Sweet Home' by Jaydeep Sarangi***

*Responding to 'LBG'*

I try to think of home  
where my feet are  
door after door  
with a key that is not.

I travel between joy and more joy  
not understanding what to grow into myself.

Dense jungle and deep water  
white mountains and smart springs  
my legs know them all.

My daughter has a question,  
'Where is the window?'  
I see one there, aging one  
in the distance, where  
the forest queen sits. My daughter  
takes me for a ride every month.  
beyond my daily failures and success.

## Concluding thoughts

Both of us believe that the language of poetry is different from that of prose not merely in its connotative abilities but also in its reflexivity in drawing attention to its own communicative (im)possibilities. We experience poetry as being perennially occupied in the process of communication, of saying, unsaying, and non-saying.

The poems we have presented in this article are armed with love, grit, fortitude and hopes. To write of land was for each of us a way of bearing witness to the issues affecting the places where we live. In sharing our poems or testimonies, and in reading those of the other, we each discovered links between our own lands and those of which we read. Responding creatively to one another's poetic accounts further enriched our appreciation for these links and was for us demonstrative of poetry's capacities to act as a means of knowing and of knowledge-generation. Common threads running through our writings include a feeling of cultural uniqueness; sensitivity to nature; an indefinable sense of longing and absences; and much angst, both personal and social. Ours is a search, the shore of which keeps us alluring.

This collaboration has affirmed for us a belief that one crucial function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. Both of us are committed to poetry that pursues this function. We write what engages us deeply. This includes our deep engagement with concerns such as ecological crisis, gender stereotyping, patriarchal hegemony, and additional issues of our contemporary socio-political situations, as reflected through the lines and themes of the poems we have presented in this article. These are thus poems of struggle, but also, poems of hope, for not all in these poems is liquid narratives of pain. We are optimistic about the capacities of people in transnational contexts to connect and engage in dialogues. Our experience has reminded us of the important role poetry has to play in facilitating such forms of connection towards possibilities of learning and transforming our worlds for the better.

## Notes

1. Jhargram is Sarangi's hometown. Kolkata is the city where he now resides.

## Works cited

- Fisher, A 1974 [2005] *Place*, Reality Street Editions, East Sussex
- Graham, J 2012 *P L A C E*, Ecco Press, New York