

Book Review

by

Malashri Lal¹***Dusk to Dawn: Poetic Voices on the Current Times, South Asia and Beyond.*****Edited by Chandra Mohan, Rita Malhotra, Anamika. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 2021. Pages 391. Rs. 695/-**

True to its title, *Dusk to Dawn* started at the time of impending darkness and gloom in the month of March 2020 when the corona virus hit India and the world with its tenacious tentacles. It was published in mid-2021 when hope became viable. The book's genesis in a chain mail plugs it to the unusual circumstances of the pandemic. Dr Chandra Mohan had written to friends and litterateurs asking for "Beautiful Lines on Changing Times". The response was overwhelming as several writers were looking for the metaphorical ferry over the stormy waters of anxiety. Poetry started arriving in plenty—moving, thoughtful, emotional, imagistic, capturing the dismay of the times yet stretching towards glimmers of hope. In the words of Robert Browning, "Man's reach should exceed his grasp/Or what's a heaven for?" Some writers started little 'jugalbandis' responding to each other's work, e.g., Keki Daruwalla and Rupin Desai, others offered photos with poems, several introduced Hindi and Urdu material to localise the scenario. The breakthrough occurred with Dr. HK Kaul's idea of the poetic emails being converted into a book. Tragically, Dr. Kaul succumbed to Corona. His faithful friends, the editorial team of *Dusk to Dawn* decided to create the volume in his honour, a tribute from across the world from one hundred writers who believed in poetry as an instrument of healing.

How does the healing happen?

First, through confronting the ominous threat of the cannibalistic virus that invades the body and destroys the innards. Isolation in home and hospitals, a death without handholding, a

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cremation of anonymity. Gulzar saab sees kites hovering over corpses in a deserted city, Cyril Dabydeen notices the empty home of his neighbour now dead, K. Satchidanandan observes one child in the garden whereas there used to be a sibling, now departed. These are emblems of loss too deep for tears, too heart wrenching for a description. Stark images, broken words stand in for the families and communities reduced to shards.

Until March 2020, the worries used to be about pollution, climate change and water famine. Worries have today become focussed on death with Sudeep Sen's poem "Obituaries" noting that the passage is not about others but possibly about ourselves. Haadaa Sendoo of Mongolia writes a "Message from the ICU", Ozge Cengiz from Turkey unravels the sorrows "Behind the Curtains," Peter Thabit Jones from Wales recalls the "disarming emptiness" of "Pandemic 2020". Globally, and this is the message of *Dusk to Dawn*, ethnic, regional, and other differences have been flattened by the uniformity of suffering. "Death the Leveller", James Shirley's poem of the seventeenth century rings true in our milieu, one may say.

Second, suggests the book, one may attempt to heal by tugging at the threads of hope - the doctors and the caregivers. Covid saw us inventing new collocations: front line workers, social distancing, contact-less delivery and many more: words borrowed from the war zone, words of aggression; a wilful separation among family and beloved friends, this has become "Covid appropriate behaviour". How has the natural garrulity of Indians accepted this situation? Sanjukta Dasgupta's poem "The Healing Touch" is an address to a doctor with the refrain "we are not well, not well at all" repeated plaintively, Sukrita Paul Kumar imagines Christ with a stethoscope, Anukruti Upadhyay sees women, the nurture givers, protectively watching over their children. Perhaps the migrants' story has been particular to India and several poets track those grievous tales and agonising images that remain to haunt our memory: children at railway platforms, women trudging onwards to a village home, men in a cluster lugging provisions for sustenance, bedraggled tents by the wayside, a stack of abandoned cycles carrying tales of grief. Sanjeev Kaushal and Alka Tyagi turn to nature for some images of succour, Rita Malhotra addresses the doctors with the "congruent hope" of defeating the common enemy. However, Ashok Vajpeyi claims, "No we will not be able to write our times".

Dusk to Dawn carries two Introductory essays, highly useful for contextualising the poetry. Chandra Mohan notes how "poets play their role of therapists", words being expressions of their hurting self but equally containing regenerative power. He also

enumerates the sub-themes covered in the poems which amount to numerous aspects of the covid experience. He and Rita Malhotra are to be credited for the international coverage and selection of the English section. Poet and feminist scholar Anamika writes a thoughtful introduction to the Hindi section moving between theories of poetics, ethics and aesthetics and offering literary illustrations. Her surmise that “poetry has emerged as the only sacred space” is worthy of regard as the ongoing pandemic has left us groping for answers in the “knowable” world. The culminating value of this unusual book of poems lies in the “Soulful Prayer” penned by Dr. Karan Singh, poet, philosopher and distinguished authority on ancient texts:

Darkness threatens to engulf me on all sides
Light the candle of faith in my heart, O Lord
And grant me a vision of Your form today...
