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The Poetic Abstract in Jaydeep Sarangi's *The Wall and Other Poems* (2015) and Birbhadra Karkidholi's *Pristine Stroke* (2015): A Comparative Study

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Birbhadra Karkidholi, from Assam, and Jaydeep Sarangi, from West Bengal, are very poignant, profound and perspicacious poets. Their latest poetry collections – Birbhadra Karkidholi's *Pristine Stroke* (2015, a collection of thirty-six selected poems translated by Srijana Subba from Nepali to English) and Jaydeep Sarangi's *The Wall and Other Poems* (2015), a collection of forty-eight poems – carry the indigenous flavours of their respective states. The poets become the eyes and the ears of the readers and show them the landscape, the animals, the plants, the mountains, the rivers, the village roads, the homes, the cities of the places they hail from. In fact, their poems open up many windows to their respective cultures, languages, traditions, and the quintessential hallmarks of their states.

Interestingly, their poems like the branches of trees spread outwards, way beyond the borders of their respective states, while still remaining firmly rooted in the soil of their motherland. This can, specifically, be said about Sarangi who, indeed, as mentioned in the foreword to his book, "lives locally but thinks globally" (5). Most of Karkidholi's poems acquire their universal appeal due to the fact that they refer and cater to humanity in general. Nevertheless, the poems in both the books are rich in images that evoke powerful abstractions. Karkidholi

and Sarangi draw images from various natural, mythological, historical, religious and manmade sources. There are concrete images that convey thoughts and emotions that mystify and befog the mind; and then, gradually, like dew drops trickle down to the heart.

Karkidholi's image of the Himalaya and Sarangi's image of the wall are conspicuous due to their recurrences in a number of poems in the books, respectively. In his poem, 'The Himalaya' (27), Karkidholi paints the image of the one of the greatest mountain ranges and uses it as a symbol or as an objective correlative of his own feelings and ideas. The poet personifies the Himalaya, comparing it to a sage in the first stanza of the poem – " That sage is meeting his fellow sage [the poet]" (27). Gradually, the character of the great Himalaya is built. It becomes a symbol of something that is timeless, intrepid and stoical; yet, humble, honest and magnanimous:

From time immemorial
The snow has been melting down,
Never has the Himalaya lost its height
Never is the Himalaya
Ever terrified of the warmth of the sun.

Never has the Himalaya for sleep
Sold its dream
Never has the Himalaya told
'I am so tall.'

Distributing snow and frost
The Himalaya has not become lesser;
Allured by beauty, never has the Himalaya
Grown flowers on its shoulders. (6-18)

For the poet, the Himalaya is an old friend, someone he knows very intimately. The poet suggests the specious, conceited, gluttonous, transient man to learn morality, humility and munificence from this stationary expert on life. The Himalaya, thus described, evokes the image of a vulnerable,

formidable, wise old man who knows the flaws of his children but never preaches; instead, he patiently, waits for the time and experience to teach them the tough lessons of life. Clearly, the Himalaya is Karkidholi's pride, his credo; and, a source of mental strength and inspiration for his poems, in particular, and life, in general.

In the same vein, Karkidholi, in his poem 'Mountains are Declared Himalaya' (42), again tries to justify the veracity of his acquaintance with the Himalaya. He maintains that

On the last dusk of December
Because of the heavy snowfall
The jet-black rocky mountains,
And the heights
— Totally covered with white snow —
Declared themselves Himalaya
Presumed themselves Himalaya.

On my part, I kept on reminding, reminding
The rocky mountains
The scorching sun of tomorrow. (6-15)

According to the poet, one cannot call any "rocky mountains" the "Himalaya". The implied metaphor here is that one cannot become a self-proclaimed God. Thus, through the image of snow covered mountains, the poet intends to highlight the specious claims of the politicians – their dubiousness of their black souls clad in 'white *kurtas*' and 'Gandhi *topis*'. The last two lines of the poem depict the real Himalaya, as the poet knows it – snowless, shining in the light of the "scorching sun" (42). The image brings forth the idea of optimism that beams with the future prospects of having honest politicians and a great nation. On a second and a more personal level, the "last dusk of December" (referring to the well-known social convention of making resolutions on a new year's eve) can be seen as a point in time of a person's life where he resolves to slough off all

affectations of fallacious greatness; and, emerge anew in his/her original form, spiritually pure and simple.

The wall and the river Ichamati serves the same purpose for Sarangi as the Himalaya for Karkidholi. In his poem, 'The Wall' (21-22), Sarangi builds on Robert Frost's famous poem, 'Mending Wall' (1914) and quotes its first two lines, as an epigraph. Sarangi talks about the bleak struggle of partition (partition of Bengal also took place in 1905, only to be reunited in 1911) of Bengal in 1947 into West Bengal and East Bengal; and, later in 1971 the Bangladesh Liberation War. According to Sarangi, the partition of Bengal should have never taken place for these two places share a history and a culture that cannot be separated by man-made borders or "the wall" (21). Sarangi holds, "We are twins/Our veins have one blood" (Foreword 4). The images that the poet paints in the first stanza are of destruction and pain brought by the partition:

Years back I got a paper. Eagles had their party
To build the wall
Between the minds, rivers and mountains.
We fought against each other, ramp shows
On different grounds. Wrote history of the other. Slogans.
Burned flags and showed our back. Organs of the senses
Had a festival. Cock fight.
Things were loud and noisy. Mothers had their nerves
On the mouth. All shattering.
A shadow is the best of mates. (1-10).

The image of the "Eagles" – that refers to the power hungry politicians who were the masterminds behind the partition of the Hindus and the Muslims in 1947, that gave birth to Pakistan and East Bengal – is sharp. "The wall" is not only the symbol of division between countries, but separation of the children of the ancestors that were once united. The image of the legacy of violence and hunger that followed the partition has been well elicited by Sarangi in the above stanza.

According to the poet, only memories remain. History repeats itself as the “Time ran a full circle”; and the “Perspective became global/Neighbourhood friendly/...Mutual concern/Respect for legacy cooled down hot blood” (21) – so ultimately, things have changed for good. Now, one can see “Corridors on the wall” (21) or ‘open passages to each other’s hearts’ that beat with the same rhythm. The poem, ‘Friendship beyond Borders’ (1), by Sarangi expounds a similar ideology. The poet once again personifies the wall and believes that “Walls stand up and shake hands,/Crossing borders of the mind/And then, two hands extending a friendship” (11). The image thus created is an abstraction of goodwill; and, communal growth and harmony.

“We are a very old wall” says Sarangi in his poem, ‘Sailing through Ichamati’ (13). The poem echoes the same notion of reunion for the sake of retrospective oneness as the poems, ‘The Wall’ (21) and ‘Friendship beyond Borders’ (1). The footnote to the poem reads: “Ichamati is a river that separates India from Bangladesh” (13). Hence the “old wall” is none other than the river, Ichamati, and the poet articulates:

Ichamati is the corridor
 Into things we can design.
 We are twins.
 Our veins have one blood
 Even when we are separate souls on map. (11-15)

The image of the “wall” and the “Corridors on the walls” mentioned in the poem, ‘The Wall’ (21), is, thus, repeated in the poem under discussion. The desperation to be one again surges with the flow of Ichamati river – the liquefied wall. It is a symbol of a thinly veiled illusion of still being united. This liquefied wall mocks the cartographers and all those who believe in communal division. The poet revels even in the scintilla of hope that offers the slightest dramatic prospect of the borders dissolving. Sanguinely, the river is not considered a rift that draws apart, but a bridge that brings people and places together. Sarangi’s other

poems that reverberate the same idea are 'A Doorway near Vistula' (19), 'Stories Beyond the Wall' (16), 'Full Story' (17), 'The Other Side of Silence' (12) and 'The Other Side of the Bridge' (48).

Both the poets have used certain mythological characters and images as objective correlatives to express themselves figuratively in their respective poems. In the poems like 'Draupadi' (40) and 'Aphrodite Near the Banks of Dulung' (15) by Sarangi; and, 'Radha! Krishna, Oh, Ram! Sita' (64-66) by Karkidholi, we see concrete images of some prominent Hindu mythological figures from the great epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The idea, behind the depiction of these images, is to voice some very profound and serious implications that are more contextual in our present society than ever before.

Sarangi's poem, 'Draupadi' (40) is based on the eponymous character from the Mahabharata: the one who was born out of sacrificial fire; an incarnation of Kali, the goddess of power and destruction of evil; the wife of the five Pandavas in the famous Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*; a friend of Lord Shri Krishna; and, the mother of five sons, one from each Pandava. The awestruck poetic persona admits:

I haven't seen the face of a second sex
So confident even when patriarchy ruled lives
She took control of the Pandavas
With strength from Srikrishna
Marked timely aggression
Heart full of Kindness
Nerves strong. Mind straight as an arrow. (1-7)

The story of Draupadi finds relevance in the present era of women empowerment. Her image, as presented by the poet, is a symbol of intrepid courage. Clearly, she is an inspiration for all the modern women of our era who complain of being bound in the fetters of patriarchy. The poet finds no suitable female equivalent to the valour and "Lethal determination" (40) of

Draupadi. She is an epitome of extraordinary beauty and influential mind.

The last two lines of the poem generalise and sum up the essence of a woman: “A dairy of pains. Eyes always wet with tears/She writes a new saga for women across cultures” (40). The image of Draupadi is of universal importance. She is a grieved mother and a deceived wife – all symbols of an ill-fated, woebegone, pathetic woman. One would expect such a woman to be weak, frail, vulnerable and gullible; but, on the contrary, she emerges as a deadly revenge seeker who stands tall against the patriarchal injustice. The poet tells us, “She had no weapon in her hands/She fought the battle with her strong mind” (40). Thus, figuratively, she becomes the Kali, the demon slayer, but sans the *astras*, for she uses the mind – the deadliest weapon ever made.

The idea that today’s modern woman is more or less an image of Draupadi is not far-fetched. A modern woman lives in constant fears and insecurities. For example, one of the most common fears amongst the women of modern age (and of all ages, so to speak) have been the fear of *Cheer-haran* (literally, stripping of one’s clothes; something that Draupadi faced after her five husbands lost her in the game of dice) or physical assault or rape. Sadly, they, unlike Draupadi, let their insecurities weigh heavy on their determination to fight back. Perhaps, the modern society needs Draupadis – something the poetic persona wishes the women of all cultures to become.

In Sarangi’s poem, ‘Aphrodite Near the Banks of Dulung’ (15) we find references to female Goddesses – local and international. The title, interestingly, mentions, Aphrodite, the Greek Goddesses of beauty, love and sexuality on the banks of Dulung, a famous river in West Bengal. In the first stanza, the poet compares Aphrodite and Wadje, the Egyptian snake goddess – the latter has a woman’s body and a snake’s head. The image of Aphrodite in all her nudity that “arose from the sea

foam/With her foot resting on a tortoise" (15) "is more terrible", according to the poet, than Wadje. This is an abstraction of the narrow-mindedness of certain religious conformists who believe in keeping their woman hidden behind veil, let alone considering the possibility of a nude goddess.

Ironically, "muse[s] in English" (15) have been written on goddesses like Aphrodite and Wadje. They are internationally known mythological figures. But, the Mansa Devi whom the "Tribals worship in mud huts" is lesser known and more localised. The poet reveals, "She [Mansa Devi] is never jealous of Aphrodite/Her skin is not white like her" (15). Furthermore, we are told that "Sage Kashyapa taught her [Mansa Devi] alphabets" and she "[d]oesn't mind if worshipped by Hindu lower caste groups,/For infectious smallpox, chicken pox" (15). Evidently, she is the Goddess of the poor, uneducated, superstitious and the marginalised people. She is benign, humble, magnanimous and benevolent: she saves her worshippers from snake bites; and keeps maladies and pestilences away from them.

Highlighting her importance, the poet explains that "Oja-Pali [musical folk theatre] rests solely on its myth" and, unlike, Aphrodite "Her beauty never misleads men to many roads and lanes/Every household on the banks of small rivers and/Water bodies see her in a sari..." (15). Symbolising decency and shame, our Hindu Goddesses are clad in saris unlike Aphrodite. Metaphorically, Goddess Mansa stands for all those who enjoy localised fame but, clearly, deserve more: the best analogy being the local talented people from the world of literature and art who deserve international acclaim and global recognition. Such people don't stoop down to cheap ways of acquiring fame and are never jealous of others who have international acceptance and acclaim. They are the local heroes who silently contribute to and propagate universal peace and communal growth through their puissant work.

Karkidholi's poem, 'Radha! Krishna, Oh, Ram! Sita' (64-66), is one of the longest poems in his book. Like Sarangi's poems discussed above, this poem also has some prominent mythological figures and images: Ram, Sita, Ravan, Radha, Krishna, Meera and Hanuman. What fascinates the reader is the use of mythological figures belonging to two different epics of Hindu religion, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, in one poem. The poem is not easy to comprehend. Though, apparently perspicuous, the logical semantics baffles the mind of a reader.

The poem begins with a reference to Lord Krishna's flute. According to Hindu mythology, Shri Krishna is a melodious, enchanting flute player. The "magical tune" of the flute "... casts spell/On the Gopinis!" (64). But soon, the poem takes a twist when poet says, "But we never heard any eagle and vultures/Being enchanted in any mythical story" (64). The lines allude to Robert Browning's 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. The words "eagle and vultures", the scavengers, evoke the image of unrelenting evil that is difficult to cull without violence: as 'the melodious tune of the flute' has no effect on them. Hence, the flute of Krishna cannot do what his *Sudershan Chakra* can. The third and the fourth stanzas of the poem read:

The thirsty serpents. Flicker thirst tongues,
On whose laps
He is gracefully seated.
Always fond of good things, he is.
Forgetting to bite, even the serpents
are engrossed in licking. Shree Krishna's members.

Lickers are poisonous like this
Venomous,
That's why I get scared.
And I always strictly keep away from
The lickers who overdo it. (10-20)

These lines create a picture of lord Vishnu, the creator – according to Hindu religion, both, Lord Ram and Lord Krishna are an incarnation of lord Vishnu – in all his grandeur, seated on

Sheshnaga, a colossal serpent, with his consort, Lakshmi, messaging his feet. According to the poet, Lord Vishnu is “[a]lways fond of good things, he is” (64). As evident, Vishnu’s incarnation Lord Krishna is a pleasure seeker – an enchanter who romances with the “Gopinis”.

‘The lickers’ or the serpents in the stanza quoted above, present Shri Krishna in a completely different abstraction. It represents the one who is in power. His subordinates fawn over him in a hope of obtaining illegal and unethical favours in return. The tone is thus satirical and the notion is to bring forth follies of our political system. The poetic persona avoids sycophants as he considers them venomous or malicious like the serpents. Then, a completely different dove-like image of Meera is drawn by the poet in the next three lines. He wonders, “What a madness in Meera?/Again what a sacrifice to find/Krishna in a statue?” (64). Meera here is a symbol of selfless love. Allegorically, she stands for all the gullible people who blindly follow the influential political figures. So far, the poem appears to be a moral and a political allegory.

Karkidholi then writes:

Thousands pain smile. Radha on lips.
What a pain? So unbearable,
On the other side, in Ram,
Just because Sita
Merely stepped on the border line.
Ravan is not contaminated
In character but
There are thoughts generated in the eyes
That if Ravan were Ram!
Why didn’t Ram get attracted at all
To playing the flute. (24-34)

Meera’s pain is defined by Krishna’s indifference. He always has the name of Radha on his lips. Radha has acquired recognition as Krishna’s consort. In comparison to Meera’s pain is that of Ram’s, who bears “unbearable” agony only because

Sita was lured by Ravan to cross the *Lakshman Rekha*. Then the poet compares Ram and Ravan: “Ravan is not contaminated/In character...” and “... if Ravan were Ram!” (65). Here it is important to mention that Lord Ram and Krishna were incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the God of Creation on earth. They came to earth in human form and on earth there are no such things as heroes or villains. There are just fallible people. Thus, from Hindu mythology one learns empathy: even Ravan is “not contaminated” or ‘corrupt’. Moreover, there is nothing in a name: an apple can be named a rose and a rose an apple – it does not change the basic intrinsic qualities of a thing, thus, renamed. In the last line of the above stanza, the poet compares Ram and Krishna. The former represents adherence to rules and promises; Godly aura of selfless sacrifices and asceticism; while, the latter, represents materialism, indulgence in worldly pleasures; bending of rules for the betterment of all; and, Karma based on a practical approach towards life.

Radha and Krishna, says the poet, were different but both shared an “unbearable anxiety” and “fire invisible” of eternal love burning in them (65). The poet observes:

That's why Radha,
 Radha arrives running
 In the river, thirsty
 Treading the sand, scaling
 off the female feet;
 Oh, the ignorance of not knowing!
 Skilled in saving the thirst
 The great god! Shree Krishna! (45-52)

Thus, Radha's act of pining for Krishna is “the ignorance of not knowing” (65). Radha does not know that Krishna's love is not only for her but for the other Gopins as well. She is only Krishna's most favourite consort. The image of a subservient woman bowing to the whims of her shrewd male companion is created. The reference to “... scaling/off the female feet” evokes the difference in the physicality of Radha and Krishna. Their

souls might be one; but, bodily, they are two. The mental and the physical frailties of a woman's body have been contrasted with the extraordinary skills of her male counterpart. The last five line of the stanza can be interpreted as being gender biased, but, after all, a human, Radha, had fallen for a God, Krishna; or perhaps, Karkidholi's Krishna is too worldly to be Godly. The next four lines compare Sita and Radha:

The pain that is to be seen in the inner Radha
The same pain is not to be seen in the inner Sita.
But the thirst that is to be seen in Radha
The same thirst is not to be seen in Sita.

Ram tested his own Sita. By immolating her.
But Radha did not test her own Shree Krishna by
immolating him. In fire.
This is the only difference
Ram ah! In Shree Krishna!
Sita ah! In Radha!
And in understanding by human like us.
Having understood but not in forgetting Meera. (53-64)

On one level, the word "inner", used in the first two lines of the above stanza, shows that Radha and Sita, if given a chance, would have manifested their real "inner" selves and might have acted differently. They might have emerged as strong feminine incarnations like Sarangi's Draupadi. Apparently, Radha is more aggrieved and hungry for love than Sita. The plausibility of this fact can be explained by understanding that Sita was too subservient and ethical to be humane or worldly. Her love rested on her unshakeable faith in Ram that he was only hers – a tacit agreement on which all marital bounds are based. And, Ram indeed was one of the most faithful husbands in Hindu mythology. But, he was not one of the best husbands. Bent on following rules and maintaining decorum, he doubted his wife and tested her fidelity "[b]y immolating her" (65). Radha, on the other hand, is more like an aggrieved lover who hopes her promiscuous beloved to return to her one day.

Clearly, Ram and Radha are different in their approaches towards love and life. Radha is more humane, a flawed law-breaker, while Ram, a King and a God, who is expected to always abide by the law of the state and the social conventions. But, love is based on belief. So, did Ram really love Sita? Or was it all a matter of false male prestige and ego that made him fight Ravan to win back Sita? If so then, how is Ram different from Ravan? In the end, the poet advises his readers not to forget Meera, for she represents love in all its purity and paucity. Thus, in the poems of both Sarangi and Karkidholi, the tangible mythological figures are a store house of intangible emotions and progressive ideas.

To conclude, both the poets, in their respective poems, use imagery as symbols to depict their strong aversion to the moral depravity and morbid political drama being played in the environments they breathe and move in. The concrete images are magnificent: huge mountains ranges like the Himalayas; a large surging, wide and deep river; a wall as strong and big to serve as international borders. The archetypes of Hindu mythology acquire a new meaning in the modern context. The poets look at them from a completely new perspective that is more *comme il faut* and relevant to the present times than ever before. The magnanimity of the images very subtly conveys the intensity of the abstractions and emotions ingrained in their poetry.

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