

the sky was an honest blue...: **Contemporary Poetry in English from Assam**

- Nigamananda Das

Abstract: The paper explores poetry in English from Assam since 1960 onwards. This poetry includes translations from Assamese poetry both religious and secular by various translators and poetry written originally in English. Those who have written originally in English are Lakshahira Das, Bhupati Das, Dayananda Pathak, Umakanta Sarma, Rupanjali Baruah and others. Assamese poets writing in Assamese are seldom obscure. The publications of Assamese poets writing in English do not reflect the essence of the Assamese culture significantly. In this regard it is different from the English poetry written in other Indian provinces.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavite Faith, jikir songs, mystical expressions, skylark of Northeast India, agonising turbulence.

In 1960 Hem Barua published *Modern Assamese Poetry*, a select collection of English translations of Assamese poems. In this collection, out of the twenty six Assamese poets, nine poets translated their own poems into English. This shows that in 1960 in Assam there were poets who could have written in English. Assamese poetry which has yet to renounce romanticism is quite different from the poetry of the other provinces of India in its emotional effects and aspects. Even, at present, except a few, Assamese poets writing in Assamese are seldom obscure. The publications of Assamese poets writing in English do not reflect the essence of the Assamese culture significantly. In this regard it is different from the English poetry written in other Indian provinces.

The poetry in English from Assam abounds in a good quantum of translations from folk and religious vernacular literatures and ethnic literatures. The *Bhagavat*, *Kirtan*, *Namghosha*, *Bhaona* and other forms Vaishnavite or ethnic literatures have been translated into English, which have enriched the reservoir of poetry in English. Discussion of a few samples will provide us some information about the works in this field. Pradip Acharya, Ajit Barua and some other English teachers of Assam have published commendable works in this field. Mahapurush Sankardeva (1449-1569) who propagated *Ekasarannamdharm*, the neo-vaishnavite faith of surrendering to the single Lord by chanting His holy name etched a good number of songs that dilate the glory of the Almighty. Some of these verses bear mark of literary excellence of universal appeal:

Numbered are the years that measure your life;
 Half the life slips away in the hours of sleep;
 A score of years fly in the winds of boyish pranks;
 Ten years go in counting coins on the finger-tip.

Think of the twenty years at the other end of it
 When life shall grow too heavy to drag on;
 Each hour in the sand-glass shall be an eternity of aches,
 Each sunrise bringing dullness and disease unknown.
 And shall melt away the dreams of your eyes and starry hues;
 Confined in a cabin it shall pile up a welter of woes.

(*Prahlad Caritra*) (Barua 27)

The English rendering of Sankardeva's works by various scholars is mostly prosaic as it is very difficult to bring the felicity of poetry in translation:

Madhava, Rama Hari, / O Jadava! Rama Hari.
 Being Vyasa, son of Satyabati,
 you saw the people becoming very foolish.
 Then you spread the teachings of the four Vedas
 and wrote the epic of 'Mahabharat'...
 You fought with the demons for gods and
 Indra won the battle at your blessings....
 Shri Shankardeva, the disciple of Krishna says such,
 "All say Hari Hari in order to destroy your vices."

(Tr. Punya Hazarika, 5-6)

Sankardeva propagated the various modes of bhakti and equity of human beings, caste and creedless society and upliftment of the downtrodden. In his *Kirtan ghosha*, he declares from the mouth of Lord Krishna:

If women and sudras cultivate bhakti for me
 Impart to them this knowledge, great minded one. (Dev Goswami 20)

He propounded the doctrine of self-surrender to the Almighty Lord and advised his disciples:

Throw thy body, soul and all at the feet of that vast one
 With single minded devotion and thou wilt enjoy the
 Bliss of human life. (ibidem 22)

Madhavadeva, the prominent disciple of Sankardeva in his works propagated the bhakti dharma to uplift the downtrodden and to cleanse the society from all sorts of evils:

My obeisance to that devotee
 Who is indifferent even to salvation.
 Verily, I crave for ecstatic devotion.
 My adoration to that Lord yadupati
 Who, being the crown-gem of all,
 Remains enslaved to His worshipper. (Dutta 1)

He also wrote many lyrical songs about many aspects of the worldly life like the sense of apathy or indifference to worldly pursuits:

O Hari, how can I be saved, sinful as I am
 Unless you shower your mercy on me?
 The sinful mind does not forsake worldly desires:
 I am deeply plunged in the dreadful world. (Sarma 1985:55)

A Sufi saint named Ajan Fakir who migrated to Assam from Baghdad in the later part of 16th century is credited with the composition of 200 jikir

songs for muslims of Assam. In his jikir he has spread the bhakti principles both for the Hindu and Muslim communities of Assam. He says:

The *Quran* and purans preach the same
If you are a wise man, you will understand

Ajan Fakir has emphasized on the control of mind and sense to overcome the worldly illusions. He said to his disciples:

Keep your wild senses under control
You will be victorious. (Malik 31)

These poet-saints, who were pillars of society once upon a time, have been so even now and their works in English translations have been enriching the reservoir of new literatures of the postcolonial times. Besides translations from the saints there have been ample translations from Assamese poetry. Famous Hiren Bhattacharya's poems have been rendered into English in an anthology *Ancient Gongs* (1985) where the profound thoughts of the stalwart have found deft expression in the other tongue. The following poem speaks of Bhattacharya's vital concerns:

My pen is the hammer in the blacksmith's hands.
I hammer words into shape sharp as the
Farmer's plough-share, the golden Sita on
The furrows, ragged like the carpenter's saw,
I extract from the grains of hard timber,
Words stained by the blood of experience,
Like sure arrows from the Santhal male's bow,
Words become ardent in my blood, flesh and desire,
Some of them stand high as mountains,
Some lie low like rivers,....
I am a poet of the vast continent
Studded with rivers and mountains,
the earth is my poem. (70)

A collection of songs of Bhupen Hazarika in English translation entitled *Where Seas Meet* (1993) speaks of the great singer's concerns and patriotism:

No room, in my new land / For traders of religion
Or champions of parochialism / I'll destroy with my own hands
The spectre of untouchability / And build a new Assam
I'll make love flow / Through all races and communities
I'll break all barriers of discrimination / And build a heaven
of equality. (3)

Nagen Saikia's new form of short expressions called *Mita Bhash* translated into English as *Aching Void* (2005) speak of mystical expressions about life and living being's explorations of realities in life:

Drops of melody hung upon the rattle of flower has become dry
Now only the agony of the petals are floating
A little bird is bathing there / It is his last bath (113)

A collection of poems by Megan Kachari (Mithinga Daimary, the Publicity Secretary of ULFA) entitled *Melodies and Guns* (2006)

translated into English by Pradip Acharya and Manjeet Baruah and introduced by Indira Goswami expose the ideology of the revolutionary:

The quiet sandy beaches, golden in the sun,
 The cascading waves of the river, across that bank,
 Our games in the past, from the water to the earth.
 The pungent smell of the corpse, afloat now
 And stuck to the mud
 And this smell of death,... from the river to the bank...
 But your breasts?... / Naked to my skin
 I stood watching the new temples, of sand
 Along the golden bank, to enter / The New World of our pledge. (35)

A collection of poems by Kathita Hatibaruah on mother Earth entitled *Earth Song* (1999), translated by Pradip Acharya reveal the poet's love for Nature and her festivities:

Such a sweet name, life-giving / Fertile, loaded with
 The rich sweetness of creation / Rich, abundant, the golden field
 The primordial mother / Of thirst and hunger
 The panacea.... / Fertility is the field
 The field is fertility / The banner of victory
 At the threshold of the twenty-first century. (29)

The translations have proved to be a good harvest of English poems. Though love for nature is intense in the poets of Assam who are writing in English, yet profuse descriptive passages about ecological awareness are rare in their poetry. Maheswar Neog (1918-1995) in his *Under One Sky* (1970) writes about the people and landscape of the East European countries which he visited under the Indo-Foreign Cultural Exchange Programme. The Indian landscape finds casual references in his poems. In "Pranams to the Danube", he writes:

Here is no Gangā, no Yamunā, no Sarasvati, No Godavari, no Kaveri, or no Brahmaputra.
 Yet here am I touching the water of the Danube in my pilgrimage.
 Here are no Mughal Gardens;
 Yet here do I look at every strange face, every beautiful face,
 And it blossoms forth into kindness and grace. (1970: 1)

Amaresh Datta (1920-), is a fine romantic poet. His momentary impressions abound references to nature, though a serious attempt to expose ecological disaster in India and an awareness concerning ecology is untraceable in his stanzas. In his poem "My God", his romantic use of some ecological terms can be seen:

You have given me / The freedom
 To traverse my sky / To gain my nest's paradise
 Or lose it. (1992: 34)

In another poem "In the beginning", such uses continue to appear:
 In the beginning was the dream

He said: let there be light / And pressed the button
 And the light was there / In his walled globe.
 And water too / For his lackey brought it cool from the bar. (ibidem 35)

Amaresh Datta is a gifted poet. He has control over the use of words and images. Besides the use of ecological terms, the poems sound his sad and

sensuous strains of the soul:

When nothing happens to the soul / I do not know what really to do:

To brood on the nothingness of life

Or contemplate the mystery of the will of God, (1971:9)

Amaresh Datta's collection of poems, *Captive Moments* (an anthology of thirty lyrics) was published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta in 1971. He is at a stretch a poet, critic and playwright. His other works are *Time's Harvest* (a collection of poems), (Seagull Books Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1996) and *Lotus and the Cross* (a poetic trilogy) (National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1997). *Shakespeare's Tragic Vision and Art* (Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1964) is a work of criticism. *Lotus and the Cross*, a verse play, is designed as a modern morality play dealing with the problems of our times like violence, greed, pollution and mad rush for individual success. Its meaning therefore relates to various levels of consciousness and the frontier between the realistic and the symbolic is not clearly marked though the characters have been conceived realistically with the usual dramatic foils and juxtapositions. *Time's Harvest* is a part of the colourful tradition set by the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*. The human psyche and emotion have been pierced and revealed in *Time's Harvest* with a modern individual interpretation.

Lakshahira Das's *Between Births* (1990) contains sixty nine poems out of which ten poems are originally written by her in English. Other poems have been translated into English by Pradip Acharya and others. In her original English poems, Lakshahira has very beautifully exposed her sentiments. But because of the lack of her consciousness as to the growth of poetry in English, which she felt late, she could not compose profusely in English, though she has a fine lyric genius. Writing on various themes, she plays on a whole gamut of feelings and sensations— love, anxiety, sense of death, passions, love-hate relations, hopes, frustrations and anger' (Sarma 1996: 97).

In her later poetry she extended her theme of love beyond the personal level to cover the whole of earth and the human race. The crisis, violence, sorrows and anxieties which ravage the land have been depicted vividly. In her flight of poetic passions, in this period she has been the home-bound pilgrim and thus has buried her emotions in the soil of her birth. In her few original English poems by acclimatizing the indigenous tradition to the English language she has produced Indian English poetry. With innate lyrical and emotional fervour, her poetry seems to be a lark's singing of the poetry of the earth at heaven's gate. Her poems heighten the glory of the soulscape. Thus Lakshahira, the *Sangeet Deepika of Assam*, may be called the *Skylark of North Eastern India*. (Das, N. 1998:29) After her visit to Neli in 1983, she writes about the hellish scenes of the place and her compassion expresses her concern over the cruelty and ethnic violence which have pervaded her land of peace. Addressing the dead children in Neli, Lakshahira, the *Sangeet Deepika of Assam*, sings:

Sleep my son / sleep in silence / No weapon of man can pierce you now

Nor any fire burn / only the blood stains

bear testimony to

Man's immense senselessness and cruelty (op cit:30)

Her finer lyric sensibility has been exposed telling us about her concept of 'time' in the poem entitled 'The Eternal':

I have taken in my hands

A broken piece of time glittering like glass

Wherein is woven the threads of all dreams

I am prepared this time for enormous nights. (ibidem 31)

Against the decency of traditional social life, the deception of modern life spreads a network of illusion. So Lakshahira writes,

That circle, that path / The well-rounded globe:

Broken water-pictures in whirlpool

Deeds, Life Insurance, Babyfood, household wars.

Huts and moors / Hospitality in ancient homes;

We ever gather from them new wealth

And a laugh in a circle. (ibidem 34)

Her concept of life in the modern world has been depicted as:

Life is here but a cry of disgust

of a bird, in bondage. (ibidem 37)

In 1993, a collection of English verse entitled *The Protest* by one Hareswar Deka has been published. This collection is a translation of Assamese poems into English by the poet himself. The sixty one poems of this anthology are simple and most of them deal with simple themes. In some of these poems simple Indian myths from epics like *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat* have been used. Many of the poems are immature, without any depth of thought and also have grammatical errors. Perhaps the poet has ceased writing now-a-days and this single collection though not a serious attempt at poetry, yet is a landmark in the Indian English verse from Assam. Hunger, grief, illusion, slavery, truth, happiness, self-realization are some of the themes of the poems of this collection.

Dayananda Pathak's *Coral Island* (1998) has been introduced by Prof. Amaresh Datta. About his craft, Datta writes in 1980: "Shri Pathak is a serious and sensitive youngman, fully alive to the world about him. What he has seen has made him, more often than not, sad and shaken to the core and like many conscientious youngmen of his generation he seems to have been disillusioned by the spectacle presented by the modern city life in its various ramifications. But he is in search of something beyond the noise and glitter of this phenomenal world." (Foreword). C. Paul Verghese introducing the poetry of Pathak speaks of the flexibility and richness of the English language and its historicity making it an integral part of the cultural and linguistic life of the people of India mainly as a medium of creative expression. Pathak's poetry exposes his emotions and experiences and his themes concern the world, life, love, loneliness and pain of living. His style and art of versification show his originality of expression and imagery (introduction, iii).

As a poet of Assam writing in English, Pathak has not tried to picturise the ethos and contemporary situations of Assam which should have

made his poetry expose the authenticity of Assamese contribution to Indian English poetry. As an Assamese poet, his poems also contribute to the Indian writing in English in a novel way and in the context of post-modern Indian writing, this presents a new mode. Like the family poems of Ramanujan and Kamala Das, Pathak also lingers on his nostalgia. About his art and themes he writes:

My grand-father bought me a sword / and a pen to play with
 Besides, I have my own words, / the weapon to fight with
 and to redesign the rickety globe / my father bought me
 in my birth day / years past. (ibidem 14)

His attitude to and concept of the modern world in which he is living has been made clear in his lines:

We are born flowers/ pure and holy / life makes us stones
 rugged and rude (Diamond) (ibidem 27)

The same feeling of agony has been voiced in a poem entitled 'feed':

Plateful of injustice/ my daily feed,
 I munch/ and digest.
 There is none better
 in the market complex
 around me/ for a fresh relish
 cupful of ignominy/ my daily drink
 I live on them and thrive. (ibidem 33)

Pathak uses simple vocabulary and his images are also comprehensive and thought-provoking. Umakanta Sarma's *Thawing out* (1998) contains ten poems. Sarma is an old man aged above eighty. A prolific writer in Assamese he has been awarded the Assam Valley Literary Award by the Magor Foundation Trust in 1997. A poet of old school, his verses contain the passions of his youth and his use of language seems to be Aurobindo-like. He is mystic, passionate and grave in exposition. The prologue of the book expresses his depth and themes:

With an agonising turbulence / deep inside
 I had a fantasy / as though I glimpsed a universe
 in its splendour, pillage and wrath. (ibidem 9)

He also uses Indian myths and concerns his life with the worldly struggles:

Long long ago/ how long/ none can tell,
 a silk-cotton tree died.
 Uprooted by the storm! / Poisoned by cruelty!
 Perished on its own!
 A Rama/ scanning the sea / A Vasco De Gama
 on turbulent waves / A hermit/ At Gangotry
 bathing in cosmic ray. (A life floats) (ibidem 17)

Sarma's contribution to Indian English poetry from Assam is important. Even his single collection sufficiently reflects his poetic sensibilities. Bhupati Das is the finest among the poets of Assam writing in English. His first collection *May I* (1998) is a unique contribution to Indian English poetry. Writing his introduction to the book in verse, he exposes his romantic and mystic concept of existence as follows:

May I/ intrude into the/ privacy of your heart and soul with a few
thoughts and feelings/ of mine wrapped affectionately/ in words/ that
you may or may not like/ but the emotions are honest and frank/ may
be some would resonate/ with your inner thoughts/ quietly tucked
away/ somewhere in the inner recesses while getting on with life and
living/ how about/ revisiting/ those feelings/ here.

A fine romantic poet of the North Eastern India, Bhupati Das is very tough in his exploration of worldly reality. His romantic mooring is very evocative and mystic. The following lines show the serene thoughts of the poet.

the sky was an honest blue
the stars were bright and the sea was a dancing dream
with the waves echoing/ the joys of an expectant night
a poignant moment/ in a cascading embrace
with the love waves..... (Op.cit. unpaginated)

A deep sense of frustration pervades his poetry. The despair of his heart after the demise of the beloved has been depicted in his lines. Life and its companion and the journey in the path of life are very decently exposed in his words.

the lonely road/ I walk it/ alone
counting the dead leaves
falling/ vibrations/ of my thought
ripple thro' them/ and / make the dead leaves / alive.
Are you my love
counting your steps / on some other path
some other time / thinking about / you and me.

The poet who “always introduces the conscious intervention of an artistic imagination without straying from the context of life” (2004: blurb), is a lyrical wordsmith. His telefilm 'Call of the Valley' based on his poems was selected for participation as India's entry in 23rd Japan festival for shortfilms in 1996. Amidst his mystery-filled surreal melody, he has been consciously troubled at September 11, 2001, the event of world-terror. He is much above the narrow communal restrictions and as such is mourning of the great tragedy:

no matter/whether you're/a moslem, a hindu or a christian/...../cry/cry
my conscience/for the death of sanity/for the remaining world of
zombies/life itself is taken for ransom. (ibidem).

Bhupati Das's contribution to Indian English writing is highly praiseworthy and it is hoped that he will publish more of his poems. Rupanjali Baruah's *All Things Passing & other poems* (2005) is her maiden attempt at writing poetry in English. Many momentary impressions find place in this collection. Her definitive poem “The beginning of poetry” explains how there is no season or exact time for writing poetry. On the other hand “poetry has its beginnings/ in some other surrounding/ when emotions are scattered/here and there/ like leaves on a dry autumn field”(24). She says:

Poetry begins /When words are weighed / On palate of upper lip
Travel through a psychedelic osmosis / When thoughts creep in
between / Moments of sleep and waking. (ibid.)

About her craft of writing she says again:

I cry with diligence / That is one thing I do with passion best
And the rest is a passable waste(25)

Rupanjali is a new voice and has a bright future to grow and compose many mellifluous forms of verses. Though a few collections of English verse by Assamese writers have come out, yet a consciousness has already arisen among the writers to write in English and it is hoped that in future a large number of poets will write in English and will publish their good poetry exploring the ethnic aesthetics and realities and contemporary phenomena influencing people's mindset.

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Short Story

an excerpt of the humorous novel Holyland Zapy

Zapy Follows Jesus In The Galilee

- Albert Russo

We had two full beach days in Tel Aviv, so that I could rest a bit from all the sightseeing. *Ferchrissakes*, if I don't put my foot down once in a while, Bonka is capable of turning me into a traveling robot. With him by my side, I've already earned my degree as a tourist agent, whether I like it or not.

On the third day we both *shlepped* by bus to the Galilee on account that Berky became jittery, it was getting too hot for him coz, unlike me, he doesn't appreciate sea bathing, so he sweats like a friggin polar bear under the sunshade. Actually he does like to swim, but he daren't walk in front of people, with just his trunks on, he feels naked. It's true that he's as white as a bedsheet and that his thin body - he's a little too skinny and his muscles are somewhat *marshmellowed* - is covered with freckles, which makes him look like a carrot-hued albino rabbit, *sans* the red pupils though. But between you and me, and I told him so, one day that he was more or less kosher lovable, he's kinda sexy in his own way, with his protruding Adam's apple, his day beard veering to fluo orange, his watery green eyes which you would think are always on the verge of crying, they're so shiny, and his tall frame - the rare times he wears a suit and a tie, you could take him for a fashion model, sort of, like them punk guys striding up and down the catwalk for John Galliano-the-drunk-Jew-basher -, coz for one thing, and in spite of being a little bald, my uncle doesn't look his age. When he pouts and blushes after I've shouted at him, which, as I've already mentioned, happens at least thrice a day, he has the face of a fifteen-year old, with his earlobes, starting to jerk like a humming bird, so much so that you'd fear they might fly away any minute. His skin reacts as fast as the fingered screen of an i-pad, then all of a sudden, dim little lights, spread on his cheeks and his forehead and even on his bare hands, start blinking *mushywise* as if he'd just caught smallpox, but he also makes me think of a bleached Christmas tree, at the end of its tether, that's about to lose its twigs because of all the presents they had to bear.

We arrived in Tiberias, a resort town named after the Roman Emperor Tiberius, and which is famous for its hot springs. The place looked cool and there was a nice breeze blowing in from the lake. I tried to picture Jesus walking on the waves and remembered a drawing in my childhood Bible, but because of all the pleasure boats sailing hither and thither, that memory got washed away and seemed totally phony. There was an image that came to my mind: if ole Jesus decided to return now, and splish splash on the surface of the lake, he would have to be careful not to be harpooned by some zealous fisherman, thinking that the *ladder* might

be catching some *merman* - who told you there were only mermaids? Did you know that Singapore's emblem was *amerlion*?

Before I could dip my toes in the lake, on the shores of our little hotel - there are dozens of them around, with pretty boutiques and art galleries, and nifty restaurants, wafting a perfume of grilled fish or of spring chicken ... mmm -, I had to listen to - what else? - my uncle's historical shenanigans. Now, instead of jotting down notes, I use a recorder to get all them factoids which I will have to present to my class. It's faster and Bonka doesn't have to bug me for making grammatical errors.

The ancient walls of the city and the round towers date from the Crusader period. You really have to make an effort to imagine what those ruins represented, coz what you see now are stones piled up, with maybe a shrub on top like the tuft of hair of some baldy, or a stray flower that found its abode inside a crack.

In the 1700s a Mameluke, called Ibrahim Pasha, built a fortress around it. You know what a Mameluke is? No, it ain't Luke's aunt Mame, ninny, but a Turkish slave who rose on the social ladder to, first, become a respected member of the military caste, and then to occupy the Egyptian throne from the Middle Ages on, to the nineteenth century. Not bad for former slaves, hey! But in 1837 an earthquake badly damaged the city.

We then walked into a pretty garden where a synagogue was built in the fourth century AD, with just a few remaining mosaics. Not far from there, we visited the tomb of Maimonides who was born in Spain in 1135 and studied medicine in Cairo. He had such a high reputation as a doctor that Richard-the Lion-Heart begged him to join him in England, but he had better things to do than to cure the king's hemorrhoids. He was also known as Moses ben-Maimon (now if you remember, I said he came from Spain, and 'maimon' in Spanish means monkey - did the Spaniards take him for an intellectual ape?) as well as the Rambam - that's wham bam for philosopher, sage and chief rabbi, coz he wrote the *Mishne Torah* - no, I didn't say *Kishke*, you silly goose! that's roasted fowl intestines with a spicy filling of matzo and suet. yuk! - so that the ordinary folk could understand the precepts of Judaism. Before conking out, he asked to be buried here in Tiberias. If that wasn't enough, there are tombs here of other well-known dudes, like Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Haness. You want to know who they were? Go to *Willywonkapedia*.

We then hopped to the Great El Omri mosque and the Jami Al Bahr mosque, both now converted into a museum and a shopping center with pretty cafés. I never thought that this Bibleland could be such a vacation resort. The next morning Bonka forced me to visit the main Christian sites: the Greek orthodox Monastery, the Scottish Center, the Franciscan Church of St. Peter, which commemorates Jesus' miraculous catch of fishes. Nearby, thank Goddess we stopped at Moriah Plaza opposite Ceasar's Hotel, to have an ice-creeeaaaam, for crying out loud, on account that when I hear too many factoids, both my ears and my mouth get dry, like they're connected through an invisible tube! You don't get it? Shucks, let Lawrence of Arabia explain that to you. He's dead! Too bad. Communicate with his ghost.

Jeezzzuuus, we stayed a third day to see Capernaum, the fishing village where the apostles Peter, Andrew and James lived. Then off to Kursi, where Christ made another miracle, known as the miracle of the Gaderne Swine - strange, coz Jews don't eat pig. From there, to Magdala, where that poor sinner Mary Magdalene lived. My hat to Jesus, who pardoned prostitutes, setchual perverts and such. If he lived nowadays, I wouldn't be surprised to see him among the bib-bazoomed dragqueens, the bare-assed jocks and the *transvestits* during our Gay Pride marches, coz he was so open-minded. Actually, did he have a girlfriend or a boyfriend? I mean lover, you ninny, coz his motto was to looove looove looove your neighbors as well as your enemies - thanks but no thanks, I will never let any nincanpoop slap me on the right cheek after he hit me a first time - what kinda morals is that?

Between a delicious mutton *shawarma* with *pita* and a large coke, we climbed to the Mount of Beatitudes, where Jesus preached his Sermon. And if that wasn't enough, we shlepped to Tabgha, where he multiplied the loaves and the fishes for the hungry. Finally, Bonka dragged me to the River Jordan to show me where Jesus was baptised by John. Now what need did he have to be baptised, he who was smarter than all of his apostles? Berky tells me that he wanted to show how humble he was. Look at today's and yesteryear's popes, they don't look very humble to me, with all of their expensive clothes, diamond rings and golden rigmaroles. A fat lot they inherited Jesus' humility. That's called ... humble bumble bee for the birds.

I forgot to tell you, but hey, as I said before, I ain't your walking encyclopedia, there was a very cute chapel at the Mount of Beatitudes. It has a dome and arcades all around the building. There's also a monastery nearby, with a beautiful garden, you almost want to kiss the place, even if you're a non-believer, like me. I'm sure if someone drugged me and I was brought here, half dazed, I could easily be converted, it's all so heavenly looking, with the sweet scents of roses and carnations and the chirrup of birdies - ain't that a potty word, they really chear us up with their gay twitter.

That same evening Bonka opened his Bible - he never travels without it, especially in this here holiest of lands - and forced me to listen to what the apostles wrote about Yeshua - who's that, you ask, open your dictionary.

Dude Luke:

And they that were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed.

And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

I can dig that alright, but when dude Matthew repeats the following, I have to intervene, coz I don't accept every word of Lord Jesus at face value, specially since I'm supposed to rack my brains, learning all this stuff:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Poor things, they don't even know whether they're coming or going,

let alone being blessed!

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Ok, but when you cry your eyes out, there's little comfort.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Now, you have to have some balls to inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Yeah, right, though most of them get dry before they can see justice.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. There should be more people like that in this nasty world.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. I have never seen him, though I'm sure I'm as pure as maple syrup, which I looove on a pancake.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Where are they hiding, with all them wars going on around the world?

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Enough already, when you're beaten shitless and losing so much blood that you can't see a thing, how blessed can you be?

It's all very well that my uncle wants me to learn this, know that and get immersed in the fat lot, yet I have the inkling ding-a-ling that by having me absorb all that biblical and historical stuff, he's slowly but surely catching the Jerusalem syndrome. Yeah, he starts performing in the middle of the night, and I don't believe I told you that, but Berky babbles and makes gestures in his sleep, like he's addressing an audience, he just sits in his bed, so I guess you can't call him a nightwalker.

Around two a.m. this morning he woke me up - I heard somewhere that if you try to push a somnambulist out of his dreams, he may have a heart attack, so I let him do all his shenanigans keeping mum, which is something difficult for me to do, on account that in 'normal' circumstances, I have to react, otherwise I quickly lose patience and maybe a couple of screws along the way. The strange thing is, that when he talks in his sleep he has that low croaky voice of a witch that is utterly exasperating.

«Follow me y'all!» he commands, «move your fingers like so. Abracadabra, Jesus has no bra. Close your eyes. What do you feel now? Your feet are wet, so wet, that you believe you're also peeing in your pants. Miracle oh miracle! That's it, you're now walking on the sea of *Kugel-lee*. Jeezzus God lovin' Christ! Thank the Lord, all of you, thank me, *ferchrissakes*, I AM JESUS!»

I wonder whether he would recognize himself raving like a madman, if I recorded him *uddering* all that crap, coz let's face it, if he did that in public and during daytime, I would run as fast as I could and leave him for good. Such *nannities* can turn your stomach inside out and upside down, till all you're left with is that disgusting Scottish dish called haggis. It's a kind of greasy sausage stuffed with sheep's intestine, mixed with stinking rotten