

A curated collection
of poems for the

Thane Literature Festival 2025.



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A VOTE OF THANKS

A vote of thanks - that thankless task.
I don't know why they always ask
Some silly fool on to the stage
While all of you just seethe and rage.
I do not wish to be a bore
So very soon I'll end this chore.
And let you go for food and booze.
But while still here feel free to snooze.
I should devote the next few rhymes
In praise of 'Economic Times'.
But since you heard what they have said,
The learned speech already read,
There's nothing further I can add
Except to say that I am glad
That they were there to organise
This function here, for which a prize
Is well deserved, as is the case
With those who won this steeplechase.
There is a basis for the ranks
H.B.S.A. is owed our thanks.
These are not arbitrary rules
But ratios from the business schools
Which you would find if you would look
Into the folds of our slim book.
They did not just go by the law
For figures might conceal a flaw.
And so they looked at quality
And were not fooled by quantity.
And this was stressed most from the chair
Where Mr Vaghul with great flair
Directed well the judges troop -
Most truly a distinguished group.
My word you'll have to take, I fear
Not all of them could make it here.
For that we blame the month of May,
The fast approaching voting day.
Now hearty praise for those who won
And those who were just in the run.
Indal, Ambuja take a bow
This is your hour of glory, now.
From Public Sector companies
The winner is - Cochin Refineries.
They have a flair that's very rare
Perhaps it's due to that small share
Left free by our pervasive state.
I think it's still not very late

To privatise bits here and there
If only government would dare.
It is my privilege to thank
The Governor of our central bank.
And since he's here, with us today
If he permits I'd like to say
That our exports will surely rise
If only he's not pennywise
And lets exporters spend before
They earn and even out the score.
Now money makes the world go round
But money's not so quickly found.
Thanks then to Patrick J. Saldanha
Who found the moolah and the manna.
And thanks to all the money pots
Who paid for all our tiny spots.
And thanks to Renu Seetharam
For her efficiency and charm.
If I were asked to make a wager
Who's owed most thanks, its Ram Tarneja.
It's he who fired the starting gun.
Since then it's been an easy run.
As we approach the finishing post
A word of thanks to our good host
From Bennett Coleman - Mr. Jain.
One moment more I will detain
Before you're free from me, your captor.
A word of thanks to Eastern Chapter
H.B.S.A., that's so well led
By Rajiv Kaul who's at the head.
The final praise now I will utter
For this great city - fair Calcutta.
(How hard it is for a Bombay man
To say this loud and stay dead-pan)
And thanks to you my dear friends
And now, at last the tedium ends.

OSCILLATION

Red-shifts tell us, the universe keeps on expanding
A concept which, to me, surpasses understanding.

It probably is open, but who knows?

Some do believe that it will close.

There would be a propensity

Depending on the density

To carry on the act

Or very soon contract.

Some extra matter

Would mean the latter.

My Hunch –

A Crunch

Sprang

Big Bang.

No thesis is limper

Just bang to whimper –

I think it is disjoint

Beginning at a point.

For such a singularity

Is a peculiarity.

My theory, I think, would obviate

A dismal, cold and empty, final fate.

So soon, the universe will halt and cease expanding,

Prepare to start again. That is my understanding.

MAUI

A crooked line has traced the fate
Of the wandering Pacific plate
As it traverses a hot spot
Creating islands dot by dot.
And Maui was the one we chose
And there before us two humps rose.
Maui, you see, is still intact
She's very young and still well stacked.
Kukui now will slowly shrink
As land below begins to sink.
Haleakala, on the fringe
Of the hot spot, can have a binge.
And some day soon the central plain
Will be submerged by sea and rain.
By helicopter we saw sights
Beyond imagination's flights.
Over the crater we did fly
Where Pele, the goddess, once did ply
Her fiery show across the sky
Upstaging any fourth of July.
But then we saw a soothing scene –
Pillars of water framed in green.
Kahoolawe, Lanai, Molokai
Majestically rose in the sky
And down below – Molokini
The bottom half of a bikini,
(For those who look with a lecherous eye
At half a crater from the sky)
Encompassing so many treasures
So full of palpitating pleasures,
For those who bravely choose to strive
For those who swim and those who dive.
Was it the sea or firmament
That put us in our element?
Or should we blame the crazy moon
For putting us in such a swoon –
And for the many wondrous fashions
In which we pandered to our passions

THE INFLUENCE OF PUSHKIN ON VIKRAM SETH

Had I not written one short letter,
In which I mentioned Vikram Seth,
Perhaps it would have been much better
For those of you with little faith
In my admittedly poor talent.
But some, amongst you, who are gallant
And choose to lend at least one ear,
In cadenced verse, you shall all hear
How Russia's scion Alexander
Sergeevich Pushkin wrote in verse
(Tetrameter, supple, terse,
Now flows, then ebbs, there's nothing grander)
About his great protagonist
Eugene Onegin – amorist.

His early verses were erotic
But then he wrote about revolt.
The Tsarist times were quite despotic
And Pushkin was then forced to bolt
To country home where isolation
Served as a source of inspiration.
At court he leads his later life
By now he has a charming wife.
Alas! She leads him to perdition
As she falls for Baron d'Anthes
And Pushkin feels he's forced to press
A challenge and uphold tradition.
His line comes back to haunt him now.
"The bloom has withered on the bough".
Whence came the poet's inspiration?
This child of Russia borrowed well.
A debt was owed the British nation
Lord Byron's touch we all can tell,
Since Pushkin's rhymes are quite audacious
The flowing rhythm always gracious
And frequently, asides are heard
As well as many a foreign word.
Verse novels are a strange invention.
What skill to write in verse like prose
And still ensure it smoothly flows!
Courageously he flouts convention
We cannot classify his style –
Sometimes he's sad, then for a while

He's funny or he's idealistic
(For Pushkin there's no pigeonhole)

At times, he's earthy, folk-simplistic –
Escaping genres is his goal.
To classic ideals he won't grovel,
Instead, like Byron, a free novel
Is what our poet has in mind
And freedom is just what we find.
There is no cause to be pedantic
And claim, like some, he wrote to rule
Or followed the romantic school.
To him, plain freedom means romantic.
Apparently he had a doubt
About the way it would turn out.

Some credit for this extravaganza
Is partly Jean de La Fontaine's.
For he inspired this lovely stanza –
A couplet after three quatrains.
And, I, for one would bet upon it
This is, by far, the sweetest sonnet.
With La Fontaine, it was but chance.
But Pushkin made a new advance –
His is a regular formation,
With both a male and female rhyme
(Arranged quite differently each time) Variety in
permutation Slow start; fast spin, while in between;
At end the resolution's seen.

"What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead".
So quoth our eminent translator
Nabokov, to my mind, a traitor
Not to the sense, but to the flair,
That English speakers could not share,
Before Charles Johnston's new translation.
Perhaps it's not as erudite
But it has verve, and it has light, I
t truly is an imitation
Of Pushkin's style, his slang, his rhymes,
And I have read it many times.

You may well ask what's the connection –
One day while Vikram Seth did browse
Amongst a bookstore's wide selection
Diverse translations did arouse
His curiosity. He has stated,
In Russian he's not educated.
So he decided he'd compare

And see how both of them would fare.
And one, he found, he was just reading
Page after page, without a rest
No doubt, he thought, it was the best.
And which translation was succeeding?
Charles Johnston's one, there was no doubt,
As you, dear reader, have found out.

It is now time for a description
Of Vikram Seth, which I could write,
But I do feel, his own inscription
Might be the best for me to cite -
"In '52, born in Calcutta.
8 lb. 1 oz. was heard to utter
First rhymes ("cat, mat") at the age of three
A student of demography
And economics, he has written
'From Heaven Lake', a travel book
Based on a journey he once took
Through Sinkiang and Tibet. Unbitten
At last by wanderlust and rhyme,
He keeps Pacific Standard Time
At times a poet needs a mentor
So Vikram Seth was wont to feel.
In search, a shared room, he did enter
And quite by chance he found Tim Steele.
A happy choice for they could rattle
Off reams of rhyme, no idle prattle
But preparation for writing verse.
This is the way Tim Steele did nurse
In Vikram Seth the skill of rhyming
Iambic meter perfectly
And other tricks of poetry.
Such was his luck, so good his timing
He found the very friend he'd need
His dedication, now, I read -

"So here they are, the chapters ready,
And, half against my will, I'm free
Of his warm enterprise, this heady
Labour that has exhausted me
Through thirteen months, swift and delightful,
Incited by my friends' insightful
Paring and prodding and appeal.
I pray the gentle hands of Steele
Will once again sift through its pages.
If anything in this should grate,
Ascribe it to its natal state;
If anything in this engages

By verse, veracity, or vim,
You know whom I must credit, Tim."

Once poetry was for the masses
But now it is for connoisseurs
Or literary graduate classes.
The common man it no more stirs.
And Seth troubled by this situation
Decides to end the aberration,
Reverts to an ancestral style,
Which still can make us cry and smile.
And though this style is old and hoary
So fresh like dew we find his rhymes
As he writes of our modern times
And skillfully unfolds his story.
In his own words I shall relate
What Pushkin lent to "Golden Gate".

I have presented the mere histories
Of both these works - a connecting curve.
To clarify the other mysteries
A genuine critic would better serve.
Strange theories they will often bandy
Derive the plot from Tristram Shandy -
Eugene and Tanya love in turns
Each time, each one, the other spurns
These theories have risks attendant
For neither poet planned or knew
What the main characters would do.
I find they are quite independent -
Though Pushkin tried to write some more
Eugene himself had stopped before.

To those of you who found this hateful
I'm sorry that I did offend.
I must admit that I am grateful
That my short verse is at an end.
Lay not the blame at this your preacher
For I was forced by my dear teacher.
But if, you think, I do amuse
Be thankful then to her my muse
Great feat or crime, she's the abettor.
I lacked the courage to say nay,
When she asked me to speak today
About what I said in my letter.
And that is why I correlate
"Eugene Onegin" and "Golden Gate".

ZOROASTRIANS

About four thousand years ago,
Civilization's early dawn,
Saw nomads always on the go
Use their strength, their sheer brawn
To plunder, pillage and destroy.
The settlers then could not enjoy
The well-earned fruits of all their labours,
They lived in dread of raiding neighbours.
But one man pondered on this hate.
"Why is there evil in this world?
Could God have possibly unfurled
This ugly thing?" It was his fate
To state a doctrine then quite new.
The universe was shaped by two

Opposing spirits struggling on.
And one of them created good,
A single God, quite early on,
Ahura Mazda, proudly stood.
But evil wasn't his creation
For that would be an aberration.
So Angra Mainyu or Ahriman
Was the chosen name for the one
Responsible for evil's role.
The role of man was to bravely fight
For good and always spread the light.
Defeating evil was the goal.
Good thoughts, good words, good deeds, the way
His followers could always stay

Engaged in this important battle.
This was the teaching of Zoroaster.
And I think it is no idle prattle,
To state that he was quite the master.
Religions then placated gods.
The people tried to fight the odds
By sacrificing what was dear
To any force inspiring fear.
But now we see a newer height,
We should ensure that good prevails
And ultimately evil fails.
We are important in this fight.
And ethics is religion's pillar.
Not that all else is just a filler,
For rituals have a role to play.

Above all else they help to guide,
They help to show the righteous way
They remind us that we're on the side
Of forces fighting for what's right.
And every day we'll see the sight
Of priests in prayer offering thanks.
The power of prayer surely ranks
Extremely high. It's not the meaning,
However great, alone, that can't,
Explain the power of a chant.
In fact I think that I am leaning
To the view that just the sound
Can influence all things around.

Zoroastrianism next hit a peak
When Cyrus built a vast empire.
The Emperors had a tolerant streak
The Jews maintain that the entire
Temple of Jerusalem
Was reconstructed just for them.
And they acknowledge gratefully
Their freedom from captivity.
Perhaps at this stage it would be wise
To talk about the exchange
Of ideas over a wide range-
The Devil, Hell and Paradise
Around this time spread to the West
As many scholars can attest.

For a thousand years off and on
Zoroastrians were at the helm.
Three continents they ruled upon,
It was a civilizing realm.
Then from Arabia came the hordes.
And Persia fell beneath their swords.
King Yazdegerd was cruelly killed.
The true believers were instilled
With dread and yet they kept the flame.
But when they could take it no more
They just set sail for another shore.
And I don't think that we could blame
The Indian prince who saw them land
For taking a suspicious stand.

His land was full, he had no need
For people from a distant land.
Refusal wasn't in his creed
And so he thought they'd understand

If he could cleverly convey
There was no way that they could stay.
A pitcher full of milk was sent.
The Persian Priest read the intent.
But he could not accept a no.
He slipped a lump of sugar in
And sent it back. And what a win!
The community began to grow.
But like the lump it stayed quite small.
In sweetness though, we have it all.

In Gujarat they settled down.
For their honesty they were known
When the British came, they went to town.
They really came into their own.
They moved with ease from East to West
As go-betweens they were the best.
They built the ships, they went to sea,
Excelled in trade and charity.
And Bombay is where they thrived
Their charity helped build this town
And this earned them much renown.
In many different fields they strived
Amazingly excelled in all.
Although their numbers were quite small.

In time they spread far and wide
Accomplished much everywhere.
The diaspora gives us more pride
For they have surely done their share.
Perhaps because of this diffusion.
We may find some confusion.
The branches now spread everywhere
But are our roots firmly there?
Should we try and proliferate
In spite of all that might encumber
Our fine attempts to raise our number.
Or should we try and propagate
Our beliefs and thoughts far and wide
To outlive our demographic slide?



THANK YOU