

Classic Poetry Series

Dilip Chitre
- poems -

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Dilip Chitre(17 September 1938 – 10 December 2009)

Dilip Purushottam Chitre (Marathi: ????? ??????????? ??????) was one of the foremost Indian writers and critics to emerge in the post Independence India. Apart from being a very important bilingual writer, writing in Marathi and English, he was also a painter and filmmaker.

 Biography

He was born in Baroda on 17 September 1938. His father Purushottam Chitre used to publish a periodical named Abhiruchi which was highly treasured for its high, uncompromising quality. Dilip Chitre's family moved to Mumbai in 1951 and he published his first collection of poems in 1960. He was one of the earliest and the most important influences behind the famous "little magazine movement" of the sixties in Marathi. He started Shabda with Arun Kolatkar and Ramesh Samarth. In 1975, he was awarded a visiting fellowship by the International Writing Programme of the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa in the United States. He has also worked as a director of the Indian Poetry Library, archive, and translation centre at Bharat Bhavan, a multi arts foundation, Bhopal. He also convened a world poetry festival in New Delhi followed by an international symposium of poets in Bhopal.

 Works on Poetry

His Ekun Kavita or Collected Poems were published in the nineteen nineties in three volumes. As Is,Where Is selected English poems (1964-2007) and "Shesha" English translation of selected Marathi poems both published by Poetrywala are among his last books published in 2007. He has also edited An Anthology of Marathi Poetry (1945–1965). He is also an accomplished translator and has prolifically translated prose and poetry. His most famous translation is of the celebrated 17th century Marathi bhakti poet Tukaram (published as Says Tuka). He has also translated Anubhavamrut by the twelfth century bhakti poet Dnyaneshwar.

 Film Career

He started his professional film career in 1969 and has since made one feature film, about a dozen documentary films, several short films in the cinema format, and about twenty video documentary features. He wrote the scripts of most of his films as well as directed or co-directed them. He also scored the music for some of them.

 Awards and Honors

He worked as an honorary editor of the quarterly *New Quest*, a journal of participative inquiry, Mumbai.

Among Chitre's honours and awards are several Maharashtra State Awards, the Prix Special du Jury for his film *Godam* at the Festival des Trois Continents at Nantes in France in 1984, the Ministry of Human Resource Development's Emeritua Fellowship, the University of Iowa's International Writing Program Fellowship, the Indira Gandhi Fellowship, the Villa Waldberta Fellowship for residence given by the city of Munich, Bavaria, Germany and so forth. He was D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange) Fellow and Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of Heidelberg and Bamberg in Germany in 1991-92. He was Director of Vagarth, Bharat Bhavan Bhopal and the convenor-director of Valmiki World Poetry Festival (New Delhi,1985) and International Symposium of Poets (Bhopal, 1985), a Keynote Speaker at the World Poetry Congress in Maebashi, Japan (1996) and at the Ninth International Conference on Maharashtra at Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA in 2001 and Member of the International Jury at the recent Literature festival Berlin, 2001.

He was member of a three-writer delegation (along with Nirmal Verma and U. R. Ananthamurthy) to the Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia), Hungary, the Federal Republic of Germany and France in the spring and summer of 1980 and to the Frankfurter Buchmesse in Frankfurt, Germany in 1986; he has given readings, lectures, talks, participated in seminars and symposia, and conducted workshops in creative writing and literary translation in Iowa City, Chicago, Tempe, Paris, London, Weimar, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Konstanz, Heidelberg, Bamberg, Tübingen, Northfield, Saint-Paul/Minneapolis, New Delhi, Bhopal, Mumbai, Kochi, Vadodara, Kolhapur, Aurangabad, Pune, Maebashi, and Dhule among other places.

He travelled widely in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America as well as in the interiors of India; been on the visiting faculty of many universities and institutions, a consultant to projects. He was the Honorary President of the Sonthheimer Cultural Association, of which he was also a Founder-Trustee.

 Death

After a long bout with cancer, Dilip Chitre died at his residence in Pune on 10 December 2009.

At Midnight In The Bakery At The Corner

At midnight in the bakery at the corner
While bread and butter-biscuits are being baked
I remember the Rahman of my childhood
And Asmat's sparkling eyes
Playing carom with me

At midnight in the bakery at the corner
While bread and butter-biscuits are being baked
I am boozing alone in my room
In front of me fried liver pieces gone cold in a plate
All my friends migrated to the Gulf

At midnight in the bakery at the corner
While bread and butter-biscuits are being baked
The wife of the Pathan next door enters my room
Closes the door and turns her back to me
I tell her, sister, go find someone else

When the bread develops its sponge, the smell
Of the entire building fills my nostrils.

Dilip Chitre

Bhopal Embryos

Dilip Chitre

Determined To Tell Lies

Determined to tell lies
People are able only to tell the truth -
Said Rahman

I said -
Leave aside truth and lies
People only speak

And what about people who don't speak -
Asked Rahman -
What do they say?

I said -
You know religion, Rahman,
I don't say a thing

Dilip Chitre

Father Returning Home

My father travels on the late evening train
Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light
Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes
His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age
fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.
Now I can see him getting off the train
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.
He hurries across the length of the grey platform,
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,
His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward.
Home again, I see him drinking weak tea,
Eating a stale chapati, reading a book.
He goes into the toilet to contemplate
Man's estrangement from a man-made world.
Coming out he trembles at the sink,
The cold water running over his brown hands,
A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists.
His sullen children have often refused to share
Jokes and secrets with him. He will now go to sleep
Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.

Dilip Chitre

Flesh Tint

Like a painting by Velazquez
A woman stands
Alone in the frame
Touched by the brush of light
Blossoming.

How did
Flesh Tint reflect Naples Yellow
In this greenish blue room?

What made the sun
Suddenly rise on the palette?

That beggarwoman on Tulsi Pipe Road
That streetwalker in Chicago
What immortal light has washed them
To make her stand here
Naked
In mysterious clarity?

Venice, Barcelona, Madrid, Rome
Florence, Castile, Nice,
Pune, Satara, Valsad, Palanpur, Jaisalmer,
Thrissur, Kottayam,
Hissar, Ludhiana, Muzaffarpur, Bhuvaneshwar,
Ujjain, Jhansi, East Godavari, Karwar,
Vengurla, Alibag,
All geography is as colourless as linseed oil
Pigments come from the sky
Like a naked woman from over the Western Ghats
Luminous.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

Frescoes

Hidden in my skull are the caves where the endless
Reticular frescoes of my awesome childhood unroll.
Those are the spaces where the banyan trees of Vadodara
Vie with the neems and the mango gardens.
They were born ancient like me — those banyans
With their branch-like roots splayed in empty spaces,
With their huge population of ants and worms,
Bats hanging upside down.
And the public libraries where books printed
On what were once forests in Sweden
Gave me the world's unfathomable texts.
Baroda is what the British called Vadodara.
That's where my deaf and blind great-grandmother died
At the age of 101 — bald, wrinkled, and withered.
That's where we flew kites and learnt to finger
The pussies of eager and willing little girls
On summer afternoons and always upstairs.
That's where we secretly read manuals of black magic
And pornographic books in euphemistic Hindustani
In which it was invariably the dhobi's wife that got laid

After washing the whole town's dirty linen on the ghat.

Could I tell those stories now?

After sixty years of fermenting in my own vat?

Vadodara's vats are full of such sexy scent!

Dilip Chitre

Haiku In The Memory Of Dadar Beach Circa 1957

As the butterfly
hovers near a sunset
its wings touch the sea

Dilip Chitre

Horniman Circle Garden Circa 1964

Discarded lovers
with charred eyes
fall asleep on the green bench
they don't care any more

Your vision is blurred
but
you don't need any help

Dilip Chitre

In The Light Of Birds

In the light of birds the lunatic wakes from uncountable sleeps
His burning electric wires begin to glow
Birds sing in every forest of flesh and blood
The lunatic's fingers turn into strings in the outer silence

The darkness of half-asleep awareness roars through
The lunatic's widening arteries, it's another kind of
Waking-- and even total sleep is a frightening fire
It's compelled to burst out even while being awake.

The lunatic sees through his sun-paraphrasing eyes
That creates circles centred outside him
And unaccountable sleep awakens lightnings
To sing a vast lullaby in flesh and blood.

The lunatic watches a bird...half-closed like eyes...flying
And his eyes as they drown begin to chirp.

Dilip Chitre

In Your Poisoned Wounds

In your poisoned wounds
Fall the shadows of burning planets
The splitting breakers of foaming oceans
Your invisible paths going through raging storms
You spread like lightning flashes through my heart
And I grew in this darkness.

My back will be of darkness when you will
Lash me with lightning
For one moment my back will turn into darkness
When you will come back in flashes
From the undulating shadows of burning planets
Into the grapes of my poisoned wounds.

Dilip Chitre

Kiev, Ukraine : April 1980

It's all mixed up: Vladimir, Yaroslav,
The skeletons of monks in the underground church,
The Tartars, the Cossacks, the Germans, the Stalinists, the contemporaries,
The bridge on the Dnieper River, the ice and slush in the street,
Golden hair, blue eyes, the overcoat,
Old women buying bread, the arrogant editor,
The worried critic, the diplomatic poet.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

Leningrad, Sans Mandelstam, April 1980

(for the poet Viktor Sosnora
Nevsky Prospekt)

The Czar Peter opened up a window on Europe
From where the bankrupt poets of the future saw
A mysterious navy well-armed with battle-ready poetics
Advancing on Russia.

I, a Marathi poet, walk on Nevsky Prospekt
Looking at the grand buildings on either side,
Realising that these monuments had no poet in mind.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

Lost Images

(For Ashay)

I am backing home where you died.
One year later, to find
Changes that mask our surrender
To the inevitability of life.
I remember my Ambulance Ride
With my friend whom you called Daddy.
It took me a whole year
To understand my loss.
A lifetime is not enough
To realize what it means to be human:
We waste what we are given
To crave for what we cannot have.
This much I know by now
As a maker of images:
A face erased in front
Of the mirror that is our Lord.
Vithoba was seen by Tukaram
Reflected in the deep end,
Where the river was its own source
And the ocean that waits for it.
Perhaps when you struggled for breath
As you finally choked to death,
You tried to forgive your parent
And the world he created with you.
And so, finally, you grew
Up to surpass your father--
Becoming a reflected sky
In the water we call life.
The first picture I took of you
In the Princess Tsehai Hospital--
In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
In the last week of June, 1961:
Sister Aiyyalij held you in her arms;
And her hand was on your covered breast.
It showed the finger on her ring
As large as your closed eyes.
Your struggle for a breath
Began before you were born,

And on December 4, 1984
In Bhopal it all came back.
You struggled for breath all your life,
Fighting for life, and looking for its sign--
An autograph of awareness,
The reassurance of your own being.
You don't know that you've left behind
Images that tell, images that haunt,
Images in which others will find
The reflection that fills God's mirror.
Where the Lord Himself twists and turns
In agony that's the other side of bliss.
His reverse is us, his children,
A family that He craves to own.
And, in the end, there's no loss,
And there's no gain either
We neither live nor die
In the endless space of why.

Dilip Chitre

Ode To Bombay

I had promised you a poem before I died
Diamonds storming out of the blackness of a piano
Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet
Releasing you like a concerto from my silence
I unfasten your bridges from my insistent bones
Free your railway lines from my desperate veins
Dismantle your crowded tenements and meditating machines
Remove your temples and brothels pinned in my skull

You go out of me in a pure spiral of stars
A funeral progressing towards the end of time
Innumerable petals of flame undress your dark
Continuous stem of growing

I walk out of murders and riots
I fall out of smouldering biographies
I sleep on a bed of burning languages
Sending you up in your essential fire and smoke
Piece by piece at my own feet I fall
Diamonds storm out of a black piano

Once I promised you an epic
And now you have robbed me
You have reduced me to rubble
This concerto ends.

Dilip Chitre

Prophets

Prophets have light
Screwed tight in their eyes. They cannot see the darkness
Inside their own loincloth. Their speech has grace
And their voice tenderness. When prophets arrive
Dogs do not bark. They only wag their tails
Like newspaper reporters. Their tongues hang out
And drool as profusely
As editorials.
Crowds in the street
Split up like watermelons
When prophets arrive.

But there are times when even the fuse of heavenly stars is blown
Space boils like a forgotten kettle
The screw comes off from the eyes
And the blinded prophet is stunned
It is then that he comprehends the spiral staircase of heaven made of iron
The complexity of its architecture.

It is the first time that he apprehends God's inhuman boredom
And the size of His shoes. The weight of His foot.
And the total monopoly reflected
In His every movement. It is then that he realises that
His journey so far is only
The space and time of His almighty yawn.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

The House Of My Childhood

The house of my childhood stood empty
On a grey hill
All its furniture gone
Except my grandmother's grindstone
And the brass figurines of her gods

After the death of all birds
Bird-cries still fill the mind
After the city's erasure
A blur still peoples the air
In the colourless crack that comes before morning
In a place where nobody can sing
Words distribute their silence
Among intricately clustered glyphs

My grandmother's voice shivers on a bare branch
I toddle around the empty house
Spring and summer are both gone
Leaving an elderly infant
To explore the rooms of age

Dilip Chitre

The Rains

Through her blood's lightly layered
Hazy darkness
Lightning flashes out branches of my being
When, through intoxicated wet leaves,
The sudden stirring that's the month of Ashadha
Passes tenderly like a slight shiver.
And there remains
Only she
Of the trees, among the trees, for the trees:
Woman smelling of the season.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

The River Indrayani At Dehu

Reflect my grief
River of loss and gain
Mother of bliss
Source of pain
Make my face
Reflect the sky
And every cloud
Passing by
River receive
My ashes and
Hold my spirit
In your watery hand

Dilip Chitre

The View From Chinchpokli

A fouled Sun rises from behind the textile mills
As I crawl out of my nightmares and hobble
To the sink. Then I luxuriate in the toilet
While my unprivileged compatriots of Parel Road Cross Lane
Defecate along the stone wall of Byculla Goods Depot.
I shudder at the thought of going out of this lane
Towards the main road. Hundreds of workers are already returning
From the night-shift, crossing the railway lines.
The bus stop is already crowded. I begin to read
The morning's papers and cover my naked mind
With global events. The ceiling fan whirs, but I sweat.
I breathe in the sulphur dioxide emitted
By the Bombay Gas Company, blended with specks of cotton
And carbon particles discharged by the mills
That clothe millions of loins. Then I shave and shower,
Dismissing all untouchables from my mind, fearing
More palpable pollution. On my way out
I shall throw a used condom and a crumpled pack of cigarettes
Into the garbage. And like a glorious Hindu hero,
Reluctantly riding his chariot to the centre of the battlefield,
I will take a cab to the Manhattan-like
Unreality of Nariman Point. There I will shape India's destiny
Using my immaculate gift. I will ride in a taxi.
I will pass the Victoria Gardens Zoo without blinking.
Byculla Bridge will give me the first line of a poem,
And the Christians, Jews, and Muslims on my way
Will inspire a brilliant critique of contemporary
Indian culture. Of course, I will ignore
The junk-shops, the tea-houses, the restaurants, the markets
I zig-zag through. I shall smoothly go past
The Institute of Art, Anjuman-e-Islam, The Times of India,
The Bombay Municipal Corporation, and Victoria Terminus.
If I glance at Flora Fountain or the Bombay High Court,
It will be an absent-minded observation
And if I seem to look at the University of Bombay's
Clock-tower and buildings it will only be the sulking
Stare of a dirty-minded alma mater-fucker at the old hag herself.
But beyond all lies my daily sigh of relief
Because the gross millions are temporarily out of sight.

Some culture is possible in that half a square mile
Where the wall of India cracks open and the sea is visible.
At Chinchpokli, once I return in the evening,
I plot seductions and rapes, plan masterpieces
Of evasion. The loudspeakers blare at me.
Bedbugs bite me. Cockroaches hover about my soul.
Mice scurry around my metaphysics, mosquitoes sing among my lyrics
Lizards crawl over my religion, spiders infest my politics.
I itch. I become horny. I booze. I want to get smashed.
And I do. It comes easy at Chinchpokli,
Where, like a minor Hindu god, I am stoned
By the misery of my worshippers and by my own
Triumphant impotence.

[Translated by Viju Chitre, from: *As Is Where Is: Selected Poems*]

Dilip Chitre

They Tell Me Your Colour Is Blue

They tell me your colour is blue
My life-breath feeds on your inspiring luminous pastures
All that stands still or moves has turned into grass
In celebration of your much-extolled blueness

It is also said that you are unfathomable
Those who know your exact whereabouts say so on oath
I am happier to realise you in your lost but similar addresses
In your nature that spurns all limits

All awareness turns over
In a winking of your eyes
Your serpentine power looms throughout your being
It shows us our destined parts in your vast anatomy

You - from the number one to its zillionth decimal - are
A unique curvature unto yourself
That has no outer shell nor has any inner space.

[Translated from Shesha: Selected Marathi Poems]

Dilip Chitre

Your First Lover

An early wake-up call
your first lover
touches your shoulder
the rain has stopped
at last
a faint breeze
blows moisture
on your eyes

Dilip Chitre