

Preface to Bombay – London – New York Amitava Kumar

*Amitava Kumar (b 1963), born in Ara, Bhojpur, grew up in Patna and later went to Delhi. His degrees are from the universities of Delhi, Syracuse, and Minnestoa. He is professor of English at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. His latest book is **Husband of a Fanatic** (2004). The present piece is an extract from **Bombay – London – New York** which is an account of a literary journey. It describes the author's discovery of cities and people in the light of the vocations of reading and writing.*



Preface to Bombay – London – New York

- 1 ... In my hometown, Patna, there is a general consensus that culture, like the surrounding economy, lies in ruins. And yet visit to the Khudabaksh Library reveals another world, distant from the cramped, dusty streets outside filled with rickshaws and cars with loud, blasting horns. A librarian, his right hand shaky, pulls out a book on medicine that was written two thousand years ago. The book is entitled *Kitab-ul-Hashaish*. The edition the librarian holds in his hands is from the 13th century AD. The book was translated from Greek into Arabic by the order of Haroun-ul-Rashid; it carries beautiful illustrations painted with herbal and mineral colours that still appear clean and bright. The librarian is old; his spectacles sit crookedly over his bulging eyes. He wants to show you ancient paintings of war scenes where, he says, 'no two faces are alike'. He keeps using the phrase 'hidden treasures'. There are 22,000 handwritten books in this library; about five thousand to seven thousand of them are rare manuscripts.
- 2 A well-known historian Surendra Gopal, accompanies me in my visit to this library. Gopal tells me that the library was gifted to the government in 1891 and is today 'the richest manuscript library on Islam in the world'. When I hear this, I am only conscious of the wretchedness on the streets outside. A stone's throw away is the Patna Medical College and Hospital, where I had been treated and operated upon when I was a boy.
- 3 My mother, too, was a patient there. Later, my sister worked in its wards as a doctor. Medical procedures in the hospital were sometimes performed in the light of

lanterns and torches: when it was raining, flying ants would crowd in and settle down on the open wounds during operations. Even during the day, stray dogs pulled away at bandages on patients. Patna is a place where rats carried away my mother's dentures.

4 The librarian at the Khudabkash has taken out from his safe another book. He tells me that it is a priceless book of poems by the Persian poet Hafiz. The book was presented to the Mughal ruler Humayun by the emperor of Iran. The Mughal rulers used the book to read omens, or '*shakun*': they would turn to a page and try to foretell the future from the words on the page that was open before them. Akbar was emperor when his son Jahangir, banished to Allahabad for his philandering, sought the help of the book to divine his future. The lines that the young prince came across were '*Gham-e-garibi wa mehnat chun barnamitabun/bashar-e-khud rawam washaher yaar khud bashan*' (If it is intolerable for you to live in the foreign land, then you should return home. You will be emperor). In the margins of the book, Jahangir had written that he was in Allahabad and had been perplexed; he returned home to Fatehpur-Sikri on reading the augury and a few days later, following Akbar's death, was crowned emperor.

5 The librarian's dark finger hovers the lines that the emperor had inscribed. The page is filigreed in gold, the bare portions stained with age. I want to touch the page myself. I ask the librarian's permission, and when he says yes, I gently place my index finger where the emperor has signed his name.

6 The librarian and the historian talk for a long time. I do not want to leave the library. It is hot outside. The temperature has exceeded 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The librarian, who knows Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, is reciting poetry. The words were written by the last Mughal governor of Bihar. The historian, Gopal, mentions his name. I ask the librarian to repeat the lines. The poet was addressing the deer in the forest, saying to them what they know, that Majnun, the lover, has died. But what the poet wants to know from the deer is what has passed over the wilderness, how the forest has suffered. The librarian is a man of courtesy, what is called *tahzeeb* in Urdu. When I am leaving his office, he gestures towards Gopal and says, 'He is a museum of knowledge. There are very few people left like this in Patna.' Patna is the wilderness; people like the librarian recall Majnun, who has departed.

7 Gopal has been affected by the conversation about Patna and the loss of cultural institutions. He says that there is a complete absence now of those kinds of conversations that he felt were essential to civilized life. He is nostalgic about his youth in a young India. We pass Patna's Gandhi Maidan, only a mile or so from the Khudabaksh Library; this is the place where the most important political gatherings have taken place in Patna's history. Gopal repeats the two lines of poetry that he had heard the poet Sahir Ludhianvi recite at a socialist meeting there in the 1950s: '*Har cheez yahan bikti hai, har cheez ko bikta dekha hai*' (Everything here is for sale, I have seen everything being sold here). The historian is burdened by his memories. He talks about the lack of funds, the theft of public money, the closing of colleges and libraries.

8 I think of the librarian with his unsteady hand, lovingly laying out the volume that was brought to India by Humayun badshah. The acquisition of these books was also a part of a process of trade and conquest. It was tied to commerce and indeed, to the sale of both precious and ordinary goods. But this was not all. There are other truths too, like the words written by a reader in the margins of text, about hopes, and fears, and the unknown. There are auguries of the future and melancholia about the past. Libraries are haunted by the marketplace – but, it can be hoped, the opposite is true as well. At the same time, there is the enormous tussle of memory and desire that cannot all be neatly or fully regulated by the market or, for that matter, the rulers of nations and corporations. Writers bear witness to this uneven battle too; it is part of the reality of the writer's work, of struggling everyday with the worldliness of the word. Writers are caught in the contradictory tasks of building imaginary worlds that are removed from the everyday life and, at the same time, establishing how the imagination is not detached from the quotidian world and very much a vital part of it. To realise the truth of this condition is to know that books not only offer refuge from the world, they also return you to it. When I had understood L's truth, I had stopped worshipping paper and become a reader.

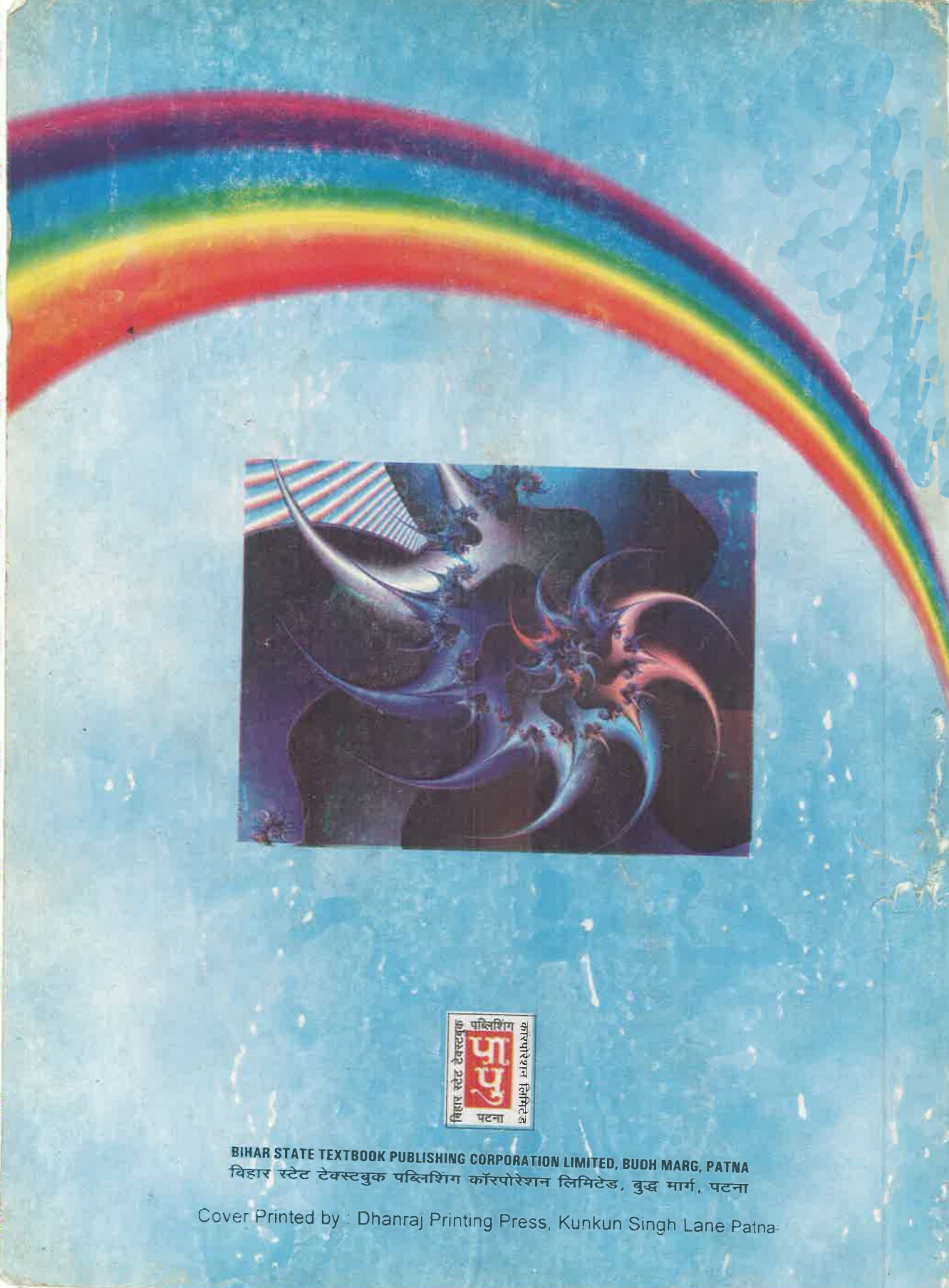


Khudabakhsh Library

9 This book is a record of my reading practice. It bears witness to my struggle to become a writer. I view the pages that follow only as marginal entries in a book written by others. In places, I have put my finger on the place where a writer has signed his or her name. This book tells the story of the many times that I have opened the thick book of Indian writing in order to divine signs for the journey I was about to undertake. The name I have given this literary journey is *Bombay –London- New York*.

Let's Think and Do

1. Write a short essay on Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library as the repository / treasure house of manuscripts/ rare books.
2. Write a short essay on the steps to improve the health of the PMCH.
3. The author presents a contrastive picture of life prevailing inside and outside the Khudabakhs Oriental Public library. Describe your own experience in a library on a similar pattern.
4. Prepare a project report on the following:
 - a) The reputed libraries in your locality
 - b) The preservation of the manuscripts



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