

Poetry of the tormented

LAST MILE TOGETHER: AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOUTH AFRICAN POEMS: Edited by S. Balu Rao. The Afro-Asian Writers' Association, 8/30, East Patel Nagar, New Delhi. Free distribution.

"Whether as a resident at home or an exile abroad, what can a poet carrying in him the burden of his highly terrorised, brutalised and dehumanised country write about? At a time when one is being strangled, what song can issue from his throat except a shriek?", wonders the editor of this bunch of poems — voices of despair, protest and, last but not the least, of a certain underlying optimism too.

If South Africa has come to symbolise man's almost infinite capacity to humiliate his fellow human beings, his cynical callousness towards the voice of the civilized world on the one hand and man's equal capacity for endurance in struggle and faith in his cause, on the other, the poetry of the South African black is a clear mirror of this scenery.

While anguish has many faces in this anthology

of sixty poems, perhaps its most solemn face is projected by Dennis Brutus, the seniormost poet in the country, in "I am the tree":

"I am the tree
creaking in the wind
outside in the night
twisted and stubborn:
I am the sheet
of the twisted tin shack
grating in the wind
in a shrill sad protest;
I am the voice
crying the night
that cries endlessly
and will not be consoled."

But, of course, there are other poems more direct and poignant, such as Pitika Ntuni's "Under the Censor's Guillotine:

"In my country
our war begins when we try

to drink the cauldron of sunset
with our bruised eyes
hands tied to our backs..."

In another poem he says:

by day I guard my tongue
by night my dreams.

There are voices of wonder by children, frightening glimpses of the "yellow peril in the green jungle", myths recreated in the light of the current events and many a bitter sigh to make the bunch a memorable experience for any reader. The title is appropriately culled from Nelson Mandela's hope that India and South Africa would walk the last mile together in the latter's journey to reach the end of the ugly tunnel, apartheid.

As Bhasham Sahni informs us in the preface this publication is a labour of love and the copies are "meant for free distribution among writers and those interested in the literary endeavours and achievements of Afro-Asian peoples".

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