

**Jaydeep Sarangi, *Faithfully, I Wait* (Cyberwit Press, 2017)**

*Faithfully, I Wait* is the sixth poetry collection from acclaimed bilingual poet, translator, editor, researcher and educator, Professor Jaydeep Sarangi. Of Sarangi's previous collection, *To Whom I Return Each Day*, Professor John Thieme of the East Anglia School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing wrote, 'Jaydeep Sarangi's poems are moving testaments to parallel lives lived on either side of walls. Personal and political, they summon up the evanescent beauty and small moments with a quiet reflectiveness that speaks volumes.' Literary critic Leonard Dabydeen similarly declared, 'to peruse poems in this book ... will rivet your mind and keep you spellbound with deep-seated soul searching.'

This is a formidable reputation for a writer to fulfil—and even more so in light of Sarangi's prolific achievements as not only a poet but also an editor of scholarly and creative books and journals. For instance, Sarangi is a founding editor of the journal *Teesta*, and co-editor (with Usha Kishore) of the recent anthology *Home Thoughts: Poetry of the British Indian Diaspora* (2017). Likewise impressive are the poetic linkages Sarangi has helped forge between India and Australia through projects including interviews and anthologies that pair Indian and Australian poets and literary scholars, helping to enhance cross-cultural understanding through the sharing of creativity and ideas. These projects, in addition to the literary strength of the work itself, put into action Sarangi's deep and sincere belief in 'transformation of society for good by means of poetry' (84). Furthermore, Sarangi has travelled extensively beyond his hometown of Kolkata, India (once known as Calcutta), delivering lectures, workshops and readings for universities and literary associations around the globe.

As the cover states, *Faithfully, I Wait* collects poems 'on rain, thunder and lightning at Jhargram and beyond'. The keyword here is 'beyond'. Indeed, this is the key strength of Sarangi's new collection – his capacity to go beyond. In deceptively simple ways, this skilled poet manages at once to situate his writing in particular places and moments while reaching out to readers who may never have been to those places or lived those experiences, but can, through language, connect across divides of geography, culture and language.

Jhargram is a district in West Bengal, approximately a hundred and seventy kilometres from Kolkata. Popular among tourists, Jhargram is known for its forests, ancient temples and palaces. In Sarangi's collection, these elements of Jhargram's beauty shine through lines such as those that open the collection's first poem, 'Love and Longing at Jhargram':

My days are care free.  
Red soil is my first love.  
The sapling I planted, is a full tree  
where birds flock together, days end peacefully. (7)

However, the true strength of *Faithfully, I Wait* is that it digs deeper than the tourist version of Jhargram, also delving into:

Book reviews: *Faithfully, I Wait* by Jaydeep Sarangi. Amelia Walker.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 11 no. 1, December 2018.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

... the forest land  
its native links where I lost  
my past. My ancestors breathed their last. (7)

Sarangi even dares ask:

What is that freedom?  
My forgotten chapter of memory  
sculpted on the walls of Kanakdurga Temple.  
my lines are straight  
Arrows fixed up  
Invasion from my city burden. (7)

Such lines hint, by my reading, at the cruelties of colonialism and other historic as well as ongoing struggles. Here I am reminded of Thieme's remark about the 'personal and political' power of Sarangi's earlier poems: this is a strength that *Faithfully, I Wait* continues, and extends.

Another highlight of the collection is 'Elected *Babu*', in which:

Some men wearing dhoti  
Came begging for vote like annual events.  
Trees are witness. Promises given and forgotten.  
Again promises. Time is ripe. (34)

If 'Love and Longing at Jhargram' makes the personal political, 'Elected *Babu*' shows the impact of the political on an individual person, on distinct lives. Sarangi reflects:

There was no development in last ten years  
All promises denied. Public amenities—  
Who can talk about these?  
Justice cried on papers. Stories repeated. (34)

Then Sarangi zeroes in on the figure of 'Kalu', who

...chased them up to the road.  
They couldn't say a word. They left. (34)

and subsequently

... took their manifesto  
Between two levels of his teeth.  
He made unintelligible words. Noises. (34)

This frustration with government and the impact poor government can have upon individual members of society reflects issues of relevance and relatability to readers well beyond the locale in which the poem is set – including but exceeding Australian readers. Here as

elsewhere in the collection, Sarangi reaches beyond borders, geographic and cultural, offering poetic lines and imagery as touchstones of connection and solidarity.

Another striking moment of connection – albeit in the realm of sport as opposed to politics – is forged through the touching poem ‘63 Not Out’, which, along with the collection as a whole, Sarangi dedicates to the late Australian cricketer Philip Joel Hughes. Sarangi writes:

No man can ever be so liquid  
No touch is so palpable.  
No life is so heavy with sighs.  
Charioted spinning wheel  
finds a destination—  
nano space of human hearts  
when night is windowless, tight and fisted. (68-69)

and at the end of the poem concludes:

All hearts are suspended,  
eyes travel  
leaf to leaf from morning to night,  
other feelings abandoned. (69)

This is a deeply touching gesture, especially given that India and Australia are rivals when it comes to cricket – and this rivalry does, at times, sadly become far less than friendly. In this poem, however, and through the dedication of the book to Hughes, Sarangi demonstrates an ability to see past the superficial games of team affiliations and national pride. He reminds us that at the end of the day, any opposition on the field is far outweighed by the shared love of both Indian and Australian people for cricket itself – or for those of us who aren’t necessarily fans of the game, for poetry itself, or simply for the shared celebration of life, passion, love, language, learning and communication. For that, at the end of the day, is what I feel this collection gave me as a reader. This is what I feel it can give to other readers too – readers in Australia, in India, and beyond.

With skilful precision, the book captures moments of the specific, the unique. Yet it shows how these moments matter, how they can through poetry resonate far beyond the particular times and places of which Sarangi writes. These poems capture themes and issues of relevance to countless people in countless places. Furthermore, they do so through deftly-crafted imagery, lyrical inventiveness and a musical language of true grace. Consider, for instance, these understated yet striking lines from the book’s title poem:

Red spills into hearts, God sinking  
in a hospital bed  
at the end of my hard day, In a dark alley. (58)

This same poem enlightens readers as to the significance of the book’s title – namely the importance, for poets, of waiting. For

A poet has no home  
Only a quest –  
Waiting, faithfully. (58)

I now wait faithfully for Sarangi's next poetic offering. Like rain upon dusty earth, his words cleanse me, refresh me, and ready me for the new.

### **Amelia Walker**

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*Amelia Walker* began writing and performing poetry as a teenager. In her twenties, she worked as a nurse before returning to university to study creative writing and eventually pursue a PhD. She now lectures at the University of South Australia and is secretary of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, as well as co-editor of the reviews section for TEXT journal. Her recent scholarly publications include a chapter in the collection *Autofiction in English* (ed. Hywel Dix, Palgrave Macmillan 2018) and another in *Creative Writing with Critical Theory: Inhabitation* (eds. Dominique Hecq and Julian Novitz, Glyphi 2018).