

'nostalgic and unflinching, evocative and savage ...'—Aravind Adiga

# DELHI

## A Soliloquy



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2021 —

Longlist

# M. MUKUNDAN

Translated by

FATHIMA E.V. & NANDAKUMAR K.

# Delhi: A Soliloquy

by M. Mukundan

translated by Fathima E.V.

& Nandakumar K.



*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
LITERATURE  
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the  
JCB Prize for Literature

## DELHI: A SOLILOQUY

**M. Mukundan** was born and brought up in Mahe. He rose to critical acclaim and popularity with *Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangalil* (1974). His stories and novels have been widely translated into various Indian languages, English and French. He has been awarded Ezhuthachan Puraskaram, the highest literary honour given by the Government of Kerala, the Crossword Book Award twice, first in 1999 for *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* and again in 2006 for *Kesavan's Lamentations*, and the Sahitya Akademi award and N.V. Puraskaram for *Daivathinte Vikrithikal (God's Mischief)*. His other major works include *Kesavante Vilapangal* (2009) and *Prasavam* (2008). He was presented with the insignia of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government in 1998. He also served as the president of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi from 2006 to 2010. Four of his books have been adapted into award-winning films. *Delhi Gathakal* (2011), translated as *Delhi: A Soliloquy*, is based on his experiences of living and working in Delhi for forty years as a Cultural Attaché at the French embassy. In 2004, he retired from that position and returned to Mahe, his hometown.

**Fathima E.V.** is an award-winning writer and translator. Her translation of Subhash Chandran's *Manushyanu Oru Amukham*, translated as *A Preface to Man*, was awarded the Crossword Book Award (2017) and the V. Abdulla Translation Award (2017). She was the translator-editor of the *Indian Ink Mag*, and her poems and short fiction have appeared in international anthologies and journals. She holds an MA and a PhD from the University of Calicut, and completed the TESOL course from the University of Surrey. Currently, she heads the department of English at Krishna Menon Memorial Government Women's College, Kannur.

**Nandakumar K.** started his career as a sub-editor at *Financial Express*, after completing a master's degree in Economics, followed by stints in international marketing and general management in India and abroad. Having travelled in over fifty countries, he claims he can speak enough German and French to save his life. Strangely, his tryst with translation started with a paper in French on the blood diseases of fishes for his sister-in-law, using a borrowed dictionary. He is now an empanelled copy editor with Indian publishers and IIM Ahmedabad. *Delhi: A Soliloquy* is his first published translation from Malayalam. He lives and works in Dubai. Nandakumar is the grandson of Mahakavi Vallathol Narayana Menon.

# DELHI: A SOLILOQUY



M. MUKUNDAN

*Translated from the Malayalam by*  
Fathima E.V. & Nandakumar K.

eka

# eka

First published in Malayalam as *Delhi Gathakal* in 2011

First published in English as *Delhi: A Soliloquy* in 2020 by Eka, an imprint of Westland Publications Private Limited

1st Floor, A Block, East Wing, Plot No. 40, SP Infocity, Dr MGR Salai, Perungudi, Kandanchavadi, Chennai 600096

Westland, the Westland logo, Eka and the Eka logo are the trademarks of Westland Publications Private Limited, or its affiliates.

Copyright © M. Mukundan, 2011

Translation copyright © Fathima E.V. & Nandakumar K., 2020

ISBN: 9789389648263

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, places, events and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

All rights reserved

Typeset by Jojy Philip, New Delhi 110 015

Printed at Manipal Technologies Limited, Manipal

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

*To Sreeja, my wife,  
from whom I learnt the joy of togetherness.*

# PART ONE



## Times of War

*We have been travelling through the cloud.  
The sky has been dark ever since the war began.*

—Black Kettle (1803–1868)

# 1

## A HUNDRED WITHERED FLOWERS

It was on a Saturday, 13 June 1959, that Sahadevan arrived in Delhi for the first time. He was twenty years old. That was the day he spoke the most he ever had. All to himself.

Sahadevan would live in Delhi, the Indian capital, for a long time, growing old there. He would accomplish many things during this time, and would fail at a lot more. One of the important things he would continue to do was to keep talking to himself. It was a dialogue that would go on for four decades. For instance, when he alighted from the train at Delhi for the first time, he said to himself, ‘Sahadeva, do you know where you’re standing now? In the land where Gandhiji fell after he was shot ...’

Sahadevan turned voluble and talked to himself every time something momentous happened—not necessarily in his own life. 21 October 1961 was one such day. He was exhausted from having talked to himself the whole day. When he talked to himself, he also smoked continuously. The constant chatter and smoking wore him out.

Around 9 a.m. that day, in his one-room government quarters at Sewa Nagar, Shreedharanunni had left the living world.

Sahadevan had great respect and affection for Shreedharanunni, to whom he owed a great deal. Shreedharanunni was thirty-nine years old when he died. He did not suffer from any ailment serious enough to cause death. It had happened as he scanned the headlines of his favourite English newspaper, which he had got into the habit of reading the day he arrived in Delhi to start his new job. Shreedharanunni's heart just stopped beating ('His fuse blew', as Inder Bhatia put it).

The previous day had held no premonition of the impending tragedy. He had left for his office in the Central Secretariat as usual, at 9.15 a.m., having pulled on a pair of slightly dishevelled white cotton trousers and a half-sleeve shirt. The tiffin carrier containing his lunch dangled from the handlebar of his bicycle. He had worn these same trousers the previous day and ridden the bicycle for two hours. A great majority of mid-level babus—the slightly pejorative term for the non-officer grade government staff—employed at the Secretariat had similarly wrinkled trouser seats, as bicycles were their primary mode of transport.

The second milk-train from Rewari was to arrive by 9.30 a.m.; the first one came before dawn. Shreedharanunni had to cross the railway gate before that. By the time the train passed and the gates opened, the place would be clogged with buses, cycles, tongas and pedestrians, making movement impossible. To be caught in the melee meant being late for office by at least half an hour.

'You wear your shirt and pants for one day and they're wrinkled. Do you go to office to work or to roll on the ground with some children?'

Shreedharanunni laughed away Devi's grumbling. 'Do you want me to get any vegetables in the evening?' he asked.

'Buy some cauliflower. A small one will do. Just yesterday, Vidya asked me why I don't make any cauliflower curry.'

Their daughter was very fond of cauliflower. She normally ate two chapatis, but would polish off at least four when cauliflower and tomato curry was cooked in the house.

The cauliflower season was just beginning; the prices were still high. Once the cold season set in, the market in Kotla would flood with cauliflowers, carrots and radishes, making the prices drop steadily. Then, every day, it would be chapati and cauliflower curry. Sometimes Devi cooked the vegetable dry, without any gravy. Sometimes she added masala and made it taste like meat. Except for Vidya, no one was particularly fond of these curries.

Before he mounted the bicycle, Shreedharanunni used Devi's saree pallu to wipe the seat clean. Its cover was split right through the middle. The leather on his shoes was also wrinkled and had cracked in places. The heels were worn out. He should get a new pair this Diwali, Devi thought, and made a mental note. She had planned to buy them last Diwali, but it didn't happen. By the time the children's things were purchased, the father's pockets had gone empty.

'Don't worry, I can manage with this for one more year,' Shreedharanunni had consoled her.

Shreedharanunni wore shoes only to the office; everywhere else, he wore rubber flip-flops. Inside the house, he walked barefoot. Even in January, when the cemented floor was cold enough to numb one's feet, he had no problem walking about without even a pair of socks.

'Arrey, Shreedharji, make haste, the milk-train will be here any moment.' Sukhram, riding behind him in the service lane, called out as he pedalled past. Sukhram was Shreedharanunni's colleague. He stayed in the government quarters at Andrews Ganj, where the city itself ended. Beyond it were wheat fields, interspersed with cabbage and radish patches.

Everyone was pedalling furiously to get through the railway gate in time. Shreedharanunni was punctilious—he aimed

to make it through just minutes before the train arrived. His calculation never failed.

However, his return trip in the evening could never be as precise. There would be some errand to run on the way, someone to meet. If nothing else, there would be a union meeting to attend.

Shreedharanunni was an active member of the union. In the past twelve years, he had participated in seven strikes, big and small. The union leaders made the most of his organisational skills. When a strike was on, he would reach home late, often past midnight. There were days when he did not come home at all. Devi had no misgivings about this. She knew that he would spend the night at Karbala, where the Class IV employees—peons and messengers—had their quarters.

‘Never surrender’ was the fierce encouragement she offered when he came back in the morning before rushing off again on his cycle, unshaven, barely managing a hasty bath, and grabbing two chapatis for breakfast.

‘If you have to be on a hunger strike till you die, do it, but don’t surrender.’

‘Oh, that won’t be necessary, Devi. We’ve never lost. Don’t you know that?’

Shreedharanunni often glanced at the photo of S.A. Dange that hung on the wall of his room, which remained dark even during the daytime. Each time, his mind grew robust in response; the longing for resistance rose within him.

There was another photo beside that of Dange—of the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai. A hundred red flowers adorned its borders. He had bought the picture outside Parassinikadavu Temple during one of his visits to Kerala. The official deity of Parassinikadavu was Muthappan, but photographs of Zhou Enlai and AKG\* outnumbered Muthappan’s in sales.

---

\*A.K. Gopalan, a leader of the Communist Party of India and later of the Marxist party, universally known by his initials, AKG.

In his unwashed shirt and trousers, with his face unshaven, Shreedharanunni disappeared from his wife's sight, pedalling between the old buildings and into the distance.

In this manner, forgoing food and sleep, he had worked hard for the success of several strikes. He had only tales of victory to narrate; till date, none of their strikes had failed. Nor would they ever lose. He believed in unity; if they stood united, no power, worldly or divine, could defeat them. He was a rationalist and a communist.

It was that evening, in the parking lot of the Secretariat, that he heard the gloomy news. He was about to get on his bicycle after hanging his freshly washed tiffin carrier on the handle, when Bansilal came up and said, 'Bhaisaab, did you hear? War has started on the border.'

'What war?'

He hadn't heard any talk of war. Why would there be a war at this point? He was confused. Starvation deaths in villages, herds of cattle killed by draught, epidemics of plague and cholera ... these were the things that usually figured in the news. All of these could be endured. But it was unbearable to listen to news about an impending war. How many would perish ...

The first war was for Azad Kashmir. In October 1947, when war broke out in Poonch, Shreedharanunni hadn't yet reached Delhi. In those days, he was working as an accountant in a warehouse owned by a Konkani, after completing his tenth standard. But the war was still fresh in the memory of Bansilal, who had grown up in Punjab. He used to narrate stories to his colleagues while they ate their chapatis and dal on the India Gate lawns on cool, sunny winter afternoons. Bansilal's brother, Krishanlal, was one of the 1580 soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for their motherland. His youthful body still lay frozen in the snowdrifts of Uri. Perhaps it would remain there for thousands of years.

'Why would Pakistan need a war now? To annex the rest of Kashmir as well?'

In the 1947 war, Pakistan had seized two-fifths of Kashmir.

'Arrey bhaisaab, the war is not against Pakistan. It's with China.'

Shreedharanunni felt a prick, as if a bedbug had bitten him on his buttocks. He realised in a flash that Bansilal was pulling his leg.

He laughed and started to pedal. There was a sea of bicycles in front of him. People were streaming out from their offices in the various ministries and the Secretariat. Tiffin carriers or bags dangled from handlebars. Bus No. 41, which terminated at Lajpat Nagar, cut through the tide of bicycles, emitting fumes. He thought of Kunhikrishnan, his journalist friend, who also hailed from his village in Kerala. He now lived in the New Double Storey building in Guru Nanak Market in Lajpat Nagar.

Cyclists seldom take the route that buses and cars frequent. They know shortcuts. Avoiding the main thoroughfares buzzing with vehicular traffic, they ride through residential areas, parks and markets to get home faster. Having lived in Delhi for thirteen years, Shreedharanunni knew all the alleys and shortcuts along his way like the back of his hand.

A throng of cyclists appeared at the end of the road. They had turned from Janpath into Ratendone Road, taking the shorter route. The rays of the evening sun bounced off their handlebars. Like competitors in the Olympic velodrome, the government employees streamed past Ratendone Road onto a path that cut through Lodhi Gardens. A chameleon that had emerged from the trees and onto the path saw the procession and scampered back, frightened.

Though it was only 5.30 p.m., Lodhi Gardens was already turning dark. The squabble of roosting birds could be heard. The place was a veritable den of foxes right in the heart of the city. No one stepped in there once dusk fell. Wild animals were known to live amidst the trees, as were ghosts and ghouls.

Sukhrum claimed to have seen a phantom cavalry brigade there one wintry night, while he was on his way home to Andrews Ganj after a late-night movie at the Race Course cinema. None of those horsemen of the Lodi king had heads on their shoulders, he said. Shreedharanunni had laughed when he heard this.

He fell behind the other cyclists. Though he had tried to dismiss Bansilal's words as a joke, a doubt had started to grow within him. Earlier, when he was in the vicinity of India Gate, he had noticed the cars of high-ranking military officials rushing towards South Block, the flags on their bonnets fluttering in the breeze. Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon's office was in South Block. The thought made him anxious.

Cutting through Lodhi Gardens, the cyclists entered Block 21 of Lodhi Colony. Shreedharanunni's legs slackened further on the pedals, and the rest of the cyclists rode past. Suddenly, he was all alone.

He cycled slowly towards Sewa Nagar. From Khanna Market, the grating sounds of the milling machine grinding wheat could be heard. Though Diwali was a few weeks away, two shops selling fireworks had already opened and were doing brisk business. He rode on, along Dhobi Ghat. Just as he reached the railway crossing, the gate closed. On the other side, horse-drawn carriages and bicycles swarmed. Only local trains and goods trains passed through here. Yet the gate remained closed most of the time. There was a coolness in the air, presaging winter. But he was sweating. He pushed the bicycle to the side of the road and squatted there. Cattle returning from the vegetable market in Kotla Mubarakpur after feasting on rotting cauliflowers and radishes brushed past him.

By the time he reached home, it was 7 p.m. As she took the tiffin carrier off the handle and stepped back into the house, Devi asked him, 'Where's the cauliflower?'

Shreedharanunni just stood there, silent. He had taken the route close to Kotla Mubarakpur. Riding through the railway

gate, he had seen the kerosene lamps of the vegetable vendors inside the market. Even then, he had not remembered. His mind had been preoccupied with more important things than buying a cauliflower.

'I forgot, Devi.'

'Didn't you come via the vegetable market? And you still forgot? Are you going to begin a new strike?'

Devi had told Vidya that her father would be bringing cauliflower. She was already salivating at the thought of eating warm chapatis with cauliflower curry.

'Devi, I need to go to Lajpat Nagar.'

'Have some tea then. I'll just take a moment to make it.'

'No need, Devi.'

He didn't usually go out until after he'd had a bath and a cup of tea. She wondered what had happened today.

'Why are you off to Lajpat Nagar?'

'I need to meet Kunhikrishnan urgently. I have to ask him something.'

Kunhikrishnan would tell him exactly what was going on. He was, after all, a member of the press.

Shreedharanunni was already on his bicycle, moving swiftly. It was dark outside, and cold too. Night falls early as winter approaches. Dussehra was over. Next up was Diwali. Once that was over, the cold would set in over Delhi. In the mornings, the mist would pass through the jamun trees at Sewa Nagar like rain clouds. The days would pass quickly, without meeting the sun. And the nights would be long and chilly.

It was to Kunhikrishnan's apartment in Lajpat Nagar that Shreedharanunni cycled. Kunhikrishnan worked for one of the leading English dailies in the city. He would have all the latest updates. Was there a war? With whom? Was it with Pakistan?

If only he had a radio at home, he mused wistfully. Not for listening to the songs broadcast by Radio Ceylon, but for the news. But there was no way he could afford a radio. Even among

his colleagues, only three or four had a radio at home. A Murphy radio was the dream of every middle-class family.

Shreedharanunni reached the Ring Road. He saw the tongas headed towards Safdarjung. They would stop plying after eight. After that, the only mode of transport was the bicycle, wherever one wanted to go.

He pedalled on in the dim light. He passed Andrews Ganj, then turned right at Moolchand Hospital and entered Guru Nanak Market. The area beyond lay in complete darkness. The cauliflower patches on the right side of the narrow road leading to Kalkaji were also in darkness. No one went there after nightfall because it teemed with robbers and thugs.

The tiny, double-storey tenements at Lajpat Nagar had been built by the government for refugees after the bloodletting of Partition. Kunhikrishnan stayed in one of these as a tenant, paying a monthly rent of ninety rupees. Electricity and water cost extra. He often said that he could not afford such a high rent.

‘Kunh’ishnaaa ...’ he called from the shadows.

Shreedharanunni could see the dim light from the matchbox-like houses around him. He leaned his bicycle against the wall and went into the yard. There was a calling-bell, but the switch was non-functional. He knocked on the door. Someone switched on the light inside and the pale yellow glow from a low-voltage forty-watt bulb filled the entranceway.

‘Who’s that?’ a woman asked through the half-open door.

‘It’s me, Shreedharanunni, Lalitha. Isn’t Kunh’ishnan here?’

‘Come in and sit down, Shreedharetta. Where are you coming from at this hour?’

He stood at the door and looked around.

‘I was sleeping,’ she said. ‘What else am I to do? I’m bored stiff.’

‘Where is Kunh’ishnan?’

‘He’s on night duty. It’ll be dawn by the time he gets home. When we got married, he promised me he wouldn’t do it

anymore. But he is always on night duty. I don't believe him these days, whatever he says.'

'It isn't his fault, Lalitha. For newspaper employees, there's no difference between day and night. Every morning, the paper has to be brought out, no?'

Shreedharanunni was disappointed. He had cycled all this way for news. Now where would he find it? Who could he check with? All the main dailies were located on Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg. There were no buses at this late hour and he didn't have the energy to cycle all the way there, he thought despondently.

He could go back to Sewa Nagar and find a house that had a radio. But when was the next broadcast? Was there a news broadcast at all tonight? Would he have to wait till dawn for one?

The only other person he could approach was Sahadevan, who was knowledgeable and up-to-date about everything. He lived only half a kilometre away, in Amritpuri, a village next to Dayanand Colony. But would Sahadevan be in his room? He was the type who always got home late.

'Come in, Shreedharetta. Why are you standing outside?'

That was when Shreedharanunni's eyes fell on the aerial inside the room. He stepped in quickly. Ordinarily, he would never have entered a house where a lady sat alone.

The room was bare, except for two steel chairs and a cane mooda. A radio sat on a small stool against the wall. Just now, the most valuable thing in the world for him was that Murphy radio. Kunhikrishnan had got married only two months ago. He was yet to buy household furniture. But for a journalist, a radio was a necessity, not a luxury; he had bought this one under an instalment scheme.

Shreedharanunni sat on the mooda and switched on the radio. There was no sound.

'It takes some time to warm up, Shreedharetta.'

After two minutes, the radio had warmed up fully; the valves started blinking one by one. Spluttering sounds came from it.

Then the opening bars of a Hindi song came brokenly through:  
*'Kisi ki muskuraahaton pe ...'*

'Please find the news, Lalitha.'

She fiddled with the knob and found the All India Radio station. A programme on agriculture seemed to be on, but nothing else.

Once again, he was disheartened. After sitting in front of the radio for a little longer, he bade her goodbye. The lights of Guru Nanak Market had gone out. The roadside corner that was usually occupied by Kallu, the cobbler—whom everyone called Kallu mochi—was deserted. He must have left for the day. Dim lights could be seen only in the windows of the tenements called New Double Storey. The cauliflower patches were completely submerged in the inky darkness.

By the time he reached home, Shreedharanunni was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

That night, he could not sleep. He kept tossing and turning on the charpoy. Every now and then, he got up to drink water from the earthen pot kept outside. Next to him, mother and daughter slept on another charpoy. Sathyanathan usually slept on the narrow veranda at the back, lulled by the breeze that blew through the neem trees. He did his homework there too. It was only when the days and nights became cold in November that he moved inside.

It was close to dawn when Shreedharanunni finally fell asleep. Almost immediately, he woke up to the rumble of Delhi Milk Scheme vans filled with milk bottles driving past the house. The DMS milk booth was two blocks away. He went to the toilet, pulled on a woollen cap, picked up the card and the empty bottles, and walked along the deserted path leading to the booth. He had permits for two half-litre bottles since they were a family of four. Devi typically gave Vidya a glassful to drink and used the rest of the milk from that bottle for their tea. The second bottle of milk was for making curd. In summer, she would make lassi instead, with ice, for her husband and kids.

After fetching the milk, Shreedharanunni pulled out a chair and sat outside, doing nothing, his eyes fixed on the road. Every day, at 6.30 a.m., the newspaper delivery man arrived on his bicycle. But not today. It was already 7.30 a.m. Eight o'clock, and there was still no sign of him. Eight-thirty turned to nine. Then in the distance, his bicycle appeared near Sewa Nagar Market. People were waiting impatiently for him in front of their houses.

Shreedharanunni did not ask the man why he had been delayed. He took the paper and opened it with trembling hands. His eyes scanned the headlines on the front page.

China had attacked India. There were massive troop movements at the borders. Sixty-five thousand Chinese soldiers were moving towards India. The Chinese had already entered Aksai Chin on the west and NEFA on the east.

Shreedharanunni felt as if someone had kicked him in the chest. He felt breathless. With great effort, he turned his head and looked at the portrait of Zhou Enlai inside the house.

*Hindi Chini bhai bhai.* Indians and Chinese are brothers.

Let a hundred flowers bloom.

The newspaper slipped from his nerveless fingers and down to the floor. His eyes rolled up. Gently, his head fell to one side.

# Discover the Greatest Novels of the Year

If you enjoyed this extract and wish to read on, [click here](#).

M. Mukundan's *Delhi: A Soliloquy* is one of ten books on the  
2021 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

Follow @TheJCBprize.

The winner of the 2021 JCB Prize for Literature will be announced on 13th November.



## THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE —2021—

[www.thejcbprize.org](http://www.thejcbprize.org)

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS