

Essays

Seasonal Reflections and Indianness in Haiku

by Pravat Kumar Padhy

Introduction

India has a wide spectrum of cultural and social diversity, language and literature. The country embodies the manifestation of a diverse climate culture: snowfall in the north and scorching summer in the south; varying dialects from one state to the other; rich classical culture to contemporary modernity; paintings from rock art to modern portraiture, and so on. It is bestowed with a magnificent landscape: from snow-peaked mountain ranges to the desert, widespread blue glittering seas, hills and enchanting valleys. Generally, the seasons are the same across India, from north to south, with varying intensities: scorching hot in the south during summer and bitter cold in the north during winter. The main Southwest monsoon season is identical across the country. Southeast India witnesses rain for the second time during October-December. The region has a wide variety of festivals, attire, and food habits as if it represents a continent in its wholeness. These diversities influence art, literature, and their way of living.

Since ancient times, classical verses have explored nature, spiritualism and humanity, all infused with a rich Indian cultural dimension. Many poets portrayed the beauty of nature with a touch of Indianness in the ancient Indian Sanskrit language. Kalidas's *Ritusamhara* (*Pageant of the Seasons*), written in the Sanskrit language, comprises classical poems about seasons in India. It has six cantos for the six seasons: *grīṣma* (summer), *varṣa/pavas* (monsoon/rains), *sarat* (autumn), *hemanta* (cool), *sisira* (winter), and *vasanta* (spring)¹.

Poetry with lyrical versification manifests the sublime touch of love, ecstasy, and natural beauty, with a touch of Indianness and exquisite linguistic subtlety. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the Nightingale of India, in her poem "The Village Song," a folk lyric, depicts the narration between a mother and her daughter about the wedding of an Indian rural girl. It is lyrical poetry on youth and love blending with the rural landscape and divine feeling:

Mother mine, to the wild forest I am going'
Where upon the champa boughs the champa buds are blowing;
To the köil-haunted river-isles where lotus lilies glisten,
The voice of the fairy folk are calling me: O listen!²

In India, the history of haiku-like poems in English goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The Indian Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941,) visited Japan in 1916, and cited references to haiku poems in his travelogue "*Japan-Jatri*". He was impressed by the beauty of haiku poetry by Basho and translated two of Basho's haiku into Bengali. Citing the brevity of the famous haiku 'old pond', Tagore comments, "That is all. And that is sufficient." His collection "Fireflies" (1928) comprises epigrammatic poems. What a splendor with seasonal reference in the following aphoristic expression!

The jasmine's lisping of love to the sun is her flowers.

From 1950 to 2000, there was some degree of familiarity with haiku in India, and during the mid-1900s onward academicians like Prof. Saty Bhushan Verma, Prof. R K Singh, Angelee Deodhar, and others tried to make this genre in English, Hindi, and other regional languages. Post-2000, plenty of information became easily available through the internet, and global connection thus facilitated the easy exchange of knowledge about Japanese short forms of poetry.

Rural themes, landscapes, festivals, and imagery rich in the Indian context began flourishing in contemporary haiku literature during a “Development Phase” (around 2000 onward)³.

Seasonal variations greatly influence human moods and psychology. The poets use rhythm, tonality and images with sensibility to showcase sublime Indianness in haiku writings. The beauty of nature, livelihood, cultural aspects, socio-economics, etc. broadly occupy the central theme of the haiku genre.

Below, a married Hindu woman wears a bindi (a small red coloured mark) on her forehead as a mark of sacredness, an important cultural symbol of Indianness.

a bindi
on my mom's forehead ...
morning sun

Aashna Goyal⁴

Cycle of Seasons and Indianness

Seiko Ota writes “The main objective of this seasonal word is not to call nature into being but rather to amplify the world of the poem.”⁵ References to flora and fauna, animals, birds, seasonal specific cultural proclivity, livelihood etc. have been used by Indian haikai to enrich haiku literature. Celebrations, marriages and festivals are closely related to seasonal time frames and are often associated with places of historical importance. The linguistic and aesthetic values have been richly embedded in the regional and cultural-specific haiku literature.

Professor Satya Bhushan Verma aptly writes, “Haiku is known as the ‘poetry of nature’, but it is more a poetry of life through communion with nature.”⁶ Poets have relied on specific *kigo* and seasonal topics (*kidai*) to enumerate their feelings. The six seasons (two months each) in India are named *Grishma Ritu* (summer: May and June), *Varsha Ritu* (monsoon: July and August), *Sharada Ritu* (autumn: September and October), *Hemanta Ritu* (frost or pre-winter: November and December), *Shishira Ritu* (winter: January and February) and *Vasanta Ritu* (spring: March and April). Spring is considered the king of seasons and hence called *Rituraj*.

Poets craft vivid observations of nature, childhood memories, human spirit, and cultural aspects through the prism of seasonal manifestations across the wide geographical spread. Primarily India is an agricultural country, thus the festivals and cultural celebrations are largely associated with farming. The socio-cultural landscape has a close seasonal association. Here the serenity of Indianness has been exemplified in some of the selected haiku related to different seasons or *rituas*, each roughly lasting for two months (*masas*).

Summer (Gishma Ritu)

Māsa/ Month: Jyesta and Aashaadha

Mango grows in the summer season and is considered the “king of fruits” in India.

back from my hometown . . .
scent of ripe mangoes
in the empty bag

Kala Ramesh⁷

Residents in rural areas often seen water shortages during the

summer, and village wells dry up.

dry well
I haul up a bucket
filled with summer

Sanjuktaa Asopa⁸

In India, homemade pickle preparations are common. Traditionally in villages, grandma loves to make seasonal pickles of mango, garlic, lemon, chilli etc. Garlic pickle (Lahsun ka achaar) is considered good for the heart.

summer heat ...
the smell of pickled garlic
from the kitchen

Shloka Shankar⁹

Cotton is harvested towards the end of summer.

quiet evening ...
still on the cotton flowers
scent of the sun

Milan Rajkumar¹⁰

Monsoon (Varsha Ritu)

Māsa / Month: Shravana and Bhadrapada

In India, the *Hindusthani* classical ragas are closely associated

with different seasons and are performed with reverence. These are raga Dipak (Grishma Ritu), raga Megha (Varsha Ritu), raga Bhairav (Sharada Ritu), raga Shree (Hemanta Ritu), raga Malkos (Shishira Ritu) and raga Hindol (Vasanta Ritu). Different musical notes have unique effects and contextual significance. Rupa Anand symbolically juxtaposes the ‘swell and surge’ of the river with the *Hindusthani* classic raga “*megh malhar*” which is associated with the monsoon season. *Megh* is a Sanskrit word meaning cloud. Popularly the raga is sung to welcome rain to earth.

in tune
the waters swell and surge
raga megh malhar

Rupa Anand¹¹

Onam is a 10-day-day long harvest festival celebrated in the Kerala state of southern India. Floral *rangloi* (arrangement of flowers) are designed in front of the entrance of homes and temples. In the above haiku, Vidya reminisces about the traditional folk songs (*Onappaattu*) sung during the festival.

Onam swing –
the rhythm of grandma’s songs
life after life

Vidya Venkatramani¹²

In India, *Raksha Bandhan* (the bond or knot of protection) is celebrated with pomp and ceremony. Sisters of all ages tie sacred threads on the wrists of brothers as a mark of protection for the sisters by the brothers.

lives entwine
brother and sister --
sacred thread

Sandip Sital Chauhan¹³

In yogic practice, “Kundalini” in the ancient Indian Vedic texts is regarded as the awakening of feminine energy at the base of the spinal cord and is considered the life force coiled up through the body.

tapping into my kundalini this rain

Shloka Shankar¹⁴

Autumn (Sharada Ritu)

Māsa / Month: Ashwin and Kartik

The autumn equinox is celebrated as the *Sharada Navaratri* in India. The flower *rajanigandha* blossoms at night with its elegance and exotic fragrance.

autumn equinox ...
the scent of rajanigandha lingers
outside my window

Sandip Sital Chauhan¹⁵

In North India, *Pitri Paksha* (*Pitri* means “ancestors” and *Paksha* means “fortnight”) falls during the month of “*Ashwin*” (September-October). This day (*Mahalaya Amavasya*) is considered the most auspicious day and people observe the 15-day *Sharaddha* ritual in memory of the revered departed souls of the family members. The poet writes about the tradition of observing *Pitri Paksha* by offering cooked food to the crows.

Pitri Paksha
my offering caws
across the sky

Daipayan Nair¹⁶

Diwali (The Festival of Lights) is one of the grand festivals celebrated across India. In early Autumn, *Diwali* (*Deepavali*) is commemorated as the day of the return of Lord Ram with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman to his kingdom after fourteen years of exile. As a mark of devotion and reverence, houses are decked with lights and people celebrate with firecrackers. Srinivas Rao observes a post- *Diwali* scene.

post Diwali day
a sweeper carries
the fallen sky

Srinivas Rao Sambangi¹⁷

The marine merchants (“*Sadhabas*”) from the erstwhile Kalinga (present-day Odisha state on the eastern coast of India) used to trade in the far Southeast Asian countries which are the present day Bali, Java, Sumatra and Borneo of Indonesia, as well as Sri

Lanka, Thailand and other places. The trade practices date back to the 3rd century BC and women used to celebrate the occasion with festivities wishing the safe return of their brother sailors. To commemorate the legacy of ancestors' voyages, people celebrate the day (*Kartika Purnima*, full moon day of the *Kartika* month) by sailing boats made of dried banana tree barks, barks, coloured papers with lighted lamps in rivers and ponds. In Odisha, it is observed as the "*Bali Jatra*" (Voyage to Bali) or *Boita Bandana* (boat worshipped with lighted lamps).

floating lamps—
ancestors' voyage from
Kalinga to Java, Sumatra

Pravat Kumar Padhy¹⁸

Ramesh Anand's haiku below portrays paddy reaping in the late autumn. The use of the poetic twist "a bent woman reaping gossip" is a vivid display of common conversations by the women in the paddy fields in Indian villages.

rice fields ...
a bent woman reaping
gossip

Ramesh Anand¹⁹

Pre-Winter (Hemanta Ritu)

Māsa/ Month: Margashira and Pausha

In India, the pre-winter is designated as *Hemanta Ritu*. The weather is pleasant and people enjoy outings. The *Hemanta Ritu* ends with the winter solstice. In the haiku below, the preparation of tea is

beautifully depicted at an open-air stall on the streets of India. The tea-seller (*chai-wallah*) holds two glasses and pours hot tea up and down the air.

first frost . . .
chai-wallah froths up the tea
as it churns in the air

Kala Ramesh²⁰

In Nagaland, a northeast state of India, the Hornbill Festival is celebrated with dance and music by the local tribal. The bird, the hornbill, is revered by the warrior tribes and is widely cited in their folklore.

loud cackling
from the hollow tree-
a hornbill calls

Angelee Deodhar²¹

Traditionally in northern India, people, especially the Punjab, celebrate *Lohri* with a bonfire, dance and song. It marks the end of *Pausha* month. The festival marks the harvest of rabi crops. Lohri is celebrated on winter solstice.

moonglow -
the echoes of Lohri songs
in the paddies

Sandip Chauhan²²

Winter (Shishira Ritu)

Māsa/ Month: Magha and Phalguna

Dal Lake is one of the picturesque spots in Srinagar, the capital city of Jammu and Kashmir, visited by thousands of tourists each year. Houseboats decorated with wonderful designs are plenty in Dal Lake and are called "floating palaces." Small boats known as "*shikaras*" are used for ferrying tourists and for vending purposes.

dawn over Dal lake
emerging from the mist
the flower boat

Rohini Gupta²³

Republic Day is officially celebrated on January 26th, commemorating the adoption of the constitution of India. The President of India unfurls the national flag and opens ceremonious parades, and demonstrations of cultural heritages of different states as well as cultural events in schools are organized.

Republic day
the fruit seller's flag is stuck
into a banana

Johannes Manjrekar²⁴

The harvest festival is celebrated in different regional names in India. In the southern state Tamil Nadu it is observed as "*Pongal*" (means boiling over) by making a traditional dish by boiling rice with milk and jaggery. It marks the end of winter solstice. People perform *Surya Puja* (worship of the Sun God), coinciding with the

start of the sun's northward journey. The Pongal date corresponds to the winter solstice in the Hindu solar calendar. The cattle are bathed and decorated with colourful clothes on *Mattu Pongal*, the third date of the four-day Pongal celebration. Tinkling bells and flower garlands are tied around their necks. Women ceremoniously boil the newly harvested rice with milk and cane sugar outside under the sunlight and offer it to gods, goddesses and decorated cows.

Pongal
her anklets follow
a cowbell's tinkle

Geethanjali Rajan²⁵

Holi, the festival of colours, is celebrated on the full moon day of the lunar month *Phalguna* (*Phalguna Purnima*) with pomp and ceremony. It marks the end of winter and the arrival of spring, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. The day signifies the eternal love of the deities *Radha* and *Krishna*. People play with coloured water and powder. The festive day is an occasion of love and forgetting and forgiving the differences with others.

Holi ...
no one a stranger
at my doorstep

Pravat Kumar Padhy²⁶

Spring (Vasanta Ritu)

Māsa/ Month: Chaitra and Baisakh

Spring (*Vasanta Ritu*) is known as the "queen of seasons" due to the

lush greenery, flowers of myriad colours, and melodious chirping of birds all around, manifesting the splendor of nature. The warmer sunlight rejuvenates new life in nature. People enjoy the serenity and sacredness associated with it. The Hindusthani *Raga Basanta* originated from the 8th century and is the only classical raga that uses all 12 notes of the scale. Spring is the season of hope and happiness. The dragonfly symbolizes hope and positive aspects of life.

basant raga ...
the bits of sun
on dragonfly wings²⁷

Anitha Varma

Rangoli is a decorated artwork or design made in front of the house. On festive occasions in different states, varieties of rangoli art forms are designed with flower petals, dry rice flour and coloured powders. *Vishu* is celebrated as Malayali spring festival or New Year's Day in Kerala state, southern India. *Vishu* in Sanskrit means 'equal' when day and night are roughly equal in length (vernal equinox). Women make rangoli in different geometric forms and fill them with flowers and fruits etc. The intricate geometric patterns of folk art (*kolom rangoli* during the Pongal festival in Tamil Nadu) are filled with coloured powders, rice flour, flowers etc. and symbolise prosperity and positive energy.

new year's eve
rangoli patterns
in the street

Ramesh Anand²⁸

The Indian laburnum (golden shower tree) is the state flower of the Southern state Kerala. It blooms in late spring, when rich flowers drip down from the tree. The bright yellow flower is considered a symbol of purity and prosperity. Gudi Padwa (*gudi* means flag and *Padwa* means the first day of the lunar fortnight) marks the arrival of spring. Gudi is fixed on a long bamboo, used as decoration on the doors, windows and terraces adorned with colourful clothes and garlanded with mango leaves, flowers etc. It is believed that this day symbolises the first day of the creation of the universe and time by Lord *Brahma*.

blooming laburnum
the way life flows
in crests and troughs

Anitha Varma²⁹

new moon day
the Gudhi's green brighter
than the mango leaves

Angelee Deodhar³⁰

The magnolia flower (*Hema Champa* in Hindi) blooms in early spring. Its shades of pink, white, and yellow symbolize purity and perseverance. In Theravada Buddhism, *Champaca* is revered as the tree of enlightenment.

sudden rain . . .
I pick magnolia blossoms
from Buddha's lap

Neena Singh³¹

Conclusion

Seasonal variations greatly influence human moods and psychology. spiritual wisdom and cultural traditions are intrinsically connected with nature in ancient Indian culture and texts. The Indian festivals are closely associated with the astronomical position of the celestial bodies.

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