

**Written in Indian Ink**  
**written after a trip to India in 2010**

There are flowers in the shit  
There's a corpse on the shore  
There's a tourist to hit  
For a few rupees more  
It's the dance of the rich  
As we turn from the poor  
And if you give just a bit  
there are 1 billion more, there are 1 billion more

She is selling her kid  
to put rice in their bowls  
and the price of a pig  
is the price of a soul  
Where a little is big  
Where enough is the goal  
Where the parts cannot live  
Without starving the whole

We are greeted as gentry  
We are treated as Kings  
Then we are caught in the envy  
And resentment it brings  
Every ritual is empty  
Every offer has strings  
Every garland is heavy  
With labour unseen, with labour unseen

On the Gaya Express  
I was watching her face  
As the East and the West  
Found an uneasy grace  
But my mind cannot rest  
And my heart has no place  
Like an unwelcome guest  
In an unholy space, in an unholy space

It is burned in my brain  
It is etched on my skin  
Why should I go back again?  
when it is written within?

It is written in Indian ink  
It is written in Indian ink

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**Bristol 2010**

## Some notes and reflections about these lyrics

These notes were written for Manjusvara (David Keefe) in response to his request for a contribution to his forthcoming book *The Poet's Way*. He liked these lyrics, and wanted me to make some comments on how they came to be written, why I chose the words I did. This article is my initial exploration, later shortened, and eventually some of these reflections were included in the chapter entitled *Writing in the Wilderness*. The book was eventually published by Windhorse Press as *The Poets Way* in 2010 and, sadly, Manjusvara died at the age of 58 in June 2011, a short while after.



As a Buddhist, I find the idea of the World being Mind-forged deeply moving and reassuring; it helps me make sense of my experience of being alive. As a Buddhist songwriter, I try to write melodies and words that articulate and deepen this understanding and this somehow eases the loneliness and confusion of being alive. A song's narrative, rhythm and rhyme breathes a pulse of life and clarity into my life experience. Sharing this process by performing my songs is a vital part of my life.

Analogy and metaphor seem essential when trying to describe what it was like to write the lyrics of this song, plain narrative doesn't cut it. Perhaps this is where lyric and poetry writing overlap; but there does seem to be a very clear distinction.

If you listen hard to a set of words and hear a heartbeat; a pulse of life, then it is likely to be a poem. If you listen and hear a melody waiting to be sung or played, then they are likely to be song lyrics. The poems and lyrics of Leonard Cohen often illustrate this idea; particularly in his recent work, 'The Book of Longing'.

When writing lyrics there has to be an intention of absolute receptivity without expectation, which is usually enough for something to happen. There must be a deep, meditative stillness with pen patiently poised. There is a lovely metaphor used when teaching meditation; if you want to see the beautiful creatures of the forest, you must tread very quietly and carefully as you walk.

Once you have a set of lyrics, the trick then is to listen to them as you would listen for the small sounds of creatures in the forest, with one finger patiently poised over the piano key or the guitar string. Without doubt you will hear something and a melody will surely arrive.

Sometimes, creating a melody feels like a strange kind of 'birthing' process. The initial chords or melody are like a kind of seed which, when nourished with care unfolds into the rest of the song. Like any birthing process, this cannot be hurried along or rushed.

It often feels as if I can aligning myself in a particular way to a lyric and its inherent melody – then a song will happen. It may take minutes, or years; it doesn't matter how long, perhaps even a few lifetimes? Song writing requires a massive amount of patience and optimism!

All these processes were present when I wrote the song *Indian Ink* and this is why I have chosen to share some of the details of how those lyrics came to be written.

Going to India for the first time felt like an existential crisis. On returning to the UK, I was physically and psychologically ill for weeks and I knew I had to write a song about it all. I had gone to the edge of what I knew and writing this song was a desperate attempt to stretch my imagination so I could make more sense of my anger and confusion.

The title of the song “Indian Ink” was a strong YES moment. I wanted to catch the handwritten, earthy quality of being in India, the sense of having an experience scratched indelibly into my experience. Naming a song sometimes feels like naming a child; it has to be chosen from the heart and the title for this song felt like that.

The remaining lyrics for Indian Ink arrived very quickly, almost in one sitting. They were seeded by the initial, rough image of the opening line, “*There are flowers in the shit*”. That seemed to sum up the whole of my Indian experience really and was a relief to write.

I nearly stopped writing this song there and then, but a second image seemed to want to arise naturally from the first; “*There’s a corpse on the shore*” which captured the enigma of the beautiful Ganges, also the most polluted river in the world.

Being a relatively rich westerner continually having to manoeuvre between begging hands and pleading eyes did feel like “*the dance of the rich, as we turn from the poor*” and I wanted to point up the paradox of harsh Indian economy in the following lines about a woman “*selling her kid to put rice in the bowls*” of her other children.

*Where a little is big  
Where enough is the goal  
Where the parts cannot live  
Without starving the whole*

These last four lines of the second verse further unfold this paradox around the idea of fractals and holograms; where the smallest particle of something forms the basis for a never-ending expanding pattern that uses the same shape. I wanted to convey the image of myriads of people co-existing as a matrix of humanity called India, contrasted with the disjointed and disparate Western culture we represented.

These lines have a relentless, insistent energy by continual use of the word “where”, echoed later in the repeated use of the word “every” in the third verse. Again, this felt like a place in the song where poetry, lyric writing and song overlapped, where a repeated word could contain real power, like a mantra or chant.

This third verse of the song explores the deeply contradictory social customs of India. We gullibly allowed ourselves to be “*treated as gentry and greeted as Kings*” before realising with a shock the underlying “*envy and resentment*” that lay beneath. It was a shock to realise that “*every ritual is empty*” and that nearly every civilised conversation seemed to end with an “*offer with strings*” or a surprise visit to someone’s brother’s cut price cloth store! It was a bit like taking a bath in the Ganges!

The image of a “*garland heavy with labour unseen*” seemed to mirror the “*flowers in the shit*” of the opening line. The addition of the word ‘*laden*’ was the only later addition. It arose from singing the repeated line “*with labour unseen*”; the words “laden” and “labour” resonating delightfully on the tongue.

*On the Gaya Express  
I was watching her face  
As the East and the West  
Found an uneasy grace  
But my mind cannot rest  
And my heart has no place  
Like an unwelcome guest  
In an unholy space, in an unholy space*

While in India we travelled for nearly 8 hours in a tiny train carriage with an Indian family. Opposite was an elderly and quite ill old woman who spent most of the journey staring at me with pale, weary eyes as she lay on her bunk. In the verse above, I wanted to capture my feelings of distress and failure as two people tried to connect and coexist in this space.

It felt like a huge, comforting YES when I wrote the line; “*as the east and the west found an uneasy grace ...*” It was a relief when these lyrics fell out of the air with such simplicity and directness, formed as a metaphor that could also frame the idea of countries trying to coexist on the planet.

Similarly the line: “*Like an unwelcome guest, in an unholy space ...*”, the two words “unwelcome” and “unholy” don’t rhyme but are like two bookends, rhythmically matched and able to hold the irony of feeling so alone in a country alive with Buddhist Compassion.

The song lyric finishes by relating directly to the title itself, and explores the idea of India being “*burned in my brain*” and “*etched on my skin*”, no need to return, it is “*written within ... forever in Indian Ink*”.

There was, indeed, something indelibly forever about that experience, and this is captured in these final lines.

Bob Dylan says in his wonderful biography *Chronicles*;

*“There was nothing easy going about the folk songs I sang. They weren’t friendly or ripe with mellowness, they didn’t come gently to the shore”.*

This song felt like that. Its arrival on the shore was more like a tsunami; fearful and frightening to write at the time, but also washing away a lot of the shock and disorientation.

**Barry Lane (Achintya)**  
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