CHAPTER IV  
HOMELAND

Native land is a problematic issue in the poetry of both Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Instead of being a matter of pure joy, it is a matter of regret and happiness at the same time. Native land is invoked as a “quotidian space” (Fitter 52) illustrating routine activity without invocation of any religious or panegyrical images or motifs or symbols. The relation of both these poets towards their respective homelands is temporal and, therefore, intrinsically secular. The emphasis is on the portrayal of common scenes of the native land rather than on the mythological or religious. Ezekiel’s response to Bombay is his response to his homeland, for it is through Bombay that he reflects on India. Never does he own Bombay with a nativist’s enthusiasm; nor does he reject Bombay as an alien outsider. As a “good native” (“Island,” CP 182) he seeks adjustment with Bombay—a strategy of survival, compatible with persona’s ideology of human balance, thus

It is home
which I recognize at last
as a kind of hell
to be made tolerable

(“After Reading a Prediction,” CP 155)

Ezekiel feels alienated from his homeland right from the very beginning of his childhood. Being a Jew, he always feels that he is an outsider. His attitude towards the land of his adoption is that of a critical insider. He would while cherishing the cosmopolitanism and the secular ethos of Bombay, bewails the gross commercial and existential character of the city. The urge for the melodious song and the sight of growing scrapers and slums continually create a drama of conflict in Ezekiel’s poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel feels lonely and alienated and his poetry has been an attempt to establish some kind of recognizable order and relevance for his self in the irrational and featureless world that surrounded him. The poet’s gradual dissociation from the
immediate environment of the city of his birth is evident from the early childhood. At school he was considered “mugging Jew” among the Hindu, Christian and Muslim ‘wolves’, perpetually a ‘frightened child’ (“Background Casually”). His failure to get into the mainstream of Bombay’s life is symbolically expressed:

He never learnt to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.

(“Background Casually,” CP 179)

Ezekiel recalls his childhood experience and emotions. Ezekiel begins with the long standing animosity between the Gentiles and the Jews and the disquietening aspect of the characteristic of communal frenzy:

I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me, I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.

(CP 179)

For want of a Judaic institution this ‘mugging Jew’ was admitted to Antonio D’Souza High School and subjected to all sorts of physical and emotional humiliations. Hurled into a den of wolves to be perpetually interrogated and singled out as a murderer of Christ has been a convulsive experience during the very formative years. Later, Ezekiel was to write, “I am not a Hindu and my back ground makes me a natural outsider. Circumstances and decisions relate me to India. In other countries I am a foreigner. In India I am an Indian” (Selected Prose 99). The original tension in Ezekiel’s poetry was probably born out of his agony of being a fortuitous Indian outside the pale of India’s dominant culture. As K.P. Ramachandran Nair puts it, “Ezekiel’s life and poetry are, in fact, inseparable. The activity of poetry produces a solemn harmony of existence for him in a world riddled with discordant notes. Each
The main concern in his poetry is the wound urban civilization inflicts upon him. His poetry gives the impression of an over-sensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilization: unable to escape from its vagaries, he consequently develops a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. Ezekiel has seen the splendour and poverty of the great city, its air-conditioned skyscrapers and claustrophobic slums, its marvellous capacity for survival and slow decadence. His reaction to the city’s oppression is a light-hearted, ironic, detached and often sardonic exposure of its several hidden faces.

Ezekiel talked about alienation in an interview given some years ago. In answer to the question, “How would you react to the charge that most Indian writers in English are alienated?” Ezekiel said, “Actually, I would like to see some alienation among Indo-English writers. However, undesirable from moral, social and other points of view, it has been aesthetically very productive provided it is genuine. You can’t pretend, you can’t play the game of alienation. If you are genuinely alienated...and feel you are hostile towards others and they are hostile to you, you hate their guts and they hate yours; this can produce great literature. This genuine alienation is really absent.” Asked to define alienation, Ezekiel replied, “For an Indo-English writer to be alienated, he must have a contempt for his audience and a similar failure on his part, a pointlessness in trying to communicate. I know no such Indian writer, isolated like Camus or Dostoevsky character. What they really mean is that these writers use an alien languages” (qtd. in Veer 41-42). His concept of alienation and its application to the situation of Indian English writer is manifestly limited in scope. It is clearly evident from his statement that genuine alienation is actually very productive.

A clear perception of this concept of alienation is clearly evident in Ezekiel’s poetry. It is likewise obvious that as an exclusively urban based native poet born and bred in westernized surroundings in his “bitter native city” of Bombay, Ezekiel cannot have the kind of inwardness with the traditional Indian ethos which some of his fellow
poets, more fortunate in this respect, can legitimately claim to possess. “The ghost of alienation, however, refuses to get appeased so easily as that, especially when the poet compares himself with a fellow artist situated partly like himself” (qtd. in Veer 49). Ezekiel is envious of the artist Jamini Roy, the painter who being an urbanite succeeded in finding ‘the law’ which governed the rural masses. In Jamini Roy, he finds an ideal which he himself has failed to attain—an artist who ‘travelled, so he found his roots’:

He started with a different style,

He travelled, so he found his roots.

His rage became a quiet smile

Prolific in its proper fruits

A people painted what he saw

With eyes of supple innocence

An urban artist found the law

To make its spirit sing and dance.

(“Jamini Roy,” CP 126)

“His alienational lack of communication is three-fold—the failure to communicate with Truth, with his own essential self and with the larger world outside. This realization naturally results in a spirit of utter distress and this may account for the persistent sense of failure which envelops much of the earlier poetry before the poet finds the easy consolation of social satire as a possible antidote” (qtd. in Veer 49).

Ezekiel belongs to Bene Israel community which migrated to India generations ago, he is acutely conscious of his alienation which is further accentuated by the fact that he spent most part of his life in metropolitan city Bombay with Marathi as his lost mother tongue and English, being the language of the home, his
second mother tongue. The poet has the feeling of linguistic alienation in a predominantly Marathi-speaking population. Another main reason of Ezekiel’s alienation is that he belongs to urban middle class which has lost its contact with the rural masses and also with its traditional and cultural values. He has reacted in numerous ways to his experience of alienation. One way has been his assumption of superiority and snobbery towards Indian conditions of life. Poems like “The Patriot”, “The Professor”, “Good Bye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”, are outstanding examples of his attitude. His attitude in these poems is of a man who feels irritated and repelled by the ill educated Indians. In “The Patriot,” he says:

I am standing for peace and non-violence
Why world is fighting fighting ,
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding

……

How one goonda fellow
Throw stone at Indirabehn.

……

Pakistan behaving like this
China behaving like that
It is making me very sad,
I am telling you.

(CP 237-238)

This alienational experience gives colour and form to Ezekiel’s poetry. “The restlessness generated by these circumstances led to a career of quick changes and numerous experiments. A brief stint abroad did not apparently help and after his return followed attempts at journalism, publishing and advertising, including even a
spell of working as a factory manager before he settled down to teaching. This restlessness was perhaps only an external manifestation of the emotional turmoil within caused by a strong and persistent strain of alienation of different kinds” (qtd. in Veer 48).

“Many of his poems derive their effectiveness from the poet’s puzzled emotional reaction to the modern Indian dilemma which he feels to be poignant conflicts of tradition and modernism, the city and the village: a somewhat obvious theme but treated by Ezekiel as an intensely personal exploration” (Karnani 105). For Ezekiel this Indian dilemma is symbolized by city of Bombay. Repeatedly he would express his disenchantment with life in Bombay only to realise in the end that only Bombay can provide him some sort of cultural anchorage. It is the city of the poet’s “birth and rebirth”. That has moved to a prominent place in the poet’s consciousness. On being asked, “Has living in the city like Bombay affected your poetry?” Ezekiel answers as follows:

I feel I am Bombay city poet, can’t imagine living long anywhere else. I lived in London for 3½ years. 1948-51, but never thought of myself as a Londoner except that the Movement was alive then and I had a live contract with it. I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay. (Chindhade 157)

In one breath he would declare Bombay as an island of “slums and skyscrapers” “Unsuitable for song as well as sense”; in the next breath realizing the futility of his resentment he would announce, “I am here to find my way in it” (“Island,” CP 182). The metaphor of ‘home’, thus, has been used as a comprehensive metaphor which at a relatively limited level, stands for the poet’s individuality, and in a wider contest, it stands for his native country in India. Of course, at a stage both these levels merge to mean life itself which the humanist persona loves to embrace, if not possess. This home provides shelter to the poet-persona’s wandering ego. After his enterprising encounters with the outer world, he comes to realize that “Home is where we have to gather grace” (“Enterprise,” CP 117).

This being so and Bombay being the very epitome of India in all her minutiae, Ezekiel’s poetry has acquired an unmistakable Indian ethos and local color. There is a
profound sense of compassion, understanding, acceptance and sympathy for the city. The poet has seen and known this city in all its aspects:

   Barbaric city sick-with slums,
   Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
   Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
   Processions led by frantic drums,
   A million purgational lanes,
   And child-like masses, many tongued,
   Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

   (―Morning Walk,‖ CP 119)

The tone is not of denigration or denunciation, it is rather one of understanding and forgiveness. This is repeated in

   Always, in sun's eye,
   Here among the beggars,
   Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
   Hutment dwellers, slums,
   Dead soul of men and gods,
   Burnt- out mothers, frightened
   Virgins, wasted child
   And tortured animal,
   All in noisy silence.

   (―In India,‖ CP 131)

The Indian scenario, both physical and psychic, the poet avers, is very much part of his existence. The love-hate relationship takes on a new color in the closing stanza with the poet accepting his predicament for want of a better alternative:
This is one: to stay where I am,
As other choose to give themselves,
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

(“Background Casually,” CP 181)

The nagging sense of failure manifested in the “remote and backward place” lurks behind all overtures of commitment so vociferously proclaimed by the poet. This is a response to the other voice, the voice of the foreigner which is so much a part of the poet’s persona and with whom he is continually engaged in a dialogue. The two voices—the foreign and the Indian—provide the central dialectic in Ezekiel’s poetry. William Walsh sums up Ezekiel’s position in view of the cultural gives which shape his sensibility, a quintessence of “Background Casually”:

Nissim Ezekiel in the Indian scene is a permanent expatriate, but one who has freely elected to stay. Displaced by his own spiritual past, he is in place but at a distance from the object and his specifically Indian poetry is both inward and detached a combination making for a peculiar strength and validity. (qtd. in Mishra 100)

Ezekiel had no sense of affinity with the large rural Indian folk. He feels as an outsider. He himself explains his position:

There is no set formula (to relate to contemporary India and also to the whole Indian heritage), no set pattern but, an unending series of adjustments and perceptions. In living out those I have experienced tensions, frustrations, disappointments and failures... it is not easy because there is too much to unify, too much that resists integration, conflicts and contradiction for example my Jewish racial soul and my Indian choices. (qtd. in Pandey 7)

For Ezekiel, city is a subtle image of growth, and finally, decay. It reflects not only the growth of the poet’s mind but the growth of the phenomenon of the city itself.
Both slums and skyscrapers are growth towards spiritual decay: slums because of poverty and skyscrapers because of hypocrisy. Party craze is a legitimate symptom of this spiritual decay.

Just as in Lawrence’s novels relationships are often defined in terms of love and hate, similarly in Ezekiel’s poetry the relationship with the city is of such a dual response. Bombay being its epitome, he would like to go away from this underworld and be one with it simultaneously: a subtle dilemma and a subtle paradox:

The city like a passion burns.
He dreams of morning walks, alone,
And floating on a wave of sand.
But still his mind its traffic turns
Away from beach and tree and stone
To kindred clamour close at hand.

(“Urban,” CP 117)

The desire to ride ‘the quite elephant of thought,’ to bask in a solitary corner of his own mind, and the equally irresistible need to belong and merge into the ‘kindred clamour’ sum up his predicament. In their monograph on Ezekiel, Rajeev Taranath and Meena Belliappa see larger implications in this tendency. Ezekiel’s attitude is contrasted with the verse of the previous generation centred round the ‘rural – typical.’ In other words, “a substantial part of the verse had a life residing outside the process that the poem was. The movement towards the urban is also a movement towards anonymity in this context. The modern metropolis could be seen as a process of the loss of the typical / exotic” (11-12).

Ezekiel feels that life in present day scenario is unbearable, but the poet has no other option left but to make a compromise. That is why he moves backward to the city of disillusionment, in order to organize himself:
To save myself
From what the city has made of me, I returned
As intended to the city I had known,

(“Time to Change,” CP 19)

Ezekiel feels that it is the city which made him follow the path of sin and iniquity. There is constant conflict between nature and city in his poetry, he wants to get rid of it, but despite his best efforts he is unable to do so. The vulgarity of the city and its stale air make him feel sad and anxious. He feels that life of a city man is without any meaning, as he has lost knowledge of the primary natural things:

We have lost
the language of dreams.
We have forgotten
everything but knowledge.
We grope among
the signs and symbols
for the source
of signs and symbols.

(“Happening,” CP 163)

Ezekiel does not assume a mask in such poems but accepts himself as a deflated and disillusioned or alienated man. Ezekiel was aware of the chaotic and disturbing nature of urban life. City represents only ugliness and filth both to body and spirit. Ezekiel yearned for the solitude of nature and suffered due to the constricting environment of the city. Ezekiel was fully aware of the deconstructive effect of city on poet’s individuality and talent. The corrupt life style was dangerous for Ezekiel as he was no longer original and natural. Ezekiel represents the chaos and distracting nature of city in poem “Something to Pursue”.
After a night of love I felt the city
With intention to return, but carried it
Within me, markets and courts of justice
Slums, football grounds, entertainment halls,
Residential flats, palaces of art and business houses,
Harlots, basement poets, princes and fools

(CP 18)

He eloquently summarises the degenerate state of modern India. As a result of this degeneration the whole vision of life has become corrupted. Cordial relationship has given way to stark business mentality. Open and free reception of life has been corrupted by the haunting awareness of death. Double standards have become a rule of the day. So, the themes drawing attention to the social, political and economic inequalities, exploitation and suppression of personal and communal liberties and hunger and diseases are frequently taken up by Ezekiel. To quote M.K. Naik:

The Biblical prophet Ezekiel prophesied the transformation of Israel into a wasteland. Ezekiel’s wasteland is within. The sole denizen of it he contemplates it in different moods and result is a poetry which rings constant variation on the central theme of alienation. (46)

City stands for destruction and ugliness, on the other hand nature stands for order quietude. Ezekiel lives in a dream world which is filled with music, creativity and order, and in which nature presides. But while confronting the city, its deafening noise and ugliness, he yearns for solitude and beauty. In Ezekiel’s first volume, A Time to Change the poem ‘Double Horror’ clearly shows his miserable plight as a city man. He has by now realized that metropolitan life is not an idealistic one; on the contrary it corrupts the man. He projects his sorrow and anguish:

I am corrupted by the world, continually
Reduced to something less than human by crowd,

(CP 7)
Ezekiel feels disgusted because he wants peace, order and stability. He was also aware of the fact that the metropolitan culture with its focus on profits and sensual gratification destroys finer sensibilities. City man is constantly burdened with commercials and advertisements which create havoc in his mind. Ezekiel is aware of the pressure of consumer culture and its lack of moral justification. He says:

Newspaper, cinemas, radio features, speeches
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces,
Posters selling death and happiness in bottles
Large returns for small investments, in football pools
Or self-control, six easy lessons for a pound,
Holidays in Rome for writing praise of toothpastes,
The jungle growth of what so obviously intends
They suck life from life, leaving you and me corrupted.

(“The Double Horror,” CP7)

Ezekiel is repelled by the city’s inhumaness. The poet deals with the theme of corruption of its inhabitants of the city. The word ‘corrupt’ is used with greater emphasis and in a wider sense. The city dehumanizes a person. The poet feels disgusted with the polite society which has a superficial existence in the city. Highly commercialised mass civilization is like a ‘jungle growth’ which ‘sucks life from men’:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. This double horror holds me
Like a nightmare from which I cannot wake, denounced
…Only being what I am
Hurts, and Hurts the world although it does not know.
Between the world and me there is a frightful
Equipoise, as infected I corrupt the world.

(CP 8)
“Urban” is a poem of eighteen lines exploring the divergence between his search for the nourished dream of a free, oppression-less existence and his perennial inability to achieve even a partial realization of it. Bruce King points at the conflict in “Urban” when he says that, “The first poem contrasts the city man with his dreams of the natural world. Imagery from nature is used to symbolize the innocence, freedom and depth of vision not found among the distraction of the city” (Modern Indian Poetry 97).

Ezekiel lives in a kind of hell, cut off from nature, having no friends with whom he can share his tensions. Poet-persona is confused by the trauma of his metropolitan existence. He never sees the skies, he never welcomes the rain. Aware all the time of his inability to totally dissociate himself from the dreams of human mind, he cannot remain in the comparative stillness because it teases his mind:

The hills are far away.
He knows the broken roads, and move
In circles tracked within his head.
Before he wakes and has his say,
The river which he claims he loves
Is dry, and all the winds lie dead.

(“Urban,” CP 117)

Lakshmi Raghunandan comments on the persona’s responses in the following words:

When those distant hills are his goals his mind is moving towards it. However repetitive its motions may be, it loses its contact with poetic inspiration and expression. In a state of detachment, he is unaware of all the changes around him. (41-42)

Individual has broken link with reality and he remains uncertain. His world is shattered and his faith has crumbled. Nature has gifted man with good qualities but
now he has turned his back on her. City is by-product of the culture and civilization made by man. But now he has become its slave. The dichotomy between man’s hopes and achievements in the distressed city is suggested by the metaphor ‘broken roads’ and ‘circles.’ The disgusting routinisation of everyday life, the resulting lack of coordination between action and perception and the sense of futility of human efforts to discover the meaning in hope are the outcome of the tyranny of the city over the citizen. The dilemma of the poet, who desperately tries to disown and reject the city which ‘burns like a passion’ is touchingly expressed in poem. Like Yeats in “Lake Isle of Innisfree” the poet here longs for a quiet habitation away from the ‘kindred clamour’ of the wild city. But all his dreams of solitary morning walks and vision of the far away hills, the beach and the trees are thwarted by an overwhelming passion that turns the traffic of his mind to urban chaos. In a state of detachment, he is unaware of the changes around him:

At dawn he never sees the skies
Which, silently, are born again.
Nor feels the shadows of the night
Recline their fingers on his eyes.
He welcomes neither sun nor rain.
His landscape has no depth or height

(CP 117)

Sanjit Mishra comments on Ezekiel’s personal relevance to the poem, saying:

The unusual conglomeration of negatives conveys the quality of the persona’s entity. Both the first and the last line of the stanza reveal the setting to be a not too tall building. One recalls the Ready Money Mansion or Mazda Mansion where Ezekiel lived, was a relatively small building complex from where he could see neither the sky nor experience a sense of death or height. (74)
City man lives for his own selfish concerns, and totally indifferent for the needs of others. City does not nourish humanity and city-life is like a rat race where man has become so alienated that he no longer affirms to the elements of nature and nature could not exalt him in this state of separation. He gets alienated not only from his friends, family but also from environment. No one escapes from the labyrinth of the circle like city. The city of ‘slums and skyscrapers’ had seduced poet to a gradual bitter experience. In poem ‘Island,’ Ezekiel gives a satirical account of the quality of life lived in the city of Bombay. Island is a traditional symbol of alienation in poetry. The poet feels the enormous expansion of the city in terms of slums and skyrocketing buildings together, precisely reflects his castaway status. It is only by finding his way in the island city that he may find his way into himself. Living in the midst of people feverishly engaged in cut-throat competitions, the protagonist’s perplexity bursts forth thus:

Sometimes I cry for help

..........  

I hear distorted echoes

Of my own ambiguous voice

And of dragons claiming to be human

(\textit{CP 182})

The poem has ominous undertones of frustrations and sadness expressed through contrasting images like ‘slums and skyscrapers,’ ‘dragons claiming to be human,’ ‘echoes and voice,’ ‘past and future,’ ‘calm and clamour’.

‘A Morning Walk’ is a great poem which translates the sense of the bustle of the ‘barbaric city’ into a gnawing pain that oppresses the poet’s memory. The paralysis of the will and the finer emotions the Bombay man suffers from is succinctly suggested by a chain of metaphors. This “cold and dim” city is his purgatory. The morning breeze and trees, the cool garden on the hill and the hedges cut to look like birds are the symbols of Bombay man’s unattained and unattainable hopes. The poet poses question:
His native place he could not shun,
The marsh where things are what they seem?
(“A Morning Walk,” CP 119)

‘A Morning Walk’ is a walk intended to be out of the city’s fatal grip but ends up once again as a walk towards the city’s fettering fascinations.

Ezekiel feels that the city is destroying his identity as a human being. He even lacks self-respect and is insignificant in this jungle where the law’s survival of the fittest prevails:

Huge Posters dwarf my thoughts, I am reduced
To appetites and godlessness. I wear
A human face but prowl about the streets
Of towns with murderous claws and anxious ears.
Recognising all the jungle sounds of fear
And hunger, wise in tracking down my prey
And wise in taking refuge when the stronger roam.

(“Commitment,” CP 26)

K.P. Ramachandran Nair comments that:

Ezekiel’s life and poetry are in fact inseparable. The activity of poetry produces a solemn harmony of existence for him in a world riddled with discordant notes... one of the most recurring themes in his poetry in the wound urban civilization inflicts on unattached man. His poetry gives the impression of an over-sensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city civilization, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. (118)

Ezekiel is confused by the stark reality of the city which he encounters. City represents noise, confusion, chaos, malignancy. Both, city and nature are at opposite
poles. City, on one hand symbolises hell, whereas nature stands for heaven, Garden of Eden. He wants to free himself from the vicious tentacles of the city.

Ezekiel wants to be in the lap of nature. Nature symbolizes the Garden of Eden with its purity, beauty and innocence and he wants to be a part of it, forgetting all the worries of the city life. Urban man is faithless, but nature serves as link between man and his maker. Metropolitan man is suffering from identity crisis and he in a constant search for anchors in life. He feels uprooted and wants to discover his roots and thus regain his vision. In rudimentary pastoral life, changing of seasons was time of festivals, as a result of which bonds strengthened but now in modern urban life no such festivals are celebrated and that is why man in city lonely and friendless. He now wants to get back to nature and break the spell of city but despite his best efforts he cannot escape the city, he both loves and hates Bombay and is committed to it as himself declares: “I have a strong sense of belonging not only to India but to this city, I would never leave Bombay it’s a series of commitments” (Beston 44).

Ezekiel feels depressed because city life has no depths to it, the metropolitan experience lacks worth and Ezekiel longs for the pastoral order in which he could discover things of real merit. City life is filled with an atmosphere of sin and is characterized by nudity. In collection of poems The Third, the penultimate poem ‘At the Hotel’ describes the sinfulness of the city:

On the dot she came and shook her breasts
all over us and dropped
the thin transparent skirt she wore

(“At the Hotel,” CP 112)

According to Ezekiel, city life is cheerless and without any meaning. City man is always searching for newer forms of entertainment, through which he might be free from his routine tensions. Man in the city does not care for the pain and suffering he inflicts on others and believes in full exploitation of opportunities. Ezekiel’s vision of
the city as a defiled entity find its parallels in Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were sinful.

Ezekiel faces such sinful example in city and he is filled with horror. His house is situated near prostitute area and one day he spots a prostitute:

I see her first
As colour only
poised against the faded
red of a post-box
purple sari, yellow blouse,
……
I sense her as a woman,
bare as her feet
…………
She doesn’t glance at me,
waiting for her
hawker or mill-worker
coolie and close-up
…………
I cannot even say I care or do not care
perhaps it is a kind of despair

(“On Bellasis Road,” CP 188-189)

Ezekiel feels that living in city like Bombay has corrupted him, bred vice in him, and day-by-day he keeps searching for more degenerate ways to amuse himself. City has created differences between human beings today. The rich are becoming richer, and poor are becoming poorer, growth in science and technology has not in any way helped us but has fostered doctrines like nihilism and rationalism which challenge the
very existence of God as a result of which people find religion irrelevant and human values non-extinct. This is what Anisur Rehman has to say:

The city being more than an image is transformed into a symbol of decomposed garbage, a space infected as also, on a deeper level, not a particular place in the large cosmos but a system of living shattered and eroded at the very core. The sapling of life with its freshness, vigour and innocence does not blossom here any more. (58)

He wants to come out of the corruption of the city into the colourful world of nature but he is unconscious yet conscious:

White wings of morning
Shelter men
Sleepless or drugged with dreams
Whose working hours
Drained of power
Flow toward futility.
White wings of morning
Bring to city masks
A taste of spring
And clarity.
Wake them by your symbols,

(“Morning Prayer,” CP 20)

Ezekiel is fed up with city’s lack of compatibility. He contends that the power politics has reduced persons to the level of pawns. He is deeply hurt by city’s politics which insists on conformity and does not consider individual’s needs.

Those who say Comrade are merely slaves and those
Who will not be my brother share the acrid shame
Of being unwanted, unloved, incompetent
As leaders, disloyal servants, always alone.
Unpolitical I still embrace the sterile
Whore of private politics, sign a manifesto,
Call a meeting, work on committees; I agree
Something must be done but secretly rejoice
When fifty thousand Chinese have been killed,
I who, as a child, wept to see a rat destroyed.

(“The Double Horrors,” CP 8)

Ezekiel is terrorized by the fact that nothing can save him now. The protagonist is obsessed by the unpleasant faces and he feels broken by his fate. He feels like a dwarf in the metropolitan city, who is completely exposed and defenceless, city being all powerful. Urmila Verma confirms the idea, as she says:

The urban dweller confronts a complex world which has multi-dimensional facts. Trapped within this prison house, he longs for freedom. There is a deep urge for a sense of belonging. The relationship with his immediate environment in that of love-hate. (81)

City as portrayed in Ezekiel’s poem is deadly. The pollution, furious pace, constant noise, tensions, frustrations, business pressure make man nervous. His mind is filled with the dreams and fantasies which are never fulfilled. His high aims are never achieved which leads to aggressiveness and depression:

All of us are sick, Sir,
Not just the elder daughter,
………………
It’s all of us who need you, Sir
Psy-Chi-a-trist!
Should we take to meditation,
transcendental, any other?
Should we take to Zen?
We cannot find our roots here,
don’t know where to go, Sir,
don’t know what to do, Sir,
need a Guru, need a God.
All of us are sick, Sir.

(“from Songs for Nandu Bhende,” CP 243)

Ezekiel’s dull and monotonous existence cries out for release from the tentacles of the city. The city has beaten him down and he wants to be free from its atmosphere which make him feel like a slave. City man is pre-occupied with the problem of survival and his world is a world of shattered dreams:

Desolation taste, play the host
To broken-hearted dreams,
beneath a sky
Of blizzard news know
The empty one within;
Where no love resides

(“Words is a Gentle Wind,” CP 23)

Ezekiel wants nature to wake the people to the reality, to remove the masks of indifference. He feels that it is only nature which can keep man’s selfish tendencies in check. He has constantly shown his great liking for nature, and he would like the qualities of nature to be transmitted to him. City repels him with its filth and Ezekiel wants a strong bonding with nature. His inner turmoil and confusion is a result of his aloofness from nature; as he says:
It was an old, recurring dream,
That made him pause upon a height.
Alone, he waited for the sun,
And felt his blood a sluggish stream.
Why had it given him no light,

(“A Morning Walk,” CP 119)

Nature works as an anti-dote for the city’s venomous influence. Its purity make him feel blessed and free from the tensions caused by the city. A.N. Dwivedi observes the inherent contradiction between urbanity and nature: “Nature is another recurrent image in Ezekiel’s poetry standing all for purity and tranquility in contradiction of the image of the city...The tension to be witnessed in a number of Ezekiel’s poems often results from a juxtaposition of the defiled city and the pure nature” (129). Elements of nature, like the breeze contrasts with the horrible atmosphere of the city:

Bright and tempting breezes
flow across the island,
separating past and future;
then the air is still again
as I sleep the sleep of ignorance.

(“Island,” CP 182)

He feels that nature has power of revival as poet is ready again to take the challenges of life. Qualities of nature as portrayed in Ezekiel’s poetry are in total contrast with that those of city. Nature is pure, original and innocent whereas city is defined by feeling of treachery, hostility and artifice. The poet clearly shows in his poetry how the natural surrounding makes him happy and hopeful when he has gone to a hill station with a lady friend. This moment seems magical, its effect is clearly visible. It is the freshness of the air and the clean surrounding that the poet forget all
his tensions and anxieties. Only thing which worries him is the thought of returning to the city:

> We lose ourselves in mingling with crowd,
> Not afraid of this ambiguous fate.
> We look inquiringly at road and stay.
> A certain happiness would be-to die.

(*CP 121*)

The poet is constantly torn between two totally different world, one of nature which he longs to be, nature, and other is the world of the city. Lap of nature has restored innocence and purity in Ezekiel but he is disappointed as he goes back to the city. Ezekiel’s poetry underlines the eternal conflict between nature and city. K.D. Verma aptly comments:

> Such images as hill, river, sun, rain, beach, tree and stone are archetypal life symbols. They project the pastoral vision of a life fully refulgent and harmonious life, a pattern in which man enters into sacred communion with his cosmos, including objects of nature. (231)

In much-celebrated poem of Ezekiel ‘Enterprise’, Ezekiel along with other city-dwellers started their voyage to realize their ideal for life. Their desire was to discover meaning in life. But this ‘enterprise’ could not succeed as they didn’t fully commit themselves and finally returned to city. Poet records this feeling:

> We noticed nothing as we went,
> A straggling crowd of little hope,
> Ignoring what the thunder meant,
> Deprived of common needs, like soap.
> Some were broken, some merely bent.

(“Enterprise,” *CP 118*)
Ezekiel’s metropolitan sensibility focuses mainly on those features which are worthy of condemnation. He is proud of his aloofness and refuses to mix with Indians. Ezekiel’s love-hate relationship with city albeit India arouses different reactions in different critics. K.P. Ramachandran Nair condemns Ezekiel for his anti-Indian attitude, “The different disgusting scene from Indian life depicted in Ezekiel’s poetry symbolize inspite of their bantering tone, derision for the values of the culture that grips him from all sides” (123).

Ezekiel’s two works “Naipaul’s India and Mine” and “Background Casually” incorporate Ezekiel’s dual vision. His life and poetry are characterized by contradictory tendencies which are characterized right from the very beginning of his poetry. Same is his attitude towards his country India in general and Bombay in particular. He for once announces his attachment with Bombay and in the very next moment declares the repulsion towards it. This is clearly a kind of conflict between his two selves, one which is Indian and other which is English. Indian self identifies with India whereas the Jewish self identifies with the western culture and the educated English. The Jewish half is generally critical of the Indian things. This inherent conflict is very well presented by N. Mohanty when he says that, “Ezekiel’s acknowledgement of the presence of Jewish consciousness of background unconsciously is the recognition of a self within a self, the one, trying to assert its indebtedness to India, the other trying to grab him, towards the centre of his Jewish origin. So the element of tension gets posited in the poetry of Ezekiel” (81).

This conflict is firstly examined in Ezekiel’s article “Naipaul’s India and Mine” in which he has defended India against Naipaul’s charges of being backward “An Area of Darkness”. He contends:

In the India which I have presumed to call mine, I acknowledge without hesitation of all the darkness that Mr. Naipaul discovered. I am not a Hindu and my background makes me a natural outsider; circumstances and decisions relate me to India. (Selected Prose 99)
His conflict is evident when in the same essay he declares, “I love India” (98). Ezekiel’s conflicting response to India can be seen in his review of Naipaul’s “An Area of Darkness” where he contends:

Few Indians are ready to believe that the roots of their failure go deep into history. They believe in their high ideals, attribute failure is not living upto these. That the ideas are false and stultifying in never clearly perceived. Hence the contradiction, between words and behavior which is virtually universal in India, the insensitive contradiction between life and way of life. *(Selected Prose 97)*

This conflicting relationship of Ezekiel is clearly summed up by William Walsh as he says that

One is aware of a double impulse in the poet, which on the one hand keeps him at a distance from his environment as he clutches his private history and aspirations as which on the other by means of a free and painful act of will reconciles him to his environment. (130)

In Ezekiel’s attitude towards India there is both attraction and repulsion. He prefers to live in India; despite this, choice is uncomfortable. In an interview with John B. Beston he says, “I regard myself as an Indian poet writing in English” (44).

The reason of this conflict is perhaps his own consciousness which considered itself superior and westernized. Ezekiel is perpetually alienated with his milieu. He is conscious of this alienation as he says:

It’s the language really
separates, whatever else
is shared...
...
The guests depart dissatisfied;
they will never give up
their mantras, old or new.
And you, uneasy
orphan of their racial
memories, merely
polish up your alien
techniques of observation,
while the city burns.

(“Minority Poem,” CP 236-237)

Ezekiel is constantly in search of the meeting ground where both his selves can be accommodated, but is unable to locate this point. Ezekiel is not in touch with Indian traditions and therefore is unable to sympathize with the Indians. He finds the mentality of the Indian people faulty:

The money – show is on:
patient girl on haunches
holds the strings,
a baby in her arms.
...the untouchable woman
smooth her hair
........
Anticipating time for payment,
the crowd dissolves.
some, in shame, part,
with the smallest coin they have

(“Entertainment,” CP 193-194)

Ezekiel denigrates the inhuman treatment meted out to servants by Indians in poem ‘Ganga’.
The woman who washes up, suspected of prostitution, is not dismissed. She always gets a cup of tea preserved for her from the previous evening, and a chapati, stale but in good condition. She brings a smell with her and leaves it behind her, and leaves it behind her,

\[(CP 202)\]

It is only one side of Ezekiel i.e. the critical side, because he believed in keeping his emotions in check. His emotional side is very well portrayed in poem, “From Edinburgh Interlude- Mangoes”:

I have not come
to Edinburgh
to remember Bombay mangoes,
but I remember them

.................

Perhaps it is not the mangoes that my eyes and tongue long for,
but Bombay as the fruit
on which I’ve lived
winning and losing
my little life.

(CP 293)

Ezekiel at last identifies himself with Bombay, through his poetry. Love-hate relationship of Ezekiel with Bombay is clearly observed by C.Vijayasree, “Ezekiel often affirms his affiliation with India – a nation he respects and repudiates, a country he castigates and cares for, a place that is hell and heaven at the same time” (166).

Ezekiel soul is anguished by the dull, crude, inhospitable metropolitan environment. His aesthetic sense is offended time and again by the urban chaos. He scorns Indian people and makes fun of them but he cannot leave them. He retains love for his country and this love-hate relationship makes his poetry interesting and arresting.

The pulls of expatriatism and nativism contest and compete in Ramanujan’s mind giving it a distinctive edge to his attitude towards his homeland/native landscape. His is not a simple, panegyric attitude; rather it is complex, unsentimental and intellectual. The temporal-spatial displacement of the poet-persona makes his nostalgia for homeland critical and secular. For him, “poetry becomes a complex narrative of journey back and forth, an argument for and against the granted home, a play of divided belongings” (Kumar 73). Ramanujan’s long sojourn abroad explains his persistent inclination with his homeland. Ghosh rightly observes that despite having been, “exposed to a completely different environment for a considerable period of time,” his “links with his motherland are too strong to be severed” (75). He was also conscious of his roots but at the same time he did not lack the ability to appreciate his connection with his home with modern critical outlook. In a conversation with Rama Jha, Ramanujan asserted:

Yes, my knowledge of English has been deeply affected by my knowledge of Indian literature and poetics... if English cuts us from our culture it won’t get us very far... Indian English, when it is good, does get its nourishment... from
each individual knowledge of Indian culture and Indian languages. It certainly
does for me. That’s what binds us back to our childhood and early years. (13)

Home, for Ramanujan’s poet – persona, is a trope of “cultural recuperation and
dissipation both” (Kumar 92). It is a matter of both concern and contempt. In “Small
Scale Reflections on a Great House”, he looks at home/nation with complex and
critical perspective. At one level, home is the site of assimilation; at another level, it is
the site of stagnation. India has been assimilating different cultures since times
immemorial and its assimilative powers have been the subject of much critical
acclaim;

Sometimes I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things come in every day
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among
other things lost long ago;

(TCP 96)

At the same time, its stagnation is a matter of deep concern. Books which
should have acted as the source of ever widening, ever renewing and ever increasing
knowledge become the breeding ground for insects. It is the ‘closed’ nature of the
poet- persona’s nation that comes in for sharp criticism:

Unread library books
usually mature in two weeks
and begin to lay a row
of little eggs in the ledgers
for fines, as silverfish
in the old man’s office room
breed dynasties among long legal words
in the succulence
of Victorian parchment

(TCP 96)

Instead of being the source of emotional support, stability and security, the poet-persona’s home has become the site of stagnation and unusual rot. The centripetal force of his home is so strong that even those things which leave the house come back, though in a processed form:

And also, anything that goes out
will come back, processed and often
with long bills attached,
like the hooped bales of cotton
shipped off to invisible Manchesters
and brought back milled and folded
for a price,

(TCP 97)

Though there is singing of song in the kitchen of the house by the cook, but the singer is ‘voiceless’ and the song is a ‘prostitute song.’ To quote Kumar: “Here the word ‘prostitute’ has serious semantic connotations. It at once relates home to some kind of a brothel visited and revisited by its clients namely the family relations to get a (sic) emotional kick now and then. Home, is thus the site of both permanent ever-lasting emotional bonds and ephemeral one-night relationships. This prostitutional value of home ruptures the noble notion of home as the sacred space” (93). For the poet-persona, home is a place where near and distant relatives meet and enjoy. At the same time it does not allow an individual space for individual growth:

or the women who come as wives
from houses open on one side
to rising suns, on another

to the setting, accustomed

to wait and to yield to monsoons

in the mountains’ calendar

beating through the hanging banana leaves.

(TCP 97)

To Ramanujan, “home perhaps stands for abstention as well as inescapable participation in life. When high modernism of west impinges upon Ramanujan, he prefers to retreat back to his ‘particular hell only in my (his) hindu mind’ (“Conventions Of Despair,” TCP 35) not for cultural recuperation but for temporary relief and respite.

In Ramanujan’s poetry, the poet persona invokes his native land as a “quotidian space” (Fitter 52) which illustrates routine activities totally bereft of any religious and panegyric motifs. Native homeland is a site of common activities, scenes and experiences. The common scene of a man defecating in the open fields, on and near railway tracks confronts the poet-persona: “I look out the window/see a man defecating between two rocks, and a cow” (“Poona Train Window” TCP 80). This image is no different from that of V.S.Naipaul whose view that “India defecates everywhere” (81) raised a furore in India. However, it is an admitted fact that India is a huge and open latrine. The railway tea “darkens/like a sick/traveller’s urine” (TCP 81). These images associated with the native landscape are unflattering but real. While travelling in a train, he watches outside a number of scenes including a newly painted milestone and a train passing another. His attention is also caught by a “rush of whole children” and “white hair in a red turban,” by “buffaloes swatting flies / with their tails” and “six gulls sitting still” by the newly laid eggs. The image of countryside is no more romantic:

Three women with baskets

on their heads, climbing
slowly against the slope
of a hill, one of them
lop-sided, balancing
between the slope and
the basket on the head
a late pregnancy.

(TCP 80-81)

The image brings forth the unenviable condition of women in India, especially in the countryside. The women moving against a slope with burdens of fuel and fodder on their heads are a common sight in Indian countryside. The image of a pregnant woman doing all the physical labour sums up the position and conditions of women. The burden of keeping the hearth burning and producing children to keep the family line intact squarely rests on the heads of the womenfolk. There is hardly any poem in which Ramanujan’s description of his native place is purely exhilarating and pleasant. Quite the contrary, there are images of dirtiness, ugliness and dilapidation which the poet-persona invokes to describe India. It is a place dominated by squalor, noise, immoral politics and poverty. The wide economic disparities between the rich and the poor are rampant. The poet-persona takes a dig in “Poverty” (TCP 253) at the apathy of Indian pilgrims who ‘donate’ lavishly to the gods and goddesses but have only apathy and scorn for the poor. They just ignore the beggars and the “soup-can” (TCP 253) remains empty. The poet persona is also taking a dig at the loud proclamations of Indians regarding their religiosity. They pretend to be full of pity and piety but are, in fact, inhumane and callous. Poverty in its naked form stalks the streets and roads of Indian cities and villages. A poor man has no friends except animals. When the pilgrims “pass him by,” he resorts to cruelty towards the dog, his only friend, and breaks its front legs to rouse pity in the hearts of the merciless and unfeeling pilgrims:

After watching pilgrims
pass him by, poverty blinds
his eyes so his status as a beggar

rises. He breaks the dog’s

front legs to raise the pitch

of pity.

(TCP 253)

The poor people in a bid to raise their status as beggars even inflict wounds or even sometimes chop off their limbs. Such scenes are not uncommon in such cities of ‘pilgrimage in India as Kurukshetra, Allahabad, Tirupati, Puri or Madurai. The pathetic condition of lepers in the temple city of Madurai is described in “Elements of Composition” (TCP 121) where he deplores the “miserable plight of lepers” (Rajagopalchary and Ravinder 28). Even the gods and goddesses living in splendour in temples are as insensitive to the pathetic condition of beggars and lepers as men and women:

add the lepers of Madurai,

male, female, married,

with children,

lion faces, crabs for claws,
clotted on their shadows

under the stone-eyed
goddesses of dance, mere pillars,

moving as nothing on earth

can move –

(TCP 122)

The unprivileged people have to walk the streets to eke out their livelihood by becoming beggars or snake charmers. In “Snakes” (TCP 5) the poor person wreathes a snake round his neck for the amusement of the rich:
The snakeman wreathes their writhing
round his neck
for father’s smiling
money.

\[(TCP\ 5)\]

The poor people of India and other poor countries throng the embassies of the Western
countries to acquire “visa and passport” (“A Poor Man’s Riches I,” \(TCP\ 141\)) to change their fortunes. But they are rudely shocked when they are engaged only as cheap labour:

\[\text{in offices}\]
\[\text{of immigration,}\]
\[\text{for coloured and discoloured aliens, brown}\]
\[\text{eyes, father’s name, five moles}\]
\[\text{classified}\]
\[\text{in each oblong of visa and passport,}\]
\[\text{with only the pink, yellow, and green}\]
\[\text{of a mango}\]
\[\text{from Acapulco to change the colours}\]
\[\text{of poverty under the sweating}\]
\[\text{boiler pipes.}\]

\[(TCP\ 141)\]

Kumar rightly observes that poverty “as a condition of economic impoverishment is a recurrent theme in the poetry of Ramanujan” (173). The only consolation a poor man finds is in sexual pleasure “under the boiler pipes” i.e. their workplace. The body of a woman is his “mint/of gold and silver” which he explores. The poet-persona ironically
observes that he has no lavish cars or bungalows to show to the world; instead what he has to show to the world as his property are the prints of love-making:

Mouth marks,
lowtide smells, and fingertips
for all to see
in the secret accounts of joy.

(TCP 143)

In “This Pair” (TCP 13) the poet persona contrasts a “fertile shabby couple” with the rich and “elegant childless couple”. He finds that the rich are envious of the reproductive abilities of the poor whereas the poor worry about “cash /and that powder
they use for diaper rush/on fundamental places.” Whereas the poor are busy in filling their cash- strapped lives with their god- given sexual pleasures and reproductive abilities, the rich are busy in trading their sterility with endless talks of movies, tennis players and new books:

They chatter of downtown faces,
movies, of tennis on the lawns,
sandalwood rooks and ivory pawns,
of books in windows, neon signs,
the happy walks in shoplit rains
they seem to have traded,
without any discount, for that Thing hardly kneaded
into human shape by some obstetric stranger,
filling with its rage the literal manager,
of their youth among breathing cows
that have begun to look like nurses on their toes.

(TCP 13)
The difference between ‘they’ (the rich but sterile couple) with ‘this’ (the poor but fertile couple) clearly indicates where the poet-persona’s sympathies lie.

The poet-persona also exposes the duplicity and hypocritical attitude of the Indian people who, in the name of charity, give counterfeit coins to the beggars:

Then, one sees
the leprosy of light and shade,
the sunlit beggar squatting
on his shadow, clotting,
the antlers of bare April trees:

(“One Reads,” TCP 49)

The moral degeneration of the Indian society is clearly visible in its inhuman attitude towards the poor people. Dulai rightly observes that “Ramanujan observes closely and often laments poignantly the human misery resulting from material want and moral corruption in contemporary India” (161). He castigates the Indian society in general and Tamil poets in particular for being insensitive to the sufferings caused by the flooded rivers like the Ganges and the river Vaikai. Newspaper reports about the havoc caused to the lives and property of the poor do not stir the conscience of the Indian people because they have become habituated to such reports. The poet-persona’s irony is all the more explicit when he refers particularly to the devastation of the Ganges, the most sacred and revered river:

Daily, and therefore calmly, one reads:
of the raving Ganges,
the boats overturned;
a summer’s thatch of villages
most casually burned;

(“One Reads,” TCP 48)
Ramanujan comes heavily on “Tamil cultural and poetic tradition” (King, *Three Indian Poets* 82) for being indifferent to the sufferings and losses of the poor people. Both the old and the new Tamil poets romanticise the flooded Vaikai river but they are simply unconcerned about and ignorant of the losses suffered by the common man in terms of property and life:

and the way it carried off three village houses,  
and a couple of cows  
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,

kicking at blank walls

even before birth.

(“A River,” *TCP* 38-39)

Every year in India, rivers are flooded causing untold sufferings to the poor but no one is concerned or bothered. Ramanujan severely “castigates the insensitivity, apathy and indifference of the modern society to the predicament of the poor” (Rajagopalchary and Ravinder 24-25).

Ramanujan attacks the immoral, power-crazy politicians of his native country. He compares the feuding politicians to cannibals who devour smaller, less powerful cannibals to establish supremacy of control and power. His loathing for these despicable creatures named politicians becomes quite evident when he compares them to maggots:
cannibal
devouring smaller cannibal
till only two equal
giants are left to struggle,
entwined,
like wrestlers on a cliff:
and at last
only one
omnipotent
maggot-ceasar who rent
his rival
and lived –
of all the mob and the triumvirate
his fat and lonely body stiff
and blind with meat,
his wrings without a wriggle.

(“An Image for Politics,” TCP 46)

The poem is a stinging satire on the Indian brand of politics and politicians. These crafty politicians have no concern for the people or the country. They are made only for self-aggrandisement and crafty manoeuvrings. The degenerate and the depraved people use the ladder of politics to rise higher and higher:

The dumb and the colourblind rise
rise rapidly in politics

(“Compensations,” TCP 101)

In “Lac into Seal: on a kind of politics,” the poet-persona visualises the Indian “politician as a crow, the symbol of evil and crookedness – and the poor masses as a cow – the, symbol of innocence” (Pal 3). The poet-persona’s disgust of these knaves
masquerading as politicians is so strong that he again and again refers to them as parasitical creatures. In this poem, he visualises India as a sturdy and leafy tree the vitality of which is being sapped by the power crazy politicians. These crooked politicians are compared to tiny parasitic “bug-eyed beetles” (TCP 50) hiding themselves inside the “armpits” of the tree and eating into its sap, thus making the tree hollow from within. These parasites dream of wielding political power ostensibly for serving “National Cause”. The following rather longish quotation from the poem reveals the poet- persona’s unspeakable disgust and contempt for these politicians:

But if you look you’ll find
in the armpits of trees whole rows
of bead – eyed beetle laying
for days their bowels’ designs.
But you’ll never once suspect
that all these beetles dream endlessly
of futures and seals of state
and signatures of brass
on their most casual turd
or that they will ever begin
to open their mouths in public
to claim for their insect
bodies’ tentative periodic
itch a taste for History
and the National Cause

(TCP 50)

Taking a dig at the autocratic and dictatorial Indira Gandhi, a former P.M. of India, he draws the analogy of a traditional house where mother- in- law reigns supreme and daughters-in-law are mere obedient servants. Here, in the poem, “A Ruler,” he
compares Indira Gandhi to an all-powerful mother-in-law and her ministers to obsequious daughters-in-law:

Governing the country from a kitchen sink
she brandishes ladles as the goddess her sword
puts ministers to work like daughters-in-law
sorting lentils and votes, slicing the gourd

\textit{(TCP 252)}

He deplores the deteriorating condition of his native land and ascribes it to the wrong people doing wrong jobs. Corrupt and self-seeking politicians enter Parliament and state legislatures to enact laws, doctors and engineers vie to become ‘omnipotent’ I.A.S. officers, thus throwing the country into deeper and deeper morass. He also laments the fact that persons returning to their native land after acquiring first-rate professional and technical education and skills are rendered useless and are ultimately forced to work in the field:

the born deaf
practice psychiatry as if
to the practice born; fingerless
men become tailors for royalty,
painters, filigree workers in
silver, or excel at the javelin
throw; with a hook for a hand
men hold and pull black strings
in a puppet show or a boxing
syndicate; stutterers become salesmen
for things like machine guns
or pet woodpeckers; good
upstanding men deformed
by literacy abroad
return middle aged to farming
(“Compensations,” TCP 109)

“Small Town, South India” contrasts the experience of those “broad-minded people who have ventured out of their own shell and have had a taste of wide world beyond” with the “narrow-mindedness of a certain section of [Indian] people who are afraid to discard the age-old superstitious beliefs, which have become an inseparable part of their existence” (Chindhade 76). After returning from “wide open spaces,” he finds his native land and its people still tethered to temples, buffaloes and cows:

I return from the wide open spaces

Temple employees have whiskered nipples.
The street cows have trapezium faces.
Buffaloes shake off flies with a twitch of ripples.

(TCP 100)

The poet-persona experiences the suffocation of a drowning man in his native land. The association of U.S.A. with “wide open spaces” and of his native land with “small town” clearly brings out the concern of the poet-persona’s regarding the backwardness of his native land. Added to poverty and immoral politics is another ill, afflicting the poet-persona’s native land—the ill of communal violence. He rues the fact that communal relations in India are so fragile that even a small incident or just a rumour has the potential to flare up into communal riots:

The perennial feuds and seasonal alliance
of Hindu, Christian and Muslim-
cut off sometimes by a change of wind,
a change of mind, or a siren
between the pieces of a backstreet quarrel.

(“Time and Time Again,” TCP 64)
The poet-persona assails the habit and inclination of the people of his native land to “find a compensation for the reality of contemporary India” (King, *Three Indian Poets* 86) in its rich and glorious past. He severely castigates the Indian people for their tendency to seek refuge in the past, thus forgetting the harsh realities of the present. The poet-persona bemoans the fact that instead of blaming the rickety bus service of Madras, “the head clerks from city banks” find a soothing parallel in the court of the King Harsha where thousands of monks had to stand in a row for the whole day for the kingly gifts of “gold/a pearl and a length of cloth” (*TCP* 74). Acceptance of the status quo and the unwillingness to change makes the Indian people take recourse to their golden past and history. After the office hours, people have to jostle and elbow to board a bus because the municipal bus service is disorderly and inefficient. The result is that they miss one bus after the other:

Madras,
1965, and rain.

Head clerks from city banks
curse, batter, elbow
in vain the patchwork gangs
of coolies in their scramble
for the single seat
in the seventh bus:

(*TCP* 74)

To draw solace, they tell each other as to how monks waited the whole day to receive precious gifts in King Harsha’s court:

they tell each other how
old king Harsha’s men
beat soft gongs
to stand a crowd often
thousand monks
in a queue, to give them
and the single visiting Chinaman
a hundred pieces of gold
a pearl, and a length of cloth;
so, miss another bus, the eighth
and begin to walk, for King Harsha’s
monks had nothing but their own two feet

(TCP 74)

Indian Fullbright scholars on their way to the United States stop in Egypt to see the pyramids and are amazed to discover that their country also shares the glorious culture of Egypt: “amazed at pyramidfuls/ of mummies swathed in millennia / of Calicut muslin” (TCP 75). The third section of the poem is a “satirical vignette” (Ghosh 90) of an Indian Professor of Sanskrit who is in Berlin on a cultural exchange. Despite the historical links between German and Sanskrit, he finds himself lost because he is unable to understand the “German signs on door, bus and shop” until he

suddenly comes home
in English, gesture and Sanskrit
assimilating
the swastika
on the neighbour’s arm

(TCP 75)

King rightly observes that the Indian Professor “sentimentalizes a swastika” because he associates it with his rich and glorious Aryan heritage, totally ignorant of the racist atrocities of the German Nazio. Ramanujan castigates Indians for always living in illusionary past. King rightly observes:
In modern India, instead of belief, action, feelings, knowledge, achievements, there are false memories (photographs of rajas stand over tigers that others have shot), legends (‘the peacocks we sent in the Bible/to Solomon’), false medicines and pseudo-science, instead of scientists learning how to recycle waste in a space ship, a leading politician advocates recycling fluids by drinking one’s own urine. (*Three Indian Poets* 90)

He laments the fact that Indians have lost the zeal and zest for life. He locates this lack in the dislocation of the inner culture and the outer forms it pretends to take (“our blood is brown/our collars white”). Ramanujan is “opposed to the ‘hypocrisy’ of the Indian mind on account of his great concern for the true Indian values” (Ramakrishna 103). The worshippers of Lord Murugan, “Lord of the twelve right hands” have become amputees and phantoms. The poet wonders why the Indian worshippers of this great Lord have become so inefficient:

Lord of the twelve right hands
why are we your mirror men
with the two left hands
capable only of casting
reflections?

(“Prayers to Lord Murugan,” *TCP* 116)

He rejects the sixth sense we Indians particularly boast of and prays to Lord Murugan to restore to him the normal, empiric five senses: “Lord of the six sense /give us back/our five senses.” He laments the present state of his native land which has “become an abstraction of dead languages, old myths, of political gatherings, of international meetings (such as Gandhi’s Round Table Conference in London), of pasts created by idealized or politicised notion of India and Indianness” (*King, Three Indian Poets* 91). He beseeches the Lord to free Indians from our obsession with our dead myths, legends and languages:
Deliver us O presence
From proxies
And absences
from Sanskrit and the mythologies
of night and the several
roundtable mornings
of London and return
the future to what
it was.

(TCP 117)

Instead, the poet-persona would prefer to opt for hard, concrete realities instead of abstraction and illusions. He prays to God to grant Indians the “specific particular, real” (King, Three Indian Poets 91) world of ‘six new pigs in a slum.’ Ramanujan is, thus, against those religious and political pundits who find that India can shine only if Indian religion is revived. The poet-persona, on the other hand, would like to return to the present condition and times, however ugly it may be. King rightly observes that “this might seem a proper, if irritable, response to the superficialities of those who speak of returning to Indian religion and tradition”(Three Indian Poets 91). The poet-persona diagnoses the ills afflicting India and Indians and finds that our most debilitating ill is caused by our tendency to turn to God. So, for him, India can regain vigour and strength only if we stop praying: “Lord of answers / cure us at once/of prayers” (TCP 117). The apt use of phrase “at once” reveals the seriousness of the present bad health of India as a nation and the immediacy of his call and concern to cure the disease.
WORKS CITED


