

CoolTan Arts joins with many others to extended its condolences to Amita's family, and to highlight Amita's inspiring work:

A Tragic Loss

Amita Patel (died 15.7.10)

Amita had been on a ward at Lambeth Hospital for about ten days. On Wednesday 14th she was on day leave from the hospital and did not return. Her body was found by the East Sussex authorities on Thursday morning. On Wednesday 21st July Amita's body was officially identified by her sisters Laxmiben and Umaben who had travelled from abroad, and by her close friend Rashmi. They said that she looked very peaceful. Amita had a long and respected history with Survivors Poetry. She was a Camden workshop facilitator for many years, and also set up a group in her local borough with Lambeth MIND.

She was a graduate of the Survivors Poetry Mentoring Scheme, being, in fact, mentored by no less a personage than Survivors' Poetry patron, Debjaneer Chatterjee MBE, who has this to say:

“One senses that here is a poet who is on a journey, and on her ‘Paper Road’ she encounters many guides, beginning with ‘everybody's ancestor’ – the monkey Anjana, who gives her a pen and bids her ‘begin.’ Journeys are a recurring theme in Amita's poems; journeys that entail risk-taking and adventure. Her poems strike a chord for she speaks as a fellow-traveller to every reader on Life's journey.”

Debjaneer also says this : “her poem ‘We are Candles’ echoes the Buddha's message – to be lamps unto oneself. A ‘Survivor’ in the truest sense of the word, Amita is one who lights a candle. Her poetry glows with clarity and wisdom in a chaotic world.”

Amita's funeral took place on Wednesday 28th July (which is also her birthday) at 1.15pm at Lambeth Crematorium.

Debjaneer Chatterjee MBE, has gifted CoolTan Arts as well as other organisations her kind permissions to re-print the obituary below:

Comma but not a closed one

Amita Patel (died 15.7.10)

I first came to know Amita through her poetry. Survivors' Poetry run an innovative and much needed Survivors' Poetry National Mentoring Scheme, sponsored by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. This scheme facilitates first publications, in pamphlet form, for poets who have experienced Mental Distress, and are unfamiliar with the routines of publishing. Many of these attend the Poetry Workshop sessions held monthly at Swiss Cottage Library, where Amita was a key facilitator. Each poet chosen has a mentor, who assists with selection and editing.

Alan Morrison, who was co-ordinating the scheme at its inception in 2006 had the task of selecting the mentees and then matching them up with possible volunteer mentors. He suggested me as a mentor for Amita, saying: "She's a talented poet and, with your shared Indian background, she will respond well to your guidance. You will be an ideal mentor for her." I did not have to commit myself until I had read a sample of her poetry – but the honesty, immediacy and originality that I read there had me hooked straightaway. Amita Patel became the first survivor poet that I mentored – through regular correspondence in a long-distance relationship: she lived in London and I in Sheffield, and for much of the time I was working as a Writer in Residence in York. Over a period of more than two years there were occasional gaps in correspondence, some of them quite long, as Amita went in and out of hospital.

I was to help Amita to assemble a poetry collection that Survivors Press eventually published in 2007 as part of a series of debut pamphlets by Survivor Poets. She was happy to take suggestions and to work at her poems, drafting and redrafting them. She took pains to consider each word in her poems. But Amita would send me more than poems – there were photocopies of prose articles she had written, thank-you letters in which she revealed a little about herself, even the occasional Diwali card. Some of her articles and poems have been published in Lambeth Mind's magazine, to whose editorial team she actively contributed. She found great comfort in the act of writing – and she had important things to say. Her prose articles were often brave attempts to campaign to improve the lives of survivors. Amita valued her contact with Lambeth Mind and Survivors' Poetry, both survivor-run organisations.

Amita was a great activist, assisting on Lambeth Mind's helpline and later becoming a 'hands-on' trustee. In 2002/03 she was granted a student elective by The Wellcome Trust. She helped to set up and facilitate a Survivors' Poetry group and Hearing Voices support groups. Among her many leading roles, she supported the fight to stop the Amardeep Charitable Trust from closure. Her article about this unique culturally-specific community mental health service for Lambeth's South Asians can still be read at www.amardeep.org

When one of Amita's close friends, Yan Weaver from Lambeth Mind, and also Roy Birch from Survivors' Poetry, contacted me with the tragic news that Amita had taken her own life at Beachy Head, East Sussex, I felt that I must revisit her poems – very much needing to hear her warm and distinctive voice again. The poems in her pamphlet, *Paper Road*, glow for me and I am sure for many others. Her five-line poem, *Groomed*, now seems to anticipate a deadly fascination with sand and sea:

Rising, the tide takes me,

again and again.

I am a broken part of a sand castle,

being smoothed and groomed

into a grain of sand.

In *At the End* she writes of a dear one's funeral: "Someone read *The Bhagavad Gita*" and all lit lamps so that Yama, the God of Death, could come to collect the departed 'for the journey/to our ancestors'. In my Preface to her collection, I wrote that journeys are a recurring theme in Amita's poems – "journeys to health, growth and understanding; journeys that entail risk-taking and adventure. Her poems strike a chord for she speaks as a fellow-traveller to every reader on life's journey."

The final poem of *Paper Road*, 'We are Candles', seems to echo the Buddha's message: to be lamps unto oneself.

We are Candles

Ordinary acts of courage,

like sunrises and sunsets,

often go unnoticed.

In the midst

of teeming cities

there are monsters.

And also millions of flames,

tiny and enduring.

Hers was a fine debut collection and I was honoured to be able to mentor her and to edit *Paper Road* for her. Amita was a talented poet, a courageous champion for social causes, and a woman for whom family, friends and community mattered.

But I have grave doubts about whether mental health professionals did enough to help and support her. Her poems tell me of an isolation in which she was not always understood or helped, and given medication that may have drugged but did not heal her. In *Voices* she wrote: "the psychiatrists give me/a tablet of mountains to swallow –/unlike Hanuman's healing herb-mountain". Hanuman, the monkey-hero of Indian epics, is a Lord of Strength and in one of *The Ramayana* stories he is the bearer of a mountain containing healing herbs.

Her doctors at the hospital will have known that she had attempted suicide before. This summer Amita was again experiencing a suicidal bout of depression that saw her on a mental health ward for about ten days. Yet, it seems that they let her go on day release on 14th July – and with no accompaniment arranged! But why am I surprised? I, and many in Survivors' Poetry, fear that cuts in NHS and Council Services' mean that our society grows more uncaring and more suicides will follow. Amita Patel's was a valuable life that should not have been allowed to be extinguished.

With sadness I now read the concluding words of my Preface to her collection: "A 'survivor' in the truest sense of the word, Amita's poetry glows with clarity and wisdom in a chaotic world." In the commonly understood sense of the word, Amita herself cannot still be called a 'survivor' as she no longer shares the world with us. But she and organisations like Survivors Poetry have ensured that her words continue to survive and to inspire.

Debjani Chatterjee

*(Amita's Mentoring Scheme pamphlet, **Paper Roads**, is available from Survivors' Poetry office)*

Following Amita's funeral, discussions continue about producing an extended volume of her work. Sincere thanks to Amita's family and friends for their offers already to endorse the venture. Thanks also to Dave Russell for arranging today's text. www.survivorspoetry.com