

# GOETHE MEDAL 2013

## LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR NAVEEN KISHORE

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Naveen Kishore - a beautiful, somewhat mysterious name I had heard so often, perhaps as the title of a beautiful poem, a song, the hero of a fairy tale. Never had I met the man who carries this beautiful name, a name with a sharp, acute beginning and a soft, gentle ring at the end. Time and again I was told about him, by people around the world involved with literature and culture, by publishers, most often by authors - which, of course, made Naveen Kishore all the more interesting to me. An *homme des lettres*, in a slightly different sense of the word, a lover of books, a champion and patron of world literature, a genuine publisher. Definitely someone I wanted to run into! And so, yes, it's a great honour to stand here today to praise Naveen Kishore, whom I have indeed now finally met.

But, in fact, I had met him much earlier. I had met Naveen Kishore when I first came across the catalogues of Seagull Books, the publishing house he had founded thirty years ago. "Catalogue" is definitely a misleading word in this case. Naveen Kishore's catalogues are books about books. Beautiful books about beautiful books, to be more precise. Spectacularly designed by Sunandini Banerjee they amply display this publisher's love for that wondrous endangered species, spanning so many centuries, the beautifully typeset, printed and bound text - the book. Naveen Kishore's publications pick up on the best aspects of tradition: high-quality printing, beautiful materials (paper, cloth, leather), sophisticated details like fancy endpapers or gilt edging, yet they are also the product of modern technologies, of the digital age. The richly evocative photo collages adorning the pages of the catalogues as well as the striking cover designs are persuasive proof that Seagull Books is not a nostalgic undertaking. Granted, Naveen Kishore is determined to recover or preserve what he finds valuable in the so-called analogous world, but the many intricate, multilayered photo montages, a trademark of Seagull Books, have obviously been created by the inspired, whimsical use of sophisticated software - and all this enlightened mixing and mingling reminded me of Claude Lévi-Strauss' affection for what he lightheartedly called "bricolage".

A bricoleur is someone with an active, curious, open mind. He roams the territory, selecting and evaluating, assembling what he finds useful and fertile, exploring different worlds, different theories. His mode of perception and selective method are emphatically unideological. He is a tinkerer, a crafter. In an earlier life Naveen Kishore was a specialist in theatre lighting design, he still is a photographer; for a while, when studying, he earned money in a factory for motor parts, he is a film director, a founder of book stores, a networker, the initiator of the Seagull Arts Foundation as well as the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre *and* the Seagull School of Publishing - there's certainly something I've missed - in essence, he's a formidable tinkerer and craftsman, indeed. Here in Weimar the Goethe-Institut is honouring him foremost as a publisher - and a true publisher (as a publisher myself I may say this), a true publisher is always a bricoleur, an inspired "builder"; he builds a list, he builds a network. A true publisher has the free spirit of the bricoleur. He "makes himself available", as Naveen Kishore once commented, weaving, dovetailing,

bringing together the high and the low, the traditional and the contemporary, the sacred and the profane. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's magpies come to mind. Let me quote from one of the splendid catalogues (you can browse through them as though through a wonderful literary breviary): "So the magpie adorns its nest with everything it finds ... it likes to pull out everything that glitters ...", Enzensberger says admiringly.

A publisher builds a list - this is at the heart of his profession. An audacious publisher brings together all those texts he perceives as glittering, often uniting books and authors that, at first glance, don't relate to each other - skimming through the Seagull list, one might wonder, what Guillaume Apollinaire has to say to Vsevolod Pudovkin or Kamilla Shamsie to Guy Debord or Annemarie Schwarzenbach to Tariq Ali. Yet Naveen Kishore has generously invited them all, and many more, into the beautiful open space that is his publishing enterprise. He has given them the opportunity to mingle, the opportunity to speak - and a continuous discourse has been ignited. What initially seemed random has taken shape, a unique list has emerged. A list that has been inspired over the years by Naveen Kishore's specific passions and interests, but (the true publisher is a bricoleur) has also incorporated numerous suggestions from colleagues and friends, fellow publishers, the authors themselves and, not to be forgotten, from the celebrated translators, whose contribution is greatly honoured at Seagull Books. Over the years, and with the support of the Goethe-Institut, an impressively eclectic German list has been published with Hans Magnus Enzensberger as *spiritus rector*, featuring Jurek Becker, Alexander Kluge, Martin Mosebach, Sibylle Lewitscharoff, Dietmar Dath, Brigitte Reimann, Thomas Bernhard, Esther Kinsky, Ralf Rothmann, Max Frisch, Barbara Honigmann, Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, Arno Geiger, Tilmann Rammstedt, Peter Weiss, Inka Parei, Sherko Fatah and others - perhaps the most sustainable German-Indian cultural exchange since Max Müller, that enlightened 19th-century German-born pioneer of Indian Studies, edited the fabled 50 volumes of the Sacred Books of the East - the English translation, alas, not the German.

As a practice in itself bricolage undermines ideological dominance, this indeed is its greatest merit; it counteracts intolerance and chauvinism, no small issues in India, and in many other countries. The authors published by Naveen Kishore represent all continents, all religions, various political orientations and aesthetic preferences. Their books have been united in an admirable, persuasive enterprise to further what might most simply be termed a civil society. Seagull Books has become an international venture, based in Kolkata, London and New York; it acquires world rights or world English language rights and distributes in all territories. This independent house seems to have formed a response to the large publishing conglomerates moving into India and gradually taking over the industry. Naveen Kishore is certainly a courageous man, a man of passion and cunning, but his most striking feature may well be generosity - generosity of mind and spirit, generosity as displayed in his urge to foster community, to reach out into the world. And material evidence of this generosity, of course, lies in the multitude of beautiful books he has been fearlessly publishing for decades. May the magpie find yet much more that glitters, may the seagull soar high in the sky. May Naveen Kishore succeed in all his inspired, visionary undertakings. And let's not forget that magical name!