

# Remembering Benjamin Zephaniah: A Griot in the World

 [thewire.in/culture/remembering-benjamin-zephaniah-a-griot-in-the-world](http://thewire.in/culture/remembering-benjamin-zephaniah-a-griot-in-the-world)



In the year 2000, British poet, activist and actor Benjamin Zephaniah visited Kolkata, my hometown, for the famous book fair held annually in the city. While he was already well known in the UK, Zephaniah would have been mostly unknown in India at the time, except in literary circles. His performance at the British Council pavilion of the book fair was described by India Today as unprecedented: “Calcutta hasn’t seen anything like him before.”

It is a rare claim about a city where the currents of the world’s contemporary culture inevitably wash up. During that visit, Zephaniah described himself as a “griot” – travelling poets, musicians, and storytellers in West Africa, who are also often the oral historians of their communities.

“He was a poet for 24 hours of the day,” said poet Vivek Narayanan, who met him during a visit to Mumbai around the same time. “He, of course, performed but rejected the division between published and performed poetry.”



Benjamin Zephaniah. Photo: David Morris/Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED

Narayanan, the author of several books – including *After* (2022), a modern retelling of the Ramayan – explains that in the US and the UK, performance poetry had a very specific social and cultural context. While established mainstream poets had books from publishers like Faber and others, performance poets were usually working-class or Black people.

“But Zephaniah did not really see publishing and performance as a conflict,” he said. “It was one of the things that came out very strongly when I interviewed him during his visit to Bombay (Mumbai). He had performed some impromptu poems, which was part of his conception of being a poet. You needed to have poetry inside you.”

In Mumbai, Zephaniah performed on the lawns of the iconic David Sassoon Library. “This reading might have been one of the turning points of how performance poetry, which was not very well-known in India then, was thought about in the country,” says Narayanan.

Poet, novelist and translator Jerry Pinto also remembers attending the reading: “The back garden of the David Sassoon Library. Background accompaniment provided by the adolescent impatience of Mumbai traffic. Faint night chill of faux winter. Whiff of hand-rolled cigarettes. Benjamin Zephaniah whipped-whupped-whopped at us. I don’t remember the set, I remember the impact, the poetry not spoken, not recited, but lived.”



David Sassoon Library. Photo: Pradeep717, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons

For Pinto, too, Zephaniah's physicality and his poetry were inseparable. "The body for Zephaniah was not just what contained the voice or the organism that produced it. The body was the voice was the poetry was the performance was the word," he said.

"I saw this and I felt the way T.S. Eliot had constrained us all, made us believe that to do anything but say the words, deadpan and flat clam, was to be untrue to poetry," added Pinto. "I saw that we could be true to the poem and the words and the body and live poetry unashamedly.

Zephaniah's radical rejection of mid-20th century abstract aestheticism in Western poetry for a more direct, conversational style and language has been much commented upon since his death at the age of 65 years, on December 7, 2023. Some commentators have traced the origins of his poetic choices and politics to his difficult childhood. Born as Benjamin Springer in the Hockley area of Birmingham on 15 April 1958, Zephaniah experienced racism as a child and had an unhappy home.

His father, Oswald Springer, a migrant from Barbados, worked at a post office. Zephaniah's mother, Leneve, was a nurse, who had migrated from Jamaica. The couple had eight children including Zephaniah and his twin sister Velda. His young adult novel *Windrush Child* (2020) combined meticulous research about the Windrush generation, to which his parents belonged, and his memories of growing up in England in the 1960s.

Oswald was distant and violent, and after a particularly brutal assault on Leneve, when Zephaniah was about 10 years old, the mother and son fled from home. The family would never recover from this splintering.

Living hand to mouth, Zephaniah was expelled from school when he was 13 years old and was arrested several times during his late teens for different offences, including burglary. "As I left school, a teacher told me I was a born failure and that within a short time I was going to be dead or doing a life sentence in prison," Zephaniah wrote in his autobiography, *The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah* (2018). Fearing that his teacher's harsh statement would prove true, Zephaniah moved to London at age 22.

In London, he started associating with poets like John Cooper Clark and Attila the Stockbroker, and experimenting with reggae, punk and alternative comedy. His first book, *Pen Rhythm*, was published in 1980. Combining dub poetry and reggae music,

Zephaniah released his first album *Rasta* in 1982. Despite his reputation as a performance poet, Zephaniah would produce 14 full-length collections of poetry, six albums, books for children, novels for adults, and seven plays. He also acted in TV, his most famous role being that of a street preacher in *Peaky Blinders*.



Irish actor Cillian Murphy, who plays the lead role of gangster Thomas Shelby in the popular BBC series, [paid tribute](#) to Zephaniah after his death: “Benjamin was a truly gifted and beautiful human being — a generational poet, writer, musician and activist.”

Zephaniah’s activism remained alive even after he had earned mainstream success. In 2003, when he was offered an Order of the British Empire (OBE), he reacted with scorn: “Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought.”

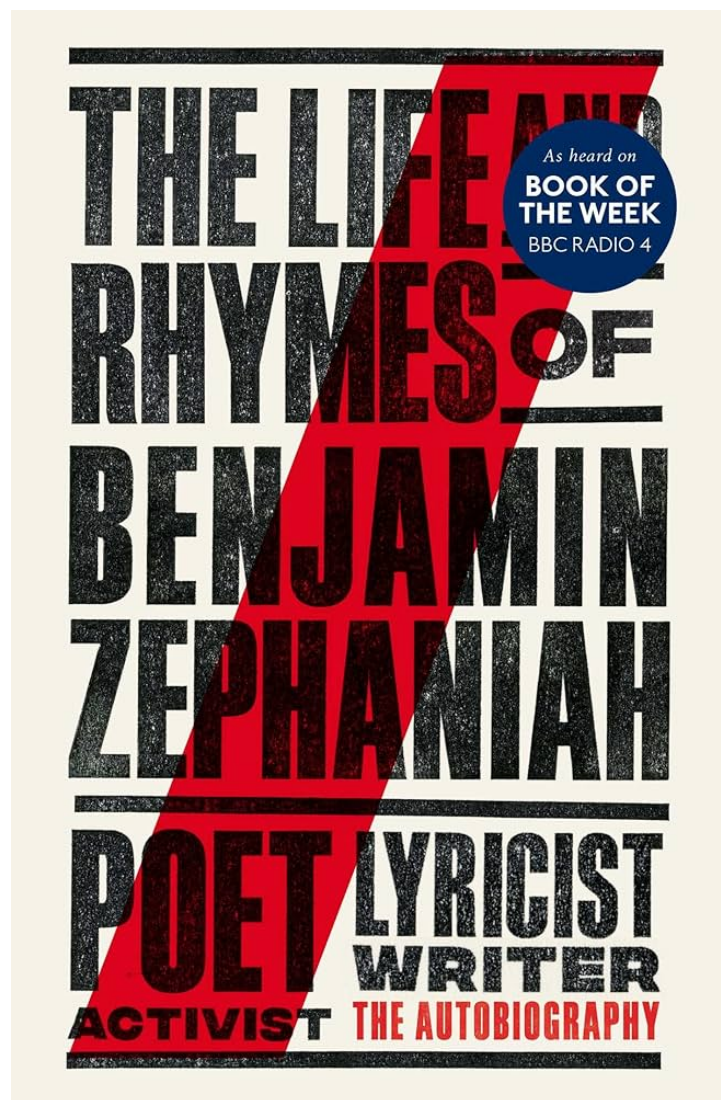
“I get angry when I hear that word ‘empire’,” he wrote in an [article](#) for *The Guardian*. “It reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised.”

Similarly, in 2018, when there was considerable speculation that he might succeed Carol Ann Duffy as the British Poet Laureate, Zephaniah rejected the idea. “I have absolutely no interest in this job,” he [wrote](#) on Twitter (now X).

“I won’t work for them. They oppress me, they upset me, and they are not worthy. I write to connect with people and have never felt the need to go via the church, the state, or the monarchy to reach my people. No money. Freedom or death.”

Perhaps it was his experience of racial and class discrimination and his anti-colonial politics that made him remarkably generous in his personal interactions. Poet and translator Sampurna Chatterji remembers this generosity from a meeting with Zephaniah nearly two decades ago.

“Our meeting was completely a coincidence,” she said. “I had just quit my job in advertising to find my way back into literature. I was conducting a workshop for children at the British Council library. The director of the British Council introduced us.



Benjamin Zephaniah  
*The Life and Rhymes of Benjamin Zephaniah*  
Scribner UK, 2018.



Benjamin Zephaniah. Photo: X/@BZephaniah

“He was a radiant presence and a gentleman. Zephaniah was not in the least condescending to someone like me who was yet to publish anything besides occasional poetry — that was very refreshing,” she said.

The workshop Chatterji was conducting, along with bookmaker Priya Pereira, focussed on the joys of writing a nonsense rhyme and creating a book. “Most adults were very cynical about nonsense poetry,” remembers Chatterji, who would in 2004 publish an English translation of Bengali poet Sukumar Ray’s legendary book of nonsense rhymes *Abol Tabol*. “I had to explain in great detail how nonsense poetry makes children use parts of their brain to understand language. Zephaniah, however, knew immediately what I was talking about.”

“His vitality is what I remember from so many years ago,” she added.

Zephaniah’s vitality also made quite an impression on me when I heard him at my alma mater, Jadavpur University in Kolkata. This was during another of his visits to India. Trying to confirm my memories, I called my professor Abhijit Gupta who is a senior faculty member at the Department of English of the university.

“It was March 2007,” Gupta told me. “Just after the Nandigram violence.”

On March 14 that year, the police opened fire on farmers protesting against attempts of the West Bengal government, then under the Left Front, to acquire land and create a special economic zone in the village of Nandigram, about 130 km southwest of Kolkata. Fourteen farmers were killed and 100 were reported missing.

The students and some faculty members at Jadavpur University were protesting against the violence. The state-wide protests around Nandigram and Singur, another village where the government was trying to acquire land, would snowball into a movement that would, in 2011, lead to the leftist state government being voted out after 34 years in power.

“I remember introducing the event,” says Gupta. “Then I told the audience: ‘Keep your questions short.’ Zephaniah, who was more than 6 feet tall and towered over me, replied without missing a beat: ‘I like my questions big and muscular.’ The audience erupted into peals of laughter.”

I remember listening to him perform his poem ‘[Rong Radio Station](#)’, a visceral critique of state-sponsored propaganda. Now, 15 years later, as the media landscape around the world is roiled by viscous disinformation campaigns, Zephaniah’s words ring out with disquieting clarity:

I really did believe that terrorism couldn't be done by governments  
Not our government, not white government  
I just could not see what was wrong with me  
I gave hungry people hamburgers you see  
I was beginning to believe that our children were better than their children  
Their children would die from terrorism but i couldn't hear their children call  
And a child from Palastine simply didn't count at all  
What despair  
No children i was not aware  
I'd been listening to the wrong radio station

*Uttaran Das Gupta is a New Delhi-based writer and journalist. He teaches at O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat.*