



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



In conversation with Abhay K.

Jaydeep Sarangi

Abhay K. (born 1980, Nalanda, Bihar) has published a memoir and seven collections of poetry. He is the editor of four poetry collections. His poems have been published in over 60 literary journals across the world including Poetry Salzburg Review. His poem-song 'Earth Anthem' has been translated into over 50 global languages. He received the SAARC Literary Award and was invited to record his poems at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

This interview was conducted through a series of emails in the month of September 2019.

JS: You are a multi-faceted diplomat, reviewer, editor, fictionist and poet. Who is real AK for his friends and admirers?

AK: I am foremost a poet, editor and diplomat. I try to synergise all these three into one. I am also an artist and paint at times and do exhibition of my art works. I am also a literary translator. I have translated poetry into Hindi from other languages, for example new Brazilian poetry (after Elizabeth Bishop's anthology which was published in 1972) from Portuguese into English. So far I have eight collections of poetry (*Enigmatic Love, Fallen Leaves of Autumn, Candling the Light, Remains, The Seduction of Delhi, The Eight-eyed Lord of Kathmandu, The Prophecy of Brasilia* and forthcoming *The Alphabets of Latin America*) to my credit and have edited four poetry books — *CAPITALS, 100 Great Indian Poems, 100 More Great Indian Poems, and New Brazilian Poems.*

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100 Great Indian Poems has been translated into Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Nepali, Irish, French and Malagasy so far. It covers over 3000 years of Indian poetry from 28 Indian languages and is my humble attempt to take Indian Poetry to the world through translations.

JS: How do you manage to channel so much of creative and critical energies at such a young age?

AK. I think it is easy to channel creative energies at a young age when they are in plenty! I for example, devote most of my time for poetry and diplomacy. I have very few other interests. For example, when my colleagues are friends are busy watching cricket matches or movies, I find myself reading or writing poetry. I think it is focus that makes all the difference.

JS: When did you start writing?

AK: I started writing in 2005 after arriving in Moscow, Russia, when I was posted there as a diplomat at the Indian Embassy, Moscow. I had plenty of time while learning Russian at the Moscow State University. My first book was an autobiography titled *River Valley to Silicon Valley*. It was published in 2007 and is still in print. It was later reissued as *Becoming a Civil Servant* in 2015. Later I started writing poems and my first collection of poetry titled *Enigmatic Love* was published in 2009.

JS: Any mentor?

AK: I don't have a living mentor but have been inspired by several writers and poets of the past such as Ernest Hemingway, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Kabir, Rabindranath Tagore, Kalidas, Premchand, Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Wislawa Szymborska, Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz among others and they continue to inspire me.

JS: Can poetry composing be taught?

AK: I think so. I have taught myself reading works of other poets. Poetry writing is mostly poetry reading. If I would have to a percentage ratio for reading and writing poetry, it would be 90 to 10. Poets learn how to write poems by reading poems written by other poets before them. I started reading poetry in my childhood. I was fascinated by sounds of *Rashmirathi* by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar when I was in class five. I was also enchanted by the shlokas I heard from *Geeta* while watching Mahabharata on Doordarshan while growing up in Bihar. I think all these have shaped by poetic sensibilities and taught me how to write poetry.

JS: 'Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own', said Salvatore Quasimodo. Do you subscribe to this view?

AK: Yes, I completely agree with Quasimodo on this. Poetry happens when personal becomes universal. For example here is a short poem by Walt Whitman—

**Stranger, if you passing meet me
and desire to speak to me,
why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?**

Here Walt Whitman’s stranger becomes a universal stranger.

JS: What prompted you to write *Love poems from Moscow*?

AK: It was in Moscow that I started writing poetry and most of the poets write love poems to begin with. This is how my first collection got the title – *Enigmatic Love: Love Poems from the fairy tale city of Moscow*.

When I arrived in Moscow I was amazed with the grandness of its avenues, squares, theatres, museums, libraries, metro-stations, beauty of people walking and talking in the street. The city opened a new world for me. I started painting and writing. Poetry started flowing within me as rivers are full of water after the rains. I wrote poems after poems and started publishing them in my blog *Ideas & Universe*.

JS: You have a collection called, *The Eight-eyed Lord of Kathmandu*. What are the themes you have addressed here? Who is this Lord?

AK: *The Eight-eyed Lord of Kathmandu* is my sixth collection of poems which I wrote during my stay in Nepal from 2012 to 2016. The book draws a poetic portrait of Nepal, its world heritage sites, festivals, historical personalities, places, landscapes and common people. The Eight-eyed Lord refers to the Buddha who sees in all directions. The book title is inspired by a poem titled ‘The Green Eye of the Yellow God’ by British poet J. Milton Hayes.

JS: What is special about your collection, *The Prophecy of Brasilia*?

AK: *The Prophecy of Brasilia* is my seventh and latest collection of poems written during my stay in Brasilia, Brazil’s capital city during 2016-2019. It creates new myths and legends for the city of Brasilia.

Brasilia is a city which was created on the basis of a dream of Dom Bosco, an Italian saint. Most people think that Brasilia is not poetic. I have created a poetic portrait of the city by writing a number of poems on Brasilia’s monuments, flora and fauna, city’s inhabitants among others.

JS: What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you constantly?

AK: I mostly write about places, cities or countries. These act as organising units of humanity. I also write about the destruction of nature being caused by the anthropocentric world view

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where everything exists to serve human beings. I think climate change and bio-diversity loss are the biggest challenges our planet faces today and our poetry must respond to it. I wrote an Earth Anthem to underline it that we share this planet with millions of other species, and we must think of them while doing anything.

JS: Do you believe we are still following a parasitical relationship with the American-Anglo-French intellectual discourse in India?

AK: We have plenty of our home-grown discourse in India. It does not mean that we should not keep our eyes and ears open to what is happening across the world. I think we need more translations from our 28+ languages into English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic etc. to influence the course of global literary discourse.

JS: 'Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary' said Kahlil Gibran. What is your take on this?

AK: Well, poetry involves words and an artistic arrangement of words to produce right aesthetics and emotions, so more than a dash of dictionary is welcome. It is important to not only have a dictionary but a thesaurus too so that the overused words are replaced with fresh words without compromising on what one wants to express exactly.

JS: How much of real India is visible in your creative writings?

AK: My first book, *River Valley to Silicon Valley*, is all about growing up in rural Bihar and getting into the Civil Service, and for my brother getting a job in Indian Silicon valley. The other book that focuses on India's capital city is my fifth poetry collection *The Seduction of Delhi*. It paints a poetic portrait of the seven cities of Delhi, its umpteen monuments, its current inhabitants, its trees of Neem and Jamun etc.

JS: Your reasons to continue as a poet in a foreign language?

AK: I don't consider anything foreign on our planet. There is nothing foreign to me as I consider the whole planet as my home. I have written an Earth Anthem that has been translated into over 50 languages. I consider all these languages as my own. English is my global mother tongue. I use it more than any other language. There is no one English anymore. There are Hinglish, Spanglish and so on. I want to enrich this global lingua franca by writing in it and translating from other languages into English.

JS: Do you write in Indian English?

AK: Today English is a global lingua franca and borrows from many languages. For example it has assimilated several words from the languages of the Indian sub-continent such as loot, pariah, pundit etc. I write in global English.

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journals.flinders.edu.au

JS: Do you keep your readers in mind when you write?

AK: No, I don't think of the readers while writing poetry. Unlike other art forms, poems are mainly written for oneself. It is a matter of chance that others also find them interesting and can relate to them.

JS: Did your travels to different places influence your writing?

AK: In fact, I began writing when I arrived in Moscow and most of my poetry collections are about the places where I have been and lived. For example, my forthcoming poetry collection is titled *The Alphabets of Latin America* which is a product of my travels across Latin America. *The Eight-eyed Lord of Kathmandu* is born out of my travels across Nepal.

JS: What is your opinion about the literary festivals these days?

AK: Literary festivals play a key role in bringing the literary community together and thus foster literary bonding among poets, writers, publishers, who do not meet usually, resulting in new collaborations. For example I met several literary luminaries at Jaipur Literature Festival such as Vijay Seshadri, Ruth Padel, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Girish Karnad among others and bonded together, exchanged ideas and even collaborated for poetry anthologies.

JS: What are the primary concerns of a postcolonial Indian poet?

AK: I don't see poetry as precolonial or postcolonial. I think these are academic terms for the purpose of studying the impact of colonialism on Indian literature. I see Indian poetry written in over 28 languages over 3000 years as a continuum and Indian English as one of Indian languages which came to India riding the wave of colonialism and got assimilated into the great Indian melting pot. Today, primary concern for me and I assume for our generation is how to find a new language and metaphors to address Climate Change, Biodiversity loss and environmental pollution, which pose existential threat to balance of life on our planet. This is why I wrote an Earth Anthem in 2008 in quest to find a common song/symbol for the humanity and for the planet. Its translation into over 50 global languages so far shows there is a deep need to unite among us and to sing a common anthem for our planet.

JS: Do you think that myth and legends are the backbone of thoughts for Indian poets?

AK: We have a rich source of myths and legends in Indian literature which shape our literary taste and sensibilities. Many poets and writers use these as fountainhead for their literary inspiration. Rewriting Indian classics is a new trend among many writers of our generation. However, today the classics of the world literature are also open and accessible to us like never before thanks to the internet. We should make best use of all these.

JS: Please will you share with me one of your recent poems?

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journals.flinders.edu.au

AK: I have been always fascinated by the moon. Recently I wrote a number of poems about it including a Moon Anthem. Here is one of these poems:

The Poet and the Moon

Abhay K.

There was a poet
who was in love with the moon
Her waning and waxing
her changing fortune

He wrote her love letters
addressing her as dear Selene
and whispered his words in air
urging her to his heart's queen

One day the moon said—dear poet,
I truly value your love, and may
I be forever your muse
but let's keep it this way

you see me soft and serene
but I also have a dark side—
I'm cold, aloof and cratered
my mood swing causes high tide.

JS: Your advice to the budding poets?

AK: Read a lot of poetry. There is so much great poetry available online and in the libraries. Collect poems you like. Read them again and again. It will help you to develop a literary taste. When you write a poem, please do not rush to publish it. Let it lie in the drawer for weeks or months and then revisit it later. See if you still find worth publishing. Keep a notebook or write down in your mobile phone new lines or images that come to your mind. Revisit them later. Write a lot, publish a little. Send your poems to literary magazines, cherish the rejections, wait for a number of poems to be published in journals before publishing them as a collection of poetry. Never stop writing new poems.

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