

Poet of Word and Presence

An Interview with Ashok Vajpeyi

Interview >
South Asia

Ashok Vajpeyi, a well-known Hindi poet, literary critic, and founder of several cultural institutions, has become a regular guest at the Department of Indian Studies, Jagiellonian University, Cracow. The visits, initially limited to giving regular academic lectures, eventually inspired Ashok Vajpeyi and myself to work together on translations from Polish poetry into Hindi and from Hindi poetry into Polish. This rather adventurous idea created, within the university surroundings, a unique opportunity to combine theory and practice of literature or, in other words, to bring together two different aspects of human creativity: the artistic and the academic. During his most recent visit I interviewed Ashok Vajpeyi on his views about the place and role of poetry in contemporary India. Notwithstanding that we focused on the individual work of a Hindi poet within the context of Indian culture, the interview also reveals the universal aspects of experiences of men, of human thought, sensitivity, sensuality, and spirituality.

By Renata Czekalska

How would you describe the importance of poetic work in your country? Is poetry in India as vastly read as it is written?

AV: India is a multilingual country – one of the largest in the world. Poetry is written and spoken in most languages. But while it is quite vastly read and appreciated in Bengali, Malayalam, Oriya, Urdu, and Kannada, my own language Hindi, in spite of having a poetry comparable to the best being written anywhere in the world, does not have a substantial reading public for significant poetry. Fortunately, this circumstance has not made Hindi poetry hermetic and exclusive: it remains open, wide-ranging, and undeniably varied. From a prayer...to an abuse...to a scream, Hindi poetry speaks in many enriching and humanly intense, formally innovative, and refreshing voices. Northern India has been the main site of cultural invasions, political battles and turmoil, and devastating expeditions: a very unstable site historically. Its instability aside, the fact that, in the twentieth century, most creative writing started being written in Khaṛibolī, thus superseding other dialects which have millions of daily speakers and users, seems to have caused a ceaseless uprooting. The somewhat late formation of a reading middle class seems to have contributed as well. Most other Indian languages have had a more stable and less ravaged milieu. The largest number of illiterates in India comes from the 'Hindi belt', which is also, economically, the most backward and, numerically, the largest.

RC: You are sometimes called a classical poet. Can you suggest why?

AV: I can only point out some obvious reasons. Firstly, unlike perhaps any other contemporary in Hindi, I've tried to reinvent the use of classical images in poetry, reworking them in new contexts, which is a way of reviving racial memory. Secondly, I've sometimes tried to supersede time and reach out to the timeless. Thirdly, and more specifically, I've attempted to revivify the great Indian tradition of erotica in poetry. At other times, I've brought forgotten classical words, images, and concepts back into contemporary poetry. At a time when most poetry tends to doubt and question, I've dared to write poetry which also celebrates life and living, love and longing.

RC: After publishing *Thocī-sī jagah*, you were labelled a 'love poet'. Did your mind such a label? Apart from love, what other themes would you consider to be most important in your poetry?

AV: I do not mind. Love is a very inclusive, all-encompassing theme. While the main body of Hindi poetry engaged itself with social reality, I chose the marginalized areas of love, eroticism, and the geography of the inner and personal. But I've also written a lot about death and absence, arts and artists, home, family and neighbourhood, social reality, and nature. If *Thocī-sī jagah* is a 'Book of Love', *Jo nahin hai* is a 'Book of Death', *Ujālā ek mandīr banātā hai* a 'Book of Arts', and *Purakhom kī parchī mein dhūp*, a 'Book of Home'. Soon to follow would be a 'Book of the World'. For me reality in all aspects, times, and resonances exists simultaneously. I am perhaps also a poet of wonder and mystery, and certainly a poet of 'word and presence'.

RC: In your poems you refer to your

mother as a deeply religious person, so most probably you have received a proper Hindu upbringing. Would you say that Hinduism has influenced your poetry in any sense?

AV: Yes, I remain very much the son of a very religious but unhappy mother. I did receive, largely from her and my grandparents, an initiation into liberal, complex, and pluralistic Hinduism. It was a proper Hindu upbringing, but not rigid or exclusivist. We were also exposed to liberalism, and the human openness of Islam, Christianity, and Jainism. I am a non-believing Hindu: it is possible to be so since Hinduism does not insist on belief. I lost belief early in life, writing a poem on the loss of gods when I was only eighteen. I have never thought of myself as a Hindu poet but I suppose I am.

In many ways, it ought to be remembered, Hinduism is more a way of life, a way of looking at and coping with reality, rather than merely a religion. Also, the Indian tradition, rich and complex as it is, has been shaped not only by Hinduism but also by Buddhism, Islam and so forth. A normal Indian heritage, therefore, is not exclusively Hindu. However, political forces and indeed mass movements have unfortunately emerged in the last two decades or so, which aggressively assert a Hinduism that is highly exclusivist, intolerant, and frozen in a medieval mindset. Imitating the Nazis in various ways, this type of Hinduism suppresses the innate pluralism of Hinduism and endows it with an aggressiveness that it inherently lacks: a religion ready to avenge assaults, real or imagined, made on it centuries ago.

It is because of this association that no self-respecting writer in India would call her- or himself a Hindu writer. All



Ashok Vajpeyi

Courtesy of Ashok Vajpeyi

great spiritual traditions have an innate universalism in their insights and wisdom. Dante, Milton, Eliot are both Christian and universal poets at the same time. So am I – a Hindu and a universalist, if you like.

I've used many concepts of Hinduism in my poetry, such as rebirth, no beginning – no end, and life-after-death. This is not so much to affirm them as to use them to explore the reality and life of our time, our innermost anxieties and aspirations, and create resonances. Hinduism is not homocentric: it believes in the unity of all beings; it posits a nature without evil; there is no original sin but play and 'lila'; it has many gods; it locates the sacred and the divine in the earthly and worldly. Many of these ideas, I guess, have been of recourse in my poetry. All my life, through poetry, I've longed for spirituality without God, for rehabilitation in a secular world, for a notion of the sacred. I've been fascinated by notions of infinity and eternity, some of which come from the Hindu traditions. Its irrepressible pluralism and spirit of accommodation also inspire me in many ways. But as a poet and public man I've struggled for a long time against the restrictive, vulgar and, in essence and spirit, non-Hindu Hindutva, which has become remarkably dominant in politics in India today.

RC: How would you describe the influence of current politics on Hindi literature?

AV: Politics is a great force in our time and has influenced Hindi poetry deeply in many ways, some of them positive. It has brought, for instance, a sense of the real social issues and concerns, and a clash of values to the realm of poetry. It has emphasized the social role and responsibility of both the poet and poetry. It has created a sense of togetherness, of participation, of being part of a larger whole, and it has certainly expanded the geography of human sympathy and solidarity in poetry. Negatively, however, politics has usurped the place of religion and spirituality, relegated issues of personal and inner reality to the margins, and created a false sense of power, social importance, and impact. It has encouraged, unfortunately, a poetics of statement, of exclusion, and tried to drown resonances and intimations of heritage. Significantly, political influence of any consequence is largely Marxist and leftist. The rightist politics in India has hardly provoked any significant creativity, given its innate aridity.

RC: Do you think that in present times poetry should become engaged in political issues and, if so, does such an engagement, in your opinion, bring any practical results?

< Translation

आओ,
जैसे अंधेरा आता है अंधेरे के पास
जैसे जल मिलता है जल से
जैसे रोशनी घुलती है रोशनी में ।

आओ,
मुझे पहनो
जैसे वृक्ष पहनता है
छात को
जैसे पगडण्डी पहनती है
हरी घास को ।

मुझे लो
जैसे अंधेरा लेता है जड़ों को
जैसे पानी लेता है चन्द्रमा को
जैसे अनन्त लेता है समय को ।

Come

Come
as darkness comes to darkness
as water meets water
as light dissolves in light.

Come,
put me on,
as the tree wears its bark,
as the pathway wears
its green grass.

Take me
as darkness takes the roots
as water takes the moon
as eternity takes time.

(Translated by the poet)

चिड़ियाँ आँगी

चिड़ियाँ आँगी
हमारा बचपन
पूरा की तरह अपने पंखों पर
लिपि हूँ ।

किसी प्राचीन सतहों के
अंधेरे सख्त वन से
उड़कर चिड़ियाँ आँगी,
और सन्ने की तरह
हम पर पड़े अजब वस्तु के टिकने
बीचक बरसोंके संगमने ।

चिड़ियाँ लक्ष्मी
कीड़े छूट गए सपने,
पुस्तकों के किन्ने,
पूले-पिसरे छन्द
और सख-सुख
हमारे बचपने में छोड़कर
उड़ आँगी ।

चिड़ियाँ न जाने कहीं से आँगी
चिड़ियाँ न जाने कहीं आँगी !

वेग और अस्पन्द के मूर्खों को सतहों पर
142 / किष्का विप्लव

Birds will Arrive

Birds will arrive on the wing
carrying our childhood
like sun light.

Birds will arrive
from the pitch-dark jungles
of some ancient century
gathering up these straws
of strange times
cast over us like shadows,
will weave their nests.

Birds will bring
dreams left behind
ancestral tales
verses
half-forgotten
leave them all
on our veranda
and fly off.

Birds will arrive
Who knows from where
will go off
who knows, where?

Perched on branches
in the midst of green leaves
Neem berries
plumping fruit
birds will chorus
the songs of our childhood
of our living
and our dying

Birds are unending
they arrive out of infinity
go off into infinity

(Translated by Arhene Zide & Teji Grover)

AV: Even if it brings forth no practical results, poetry in our time cannot escape engaging in politics. But since both the Left and the Right in the twentieth century have often deserted their own values and visions in practice, and have betrayed mankind in some deep and damaging sense, it is now imperative that poetry roots itself in the politics of elsewhere. It should adhere to the values of freedom, equality, justice, and liberty, so as to intelligently and courageously avoid riding the bandwagon. Politics seems to have left no social space where it could be interrogated. Poetry should become such a space: open, vulnerable, self-critical, morally tough, intellectually rigorous, emotionally strong, and deep-rooted. Poetry's politics, if such a thing exists, consist today in rehabilitating the notions of the social and the individual in public space, from where the present-day politics of globalization seem to have banished them. ◀

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Ashok Vajpeyi is an Indian poet, essayist, literary critic, and translator of poetry, who writes in Hindi. He was the founder and first Vice Chancellor (1997–2002) of Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University in New Delhi, and is author of 21 poetry books (10 collections and 11 volumes of selected poems). In 1994 he received the Sahitya Akademi Award; his poems have been translated into several Indian languages as well as into English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Hungarian, Norwegian, Arabic, and Polish.
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देह को प्रकट करती है देह ही

जैसे वृक्ष के पास
पत्तियाँ, छत्त, तना, जड़ें हैं
वैसे ही उसके पास है
उसकी अपनी धूप, अपनी आभा—
सूर्य उसे प्रकट-भर कर देता है।

देह की दीप्ति भी इसी तरह जागती है
प्रिय-स्पर्श से,
देह एक वृक्ष है
दीप्ति की प्रतीक्षा में—

देह को प्रकट करती है देह ही।

Does a Falling Leaf know

< Translation

Does a falling leaf know it's going to die?
In simplistic times, does a difficult word know
that entering an abstruse poem will be its end?
Wandering in the ruins of a rāga,
does a note recognise its own fading away?

What doesn't exist has many names
fading, absence, end, closure,
mortality, death

But everyone remembers its existence
no one
experiences it's not-being.
Not-being is not possible at all in language or poetry
Placing your foot outside of time
is stepping out of language.

(Translated by Arhene Zide & Teji Grover)

Note >

1 Lila is a Hindu concept of a 'divine game' (in which God creates freely and for no reason, as a form of play) understood as the origin of this world.