

# 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 you 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', *Ujjālā 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 अँधेरा आता है अँधेरे के पास  
जैसे जल मिलता है जल से  
जैसे रोशनी घुलती है रोशनी में ।

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

मुझे लो  
जैसे अँधेरा 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 आएँगी

चिड़ियाँ आएँगी  
हमारा बचपन  
धूप की तरह अपने पंखों पर  
लिये हुए ।

किसी प्राचीन शताब्दी के  
अँधेरे सचन वन से  
उड़कर चिड़ियाँ आएँगी,  
और साये की तरह  
हम पर पड़े अजब वस्तु के तिनके  
बीनकर बनाएँगी घोंसले ।

चिड़ियाँ लाएँगी  
पीछे छूट गए सपने,  
पूरखों के किस्से,  
भूले-बिसरे छन्द,  
और सब-कुछ  
हमारे बरामदे में छोड़कर  
उड़ जाएँगी ।

चिड़ियाँ न जाने कहीं से आएँगी  
चिड़ियाँ न जाने कहीं जाएँगी !

नीम और अमरुद के वृक्षों की शाखाओं पर  
342 / तिनका तिनका

### 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.

### < Translation

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. <

**Dr Renata Czekalska** specializes in modern Hindi literature and lectures at the Department of Indian Studies, Institute of Oriental Philology, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland. She also translates works of Hindi writers into Polish, and Polish poetry into Hindi.  
rczekal@vela.filg.uj.edu.pl

**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.  
ashok\_vajpeyi@yahoo.com

देह को प्रकट करती है देह ही

जैसे वृक्ष के पास  
पत्तियाँ, छाल, 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.

# The Wonder that is India

## A Farewell Seminar for Dirk Kolff

Professor Dirk Kolff has left his mark most emphatically on the social history of medieval and early modern South Asia. In due respect of his interest in the genesis of pre-modern social and ethnical groups, the speakers at the 'Social Dynamics in Mughal India' seminar re-examined and discussed the changing role and status of four social categories: Sufis, warriors, merchants, and peasants. All speakers agreed that one of Kolff's most significant contributions to the field of South Asian Studies has been his insistence on the open, fluid, and highly conscriptive nature of such categories, which today appear rather closed, rigid, and ascriptive.

Report >  
South Asia

8 October 2003,  
Leiden,  
the Netherlands

By Jos Gommans

Several historians of South Asia who have been influenced by Kolff's scholarship were invited by convenor Jos Gommans. Simon Digby, a leading figure in Indo-Islamic studies, praised the remarkable continuity of medieval Indian studies at Leiden, a field becoming exceedingly rare in present-day academics. Digby proposed using Sufi hagiographical works and eastern Hindi *premakhyanas* to demonstrate and illustrate the fourteenth-century provincialization of the Delhi Sultanate. Sufis were highly instrumental in bolstering the Muslim diaspora radiating from Delhi, eastward into Awadh and southward into the Deccan, not only in their religious capacity but also as peasants, landholders, craftsmen, and soldiers. Linguistic evidence of the southern branch of this diaspora is provided by the spread of 'proto-Urdu' or 'coarse Hindustani' dialects, which closely reflected the form of speech then current in Delhi. By contrast, the eastern provinces developed a distinct dialect of 'eastern Hindi', which appears to have been purged of Persian and Arabic loan-words.

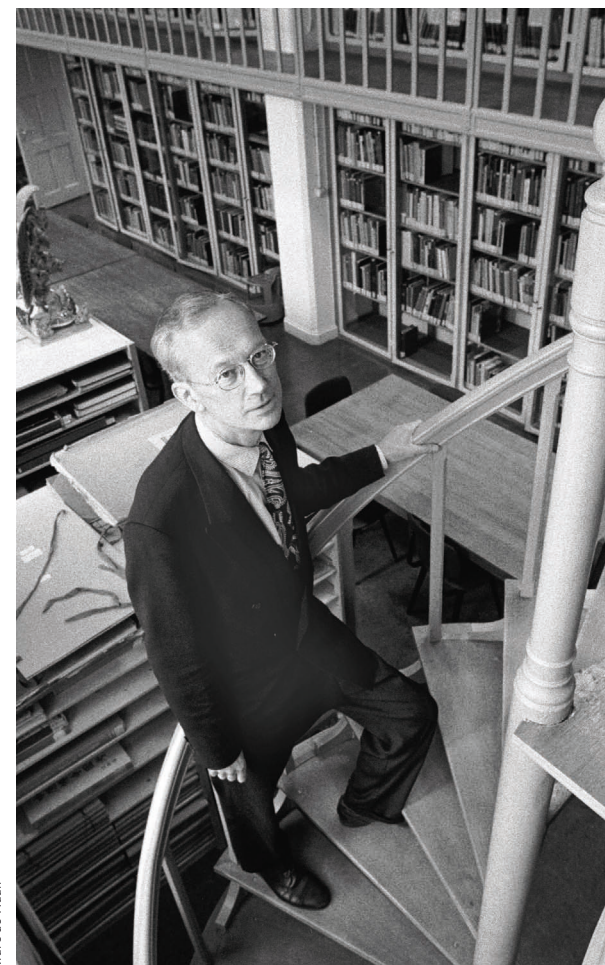
Digby's lecture clearly underlined the importance of studying and re-evaluating the much-neglected hagiographical and literary Sufi sources of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, not only to gain a better understanding of the mentality and world view of Sufi authors but, also, of the making and unmaking of the medieval sultanates of South Asia.

John Richards of Duke University, sought to refine Kolff's famous concept of the military labour market by suggesting

three sub-categories of armed men, consisting of seasonal peasant soldiers, armed retainers serving the local gentry, and full-time professional soldiers. According to Richards, these local and regional men were much more reliable sources of imperial soldiery than the broadly undifferentiated military labour market that operated across the Indo-Gangetic plain. Compared to other areas such as Tokugawa Japan or early modern England and France, the constant confrontations of the Mughal state with sharp-edged rural resistance, rooted in a common martial ethos widely shared by both peasant-cultivators and rural aristocrats, suggests that the militarized society of North India under the Mughals was an outlier in world historical terms and, consequently, that state building and administrative consolidation in early modern India faced unusually difficult obstacles. It was only in the nineteenth century that the British colonial regime succeeded where the Mughals had ultimately failed. In conclusion, Richards suggested that we reconsider Kolff's observations, and assemble and analyse the hundreds of discrete accounts of endless minor wars occurring between 1757 and 1857, which still lie buried in district gazetteers, regimental histories, and military dispatches and have yet to be examined. Only through such research will we be able to correct the current impression that British conquest was somehow benign and bloodless.

Reprising the seminar's theme by taking a fresh look at India's maritime merchants as a social category, Om Prakash of the Delhi School of Economics proposed three sub-categories in 'his' social group: the maritime merchant engaged in coastal and high-seas trade, the broker and the intermediary merchant providing goods to and buying goods from the maritime merchant, and the money merchant. There was a certain amount of overlap, particularly between the first two categories. The intermediary and the money merchants were almost exclusively Hindu, with the Bania merchants dominating the latter two groups. It was not so much the greed of state officials but the value system of the Banias itself that prescribed a relatively frugal lifestyle, when compared to the more opulent behaviour of influential Muslim merchants and shipowners like Mulla Abdul Ghafur at Surat. Although Muslims were more visible as high-seas maritime merchants, there were significant regional variations; commercial involvement of state officials and army commanders also varied regionally. For example, the composition of the maritime trading community on the Coromandel coast, which included a fair number of so-called portfolio capitalists involved in coastal and high-seas trade, was very different from that in Gujarat, which lacked the substantive role of 'official' merchants in maritime trade, not counting the involvement of members of royalty in running a pilgrim service to the Red Sea.

Seventeenth-century Bengal was different yet again; its trade with Southeast Asia was entirely dominated by primarily Muslim state officials. This goes to show that, in all these



Dirk Kolff in the Kern Institute's library

Marc de Haan

regional cases, indigenous explanations for the eighteenth-century decline of Indian commercial participation may be as important as the, in this respect, often overrated influence of the European Companies. Even in the context of growing European dominance, Indian merchants continued to show a great deal of adaptability and resilience.

It needs to be said that Kolff's work, in particular his *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, goes well beyond the Mughal and early modern fields. To demonstrate this point, Walter Hauser of the University of Virginia compared Kolff's Purabi armed peasants with his own study of twentieth-century militant peasant activism in the very same region, nowadays called western Bihar. In his concluding remarks, Dirk Kolff expanded on Hauser's observation by highlighting the continuity from the medieval into the modern. As will be shown in his forthcoming monograph, Kolff may have retired but his ongoing fascination with the wonder that is India will continue. <

- Gommans, Jos and Om Prakash (eds), *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff*, Leiden: Brill (2003), pp.370, ISBN 90 04 13155 8

**Dr Jos Gommans** is teaching South Asian history at the Kern Institute of Leiden University. His research concerns the geopolitical history of the medieval and early-modern periods and focuses on Indo-Islamic state-formation, European expansion, and interregional trade, all in a comparative, world-historical perspective.  
J.J.L.Gommans@let.leidenuniv.nl

Information >

Dirk Kolff became Emeritus Professor of Leiden University on 1 March 2003. The above seminar to celebrate Kolff's contribution to the field of South Asian Studies received financial support from the IAS and CNWS (Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies). During the seminar, Kolff was presented with a Festschrift containing essays by Jan Heesterman, Hans van Santen, Simon Digby, Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, Dietmar Rothermund, and many other friends, former colleagues, and students. At the end of 2004 the papers of the seminar, together with a contribution by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, will be published in a special theme issue in the Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient.