



Sudeep Sen in Conversation with Akshaya Kumar
on his latest edited anthology, *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians*
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Images consult
one
another,

a conscience-
stricken
jury,

and slowly
comes
to a sentence.

— A K Ramanujan

Akshaya Kumar: Editing a volume of poems is an act of responsibility, because anthologies, in a way, set the broad contours of what may later on ossify as a canon. Bringing within the scope of one volume, one hundred sixteen poets is a mammoth task, fraught with all kinds of risks, and possibilities of backlash from those who have been excluded. Scores of poems must have been read, re-read, and scrutinized by Sudeep Sen for the purpose of his latest anthology *Converse*. Reading a poem involves lot of cerebral effort, and also a necessary degree of immersion. Imagine how arduous it must have been for the editor to go through a whole range of poets and their poems. One has to be a poetry addict. I have known Sudeep for many years now, and I can say that he is addicted to poetry as much as poetry is addicted to him. He consumes poetry, and is consumed by poetry. His primary instinct is writing poems, but on the sidelines, he has this important contribution of an editor of poetry — not just Indian English, but poetry in translation both from India and abroad. Not long ago he edited an anthology for Harper Collins, to be precise in 2012. It was well-received and it travelled far and wide as a definitive volume of Indian English poetry. Then you edited *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi) which sort of acted like Volume 2 of the HarperCollins one. In this new collection *Converse*, one gets a sense of the field, and the broad spectrum of styles and moods that Indian English poets have been through in the

last 75 years. This book comes on the eve of 75 years of India's Independence.

So Sudeep, before I ask specific questions on the anthology, let me ask you about your motivation. What really triggers you to re-do an anthology of poems? Do you think in the last ten years the field has changed enormously?

Sudeep Sen: I do have an addiction to poetry, it's true. It's a strange disease, and I seek no medication, because I do not wish to be cured. Poetry sustains me.

So why do I do poetry anthologies? At a generic level, I find the world around us is so fractured, that the only things that seems capable of a universal healing, are intimately crafted words. Words that use both the head and the heart. Using just one source would be problematic. A lot of young poets write only from the heart, and it's wonderful if it's written for a specific person, but it can be sloppy. There are poets who write only cerebrally and that can be problematic too because the *rasa*, the cadence, and the texture is often missing, making it too academic, too staccato. The right calibration is in the balance.

The truth is, I have often told myself I will never edit another anthology. It can be a thankless job. Anyone you leave out is an instant foe. The reason I continue is because I think that the best of English language poetry coming out of India, and the Indian diaspora, is of a very high standard. I am fortunate that I am able to travel overseas extensively for my own poetry, and it makes me realize how little of poetry from India gets across to the world. Actually, very little gets across within India itself, leave alone outside India. I just want the best poetry to be out there. If it is there in book form, it is possible to pull people in to see it, to read it.

A very important motivation for this book also comes from my interest in Classical Indian music and dance, and my respect for the *guru-shishya parampara*. I have, as a poet, been very privileged to have had some wonderful mentors, directly or obliquely — Jayanta Mahapatra, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, and Arun Kolatkar in India — Derek Walcott, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and others

overseas. These were all guiding lights as far as I was concerned. I wouldn't be a poet now, had they not paved the path, and carved the space for the next generation of poets. It's very important to recognize this. Some younger poets may decry and call their poetry "old fashioned" and therefore "not relevant." I believe it is important to know their poetry, because it situates us as part of a continuum.

Now in classical music and dance, this tradition or *parampara* is respected. You learn from your Guru and if you are a very good student, you break away from the Guru, and the Guru allows you to do that. And I have to say, the best of Indian poets in my case, people I have learnt from, have allowed me to break — break free, without them feeling slighted, because most good writers do not feel slighted. It's the mediocre people who get agitated.

Mediocrity is the biggest contagion in Indian poetry. Angst ridden poets, wanting their voices heard, wanting to be known, create a grisly kind of situation, because they feel the need to be everywhere. On the other hand, the really good Indian poets are fairly relaxed. They are doing what they have to do — they continue writing.

When we talk about other languages, I feel the problem is lesser, perhaps because we are talking about rootedness of a different kind. I am not going to get into a discussion of English being a rooted language or not, because English to me is an Indian language, always has been the case. But, the English language poetry scene in India is so fractured that it is almost disheartening, to the point of exasperation, really. Putting this book together, is perhaps, a gesture, to provide some peace and calm and salve. But ultimately, I do it for the wider cause of poetry.

Akshaya Kumar: One of the advantages of reading Sudeep Sen's anthologies is that he provides a very lucid and extended introduction or 'Foreword', which he terms as 'Contexts'. Each such prefatory note, in itself, speaks of his critical acumen, and can be read as an important resource for writing literary history. In *Converse*, Sudeep takes a long shot at the history of anthologies that have come right from *Dutt Family Album* onwards. He refers to various anthologies which have been compiled in the recent past. Sudeep, what do you think about the sudden spurt in anthologies of Indian English poetry?

Sudeep Sen: I am happy to see the spate of anthologies that have come out recently. It allows a wide variety of poets to be showcased, and allows the reader to really choose. The more there is out there, the more you have an opportunity to discern.

Akshaya Kumar: Designing an anthology needs to have some governing principle. When you do *Converse*, mere seventy fifth year of India's Independence can never be the only reason. So, when you put these poets together in one volume, do you have some overarching design, or overarching theme so to say? Are these poets being clubbed together because they have been writing prolifically all these years?

Sudeep Sen: Every anthology would have a very, very essential kind of tissue formation, the DNA is very important in any structure.

Poetry is not scrutinized in a critical way, like we scrutinize cricket for instance. Everybody is such an expert on Indian cricket, every missed cue, every leg lance, every little fielding lapse is deconstructed, in every home, across the country. Poetry on the other hand is the opposite. So, it's very important to deconstruct poetry, to see what is living, because no poem is dead. When you pick up a poem, whether it's by a dead poet or living poet, if a poem is working, it's like a microorganism that is living. It's like an algae that keeps moving, and you can't stop it, because it does something to you. That's the magic of poetry.

So yes, all these anthologies had a sort of reason and impetus. When I look back, I am kind of astonished at how many I have done. I have done almost fifteen anthologies, by which I also mean special issues of magazines which are on Indian poetry or South Asian poetry. And, truth be told, I take it up purely because it's my weak point, my Achilles heel.

When I was commissioned to do *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry*, it was the sixtieth anniversary of Indian independence. The years don't really matter in terms of poetry, it's not important — but of course, it gives the publisher a reason for publishing. My impetus for putting together an anthology then was to showcase the excitement and ebullience that I saw in the poetry

firmament in India. Some years later I did another important anthology for the Sahitya Akademi., it was the *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* — and acted as Volume 2 of the HarperCollins one. When I was commissioned to do *Converse*, I already had these two big anthologies that had done really well. I looked at both of them and I asked myself, “Who are the people who deserve to be in this new one?” The answer was, “There are lots of poets who are good poets, but who haven’t really written in the last fifteen years significantly. Maybe they need to be given a rest, and others who were part of the larger team, to use a cricket analogy — those who are playing really well in the Ranji Trophy, but haven’t got a chance in the Indian Test Team — should be given a chance.”

You will find, therefore, that some who are not in it, are people who are significant names in literature, but have gone on to write novels or are doing other things. Very little poetry is coming from them, I don’t feel the burden that their older work should be here. The flurry of good younger writers now is just astonishing. And this is perhaps because the access and width of the platforms have broadened — it is not just print, but also performance, and it is on various platforms — social media, and so on. Personally, I do not hierarchize a printed volume over the others. I read poetry on Instagram-Twitter-Facebook, I watch poetry films. There is a lot of very, very good work coming out that captures this new vibrancy. And so, I chose to feature only living poets — because this would allow a wider representation of active younger poets.

But at the end of the day, the only guiding principle for anybody to qualify to be in this book is the purity and quality of writing itself. Nothing else matters to me. Whether he or she is powerful, or is a friend of mine or not. None of these concerns matter. The only reason poets feature in *Converse* is because they have written good work.

Akshaya Kumar: When you talk about *guru-shishya parampara*, are you aware of the perils of *gharana* politics? There are many *gharanas* in Indian poetry.

Sudeep Sen: Sadly, that is true. The English-language poetry scene in India is completely fractured. I had hoped as a younger editor when I first started editing anthologies, things would change over time, but

unfortunately, they haven't improved. Quite the reverse in fact — that is the reality. Ironically, in contrast, the state of Indian English poetry itself is very strong, the best if it is very good indeed, and there is a lot of it — which is what you find in this book. I try and side-step the regional *gharanas* because I want the focus to be on good poems as a whole, not the poet's personality. And for me, all the poets in the book are equal — they are all my children. Jayanta Mahapatra who is born in 1928 is rubbing shoulders with the youngest poet (born in the 1995) in this book — isn't that wonderful? And both are there for the same reason, because of the quality of their writing.

I have visited Jayant Mohapatra in Orissa many times over the years. His address is charmingly old fashioned — Jayanta Mahapatra, Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack, Orissa. Send a mail to that address and it will reach him safely. I have spent many afternoons and evenings on his slanted mango tree, talking about poetry and life over endless cups of tea. I still cherish the sense of comradeship that came with it. The youngest poet in the book is someone I had a chance to mentor on a long train ride to Delhi. When I first knew her, she was starting out. By the time I was putting this book together, she had published her first book of poetry by a very fine press in London. These are the two poets who book-end the *Converse* anthology.

Akshaya Kumar: Can you name some of the *gharanas*? It should not be very difficult to identify them.

Sudeep Sen: It is an open secret. Traditionally, it's been topographically mapped. There is the "Bombay School." It's not a school really, but for historical reasons, certain areas of India had clusters of poets, who in terms of numbers were much more than those in the other parts of India. Bombay was probably number one in terms of numbers. Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, and various others, Hyderabad for instance, had a loose conglomeration of poets. Then there are two other very interesting non-metropolitan centres. One is Orissa, and that largely happened because of Jayanta Mahapatra and his tutelage. And the other is the North-East, which often gets left out -- there again there is this sort of micro climate of poetry that exists independently. The poetry there is quite different, though in a holistic sense it merges with the larger Indian poetry scene.

And then, for the first time — in various journals I’ve guest-edited: *Lines Review* (Scotland), *Wasafiri* (UK), *Literary Review* (USA), *The Yellow Nib* (Ireland) and others — culminating in *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (1992), I opened the whole anthology-making tradition to include the diasporic Indian poetry as well. Not just people from India who happen to have settled overseas in later years, but people of Indian origin who may have been born overseas. So, I included poets from say, the South Pacific, Fiji. I have travelled to many of these places — on the back of my poetry. I was invited to a festival, for instance, in South Africa, and because I am interested as an editor, I bought books by diasporic poets and brought them home. Over the years that aggregation is what has made these anthologies rich and diverse.

So yes, the old “gharanas” are there, but I find the divisive idea of that very unattractive. They work more like coteries and have no allegiance to a *parampara* or tradition. Personally, I don’t believe in clubs, cliques and hierarchies. I do not believe in boxed rooms. I like airy spaces which have transparent walls, which can breathe through osmosis, because poetry actually travels that way. You have to defragment (to use a computer jargon), to get the energy back. I believe in inter-racial-hierarchical mixing.

Akshaya Kumar: Since you’ve referred to Jayanta Mahapatra — Mahapatra himself says somewhere that because he was published abroad to begin with, that he received some audience back home. When one reads the biographies or bio-notes of the poets here, the same impression is buttressed. Some of these poets have been published, of late, by Sahitya Akademi, but most of them are recognized abroad first, and then these poets are anthologized back in India for some native approval.

Sudeep Sen: Doesn’t that say something about us, as Indians? I mean, the answer lies in your question really, and I don’t have to add anything. Just because someone has published in some obscure magazine abroad, is it the reason that their poetry is better than someone who has published in India? -- Of course not.

Overseas, in the US and UK at least, there is some degree of process in how books are published. There are dedicated ‘poetry

editors' in major publishing houses. The poetry editors are usually reputed practicing poets. Some of them are given a limited tenure, so their editorial vision doesn't get stale. Then the editors may change. This is wonderful for the health of good and diverse poetry.

Often, the only way you can get a manuscript published with a really good publisher there, is based on the 'acknowledgements' list in your manuscript. If eighty percent of your manuscript is published in various publications, then the poetry editor knows that it's already gone through a sort of a sieve or a system of selection, because these editors of different journals and magazines are varied. So, if you can impress, say twenty different editors and have eighty percent of the manuscript already published, automatically the editor at the publishing house will take the submitted book very seriously. Therefore, the whole tradition of publishing widely, literary magazines, reading live at festivals, become important — because there you can expect to encounter people who are really watching and taking notes.

So, what can I say? I do not want to sound bleak, because despite everything, four or five anthologies have appeared this year. It is a source of great celebration and I think the reason that is happening is because younger people are braver and more willing to cross boundaries, despite the hierarchical structures.

Akshaya Kumar: In this particular anthology you refer to, as to who to include and who to exclude. That only the living poets become part of the book. How good is that rule to compile an anthology of this scale?

Sudeep Sen: That was purely partly a practical decision I had to take. When I set out to work on this book, we put out an open call, and received over 15000 pages of poetry in response. This was in addition to the poets I had personally invited to be part of the book. I wanted the book to reflect the live stream of energy I was encountering, and so the decision to go with only 'living poets,' I say very specifically in my introduction that some significant, well-published, senior poets are not in the book. These are poets who are well-mapped already and their work is easily available. So, if I have left out Nissim Ezekiel or Arun Kolatkar or A K Ramanujan, have I done any disservice? Not

at all, because they are already well anthologized over the years and are incredibly easy to find. I think I am doing a service by giving space to poets who are bright and who haven't had the space thus far.

Also, there are some very good poets who were in the HarperCollins book, who are not in this book. There is a very good reason. Some of those poets haven't produced any significant new poetry in the last fifteen years. Therefore, I haven't included them. They may come up with a better book or a new poetry book later on. If that's the case they'll be in the next anthology. It's not a race, you know. It's not a life and death situation. Poetry is something to be enjoyed, it's part of a living tradition. So, for many of the deceased poets (who I greatly admire) and who are not there in *Converse*, I have tried to ensure that I liberally use epigraphs of their poetry in my introduction to mark their presence.

Akshaya Kumar: Death is not something you can hold against somebody. After all, if you are publishing a book for commemorating seventy-fifth year of India's independence, I mean I am not talking about the other living poets, but poets like Meena Alexander, A. K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, etc. happen to be the frontline poets of post-Independent India. How can one not include them in an anthology which has the claims of being 'definitive'?

Sudeep Sen: Many of the poets you mention are in my HarperCollins book. I do believe they are very fine poets. You can't hold me accountable for a publishing house's marketing spiel. Of course, they are going to say definitive, most intelligent, the best — but any discerning reader knows that is just a marketing strategy. Of course, it is not the "the" definitive anthology, which is why I continue to endorse other anthologies that have come out this year or last year. It's been such a wonderful thing that multiple anthologies have come out in recent times. And frankly, no matter which anthology you show me, I can make a credible argument why it is not 'definitive.' I think 'informative' would be a better word. The anthologies inform us about the movement in Indian poetry. I would say, just rejoice in what is there to savour.

Akshaya Kumar: Those who have read Sudeep's poetry will find that in any case when he writes, he doesn't write all alone. There are

epigraphs of poets from different continents and different nations that precede many poems or are placed in the beginning of a new section of a book. As he writes his poetry, he orchestrates world poetry to his advantage. There is always a lurking anthologist in Sudeep's poetry.

One of ways to anthologize poems is to put poems under some thematic rubric. The general rubrics have been 'love poems', 'green poems', 'peace poems' etc. What do you say about such anthologies?

Sudeep Sen: Thematic anthologies are a different beast. That was not what I set out to do. I wanted to do a book that was representative of the time(s). I look at anthologies from a practicing poet's lens, so my duty is not that of an academic or a critic who may wish to do anthologies under certain themes. For instance, in the last two years, there have been way too many anthologies on climate change, perhaps because it is topical or trendy. What about everything else that is important? — those tends to get edited out in thematic anthologies.

I have tried to make the *Converse* anthology different in subtle and nuanced ways. The book exhibits the poems from the oldest to the youngest. So, you can see the poetry change over time, and also see the poetry at a point in time. I have chosen to publish between five to twelve poems by each poet, which is again unusual. I want any reader who reads the book to get some sense of what each poet is all about. The norm in other anthologies has been to feature just two or three poems per poet — and the problem with two or three poems is, often, that the same poems get recycled in every anthology.

Another effort I made was to resurrect some work that was out of print. And make space for long poems. In anthologies, long poems are almost never published, because of the nature of anthology making and the market forces — there is just no space to include them. For instance, Adil Jussawalla's 'Chakravyuha' is in *Converse*. It has never been published before, you know? He wrote it as a commission for Channel Four television in the UK. Subsequently extracts were published here and there, but not the whole poem. He wryly said, "Sudeep, publish this at your own peril. Publishers won't commission you again because one poem has eaten up twenty-five pages of the book." I replied, saying, "It does not matter."

Similarly, I found some work by another poet, Tanya Mendonsa — who had written this wonderful, fable like, book-length poem, ‘The Fisher of Perch’, that was published by a small press. I thought the poem was so brilliant that it ought to have a full run in a book like this. So, the entire poem spanning over 15 pages is there in *Converse*. I told her, “I am only choosing one poem by you ... but it is going to be this long poem.” She said, “I would have preferred six shorter poems.” I said “It is your choice. Either six poems or one poem — and I prefer the long poem.” She later thanked me for my selection.

There has also been an effort to do things innovatively. Anybody who reads the book will see that. There is a lot of interesting internal architecture and musicality that resonates within the book. A *terza rima* poem is sitting next to a *ghazal*, fragmented Sapphic verse is sitting next to a tightly-wrought *canzone*, and so on. I had to read very deeply as you can see. The selection took many hours of re-reading every submitted poem.

Akshaya Kumar: My next question springs from your answer. In this age of anthologies, what is the future of book-length poems? Don’t you think that the poem-centric anthologies supersede book-length poems?

Sudeep Sen: I think there is a great future for book-length poems. Any serious reader of poetry reads poetry without any stipulated rules, as you well know. You look at Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, it is a book-length poem. His *Tiepolo’s Hound* is a book-length poem. Joseph Brodsky’s *To Urania* is a book-length poem. Michael Madhusudan Dutt has written book-length poems. Arun Kolatkar has written book-length poems. Mahapatra has written a book length poem (which won him the Sahitya Akademi prize) — *Relationships*, which is now being re-published, fortunately. Your own favourite book of mine, before I ever met you, was my book-length poem, *Distracted Geographies*.

I was a young poet then, and I came across one of your books *Poetry, Politics and Culture* published by Routledge, and there was a whole chapter in that book on my *Distracted Geographies*. I was relatively young when I had written this long poem, which takes place over two hundred and six pages. Reason it takes place over two

hundred and six pages is because there are two hundred and six bones in the human body. And the guiding principle for the structure of the book was the human spinal cord. Since there are thirty-three sections of the spinal cord, so there are thirty-three chapters in that book. You wrote a chapter on this book before I ever met you. That's how poetry should be read. Read the text first, if you like it, that is what matters — the person who has written can be discounted. If this person happens to be a nice guy, or you get to know him, great — that is a bonus. So yes, long poems have been a part of the poetic tradition. It still exists, very much so.

Akshaya Kumar: That is true. The question is that these days anthology is a very handy kind of a pedagogical tool also. Accommodating a long-poem within the limits of an anthology is difficult. Parthasarathy's 'Homecoming' or Mahapatra's 'Relationships' or Kolatkar's 'Jejuri' are difficult to fit in within the scope of any anthology.

Sudeep Sen: The length of any poem does not deter me. I take my decisions based on the merit of the poem. Including long poems in this anthology is one of the barriers in anthology-making that I was breaking. I have also included concrete or visual poetry, poems that are very difficult to set up typographically. It is a nightmare for a typesetter. If I find a poet who has taken interesting liberties with typography, how do you represent those poems? So, the first thing the publisher tells me is, "Drop that poem. Let's just get left-aligned poems." These are things you fight for, because you want to show variety, diversity, and representation of the different kinds of things that are being done.

Akshaya Kumar: There is a balancing act somewhere. You tend to choose poets from different rubrics, different clusters, and you keep repeating this thing that it is 'inclusive', and that I have tried to give representation to all *gharanas* or non-*gharanas*, or whatever else.

Sudeep Sen: Yes, you also do want to represent fairly — that is part of making a good anthology. If it was just a book of five poets, then my choices would be very clear who I would want. If you have a very small number of poets in a book, you could make a really cutting-edge, tight anthology — maybe even a maximum of twenty poets.

Now if you are making that kind of anthology, if that is the publisher's brief, it'll be a great thrill to do it. Only twenty people to be selected from the entire history of Indian poetry. But in *Converse* we were looking for a wider representation that does justice to the last 75 years and the present time.

Akshaya Kumar: You say that in your anthologies, including the present one, poetry precedes the poet. What matters to you is the quality of the poem more than the reputation of the poet. So, can you shortlist five poems which you think are one, two, three, four, five, as per your standards? I know it would be difficult to commit to four-five poems.

Sudeep Sen: I am afraid, I won't fall for that question. Instead, I will read just two poems — the first and the last. I will read one by Jayanta Mahapatra — who starts the book. It is a fairly iconic poem, ageless, — this is what the best poems are all about. It is called 'Dawn at Puri':

Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.

White-clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives
awaiting to enter the Great Temple.

Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith.

The frail early light catches
ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another,
a mass of crouched faces without names,

and suddenly breaks out of my hide
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre
that fills my aging mother:

her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like the light
on the shifting sands.

Now, let me read the last poem in the book, by the youngest poet in *Converse*. This is a young person writing, ostensibly, about shoes. But it is talking about so many other things — about exile, about language, about moving from one land to the other, about being taken abruptly from a warm Punjabi-Himachali space into a cold Irish space, where slippers-and-barefoot existence is simply not available.

It's been a good discussion, and we do not want to spoil the beauty of poetry by too much analysis or explanation. Let us end with a poem by Supriya Kaur Dhaliwal, who was born in 1995. And it is called 'Reading Natalia Ginzburg in East Cork':

Words fail me often and so do shoes.
I always keep a pair ready, polished

in an empty suitcase like an air ticket
without a return date purchased on a whim.

I wear them only on uncomfortable occasions.
For when I am feeling most comfortable, I long

for the worn-out sneakers I have been wearing
every day for hundreds of days;

trusting them the most to keep my feet warm
and dry, to keep my gait pronounced

like an athlete's or a ballerina's. It is too much
to ask for, perhaps from something lifeless

summoned by all the burdens of the living.
At the edge of this forest and the tree-lined

avenues of the city where I have not yet
been able to go — reside some little virtues

and there, we can ask for everything
that the heart needs and there, we will

know that it would have been the best
if we came in our most worn-out shoes.

Akshaya Kumar: When you read this anthology, you are overwhelmed by the poetic talent particularly of the emerging younger poets. The natural ease with which a variety of emotions are expressed in the so-called ‘father-tongue’ English is simply remarkable. Diverse poetic forms — native, non-native — are practiced. Sudeep himself has written haiku, sonnets and quatrains. Agha Shahid Ali mastered the art of *ghazal* in English. He was a pioneer of English ghazal poetry as you know. In Converse, there are poets writing ghazals now with greater felicity. Let me take the liberty of reading one such, the opening four couplets from ‘A Ghazal for Peace’ by a young poet Mihir Chitre on Twitter, and the culture of trolls and fake-news that it perpetuates:

Empathy has just died on Twitter.
We have violently lied on Twitter.

They, who’re targeted today,
Your retweet is their cyanide on Twitter.

Lynching anyone with a dagger of accusations
Truth is often mystified on Twitter.

A lifetime reduced to 140 characters
Nuance commits suicide on Twitter. ...

Sudeep, since you have covered poets of the last 75 years, do you notice remarkable changes in the way younger poets deal with issues of religion, culture and nationalism? For instance, I read this anthology as a solid and unambiguous testament of non-

parochialism. Or this anthology can be read as the locus of India's cultural journey towards a more cosmopolitan and planetary future. To what extent have the poets experimented with the traditional forms of poetry?

Sudeep Sen: Not just experiment, I think new poets have been making new forms with wonderful exuberance. For instance, to cite a personal example, there is a poem of mine called 'Bharatnatyam Dancer'. It uses a form which never existed before — I invented the form. The story behind it is this: When I was watching a particular dancer dance to a particular *raga*, the *taal* and *bol* that were being used was — *ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta, ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta, ...* So, when I was working on the later drafts of this poem, it struck me that I could use that as the rubric for the structure. So, I invented a rhyme scheme — *abacca, abacca, ...* to match and mimic the dancer's classical beats. Now in books of prosody, this poem is cited as an example of a newly invented form. There are others I have invented too, like in the poem 'New York Times', and for the book-length poem 'Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent'.

Akshaya Kumar: And I have ventured to translate some of these poems into Punjabi.

Sudeep Sen: Yes, indeed. A book of my English poems in Punjabi translation, titled *Godhuli Lagna*, has come out as well. Can you imagine the challenge of translating these formal structures into Punjabi? Because a lot of my work is formally very strict, even though it may ostensibly appear as free verse. One of the poets I have admired is Gerard Manley Hopkins who is a master of half rhymes and internal rhymes, and formal experimentation.

So, it's not easy, but I think you did a very fine job. The translation project was, coincidentally, prompted in this particular hall where I had done a talk/reading and a workshop with young students. There were some people who wrote in Hindi or Punjabi, and I told them, "You don't have to be an English language poet to come to my workshop. Just be a poet." So, people who came, wrote

in Punjabi, Hindi, and English. Then some of the students started translating my poetry into Punjabi, and eventually, more than a decade later, under your tutelage, this new book of my 'Selected Poems' saw light of day. The book, apart from your fine critical introduction, also has a wonderful Foreword and Afterword by the illustrious Punjabi poet Surjit Patar and theatre director Neelam Mansingh, respectively. What a pleasing and fulfilling journey poetry can be.

(This is an edited version of a live conversation that took place in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 26 November, 2022)

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Sudeep Sen's [www.sudeepsen.org] is one of the leading international poets whose prize-winning books include: *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Rain, Aria* (A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Vintage: Penguin Random House), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms* (Bloomsbury) and *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (Pippa Rann, 2021-22 Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize winner). He has edited influential anthologies, including: *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (editor), *World English Poetry*, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi), and *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* (Pippa Rann). *Blue Nude: Ekphrasis & New Poems* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize) and *The Whispering Anklets* are forthcoming. Sen's works have been translated into over 25 languages. His words have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Herald*, *Poetry Review*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Outlook*, *India Today*, and broadcast on BBC, PBS, CNN IBN, NDTV, AIR & Doordarshan. Sen's newer work appears in *New Writing 15* (Granta), *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Leela: An Erotic Play of Verse and Art* (Collins), *Indian Love Poems*

(Knopf/Random House/Everyman), *Out of Bounds* (Bloodaxe), *Initiate: Oxford New Writing* (Blackwell), and *Name me a Word* (Yale). He is the editorial director of AARK ARTS, editor of *Atlas*, and currently the inaugural artist-in-residence at the Museo Camera. His professional photography is represented by ArtMbassy, Rome [<http://www.artmbassy.com/artists.html>]. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for “outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature.” Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read at the Nobel Laureate Festival.

