



In Conversation with Amlanjyoti Goswami

(This is an edited version of a conversation conducted on-stage with poet Amlanjyoti Goswami in the auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 31 March, 2023)

Akshaya Kumar: As academics we have this propensity to place poets into brackets. In fact, we feel emancipated if are able to pigeonhole the poets into some ready-made templates or epistemes of canon. Some poets are labelled as spiritualists, some as romanticists, some as modernists, and some as experimentalists, so on and so forth. When I read your *River Wedding*, I tried to map the universe within which you operate, knowing fully well that all mapping can be very tentative and porous, and that only some poems can fit in any kind of rubric, the others simply escape out. When I read the second collection, the recent one, *Vital Signs*, I abandoned the idea of dovetailing you into any given template. In the second collection, each poem has its own distinct trajectory. Each poem has its own grammar, so to say. Each poem has its context-specific mini play embedded in it. The only common thing about these poems is probably their innate playfulness. You create some degree of conflict, then the transitions are worked out. I found that these poems are about people, about places, about things, about seasons, about family, about trees. Would you like to assign a category, a working category for yourself as poet? What is your credo as a poet?

Amlanjyoti Goswami: I do a bunch of things generally in life, which have almost no relation to each other. I was conflicted about that initially from the lens of identity, because identity usually is about stereotypes, is about fitting in, it's about adjustment and so on. Till of course I read about pluralities, and I discovered the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa many years ago. That was very liberating for me. Heteronyms for Pessoa were not just pseudonyms. They were distinct personalities in themselves. Pessoa had at least four very notable heteronyms who were independent poets in themselves. There was

Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos and Ricardo Reis, and Fernando Pessoa himself, among another fifty odd lesser-known heteronyms. Now of course Pessoa's universe was very contained in itself and came from a particular historical age. These heteronyms would also fight each other, in their own parallel universe. They would fight over girlfriends. All kinds of interesting things were going on. There was *The Book of Disquiet*, I think, and also heteronyms turned up in his collected poems. But yeah, it was very interesting for me to see that the same poet has at least four poetic personas, all of whom are independent in themselves and can qualify as distinct poets. Jose Saramago has a novel where he brings in Ricardo Reyes as a character. It's called *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*.

So, coming back to the question of where I see myself. If I use Harold Bloom's idea of "anxiety of influence," I suffer less anxiety of influence now, but maybe ten years ago the idea of breaking out of established molds was very clear to me. Now I am trying to break out of my own mold. I look at my first book *River Wedding*, which like first love remains very precious to me. But after a few years since the publication of that book, I have also discovered that the person who wrote *River Wedding* (fortunately or otherwise) seems different from the person who wrote *Vital Signs*. Even if there are commonalities as there would be, perhaps it is also a journey in the poet's own growth. In terms of subjects or themes taken up, and maybe a certain maturity of writing.

But to be honest with you, these are only two books. I have not written much. I have only written two books. I have been writing poetry for about twenty odd years. For fifteen years I didn't publish anything because I didn't feel the need to. I write poetry because I really love it. It makes my day. When I don't read or write good poetry, I feel something is missing from my life, and therefore a gaping hole in my life has been filled by poetry. It has given me healing. It is extremely gratifying for me to know that people who read some of this work also find some meaning, find some fragments in my poetry which they find interesting. Which I feel is very interesting because I did not write for any particular person. If it makes some sense to them, these are great rewards, and these rewards are unthinkable when you are writing the poem.

AK: You used this word “disquiet,” and you insist that you are not one persona but many. But there is one word that dominates throughout your poetry—quiet or quietude. So, does that also not in a way pre-empt you from writing poetry which could be poetry of dissonance or poetry of protest? “Quiet” is writ large in *Vital Signs*, almost every second-third poem has this word “quiet.” Of course, a poem follows its own trajectory; you create that inner conflict. But there is a quietness that envelops everything. What is this propensity?

AG: Possibly because, I mean, it could be that poetry gives me satisfaction, so it’s coming out in a way. Maybe it’s actually very fulfilling and maybe the fulfillment is achieved through the page which itself becomes a limiting factor. But what you say could well be true, if we go back all the way to poetic traditions. Whenever my mind is cluttered and I need clearing, I go back to haiku, because that is where I began to read the oldest haiku poets. But, back to this quiet thing you say. I could have written some protest poetry as well, if you can call that protest poetry. But instead of a label of protest poetry, I would rather be able to convey an element of protest in a manner that is not obvious or blunt and boring. I am able to convey a feeling of protest in less predictable ways, so to speak. I think there is a poem in *Vital Signs* about this policeman, “To you bottled up in uniform.” It’s not a poem that I intended to read today. It might answer your question on why my stuff is not so loud. Here’s “To you bottled up in uniform”

It is not always
you get to decide
the colour of the street.

Choose wise
then tell others why,
You prefer the gates

Open, not shut (I know)
And why the girl offering a rose
was doing the right thing

And why sometimes, it is all right
To look away.
Sometimes, do ask

Why we are all here
And what made you
Pull the writer's shirt

And drag him away
When he was just giving
Another lesson from history.

Your uniform will wear out by end of day
And you will once again
Become father, mother, brother

Watching TV, wondering silent why
It came to this
And why that man on the screen

With face just like you,
Angry, baton wielding, must be
Someone else.

AK: Somewhere you write that “night’s silence is louder than the day’s chatter”. There is this yearning towards quietude. *Vital Signs* is all about the matter. Silence is metaphysics, matter is the humdrum. How do you reconcile the two?

AG: They have to go together. For me metaphysics is not “I wander lonely as a cloud.” For me metaphysics is a tulsi plant outside the house, and next to the plant is a lit earthen lamp. That to me is a metaphysical way of getting there. In other words, it has to go through matter. I recognize that I will always fail because for me everybody in academia seems to be Lacanian. I am in that sense not a pure Lacanian, let’s put it that way. I am more Deleuzian.

So, for me there is a whole world outside language which I cannot convey through language. What I am doing on a page is trying to put

together fragments of a much larger universe which is beyond language. In that sense verbal forms include poetry, and poetry is the closest words come to getting into the heart of the matter. Verbal forms are always limiting in that sense. You have said dance will convey something else. A painting does something more. When do we prefer a painting over a movie, a motion picture? And then there is music, which is also non-verbal. So, there are elements which are outside language, which the word cannot capture. Walter Pater once said, "All art aspires to a condition of music."

Call it *Nirguna*, call it whatever. In that sense it is an acknowledgement of the limitations of the word itself. If you look at these letters on a page, dressed as a poem, as scatterings. Scatterings across slightly larger universe where non-verbal components are much wider. Perhaps that might explain why there is this quietude. This could also be an acknowledgement that I am not good at explosive poetry. Maybe I haven't tried it out. Maybe the stuff I have read doesn't appeal to me in the same way. But it is not to say that I don't want to write poetry which is also a form of protest, and so on. I think there are strands of that coming out. What is it that you mean when you mean protest poetry? When somebody's a protestor, what do you mean? Protesting against whom? Is it all unidimensional? No. So, can I in some way convey the multi-dimensional aspects of even protest in a manner that makes sense to me?

AK: You used this phrase "anxiety of influence" that Harold Bloom brought this into critical circulation. But why should one be so reticent about influence? Is influence not to be disclosed in that sense? You refer to Ghalib, you refer to Ginsberg, to other poets, and to painters as well. You refer to streetlights that look like Van Gogh's sunflowers. Many traditions—verbal and non-verbal—from across the continents seem to provide intertextuality to your poetic fabric. So, what is your 'poetic lineage', if I may use this expression, to ask you about the influences you have had?

AG: I'll come back to anxiety. I feel that there is less anxiety of influence when you are more in control over what you're doing. So, when I mean anxiety, I mean fifteen years ago. When you are trying to figure out what is good and you are writing lot of what is called

juvenilia. But you are trying to figure it out, you don't want to write derivative work. The interesting thing is that my introduction to poetry came primarily through translation. Which is why, I think it is different from the general English poetry in India. So, translation from largely initially European modernists, 20th century modernists. People like Pessoa. Then there was the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. There is an Italian tradition with Cesare Pavese and so on. Then of course the Japanese masters starting from the Haiku tradition (Basho, Issa and Shiki) right down to the 20th century post modernists like Shuntaro Tanikawa. Among Indians I would put Arun Kolatkar in the same kind of category, because he comes from a very bilingual tradition.

So, in other words, while I was writing in English, it failed to touch me initially, at least typical English poetry including twentieth century poetry, and this was a big problem because it was as if the poetry is thrown at you in school, in early college, and yet you can't connect. The kind of things you want to write about or what you write about, you don't see in poetry. And therefore, you ask that question, is this poem okay? Of course, now I feel, yeah whatever I do will be okay or not okay, doesn't matter. But at that time, it does matter, and you don't have enough people to say that this is okay. So, in that sense my discovery of writing in English did not happen through English poetry and didn't happen through American poetry. I think I got a kindred connection in Irish poetry but not Yeats, but Seamus Heaney first, and after Heaney there were others thankfully, because Heaney was also becoming too Latin for me. There were people who were from the same generation—Derek Mahon, Paula Meehan and so on. And of course, I had a great early mentor in Pradip Acharya, who understands poetry better than most people around.

I found Derek Mahon a great solace because he was writing about everyday concerns. Very typical everyday things. And to me in my own personal development as a person, the idea of everyday was becoming and has become more and more important. The commonplace has become very important. Whether it's a sense of place or a sense of time. The idea of this moment, this time, this talking, this listening, is perhaps to me the most important thing. In other words, poetry as a way of happening as opposed to poetry

makes nothing happen. I think there is no anxiety of influence as you can see it. There is none. But to say that I did not have those kinds of issues, questions at one point, would not be true. And frankly, whether there is a forum or not, there are not enough people to answer your questions.

When you are a young poet, you want to ask questions, you want to know how to publish, you want to know what to do. Is this okay? So, then you have to be really kind of, either pig-headed about it, or you really must be a little ‘off’ frankly. To say that I want to still do this and let’s see where it takes me. That’s why I am saying you have to love it; it has to be fun for you. It has to be playful. Because otherwise if you say I am climbing a mountain, you finally realise there is no mountain. But at that time, you think *mera pehla kitab kab niklega?* And then you are wondering *mera kitab toh nikal hi nahin raha, koi lega hi nahin, mujhe koi janta bhi nahin hai*, etcetera, etcetera. So that is the anxiety part and I guess some of it is voiced out to elite circles of poetry I have steadfastly kept away from.

AK: Was Kolatkar not a part of this circle?

AG: Even if he was, his bilingualism enabled him to transcend it. Remember he was also an ad man. Even *Jejuri’s* jackets he meticulously designed. The original Pras Prakashan publication in colours of rust and yellow.

AK: And interestingly Penguin did not publish it.

AG: In fact, Kolatkar refused to sign a contract. He said, “I can’t trust anybody.” So, in that sense what is the gatekeeping process? See, this gatekeeping culture is actually redundant, because the gates don’t matter. Only when there are gates should there be a gatekeeper. When you say the gates don’t matter, and frankly, online has really helped broaden the reach. It’s postmodern, yeah? Because you don’t know what is good poetry, because it’s entirely subjective in the hands of the editor. But it has also enabled publishing in journals, and because journals don’t have to factor in printing costs and all that ... online is very liberating. I have been liberated by online. By realizing that I

don't have to publish a book, I can simply send my poem anywhere. Somebody takes it, great. Somebody does not take it, too bad. It doesn't matter. It's not a reflection of myself. But it does sharpen your pencil, it does sharpen your mind, because you are thinking.

AK: Kolatkar famously wrote, "My pencil is sharpened on both the ends."

AG: Correct, correct. Thanks for that. It was subliminal.

AK: And also, Kolatkar was from J.J. School of Arts Bombay. He was also into painting.

AG: I think there is a strong visual sense in my poetry. I am trying to see if I can cultivate a strong aural sense which is from the ear. But, yes, they are very visual in nature. It is what it is. Paintings enable me to think in terms of images, and some paintings evoke strong images in me, and some of my poetry also appears as very visual. But it is an interesting idea you have given me, because maybe I should collaborate with painters.

AK: No, no, but there is a catch in this. If you are into ekphrasis then this in a way implies that experience is already mediated by something. So, instead of encountering life first-hand, you are using a painting for your poetic tale. So that way it becomes already once removed from the actual site of happening.

AG: But what isn't once removed? I am saying even text is mediated, no? If I am writing in language, it is itself a mediation. If as you say students have translated some of my poems into Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, that itself is a mediation, and maybe those poems are different from the original poems and there is no authenticity anyway. So, in that sense, I am not a votary of authenticity.

AK: But I am saying that in a way it becomes kind of a closed-circuit of various arts—painting, poetry, music. One is that you remain in that rarified zone of high art where one art talks to another art. The other is that you plunge into life.

AG: I think both go together in my work. Both go together. But I don't make a distinction in that sense. To me it's not as if painting is not a part of life. It is. So, life is not separate from a painting. There is life and then the painting is trying to do something. Like poetry. Poetry is not separate from life. It is a part of life. Life is also part of it. So that way the distinctions fade away. In other words, you could say I am very greedy. I take whatever I get, and if it evokes a poem, I will make it a poem. Whether I can make it a poem or not is not entirely up to me, so therefore one has to be humble. While I will be greedy and while I will be trying to make everything art, so to speak. Make everything new.

AK: In one poem you say, and whether that is autobiographical or not, but you say that "you could not paint anything on the canvas because for thirty years your teacher wanted you to look at the flowers only." So, are you making that deficit in the poetry?

AG: No, no. Actually, it's interesting. There is a poem called "Art Lessons" and it talks about my old art teacher and who recently passed away, and you know that was the time of those TV serials on Sunday mornings in the 1980s, Ramayana & Mahabharata. Sunday mornings were very important because you could watch TV in the morning on Doordarshan. There was Ek Do Teen Char, if you remember those days. So, for some reason my parents thought that I should also learn painting But, what we did was very interesting actually. The art teacher, Dhruba Deka said, "you don't have to paint at all, you don't have to draw at all. You just keep looking at this thing." It was a flower vase. For kids like me it was, "My goodness. I would rather play cricket." But later it came back to me, this idea of just presence. Modern painting being good or not being good, what was that? The idea that presence is what he was trying to cultivate. A kind of meditative sense of presence about things around you. That was what came back to me. But I don't make too much of a deal about it. If you see my third book, my next book, when it comes out, it may not have anything on paintings!

AK: You refer to lyrical narratives. I could see that these narratives have their own latent lyricism also. But the narrative that you build

is fairly descriptive. Do you think that a microscopic description has the possibility of sublimating itself to the level of poetry?

AG: Earlier I didn't. Now I absolutely do. Earlier this was my dilemma. I thought lyric and narrative are two different worlds, and I was paralysed because I wanted to write the perfect line. Till I discovered there is no perfect line. And the narrative was in the realm of stories, in the realm of novels. In the realm of you know, fiction and non-fiction. Our oral tradition in poetry is entirely narrative. You read right from our epics to also subaltern epics. Read Homer. These are nothing but oral narratives. You know sometimes I feel that this tyranny of the page is also a problem. You know, I feel sometimes this is because of technology, no? It has to be printed, or today when you have screens, it has to be on A4 size. So A4 gives you great discipline, you almost realize how you are writing. But at the same time imagine it as a scroll. You are opening a narrative epic. Look at Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh's paintings. Where you are telling a story or so many stories, which are all narratives, not one story. Look at the Persian masters, and you see that in the oral traditions. The bard, the minstrel was telling stories, and so in that sense why can't we? Perhaps, it is possible today, you never know. How the medium is also changing. So, you might say that if descriptivism is less poetic. Maybe that is what you are hinting at.

AK: Yes, it sublimates, and images cumulate and gather some kind of surcharge to culminate into a well-made poem.

AG: Which is why I have this idea; I can't call it a theory. This idea or theory of what I call *poetic momentum*. Poetic momentum is where at some point in the writing, the poem takes over. Takes over the poet. The description, the writing. It is not streams of consciousness. It is a sense of where the poem is a kind of achieved momentum. It's like driving at fourth gear, fifth gear ... the poem starts moving on its own, and it is not entirely wielded by the mind. And this is something that has happened with other genres as well. Novels do it. You ask short story writers about how do the characters start defining themselves? They say that the characters start doing their own thing, and after a while the novelist has to sit back and watch.

AK: You begin with some plot and after the fourth page the characters or metaphors begin to take their own course.

AG: So, in my case, it may start in a particular way. I put words to page, want to write in a particular way. But if it is going right, it is turning out to be completely different or unexpected by the time you are reaching the second page or third page. Which is why I feel that you should let the narrative unfold. Let it unfold.

AK: This is what happens in your poem “A Hundred Miles.” Some of the poems are written during the difficult times of Covid here. Would you read? That would make more sense. I find that there are steps—one step, two steps, three steps, and then finally it culminates into a poetical narrative.

AG: There is a subtle or not so subtle politics here. The context is obvious when I read it. It is called “A Hundred Miles,” which is a take on the song by the same name. It is my tribute to something I heard when I was a kid.

The room overflows
With people
Known, unknown.

They place their bundles
Silent, without a word.
Another hunches by the door, once in.

A third with a child, asks for milk
With silent eyes, words not spoken.
This is all quiet as a painting

The solemn dark of Amrita Shergill’s Three
Sisters.
The stark lines of Somnath Hore.
The moving bones of Zainul Abedin

But the images are stirring.
The door is unlatched

More come in.

They are asked: do you need anything?
Tables are removed, then chairs
Make room for hope.

No one is asking for tea or water.
They are just happy to be in.
No one asks where they are from, why they are
here

And what happened to them along the way.
All that later.
Right now, they are here

Noah's ark, a room with no view, no windows
The dark outside,
When four by four means forty.

AK: So, it takes a while, a step-wise incremental build-up, before you reach to "four-by-four means forty." There is a gradual incremental build up to it, a long cataloguing of images and impressions.

AG: But if you ask ... Did I think of that last line when I started? No. Am I responsible for that last line? Honestly humbly, no.

AK: There is this another important recurrent image of moon, or you may call it symbol. Moon is always a presiding kind of presence in the poetry and there are a number of poems where you leap forth into a new territory of the moon. Somewhere you say that you prefer to look upwards toward the moon because there is a lot of strife down below.

AG: So maybe it is more Thanks for telling me because it is not something I am very proud of myself. If there is too much of moon, maybe I am not living up to my own expectations.

AK: No, but this poem “The man on the tree.” reads good. Here again there is a sustained good description that creates a gradual build-up and then you lapse into some an epiphanic revelation of the ‘four-by-four means forty’ kind.

The man on the tree
Watches the moon.
He is looking for a way

To go back.
He is not certain
He will reach

Where he came from.
Now he is stuck in limbo
Cannot go higher, cannot come down

Lend me a hand,
The rest mock him.
Let me be, he pleads

The birds are coming for me.
They are feathered and mean
They believe in nothing

And when they flutter
A thousand illnesses
Creep upon you

Why are you up then?
Someone asked,
To jeers and cheers.

Because I cannot see a thing,
From below, he said.
Down there, only strife.

AG: There’s more. And then he says, what is there down below? We also have “neighbours and prying aunts/ ... and the stirring sunset.”

AK: And you have lot many poems about city strife. City is not your bastion and there is a propensity to look at city as a kind of a semi-hell, full of strife. But there are poems of your native town-scapes, full of nostalgia and very intimate reflections.

AG: I'll read a city poem which is a different kind of city poem. I am reading a part of "Bus Routes of Childhood."

Machkhowa: Fish eater.
Dighalipukhuri: Long pond. Not Silpukhuri: Stone pond.
Or Joorpukhuri: Twin ponds. Nak kata pukhuri: Chopped nose pond.
Ambari: Mango garden. Bharalumukh: Mouth of river.
Sharab Bhatti: Booze joint.
Adabari: Ginger garden. Near Jalukhari: Pepper garden.
Jorabat: Sticking ways. To the hills where the air turns cold.
Teeni aali: Three alleys. Saari aali: Four alleys.
Bijoynagar: Victory city. Swamped by the flood.
Barowari: Twelve came together (for a cause).
Pan Bazaar: Betal leaf bazaar. Books housed in childhood.
Aath gaon: Eight villages. Can't find any.
Puronigudam: Old godown. Near ma's place.
Palashbari: Garden of palash flowers. Dad's place.
Khatiamari: Where the deer was killed.
Santipur: Place of peace. Near a hospital, a football field.
Nagaon: Nine villages. Where ma comes from.

Bus routes of childhood. No place to sit, standing room only.
On the ledge, breeze on hair.
Travelling tomorrow with yesterday's eyes.
.....

Once upon a time, there was no city.
There were only dreams, gardens, a flower market.
And you still ask me, why do I like it so much?

As an aside, we were talking about, this poem was published in *The Poetry Review* in UK. I can tell you that the poem would not be published in an Indian publication today, and that's an irony. I don't know why it is.

AK: Why did it find a publisher there and not in India?

AG: I sent it to The Poetry Review because I thought it was a good poem. I felt it was a good poem, maybe it will find a resonance, but ...

AK: There is an element of exotica of childhood, of the folklore.

AG: I grew up like this. This is autobiography. What is folklore for someone else is reality for me.

AK: And this is what I am saying. That's why the UK press is interested and the Indian press is not?

AG: I feel that something is happening in poetry in UK right now, because people have been pushing at it for the last thirty forty years now against the white panchayat which rules British poetry.

AK: Why panchayat? It is some kind of an underworld.

AG: Underworld is where we are coming from. The white male panchayat has ruled for a while. Not that it matters. It doesn't matter. What has happened over the last twenty thirty years there? There has been so much of push from the edges in UK and certainly from performance poetry, which many people don't consider poetry. They say performance poetry is not poetry. I refuse to take that as true. Basically, because there has been so much of pushing, now finally the thing has broken. I feel that they are open to influences from outside typical English influences. Maybe less in conventional England though. You know the Irish keep publishing me, and I find

that very interesting. Another very nice thing there which I feel is lacking in Indian English poetry is that we don't have a journal culture. Poetry does not thrive in books; it thrives in a journal culture. It thrives in conversation; it thrives in notes that you circulate among people and so on. However small it is. It is not about how big or small it is.

AK: Are you referring to the seminal role of the little magazine movement in augmenting the cause of poetry?

AG: Yes, the little magazines. This is what keeps (and has kept) poetry alive. This is what I get the maximum kick out of. I don't get so much kick out of the book. The book is good because it has to survive; it has to go to the library. But it is the journal which keeps poetry alive. It is the journal which keeps you going every day.

I would not go by that senile theory that the city is this bad place, the city of early sixties or that the city is a place where the individual gets smothered. Individual versus the bad city. The capitalist machine so to speak. Mahanagar, all of that.

AK: You are into human settlements. I mean as a professional you are working with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements.

AG: I am into human settlements. I feel that caring about cities or caring about one's place in cities is about caring about neighborhoods, about habitats, about places where you live, and this is what you must celebrate. So, this idea of saying that there was this romantic idea of the rural and it was also very nice and all that. Politically you know it's not true. There's enough written on it. How exploitative it is. Just the city itself has so many contradictions. So, I feel that this dichotomy of rural versus urban, city as this big bad thing where the individual encounters the city. These things are very tried and tested truisms which I think are beginning to unravel, and my way of tackling that is to not look at *the City*, but look at places, locales inside a city. Yeah, there is an element of folklore there, I guess. Exotic, you are right. It is a right criticism, that okay we have all these fancy words, so for a foreigner it looks very fancy, exotic *ho gaya*.

AK: Could be.

AG: Maybe, maybe. But to me I didn't think of a foreign audience while writing this. I wrote a poem because I had to write a poem. I wrote a poem because I thought my "Bus Routes of Childhood" in an autobiographical form says something about the city, says something about things changing, and perhaps I could put in a manner which is different from how a poem is written and that is all there is to it.

AK: Not only in this poem but I could see a poem on food and all those things. There is this relentless cataloguing, you catalogue one food and rate it with some great, parallel kind of a universe. Is cataloguing another term for plural inheritances? Or what is it?

AG: Kolatkar has this great poem—that alphabet catalogue if you remember. It is nothing but a catalogue. Does a catalogue mean just writing words down? The question is, is this a poem? And I am saying that this question is an irrelevant question, and the more one asks the question, "Is this is a poem?" *Yeh Kavita hai? Yeh kya hai?* I think you are missing the experience of having read something. Even novels are becoming descriptive, different from the way novels were written earlier. Novels are experimenting a lot these days with form, with structure, with meaning.

AK: Yes, I do recollect the opening lines from Kolatkar's "The Alphabet": "anvil arrow bow box and brahmin/ cart chariot and compost heap/ ..." African writers also use alphabets rather ingenuously. Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa* is one instance of the creative deployment of alphabets. Even in medieval Punjabi *sufi* poetry of Bullel Shah *siharphi* (golden alphabet) is a well-known form of versification.

AG: Yeah. Modern English poets are also bringing such practices of oral tradition. So, novels are not looking like novels anymore. Poetry has had the prose poem form for so many years. So, in that sense the genre itself is changing. Instead of asking: is it a poem or is it not a poem, perhaps we move out of that bracket. But if you say that it is just cataloguing, then it may well be valid criticism...

AK: No, but cataloguing is not to be held down. Creative cataloguing also builds up the poetic climax.

AG: Cataloguing alone is not enough. What is it doing? It has to do something. If it is not doing something then it ends up as mere description. If my cataloguing is not doing it, it is a weakness in my poetry which I am happy to understand and say that yes, it cannot be entirely only a catalogue.

AK: So, as I said this childhood poem that you refer to was *exotica*. Now there is a poem called “Tropical Vocabulary” which you write, and which is, I am using kind of a cliché term, kind of a postcolonial poem. You are saying that your vocabulary is deliberately monosyllabic and not heavily worded. When I read your collection, it is very simply worded.

AG: I think that’s intentional. I’ll read out “Tropical Vocabulary,” because I feel very strongly about this poem. Many of us may have felt the same way in high school.

X, used heavy words to crush spirits.
Think *contumacious*, or *concatenation* or on better
days, *serendipity*.
One day I took my 6/10 to my father who liked
words
To be light as a feather, who knew his Lawrence
and Shakespeare.

Then there was Y, who wanted to crush the
imagination.
Didn’t want young birds to fly on a wing.
Who said: cut one’s cloth as it fits
That there was no better way to pass the
examination of life.

But I was lucky.
My father told me – not to worry, not to cram those
notes

With words that spell empire, the long arm of it.
That the marks on the page, were sorry reminders
of its long tail.

The sun that set long ago while some went on
believing.
Or my father's – PA – who told me *take it easy*,
clinking a glass.
He said: write a page on Eliot: *some say the world
will end in fire,*
Some say in ice. This was language, its beauty,
how you held it

Against the autumn sun
No more tooth-breaking words from the guy at
school.
I wish I remembered more, but the bone crunchers
evade my knuckles
They are to be seen, not remembered.

And so it is.
I have made a calling of stringing words on a high
wire.
They dangle simple as a sentence. They have
power.
They have long tails. They bite.

So as is obvious, you know, the ability to use very difficult words seems to characterise our vocabulary and we get marks for it. I have also been a victim of such a school experience, of such a system so to speak. But thankfully I've grown up near people with cultural capital. My father, Robin Goswami, has been a professor of English Literature. He retired as the Head of Department of Cotton College in Guwahati which is now a university. He taught English for thirty-five years but he never pushed anything at me at all. He's very surprised that I write poetry (Everyone laughing). So, he has a strange anxiety of influence. (Everyone laughing). In reverse, with my own father who I can never impress, and who also doesn't want to be

impressed, and who is very surprised that of all things, “Goodness, *tu bas Kavita likhta hain?*”

AK: And this is despite your being an alum from Harvard.

AG: But that is why I am saying that this identity business has never been so appealing to me, because the minute you ask this question of who I am, it's a limiting question. Then you will limit what you do. Whereas if you do what you do, then *kisi aur ko kya bolna ki kaun hain aap?*

AK: Most of the people who I meet from the Department of Laws are full of esoteric and a very different kind of language. How do you keep this law-lingo out of your poetic vocabulary? Do you consciously filter out the jargon of law?

AG: I have thought about it at times. It is not about identity as much as how do these traditions influence each other. The legal tradition is a strong written tradition, a very logical tradition. It has its elements of rhetoric but logic is the leitmotif. Things have to come together, so perhaps this has also helped me. And law does enable a certain conciseness of thought, a certain discipline of thinking which is good generally. When does it become a problem? It becomes a problem when logic takes over and logic becomes an end in itself. It throttles imagination, it throttles spirit, it throttles feelings because these are considered ‘external’. All that matters is the case, the evidence produced. So, I approach law as a disciplining tradition. And it is a written tradition largely. I also studied sociology. So, sociology as you know called itself a social science. The idea that you have to call something social science as opposed to humanities means that you're already on to get the legitimacy of the sciences. So, it is empiricism. You have scientific methods, techniques, all that stuff.

Now, today we are beset, and I think humanities in general, Literature included, Political Science, History and questions of method are coming in, are beset with this obsession of being empirically correct to such an extent that it has almost become correlation and regression. In some Political Science departments in America, ethics and principles are no longer taught. It's mostly correlation and regression,

all mathematics. It's quantitative, it's entirely mathematical. So, I think there is this one thing in my poems. There is a very strong anti-empiricist thought in it. So even matter is not matter because you can't measure it and put it inside a test tube and you can't say this is matter because I can see it, I can feel it.

You are Literature and Cultural Studies students, so I don't need to explain this to you. But I think there is a sense that the minute you step out of this auditorium, step out into other worlds, as I think we all must, you will feel it. I honestly feel that my own work will improve the more I step into other worlds which I have no clue of. Which are possibly antithetical to me. So, in other words reading a good piece on Quantum Physics which I know nothing about. So, it's always nice to get out of one's comfort zone and read stuff, which is outside, but it also induces reactions in you because you realize that those worlds are different, including AI, and Chat GPT, god knows what else. You are talking about poetry being written through an AI machine. The world is throwing empiricism at you and it is saying that two by two is equal to four and that is it, and there is nothing else. But this is Plato in a way. This is why the poet got banished.

AK: So, we are back to Plato's. But what about Chat GPT? Would poetry survive AI invasion into the intimate creative domain?

AG: I think we will always survive, because we will go underground (Everyone laughing). And I feel therefore that the idea of "Oh we are margins" doesn't make me feel bad, because margins exist when there is a centre. In a postmodern world I don't know what the centre is anymore. I talk to my friends who are writing novels, established novelists who are struggling. So, if I say I am struggling because I have only two books of poetry, doesn't sell, nobody reads them, etcetera, etcetera. They are saying the same thing "very tough." So don't assume that "Oh! Poetry is at the margins and there is the novel and there is some non-fiction and there is some stuff that Penguin wants." I think these are all largely monetary concerns.

Poetry has always survived. Poetry has never been read by more than ten percent of the people. It has been a minority discourse, but oral traditions, oral renderings and therefore Bhakti is so important, and

therefore those subaltern traditions are very important, because they actually help in social transformation. I don't know how technology will happen. I am already saying: go online because it is fine. It's a place where you can publish. We may be in a situation where we may be going back to oral, even as technology. And maybe it will be different kind of oral.

So, poetry will survive but it will perhaps always be in some ways different. That's why I am saying when you ask me this question of why is it so silent? Why is it a subliminal kind of thing? Because I feel this is the heart of poetry. This part will survive. Our feelings will survive. I keep wondering for example, and Ashis Nandy has written about it. One has to qualify what one says these days (Everyone laughing). This is no disrespect to anybody, but I would wonder about, scientists with empiricism from morning nine o'clock to six evening. But also, there is a private universe where you know who you are, depending on which deity you are worshipping. And I felt that this double consciousness is there. Typical Western rationality will be like, "But if you are this Bhakti, then you cannot be that." I feel that these are only boxes. We are more complex, more layered and far more surprising than we think ourselves to be. And because it is like that, there will always be dissonance. There has to be some outlet for that dissonance, for catharsis, which I think poetry will fulfill. That way it will always survive. It will survive differently but it will survive. It has always survived.

AK: There is one line in your collection *Vital Signs* "every breath is a birthday" that resonates as a grim reminder of Covid days. I think it was written when Covid was at its peak?

AG: Yes, it reminds you of a refrain by Ghalib, doesn't it?

AK: Ghalib is inescapable, is that right?

AG: Ghalib is inescapable, yes you are right. But my post-coloniality if I may, doesn't have to go through Lucknow and Delhi. I grew up in Assam. My mother tongue is Assamese. So, my tradition is different ... I am not trying to be folkloric here. You cannot club me inside the North-East poetry circles either. That kind of folkloric

tradition I moved out of, because that again looks very predictable to me. But nevertheless, I am not in the North Indian traditions. Even Agha Shahid Ali is to me within the ghazal tradition. The ghazal tradition is alien to me. The quatrain, the refrain at the end and this “wah-wah” (Everyone laughing) is alien to me. So, in that sense you can call me a modernist in some ways.

AK: Let me go back to the line. Tell us more about the philosophical or even existential underpinnings of treating every breath as a birthday.

AG: This I learned from a Buddhist monk because he said that you know... (deep breath)

AK: Birthday?!

AG: Yes! There are three sections in *Vital Signs*. First is “Life”, second is “Belief.” So, belief is where I say it is not enough to paint a boat. You must make it float. The third one is called “Fellowship” where I write about Gandhi and say what will Gandhi be today, and at the end I say, “he would travel incognito”. There’s “Ghalib at the Door” too.

Ghalib stayed outside
Last night.
I had forgotten about him

Just as I had forgotten about
Other things

In that folded universe:

Galli and kuccha, mohalla and chowk.
Qasida and nazraana and kalam.

To explain all that
Would take a dictionary
and many anthologies.
Perhaps, Ghalib in person.

Not that Ghalib turned up drunk
After midnight
and I wouldn't let him in.

He cares, I know.
He still hasn't received his pension.

AK: You have this capacity to invest energy into the most static things, sites and scenes. Map, for instance, is also your part-time aeroplane, so to say. "Books stare/ Like jelebīs and samosas on the counter." Rivers are not just routine water-ways, they dance, sing and marry. The image of the wedding of the river Sompawoti resonates in my mind. Let me read some lines:

All the rivers would come,
Kopili, Bordoīsila, Dibang, Disang, Kolong,
All the sisters of Brahmaputra would
Flow through their village!
It would rain and thunder,
So much fun.

The poetic playfulness accentuates the image, and lends a degree of intimacy to the poetic idiom. Let me conclude the conversation on this note. Amlanjyoti's poetry indeed has vital signs and we hope that in the days to come we shall see more of this kind of experiential 'felt' poetry.

AG: Thank you.