



“Queer is the canon”

Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Akhil Katyal

(This is an edited transcript of an on-stage conversation between Professor Akshaya Kumar and the poet Akhil Katyal that took place in the Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 20 October, 2023.)

Akshaya Kumar: This is presumably an event of an interaction with a poet-translator, translator-poet. But the hyphenated identity of poet-translator that we have proposed is rather too inadequate, because there are many interstitial spaces that Akhil traverses as a poet, and we will have to invent more hyphens to accommodate his multifaceted profile. We have chosen the rubric of ‘poet-translator, translator-poet’, just as a point of entry into the conversation to cover, later on, other aspects of his creative or critical diversions. There is a common accusation against English poets that they are poets of a different orbit and that they only know their English, and that these poets have no organic relationship with their native cultures. The moment we enter into the zone of hyphens, we must realize one thing that, practically every English Indian poet, not just informally but also formally has been a translator of Indian poets in other languages, almost without exception. Some of these poet-translators, started as translators and then graduated into poets; some started as poets and then graduated into translators. Difficult to say what precedes what. To slot a poet like Akhil into any monolingual bracket is not fair. When you read Akhil’s poetry which is predominantly written in English, Hindi poems enter into the collection, Hindi and Punjabi phrases enter into the poems and sometimes even Urdu script makes its way into the poetic argument. Out of around 90 poems in his poetic collection *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue*, there are as many as 28 poems of Hindi printed in Devanagari script. This is bold and unconventional. The poets of Akhil’s generation are first and foremost poets only, their choice of language should not lead to their ghettoization into exclusive linguistic denominations.

So, Akhil, now let me begin the conversation with some remarks on your poetic practice. I can begin with your translational practice as well. We can begin from anywhere. It is not a very structural conversation. Let us see where we go. Akhil, in the beginning of your poetic journey the Partition casts its proverbial long shadow. I am not jumping into putting you into readymade category of 'a partition poet'. What I am saying is that there is this deep concern for the history of the subcontinent and also that the post-memory of Partition informs you at the level of the unconscious. Of course, you were not a direct witness to Partition but since your parents and grandparents suffered it, it must have been a matter of daily domestic conversation. So, what I see in your earlier collections of poetry is this engagement with a disturbed, turbulent cultural past. But as we move forward, in later collections, you begin to strike associations with your immediate present. Both past and present co-appear in your poetry, and that is perhaps the predicament of all those who have suffered Partition or survived Partition. How do you look at this historical baggage. Is there a journey towards a more synchronic spatial engagement. What is your take on that?

Akhil Katyal: Thank you so much for the remarkably detailed outline of the trajectory that has happened since *How Many Countries Does Indus Cross* to poetry such as in *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue* which is largely on Delhi. You are absolutely right, I mean in one sense, I am sure several people here in the room belong to the third generation, people who migrated from what is now Pakistan Punjab. So, in one sense those are the stories one grew up on and we grew up not so much on systematic assessment on what our past is like but some truth-bombs were dropped around, imperceptibly, in ordinary conversation — what they thought about the other community, what our pre-Partition home was like, almost a kind of paranoid nostalgia of what we have lost when we had to come. Also, the family had gone through violence which had led to the loss of two of our family members on my father's side during the Partition. So as people growing up, whether in early teenages or in my early twenties, those are the stories one grew on and those are the stories that informed what one turned to, as a third-generation Partition refugee family, to think about that past. In poems such as 'My

Grandfather', one frontally dealt with the legacy of the Partition, especially in terms of language:

My Grandfather

would ask us to read him
the shop-signs in Devanagari:

मिंटू आइसक्रीम
जगत हार्डवेयर
चित्र सिनेमा

All his life, he
only knew Urdu,
leaving Lahore at 18,
a young railway-clerk
new at the desk then.

In the early months
he struggled,
tried opening a cigarette-shop
at Panchkuiyan Road in Delhi,
before being given the same job
in the Indian Railways
in Lucknow.

In all this commotion,
he never bothered
learning another script,
dependent still, at 73, on his grandchildren
to read him ice-cream signs
when he treated them to
an orange-bar.

Years later,
when I ache to read Faiz's letters
in his own hand-writing, I had to
write to a Facebook-friend in Lahore,
or ask an old Jangpura neighbour,

or worse, use a translation app
which is like rubbing stones on silk.

As grandfather and I stumble
through these years,
Urdu, Hindi
still look on at each other
in an old mirror convexed by history,
reaching around its opaque silver.

*

This year,
after my second Urdu class
I get straight on the Blue Line
– nuqtas arraying in my head –
for the Ramakrishna Ashram station.

Here, in this first city of his coming,
Panchkuiyan Road, where he tried
but failed at a living, पंचकुइयाँ रोड,
that of the five old Mughal wells,
پنج کونیاں روڈ, where grandfather and I

after the opacity of years
find homework in a Delhi road-sign
caress old shapes
into meaning, curve old losses
draw water with
a new tongue.

(from Indian Literature, Vol. 59, No. 2 (286),
Sahitya Akademi: March/April 2015)

But lately, you are absolutely right. Lahore is like a talisman, of
some sort. The strange parallels because if I live in Delhi there is for
an instance, Shahadra – *Shah ka Dar* or *Shah ka Darwaza* in Delhi as
there is in Lahore and once I started noticing the similarities, I could
count to about nine to ten geographical similarities, nomenclature

wise and in terms of historical inheritances, similarities between Lahore and Delhi, and those were exhilarating finds for me. This was also a documentation of our presents rather than reconstructions of pasts alone. But subsequently, I think you put it remarkably that one finds the most synchronic filiation and that's a wonderful phrase because that told me as well, is that actually some of the stories that I have been hearing were only part of the stories, they were only half the stories. Incomplete, because they carried assumptions, half-knowledges and looking askance at others. And the fact that I came from particular caste privilege, *khatri* family, they told me some Partition stories and they did not tell me other stories. That is evident. So, for instance one of the things, I realized in fact I have noticed this Ravinder Kaur's work for instance on partition refugees in the Rehgar Pura, Karol Bagh area in Delhi, which is largely subaltern caste partition refugees. She says that whenever you speak to dominant caste partition refugee families, they systematically do not talk about the role of the state in resettlement and allotments of newer plots and jobs, whereas whenever you talk to the subaltern caste partition refugees, they speak a language which acknowledges the state, speak very evidently about how the state played a significant role in their lives. I wasn't aware of or was not attuned to that fault-line if I only believed the stories my parents or grandparents told me. For my grandparents obviously at some point, the very historical, complex, layered, messy, difficult, violent event of the Partition was also turned into a simple occasion, almost a legitimation for hatred for another religious community. Thankfully, that skipped my parents' generation and is continuing the skipping so far. So, I think my initial, considering the kind of trajectory you are building sir, I think there was a recognition of one's own layered past and then there was recognition that the stories I have been told about this layered past are nowhere as layered because they carry the assumptions and the blind spots of an evidently and discernibly caste-proud khatri family, and all the blind spots of that caste have been carried into the stories I heard. So, then the nostalgia got punctured a bit and other kinds of stories started emerging. I am reckoning that, it seems to be the trajectory and that is where I am at currently, in terms of thinking about what the shared past can look like.

Akshaya: See, the moment one thinks of Partition, one gets very serious and it is a very intimidating kind of a haunting past. But the way you live it in your poems at times is remarkable. Maybe this is because you belong to a third generation so you are away from the heat of it. So, it appears to me that as you grow out of it or there is this playfulness that creeps into your work. Is this playfulness a strategy of negotiating with that traumatic past? Because this playfulness is exceptional within the range of Indian English poetry. Poets have their pedestals, so to say, and they are very serious in holding on to them. You have referred to Agha Shahid Ali, and his Kashmir, and both are a constant presence in your poetry. In fact, you use Shahid's phrases as titles and sub-titles of your collections. In *How Many Countries does the Indus Cross*, you play on the intonational possibilities of Shahid's line 'to will the distant mountains to glass,' and the title of another latter collection – *Like Blood on the Bitten Tongue* – is a line from his poem "Chandni Chowk, Delhi". Shahid Ali is very serious. There is this sense of requiem, melancholy and some elegiac note, but in your poems, on the other hand, you deal with all those intensities of emotions, but there is this playfulness and there is this unmistakable political embeddedness. What I am asking to you is that for this kind of poetic register, what is your poetic genealogy? I mean who you look up to for some kind poetic guidance or motivation.

Akhil: That's actually a great question because you have laid it out as an invitation to consider. Usually, the question of humour comes as where the other person is asked to defend it whereas this is not what you have asked. That is remarkable. You are absolutely right that, I mean several of us in this room who might have read Agha Shahid Ali's work, there is largely a tone that is elegiac in nature and he seems to be mourning, either a person or a place or what was happening in his homeland or towards the end of his short life, the loss of his mother. In the 1970s, you see that he has lost Begum Akhtar in the mid-70s and he is writing very evocatively about that loss, in the 90s what is transpiring in the region of Kashmir and arguably continues to transpire and occupies his imagination, and in late 90s when he loses his mother to brain tumor, a disease to which he succumbed himself about four years later after his mother's passing. He is thinking very evocatively, attempting to come to terms

with that loss. But even in Shahid, there is a Shahid who is queeny, who is campy, who is humorous, who is satirical, and it comes in flashes in his collection, portions of yellow pages collection and portions of *The Half Inch Himalayas*. So earlier on in his career those are moments where also one felt like there was fellow-feeling, there was hand holding, there was a persona who was trying to make sense of himself among the big wigs as he was a student and a teacher in Delhi university as I was as well, and subsequently his early Ph.D. years in the U.S. So, the people who I constantly go to and I think who do remarkable work while dealing with, as you said, question of intensities, are three poets: Agha Shahid Ali's earlier oeuvre; Dorothy Parker who wrote in New York in the mid-20th century; and Wendy Cope, a British poet. All of these three poets, they are speaking of subjects as serious as the gravitas of betrayal in interpersonal relationships, thinking about subject matters which can be deeply triggering like self-harm, thinking about, in those same years, also of what it felt like to be in mid-late 80s and early 90s in the America losing your own friends to the HIV-AIDS crisis. These are the subject matters, but there is a way in which they have arrived at a vocabulary which some people choose to call "Dark Humour" or "gallows humour" and dealing with let's say, a subject like self-harm in *abab* quatrains and when I saw that that vocabulary did not trivialize the subject matter but instead found another entry point into it, another portal into it. I think that seed then was germinated into oneself. Maybe I could read an example. I think I have carried and maybe some of you might have read Dorothy Parker's work and there is poem of hers, and I apologize for the triggering subject matter- it is a poem about self-harm. It's called "Resume":

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

So, the poem which is a contemplation of self-harm, contemplation of suicide, is literally going through a laundry list of all the ways you can use to end yourself and at the end of it, it is not some exhilarating epiphany about “Oh! One should continue living because this is a route one should not take as there is some moral principle against it,” but no, at the end of it instead is quasi resignation that these seem to be very inconvenient ways of going, so I might as well live. So, in that sense when one of my students was translating it “*Khudkhushi*”:

*Razor mein tees hai
Nadiyan hain silli
Tezab main daag hai
Tablets dardili
Bandook avaidh hai
Fande hain dheele
Gas main baas hai
Chal yar jeele!*

I was just wondering, “you might as well live” and how to get a sense of that resignation which you only share with your buddies. A kind of comradely decision to continue to live and despite the seriousness of the theme, I think that buddy-ness, that comradeship of that gesture, of that line, this, only gallows humor could manage. And Parker does it for various other poems and various kinds of literary occasions. That rhythm is infectious. Parker’s is, in this instance, ababcbcd. It continues with more or less the same rhyme, more or less the same syllable count, but towards the end I had the occasion, and that was great subcontinental privilege to introduce the various and fondest of words “yaar,” and what we do with that word, which is to create a space of intimacy and casualness, an informality in a poem about suicide, but Parker, in a sense, allowed you to do that. So, I think these are the antecedents and this is the genealogy of that humor.

Akshaya: Is there anyone from within the Indian tradition of poetry who you would like to identify as your poetic ancestor? I noticed that particularly in your Delhi poems, every small thing is a cause exciting enough for poetry to happen. I would think of relating your playfulness with that of Kolatkar’s laconic black humour. Who

among the Indian poets would you count as your 'poetic ancestor' or just simply a 'poetic master'? Or would you like to place yourself as the poet of new generation of post-Kolatkár, post-Ramanujan?

Akhil: My engagement with Kolatkár actually came way after my engagement with poets like Eunice De Souza or Hoshang Merchant. So, I tell myself that I was always finding my way towards Kolatkár. But when I did read *Jejuri*, it hit me like a stone, like a train. And what is interesting about it is that it is a very sardonic, ironic voice that actually briefly inhabits a place of pilgrimage. And the fact that he has this quasi-ironic eye, he is able to see that which no other pilgrim will be able to see. I think that voice grew on me, and the other thing which grew on me is that collection which is mid-seventies, that collection was simultaneously being written, conceptualized, thought of both in Marathi and in English. And that as you said right in the beginning of this conversation, and as one of your students also said that there is no way you can find which came before. You know, there are some poems which start off in Marathi. One image of it, and it's not that the whole poem is turned into an English poem. One image of it in one language would make many more poems in the other language, for instance. So, this necessarily not knowing the starting point was almost a methodology for him working with both his Marathi and English dimensions. So, Kolatkár is beginning to claim me more and more, now that I read his work and along with his dog persona poems, *Kala Ghoda* poems. But I think that just might be the quirk of what you one reads before and what one reads later. The other English poet who does remarkably precise, pungent and playfully 'nasty' things with her own community is Eunice De Souza. Her collected poems called the *A Necklace of Skulls* immediately comes to my mind. And she is one of those rare poets whose collected works over last years was progressively becoming thinner because she was editing so extensively. She was deselecting poems out of her oeuvre and what remains is as sharp as a razor blade. And she thinks of this small, incestuous, eating into itself community of Goan Catholics that she grew up in. That small community in Pune. And the way she is able to caricaturize, the way she is able to satirize, the way she is able to take down the pedestalized figures, whether they are the ones who are the Brahmin De Souza's, who going back several generations

purposely found that the first person who converted to Christianity among their ancestors had indeed a Brahmin worm inside him. She exposes the upper caste pretensions among those in a religion which does not scripturally legitimize caste. Instead of extolling this allegedly great ancestry, she is able to pull them down. So, I believe that De Souza was quicker to claim me, but Kolatkar is very sturdily and I think less with humor and more with irony beginning to make that claim. When De Souza passed away, I found myself turning to her, again, such as in this poem:

Listening to an evening of Eunice De Souza tributes

In her last years,
Gieve says, Eunice learnt first-aid
from a vet and would treat the wounds
of the local strays.

After a while, dogs
she didn't know, from all over
Vakola, would come find her
on her street, turn around,
show her their wounds.

Once her compound regular
brought a stranger to her door
for urgent treatment.

I imagine the poet
— those speaking of her
call her 'grande dame', 'formidable',
even 'charring' — surrounded
by dogs and parrots in the end.

Opening her apartment door
to find those who need healing.

I go to my bookshelf,
start looking up and down the spines
like the dogs of Vakola.

(thanks to Gieve Patel)

Akshaya: Coming back to your Delhi poems. You have mentioned how in the narratives of Partition, the subaltern communities, their resettlement processes and their displacement were not chronicled enough. But when I look at your Delhi poems, you also seem to ignore the claims of the subaltern to their possible space in the national capital. You have translated Ravish also, and he talks about this juxtaposition between South Delhi and Karawal Nagar. Don't you think that your Delhi is also partly lopsided in the sense that it does not include in its sweep the subalterns of the metropolis to that extent?

Akhil: You know the thing is when one writes unconsciously one tends to replicate one's own assumptions and projects them out into the world. And I am sure for instance the limitations of my constraints, the limitations of my worldview have made its way, crept into the collection which otherwise seeks to celebrate Delhi. You know, Delhi is a strange place. It has its set of love tales, what Ravish Kumar calls as *laghu prem katha*, in his collection of city-snippets called *Ishq Mein Sheher Hona*, which I have translated as *A City Happens in Love*. It starts off with these two young heterosexual lovers speaking to each other and it starts off by saying- "*Mein aaj small town sa feel kar raha hun. And mein metro si.*" And it continues from there and at some point, he says, referring to two neighborhoods in Delhi and for several of you who are familiar with Delhi's geography, he says: "*Jab bhi tum South Ex se guzarti ho, mein Karawal Nagar sa mehsoos krta hun.*" And considering the laughter in the room I am assuming that one knows these neighborhoods. And in my class, I am very fond of asking my students that okay "how many of you know where South Ex is" and about ninety percent of the people raise their hands, and when I say "how many of you know where Karawal Nagar is?" the number reduces to about five, four, three, two, and sometimes there has been a class where not even a single person raised their hands, except the one person who was from Karawal Nagar.

So, in that sense Ravish Kumar is both hugely celebrated and hugely condemned and by an extensive and ferocious lobby as it happens. His journalism was also the kind which was very attuned to

the different qualities that Delhi as a space was capable of, and his stories always emerged from not just Lutyen's Delhi or what our current dispensation is fond of calling "Khan Market gang," but emerged from places such as Karawal Nagar, which might or might not be geographically the margins of the city, that's not relevant, what is relevant is that they are imaginatively the margins of the city. That's as far as the conscious narrative of these poems is concerned, but you're right. After all this young man who comes from Lucknow has studied in a remarkably self-aware, elite institution called La Martiniere College in Lucknow where *jahan aap angrezi mein batt na krein toh appko baint padti thi haath pe, aur vahan se Hindu college aur St. Stephen's college se hote hue woh London se Ph.D. kar ke aaya hai. Toh uske nazariye ki ek limit hai, ek boundary hai, aur woh boundary kavitaon mein bhi replicate hui hogi.* The effort is that one keeps on pushing against it, the effort is that one keeps on being alert to what lies beyond one's ken. For instance, the Partition narrative. For me to exercise the affective, this great emotional claim that my own parents and grandparents' narrative had about the pre-partition reality and to disabuse myself of the fact that this was not as hunky-dory as they led me to believe, and that there were various fault lines among these two families who were always fond of remembering *ki humare ghar mein toh 17 kamre the, ek taraf koi cricket khelta tha toh dusri taraf awaz nahin aati thi.* And this story when I started listening to many other Partition stories, several people were replicating this story. It is almost as if the size of their house was increasing in their imagination. And what I noticed is that in order to make my own grandparents real, give them the gift of being ordinary rather than standing for a historic time period as such was a long process. But you are absolutely right. One's own caste and class and linguistic location initially must have replicated in these joyous or serious and unselfconscious poems.

Akshaya: I made a comment in the beginning that your poetry is embedded in the political. Protest comes naturally to you. Your queer orientation in a way makes you a poet of protest, against the dominant heteronormative ways of culture. How does your queer orientation impact your political outlook, and poetic output?

Akhil: You know that's a question...It's one of those questions which sort of sends you hurtling back into your own past and try to

excavate some kind of order from it. I was telling the other day that when I was taking the train from Delhi to Chandigarh, I finished it very late in my life, but I finished reading Morrison's *Beloved* only yesterday, and you know at one point there is a character who says...he is describing somebody who is beloved to him, and he says — I am only paraphrasing — “They were a friend of mine. It's almost as if I gave them the cluster of my own life. It's almost as if I gave him all the disordered chaos of my life and he returned it to me in the right order.” I *am* paraphrasing. So, your question makes me think of what the right order might be in terms of politicization of one's vocabulary. But you are absolutely right. In my sort of mid-twenties, late twenties, early thirties work there is a kind of stridency. There is not just a kind of consideration of meditation, but the ferocity of a slogan, which predominates over certain kinds of poetic registers. There are two ways. When I came from Lucknow to Delhi, obviously one of the things which was really exhilarating was that there were so many new groups. That were self-consciously calling themselves queer groups and they were using a vocabulary which was manna to my ears. Because they were using words which otherwise, I thought taboo, whether it was lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etcetera. And just having heard those words with a tone of ordinariness seemed in 2003, 2004, 2005, before the Delhi High Court judgment, before the recriminalization and re-decriminalization which carried on till 2018. But then, these were exhilarating words and I think that sense of exhilaration entered one's vocabulary. For instance, in a poem such as:

Girl, when you
blow your boy,
or boy, when
you go down
on her, or when
both of you use
a toy, and all the
world's a blur,
I know it feels
like heaven, you
too violate 377.

But one other thing which was happening in parallel which I think claims me more where there is not a kind of quickness of easy liberal queer vocabulary but an assessment of the fact that after all in various kinds of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi traditions, there are various idioms of same sex desires which indeed were part and parcel of the way eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century literature imagined these figures, imagined the transaction of this desire and imagined the possibility of quasi-contempt, quasi-fulfilling life in terms of how we now think of what queer people can lead. When I was reading Ismat Chughtai, or Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra', or Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, you obviously don't find nomenclature calling someone one thing or the other. Not this easy binary between something called homosexual and then once you call someone homosexual you have to find it's opposite and then lo and behold there is the gift of the 'heterosexuals'. Heterosexuals are an afterthought. Only when you have to invent something in order for something to stand as an opposite. I found instead of this easy liberal lingo, what one found was, there were various idioms which were making claims on the desire, whether they were that of habit, *lat*, *aadat*, *inko toh nawabi shauk hai*, or I found the language of playfulness, *masti* which predates marriage, but there is a limberness to it, allowed till a certain point in your life, or you found the language of *baazi*, *ki logon ko alag alag tareeke ke shauk hote hain, jaise aap exam se phle rattabaazi karte hain*, if you have bad habits *aap darubaazi krte hain*. And within that same framework there was a framework of *laundebaazi*, and so it was not so much that there were two kinds of people in the world, but, but according to this earlier Hindi-Urdu vocabulary of idioms, we were all on the sliding scale of ideal masculinity and ideal femininity and the more certain kind of habits you had, you were closer to one part of the spectrum than the other. And the idea was that no one was ideal. Everyone was a cluster of one kind of *shauk* or habit or the other. *Aur jismein koi aib nahin hai woh toh sirf khuda hai. Har insaan mein koi na koi aib hota hai*. So, there was a way in which the language was condemning what we now think of as queerness but it was also making room for it. It was also accommodating. And I think lately, especially after my doctoral work at SOAS, one is more attentive to that sort of accommodation, that sort of slowness of languages, its counterintuitive capacities, ability to mine many kinds of resonances rather than hanker only for

the sloganeering gesture, i.e. rather than transacting only in the easy vocabulary of straightness and gayness which is more contemporary.

Akshaya: How is queerness pitched vis-à-vis the rise of the right? What future do you see for the queer as a movement in the face of the rise of the right? Do you think that queer can take on the assertion of the conservative right? Or can the right overwhelm and subsume the queer too?

Akhil: You know not in any unmediated way because queerness is also something which can be very easily appropriated. I mean, today you can see the way the Israeli establishment uses the language of what is now being known and I think some people in the room surely know this — “pinkwashing” — where you use queer idiom, queer vocabulary, queer support, queer acceptance, in order to unleash and in order to legitimize your far greater onslaught on the rights and lives of other people. So, you know Israel is very fond of saying — “Look at the Palestinian Arab Muslims. Look at the way they mistreat their queers. Look at the way we treat our queers so well.” Right? So just as long as you make room for the one quarter inch of one kind of queers, you are able to use that vocabulary in order to legitimize a wider onslaught on others. When for instance, article 370 was abrogated, more than one BJP leader made the case that it is good news for queers in Kashmir. And I was just wondering how easy this vocabulary of queerness, and support of *some* kind of queerness, can be wielded by the right. So, I do believe that a larger umbrella term of queerness which is able to make room for various kinds of rights bearing bodies, they might be bodies of children whose rights need to be protected, they might be bodies of religious minorities whose rights need to be protected, they might be bodies of heterosexual single women who have chosen to remain outside the institution of marriage, and they might be bodies of queer people themselves. And I think what I had as one of my inheritances when I came to Delhi in the early 2000s was this kind of catholic grouping under the term ‘queer’. There was one group in the early 90s called ABVA- AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan. And they were not just people who identified themselves as gay. They were people who engaged with and identified with all sorts of groupings, some of which I have just mentioned. And the fact that they come together implies that queerness is not simply something which resides in a body and is

about the desire that you have, but queerness could be alternatively be understood as being against the social grain of things, and I think that I inherited that vocabulary with my immediate queer elders. So, in that sense, that kind of queerness was leading you to be skeptical, deeply skeptical of the rise of the Hindu right and also because the latter was constraining the vocabularies, we can use to regain our own past. Because one of the greatest obsessions of the Hindu right is a delimited and a narrow construction of the past. Whereas what my queer elders and other people in my university were telling me how you can play with it, how you can enter it, how you can live in it and acquire kind of limberness of your own inheritance. The frame of your own inheritance only widens rather than narrows whereas at the same time the rise of the Hindu right was telling me another story. So, in that sense I think, perhaps to address the latter part of your question, I do think queerness did give a vocabulary which was wider than just body-based desire. You know because this idea that who you desire determines who you are. Let's say I like men so I am gay, or you like women, you are straight. What does this sort of division mean? This is barely 120/130 years old. What makes one kind of desire into determining of self-identity. I mean I also love cabbages, does that make me a certain kind of a person (Audience laughing). So why is one kind of desire not making me who I am, a claim on my interiority, whereas others can. It is because there was violence meted out to some people, and when this violence will fade, will be eradicated, at some point the deep claim of this identity will also fade, will also be eradicated. So that we will just become different kinds of messy, chaotic, intermeshed people rather than these two species called heterosexual and homosexual.

Akshaya: Looking at your Delhi poems, I find the mythical Delhi is conspicuously missing. It is largely the historical Delhi which you talk about, and you largely engage with. There is a poem on Bangla Sahib, a poem on Nizamuddin West, a poem on Connaught Place, on Nigambodh Ghat and even on Akshardham Temple. You also dig out old maps of Delhi to suggest its colonial coordinates and their awful inadequacies to capture the pulse of modern Delhi. Your critical take on the 1807 map of Delhi, for instance, gives us an idea about the temporal limits within which you place Delhi:

1. The British Surveyor's surname

is 'White'.

2. He is still using light blue
for the 'Jumnah'
3. The map's scale is emotionally accurate.
Every inch is one and a quarter miles.
4. The walled city is light red. In fifty years
the colour will be 'bayoneted on the spot'.
5. Where you and I met last night
is not on the map.

There is a mediaeval Delhi, there is a modern Delhi too, but there is not a hint on ancient Delhi. There is no reference to Indraprastha, no reference to Hastinapur. You think that this is a deliberate kind of erasure? Because you are now in a way adopting a city as your home. So, you are not interested in going back to the pre-historical past of the city?

Akhil: Okay, so that's interesting. You know, for the longest time...and I have been in Delhi now for twenty years...there is a way in which there is that hurtling migrant's desire to belong and you belong by name, claim, on everything which is ordinary, on the everyday around you. So, in one sense, the material, the bread and butter of my belonging was laying claim on things that are seeable, concrete material, right beside me. Anyway, I think the kind of construction of the past which has happened as also considered in our previous question, the past where anyway so many dubious and so many harmful claims were being made, being held to it, that the fabled was a category which, in one sense, I avoided. And since then claim on Delhi now seems to be sturdy enough, I have been thinking that one of the next collections that I have been putting together are all poems on Lahore. And this is a city one has not been to, not physically, this is a city in one sense a city of my imagination. The effort again has to be to step out of the excesses of mythology, the immaterialities of fables and the cloudiness of nostalgia. For instance, one of the poems that I imagined. This will me take me two minutes to read. It's a slightly long poem. It is called "Twenty-Seven Things I noticed on my first day in Lahore when my friend and I walked from Gulberg-II to Shadman"

1. It is early summer. The sky is a hot tongs+ blue

2. On college road as soon as we start, I see 'ilove pak armi' graffiti and ask him "yeh kya mera welcome sign hai?" He rolls his eyes and says "Shut up. It will only take us half an hour."
3. I see kites make gentle circles above us.
4. A dry kikaar spreads its arteries above the traffic
6. We quickly wade under a flyover. Qaid-e-Azam's painted bust is chilling in the shade
7. We pass by a man in a black beret. Behind him, an almost pun is hung on a tower called 'High-Q'.
8. We pass by another man who is standing in that cool aloof way men stand when they're looking but have too much tact — their hands behind their back — to be seen looking
9. Street CCTV's hand like dimpled chin in the sky
10. The Eucalypti draw groundwater from under us
11. A yellow Toyota blisters in the sun
12. I show off my knowledge of Urdu by reading 'نو پارکنگ' signs. No one is impressed
13. Three crows dash against our hairlines
14. An LWMC bin asks me to keep Lahore clean. My friend says "Mind it".
15. A red bike grazes past our chatter. The pillion boy balances a 27-inch TV in his small arms
16. We hit a canal. A blue board tells me the direction to a neighborhood called 'Thokar Niaz Baig'. I think of all the synonyms of the first word. And of the second.
17. In the canal all the acacia reflections meet at infinity
18. We continue down the Jail Road. In Lucknow, absent-mindedly I tell him, I grew up next to a Jail Road. We passed it each day to school
19. We keep walking. There is a foot bridge above us that resembles attics in Shimla
20. But I don't want to think about this city through resemblances. Or why I have come here? 400 kms from Delhi (give or take an iron curtain) I am still using an old pair of eyes. This is a *different* city. I have *not* seen it before. The summer air dries around us
21. My friend consoles me — it's only your first day, you're still a tourist; don't overburden yourself with epiphanies. But

what if I return a tourist, I warn him. “So what? You’d have seen Lahore.”

22. Sach, I think, skirting Coca-cola crates on the road.
23. A couple passes us by. The guy is wearing Lande da Gucci
24. Suddenly the road is full of clinics and hospitals and pharmacies. A booboo asks his mother to take him in her godi.
25. Then this guy with L’oreal hair and a Gillette moustache — walking, sipping a cup of chai — does not even deign to look at us. We giggle like two queens
26. “The shady man of Shadman” I make a bad pun, reading the road signs. Friend ignores it
27. Another board shows me the direction to ‘Race Course Park’. I tell him the story of *Race Course* to *Lok Kalyan*. He asks me the meaning of ‘kalyan’.
28. We enter a subway. I am hungry. So we get a samosa.

The thing is that this is a city I have never been in. Right? I am very careful about not folding back all the capacities and contemporaneities of Lahore into a narrative of this third-generation refugee family which looks at Lahore only through rose-tinted sort of lenses of nostalgia. So, the exit from that nostalgia, the exit from that kind of fabled nostalgia, is actually the exit into concreteness, the exit into materiality, the exit into dust, the exit into a contemporary references whether they are crates of Coca-cola, or whether there is a Toyota blistering under the sun, or the eucalypti which the British were very fond of planting despite them being water sucking trees on roads, whether in Lahore or in Delhi. So, I think the larger drift from the fable into the grittiness is a drift which is coming of great use to me when I am writing about Lahore. And I think Delhi was the training ground to do that. That’s what I reckon. And one of my quirks and of the strangest habits that I have, I spend far too much time on Google Maps, and if you use the pedestrian view you can walk the roads, it *as close as you get* to being there without being there. And one of the things that several Pakistani friends who are also readers said that there was a way in which it was not immune to and it led the contemporariness of Lahore claim the texture of the poem. So, I think I aim for that kind of a relationship rather than a relationship which is a relationship which my parents or grandparents

would have drawn from these cities, or those interested in fables or mythologies would draw

Akshaya: You are talking about the immateriality of the myths and you want to avoid what you call the fabled past. But how material the platform of the GPS or Instagram is? Because that is your place where you seem to be very comfortably ensconced in. I know that this is a new generation and you have to be visible on that platform as well. But if fabled past is something which is not so tangible, then this too is ephemeral?

Akhil: That is remarkable, no? Thank you for catching that. One of the things I have always worked with as a poet, and I am thinking on my feet right now because this is a kind of question which I have not thought about at all. Is a sense, that as long as there is some formal or writerly constraint that you have, in struggling against that constraint, constantly, you find expressive possibilities. So, most of the time when we are writing formal poetry, that happens with us, that's the bread and butter of a formal poem. For instance, in some formal poems, there is a fact that you have to arrive at some refrain and there is a fact that right before that refrain, in that penultimate location before it will be arriving the qafiya. We are, of course, speaking of the ghazal. And the fact that you have to reach these words which need to sound like something or repeat themselves in one order or the other makes you think of occasions, takes you to places which you otherwise wouldn't have gone in only through your instinct, only through your gut. So, you know there is a poem by Agha Shahid Ali which is an English ghazal called "Tonight." For instance, the matla is "Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight? Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?" And at some point, when Shahid was describing the process of writing this ghazal he said, for years I kept on creating a laundry list of all the words which rhyme with the -el sound and at some point, when he chanced upon the story of Jezebel and was taken in by the story, in a sense, he said — Oh! another couplet ready to be made — And he then writes "I'll bless Jezebel tonight." So, now, he would not have arrived at that couplet if the formal constraint wasn't there. If he wasn't looking for the possibilities and permutations of the -el sound. His interiority wouldn't have taken him there. But that constraint did take him to that place. In one sense it was a generative closure. So, I

am telling myself now that you are making me think of the ephemerality of the virtual, the Google maps, I am telling myself what will this constraint of writing about a place one has never been to, of writing about a place whose single Visa stamp can jeopardize your movement to several other countries, of writing about a place which is the place of my ancestors but does not have my physical footprints. Maybe this constraint will also create its own expressive possibility. When the Sutlej crosses from the Indian side of the border to the Pakistani side of the border, the map shows Gurmukhi transitioning into Urdu script. In one of the poems where one was thinking about that transition, one used both the Urdu and Gurmukhi script. That is not a point of expression which material walking or flaneuring in the city of Lahore, or in any physical site, would have been given me. The virtual will create its own expressive possibilities, one hopes. That poem was called 'Five things that happened tonight on Google Earth':

**Five things that happened tonight
*on Google Earth***

1. Thinking wealth, thinking French Riviera,
I type Monte Carlo. It takes me to
a factory outlet in Gurgaon.
2. From up in the sky, Chandigarh
is so many bourbon biscuits.
3. If you type 'Aurangzeb Road'
it still takes you to the right spot in Delhi.
4. Near Kasur district in Punjab, the ਸਤਲੁਜ
suddenly flows into ستلج.
5. Everytime you zoom, the screen reloads.
The Indo-Pak border disappears
then reappears.

Akshaya: So not fair to call you as an Instagram poet?

Akhil: You call me what you like, I don't mind. There is so much gatekeeping which happens around poetry and I teach in a Masters in Creative Writing Programme. Often people who enter the programme are so timorous about what kind should they write, what subject matter they should engage with, and what form should they practice to be counted as a poet. I guess first we have to disabuse ourselves of a kind of a hallowed pedestalized figure of the poet. When you transition from one mode of expression to another, historically we have seen this, from one medium or platform to another, there is always going to be anxiety. You know when they went from oral literature to written literature. If you look at early Greek writing, there is some commentary about that transition from oral to written as necessarily a loss of aesthetic possibilities. When you went from silent to sound cinema, you will find early Film Studies criticism saying that expressive possibilities have been reduced by the occurrence of sound in cinema. Similarly, the Gutenberg Press, where its coming, was also seen to stifle and solidify the word as against the limberness which otherwise roving manuscripts had. So, we are in a moment of digital transition and at some point, some examples are going to be cast as bad examples and they are going to mention some names and some examples are going to be cast as good old examples. But this anxiety I have no trouble with because fifty years from now some other medium would come and a different kind of anxiety would take over.

Akshaya: And in any case Instagram also needs to be redeemed?

Akhil: I mean if I compare the nastiness of Twitter with the quasi-alooofness of Instagram, then maybe one prefers one to the other.

Akshaya: I have read this collection *The World That Belongs to Us*. It is a remarkable anthology and you talk about the tentativeness of the term 'queer'. You refer to multiple possibilities of the term 'queer' and how the contributors have extended and expanded the term. Is there a different measure to measure the quality of a queer poem?

Akhil: You know this is remarkable that you asked that because when Aditi who is my co-editor for this collection and a remarkable

poet, when we first went to the Harper Collins India Office – they are the publishers in Noida near Delhi – this idea of who we are going to include, almost like a talismanic word, this word ‘quality’ was mentioned. And it was supposed to be assumed that what the publisher was saying, what the editors were saying, and what the potential contributors would think of this word ‘quality’ would be self-evident. And we had told ourselves that 30-35 poets are what we will include, good ‘quality’ and everyone agreed, and we all nodded along, puppet-like. But when we got into the process of actually receiving and reading the material, the question of what counts as a good poem, I think, diversified. Briefly we engaged with that in the “Introduction”. But what is a good poem if I may ask this room to consider? You know, is it a poem which has made us think of something ordinary and every day in a startlingly new manner or is it something which has allowed within the ken of our observation and consideration something we had never considered before? Is it that which creates a great sense of community around a particular subject matter where we find ourselves together with people or ideas or places that otherwise we never thought we could find togetherness with? We were at pains to establish any one marker of what constitutes a good poem especially in a subcontinent where that which makes a good poem, let’s say, capacity of linguistic play and dexterity with words, is so dependent on the mode through which you reach that capacity. And we know how differential the access of people to education and learning is in this country. So, when we say taste, we don’t actually think about very specific class and caste access to that thing called taste. Then who are we, two Delhi-based Savarna English speaking editors to decide what a good poem is? Considering that we were still editors of this collection who had to choose between poems coming from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and India, we then chose to be more catholic in our selections than narrower. And I think it has made room for the kind of expression which otherwise would have not made into a collection if we held a high horse of something called a ‘good’ queer poem. When we say someone is a woman writer, queer or black writer, we assume that behind all of this there is someone called a writer, and as if that is not usually a white male heterosexual writer. Why should some people be allowed universal claims and others keep hovering under a sign or a mark alone? Right? And the fact that everyone has

some kind of mediated access to this capacity and the role of being writer, we assume that is the case. So, in that case we allowed different kinds of poems, and in each poem, on one count or the other, on one of these many criterias, the poems were persuasive. So that's the nature of what we call a 'good' queer poem. That would be the long answer to that short question.

Akshaya: Another short question. If it is queer, what form would it take? Any specific form? Because all these forms that we now memorise as standard are ultimately forms of the so-called mainstream heteronormative poetry.

Akhil: You know you are right. But because queerness is such a recent vocabulary and as I said has only a century and half of an active kind of self-conscious or adopted queerness as kind of an identity. If you boil down queerness to presence of something called same-sex desire or presence of some kind of play of gendered inhabitation. If that's what queerness is, then several people across history of Literature can be recruited to this category of queerness. The kind of Greek or Shakespearian narratives can also be as easily recruited as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to this kind of wider formal experimentations within queerness. There was a moment in my twenties and thirties when one was keen on a register of queerness because one was encountering it for the first time and I think it is a rite of passage for many queer people to experience it as a kind of joyful expanse of one's own life's possibilities. But I have also noticed many queer people outliving that joy into a kind of seeming adaptation in a world in which that queerness does not become a primary marker of differentiation. So, in that sense I would not say at all that there is a specific form that queerness projects or immediately transacts with. Because what is this thing called queerness? It is a phantom thing. We seem to be finding some countable references to it but within a hundred or two hundred years we won't. If a certain kind of progressive granting of rights remains the trend, although, of this progressive arc, one can never be fully certain in all places and all times. In 2003 when I came to Delhi the very mentioning of these words was a taboo in the universities, but in 2023 none of it is a taboo. Even the Supreme Court judges who have refused to grant marriage rights and have transferred it back to the legislature saying that let the parliamentarians decide, but even in that room there is a great

consensus that queer people are ordinary people, their rights should be respected, the State should help them in a variety of manners, if there is active discrimination it should be avoided, there is a need of anti-discrimination bill, the *Garima Grah* should be popularized across different states. So even in a room which is not granting marriage rights, the consensus seems to be that there is wide acceptance. What queers make of this acceptance while other communities rights are shrinking is for the queers to decide. But what I reckon is that this term won't last for very long if the progressive trend continues. By very long, as in, within our lifetimes it will last but after fifty years, hundred years, the term might evaporate as quickly as it came, because hopefully it won't be needed.

Akshaya: The way we are expanding the list of the queer poets, it might happen that one day the queer becomes the canon.

Akhil: The queer is the canon. The thing is, for instance, the usual formatting of an English Literature syllabi was that first we encountered something called Chaucer to Eliot, and then in some papers by the time the Bachelors students got into the third year, there was something called American Literature, African-American writing, Women's writing, Queer writing, as if it is distinct from this canon. But there are now several universities attempting to experiment with even the way they organise the syllabus and in what sequence do the students encounter these entities. And I think there is a claim to be made to stitch together another way of encountering the canon itself so that you don't think of women's writing or queer writing, or racialized writing as necessarily distinct, from something called the canon has to be kept somehow immune, but rather navigating it and interspersing it and informing it, even becoming the canon, in different historical moments, rather than only finding hoary white or savarna dead 'heterosexual' men in order to constitute something called the canon.

Akshaya: So, how do you justify the inclusion of this poem "*Laga Jockey mein Daag*" in the anthology? Are there any queer aesthetic standards?

Akhil: This is a poem by Shakti Milan Sharma called “*Laga Jockey mein Daag*” and I’ll tell you why one has included this poem. Because of a sense of play in it. How many of you have been on some kind of dating app? Like Tinder, Hinge, Bumble. Not Bharat Matrimony, not marriage apps. I see about twenty hands. I am sure there are far more than are ready to raise their hands. So now there is a very peculiar experience which happens on these apps. It is a cluster of highs and lows, crests and troughs, and there are people with - their profile images are tigers, or their profile images are for some reason Harry Potter. People are making all kinds of self-fashioning in this space. And there is a way that for young queer folks who have just migrated to cities not of their parents or family, who for the first time in their lives are outside the structures of surveillance. There is also peculiar joy, whimsy, and the thrill of pleasure which is sometimes close to danger as well that animates these apps and the possibilities it opens up. And Shakti Milan Sharma’s bilingual poem captured that sense for us. I am not interested in the question that is it, for instance, does this poem have the literary grandeur or detailing of an Atwood or a Szymborska or a Kolatkar poem? That’s not the concern, or the point. Does it capture the sense of playfulness and delirious possibility that a dating app makes possible for someone queer, in his early twenties, yes it does. Do you want me to read the poem?

Akshaya: Yeah. Please go ahead.

Akhil: लगा jockey में दाग

लगा jockey में दाग, छुपाऊं कैसे?
cab is unavailable, घर जाऊं कैसे?
jockey का दाग धुलाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
भूल गया सब वचन पिता के
खो गया मैं PR/Grindr पे आके
जाके भाई को quickie का मतलब समझाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
कोरी jockey soul मोरी
Douche है माया जाल

ये दुनिया मेरी fetishes का घर
वो दुनिया boredom का hall
जाके मम्मी से नज़रें मिलाऊं कैसे?
घर जाऊं कैसे?
लागा jockey में दाग, छुपाऊं कैसे ?
cab is still unavailable, घर जाऊं कैसे?

This poem is in response to the song 'Laaga Chunari Mein Daag, sung by Manna Dey.

It is a wonderful poem. Now this is a demonstration of what we were thinking of what constitutes a good poem. A good poem will have the capacity to create community of affect around it, right? I heard at least fifty people in the room laughing along with this poem. Which means in one sense it has already made a claim to your heartbeats. In one sense it has already made a claim to a representation of a certain reality which is that of desire, delirium, and euphoria which this poem is attempting to catch. And it is not written in the meditative register. It is also the first published poem of the poet Shakti Milan Sharma. Wouldn't as queer editors who in early twenty first century have been asked to edit a collection, want to stencil the delirium of the community to which the book belongs. *The world that belongs to us* is the name that we have very pompously given ourselves. Shouldn't it be open to all the coordinates of that world? And Milan Sharma's is one of the coordinates, as indeed there are several other poems which perhaps do not merit scrutiny as to their inclusion which may make claims even by conventional criteria. Perhaps the criteria for this poem are slightly unconventional. And also, you know, there are some poems which speak to us at a certain age in our lives and they are rite of passage of poems that at some point stop speaking to us because our life circumstances alter. Maybe this poem makes the younger people laugh, but maybe some folks who are in their forties or fifties will be like "What exactly is happening in this poem?" And perhaps there is not even a sense of resemblance to anything that can be thought of as part of their lives and that's fine. There are other poems which will speak to them. I think a kind of Catholicism in thinking about what enters any world, for instance, if you look at editions of women writing by Susie Tharu and K Lalitha or other

collections of black, queer, Dalit or women writers, then you will notice that there is allowance of a greater frame of reference, an erring on the side of a greater frame of reference than narrowness of taste, and which is why this poem, sort of, enters.

Akshaya: There is no end to questions. Each poem that you write invites a question. But we stop here. Thanks for a very candid conversation.