



Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena: Interrogating Life through Poetic Vignettes

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A multifaceted and prolific talent, Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena (1927-1983) was a prominent Hindi writer. With his signature wit, satire and communicative economy, he infused Hindi poetry with rare density of observation, aesthetic and activist energy, and compactness of thought and resistive vision. This aspect of his creative oeuvre specially came to fore in his propensity to capture the context at hand through poetic vignettes. He positioned these vignettes as layered life observation and interrogation tools to articulate and unravel the exploitative seams of society. These vignettes also endowed his poetic explorations with structural and communicative economy, analogical astuteness and resistive – against the grain – possibilities. To give his creative-critical endeavours depth, expanse and inclusiveness, and capture the complexities of the context, Saxena would often etch a series of interconnected vignettes. The following translations sample Saxena's poetic propensity for vignettes as 'micro-observations on modern life'.

1

Prayer - 1

No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

I'll earn it in death and disintegration
I'd come back whole after annihilation
No shame, if trodden under-feet in the process
I won't let the mountain collapse
I won't seek safe shelter in any case.
No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

Smell-less flowers never seek fragrance

Nor sharp, standing thorns seek softness
Whatever you gave me was fine
Whatever I now have is just mine.
Sleep, distraught night, now I shall awake
No God, I shall not beg
For your power or help.

Prayer - 2

May the travails of the path be yours,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

May failures be my travel mates
May limitation befall on me as my fate
May happy scenes and sights be yours
May tear-filled, smarting eyes be mine.
May the travails of the path be yours,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

With courage hauled up on my shoulders I say
Let me keep on walking, till you melt my body away
May your creations tread immortal ways
May my life forever be under death's sway
May the travails of the path be your,
May the trailing feat, tiredness be mine.

Prayer - 3

I have to be proud
of my frailties.
I ought to acknowledge
my boundaries.

Each moment I ought to know
What is it that I have to forgo
How much to enjoy, what sad tear to shed
God, help me acknowledge
My joys and adversities

I have to be proud
Of my frailties.

Let there be no such stake
That I possibly cannot take
If my shoulders are burdened, so be it
Nothing should remain unattended beneath.
God, this much I should
Understand about my dreams.
I have to be proud
of my frailties
I ought to remember
my boundaries.

Prayer - 4

This, God, is my only prayer
When I am down, don't appear.

If I stand defiant and tall
Despite your armoured onslaught
Sent me to purgatory for my fault
I would be happy, in heavenly thrall
Pat me for my bravery and courage
If you are compassionate and sage
I don't seek the joys that blind devotion envisage.

Eyes of sadness are vast
Nothing is outside their cast
This galaxy is so very small
How come you are in its thrall.
Grant me a mere tear-drop of life
Take away all the eons and their strife.

2

Dust - 1

You are dust -
The dust trodden under feet.
Rise with the agitated gust,
Be a storm
Fly in their eye
Beneath whose feet you lie.

There is no place
Where you cannot be,
There is none
Who can control your pace.
You are dust
Trodden under feet
Be one with it!

Dust - 2

You are dust
Suck in the dampness of life
Be a termite.

Move through the night
Usher in the light
Through windows,
Doors, ventilators
Onto the wall
Shut off since centuries
From one and all.

You are dust
Draw vitality from the moistness of life
Be a termite, march ahead.

Once you are on the right way
None can sniff your life away.

3

River -1

The whole afternoon
I strolled on your bank
Without knowing:
From where you originate
Whom you plan to meet
What is your depth?
I loved those waves
That arose in you -
Simmering in the sun, laughing
Turning like fish, sliding.
Constantly wondering and asked
Where does this flow vanish
When I scoop you in my palms.

The whole afternoon -
I sat on your warm sands
Which I found cool on removing a layer
That you would bring in wave after wave
And spread them on each other laughing.

The whole afternoon -
I played with shells
That lay scattered in your sand
Kept etching deep and deeper in the sand
And watched how cleanly
Every script is erased slowly.

The evening is setting now
I will presently go
Without knowing, whether you know
That someone walked on your bank
Sat in sand
Played with shells
And watched his script vanishing.

River -2

Whatever water
I can scoop in my palms from your depths
You are only that much to me.
I quench my thirst with just that
With that, I offer oblation to the sun
 Rising within me.
And every time
touching my eyes and head with
the empty palms
I experience you
 And watch you
 Flowing within me.

River - 3

In this seclusion
un-cladding myself
I will jump
Into your surging waves.
This clean body
Will become cleaner.
And then we two
Would leave each other
And depart.

4

Wolf - 1

Wolf's eyes are red.

Gaze at them
Till your eyes begin to burn
And turn red.

What else can you do,
When the wolf is in front of you?

If you turn fugitive and take flight
You will find him standing inside
Only if you survive.

Wolf's eyes are red hot.
And yours?

Wolf - 2

Wolf howls
You lit up the torch.
This is the basic difference
Between you and him
Wolf cannot light up the torch.

Now with the torch ignited
Approach the wolf
It would take flight.

With a million hands holding the torch
March forward to every bush
All wolves would surely be on the run.

Drive them out of the jungle
And leave them in the snow
Hungry wolves will howl at reach other
And tear apart one another.

Wolves will be dead
And you?

Wolf - 3

Wolves would return.

Suddenly
Someone among you would
Turn into a wolf
Its progeny would multiply.

The wolf must return
For you to know yourselves
To recognise the joy of being brave
To learn to light up and carry the torch.

The history of the jungle
Will always evict the wolf from its den
The man in courage and unison stand
Holding the torch ablaze in hand.

History would live
And you too
But what happens to the wolf?

5

Five Urban Tropes

Delhi:

A paper box, exquisitely painted in
watercolours
With a fake diamond inside
Wrapped in genuinely priced cash memo.

Lucknow:

An old, empty vial of perfume
Lying in a makeup box
Presently only a cork in which
Lies decaying.

Banaras:

A talisman tied with an ancient cord
Ripped open on one side
To be used as a hemp box.

Allahabad:

A palmful of trickling Ganges;
Offered as oblation for friends

through the day
And in the name of arts
In the night.

Basti:

A mirror in *paan*-vendor's shop
In some rural fair
Layered with so much dust
That no image can be discerned.

6

Shoe - 1

My shoe is torn
At many places
The dirt pricks
I halt
And ask the shoe -
“Why don't you move forward?”
The shoe replies -
“I am still ready
If you too move!”
I keep shut
How do I tell
That I'm also torn
In different places.

Shoe - 2

Since I
Bought new shoes
My gait has altered
But the ways of the world are still old.
Friends say
I put more stress on my left foot now
But I do so
To avoid the pain in my right foot.

Shoe - 3

He said:
In the shine of my shoe polish
You can see your face.
Agitated I thought
Fortunate are those people
Who don't have a face.
But I had a second thought -
No, those are good people
Who don't wear the shoe?

Shoe - 4

Smeared in tar and gravel
On the road lies
A twisted, bent over, misshapen
Shoe.
I think about those feet
Which this shoe might have secured
And
Bow down in respect.