



Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Collection of Hindi Poems

The Laughing Flames and Other Poems

Ramdarash Mishra



Translated from Hindi by

Umesh Kumar

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The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

*From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi*



SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Ramdarash Mishra (b. 1924): Author
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Contents

Translator's Acknowledgements

ix

Introduction: *The Laughing Flames and Other Poems: A Collection of Multiple Arrivals*

xi

The Laughing Flames	1
I Get no Letters Now	2
The Roadside 'Restaurant'-1	4
The Roadside 'Restaurant'-2	6
A Poem on Women's Plight	8
Global Village	9
The Sunshine	13
Cat, Sparrows and Flowers	15
The Tree and I	17
They are Silent Now	19
Along with Poems	20
The Whole Country has Become Your Village Now	22
The Heights	25
Stone Gods	26
Our Earth	27
Against the Darkness	28
The Flower	29
A Beginning	30
And then One Day	31
Bank Note	33

The Seed	36
Diary	38
Fame	40
The Body vs. Mind	42
A Ray of Hope	43
Laughing out Loud	46
Here Comes the Kawaar	47
The Days Gone By	49
I Search this Light	51
The Temple — Palace	53
The Traffic Signal	56
The House and the Peepal Tree	58
You shall Come Back	60
They are Back	61
The Right Path	62
Let us Search a Well	63
The Money Laughs	64
You Graze in Our Fields	65
The Chair	66
The White Demon	67
Hunger vs. Fast	69
I Know	71
Hanuman	73
God in the Dream	75
Poetry is the Tune of Humanity	76
Poetry Makes us Sensitive	77
Jasmine	78
How Good it Feels	79
Jungle	80
Vasant Panchami	83
After Such a Long Time	85
What is This?	86
Some Independent Verses	88

Translator's Acknowledgements

At the time of writing these lines, the COVID-19 pandemic has created havoc in human life. Literally consigning the whole human population into house arrest, the virus has presented itself to be the most powerful challenge for human race in over a century. Quite strangely, humans—considered to be the most powerful and intelligent of species, find themselves in utter helplessness. The situation seems to have busted quite a few established myths. One of them, of course, is that one does not require nuclear arsenal or other sophisticated weapons to destroy mankind. A sneeze is enough!

The crisis has also opened floodgates for an urgent reassessment of *human condition* and *attitudes*. It is pertinent for us now to introspect and critically evaluate our relationship with nature and fellow human beings. It is not a mere coincidence that the work presented here makes a plea for similar reassessment from a variety of standpoints. It has been my good fortune to translate Ramdarash Mishra's *Aag Ki Hansi* into English. During the course of this translation, I have incurred debt from many quarters. Firstly, I wish to place on record my sincere thanks to Sahitya Akademi for roping me in for this project. I am thankful to Prof. Anita Singh for her sincere encouragement and faith in my abilities.

An early draft of this translation was prepared during my tenure as British Council's Charles Wallace Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), the University of Edinburgh between September–December 2019.

I was there to work on a separate project but the institute's generosity in allowing me special access to the office premises on Saturdays and Sundays provided much needed space and privacy to work on the text. I am grateful to the staff and Co-Fellows at IASH, especially, Prof. Steve Yearley and Dr. Ben Fletcher-Watson for looking after my comforts — necessary for thinking and writing. At Edinburgh, parts of this translation were read by/to Maria Trompers and Helen Tyrrell. Those parts have been benefitted by their suggestions.

I would like to thank my poet-friend Basudhara Roy, for reading the early draft of the translation and pointing out missed nuances at some places. I am no less thankful to the anonymous reviewer appointed by Sahitya Akademi. The comments have enriched the text. The onus of problems and niggles — remaining still, however, entirely mine.

I wish to appreciate the perennial support and encouragement of my companion Nilekha Salunke. She has always been the first reader and critic of whatever little I write or translate. Pramod Padwal, Namdeo Gapate, Tariq Khan, Dipti R. Pattanaik, Manoj Yadav, Jagadeesan T, Hephzibah Israel and Rahul Chaturvedi for having faith in me — sometimes more than what I deserve. Dipti R. Pattanaik read the introduction and suggested constructive changes. I am thankful to him.

Ramdarash Mishra Ji has been very enthusiastic and supportive during the course of the translation. He has been just a call away to answer my calls and doubts. I am thankful to him.

I am grateful to my family especially my mother. Without her care and support, it would not have been possible to complete this translation in the allotted time. The committed translations of Maya Pandit have had a strong positive influence on me over the years. I humbly dedicate this translation effort to her.

— Umesh Kumar
Varanasi

Introduction

*The Laughing Flames and Other Poems:
A Collection of Multiple Arrivals*

Umesh Kumar

Of 'Missing' Writers: In lieu of an Introduction

Every translation carries a story. A story often relegated to the backstage unless the translator has the willingness and also the 'space of her own' to narrate it. Opportunely, I seem to have both. What follows in the following few pages is an account, delineating the text and context of *Aag Ki Hansi* in English translation. A collection of poems in Hindi, *Aag Ki Hansi* was first published in 2012. Subsequently, it was given the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015.

When Sahitya Akademi approached me for the English translation of *Aag Ki Hansi* (*The Laughing Flames and Other Poems*) in 2018, I was both anxious and excited. One of the reasons for my nervousness was my unfamiliarity with Ramdarash Mishra's literary repertoire. In fact, I heard his name for the first time! Without a doubt, it made me realise my comparative illiteracy. With humility and concern, I do not hesitate to submit that comparative illiteracy is a common

trend in the scholars of my generation, if not that of the past.¹ And I am not entirely sure about the past because how can the present be so drastically independent of the past? Indeed unfortunate, the literary and aesthetic relationship of 'give and take' among Indian languages including English is shrinking by the day.² However, I can only dare to speak on the English literary scene for I am a part of it.

Barring a few exceptions, students and teachers of English departments are hardly interested in getting to know the health and 'affairs' of Indian languages. The structural entitlements bestowed on the learning of English language and literature during the colonial period seems to linger on, still. The stakeholders of this learning continue to wear their 'Englishness' like a jewel over bodies and minds—turning a blind eye to the literatures produced in our own languages. We must understand that the actual realisation of an idea called 'Indian Literature'—an important mandate even for Sahitya Akademi, cannot be realised fully unless there is a formation of powerful dialogue not only amongst English and Indian languages but also between Indian languages themselves. Sahitya Akademi, through its varied projects and publications, is attempting to bridge this gap for a long time

1. For instance, in an interview with me, noted Odia short-story writer Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik connects multilingual proficiency with society's material and utilitarian needs. According to him, today, most of the teachers/scholars are trained in such a way that they are extremely competent in one language and not much in the second. People in the past learnt multiple languages with equal proficiency because it was their need. Pattanaik maintains that the kind of social engagements that we make today, we can live 'meaningfully' with one language only. However, for the sake of creating meaningful intellectual capital we need more and more scholars who are conversant in one global language and at the same time deeply rooted in the culture and literature of their own language(s). See, Umesh Kumar, *Dialogues on Translation with Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik* (2020: forthcoming).

2. I have collaboratively written about the fallout of this growing phenomenon elsewhere. See, Padwal and Kumar (2019:13-14).

now. At a personal level, I felt Akademi's invitation to be a valued opportunity that could link a (local) Indian writer with the global. On a different plane, attempts such as these will also decolonize the (English) literary studies in India.¹ I am aware that translations solely will not be able to jettison the colonized landscape. However, my purpose here, like many others, is to foreground well-meaning translation activity as one of the potential tools for decolonization.

Still, not knowing Mishra Ji all these years was a personal shock. More, for I have continued to relatively identify myself with Hindi literature. My assumptions of keeping a track of the recent and past developments in Hindi literary scene went for a toss. In retrospect, I realise that I was trapped into the *buzzwords* and *buzz names* of Hindi literary criticism, propagated especially, by the celebrated critics. To be fair, this buzz culture is not specific to Hindi criticism alone but 'an ailment' in all Indian literatures. I shall return to this observation with evidence in a short while.

The arrival of 'modernity' in Indian languages started to bifurcate literary production in somewhat two groups. The first group, as we know—has been in existence all along—identifying to a certain degree with the so-called 'classical' mode of writing. The primary 'purpose of which has always been to entertain the readers coupled with the classical purpose of developing the aesthetics and sensibility in mankind. It is like a *Mirror* to humanity—as the well-known American critic M. H. Abrams would have called.

It would be unfair to say if the second group abandoned all these 'classical modules' completely. But there is no denying the fact that a certain categorization of literary

1. In this connection, the pioneering works of two bilingual critics, Bhalchandra Nemade and G.N. Devy is well known. Heavily rooted in India's *bhasha* traditions, their intervention consistently attempts to liberate Indian literary criticism from the overarching influences of European dominance.

output began to emerge particularly from the second decade of the twentieth century, with a suffix called *vaad* (-ism) attached to it. Breaking away from the first group on a variety of parameters, the initial phase of the second group was termed 'modernism'. Likewise, as a part of it, Hindi poetry went through a series of successions namely—*Chhayavaad* (literally shaded, approximated with the word romanticism in English?), *Pragativaad* (progressive), *Saathottari Kavita* (literally the poems written after the sixties), *Samkaalin Kavita* (contemporary poetry) etc. The mere nomenclature of these literary 'movements' (termed so by the critics and literary historians) is sufficient enough to reveal their 'focussed' and exclusive treatment of the subject matter. The fashion of similar trends in literary production across genres started to manufacture and define literature in a new light now. Needless to say, these diverse literary trends came into existence with their own requirements and commandments in relation to the theme, language and subject matter of literary production, among others.

It needs to be mentioned that the class of critics that followed the '-ism' literary productions were also divided on a variety of lines and ideologies. Yet, their writings have been instrumental in creating intellectual-literary capital for a host of writers. It is because of such influential tendencies that I have termed them as carriers of 'buzz culture' in the beginning. To further understand the complexity of the issue, the possibility of an alternative reading of literary histories should be explored. For I assume, such an exercise has the dormant potential to lay bare the underlying politics of critical circles. For instance, the issues of over-representation and under-representation are perennial issues continuing to cast clouds over the ethical choices of the critics. Hindi literature is not bereft of examples where a particular group of critics promoted a particular group of writers. If an X writer failed to be swayed by the reigning ideologies of the critics—the critics would also see him excluded from the canon formation. In

other words, he will be excluded from the buzz culture that grips the popular imagination.

Ramdarash Mishra appears to be a victim of this buzz culture. During a creative career spanning almost five decades, he resisted pigeonholing himself under a flag or a group; a particular ideology or an—ism. His sole intention has been to walk with time and the conscience of the society—of which he considered himself to be an important spokesperson. Of course, apart from a handful of critics, the so-called 'mainstream' critics ignored his writings. Holding positions across publishing and other power channels in academe and research, the mainstream critics can determine the writers they wish to ignore. Unfortunately, the younger scholars/readers like me continue to consume the judgments of such critics without casting an inch of suspicion. Sadly, not only we consume it for ourselves but also pollinate it across generations. At this juncture, a question must be raised: if writers are held answerable to the critics, why shouldn't the critics be held accountable for their pronouncements? It is high time that we also devise mechanisms and methods to crosscheck and counter the hegemony of mainstream critics in the realm of literary production. It is in situations like this that the role of Sahitya Akademi becomes much more critical. Translations like these will break the glass ceilings of buzz culture and will provide visibility to hitherto 'ignored' writers like Ramdarash Mishra.

Ramdarash Mishra: A poet of humanity and much more

During one of our conversations¹, Ramdarash Ji shared one of his ghazals² (not part of this collection), which in his own words describes him the best. It is worth quoting here

1. The perspectives appearing on behalf of Ramdarash Mishra during the course of this introduction are based on these conversations.
2. The original title in Hindi is: *Banaya hai maine ye ghar dheere-dheere*. My translation.

in full though I am not an enthusiast of quotations during conversations. Barring these lines, I refrain from quoting in the rest of my discussion — a deliberate attempt not to play spoilsport before the actual poems!

I made my home, at a snail's pace
The wings of my dreams opened too, at a snail's pace
I neither kicked nor tossed anyone
The journey of my life passed too, at a snail's pace
The place you reached by leapfrogging others
I reached there too, at a snail's pace
Never I wished to defeat the mountains
My wish was to walk slowly, keeping my head high
Never I attempted to outsource my pain
Drank my own poison, at a snail's pace
I too cried lonely at every failure
My wound healed too, at a snail's pace
I carried the soil from my fields
A town emerged from it, at a snail's pace
O life! Could you stop me?
I too got everything, what if at a snail's pace?

Ramdarash Mishra was born on 15th August 1924 in Dumri village of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Like most belonging to his time, childhood was spent in poverty and in the scarcity of other earthly requirements. According to Mishra Ji, one reason for this deprivation could have been his father's attitude that refused to surrender in front of material needs. In his own words, "My father was a misfit for our world. He was innocent and emotional; loved his music and social commitments only. Whenever he would see pain and misery, he will not waste time thinking about it. Rather, he would go and join that pain and misery."

Similarly, Mishra Ji recalls his mother to be a very hardworking woman accompanied by a strong religious

orientation. Like her husband, she too had a strong hand at music and often led the village women during festivals and religious rituals. She carried colossal knowledge of folk wisdom especially that of folk tales. It seems Ramdarash Mishra inherited the best from his parents: sensitive and committed attitude from his father; music and wisdom from his mother. The music of his poetry and the numerous folk elements that appear in his creative writings — he credits it all to his rural upbringing. A self-confessed rural inhabitant all his life, Mishra Ji displays a strong urge to go back to the village. Village — he recalls, is the *buniyad* (foundation) of his existence.

Ramdarash Mishra has been a voluminous writer. There is hardly a genre of literature that he did not lay his hands on. Be it poetry, novel, short story, essays, travelogue, diary, memoirs, autobiography — he wrote enough and wrote consistently. All his collected works are now published in fourteen volumes. It is an impossible task within the scope of this introduction to touch upon all these genres. Therefore, it will help our cause to focus on Ramdarash Mishra — the poet. Further, it is not a mere coincidence that he primarily identifies himself a poet. However, even in poetry, I could trace twenty published volumes. Naturally, we shall focus on *The Laughing Flames* here. It is not only one of his latest collections but as Ramdarash Ji said, "[*The Laughing Flames*] is a condensed version of most of my life concerns".

At 88, Ramdarash Mishra published the first edition of *The Laughing Flames*. The collection chronicles the poems written between 2009-2012. It is heartening to know that even in his late nineties — considered typically the twilight of one's life from all perspectives; Ramdarash Mishra's collection displays a unique poetic freshness, landscaped on the fertile soil of human experience. He is a poet of humanity, for humanity. Most of the poems here chant the songs of life and nature in varied ambiences. Without a doubt, he celebrates the village life but his empathy with the 'ruins' of

the city-life is on display too. On the one hand, he finds it difficult to conceal his nostalgia for the idyllic rural life and on the other, he is extremely troubled by the negative vibes of contemporary urban life.

Nowhere in *The Laughing Flames* does Ramdarash Mishra come across as a poet of superheroes. He sides with the troubled, suppressed and the ones in need of a spokesperson. For instance, in the title poem, the poet argues: the fire of the hearth does not spread fire; does not burn humanity. On the contrary, it extinguishes the fire of the hungry bellies. Once the hunger is pacified—the same fire now metamorphosis into a gentle smile—visible on the lips of same hungry bellies. On the contrary, the so-called members of the elite class too unleash a ‘gentle smile’ but none is able to decode its pretension. Their ‘gentle’ ‘sober laughter’ ultimately turns into a mighty fire without coming into notice—engulfing all directions. Sadly, innocent people never get to know the modus operandi of this deep fabrication. They get swayed by the outer illusion weaved by the elites. Eventually, the illusion makes everyone believe that the ‘mighty fire’ must have been originated from the hearth i.e. the working class. No one even has the slightest doubt that the genesis of this havoc could have been administered by the ‘gentle laughter’ of the ‘gentlemen’ elite. With his subtle application of fire metaphor and pungent satire, the poet attempts to provoke as well as sanitize the readers against the prevailing class stereotype in our society. Irrespective of the situation and the context, it is only the poor who are ultimately held accountable for every misfortune that they are forced to confront. The rich, without failure and fear, are able to deposit their loot in the safe heavens of Swiss banks and also manage the safe passage of exile if the need arises.

The title poem also sets the tone for a number of other poems in the collection, spread sporadically on the concepts of *varg-chetna* (class consciousness) and *varg-sangharsh* (class struggle). It is the common man and his concerns that sustain

the poetic cosmos of *The Laughing Flames*. As one would see, the central emphasis of quite a few poems concerns with the issues of poverty and hunger—juxtaposed directly with the relative concepts of *ann* (food) and *shram* (work/production).

Closely aligned with the poet’s concern of *varg-chetna* is the exploitative economy of the modern marketism. However, Ramdarash Mishra makes a distinction between market and marketism. To live in the market (economy) and not be influenced by it is one thing; to become one with the market while living with the market is another. He once said, “I could neither become one with the city even after living in the city; nor could I associate with the market after being with the market for that long.” He considers market to be an essential part of people’s lives as long as it is in tune with people’s essentials and not with their surplus and accumulation. For example, the weekly *bazaar* in a village setup is not only a site of sales and purchase but also an important platform for socialization. The poet does not deny that in urban life too one has to venture out to markets for essentials. But the urban market journey to *bazaar* cannot be undertaken without negotiating an army of advertising hoardings that come on the way. The modern marketism encourages people to consume more and more, accumulate more than what they require and eventually turn their homes into a dumping ground. Ramdarash Ji alerts us about the increasing intrusion of market in our homes. A few poems in this collection highlight this growing trend and alienation of modern man vis-à-vis marketism.

Ramdarash Mishra establishes close links between human beings and nature in *The Laughing Flames*. Against the exploitative machinery of capitalist market forces that continue to milk nature and its invaluable resource, the poet attempts to revisit the umbilical cord between nature and her varied species, including humans. Some of the titles in the present collection reveal this connection: *The Sunshine; Cut, Sparrows and Flowers; The Tree and Me; Our Earth; The Flower; The Seed; Jasmine*. The poems here advocate

a close-knit parallel co-existence between man, nature and other species. The readers will discern these poems to be a bit different from the other eco-poems known to them. Refraining from discussing nature either an enabler or victim, the poet is arguing for her non-negotiable presence amid us. In a similar streak, a host of other poems discuss the existence of God but not in the normative theist mode. Poems like — *The Stone Gods; The Temple Palace; The House and the Peepal Tree; Hanuman* may sound normatively religious by titles but in fact very subversive in nature. Through these poems, the poet is successful in revisiting religious symbols and infuses a rational angle to their long-standing existence.

Any good art or the artist must possess high levels of self-reflexivity. She must not leave anything unexamined. Ramdarash Ji keeps his eyes glued to the acts/art of poetry as well as the poet. Strangely, in poems such as *Poetry Makes Us Sensitive; Poetry is the Tune of Humanity; Along with Poems; A Poem on Women's Plight* he finds both the parties wanting and gives a shout out to poet and his poetry — compelling an examination of artist's role and character in the society. Such an examination, Ramdarash Ji believes, has been a work-in-progress throughout his creative writing career.

In the course of translating *Aag Ki Hansi*, I got an opportunity to know Ramdarash Ji as a poet and a person. However, in retrospect, my own assessment fails to make a difference between the two. During a telephonic conversation, Ramdarash Ji said once, “*Ab toh srijan hee saans ban gayi hai* (poetry (writing) has become my life now)”. I deliberately use the word poetry as a substitute for writing here. On the brink of entering his 97th birthday, Ramdarash Ji hardly ventures into any other genre now except a bit of diary writing. On the writings that I could chance upon in the last two years, he came before me as a writer who wishes to see the world changed — for the better. A life-long defender of the ordinary, he enthusiastically discussed his future projects with me once. One of these is to write poems on the often forgotten and

neglected — yet no less important items in our households: a spoon; mug; gas stove; flower pots, doorbell and so on. Picking up broken things and energies rather than discarding them, Ramdarash Ji's poetry and concerns strongly remind me of the Japanese *Kintsugi*. Like all writers in the classical mould, the poet in him wishes to see us turn fairer, wiser and kinder. *The Laughing Flame* shall go a long way in proving that. Hopefully.

Translating *Aag Ki Hansi* into English: A Note

All endeavours of translation carry their own opportunities and challenges. In the past few years, I have made humble — though no less sincere, attempts at translating fiction between the following language pairs: Hindi-English-Marathi — on either ways. Actually, *Aag Ki Hansi* is my first attempt at translating poetry in any language. When I first came to know that the assignment is a collection of poems, I got jitters! Nonetheless, the initial sample text translation sent by the Akademi eased my nerves. I felt at home to see the prosaic nature of *Aag Ki Hansi*.

Ramdarash Ji once told me that he always makes an attempt to walk with his poems all along — so as to establish a conversation with his characters and concerns. Similarly, almost all the poems in this collection are composed in a dialogic style producing a distinct dramatic effect. To enhance this effect, he makes ample use of *thaa, thhey, thhee, hai* (was, were, is etc.). In the English translation as well, I have made conscious efforts to keep the spirit of the original without infusing the usual standardisation of English. There was a temptation to costume the translation according to the rhythms of English. Indeed, I translated a few poems keeping that ‘coaxing’ in mind initially. However, a revisit to those poems made me look at my translation effort ‘too small’. To me, translation provides new clothes to the source text, not the soul. Likewise, it hardly makes any sense to exchange the soul, just for the craving of a few new clothes?

Consequently, the English readers will hardly see any full stops or other punctuation marks in the poems. In the Hindi version, Ramdarash Mishra seems to desert a poem rather than completing it. Or maybe he seeks to create a continuum across all his poems through their open-ended structures? All the poems in the collection are individually dated except for the last two. As a translator, I consider these stylistic features important for the overall cosmos of the collection. Thus, I have consciously retained them in English too. I have taken the liberty to improvise on the English title so as to accommodate poems that are distinct from the ethos and concerns of the title poem.

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The Laughing Flames (*Aag Ki Hansi*)

I can't be befooled, for I know
The fire of hearth produces only
The hot and blazing rotis¹
Rotis that extinguish the fire of the belly
And slowly and gradually
Transcend into MAN'S LAUGHTER
But YOUR LAUGHTER is not the same
Look into your mirror gentleman
There you will see – how gently and slowly
A different fire is making an appearance
Through your calm and sober laughter
And how slowly and gradually it is engulfing
All the directions into its lap
By turning itself into a mighty-fire
And full credit to your mystery
For people still think—
That the hearth unleashed the fire
Your mystery is beautiful, O mysterious!

(20.9.2009)

1. A type of flat, south Asian bread. In this context, it seems to be made from the wheat flour.

I Get no Letters Now (*Ab Nahi Aati Chitthiyaan*)

I do not wait for the post any more
For now it comes like an unwanted luggage
Again by today's post, I have received—
Some known-unknown magazines
Some unwanted books
Some invitation letters for seminars and conferences
And also—my telephone bill
But still, I did not get any letter

I know, today one can communicate one's feelings
With a mobile
But letters are letters, isn't it?
When the deeper thoughts of human soul
Enter into his fingers in the form of ripples
And then those ripples enter into his writing
The writing then starts to create the dialogue with the soul
In varied shapes, then,
A letter does not remain merely a piece of paper
It becomes an emblem of man's soul

Letters do not become numb by speaking only once
They continue to speak intermittently
They sleep to wake up again
As the time passes, their existence becomes deeper
And their fragrance speaks of the distant past

Eventually the letters are turned into a mirror
In which the present delves into its past
The time does not remain time then
It becomes a stream of sympathy

(25.9.2009)

The Roadside 'Restaurant'-1 (*Dhaba-1*)

Decorated at all corners, this colourful and mesmerising market
Affluent with their fat bellies pass through it
The market welcomes them with open arms, lures them
And after some time, clinging to their pockets
It comes along — to their homes
In these homes, so many markets are already enjoying themselves
The *new* market too occupies some space
And the people in it are pushed a little bit more —
Outside of their home
Till a day comes when they feel
That the market is in their home and they are in the market

Silently at the same market's footpath
Has emerged a little Dhaba¹
That wakes up every morning with the music of tinkling utensils
The fiery coal brightens its hearth
The boiling of daal-chawal² along with the vegetable curry
And the red-hot rotis coming from the hearth
The weary labourers come and sit on the broken benches
After filling their bellies with some money
They leave again for work
Meanwhile, having homes within their eyes

1. A roadside food stall with humble facilities.
2. Daal is a split grain (lentils) used in Indian cookery. Chawal is rice.

The pahadi¹ workers of the Dhaba
Begin to count the money
Their eyes brim with the distant mountains
Their homes on the mountains
Old parents
Young wife, innocent children
Images begin to float on the money they hold
Their hearts get soaked with affection
It seems the mountains are calling them
Disguised in the voice of their homes...

(12.3.2010)

1. Those belonging to hills and mountains.

Inflation ruining their lives
Their pains now merge with each other
Laughter converge with each other
Who waits for Holi here?

(13.3.2010)

The Roadside 'Restaurant'-2 (Dhaba-2)

Two tall houses
Standing adamantly against each other –
Roaring in silence
Years ago, it seems
Their egos clashed
On a petty issue
In between passed many a Holi¹
None could bridge the distance among them

Between them is a crossing
Just near the Dhaba
That too witnesses petty clashes on everyday basis –
The taller with the dwarf
The thinny with the fatso
The rickshaw with the rehadi²
One drunkard with another
The crossing yells
As if the storm has come
Next day I see
All of them sitting
On the benches of Dhaba
Talking
About their homes

1. A Hindu spring festival celebrated with colours.
2. Small cart, made usually by assembling four bicycle tyres.

A Poem on Women's Plight (*Nari Yaatna Par Kavita*)

Sitting within the closed doors
He was writing a poem on women's plight
The floor was littered with cigarette butts—
Matching equally with his flaming thoughts
Like a true companion
The liquor beside was cherishing his mood

There was a knock on the door
Opening the door his wife saw—
A woman draped in rags
Is she a woman or an embodiment of pain
“Who are you?” asked the wife
“I have come from the village
I want to see my man
Who came here after abandoning me”
The poet recognised the voice
He shouted at the top of his voice—
“Who is there Prabha crowing incessantly
Give something and throw her out
The rhythm of my poem is breaking.”

(1.4.2010)

Global Village (*Vishwagraam*)

Global Village
What a beautiful word it was
It gave goosebumps to my heart
Aha, after so many centuries
Our idea of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’ is taking shape
Not only my country
But the whole world is now transforming into a village

And then the mobile rang
Damn it! The same number rings throughout the day
And why blame only this number
There are many that have created havoc in our lives
I have always been a man of few needs
They are fewer in my retirement days
Like me, my needs remain shrunk within
The four walls now
But this mobile keeps me in a dreamy world
Promising new consumptions every day
It wants to lure me towards the new offers
Makes me listen new romantic songs of cinema
Keeps me entrapped through its spicy gossips and poems
And slowly and gently
Squeezes my old pocket towards its dead end

However annoyed I am, I cannot scold it
For it never tells me the source from where all this originates?

Yes, Global Village

Village is such a lovely word
The village that I had lived
Still floats as music in my consciousness
However broken, it was still a home
That housed the continuous blessings of my mother
The guidance of my father
The companionship of my siblings
It imbibed the happy and sad stories of my village
Admitted, the whole village suffered from lacks and deficits
Forlorn, disheartened, an emblem of calamities
But peoples' hands were enjoined with each other
The eyes showed villagers' soulful connection
Their hearts showed the balminess of the festivals
The warmth of their relations was at its peak
Every man had his individual colour
And so many individual colours
Would create a unified colour
The closeness among the adjacent villages
Was difficult to miss
The seasons would come and go
But the unison of the villages would stay
Where the stranger of one village
Could slip into another without a fuss

So how pleasing it was to know
That the whole world is converting into a village
That it will embody the kinship of a village
One's happiness and pain will be pain and happiness of the other
All will uplift the weak in the family
If one home be in dark

The neighbour will pass on one of his lamps
The venoms of religion, community, caste, nationality
All will succumb to the expansion of the global village

I just plunged into this dream
But the child came and switched on the T.V.
The romantic and illusionary market lay bare in front of me
And there was again a knocking on the door
What I saw — a salesman
He was in hurry to dump
The new products of a company on my family
That none of us required

Slowly and gradually the mystery began to make it clear
That the tempting palace of the global village rested
Not on the village empathy but on commercialisation

I admit
Village and market always had a very close and soulful connection
In village the market would erupt once in a week
People would wait for it desperately —
Especially for those things
That made house a home
Such as dal-chawal, salt-oil
Spices-veggies, cloths-detergents
Indigenous make-up items for women
And many such things
The village would move towards the nearest town for certain things
Such as medicines, utensils and for the stationary items
As the times changed
Slowly the needs of the village too started to increase
And its association with the city market got deeper and deeper
These new needs were inevitable too
The market did not impose them
It was from the womb of the village that they originated

But now?

Now the developed countries of the world are spreading
Colourful mysteries of market into the *Third World*
A kind of neo colonisation
Things manufactured by them
Are becoming indispensable even when they are not needed
Under this heavy spell of buying
The market is entering into peoples' homes
And they are self-exiled into the market
True, the world is becoming one
But only in the sense of the market
The uniform market of the global village

In this village

You don't have the aroma of the bygone villages
It does not have its varied individual colours
Here, man has no connection with his roots
In this village, man is no man; he is either a seller or a buyer
Human emotions are converted into things
In our country too
The chariot of economic progress is moving smoothly—
Under a certain romantic delusion
With the following riders onboard—
Politics, Religion, Business Houses, Media
And the glittering faces of the administration
And people from below
Are watching this chariot without a wink
And asking each other—
Whose chariot is this, brother, and where is it going?

Amidst this chaos and turmoil
Rises a melancholic Pen
Singing the melody of its land.

(20.1.2011)

The Sunshine (Dhoop)

After long, the Sun is smiling today
It was indeed the coldest time
The fog-wrapped earth was in a frightened state
The chilly winds would come uninterrupted
To settle in in our closed-door rooms,
The road was in a state of shock
The cold beaten lives were slithering on it
The trains were standing frightened or crawling
The winglets of the airplanes were not opening
Bodies were numb, consciousness blocked
In my closed door, I kept thinking —
About those
Who would be sleeping on the footpaths and pavements
Draped in coarse clothed quilts and ragged blankets
The next morning would not be waking many of them
Who can understand your mystery, O mysterious
You send some people on this earth
Only to be victimized by the cruelty of society and nature

I am a writer
Withholding the pain of inside and outside
My pen tries to move on
It makes me realise the sense of my being
But in this coldest time even she remained stiflingly crouched

Time kept on moving—
Leaving behind a sense of meaninglessness in me

How pleasing it is looking today
Defeating the monstrous shackles of cold
Finally we have the Sunshine
She is providing warmth to the body
And injecting new vibrations in the human consciousness
The roads are busy once again
And so is the road in front
Hosting different clusters of people
Talking and arguing with each other

The school children are not shrinking in cold anymore
They are like blooming sunflowers now
Chattering and shouting in the Sun
The desolation of the trees is swept away too
With the songs of the birds
The sunshine is caressing the bodies sleeping on the footpath
As if asking — “Hope you are fine.”

My pen woke up with her pandiculations
And is asking —
Let me roam around in all corners of this happiness —
From the city to the village, let me go and see
The flower laden crops and the dancing butterflies on them
The overhead blue sky and the showering of his blessings
Let me write the tale of sunshine
See, o see, how happy I am
A bit farther, I can hear the footsteps of spring coming nearer.

(22.1.2011)

Cat, Sparrows and Flowers (*Billi, Chidiya aur Phool*)

There sits a Cat, under the tree of my cramped garden
Ill-treated by the hot Sun
She returns, even after repeated expulsions
Her presence is a bad dream for the Sparrows
They absent themselves from our tree now...
My wife continues to wait for them though
Carrying the feed in her hands
But knows she well that the Cat is the TERROR
So, with a stick in her hand
She runs behind the terror
I am very happy
That the sparrows don't show up now
In fact, one day I too hurled a mudstone at them
They ran away, in fear, I remember
It was my revenge...
For they gobbled the fresh green leaves
Of all the marigold flowers that I planted
My marigolds!
Left stranded — with their disabled bodies — crying
My marigolds...
They are the conscience of my aesthetics
They blossom in Falgun¹
And so am I — in their company

¹. A month in the Hindu calendar that corresponds with February/March in the Gregorian calendar.

I put myself in the midst of marigolds
Their radiance transfers to my eyes
And so does their fragrance in my breath
Marigolds water my cold, frozen, creative sensibilities
And my heart starts to dance, suddenly.
And these sparrows!
Destroy the vehicles of my creativity
Even after surviving on the feed of my house
My pain and anger knows no bounds...
The cat enters in the garden, once again
My wife is after the terror of her sparrows, again
Seeing me laughing with sarcasm, she said —
“You could feel the pain of your flowers
Not the life of my sparrows?
They survive on my food
Are flowers more important than the food?
And when the sparrows splash together
In the water kept by me
The fluttering sounds of their wings
The melodies of their songs
Is no less than the composition of an epic
For me ...
And you don't feel an impulse of aesthetics in them?
Everyday in their company
Feels like a festival to me”

I don't know what happened to me
I too started to chase the Cat, suddenly, with a stick.

(24.1.2011)

The Tree and I (Ped aur Main)

Once wandering lonely, I saw-
Sapling of a Mango tree, struggling in isolation
Seeing me it called —
“Thirsty I am. Fetch me some water”
From then onwards
I started to quench its thirst, everyday
Even guarded it with a tree-guard
Continued talking to it, every now and then
During my habitual wanderings...
Today, it is a full-grown TREE
In the glory of its youth
Many a people sit under it
To cool themselves off from the unkind sun
They exchange their tales and stories
Under its patronage
The life-stricken fragrance of its flowers and fruits
Mix with that of its refugees’
And on its young branches
The young girls hang their swings
Their youthful spirits travel far and wide
And somewhere on its branches
When the nightingale sings with ease
Every part of the tree comes alive

I have not gone on that site for a while
In fact, I don't go there at all now
Today I reached there, in my dream
And there it was — the Tree, as if asking —
“Why don't you come friend
To take the fruits of my existence, now?
After all, I exist because of you, isn't it?
I said-
“O kind friend, I only come — in so many different faces
‘Not everything is done for the self’
And who knows it better than you?
Do you ever live for yourself?”

(26.1.2011)

They are Silent Now (Ab Ve Chup Hain)

The poets continued to sing
In the praise of their poems
Though the poems themselves were silent
In the individual and collective chaos of such poets
He was absent — as were his poems

They are silent now
Their poems had always been silent
He is also silent, like ever before
But his poems are speaking now.

(18.3.2011)

Along with Poems (*Kavita ke Saath*)

In common parlance, he is a BIG poet
In his rule-bound verse
Rests the nuances of art itself
Deep beneath his rules are caged
Many silver lines, fluttering to break free
There is an unprecedented race
To praise him more, and more
Every CLEVER poet wants to pass
Not through his poems but by him
Dying to praise him
He flutters his honey-dipped tongue

I am made helpless by my desi mind
That reads poems and life alike
I know
If I say what I want to
The CLEVER people will laugh at my ignorance
I remain silent therefore
And walk silently along the poems unbound by rules
They carry the pain of my soil
Weight of my air
In them I see the transparency of my water
Warmth of my fire
And the laid out extension of my sky

They carry my dreams
I feel to have been walking with poems
That belong and relate to me
And you see — how well they reciprocate.

(21.03.2011)

The Whole Country has Become Your Village Now (*Poora Desh Tumhara Gaon Ho Gaya Hai*)

How badly I remember my village today
The physical constraints of not being there
Are becoming deeper
And so is my desire and remembrance of village

Though it is not unfamiliar to hear now
That my villagers are shrinking too
Towards the neighboring cities
And the homes they leave behind
Which earlier used to live amicably
Are fighting their heads out
...Ghurr....!!! Ghurr....!!!
The dark times of political instability
Flies over their heads like the dark demons
The fragrance of the crops...
Which used to be common in Chaitra¹
Nowhere to be found now
Neither one sees those melodies of Chaitra
Machines do everything now
Seasons do come, with their signature music

1. The first month as per the Hindu calendar. It corresponds with March/April in the Gregorian calendar.

They stand, undecided – on the village borders
As if asking...where are the trees?
That displayed the signs of our arrival
The festivals come, even now
But they vanish without singing their tunes
For the T.V. can sing now – on their behalf
In fact, the T.V. can house everything
Even all the houses of the village in it
But what to do with the village
That resides in me?
Every now and then it cries for me
Yes, the whole village suffered from lacks and deficits
But it had no dearth of voices
The farms...
Gardens...
Ponds...
Village paths
All would sing in tandem
In anticipation of the seasons and festivals
And every home would look like a bright candle
All of us covered our distance
Sometimes through the feet of our companions
These barren feet of mine
Still have the repositories of those times

Perhaps this is the reason
That my village calls
I too feel like going back to its lap
Before death beholds me in its own
I am curious to see – the ones who are still alive
I am curious to see – what stories time has written on them
Let me witness the changing times in my village
Let me see how much it is illuminated by the new dawn
The metamorphoses of the village trails into roads
Lead...
I wish to know – where?

The hut in the village continues to call me
The one that shaped my childhood—
It was the site of our happiness, miseries, and dreams
It had the blessings of my mother
Warmth of my father
And the companionship of my siblings
I remember still—the nights
And the survey of the night sky
With mother on my side
What a sight it used to be
To see the birds returning to their nests
The uneven walls of our hut
Might still have the marks of my breath
The hut was dumpy and small
But it could always accommodate us all

I have a wish
That I should have my final breath
In the lap of my village
My body should dissolve in its soil
But then someone speaks
From inside—You stupid!
Haven't you realized that you are carrying
The soil of your village, all these years
From one city to the other
And in this process
The whole country has become your village now.

(15.4.2011)

The Heights (*Unchaeet*)

Stairs over stairs. Just stairs ...more stairs
How excited he was
After reaching such a proud height
With his hysterical laugh
He looked down at the earth
And those who were present there before him
Welcomed him in mystery wrapped tones—
Welcome! Welcome! In this great wonderland

But why he has started to feel lonely
All of a sudden
Every moment he lives now
In the fear of falling down
In his dreams—someone steals him
From his own self
He wakes up many a times
And can't sleep at all.

(4.4.2010)

Stone Gods (Devtaa)

The stone-gods were sleeping
In ever illuminating colourful stone-houses
Their devotees continue to break their heads
On the stone-gods
For the sake of wishes they nurtured
Witnessing all this, I returned home in emptiness
But as I entered in my kitchen
The grater-stone cried—
“Where have you been?
I am here. Waiting for you...”

(14.4.2010)

Our Earth (Dhartee)

Our Earth: Plain, broad, muddy
It has everything: hunger, thrust
And a continuous quest for survival
But still, all of us walk on it
There isn't a fear of falling down
Look -so much glitters in the sky
But there are no companions with it.

(14.4.2010)

Against the Darkness (*Andhere ke Virudh*)

Aligning with different groups
They continued shouting against the darkness
At the top of their voice
But slowly and gradually, one by one
They too fell in the same darkness
Seated amongst them now – the DARKNESS
Not only became deeper
But was laughing too, at their expense.

But HE continued to walk through in silence
Carrying a mashaal¹ as his companion
He wasn't alone now
However small, a light was with him
And with every ray of this light
The DARKNESS was trembling
It was his turn now to have a gentle smile
At the expense of DARKNESS.

(15.4.2010)

1. Oil torch

The Flower (*Phool*)

The existence of the living and the dead
Was gobbled by the dark night
Its blind darkness was drinking
All the drops of life
But somewhere, one FLOWER
Was bathing in the glory of its fragrance
It was hardly bothered
If people noticed it
Its presence was all around
From here to there, from there to here.

(16.4.2010)

A Beginning (Ek Shuruaat)

Everyday newspapers are filled
With novel episodes of horror
The T.V. screens are always
Dipped in blood
He gets jitters
Wishes to set this world free
From all the ugly shadows
But what can he do — alone

Whose voice is this —
“No worries friend, begin from yourself first
At least the burden of one shadow will be lessened
A small ray of hope shall come alive, and then
It will lighten the lamp with a lamp.

(17.4.2010)

And then One Day (Aur Ek Din)

Walking for centuries, Man finally came out of the jungle
How happy he was to see the light of civilization
In jungle, he was always in a perpetual fear
Of being attacked by other animals
He could never enjoy life there
Where was the peace to do so?

Once out of this mess
He established villages, cities
And all the human relations
The sorrows of others became his grief
And their happiness his joy
And to suppress the traces of jungle in him
He created religions
Constitutions
Arts, beauty and aesthetics
To nurture and water his fragile sensibilities

His developing legs are struck now, suddenly
He heard someone crying in his own jungle
Who is crying? Why? Still! We have everything now
—A never-ending series of beautiful buildings
—The meticulously laid out roads
—And the variety of vehicles running on them

—Man-woman of this land carry a unique smile
Well, they hardly look lesser than gods

But still — someone is crying and says
—“I am TIME”
Tear open my breast to see
The account of atrocities I behold for
—the poor and the hungry
—the ones who were murdered for their innocence
—the girls and young women who were raped
—the innocent children who were kidnapped
(Either sold or killed for not getting the ransom)
—and the poor people, plagued by terrorism of
Of dirty politics and the magical might of money and religion
How ironical

Man brought only the negatives of jungle
He forgot to bring the liveliness of its flora
—the music of its fauna
—the fresh air that never discriminated
—the singing of its birds
Leaving behind all this, here he is
Caged within the four walls of his concrete jungle
Outsourcing his life to a variety of gadgets
And becoming a gadget himself in the process

I don't know to which extreme Man will drag me
He, the ignorant doesn't understand
I am TIME
And will not tolerate for a long time
This vicious circle spun by him
Because one day...

(29.9.2011)

Bank Note (Not)

When the bank note is with me
Or somewhere in the house —
I afford a sound sleep
The morning embraces me
With happy dreams
And taking a cue from such warmth
I embark upon my every day journey
And I am still happy to return in the evenings
For I know that the house will be waiting

However it is nothing in itself —
Not bread; cloth or shelter
It is just: a piece of paper
But still it seems
That everything is dissolved in it
Or exists — because of it
In its texture are engraved
Different shades of our bread
Different designs of our shelter
From that of a hut to a villa
It defines everyone's life
For both the needy and the affluent come
Within the radius of its powers

They say that the papers of a bank note
And that of books

Are mutually contradictory
Even their souls often lash against each other
But even in the existence of books, bank note is involved
It is only with the key of a bank note
That the doors of learning are opened
For a healthy mind you need a healthy body
And the doors of healthy body can't be opened by anyone
Except a bank note

The availability of a bank note
Is like a powerful shield
And a massive consolation
That we can fight all the challenges
Which life may offer
At least, there would never be a regret
That comes when you have no weapons to fight
How I feel when I see
That to afford a few pieces of bank notes:
—the elders are toiling on the streets
—the poor and the half-naked battling in the harsh weather
—and the little children:
Roaming on streets, carrying garbage sacks
Among the barking dogs

And then I think
O God!
Give me the rag of bank notes
But only in the quantity
That I may need
For the excess would make me feel
That the share of others has landed in my pockets
It is only by making the needy helpless
That the economic demons have grabbed
Their share of bank notes
It is only at the expense of
The hungry stomach of the poor
And their extinguished lives

That the rich always have their way
The government machinery aids the rich
Which laughs and collaborates with them
In a mysterious way

My poems do ask, again and again, in anger,
"After all, for how long things shall be like this?"
How long!

(31.5.2011)

The Seed (Beez)

He was laughing
"What's the matter?" I asked
He continued laughing
And said, then —
"I am laughing at his foolishness"
"On whose foolishness?"
Brother, look: Both of us are competing seeds
And landed on this wet park soil, all at once
I dragged myself, slowly... slowly
And reached here on this dry bed
But he — the fool, dragged himself to the mud
And became one with the soil
Alas! Poor soul..."

I started to smile now
"Why do you laugh?" he asked
"Stay here thou shall get to know
In days — three or four"

When I reached there after some days
He was very sad
And just a short while away from him
Was fluttering a small plant
Having its small and red leaves
Flying freely in the air

"What's the matter mate, why so sad?"
"What to say brother
Feels as if I am getting dried from within
I may lose my life-string at any moment"
"Remember, that day you asked
The reason for my smile
Could you see now?
Your competitor friend did not die
By becoming one with the soil
It got metamorphosed into a plant
As it grows, it will turn into a big tree
It will be overloaded with flowers and fruits
Many a people and birds
Will be benefitted by its presence
Its fruit will be the repository
Of many more like him, for the future
This has been the tradition of trees, isn't it?

You were trying only
To save yourself
You never realized
That only those who give, get
Earth lives its generosity
It always multiplies what you give
And makes you the music
Of its own universe.

(01.8.2011)

Diary

You wrote poems
Stories
Novels
And what not...
But you never plunged yourself directly
In any of them
Your own pains
And that of others
Emanated in the imaginative writings you produced
You heard others and said your own stories
Whatever impact it created on the minds of people
You always escaped by thinking
Oh! It is a mere imagination

But in me you entered as you were
With your naked truth
Whatever remained unsaid through imagination
Those little moments
Those emotions
That you could never express through writing
Are sorted through me, always
Like a mirror that shows thy true self
When people see my face, it confuses them
"Who is this? Seems—
We have seen him before
But how come this man
Who has always been stubborn and unbroken
Is looking like a common man

In this mirror — with his rise and fall
Breaking and then becoming
Tears in laughter and laughter in tears
He matches the man on the street

And I — the repository of your secrets
Feel happy that at last
People have recognized the human in you
Who has travelled afar through the broken roads
To be where he is today
But you have given me more than the pains
You have induced many images of man and nature
That has enriched me
Made me bath in the glory of the moonlight
Drenched me in the rains of monsoon
In your abundance
I sought the sense of my being
Till your concerns for the poor and oppressed
Bent jitters down my spine
But now the same concerns fill light in me
To visualize a better tomorrow
By becoming one with the lines written by you
I croon these lines again and again
How lucky I am to witness your journey
And accommodate the fragrance of the soils
Covered by you

You did a favour to me
By not putting the burden of jargon ridden
Values of Criticism on me
Otherwise Criticism would have herself said —
'Why are you a Diary if you wanted my job
I wouldn't have kept quiet—
'I never entered in your house O prideful
It is you who have done so, uninvited".

(94.7.2011)

Fame (*Sohrat*)

While in conversation
With my little granddaughter
I felt the whole pleasure of the universe
Getting settled in the pitch of our dialogues

Suddenly there was a knocking on the door
While opening, I asked "who are you?"
"I am Fame"
"Please come in, have a seat"
"I haven't come to sit with you but to tell you—
That to get me, you have to come out
Run behind me — here, there, everywhere
There is a rat race to have me, can't you see"...

I smiled gently and said—
"So why don't you go after those who are after you
Whatever I have of you is enough
And yes, every time
You have come after me"

"You are right, now I am so much entrenched
Into the market psyche of the people
That I don't get enough time to visit people
At their homes
Today I stole some time
To come and advice you"

"Can you count your arrival by doing a good thing
In my locality there are many hungry bellies
Who have remained hungry for generations
There is a silent pain in their existence
You become their voice and make it reach to those
Who are often called the messiah of such ill-fated"

She stood for a while, silent
And said then — "I am not the voice of ill-fated
I am the victory song of luckier ones"

I closed the doors and came inside
"Who was she grandpa?" asked my little one
"Girl she was someone who once get behind
Makes it difficult for a person to eat, drink, laugh, and cry
She turns him an alien in his own house"

My girl looked perturbed
She must be thinking
What sort of disease was that?

(02.8.2011)

The Body vs. Mind (*Man Toh*)

I remain untouched
Though the stream of time continues to flow
There is so much happening around me
But in me the silence finds a resting ground
And then I get the remembrance of the past
The long journeys that gave me pleasure
My fragile body puts a restrain now
Though the heart wishes to go back there, again.

(9.8.2011)

A Ray of Hope (*Ek Ujaas Bhara Kona*)

Night comes like a mother to embrace
The tired and hapless in her motherly affection
She induces sleep in them, slowly
Where their suppressed self of the days blooms
During the night dreams
In their dreams
The lack of the day gets its desires fulfilled
He gains himself in the dreams, a little

As the night passes
There are glimpses of a new dawn
Setting aside the forgettable experiences of the past
The new morning promises a lot
O here comes the newspaper
Nothing changes!
Theft, accidents, suicides
The false promises of the politicians
The attack of police on the hapless
The mayhem of the terrorist on people
The diktats of Khaps¹ on the lovers
It looks lesser a newspaper

¹ Caste councils – particularly active in parts of western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Enforcers of strong patriarchal norms, Khaps have been in the news for their extra-judicial interventions in marriage and caste norms.

More a drainage of blood
Entrapping me in its universe

I seek refuge
O! Here we are—
Pleasant news is hidden in an invisible corner
“A stranger took an injured person to the hospital
In spite of the police fear
The person got saved”
Two-three similar news items were found
At the margins of the newspaper
All of a sudden, the newspaper was breathing
In an ocean dominated by politicians, actors,
Bureaucrats to name a few

It rescued my morning from darkness
And gifted it a gentle smile
It became one with my poetry
But my poetry cannot help but think with pain—
What will happen to this world tomorrow
Mounting himself on the demon gadgets
Man is crushing his environment
Soil, fire, air, water, sky
All crying with warnings
But He is happy on his material throne
Caring less of what he has broken
The values that he has broken
Are like broken glass pieces
Making life difficult for everyone
He has turned his ears deaf to the values
That defined him in the past
He just wants to fly now
Higher. Far more higher
The voice of my poetry fails to reach
The height that he has occupied

But whenever it sees that pleasant news'
In the neglected corners of the newspaper
My poetry gets lit up again
And becomes a ray of hope
For those who survive in the neglected corners
Through these neglected corners she survives
And so does humanity, alongside it.

(11.8.2011)

Laughing out Loud (Kahkahe)

Who is laughing out loud
Without thinking that this is a market
Everything is sold here
But without a fault in the measurement
Yes, even smiles!
Here smiles are not usual natural outcomes
But stickered on the lips — like commodities
And if at all they appear naturally
They do so to laugh on the haplessness
Of a man whom they don't even know

Still, among such clear rules
Who is the one laughing out loud
Like a monsoon rainstorm
Suddenly I saw — it was a hermit
Standing at a crossroad
He was laughing out loud
Having his face towards the market
Even the market was thinking —
Why his voice is annoying me so much
I went and asked —
“At whom you are laughing out loud Baba?”
“At my own self
How came I in this market?”
He started to laugh out loud, again
And I felt a poem raining in my head
Like his rainy laughter.

(15.9.2011)

Here Comes the Kawaar (Fir Aa Gaya Kawaar)

Kawaar¹ has come again
And Saraswati ji is admitted to nursing home again
Her Jasmines waft all night
And rain flowers in the morning
They cry for Saraswati ji —
“Where are you?
Our flowers on earth
Are waiting for you”
The squirrels are jumping from branch to branch
As if waiting for her
And so does the sparrows
As if saying —
“Where are you? Where are you? We need food”

Winter — you know how much I love you
You are part of me
In many forms and tunes
But still I wait for Kawaar
It brings patience
The fun times of Ramleela²
And the songs of Dussehra³

¹: A month according to the Hindu Panchaang. The corresponding months in English are September/October.

²: Folk re-enactment of the life of lord Ram on the lines of ancient epic named *Ramayan*.

³: Also called Vijayadashmi, it marks the triumph of lord Ram over the 10-headed demon king Ravan, as outlined in the epic *Ramayan*.

I like the Sun of Kawaar
For it carries a pleasant sunshine
Just enough to fill the corns in the fields
And stream away the moisture —
Of the wet sarees¹ hanging in open
Kawaar also brings the new rice to our food plates
And the newer jasmine flowers in our courtyard
What a pleasant time it is
Cool air fills its warmth during days and nights
And here comes Diwali...
Full of hope and new life
And it doesn't come alone
Bhaiyadoo² and Govardhan-pooja³ follow it
We remain drenched in the festivities
Till winter bids adieu to our lovely season

In nursing home
I sit near my sick Saraswati ji
Thinking about such a pleasant weather
And the conspiracy of Kawaar
To throw us out of the house!
Why?

(12.9.2011)

1. Indian woman's garment.

2. Hindu festival that celebrates the love between brother and sister.

3. An auspicious festival of the Hindus celebrated a day after Diwali.

The Days Gone by (Beete Prasang)

It is never too late to mend — they say
He who lost the way in the morning
Finds it back in the evening
I asked — “where have you been, all day?”
He said — “leave the day and talk about the night
For it is night now”

Even the wise ones have said —
“Leave the bygone and think on what is to come”
I too trust this wisdom
But what shall I do with my heart
That entangles to and fro
With the conflicts that are so perennial
At times I find myself in the midst of these
And the guilt ridden in me starts thinking
“Why I did all that to him? Why?
If only I had participated in his grief
And fought his enemies with him
Had I given something more to my myself
For the sake of my family and the surroundings”

The arrival and departure of these thoughts
Make me feel
As if I have started to relate with my present now
In a much more sensible and valued way

And now when I dream of the future
I see a lot more of my people
This intensifies the fragrance of my village earth
A bit more...
Against the ever shining brick stones of Delhi.

(15.9.20110

I Search this Light (*Us Jyoti ko Khojta Hun*)

Here comes Diwali, once again
The markets smile in the hope of
The upcoming abundance
And people too wait for Diwali
With a hope that Lakshmiji's¹ arrival
Will lighten their future
But in my home...
Lakshmiji never came
Rather she went back — to the market
Or got attached with those who came for tips

Still, I wait for Diwali —
For its lights
Yes, light for me is THE festival
They say Ram returned to Ayodhya on this day
After crushing the darkness of demons
With his divine light

All of us also inhabit a Ravana
And a Ram too
There is a continuous struggle between the two
Till one day we get to know that
Our Ram defeats our Ravan

1. Hindu goddess of wealth and purity.

And that joy
Gets illuminated in us in the form of Diwali

But who feels this divine light in the cities?
Here Lakshmjji is welcomed by
A string of illuminating electric lights
They illumine not the light of the heart
But the arrogance of money
The high decibel crackers make life hell
And many a suffer from their side-effects
The morning of the next day
Struggles for breath — on a pile of garbage.

I remember the Diwali of my village
Where the earthen lamps would be fighting
Against the darkness of the sky
They burn to create a new light
In this divine light
One could see the faces of all my relatives
The lamps will be everywhere —
On the wells, fields, temples
And in this way the light of one village
Will be connected to the light of other village
One connects with the other so as to produce
A congregation of twinkling stars on earth
The sight of the scene makes me feel as if
The music of light is playing itself
Piercing through this lull Amavasya¹
Egos are crumbling and the whole village
Is erupting in joy and happiness
I search this light on every Diwali
And sadness takes over, if I don't see it.

(13.10.2011)

1. Lunar phase of new moon in Sanskrit.

The Temple — Palace (Pooja Bhavan)

I prefer a room with its windows open
Allowing it to be filled with fresh air —
From the trees nearby
In this way, let my silence
And the hustle-bustle be allowed
To live together
Let this room never be burdened
By too much of furniture and earthly materials
Bereft of any money and jewelry
It will remain away from the scanner of thieves
Yes, sleep comes to me only in such a room
It helps me write better
For my mind can walk free
Without bothering much about the room
I get a better sense of the world
— the dominating, dominated
— the victim, victimiser
Everyone comes under the radar of my pen

But O god
How you live in such big temple-palaces?
How you manage to survive
Among so many pillars of silver and gold
How do you breath
Among the goodies bestowed on you

By the filthy and poisonous rich
How do you digest the comforts
Hurled on you by the rich
That smells the blood of poor?

O yes! You don't need these goodies?
They were collected on your behalf
By the big stomachs
Who always see sin
In those who are hungry and poor

But don't you think God
When those who sing
The songs of your victory and might
At the same time—
The cries of hunger
Strike your silver and gold plated pillars
You are omnipresent—o god!
Nothing is hidden from you

Suddenly, I heard a gentle laugh
"Who are you and from where have you come?"
"Try to look within yourself first"
"O! My god! You are here?"
"Yes, it is me
And be clear. In temple-palaces
Not me but the stones live
That bear my name
And those who worship those stones
Are not priest but traders
Who trade on my name
There no one comes to offers prayers
But to display their desires
In their goodies are hidden
The wishes to find salvation

You don't know but I always live
In the house of those
Who carry the rays of sacrifice
And never discriminate among
The rich and the poor.

(8.7.2011)

The Traffic Signal (Chauraha)

Nothing bothers the life of this traffic signal
Not even the bone-chilling winter
It never surrenders to the uncontrolled rains of summer
One of its footpaths is home:
To Shankar and his sewing machine
His machine gives rebirth
To the injured clothes of the poor
And of course, two square meals to its owner

The coal continues to burn
In Maatbar's dhaba
Supplying food to his customers
And to his family

On an intersection close by
Stands the rehadi of our sardaarji¹
Supplying cups of boiling tea
To the tired bodies
And a life to sardaarji's family

On the edge of the road
You would see nameless rickshaw pullers
Running between here to the metro station
Their running ensures the smiles of their children

1. A way of addressing the people of Sikh community.

In the vicinity, there is a hair saloon
Always busy in giving new looks to people
Meanwhile the rehadis of fresh veggies and fruits
Continue to hover around
In hopes of securing two meals for their families

And from the same traffic signal pass
Many a congregation of demi-god babas
Including those having their bellies full
For they are in search of more, a bit more
The babas promise people the prescription
To digest their accumulation
The throng is lead by painted women
Having decorated urns on their heads
Dancing men follow them
In varied postures
The accompanying chariots carry cutouts
Of the smiling babas
And the disciples on the chariots call out
Almost everyone at the traffic signal
"Please come, you also come"
But those at the traffic signal pay no heed
As if saying —
"Get lost,
What business we have with these babas
Our two hands are our only gods
We need only their blessings to be happy."

(10.7.2011)

The House and the Peepal Tree (Peepal aur Ghar)

In the root of my outside house wall
Newly sprouted a Peepal tree
What a powerful storehouse of energy it is
Peepal can born wherever it wants—
Even in the rocky lands
It has the energy of its own
After all, it is a dharamtar¹
Many a tales of life and death
Are witnessed by it
Its life-giving air keeps alive many lives
That is why they never cut a Peepal tree
They just pass by it, paying their gratitude

That day, many women of neighborhood assembled
Having the worship bowls in their hands
They said—
“No need to travel afar for worship now”

Suddenly, I could vision—
My peepal has grown big
Big enough to cover the whole of my house
Its roots have made cavities in my walls
My winter sunshine got entangled into its infinite leaves
Below it I could see the congregation of priests

1. Sacred tree.

The crowd of worshipers
Carrying many instruments of their worship...

In fury of this religious ritual
The peace of my house is going haywire
I too revere Peepal
But not that blindfolded by the religious rituals
For me, the most pious is my house
My identity and existence survives through it
I will not allow anyone to muddle with it

One day, I picked up the axe
And said to peepal—
“O lord, pardon me, but this place isn’t yours”
People were watching me with frightened eyes—
“What this man is doing — an atheist idiot?”

(26.6.2011)

You shall Come Back (*Lautkar Aaoge*)

Put stairs over stairs, more stairs
Climb up, up, up... just up
Though you will not get anything there
Except a big zero
You will repent after climbing so high
You would want to come back
But by then, it will be too late.

(27.6.2011)

They are Back (*Laut Aaye Hain*)

They are back now — worn out and broken
Swayed by the glittering world —
They went to that 'divine' world
There was too much light there
Enough to make them blind
Their bodies got awakened there
Though their souls went to sleep
After all they all belonged to the world of souls
How long they could have stayed there
They are happy now — they are back.

(27.6.2011)

The Right Path (Sahi Rasta)

Today, 'C' is on the chair
He said—
“THIS is in the interest of the nation”
'B' said—“not at all”
Yesterday, 'B' was on the chair
And he ratified THIS very way that he is opposing today
But then 'C' had said—“not at all”
In their arguments
The prosperity of the nation is getting drained
But how prosperous they are becoming!

(27.6.2011)

Let us Search a Well (Koi Kuan Khojte Hai)

Hey stop!
Where are you going?
It seems a blue veil has covered your eyes
Hey! That is no water
But a mere mirage of it
Let us dig a well — if you are thirsty
In this barren land
This is what man has done always
Made a hut and dug a well — in need.

(28.6.2011)

The Money Laughs (Paisa Hasta Hain)

The roads were already shrunk
The traders shrink it a bit more
From all sides...
People now collide with each other, fall
They duel and abuse each other
But have no option to complain
Police has already turned away their backs
Meanwhile, the money laughs... louder and louder
On people's plight

(28.6.2011)

You Graze in Our Fields (Khet Chartain Hai)

“We represent people
And we only know
What is to be done for them and what not
And who are you to jump in here
Like a messiah — between us and our people”
“We haven’t jumped in here, we are the people
And we know what you do for us
You pretend to protect our fields during the day
So as to graze happily in them during the nights”

(28.6.2011)

The Chair (Kursi)

When my son came to the city for the first time
He asked —
“Father, why so many people are fighting?”
“Not fighting, said I.
They are playing musical chairs for THE CHAIR
So as to reach nearer to the chair
They are pushing each other aside
Could you see the man — currently on that chair?
And people pushing to remove him aside”
“But father, the chair will break in this tussle”
“No my son, people get attached and removed
From the chair they seek...
The chair remains intact, as it is
Only those who seek it are broken.”

(30.6.2011)

The White Demon (Safed Asur)

Once there was a demon
Whose soul rested in a parrot
He abducted a certain princess
And imprisoned her in the palace
Inevitably a prince would come to rescue her
From the clutches of her tormentor
In the ensuing battle between the demon and the prince
The demon would loose all his limbs, one by one
Only to receive them back and turn as he was
But on the princess' signal
The prince throttles the parrot's neck
And the demon falls
Never to rise again

Today, the country has
Many a white demons
Their souls reside in the money
Deposited in the Swiss banks
So many helpless lives are imprisoned
In the palaces of these white demons
The princes still come
But realise that these white demons are their brethren
How can they kill them?

How can they be killed here?
When their souls are in the foreign countries
The powers are hell bent there to protect them
And the ones trapped in the prisons of these white demons
Are no princesses
They are vulnerable, helpless lives
Who would fight for them?
Some fakir!
How does it matter?
After all, he is just a fakir.

(02.7.2011)

1. Religious ascetic who lives solely on alms.

Hunger vs. Fast (Anshan)

For many days they are hungry
Mother-father, brother-sister
Looking at each other with helpless eyes
They are silent, knowing their own helplessness
Though a volcano resides in them

At some distance there is a parallel world
A world: full of over-fuelled bellies
Showcasing the rainbow of luxuries
And the sound of their treachery filled laughters
Yes! Here live the Human Gods
The ones who snatch the food of the people
They eat some; throw away the rest
And to loot this thrown away food—
The poor and the dogs compete with each other
It is an attempt actually — to retrieve what is theirs
However, these Human Gods also observe fasts
When the indigestion of too much food troubles them
They fight the battle with anti-constipation tablets
To gobble the share of others again

That hunger or this fast
How filthy both look
One tormented by oppression
The other making attempts to digest it

One getting away from life
The other trying to squeeze it

But how the same fast acquires new meanings
When it gets associated with a Gandhi —
Then it becomes a weapon against the falsities
And as it gets deeper and deeper
So does its potency —
That stands against the unruly powers and systems
Known for making fun of even the best of weapons
But the slow light emanating from the fasting
Unleashes chaos even among the best of armies
And there begins a bloodless war
Between the truth and untruth
Where truth is always victorious inevitably
But for all this to happen
We always require a Gandhi
As naked as the truth itself.

(20.6.2011)

I Know (*Mujhe Pata Hai*)

I know
My poems will not come along
Not even this long-earned fame
Everything shall remain here —
When I will embark on my final journey
And of course people do ask —
“Why am I writing these poems after all
In the twilight of my worn out life?”

What else should I do?
I love this life immensely
And till it is there
I wish to live every bit of it
Does not matter if it is sweet or sour
I will continue to hold on to it
Poetry is the essence of life
Without it —
Life seems like an empty space
That one has to occupy without reason

When the poem hums inside your mind
Or appears in words
You feel the essence of life, the sense of your being
A unique fragrance spills everywhere
As if the static time flutters with his wings

The birds start singing
And my loneliness transforms into many a sound
Creating ripples of laughter and tears
In the corridors of my soul

I don't know how valuable my poems are for others
For me —
They are the essence of my meaningful existence.

(22.6.2011)

Hanuman

*'O lord Hanuman! Victory to you!
You are the ocean of pure knowledge
O lord Kapeesh! Victory to you!
The entire universe is illuminated by thy fame!'*
These lines were emanating from the kitchen
Yes, Saraswati Ji has established a small temple there
It is her usual routine after the morning bath

In the seventies
Physical pains tormented me
It is the cruel hand of Sade-Sati¹ — they said
I was advised to worship lord Hanuman
Even the enlightened Tulsidas wrote *Hanuman Bahuk*
To get relieved of his physical pains
But what should I do with this cynical mind of mine
That refuses to believe in the blind rituals
Created to worship the sacred

So in her quest of relieving me off my pains
Saraswati Ji started to worship lord Hanuman
I too hear the rhythm of her hymns —
Without making much of efforts
Whenever I cross by the other Hanuman temples
I see long queues of worship

1. A 7½ years long period/spell of *Shani*. This astrological phase is much frightening for those in India who believe in Indian astrology.

People waiting under the baggage of their own desires
I laugh and pity them
Though I love my Hanuman
Whenever he appears in Ramayan —
I feel a sense of thrill and excitement
There he is alive — full of life and passion
The unchained fighting light
Against the empire of darkness
Now to see the same lord caged in these temples
Breaks my heart

I do not aspire earthly reaches from the lord
I just seek a bit of his light
So as to fight battles on my own
Against the devils and ghosts.

(14.7.2011)

God in the Dream (*Sapne main Ishwar*)

Last night, I met the God in my dream
With a thought
That he will embrace me with love
And will take away all my pains and troubles
But he did not even look at me
I was surprised
Ignoring me, He was talking to an atheist —
With love and affection
I shouted with anger —
“O lord! I am your true devotee
Day and night I recite your name
I sing your glory from home to temple”
The lord looked at me with a sarcastic smile and said
“You are brimming with pride that you have known me
But the fact is that like your leaders and bosses
You consider me a believer of sycophancy too
You hail anyone to get what you want — don’t I know that!
I created a beautiful world for all of you
Immersed something of me in everything that you see around
With a hope that all of you will love it — develop it; protect it
You will destroy those who want to destroy this world
But you love my name and ignore me
You hail me and ignore my aesthetics
The earnings of life got washed away in a second
I thought
And then the sound of utensils in the kitchen
Broke my sleep.

(19.4.2010)

Poetry is the Tune of Humanity (Kavita Manushyata ka Raag Hai)

“Poetry is the tune of humanity
It connects us to us and with the rest of the world
Pity the ones who are disconnected from poetry”
The poet has uttered it many times in numerous congregations

But today, in his neighbourhood
A boy has inhaled poison
The women of the house were in perpetual trauma
The only other man of the house was out
The other ‘normal’ people of the neighbourhood
Got together to see what has happened
But the poet seemed busy with a great work
By locking himself in his closed room space
He was composing a great poem, probably.

(2.04.2010)

Poetry Makes us Sensitive (Kavita Sanwedansheel Banati Hai)

“Poetry makes us sensitive
It keeps awakened our sleeping conscience”
Thus was he addressing the congregation, in a high-pitched tone
Revealing the human side of the art of poesy

While getting out after his great speech
People started to shower him with heavy gratitude
Without even looking at any of them
He was accepting their warmth
As if doing some favour to them
In such a way
He ensured his exit — keeping his arrogant head high
Now people started to think—
“Alas! The man fooled us with his rhetoric!”

(3.4.2010)

Jasmine (Harsingaar)

For many days its flowers were falling slowly
Without revealing if the falling was its laughter or tears

From my courtyard, I would often witness this scene
And inhale the fragrance spread from its fall
Reminding many autumns that I have spent

The buds will continue to ask throughout night
Why don't you let us live for a few more days
Even our nights are full of fears
Due to the impending deadly mornings

O my heart! Why this happens always
Wherever it sees pain, it becomes silent
Why doesn't it understand that
Whatever will happen, will happen
What is the point in so much of contemplation?

(25.11.2011)

How Good it Feels (Kitna Accha Lagta Hai)

How good it feels to read and write
In the comforts of one's home
How good it feels to weave dreams there

Everyone craves for the gathering
So as to speak from the dais amidst thunderous claps
They say — leave your homes to rise high

The pain comes as a guest from varied corners
And its exit is ensured by my poetry
I belong to the earth — I have no desire for the mountains

Every corner of my home chats with creativity
It says — “worry not, don't cry in any pain”
It taught me to battle with self before the world

I come home — again and again, after many a journey
Surrender all relations that I bring — to this very home
Abandoning this home now will be a self-abandoning

(11.12.2011)

Jungle

While in village
I always dreamt of a city
I had heard—
There are many seductive building there — kissing each other
And the glittering roads
Accompanying vehicles of different kinds
And the theatres — having many dancing damsels
All corners are filled with the echoes of joy
Men and women lighten the city with colourful attires
No less than the gods and goddesses
And... and... and...

It's been ages that I live in a city now
It has colonized me
But my heart knows no bounds
It flies like a bird
And takes me back from where I had come
It asks the body to leave the city
The body replies
There isn't a calorie left to support your adventure

In this entire helplessness
Once in a while I sit in front of the T.V. Set
To watch *Discovery* or the *Animal Planet*
How good it feels
To travel the jungles of the world from my home
And see their existence through such density

Variety of tress — short and tall
Many rivers decorated with the shadows of trees
And the small naughty streams
Navigating the uneven earth
Different species of animals and birds — all at one place
How good it feels
To be travelling with this open world
Without moving an inch

But it feels paradoxical too
After being scared from the bloody life of city
I turn towards the nature — on T.V.
Only to find that
There too the same bloody battles are going on

In the jungle I wished to see
Spring, rain and the abundance of autumn
Trees loaded with colourful flowers and fruits
Green vegetation across valleys
Dancing peacocks — all this and more
So as to get away from this deadly city world
And to be in the nature's sunshine

But I don't know what has happened
Even to the eyes of camera that humans use
It only sees the violence of the jungle
Wild, deadly unruly animals
Expelling the innocent animals
Every now and then — one sees
An innocent life into the jaws of death
A toxic silence prevails all around
And eventually the silence is broken
By painful cries of death
Animals arrive at riverfront — to quench their thirst
Pay inevitably — with their lives

Doesn't matter if it is my neighbourhood or jungle
How disturbing it is to see the innocent get attacked
By those who are drunk on power
And how good it feels — to see once in a while
A group of wild buffaloes — in unity
Driving away a herd of lions

In the natural world
Violence is permissible though
According to nature's norms
But the heart broken by man's violence
Seeks refuge in the natural world
But alas! Even from jungle
He shows his own mirror image
Petrified — I switch off the T.V.

(12.11.2011)

Vasant Panchami

Today the Sun has been kind
But the cold winds coming from the west
Are bathing its sunshine with their vapory touch
I too sit outside my door to touch the sunshine
My heart starts to croon —
“Today is Vasant Panchami”
I continue to think —
Such a pleasing name
Whatever be the season outside
The season of my heart
Has already turned colourful
—With the touch of Vasant Panchami
Someone sings inside me —
Vasant has arrived
The laughter of colourful flowers is heard everywhere
The fields — as if covered by the blanket of yellow sky
And the uncontrollable winds
As if running away in enthusiasm
Even in the coldest of eyes
I can see the rays of hope, a future
The weary ways have started to smile now
And it feels
If the nightingale is about to spell its cuckoo spell
And my companion who has been sad too long

1. Also spelled Basant Panchami is a Hindu festival that marks the preparation for the arrival of spring.

And the *tulsi* plant that has long been unconscious
Always made me feel about their impending death
Are breathing a new lease of life today
All due to the sight of Vasant Panchmi

Outside, the footsteps may yet not be heard
But inside me:
The Vasant has already set in.

(28.1.2012)

After Such a Long Time (*Kitne Dino Baad*)

He was out of my memory for long
The concern for his arrival had ceased too
How happy the heart was, bereft of any hope
With the passing of time, his absence became a routine too
Days, weeks and years will come and go
All pass with a steady pace

Two days back the news broke
That he is coming after ten days
All of a sudden the heart went crazy
He is coming, he is coming...
Strange melody started to reverberate in my heart
Every passing moment now started to look like a day
Why can't the days in-between wither away in a flash?
Ah! After such a long time...

(4.2.2012)

What is This? (*Yehain Kya Hai?*)

Today the morning was different
I felt as if the light outside was calling me
Its entry into my body made me light
When I sat in the courtyard
A cup of tea was in my hand
In its hot radiance
I could feel the warmth of my wife
And the fragrance of her touch
Getting communicated to me
Through her cup

I turned towards the trees of my courtyard
Their soulful green started to ask me—
How are you?
Sparrows started to chirp around to say
Good morning... good morning
Squirrels started to talk in their *chik-chik* tone
And the red-yellow shades of Marigolds
Started to colour my poetic sensibility

For a second, I thought— who are they to me
But then why do I feel: Had they been absent
My mornings would have been gloomy
Every room of the home
Started speaking to me, every corner

And when I went to the entrance
The road said — ‘Ram-Ram’
And with this — all the echoes subsumed in me
Suddenly the newspaper is thrown at my door
The whole world arrived on my hand
A world full of pleasures and pains
A world full of strangers
But why their pleasures enthralls me
And their pains make me cry
I was thinking all this
Then came my granddaughter, suddenly
Smiling silently, she came and sat in my lap
With her weight I felt so light
And turned into childhood, all of a sudden
Oh! What is this that I have written?
The editor asked for a love poem

1. Customary greetings among Hindus.

Some Independent Verses (*Kuch Muktak*)

I came to the new town, breaking ties with the old
Many a troubles that I faced slayed my enthusiasm
Everything of that town, I brought in here
But it feels that the old beholds me, still

How difficult it was to come, don't walk away now
Imbibe some light in the darkness of your eyes
How long he has been waiting for you
His home deserves a bit of your stay

Time's tests were always thought to be an injustice
None could understand the gifts hidden in its troubles
How much pride we carried in having understood the world
But friends, now we understand — how naïve we have been

The day seems to be singing, is it an illusion
Some of our own seem to be laughing here, is it a shadow
A strange fragrance is floating in the air
There is a knocking at my heart — has he arrived

It was a long journey my friends, a troublesome path
On the thorns of life I almost gave up
But then life came to speak in my ears
I should never give up — said she

While walking together, we continued to share secrets
We kept on encouraging the weary
With a desire to reach the destination one day
We kept on encouraging each other's dreams

What is victory or triumph once you are out of the game
But one can continue to surrender from within
When grief is all over, there is hardly a place to run
The only way to live life then — is to have a treaty with grief

On the path of life whenever I struggled, someone rescued
Every time darkness engulfed me, someone put up a candle
And whenever grief overtook me, someone put out a hand to hold

On the one hand I play hide and seek with poverty
On the other — there is money that never plays to my tunes
Which path I should seek on this intersection
One goes to the village and the other — to the city

The shivering cold felt like a dark well
Everyone was saying what difficult times to live in
I thought otherwise: time has been kindest now
Come on! Come together — we have such sunshine

The Laughing Flames and Other Poems: Published originally in Hindi as *Aag Ki Hansi*, *The Laughing Flames and Other Poems* accounts Ramdarash Mishra's medley of poems composed between 2009-2012. The collection displays a unique poetic freshness, landscaped on the fertile soil of human experience. Most of the poems here chant the songs of life and nature in varied ambiences. Without a doubt, the poet celebrates the village life but his empathy with the 'ruins' of the city life is on display too. On the one hand, he finds it difficult to conceal his nostalgia for the idyllic rural life and on the other; extremely troubled by the negative vibes of contemporary urban life. Taking a dig at the modern man and his cultural values, *The Laughing Flames* exposes the faultlines of the market economy and the resultant alienation of humanity from her roots. Deeply reflective and contemplative, *The Laughing Flames* calls for a painstaking re-examination of our (new) beliefs, choices, systems and values.

Ramdarash Mishra (b. 1924) is an important signature in modern Hindi literature for more than five decades now. Always in limelight for his *ghazals* and poetry, he has made a prolific contribution across genres in Hindi language, which is now collected in 14 volumes. In spite of undertaking such a long creative journey, Ramdarash Mishra never surrendered his artistic gifts in service of a particular *-vaad* (-ism) or ideological school. On the contrary, he reserves his creative prowess to understand the *human condition* and *attitudes*, especially in relation to the vagaries of changing times. He is a spokesperson of humanity, for humanity. A life-long defender of the ordinary, Ramdarash Mishra's literary universe advocates a fairer, wiser, and kinder future for humanity. He has received almost all the prominent awards reserved for excellence in Hindi literary writing including the Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry collection titled *Aag Ki Hansi* (*The Laughing Flames and Other Poems*) in 2015.

Umesh Kumar (b. 1986) teaches English literature at Banaras Hindu University. His work has appeared in the pages of *Indian Literature*, *Translation Today*, *Sage*, *The Wire*, *The Hindu* among others. He has recently co-translated an anthology of children's literature titled *Kisson Ki Duniya* (The Landscape of Tales) published by *Vani Prakashan*. He was British Council's Charles Wallace Visiting Fellow at University of Edinburgh in 2019 for a project on 'violence and translation'. He also held Associate Fellowship at the NIDA School of Translation Studies, Italy in connection with a project on 'translation and pedagogy' in 2018.

