



# Kabikantha's 7th Spring Festival of Poetry Opens Today



Even if Fazal Shahabuddin had never composed a single successful poem in his life, he would have gone down to our literary history for bringing out the longest running poetry magazine *Kabikantha* (though regularly irregular). For fairly a long period of time — 30 years to be precise — *Kabikantha* has been a great treat to our poetic sensibility. The magazine's special gifts were back to back six spring poetry festivals from 1981-86. But over the years there were many rifts and grouping among the poets — some are as ugly as leading up to war of words and avoiding of sights of each other — but Fazal kept his cool organising poetry reading session and enlightening *addas* to

further the cause of poetry. His friendship with Ershad in the 80's sparked controversies and he was almost left deserted by the poets. Fazal eventually came out clean from the dirt of controversies and from his creative hibernation this year to use yet again his organizing wizardry to make the 7th spring poetry festival happen in our dry poetic milieu. This festival will witness an unique congregation of poets who turned foes because of mistrust and misunderstanding. Today Saturday 28th of March 7th poetry festival opens at its traditional venue — Jalshaghar, Hotel Purbani — at 6 in the evening. Long live the poets unity in difference and spring festivals' architect Fazal.

## "A poetry festival creates a shared ambiance between poets and its lovers"

*Ashok Vajpeyi, the Academy Award winning Hindi poet spoke about his feeling to be able to make time for the festival as a guest poet and why poets do need platforms to create a shared ambiance between poets and its lovers.*

**Ziaul Karim:** You are for the first time participating in the Spring poetry festival in Bangladesh. How do you feel about it?

**Ashok Vajpeyi:** I was very happy to participate in the Second Asian Poetry Festival held in Dhaka in 1989 in which many important poets namely Subhash Mukhopadhyaya (India), Ted Hughes (Great Britain), Gozo Yashimasu (Japan), Ahmed Faraz, Kishwar Nahid (Pakistan) had also participated. To come back to a country where people at large care for their language and poetry and where poetry is still rooted deeply in its culture and life is, to say the least, exhilarating. It would be yet another occasion to be in the vibrant and evocative company of fellow poets and poetry-lovers.

**Z.K.:** Spring has a special place in Bengali poetry. What I am interested to know is how spring is being looked at, evoked, visualized and conceptualized

in Hindi poetry?

**A.V.:** Sadly the Spring seems to have faded in Hindi poetry of today. Earlier our great poet Nirala sang:

... sweet spring this very moment  
came back into my forest —  
not yet will be my end.

It continued to figure both as fact and metaphor, as image and landscape in Hindi poetry of many modern poets such as Ajneya, Shasher Bahadur Singh and Ranguvir Shaya. With increasing urbanisation and other factors, it seems the spring is hardly noticed now in poetry. If ever it is, the treatment is invariably ironic. However, there are some poets who write out of an acute sense of the absence of Spring, its gaiety, colours and fragrance. Poetry sadly no longer celebrates Spring. It is increasing more of the world, less of the earth.

**Z.K.:** We are well-informed about what is happening in the poetry front in west. But when it comes to even our neighbouring countries we are quite in dark about the literary developments there. What needs to be done to change this colonial mind-set?

**A.V.:** Yes, it is unfortunately true.

This is perhaps the first century when the West has become so dominating, so central and overpowering in the world culture. Its poetry occupies more space in attention and influence than any other. This in spite of the fact that we hardly share, for instance, the Western notions of selfhood, poetics or aesthetic pleasure. On the other hand, we have so common with our neighbours not only in life, traditions, culture but also in poetry. We share several anxieties, hopes, despair etc. Yet we do not know what is happening to each other. The colonial mindset can be changed only by us, the creative community. Festivals of poetry, exchange of poets and critics, publications of mutual translations in books, anthologies and magazines etc. are some of the steps which could be taken. Also, poets of the younger generations must be encouraged through fellowships and residencies to not only visit neighbouring countries but also spend substantial time in such countries to acquaint themselves with the work of their counterparts and maybe translate them with their help.

**Z.K.:** How do you look at the recent concern for exploring our identity anew

in the post-colonial world? How do you feel about the xenophobic urge to overthrow Eurocentricity and the need for a counter-discourse?

**A.V.:** The exploration of identity is not exactly a post-colonial phenomenon. It started much before we attained freedom, from the colonial rule. In a manner of speaking we were free before freedom was actually achieved. The notion of freedom became the crucial instrument of defining and expressing our identity. The traditional poetics of celebration also started including doubt and questioning. The West-propelled modernism in the Indian subcontinent created several ruptures of disjunctions. We became aliens in Asia. It is this Eurocentricity which has come under severe creative and critical assault. We cannot, need not which away Europe. But we cannot and are not a colony, intellectually or creatively of Europe.

**Z.K.:** Do you think that festivals like Spring Poetry Festival would further the cause of poetry, inject new blood for the future poetry and act as a platform for meaningful poetic exchange? Since poetry is more of an individualistic act do you reckon that the poets need a plat-

form at all?

**A.V.:** Yes. A poetry festival creates a shared ambiance between poets and its lovers. Poetry is at its best when it is allowed to be a direct experience. It should be uttered and heard for it a voice, an utterance. It makes us all feel that poetry matters; that it speaks to us, that it deserves our full attention. True poets write poetry individually but they need a community to resound and react, to understand and appreciate.

## "As society needs festival so do poets"

*The soft spoken and himself a poet of little voice Aminur Rahman, convenor of the festival, shares his views about the 7th Spring Poetry Festival.*

**Ziaul Karim:** How is this festival different from the past ones?

**Aminur Rahman:** I feel I should talk more about the importance of this festival particularly in the context of the country's present poetry scene. This festival is acting as an wonder balm on

the long standing distrust and misunderstanding among our leading poets which has so long kept them at a painful distance from each other. The ice finally starts melting; poets from all rival camps are taking part in the festival. Once bosom friends but foes at present reuniting this Saturday. So this is the finest event in our poetic milieu.

**Z.K.:** You are involved with a poets congregation — as convenor for the first time — where as many as 25 front-raking poets will be reading their compositions. How do you feel about it?

**AR:** Great. Just great. More so because some young poets are joining their illustrious counterparts.

**Z.K.:** Do you think this event again should be made regular as has been 12 years ago?

**AR:** As society needs festival so do poets. It's at festivals that people renew and rediscover their relationships. By reading poems at a festival no one would become a famous poet. Its significance lies somewhere else in its unifying spirit. It's basically the absence of festivals apolitical that mistrust and misunderstanding crept in among our poets.

## More of the World Less of the Earth

by Ashok Vajpeyi

**T**HE legendary heroes, the mythical characters, the royal personages, the divine masters etc. have all receded. And with them the theatrical grandeur, the awe-inspiring trappings, the large gestures and grand ornamentation, the rhetorical flourishes. The grand narrative has been, as it were, usurped or appropriated by the ordinary man and his/her life. The details of the sometimes humdrum and often sensuous business of ordinary living are centre-stage. The ordinary man seems to have dethroned at least in poetry, if not in polity, the Gods, the masters and the leaders. The ordinary has pushed the extraordinary away. Although ordinary living has always engaged the attention of the epic imagination as well as that of the lyrical mind or impulse, it was almost always placed in a large locus, as part of a vast geography. For the first time it seems to be happening in this century, and more in its later half, that almost the entire poetic landscape has been taken over by ordinary men and women, by their life, its struggles and hopes, its anxieties and tensions, its neighbourhood and familial disputes. A demythologised universe finds its angst of being even spiritually in poetry intent upon the common place ordinary life in our time has emerged as a metanarrative which subsumes history and myth, politics and ideologies, visions and nightmares.

In our somewhat post-modern times the pre-modern Indian practice of reading and interpreting poetic texts in multiple ways has regained currency and respect. Some startling stock-taking takes place as the end of a century of tremendous and tumultuous poetic production comes near. It appears that the Romantics, variously called in Indian languages, with their apparently unconcerned autonomous world of poetry were in fact discovering and defining the spirit of freedom much more deeply and memorably than the loud-mouthed jail-going nationalist poets. In poetry, as in many other arts, we were free before freedom. Against the colonising mind there was an assertion of the Swaraj of poetry, a territory of imagination where traditional shackles and

restraints were being boldly broken and new images and profiles of the changed times as well as of the persisting eternal forged. It is now clearly acknowledged that many languages in India started struggling out of the medieval mould into the so-called modern in the 19th century. Although later the Western impact did play a crucial and provocative role, the angst of being so powerfully articulated by Ghalib, for instance, [his 200th birth anniversary falls in December 97], was a daringly modern as anything that was happening in English or for that matter in European poetry. We are now able to see, across the colonial and post-colonial maze, that, albeit subterraneously, and Indocentric modernism strong spiritual rooting and, once in a while, even popular following as is evident in the case of Rabindranath Thakur, Iqbal and Subramanyam Bharati to name just a few. The romantic and the mystic became somewhat subversively a part of the nationalist project. However, the hiatus between the social and the personal remained and in the post-independent period assumed alarming proportions.

Freedom came with partition: a moment of joy and fulfillment but accompanied by deep pain and a sense of loss. There were many voices in poetry which manifested this agonizing ambivalence. Somewhere around that time a new poetics of celebration and doubt, of affirmation and interrogation took root. Since creative freedom had already been attained and practiced before the political independence came, the creative was already questioning the political. And yet, as in other walks of life, politics soon made inroads into poetry through ideology. In an India which became more public than ever before, the personal receded. The spaces of autonomy got increasingly eroded and usurped. Riding on the bandwagon of ideology and often misled by politics, poetry was deluded to believe that it could matter in or change human affairs. Apart from sporadic euphoria and consequent disillusionment, however, poetry has remained rooted in hard and harsh reality. Its geography of empathy and concern did vastly expand and its sense of human predicament and destiny intensely quickened by the ideological intrusions. There are any number



Ashok Vajpeyi (L), pre-eminent Hindi poet and Zaved Akhter, Urdu poet and song writer, who has redefined Bollywood's playback songs by bringing poetic richness back into the dry and stereotyped lyrics of Hindi movies. Certainly these two great souls are going to be the cynosure of the festival. They were caught sharing a joke by our photographer Zahid at Kabikantha's office yesterday.

of poets who strongly believe that their poetry is their politics and not vice versa; and that poetry need not be a version of their or somebody else's politics. It is not accidental that poetry largely has grown anti-establishment in free India. It could be credited to have continued the pre-independence tradition: the State was and remains suspect although it has radically changed from being a colonial repressive state to a Republican and democratic state. In its socio-political critique sometimes poetry gas gone to extremities of violence and aggressiveness, indeed to the point of being even anti-poetry. The establishment, whether of society, morality, state or literature, comes under continual assault. Even though poetry in India has a past of thousands of years and consequently bears a heavy burden of history, it is surprising that it has been more experimental and daring than prose of fiction both of which has had a much shorter history. In fact, one of the main preoccupations in poetry has been

to convert a lot of prose or intractably prosaic areas of experience and feeling into prose, as it were, poetry has felt confident and free to appropriate prose.

The Victorian value-bag, which has insidiously restricted the arena of expression, has been abandoned for good and there have been many poets such as Agyeya and Shamsheer [Hindi], Jibananda Das [Bengali], Mardhekar [Marathi] who have struggled in their work to retrieve the disinherited erotic and recapture the utter sensuousness of existence in India. While free verse became the dominant genre in most languages, in some, mostly Urdu and Malayalam, the metrical verse continues to dominate with considerable resilience to include many ranges of experience hitherto thought to be unnegotiable in the metrical mode. Since the metrical invariably has public appeal and a certain entertaining value, in languages where the free verse reigns supreme like in Hindi, the largely metrical and invariably trivial poetry en-

joys huge audiences whereas significant poetry written mostly in free verse has small audience; a division reminiscent of the vastly varying audiences of film music and classical music.

The dominance of the public and the social and the ever-present overshadowing by politics has also led, unfortunately, to a poetry of statements, neatly painting the world in black and white. More dangerously, it has seriously affected the reading habits of those who still go to poetry. The subtle and the complex, the intellectually rigorous and the morally ambivalent which constitute the truly modern oeuvre of poetry tend to get lost and undermined. Serious critical engagement with poetry is increasingly less evident. The academia, by and large, has been a citadel of orthodoxy unsympathetic to the innovative verve and incapable of generating new insights or articulating the new poetics. In some languages such as Bengali, Malayalam and Marathi the popular press does publish significant poetry, but in most other, poetry survives through little magazines mostly funded and published by writers themselves.

While in radical departure from the India tradition and belief, homocentricity has taken over most of our fiction, in poetry and certain reverence and concern of nature has survived. By and large poetry has shunned the consumerist approach to nature and in this respect it has been in sharp contrast to the middle class culture. Yet one cannot but lament that poetry has become more urban often uprooted from the rich folk repertoire of memories, images and utterances; more of the world, less of the earth.

It would seem that while freedom expanded the possibilities for poetry in an unprecedented way and in that any theme, subject, experience or word became inherently capable of being treated in poetry, the epic imagination has declined, if not altogether disappeared at the end of the century. There have been powerful moments in G K Adiga (Kannada) G M Muktibodh (Hindi) or Ramakant Rath (Oriya) of truly epic dimensions but the ruling mode is the lyrical impulse, even if disrupted many a time and at others handled with irony.

The poetic space has also been inter-

rogative of the modernism and the relentless process of Westernisation. Equally it has been a battleground for fighting varieties of cultural and political consumerism. Without aspiring overly to be so, poetry is a kind of a subaltern history of our time. Not a chronicle or narrative but certainly a complex and in many ways surprising text existing simultaneously on many levels and of course, pages.

The democratic nature of the polity is replicated, in a manner of speaking, in the pluralistic ethos of poetry. Almost in every language a very wide range of relationships, idioms and styles, symbols and imagery, resonance and memories, anxieties and insights are to be found and taken together the India scenario of poetry, as indeed of literature as a whole, is amazingly plural and stubbornly resistant to broad generalisations. This poetry has all too often not overtly celebrated India. It has questioned the idea of India in some disturbing ways. Without moral self-righteousness it has looked askance at politics. It has deeply suspected both the colonial and the post-colonial. It has found tradition sustaining but inadequate. It has asserted the personal in place of the overwhelmingly public. It has attempted to be a repository of the spiritual anxieties and metaphysical yearnings of both individuals and communities. It has also dared to bring the unspeakable into the realm of speech. The Dalit poetry and poetry of women are two aspects worth noting not only as literary phenomena but also as socially crucial in empowerment. Poetry has had the courage to be left alone, out of popular attention and care. And yet, it has never betrayed the Indian man, his universe and struggles. On the contrary it has always stood by him. The India which emerges out these vastly differing poetic voices is an India, alive and human self-critical and vulnerable, curious and restless, inventive and joyful, morally alert and reassuring. Rooted as it is in reality, it still carries dreams and visions, values and beliefs. Happily, it is specific and local in its hues and smells, in its objects and emotions and not an anonymous colony of the so-called global village. Poetry in free India has been a reliable witness, a willing accomplice.