OF FREEDOM AND STRUCTURE

C'est l'apothéose!



What is the Apotheosis in Revue {R}évolution's language? A poet who epitomizes our philosophy, which is constantly evolving, as we intensify our effort in Beauty, Truth, and Wisdom. After receiving *Aśoka at Dhauli* and Sourav Sengupta's humble cover letter, we knew. We delved into his literary influences and creative process, which ranged from the epic *Mahabharata* to the soulful Baul singers of Bengal to Stephen Fry. Sengupta's vivid erudition impressed us. {R}#5 has captured the most powerful moments of his interview, which can be read in its entirety online and watched on YouTube. We encourage our audience to engage with the Poet through the comment section on our channel.

SOURAV SENGUPTA is an Indian Poet from Kolkata. He authored *Aśoka at Dhauli*, a metered treasure in twelve stanzas which narrates a seminal moment in the Asian subcontinent history, and many more beauties for the intellect and the soul. Last season's episode of QELP, the Poet's LIFE Podcast covered various topics, including the origins of *Aśoka*, Sengupta's creative process, the significance of musicality in poetry, Baul singers, the four levels of abstraction, sponsorship and the publishing industry, emotions, polymathy, and Tagore. Sengupta also shared his favorite archetype and recommended excellent reads for those looking to excel at writing poetry. A conversation rich and inspirational for poets and artists.

ΑΠΟΘΕΩΣΙΣ

How *Aśoka* came to be



The Lion Capital of Ashoka
Four Asiatic lions positioned back to back. Symbol of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism surmounted with the Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra). Often translated as religion, moral, or natural law, Dharma *is what supports life. Circular abacus adorned with dharmachakras and four animal profiles: a horse, bull, an elephant, and a lion.*

Ever since I was young, I have had a passion for history, and I have spent a lot of time reading about it and visiting archaeological sites all over India. I even had the opportunity to visit the historical battlefield of Kalinga, a significant event for the Indian subcontinent also taught in our schools. If you look at the spread of the Buddha's message, Buddhism as a philosophy and a religion took off after the Emperor Ashoka fought the battle of Kalinga. After that, he developed this missionary zeal to spread here first of all and adopted that religion himself. So, Ashoka became a Buddhist and sent his children out as ambassadors out all over the world to spread the Buddha's message. A lot of what India is known for today–Gandhi and nonviolence (ahimsa), cultural pluralism, tolerance, etc.–somehow links back to this event in my mind. This is where it all started. The national emblem of India is the four lions of Ashoka. So, in many ways, Ashoka and Kalinga are linked to Indian history and that is where my interest came from, and I thought I should write about it.

This poem is written in something known as the ballad meter, a 14-syllable structure. A lot of Kipling's work is in that song and rhyme style. I also looked at a lot of Indian poets and realized very few have written something on this subject in English. So, I decided to give it a shot and see how people respond to it.



Baul singers & the importance of musicality in poetry

Musicality, that is, rhyme and rhythm are the qualities we associate with poetry traditionally, in our mind. There is a very distinct tradition, going back centuries of folk music, and folk poetry, which has inspired poets down the generations. India is a big country, a nation of nations, so to say. The part of India that I come from is Bengal, which is East. So, we speak Bengali, and we have a very well-rooted tradition of Baul singers who are essentially wandering minstrels. They go from village to village with their stringed instrument, and sing and in exchange for their songs, they beg alms from the village folk, and that's how they survive.

Baul singers live very simple lives and sing deeply philosophical poetry with a vocabulary rooted in the soil, highly relatable to the people. They sing of profound truths about God, the oneness of all beings, the universe etc. We also have a tradition of fisher folk in Bengal, a land of rivers. So, the fishermen and the boatmen have their own tradition of folk music called *Bhatiali* in Bengali. Some of the great Indian poets like Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam have been deeply influenced by these folk traditions.

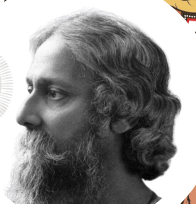
One of the most historically famous Baul in Bengal is Lalon Fakir. Lalon is his name and "Fakir" is a generic surname attached to every Baul singer which essentially means "a poor man." So, every Baul is known as "XYZ Fakir." So, this excerpt is called *Sob Loke Koy Lalon Ki Jaat Sonsare*, or *Everyone asks of Lalon, "What is your religion in this world?"* which translates like this:

What does religion look like? I have never laid eyes on it. Some wear malas* [garlands] *around their necks. Others wear tabeez* [rosary] *and so people say they've got different religions. But do you bear the sign of your religion when you come or when you go?

Lalon Fakir

1772-1890

Using simple vocabulary and idioms, Baul singers will convey something hard hitting and profound and capture a universal truth. Contemporary music in India is often inspired by traditional forms, from various musical bands to rock and other genres. This inspiration can be seen in music from all parts of India, including Bengal and Punjab, where folk songs have influenced their own unique traditions. Sufi, of course, has also been playing a major role in music. Some thumbtacks of that inspiration, possibly may have crept into my work unconscious. Definitely not consciously.



Tagore

1861-1941



Nazrul Islam

1899-1976

The 4 levels of abstraction



REFERENTIAL

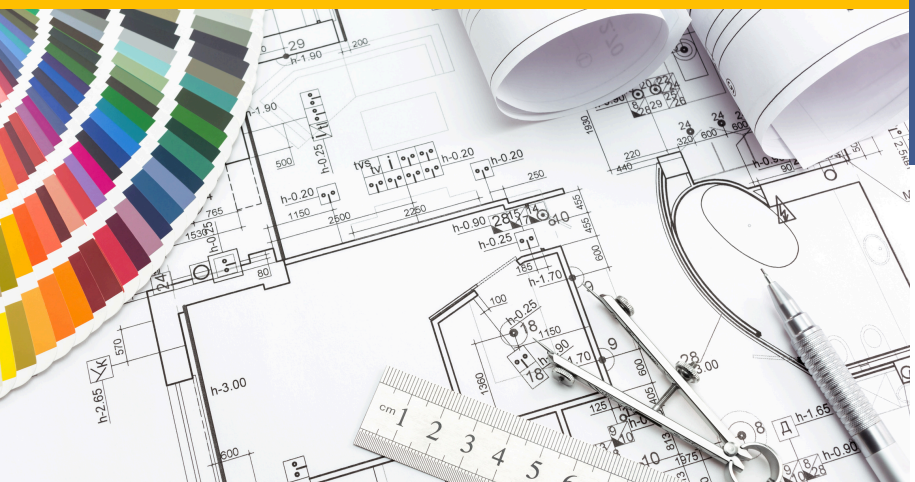
I realized poetry is being increasingly treated as something which does not require any training. It's no longer a craft, it's no longer art, it's no longer a skill that needs to be developed in the day. Maybe there is a merit to that thought that poetry is just an outpouring of what you're thinking about and any structure or any rules that you put around your writing inhibits that free flow. Hence, you should just write without thinking about any rules of the craft. But I personally don't subscribe to that. If you read a lot of the things you find on Instagram, you will wonder, "Is this a poem, or is this a quote? Or is this just a passing waste of thought? How do you categorize this? Literature?" I think poetry is an art form. I was trained as an architect and our design professor used to talk about these various levels of abstraction. He would say that architecture is at relatively the lowest level of abstraction, because you can see it, there's a visual aspect to it, a tactile aspect you can feel and a spatial aspect you can roam around and experience. So the designer has so many tools to convey what he or she wants to convey. The next level or the next higher level of abstraction, he would say sculpture, because there's the visual aspect, and you may also feel the statue. The next level is painting, only visual aspects, so you only have the visual medium to communicate your thought. That is how much limited your tools become.

Now the highest level of abstraction for him is poetry, because you have neither the visual element, nor the tactile element, the touch-and-feel or experience element, and the spatial element is also missing. So all you have is a word through which you have to convey an image which makes the craft of the poet much more challenging. I wouldn't say "superior" to any of the other. Each is unique, but the poet's task is much more difficult because of that. Therefore becoming. a poet should require a lot of training, by definition. To be an architect, you need to train for five years in a design school or engineering school. But for poetry, the highest level of abstraction, there is no [standardized] training...

REFERENTIAL

Mankind can live free in a society hemmed in by laws, but we have yet to find a historical example of mankind living free in lawless anarchy.
–Stephen Fry





Sponsorship & the publishing industry

In this hankering or struggle for fame, a lot of artists are just falling by the wayside. The issue of sponsorship is significant because in India's history, during the Golden Age of poetry, court musicians and poets were supported by Rajas and Maharajas. Renowned poets such as Mirza Ghalib rose to fame solely due to royal patronage. They did not have to worry about basic necessities such as food because the king provided for them. They just needed to be in court and compose a few lines for the king. Even Hindustani classical music, which is the ancient Indian tradition of music, also flourished due to that form of patronage, because we have these Karanas of music. Each Karana [standardized movements in dance and music codified in the Hindu canon of performing arts, the *Natyashastra*] represents in some way the court of a particular king. But in contemporary times, of course, these kingdoms and these rajas and maharajas and patrons have withered away. In modern times, governments have a multitude of priorities to address, especially in countries like India. Supporting art and poetry may not be high on their list of priorities, though it is not to say that they completely disregard it. The harsh reality for artists is that they are often left to navigate their career paths alone, searching for a mentor or sponsor to help them climb the ladder of success. In the highly competitive world of Bollywood, our version of Hollywood, talented singers abound, but only a select few are able to break through.



Ghalib

1797-1869



It is a cutthroat environment, with dark and seedy stories of the industry and the unsavory practices artists must endure to achieve fame and fortune. The reality is unfortunate. It may hold true for poets too, unless they are commercially successful. If you happen to be a commercially successful poet, publishers will hanker to publish you regardless of the quality of your work. On the other hand, there are many poets out there who produce outstanding work but struggle to get published, while others who are not as skilled get published simply because they are popular on social media platforms like Instagram. So, the publishing industry as far as poetry is concerned, is also publishing poets on Instagram who have more followers. This suggests that the determining factor for publication success may not be based solely on the quality of the work itself. Instead, it could be influenced by external factors such as the poet's popularity or social media following. As a result, a well-trained and profound poet with little following may struggle to get published, whereas an Instagram poet with a large following could easily get a book deal. Additionally, the idea of "verbal vomiting" in poetry is also discussed in James Fenton's book. Fenton compares it with music and says the same poets, the same people who extol the virtues of this kind of poetry may not have the same tolerance for bad music. Despite the praise for the raw and unfiltered expression in such poetry, these same individuals would not listen to a song that is out of tune or poorly composed. So they do not hold poetry to the same standards apparently. You can still do your catharsis though music but, if it is poorly produced, off-key, and lacking rhythm, it will not be enjoyable. Therefore, shouldn't poetry also be held to the same standards of quality and craftsmanship?

Emotions, the craft and Harmony

Emotions are a very important part of the creative process and the best way to deal with emotion is to transform it into your work so that it is reflected into your work. At the same time, if your work is a pure download of your emotions or feelings in the here and now, which may not have any relevance to anybody else in the world, then that is not good poetry, right? Good writing is deeply moving. While it may be relatable to hear a poet talk about their experience with a breakup, for example, many people have gone through similar situations. That is part of life. So, as a poet, are you bringing something unique to the table and delving deeper into the subject matter? Is there a bigger story that you are telling people? Is there a higher truth that you are speaking to through your work, through your emotions? That makes all the difference. Also, knowing when to end a poem comes partly from your approaching poetry in the classical sense, that is, trying to write in a particular form which will set boundaries to your writing. Free verse champions often assert that limits restrict artistic expression, saying "it's a free world, break free from boundaries, and all of that," but in my experience, setting boundaries such as meter, length, syllables, or lines can actually enhance creativity. Rather than hindering the creative process, these frameworks provide a channel for it, allowing me to explore and refine my ideas within a defined space.

It helps me to channelize my thought and creativity with conditions, parameters. These are the extent which I can write, and I have to tell what I want to tell the reader within these many words or syllables.

Tagore, poets and polymathy

We have all heard of Rabindranath Tagore. Most of the people in the West know him for his collection of poems, *The Gitanjali* (1912), which gave him the Nobel Prize. He was a polymath. He was a painter, an artist, a songwriter, a playwright, a novelist, a short story writer. Tagore founded a university on his principles of reviving ancient *gurukul* system of learning, so in that sense, he was an educationist and a nation builder as well, and he had a great interest in science. He met with Albert Einstein, and they had this famous dialogue and wrote a book of popular science which proves the extent of his erudition! Tagore wrote *Our Universe*, and dedicated it to Satyendra Nath Bose, a scientist who was also a contemporary of Einstein. In the book, Tagore discusses his understanding of various celestial bodies such as comets, galaxies, planets, and solar systems. Tagore was such a fascinating person. A lot of great poets have been polymaths, at least they have had a diverse set of interests. There are so many examples. But is it a prerequisite to being a good poet? Maybe not? There are an equal number of examples where a poet has been only a poet possibly and not many other things, but if you have a diverse set of interests about what is happening around you in a diverse set of fields or subjects, I think that informs your creative work.

These icons surmounting photographs of poets, artists, philosophers, and scientists represent time eras. The video "A timeline of poetry and art genius by Revue Revolution" explains this classification. Link in biography.

What are these?



Your writing possesses a special sensitivity and value to readers, for they are not only a reflection of your poetic mastery but also the expression of your broad knowledge across various fields. By infusing your work with multidisciplinary perspectives, your works become timeless and incomparable, a true testament to your craft.

A Poet's favorite archetype

In the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, which is one of the two great epics in the Indian tradition, the other being *Ramayana*, I would consider my favorite archetype to be Krishna, who is a God in essence. In the story, he is depicted as a divine being in human form, but he is unlike typical gods due to his character. Today's interpretation of the *Mahabharata* may characterize him as a villain because he is cunning and uses various devices to achieve his objectives and manipulate the course of events and war.

When Krishna asks his idealistic disciple Arjuna to do something unethical, Arjuna questions the morality of the situation. Krishna smiles and sniggers–this is a typical characteristic–and responds: “I am God, so whatever I say is right, that is rule number one. And rule number two is, refer back to rule number one." (laughs). Krishna's character is interesting because he has many shades to it, unlike most of the Western epics that portray characters as purely evil or devious. This complexity allows us to learn from Krishna's portrayal in the epic, as it highlights the various shades of human character. We cannot be put in a box, and must respond to situations in different ways. Sometimes, we need to be good, and sometimes, we need to be bad. Even when we know something is right, we may need to do it wrong.

–Sourav Sengupta

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