

Full Transcript: Agyeya and the Multitudes He Contained

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Author and journalist Akshaya Mukul has recently published a book about the Hindi writer Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan, better known as Agyeya, titled *Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: The Many Lives of Agyeya*. The following is a transcript of an interview with Mukul, conducted by Trisha Gupta, journalist, critic and professor at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication”. They discuss the book and the ‘multitudes’ that the writer contained. The following is a transcript of the interview. It has been edited for style and clarity.

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Hello! Welcome to this conversation with Akshaya Mukul. I’m Trisha Gupta and I’ll be interviewing Akshaya about his new book. Akshaya is an independent researcher – which is a very small way of describing someone who has written one of the most acclaimed and finely-researched books of recent years on the Gita Press and the making of Hindu India which won pretty much every award there is to win in English-language book publishing in India.

He’s now out with a second – thicker – book on the iconic Hindi writer Agyeya (Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan). Agyeya was a colossus of the Hindi literary world throughout the 20th century. And we will find out why so many people outside of the Hindi literature world don’t know about Agyeya today.

About Akshaya, I can only say that I have had the fortune of getting to know him a little bit because sometimes he shares his immense journalistic experience and wisdom with students. He has taught journalism for a year at the Lady Shriram College for Women in Delhi and most recently at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication, where I also teach. So, welcome, Akshaya.

Thank you.

The book, as I have already said, is this unbelievably huge 800-page affair, with all the notes. How long have you been working on it?

Almost five years. It becomes almost an undergrad course plus one year.

Good way of putting it! *Matlab lagan se aapne poora* undergrad course devote *kiya* to Agyeya (Meaning you've devoted the effort of a whole undergrad course to Agyeya).

And there has been a biography of Agyeya before this, but nothing has ever been written about him in English biographically, before?

No. Even the Hindi one was written in his lifetime. In a way, you could say it was a controlled biography because Agyeya was in control of it. Chapters were being shown to him, he was being interviewed. So a lot of things, which normally a biographer will ask about his subject are missing. I don't know whether it was deliberate or not. So I would not like to comment beyond that.

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I have never read the book, but it sounds very much like an authorised [biography].

Yeah, it was authorised. It was released on his 75th birthday in Delhi. [The name of the book is] *Shikhar se Sagar Tak*.

So your book, I feel like I have spent a long time reading it. So I can't even imagine how much work went into the writing of it. Because reading it is scintillating, and yet one does see the archives – the many archives – that you worked on. But maybe before we get to talking about the process of your writing it, I want to try and draw people into Agyeya, because he is such a fascinating figure.

One of the things that struck me really quite early in the book is that you talk about Agyeya getting this idea of living dangerously. He has this immensely varied life, as the book's title itself suggests: 'Writer, rebel, soldier, lover'. And the thing about living dangerously, apparently he first encounters from Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1929 Lahore Congress.

Yes. He writes in great detail about his experience with the Congress. What is happening in the camp? How do the workers behave? How do the police behave? And you also see his frustration with that politics. He's seen it but he doesn't like it. He's still in college then, in Lahore, at Foreman Christian College. Nehru remains his hero in many ways – probably the only one in the Congress that he never talks ill about, never writes against. He even becomes part of the Nehru 60th birthday commemorative volume.

It seems like a personal admiration.

Yes. And he chases Nehru down for [the Foreword for] his prison poems. Nehru is also very indulgent to him. He gets a close interaction with politics – the way it's done, what leaders do, how politics gets articulated to the masses. And this whole frustration, as I said, builds up, and then he thinks that the real politics [like elsewhere]. Maybe because of his age, he was in his 20s – he moves towards the revolutionaries. That's living very dangerously.

He joins the Hindustan Republican Socialist Association. Or Army?

Association. The Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. He starts as a pamphleteer – distributing pamphlets – and he becomes part of the main gang. Comes to be known as 'Scientist' because he is known for being an expert at making bombs.

Yes, and he was in prison for 4 years for the Delhi Conspiracy case. And it is actually remarkable. Because we know the names Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekar Azad – but we barely know the large number of other revolutionaries that were actually involved – for short or long periods of time – with the movement. And some of these people also seem to have literary careers.

Another person who had a connection with the HSRA – I was stunned by this – was [the well-known Hindi novelist] Yashpal (with a complicated relationship with Agyeya which we won't go into). But it seems like Agyeya is very strongly involved as a young, just-graduated science student with this moniker 'Scientist'. It's almost, cinematic.

That entire period is very cinematic and if you see the entire [Delhi Conspiracy case] proceedings, that also is very cinematic. In fact, you and I, we were talking about it, that a reader might think that I have kind of gone overboard writing about this whole procedure, what is happening in the court case.

My editor had to really put her foot down and say, "Look I'm cutting 10,000 words out of it. So what you see is..."

This is the truncated version? [laughs]

This is the truncated version. You know there are so many myths about Agyeya's life as a revolutionary. So when you stumble upon something which is record-based and then corroborate it with his own private papers, you find that the story needs to be told. Because people who love him tell you the story that he was supposed to be the driver on that day when Bhagat Singh was to be taken out of the jail and the whole conspiracy. Everyone will tell you that, Agyeya was to be the driver. But the records don't say that. Records name one Mr Singh – it could be Agyeya – which I have written, that it could be. But we don't know. All the myths – that he learned driving overnight. No one learns to drive overnight and is given the charge of doing something like this.

Absolutely. Yes.

I kind of got a little obsessive, I must admit, writing about it. Because this needs to be told.

It could be a little book in itself, the earlier part. Because he has these different, quite definite sections of his life. He chooses to have those. In some ways, the revolutionary Agyeya is very much a sort of a story in itself. And I feel like the unfolding of the court case is a climactic event. Then in that narrative – I'm sorry to create an almost fictional narrative out of this – but in that narrative, it's almost like the writing of *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani* is a literary coda to this very eventful life. Because he starts writing his first novel, which is a very very celebrated, modernist novel – perhaps *the* modernist novel, the pioneering Hindi modernist novel. He starts writing it in jail.

Yes! He's writing in jail and if you remember, he writes to Jainendra and says, "I'm myself surprised with what I'm going to write. The way it's coming, it's overwhelming." The first title is not *Shekhar*, it's *Ushantarer*.

Which is a Bangla word.

Which is a Bangla word. He's greatly influenced by Bangla. It's all the home-schooling. He reads Bangla, he reads Sanskrit, he reads everything and his range of writing and reading is completely mindblowing actually. He's younger to Jainendra, and he is giving a list of books which Jainendra should read.

Yes from prison.

And he's writing from prison.

And Jainendra is taking those books very seriously.

He's not only telling him what books, but also where they are available in Delhi, in the Marwari library, or others. So his scholarship! Mind you what, he is 19, 19-20.

Clearly, there is very much a sense of him as an intellectual prodigy. It's very hard to keep a conversation about Agyeya on track because his life is so immensely varied, but let us come to *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*, since we've actually arrived at it. *Shekhar* is Agyeya's first novel, which takes a long while for him to actually bring to the form in which it is published and it's published, in two parts. It is obviously drawing on his lived experience – but he also is at pains to say that it is not *only* autobiographical. As a reader, when you first encountered Agyeya's writing and *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani*, did you assume – like so many other readers – that there was a connection between this charismatic hero, this kind of torn hero, and Agyeya the writer?

Not when I read it for the first time. I was barely 16-17 when I read it for the first time in Hindi. And if you read *Shekhar* at 16 or 17, you're completely blown away. Maybe not now, maybe now I find *Nadi Ke Dweep* [Agyeya's second novel] to be a better novel, I like it more. But at that age, I had no clue that *Shekhar* is actually a kind of take-off on Chandrasekhar Azad. That's what he's trying to do – but it's about his (Agyeya's) life and everyone's around him. The character of Shashi, she is his cousin, and everyone talks about it, but nobody knows that it's actually the life he lives that is all being reflected in his novel.

And it's a very troublesome phase of his life. He's very troubled and his angst is coming out [in the book]. And his brother Vatsaraj tells him, "Father will not like reading it."

And he doesn't.

He doesn't.

To switch back from his first novel to this autobiographical self, which you're saying is a very troubled one, the relationship with his father – who is an archaeologist – features a great deal in the shaping of Agyeya. Also allows for an itinerant childhood of the sort that is quite rare and a privilege and I think again seems to really enjoy and use that. I was very struck by the time he spends in South India and the ways that you know Ooty or college in Chennai, these things for a Brahmin North Indian Hindi writer, these are very unusual experiences.

Yeah, among all of Hiranand Sastri's children, Agyeya seems to be his favourite. Therefore Hiranand is always more pained whenever Agyeya is not doing what he wants him to do. He knows he's a prodigy. In fact, when the editor of *Asia* magazine says, "Oh I didn't know this boy is your son" when both father and son get published in the same issue, his father is very proud. When the father's gone somewhere and someone sings praises of Agyeya. The father writes to him, "Oh, people really like you a lot." And his younger sister [laughingly] asks why he wants to quit literature, "because you have to win the Nobel Prize."

So he's a prodigy, but yet there is a troubled relationship; his father Hiranand is a man of strong likes and dislikes. He has his own problems: his wife dies and he has so many children to take care of, he's the sole earning member – but he always indulges Agyeya. He indulges even the younger children – Vatsaraj is sent to Cambridge. But there is this constant thing about Agyeya. He's too much in his life. Even for Agyeya's marriage, he has these secret parleys with Jainendra and later Banarasidas Chaturvedi, which Agyeya doesn't like. "Why are you getting into my life?" he asks. This also affects his relationship with Jainendra, which starts to see some rupture because Jainendra is taking too much interest in it.

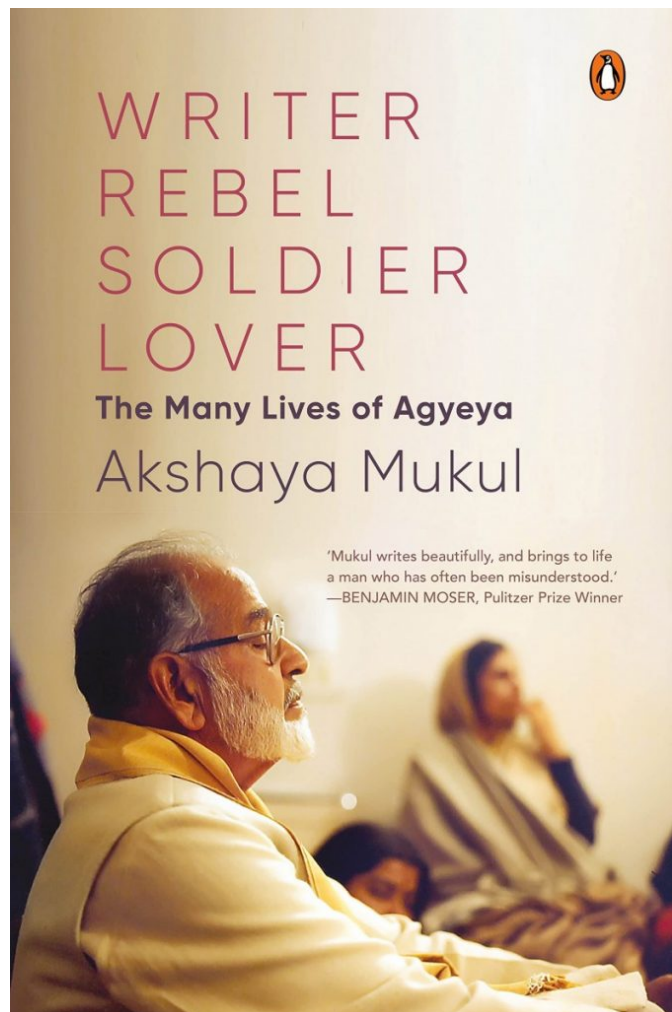
It's interesting, because he has these mentor figures.

Yeah, Jainendra and Banarasidas Chaturvedi both are mentor figures.

And he has a very, very close intimate relationships with them and yet both these relationships seem to dwindle quite and perhaps turn with Banarasidas Chaturvedi, who is the editor of *Vishal Bharat*, and Jainendra who is a senior Hindi writer of the time and perhaps also pioneering in certain ways in his work. But both of these relationships by the end of his life, it is as if they are [gone].

But that's true of Agyeya's entire life. It starts with Jainendra, Banarasidas Chaturvedi, Nemichand Jain, Bharatbhushan Agarwal you name it – everyone is just going away. So it's like what Mukund Lath once said, Agyeya is like Picasso in many ways. Place changes, friendship changes, relationship changes, everything changes every few years. So people in his inner circle are never the same.

Later on, he really mentors, to some extent, Raghuveer Sahay and Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, but they do not become part of his coterie. You know what Harold Bloom used to say – that ten years of a writer's career is a great phrase. You see that with Agyeya, I guess,



Akshaya Mukul
Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Lover: The Many Lives of
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41 to 52, in those eleven years his best works have been produced. After that, he becomes a bit of a messiah, a bit of a granddaddy of literature, surrounding himself with people, and with the years, more and more mediocre men.

Well, the people that are willing to be followers I suppose are the ones that joined.

Yeah. I forgot to name Dharamveer Bharti, who is someone he again mentors. But at some point they just fall apart.

Agyeya's literary feuds are sort of legend, at least in the Hindi literary world. And even though I've read your blow-by-blow accounts of some of these, in general, do you feel like he was quite difficult to get along with? Because he also keeps making these efforts to reach out to other writers.

He does. I'll say, he's difficult, yes but an image is also created of Agyeya that he keeps to himself. In Hindi they used to call him "Chuppa", you know. That he's a man who's always quiet, that was kind of read as being arrogant; of being of a different class. The bulk of the Hindi literary writers I am talking about are from a rural or mofussil background. Maybe some from Calcutta – but most, you will find from the Hindi heartland. And here is a man who doesn't look like them, who doesn't dress like them, who's open about his relationships.

Here's a man who's not cut from the same cloth as the rest of the Hindi world. And that creates an image that he is the man who keeps to himself, he's arrogant – which in many cases he was not. Nirmal Varma says that's his protective gear. He wears it because he needs to protect himself.

But I don't agree with a lot of these allegations about him keeping away from or trying to be seen as above the rest of the Hindi crowd. No, because we do have instances when he goes out of the way to help writers, even people who were his fiercest critics.

There's the legendary rivalry created by the Hindi literary world between Agyeya and [Gajanan Madhav] Muktibodh as poets and yet again it seems that there's a very close relationship.

Very close relationship. And this is all created post-Muktibodh's death. Muktibodh himself is reaching out to him, they have great warmth.

He goes to visit him, he's had a heart attack that year, these kinds of accounts I feel like there is a lot of clearing of the air that your biography really achieves.

In fact, among the people who went for his last rites, Agyeya had just come out of a heart surgery, he's there... Kapila Vatsyayan is there.

Yeah and providing financial support often to a lot of these people. The class barrier, the class divide – we'll call it a gulf – that may exist between Agyeya and others is something he acknowledges, I feel like subtly. And people do reach out to him for financial help quite often, especially younger writers [Phanishwar Nath] Renu writing to him.

And he's really affectionate to Renu. One writer's death which really affects him is Renu's. [And earlier, we see] Renu is not only asking Agyeya, he is asking "adhikaarvarsh", *jisko Hindi mein kehte hain* (as you say in Hindi). Adhikaarvarsh [with a sense of legitimate claim] he says ki '*Dinmaan nikal raha hai aur ab mujhe naukri nahi milegi?*'

Aur woh bohut mazedaar hain quissa, ki main Bihar ka correspondent banne wala hoon.

When you see his diary of that, when they go together to cover drought in Bihar, my god, he's scathing. Renu, he says, "What kind of editor I'm traveling with?" He wakes up at six in the morning and here he is used to waking up at ten and Agyeya comes at six in the morning with a cup of tea, wakes him up saying get up we have to go for assignment, we have to go to villages. And Agyeya indulges him and some of the best reportage you can see on you know which came as a book *Rinjal Dhanjal*, kitaab hain.

Dinmaan reportage.

Dinmaan reportage. He's so indulgent. Even Rajkamal Chaudhary. Rajkamal Chaudhary is one bohemian Hindi writer from Bihar. He is writing to Agyeya. They have nothing to do with each other – they are from two different worlds. But Agyeya reaches out, Agyeya helps, Agyeya sends money. After Chaudhary's death, when Dinmaan writes something which is not very good – copies of Dinmaan are burnt in Muzaffarpur. But yes, he reached out throughout. And that in a way, you see even the creation of Vatsal Nidhi and these writers camps which are happening they're all geared towards, if you see the common thread, is trying to help writers, the community of writers.

Vatsal Nidhi, of course, is the trust that he starts very late, and perhaps towards the end of his...

With money he gets from Gyan Peeth.

Yes, but we've jumped far ahead. We can go back perhaps to the beginnings of this community-making, where he starts by creating journal after journal after journal...

And look at the way he is going. First there is one little hand written journal which is in his copy which is called *Sankranti* which comes out from Meerut. Then of course there is the famous story of him and this writer from Hindi, *Aarti* from Patna. Then of course he goes to work for *Sainik* which is not his, and then *Vishal Bharat*. So he is constantly

[working] and it leads to finally *Pratik* in Allahabad, which is the first unique experiment in literature. I don't know about other languages, but four or five writers living together, common kitchen.

It's an absolutely astounding thing to think about because it's a commune, literally a commune.

All of them become big writers, Nemichand Jain, Bharatbhushan Agarwal, Sripat Rai, Agyeya.

And there is even someone like Upendranath Ashk visiting!

Who writes a scathing account of it many many years later, of what's happening in that house.

And the other person of course, crucial to this world, is Sripat Rai – his publisher and Premchand's son. But maybe we're not going about it very chronologically, Akshaya. I'm going to try my best. So, Premchand of course features quite early in the literary career of Agyeya and for people that don't know Agyeya means "the unknown", "the unknowable". So, and the name is given to him by Premchand, will you tell people how that happened?

It so happened while in jail when he met another inmate Bimalrapasad Jain, who was a very close friend of Agyeya, and related to Jainendra Kumar. And Jainendra is visiting him and then Agyeya's story is kind of smuggled out

Agyeya's first two stories.

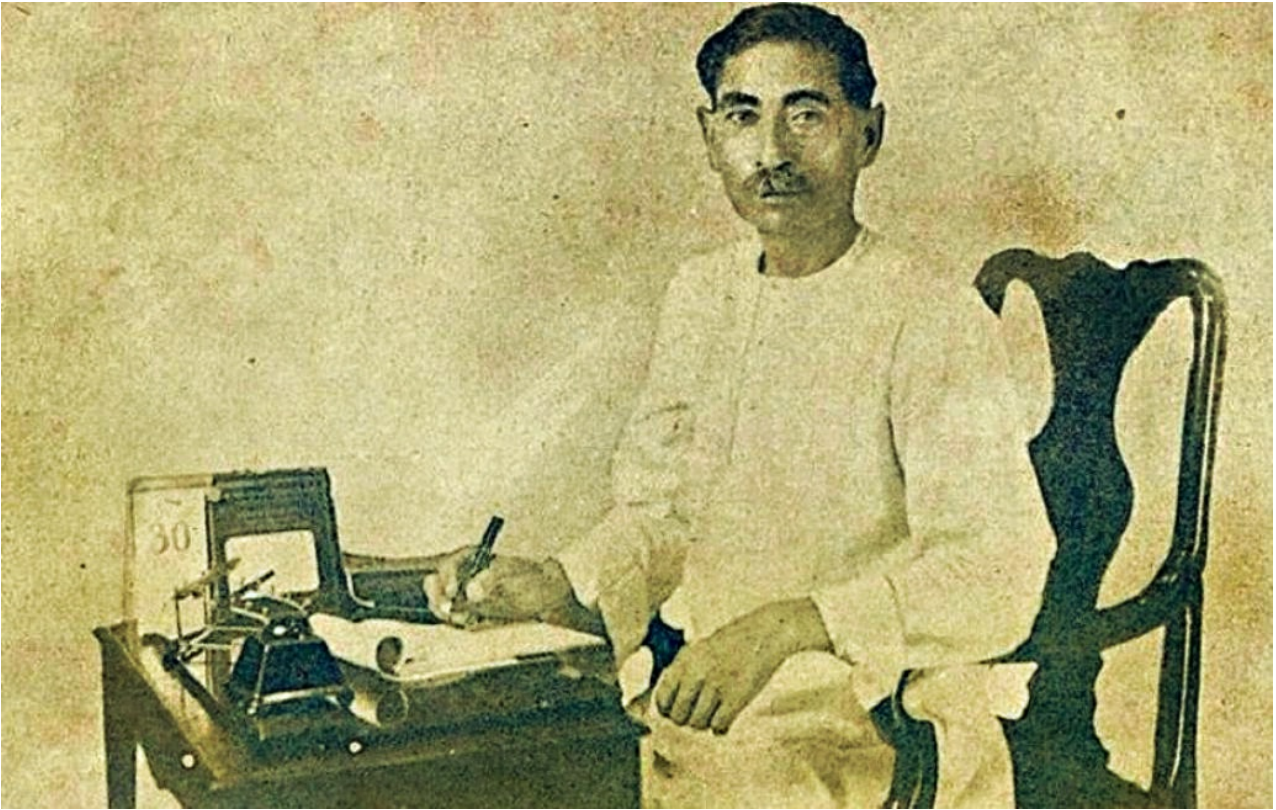
Agyeya's two stories are smuggled out and Jainendra shows it to Premchand. Premchand sees the first story he says, "Well I can publish it but can you give me Rs 5,000?" Because the British government is going to ban it. "The other story I will publish," he said. It's called 'Amar Vallari' and so he says. "Who is the writer?" So he says, "Agyeya hain". He basically said, "*Naam toh chhap nahin sakte hain* (We can't publish his name), he's in jail." And Premchand publishes it as Sriyut Agyeya. So for a name which already was big – Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan – you add Agyeya to it, which Agyeya never likes in fact. But well it got stuck.

But it sticks.

Yes, it sticks and then you know, later on, he tries to make that whole distinction of writing poetry as Agyeya and writing newspaper articles as Vatsyayan. But yes, mostly it's Agyeya. The world knows him as Agyeya, very few people still call him Vatsyayan or the Dalmia family called him Vatsal. Otherwise. Agyeya is the name and Premchand is responsible for it. And that relationship with Premchand doesn't end there because Agyeya and Jainendra are also trying to take over, buy out *Hans* when it is going through a bad phase...

Which is the journal that Premchand has edited for years.

And it doesn't happen. They tried really, really hard to get it and you know others came in and it didn't happen. But Jainendra joins the editorial board, Agyeya could not.



Premchand. Photo: Unknown author, Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

Agyeya did not.

Agyeya comes to Agra to edit *Sainik*. Agyeya is also very worried about, kind of he's constantly asking Premchand, what he thinks of his poetry? There is a whole letter, in which Premchand is telling Jainendra, "*Humare daftar mein wohi kahaaniyon ko bohot logon unko pasand karte hain. Kavitaon ki baare mein logon ko itna yeh nahi hain.*" (People really like his stories, but there is not much interest in his poems.)"

To Agyeya, Premchand, very diplomatically, says great work is happening in Urdu. So he's not very enthusiastic about what he's reading but he's being very diplomatic and very polite. So that relationship continues for long. In fact, I think they met when Premchand is in Lahore for some literary conference. Agyeya always acknowledges that Premchand had a role to play in his life. But it's also that the end of Premchand leads to the new era of modernism – and Agyeya is at the centre of it.

Yes absolutely. The argument is sometimes made, I believe, that, Premchand tries to bring interiority into his characters and Agyeya really becomes the pioneer in that. *Shekhar* for instance, is from within one man's mind.

One man's mind, yes. Which, both the left and right, used to attack Agyeya. They said it shows what kind of perverse life he has. He has not thought of society but the life of an urban youth, who is leading a very, very complicated life. If you see around the time,

Godaan [Premchand's novel] comes out and many of these Marxist critics, Shivdan Singh Chauhan, for instance, juxtaposes the books. He says, look at the concerns of Hariya, the character in *Godaan*, and look at Shekhar's concerns.

So basically it's a decayed world of Agyeya, it's a decayed modernism. We are talking about ourselves and society is in decline. So they're trying to do this, but whatever they do... modernism is there now, and slowly the movement starts

It's interesting that this is one of the early reactions, I mean this contrast... because, of course, this plagues Agyeya throughout his life, this idea that he is somehow indulgent, self-indulgent and elite. And these are themes that keep coming up over and over – and we've talked about them in relation to his relationships with the Hindi world – but also in terms of his politics in general. Let me ask you, how you would characterise his politics? Because his relationship with the progressive movement, which is sort of a dominant strain of writers at the time that he emerging as a writer, is quite fraught.

It's quite fraught. At one point, they do this anti-war conference in Delhi, where everyone has come, even people from the Left have come. But mostly he feels very let down by the Left, with the reaction *Shekhar* received, where one line says Lenin he says is "*Jhuthan kahne wala*", or something like that. There's a reference to it in *Shekhar* and the Left never forgives him for that. Resolutions are passed. The right doesn't, of course, like the depiction of a relationship with your own cousin.

So he gets it from both. And somehow, he says later on, about his politics... he changes tack a bit. There's a bit of contradiction later on. He says, "It's not a writer's job to do change the world. The writer's job is to write." Someone asks him, I think this long interview that Duke University did, they ask, "What would you be known as?" He says, "At the most an anarchist."

But this is later in life.

In later life. This is in the 70s. And he said, "If I was close to one person, it was M.N. Roy." Which he is. They're very, very close.

Yes. A lot of mentor figures.

Big mentor figures. M.N. Roy is someone he loves. I mean M.N. Roy and [his wife] Ellen Roy are very close to him. Ellen is even close to Kapila and everyone in his circle... it's a big circle of friends. But politically, he takes not-so-popular positions. For a revolutionary, of the 1930s, joining the British Army in the 40s... how do you justify?

Absolutely not understandable in some ways.

For that, *Nadi ke Dweep*, apart from what was happening in his life with Kirpa Sen and others, it is also his explanation, justification for joining the War where he thinks well Fascism is a bigger enemy at this stage.

And if you come to think of it, he was not alone. There were others also saying the same thing. But in the Hindi literary scenem he gets the real beating for everyone. They say he's a British stooge and then the [Congress for Cultural Freedom] CCF happens in the 50s and they say he's an American stooge.

American stooge, yes absolutely.

So, labels come to him very easily and quickly from the other side.

From all sides apparently.

From all sides, and he's kind of, he's bitter about it. He's very bitter about it.

I think perhaps, he's not careful, And he seems to go all out, when he's taking a particular position. For instance, joining the army is different from, you know, the writerly mode – which would be to support it in conversation, be willing to criticise, talk, etc. But there is something about Agyeya, and this is what I mean about living dangerously that really stayed with me, that he actually goes there and does it. He sort of puts his money where his mouth is.

Does it, exactly. His partner – his new love, Kripa Sen – is telling him in so many words, only fools go to war, only fools join the army. You are not a man who should take orders from some army man. But he goes and when you, when you read Sidney Bolt's book on this the entire episode where Agyeya is mentioned... So you have Tariq Ali's father there, you have Sidney Bolt there, you have Agyeya there. So, at least these people were going out... as you said he was, he's living life dangerously. He could have very well taken a position, sat in Allahabad or Delhi and lived life comfortably.

To be fair, in later years, he does gravitate towards a more comfortable life. But he has this kind of, there's a moment where he says... at the time of the Spanish Civil War, he writes to somebody...

Yeah to Banarasidas Chaturvedi.

He's still his mentor at that time and he says, "In spite of all my pacifism I would like to do something desperate like enlist in the Spanish Civil War." And then he says something very interesting – which I thought was really stunning – which was "our country, the present government doesn't provide any outlet for this craving for dangers – one of the prime causes of terrorism and secret work." This is a remarkably psychological explanation for....

What he does.

Yes, for his life! So it's almost as if he's driven by non-ideological kind of desires. And that in some ways is also what gets him so much flak.

Yes. And he says, in fact, in the 70s and mid-70s that writers would be non-ideological, a writer's job is to write, and a writer's job is not to change the society. What you write might provoke or help people to do what they want to do, but it's not your job. So, he's doing all this, you know. He also tells you that he's... he's also one of the few authors who is so well-versed with what's happening in the world. So he wants to go and enlist in the Spanish Civil War.

And even before the Second World War starts, he and Balraj Sahni are making plans of skipping to this thing with some money. And they say because he wants to leave his wife behind, Balraj has his own plans.

This is of course another camaraderie which may interest people from another world – the cinema-interested world – may be interested in Agyeya from this perspective, which is amazing. Again quite a filmy relationship – with Balraj Sahni, who is a comrade in arms, a writer, a critic. They're sort of trading literary criticism of each other's work. But then they have this really strange sort of romantic entanglement with the same person. I almost don't want to give it away but it's remarkable. And then they somehow manage to get over that eventually, civilly.

Yes, they do.

But I was going to say maybe, there are two things which we haven't talked about which we must: his relationships with women (which kind of emerges from this). And the other is the cosmopolitanism – we'll come to that.

But how do you evaluate his relationships with women, starting perhaps with, you know his cousin – which is barely spoken but is also the subject or at least the background of his first novel? And then it remains a thing while he gets married. His first marriage is in the shadow of this relationship with his cousin...

The first marriage is happening in the shadow of his cousin. Later, his lover Kripa Sen tells him that, 'Look you have to get out of it, because she is the only one you love. You don't love anyone else, you keep going back to Meerut.' His first wife Santosh has the same problem. This relationship could be seen [as a result of the fact we were discussing earlier]: cousins being the only women you have close interactions with in [traditional] Indian homes.

So that could be one reason. [Another might be] his almost non-existent relationship with his mother, which came as a big revelation to me. These are questions that someone asked me: "Is he not looking for a mother figure?" I said I don't know.

He's very extractive and even emotionally, he drives them mad. These women are, they're miserable in the relationship. Yet, one after the other, women are in his life. All of them without fail are remarkable women, great achievers... they could do so much. This is one bit about Agyeya which frankly, you know, even when I was writing I was asking many

people, many women, “What do you make of the relationship?” Some of the women who knew him, women who were in their 80s now, or 90s, I asked them. Everyone only said, “All I remember is that we were mesmerised by him.”

Yeah so clearly, a man of charisma. So that’s quite clear. I’m going to speculate... I want to know what you think. Because when you say searching for a mother figure, the first relationship is – this cousin of his is older than him, and perhaps an elder sister figure. But then as he moves on, his marriage to somebody roughly his equal in age, is an absolute failure.

And his next relationship – a very intense passionate love affair with Kripa Sen – is very short-lived and does not fructify in the long-term. Both of his long-term relationships are with younger women, far younger than himself. Kapila Vatsyayan...

First was almost 18 years [younger] and the last partner is 33 years younger.

It’s very difficult to speculate on any of this, except that some people say [with] age he learned. I don’t know.

With age he learnt what?

He learnt to, kind of, the mistakes of the past... he is kind of more patient with women or is more patient in relationships. But when you see whatever little is available of his relationship with Kapila, you don’t think so... She’s a very successful very senior government official. Yet, she is constantly looking for his approval for everything that she does. What is it in this man?

Oh well, this I have to say perhaps is not unique to Agyeya. I think we’ve had, unfortunately, a history of very immensely capable women throughout the 20th century – and perhaps now too – who devote themselves to enabling the career and the joy of a particular man that they admire. So I think that is perhaps not only Agyeya. And then he finds... somehow he manages to pretty much replace her with an even younger partner. And these women I can say, I do get the sense that they are to some extent, to some extent at least intellectual companions as well. But perhaps mentees in some way again.

They’re mentees. See, of all the women he has a relationship with, I think Kripa Sen is the only one who returns his silence with her anger. You know what lovers do in a relationship. Otherwise, everyone is in a very muted relationship, it’s too one-sided. Not with Kripa. Kripa is a woman who has a mind of her own and she knows how to give it back.

Yeah, her letters are a delight. Whatever we read of them in the book, it’s just astonishing.

Someone who writes four love letters a day, all four different from each other. And when she doesn't hear from him, she tells him, "You don't know me I'm a Maratha woman." She has anger. The others are very subdued, very calm. They just quietly fade away. She refuses to fade away... even in the 50s they meet somewhere in Europe. We don't know what happened. I tried hard to track what happened to Kripa Sen and I couldn't. I tried through the Raja Rao route and everyone. I couldn't get anything.

With Kripa Sen, of course, the feeling one has is that one wants to read her account of everything actually. One wishes that she was the writer.

Kripa Sen is a fascinating character, but maybe we should talk about Agyeya's interest in cosmopolitanism or his desire to be read internationally. And, sort of using his access in some ways to English is a shaping thing... he's always, he's constantly getting translated, trying to translate himself, and translating other writers that he is bringing together. There is this long phase where he's interested in travelling to Europe... the Rockefeller Fellowship... he manages with great effort and some effort on his wife, Kapila Vatsyayan's, part as well to get these long stints travelling. There's also the Congress for Cultural Freedom, where again there is an international... But yet, there is a constant contradiction... in the positions that he takes about language... saying English is not an Indian language. What do you think?

He is very dismissive of the English language. In fact, in this Duke University interview that I was talking about, someone gives him an example of Vladimir Nabokov. He says, don't give me the example of Vladimir Nabokov because that's the only example of a Russian writing in English and doing a great job of it. But that exception proves my rule, that everyone should write in the mother tongue. So it's a contradiction. Here is a man, who wants to write in Hindi, wants everyone to write in their mother tongue... yet he's the one who's really into translation, very early on.

Imagine, he's writing to Upton Sinclair in the 30s. He's reaching out to people like, you know.. the lady who found Allen Ginsberg... Josephine Miles. Various others, you know... Leonard Nathan. These are all big names in America and are all involved in the translation of Hindi. So he wants that translation. But he is, he's very, very kind of... he had a very hard position on this. And when people ask him, what do you think of this writer or that writer in English, he says this one doesn't know how to write, Nirad Chaudhary and another friend of his, Mulk Raj Anand.

I was very stunned by that.

They are friends. Mulk Raj Anand was his friend.

He's not very kind.

He's not very kind at all. Maybe he is kind a little bit to Khushwant Singh, at one place. But mostly dismissive of it, because it's not their mother tongue. Why are they writing in it? One of the interesting interviews with Agyeya was by students of St. Stephen's College

for the English Department journal, called English Miscellany, I think. It has since been discontinued. An interview done in the 60s, and he's constantly harping on this that, look English is not the language, we can't write in it. So, he's taken a position and instead of realising that he needs to revisit that position, we see the hardening of that position. Therefore it almost borders on Hindi chauvinism at one point.

Yes and that's very strange.

Yeah, that's very very strange and he's the man who's keenest about translation. His relationship with [translator Gordon C.] Roadarmel, goes haywire.

Even until the 70s or something, he's trying to create journals in English. Like *Vak*. Does he never express any or recognise the contradiction in himself. Did you ever find any evidence of that?

He says it's in English because it's a journal of South Asia, East Asia with writers from Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Japan. And he's getting them translated. In fact, you find A.K. Ramanujan's early poems in it.

Absolutely some stellar poets.

Ramanujan's frustrations... sitting somewhere in Pune, saying my life is going nowhere, Agyeya kept publishing him.

And also Richard Bartholomew before that, the art critic. There are so many names from the literary cultural world.

Yes. Like Krishna Baldev Vaid's story getting goofed up.. you know, in translation... and Vaid's very upset and all that. So yes, there were these contradictions [on the politics of language]... but then Agyeya always had this stock reply, whenever you asked him. He'd quote Walt Whitman: "I contain multitudes."



He certainly did, he certainly did.

He certainly did.

I wonder whether we should perhaps wind quickly – or slowly – to a close. I was going to ask you a little bit about the process of writing this book. As is probably evident to anyone viewing this conversation, there is a wealth of detail in this biography. Is Agyeya's life unusually well-documented for a man of his time?

Yes, it is. But he's not alone. Actually now, while working on Agyeya, I realised there are many others. If you see a bit of, not entirely, but a bit of Premchand papers are available. Nemichand Jain papers are available. Great literary critics like Shivdan Singh Chauhan and his wife Vijaya Chauhan's papers are there... Someone should go and write the biography of Upendranath 'Ashk', a very interesting character.

Absolutely.

So, we have the 60-70 boxes lying uncatalogued at Teen Murti Library.

Of Ashk's papers?

Ji, Ashk's papers are there. The problem is that, most of us...

There is a short biography of Ashk by Daisy Rockwell.

Yes, there is...

Which is very lovely.

Which is very lovely, but I would like someone to do the complete detail. Because he's also a very polarising figure in literature.

Absolutely, colourful.

People don't like him.

And many relationships.

Many relationships, wives, sons. You know various things. Yes, so here's one character waiting to be written about.

Yeah.

Then you find with Agyeya also this, although [there are huge number] of personal papers there... to join the dots, you need to go and see other papers. You know for Jainendra's papers, I had to see Nemichand Jain's papers. Then the entire allegation

[about Agyeya's links to the CIA] took me to CIA's Chicago Archives... you know, in Reagan's time, and you see those CCF [Congress for Cultural Freedom] papers. Then this gentleman called Burnham, James Burnham, who's a big philosopher in America. He's always quibbling with George Orwell. He's also friends with Agyeya because of the CCF connection... and he's the one who's taken a very stern position and I think he's responsible for getting Agyeya thrown out of CCF in 1951.

Right and that was because of something financial.

Because of something financial. Yeah, that is something that happened. So those papers in Stanford and then you find this entire Rockefeller thing is happening, it's a real treasure trove in New York.

Right, so you accessed all of these documents.

All of them. Because you have to join the dots and then you see where it's coming from.

We haven't even mentioned the Delhi State Archives.

No, I have not. You know at Teen Murti Library, where all kinds of scholars you meet and you hang out with... Someone, generally said, I have seen I think some Delhi State Archives... I owe it to someone there who said, you know, you might find something in the Delhi State Archives. And I go there and I find... my god! It's like, it's a 1,500 hundred pages [about the Delhi Conspiracy case] lying there. No one has seen... I checked. Has it been ever been accessed? Everyone in Delhi, who know about the Hindi world – will have some 100 stories about the conspiracy case but without looking at the papers.

Apparently, we trade in literary gossip and we're content with that.

I don't know about other Indian languages, what happens... but Hindi definitely is. Hindi survives on that.

And then after people are dead, then we make them into epic or mythified characters.

For example, this entire fight between Agyeya and Muktibodh.

Which even I have heard of and I am not even a dyed-in-the-wool Hindi reader.

That Duke University interview, Agyeya says... 'Well there was a problem, he was a politically very alert poet. But language was not something [he took seriously enough]... So see, that's a poet's critique of a poet, there's nothing personal. If you see in the 60s, after Muktibodh's death... there's a concerted move to build up Muktibodh – who himself was a great poet – no denying this, he is one of my favourite poets.

Yes, absolutely, but we shouldn't have to choose between the two.

Exactly, exactly. Why do you have to choose? They are two different poets, they come from different backgrounds, their concerns are different.

And there's space for more.

Absolutely, you need Agyeya and Muktibodh to co-exist.

But I wonder, whether you think – given this sort of amazing wealth of archival material that is available to us – why is it that we have so few literary biographies? Even if not in English, then in other languages, there are not many.

The problem with biography.. while I might I have done just one biography of an individual and one biography of an institution, Gita Press...

And you're working on a biography of Jayaprakash Narayan.

Yeah, my little experience has been that the biographer has to completely fade away from the conversation. Just keep yourself away. Many, at least Hindi biographies, I can tell you are basically assemblage of reminiscences of the writer. 'I met Agyeya and this happened... this *baithak*, this happened... this *goshthi* that happened.' As a reader of biography – and I read biographies – it bores me.

You know, it's like your series of reportage of various interactions that the writer had. I draw him out, take him out of that. I keep repeating the example of John Richardson's full volume on Picasso. He's a groupie of Picasso, he's an insider. He starts writing after Picasso's death, and the fourth volume comes after John Richardson's death. And he's unsparing. Never does he say, 'I was hanging out there and this was happening.' He's not dropping names. He's critical when Picasso needs to be criticised.

And also, this larger thing of 'Never talk ill of the dead' that we have... so we tend to glorify. And how boring a man would be if there were only good things about him, you know? Agyeya used to say multitudes I have, I have tried to bring those multitudes.

I think that has happened. I mean, you are careful. I completely see it is a historian's biography. I mean, you studied history in Delhi University and I think some of that has stayed with you. The caution with which...

Why should I say something which is non-existent?

Which is absolutely true, but you don't shy away either from what is in the archive.

Absolutely.

And I think that makes it a really [balanced account]... because the man's life, has not just multitudes it has dark shades and they exist and they come across [in the book]. And yet, he is absolutely fascinating as a character.

This doesn't make me love Agyeya less.

Yeah.

All his darkness, all his melancholy, everything... whatever it is...

And he does really stride the 20th century like some kind of colossus, so there is a sort of intellectual history and political history and literary history of the 20th century contained in his life. I think it's a book well worth reading, even for those that are not invested in Hindi literature per se. So I hope a lot of people will be inspired by this to go read it. Thank you so much, Akshay.

Thank you, thank you Trisha.