

Poets and Lovers in Ninth Century India

Book review

The world of Aditya Narayan Dhairyasheel Haksar is not for the faint- hearted living nothing lives counting gain and loss. It is classical and contemporary worlds in harmony. Imagine Rahul Dravid strumming his bat and nodding the ball to the far corners of the field. Haksar's pen talks similarly precise and serene.

Haksar has 23 translations of Sanskrit classics. But that is not enough. It is a world where ideas and emotion coalesce to create a canon that rightfully can be called timeless. If Sanskrit literature needed rescue from within the culture, thank Haksar. How many such figures do we have in India who release us from our forgetful writing of history?

On the lawns of the apartment blocks where we live Haksar sat erect and agile, ready for everything, Dravid- like, oozing restrained glamour. Haksar's eyes shift from intense examination to caressing gaze, and his speech is so precise that it seems like it has gone past a genius editor. Welcome to the life and times of this softly- spoken yet sharply- toned scholar diplomat at the peak of his powers.

I sit across Haksar, stiffened by the Covid protocols and acting the schoolboy playing the Game of Discipline (I wanted to leap forward and shake his hand!). How can someone sit so serenely across me with the sky and the birds and the trees so curious about his presence? How does awareness seem so unaware? It is a master's utmost modesty. Are the birds listening?

Thus, we get to Haksar's latest verse offering, *Amaru Shatakam*, with men, women and the observer talking about the experience of love. These characters leap at us with spring steps, but the women are the heroes because they embody power and agency.

These could be the women of Lahore's *Anarkali Bazaar*, or *Vogue* models walking the tunnel- streets of Manhattan, or star- struck women gazing at the Jagannath Temple from Puri's *Dolamandapa Sahi*. These women are beyond time and space, beyond everything except themselves. "Amaru's feelings have a constancy, a timelessness," Haksar says. "He is able in a single stanza to express the sentiments of the whole poem."

We know little about Amaru. Haksar says the earliest commentary he has read is from the 10th century; thus "the work must be from an earlier era." We can guess it's from the 9th century or earlier. Translations by Greg Bailey and Martha Ann Selby feature in anthologies. There are collections by Andrew Schelling and C.R. Devadhar, but these are difficult to access. Welcome Haksar the historian.

Amaru Shatakam makes us re-examine love as freedom and choice. Remember that these were women in early medieval India. A favourite of mine is canto five, the maid's experience of love ("Hush! Softly! My life's lord may hear you,/ he is here, within my heart"). Have you seen the film *Sir* where Tillotama Shome gets into the bones of the housemaid whose love for her employer liberates her from class?

Amaru's female characters are not merely chasing dignity. They are circling around us for companionship. Each love is capable ("But my shameless heart still yearns/ for that callous spoiler of our love") and each one teases ("when the stitches of my bodice/ themselves burst a hundred-fold").

I am reminded of the great Indian poet Ramakanta Rath's *Sri Radha* ("my bangles tinkle and snub all scandals").

Phrases like "the signal of her favour," or "that every maiden has the right/ to the form of her own body," or "my worries of honour disappear" are so contemporary that Amaru seems to be us. Even a daughter can discuss love with her mother: "But passion's fire burns in my heart,/ mother, to whom can I go?"

But this is not feminism, let us call it the lover tossing her emotion around happily. We have every feeling there is, from the sensuous ("and a tear fell on her breast,/ as the signal of her favour"), to the sorrowful ("If your love, that was so deep/ has now reached this state,/ my life too, that was exciting,/ has now wilted with pain").

Amaru shifts from lover to observer: "that slender woman stopped her lover/ with what seemed like a river of tears." Then: "But suddenly she burst into tears/ that would neither stop nor flow." The truce between partners in the dead of night is, oh, so familiar: "though conciliation with each other/ was in the heart of both,/ they preserved their dignity./ Then, gradually, the couple turned/ their eyes on one another:/ their quarrel gone, and with a laugh,/ they embraced once more." Here is another third-person gem: "whose cheeks glowed with a laugh within."

With simple and precise phrases ("That young girl is full of love,/ but delightful also in her pride") Haksar brings Amaru so close that we can almost touch him. Do not denigrate ordinariness because it decodes everything there is, making stone look like sculpture.

Amaru must have been a researcher of the heart, observing humans as lovers. In the streets of Madurai, or Pataliputra, or Takshashila, the women of the 9th century CE might have enjoyed the freedom denied to them in later ages. This makes poetry a source for the study of history. While archaeology and numismatics reveal the politics and economy, literature becomes an entry point to society.

Amaru's women are not puffy butter-doll beauties. They are proud and capacious, not afraid to express themselves. Amaru reads them like a sociologist, and Haksar transmits one era to another with accuracy. Don't be deceived by the sparse prose which actually is so joyous.

The Foreign Service community reveres Haksar for his choice of pathways where stumbles are the norm. Diplomats, trained to bat and score for the nation's glory, understand what it means to dig into heritage. Haksar's monumental contribution to the preservation of knowledge is borderless. When Bangladesh's *Prothom Alo* newspaper published a review of *Amaru Shatakam*, "a pointer to cultural community" is what Haksar called it.

There is no triumph here, but a connector to the elsewhere that actually is right before us.

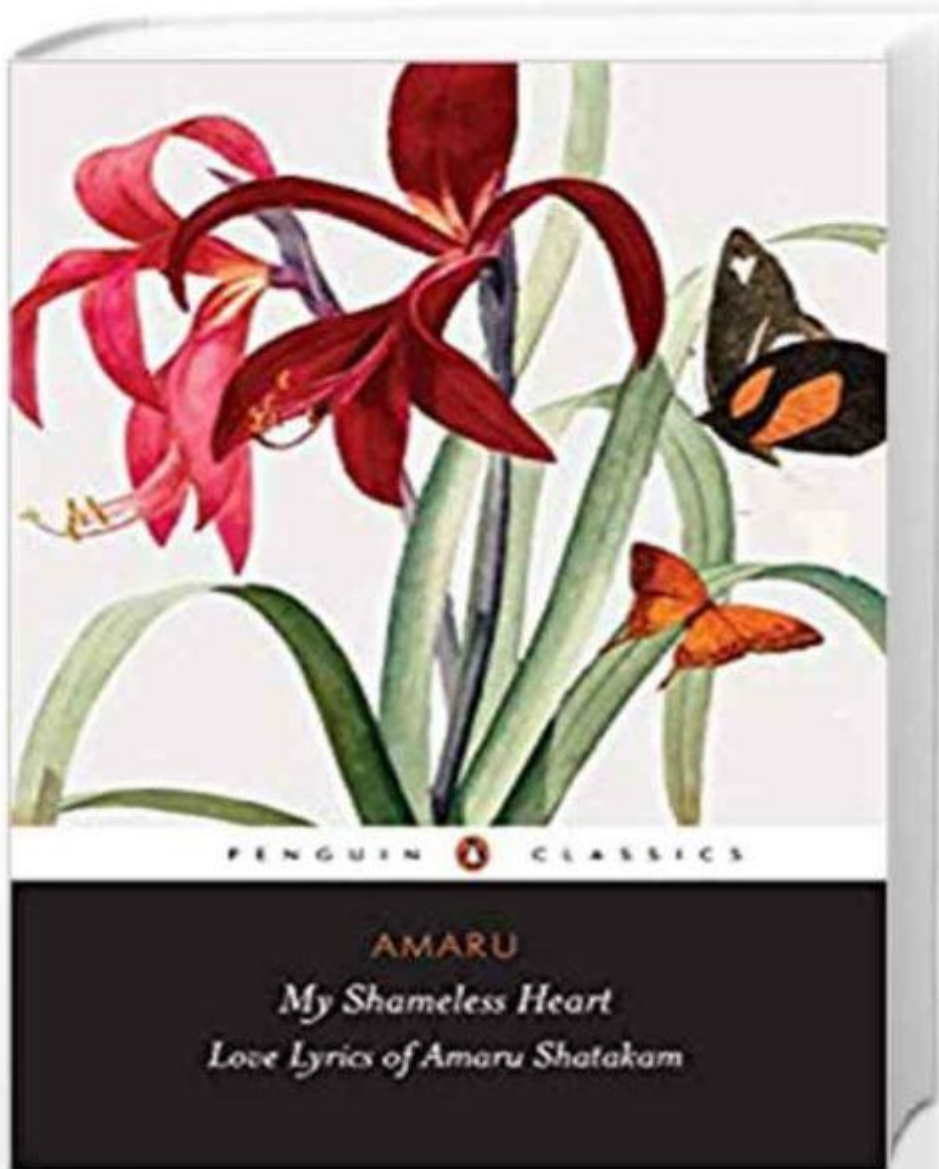
My Shameless Heart: Love Lyrics of Amaru Shatakam.

By Amaru.

Translated by A.N.D. Haksar. Penguin Classics.

Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd., Gurgaon, 2021.

150 pages. Paperback. Rs. 399.



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