**The 60s Poetry Scene**, or What I Learnt in Poetry Nursery.

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Before the Gulistaan of Indian Poetry began to flower there were cultivators who had seeded the soil. They had learnt their craft not from the local traditions (indeed, they were emphatic in turning away from Auoribindo, Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu who had served their time) but from influences abroad; from the voices of Modernism in England, on the Continent, and more importantly, from the eloquent new poets in America. They became our founding fathers – Nissim Exekiel, Dom Moraes, A. K. Ramanujan – who set the tone in the 50s. In Orissa, there was Jayanta Mahapatra, in Delhi there was Keki Daruwalla, and in Bombay appeared the early work of Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar ( both bilingual writers) and Gieve Patel, who was the painter in the group and practiced medicine.

At this time I was still an undergraduate and taking baby steps in this playground of poetry. Those were heady days. Newspapers and magazines began to notice and publish what was being produced. There was *Illustrated Weekly* which devoted a full page every month to poetry (Nissim was the Literary Editor). *Gentleman* magazine provided a 2-page spread; *The Times*, also offered a corner. There were other outlets. Opinion was a forum for politics, but it’s editor had a soft spot for literature and regularly featured poetry and short fiction. And we even got a modest payment ! Nissim founded *Poetry India* which became the official literary mouthpiece for the New poetry. So overall, the magazines showed tremendous support in showcasing literary work by contemporary writers. *Quest* went even further by inviting me to edit a special issue on Indian Poetry in English. It was 1968, and I was still a grad student in the English department at Bombay Uinversity and I can never forget the confidence the people at *Quest* placed in me.

The whole project was set in motion by the publication from Writer’s Workshop of *Modern Indian* *Poetry in English*, edited by P. Lal. As was to be expected, the garden cultivated by the Bombay poets, began to be overrun by weeds. Cartloads of them found a home in Lal’s anthology which included about 130 poets. This provided me with the provocation I needed to attempt to put together a more critical and discriminating anthology. As you might be aware, that special issue commissioned by Quest later became a pioneering anthology called *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: An Assessment and Selection*, published by Macmillan. In 2008, when I attended a conference in Goa, I discovered that my anthology was on the syllabus of Goa University’s English dept. It is used worldwide despite many other worthy anthologies that have come out since.

The time for establishing a Collective of poets had arrived. The experience of publishing my first book was exhilarating—not only because it was my first, but because it was a do-it-yourself effort. Clearing House had set the example in terms of production values (Arun Kolatkar, one of the top graphic artists, designed all the covers) and marketing via pre-paid subscriptions at a discount. So I was involved in all aspects of the publication: finding a printer, designing a cover which I did myself, buying mailing lists, arranging reviews and readings. I worked with a printer who took a real interest in formatting the pages, choosing a font, and working with me every step of the way. The second collective, Newground, stuck pretty much with the size and design elements established by Clearing House. On the release of the book, I undertook a nationwide tour of college campuses from Baroda and Delhi to Madras, Hyderabad and Bangalore.

Nissim had a considerable influence on me. He was a real mentor, a role he played all his life to three generations of writers. I remember as an undergraduate at St Xavier’s, I used to visit him at his *Imprint* office in a garage in Colaba and he would patiently read my rough drafts and critique them. From him I learnt the necessary art of revision. I had no contact at all with Dom, then or later. Gieve Patel and Adil Jussawala were other poets I was frequently in touch with as with many others, often hanging out at Samovar, or calling on them at home. Kolatkar had table in a restaurant at Kala Ghoda where he could be found almost any morning. For the most part there was a great deal of comraderie and spirit. There was also dissension, rivalry, and bitching.

The Emergency did not have a direct impact on my writing. I do recall an edited anthology that somebody published which focused on writers of all stripes and languages reacting to the Emergency. I was not one of them. Although my work is deeply informed by social issues and cultural practices, I have rarely attempted to write a ‘political’ poem based on news headlines or popular trends, or the perceived need to make a statement.

Bombay was alive—still is—with public performances and shows especially in theatre (in several languages), music, art, cinema and dance. Public readings of poetry were plentiful. They took place at NCPA, the PEN centre, Max Mueller Bhavan, Cymroza Art Gallery, American Cultural Centre, in colleges and other venues. The audiences were small, the discussions were stimulating at times, predictable at others. The most tiresome was the debate about the legitimacy of English as a language for Indian writers. We never paid much attention to that. The writing and publishing of poetry in English was evidence enough that we were up to the task.

Often times it was observed that poetry in English got more attention and better press than it deserved, to the detriment of writing in other Indian languages. I believe that was a just complaint.

A highlight for me in my writing career happened when my book, *First Offence*, came out in 1980, I organized a public reading at Max Mueller and Prithvi theatre and had actors do a stage reading accompanied by my art work and music. Naseeruddin Shah, Tom Alter, Benjamin Gilani, and Luku Sanyal gave generously of their time and talent to make this a huge success.

Today, several decades later, the state of publishing has changed in big ways. Although many more outlets are available, the population of poets has exploded worldwide making it still very difficult for poets to navigate their way from manuscript to print. More than ever, it falls on the writers to bring poets and readers together. We have to do it ourselves. Because if don’t create a community of poets by forming collectives to help each other out, no one else will.