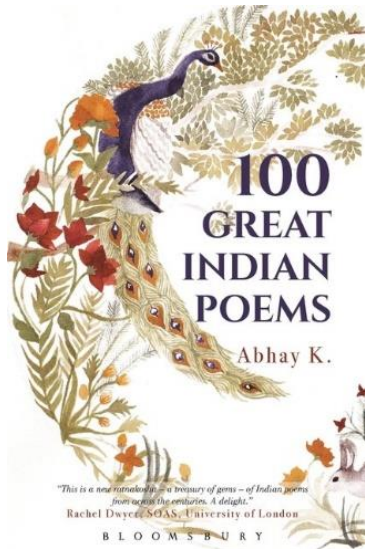


An excerpt from the review of **100 Great Indian Poems**, an interview with Kavita A. Jindal about her poem **Kabariwala**, from DESIblitz

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India's future



There is one theme that editor Abhay K. fails to mention in his introduction: hope. Combining the themes of social issues and the passionate emotions infused in poetry, modern India is forging its own unique identity.

After all, when we think about great Indian poems, surely we should look to the future too?

Abhay K. talks about picking the poems that move us and **Kabariwala** by Kavita A. Jindal seems a perfect choice.

One of the few poems in the collection to be originally written in English, the persona talks to a kabariwala, or a scrap and rag dealer. He talks about going away, to somewhere there is “free love” like England where he won’t be a kabariwala.

The poem is notable for its subtitle dating it to Delhi, 1975. Some readers may think of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in 1975, but Kavita A. Jindal tells DESIblitz about the inspiration behind her poem:

“Kabariwala is based on a true incident from 1975. I remembered it years later and didn’t know what had triggered the thought, but this often happens with random childhood memories.

“His phrase ‘free love’ probably stuck in my head although I didn’t quite know what that meant. It was colloquial speech of the time. I think in those days ‘free love’ may have been a big deal for a young man.”

Kavita continues:

“It’s a snapshot of a particular time. The excitement of a person breaking shackles and strictures by departing for somewhere new where they can be themselves. This is guesswork on my part, but the kabariwala must’ve had hopes and dreams and was pleased about having the opportunity to move to England.

“My hope for him is that he worked hard and was well-rewarded. Perhaps he gained a better status.

“How times have changed is made apparent in the sentence ‘in foreign / they don’t re-purpose old things.’ Western countries were deemed rich enough to be wasteful

but I would wager that India has an equally throw-away culture now. My hope is that readers reflect on that part of the poem too – who recycles, who doesn't; what is recycled and where?

“Lastly, it's a poem about childhood and the innocent (possibly ignorant and hurtful) questions kids ask: ‘Will you be a kabariwala there?’”

Kavita raises the point of the ever-changing fabric of India. The poem may seem closer to our time than others, but India has dramatically become more like the west in the last 40 years. Still, during our discussion on the difference between her poem and the others, Kavita shows how the poem maintains a ‘Desi’ flavour, and essentially its Indian heritage:

“The difference is probably in cadence and style. This poem is informal and conversational, yet bound by the strict form I have given it.

“There is direct idiomatic speech, but it makes sense without translation. For instance, I use the words ‘going foreign,’ which is ungrammatical if one were being purist in English, but is just how the kabariwala spoke.

“In rhythm and tempo, the poem straddles two of my [languages](#), English and Hindi. It may spark an interest in a reader who doesn't know Hindi.

“What is a kabariwala? If I'd titled the poem ‘scrap-dealer’ it would not conjure up local imagery nor do justice to all the different types of kabariwala we have in India.

“This is one of those poems where two languages are inherent and have cohesively formed an interesting whole, although on the surface the poem is in one language. Such a synergy doesn't happen often, much as I would like it to.”

It's very true that such synergy of poetry and language can be difficult to achieve. In fact, Abhay K. in his ‘Editor's Note’, mentions that several great poems like the Rashmirathi don't feature in the anthology owing to untranslatability.

But on the whole, 100 Great Indian Poems does well to draw together the abundant diversity of the Indian history.

Some poems remind us of the cultural touchstones in Indian poetry. Take famed works such as the 7th or 8th century Amarusataka, for instance, with its Sringara or erotic and romantic love. In fact, 100 Great Indian Poems is an ideal place for a first foray into the deep waters of Indian poetry.

Arranged by title rather than the poet or a chronological order, we are reminded of the timeless nature of poetry. The emphasis then is on the creations themselves rather than their creators.

And it is remarkable to see how we can come across familiar lines from celebrated poets like Kabir, Ghalib, Amir Khusrau, [Rabindranath Tagore](#) and [Shakti Chattopadhyay](#) amidst some more unfamiliar ones.

The voices of those young and old, enchant us with all rasas or flavours, beyond Sringara. We giggle at the witty humour before another stanza moves us to pity.

But perhaps the anthology's real skill is appreciating the past while capturing something of India's future.

Indeed, India is not just small villages and wealthy Maharajas anymore. It's towering buildings and ambitious adventure-seekers, proud of their Asian identity in new lives at home and abroad.

Whether it's the love and passion known worldwide from our ancient poetry and Kama Sutra or cheeky poems that capture the same Desi humour as Bollywood comedies, the anthology shows India's emotional richness to be a constant throughout the ages.

Tapping into the timeless feelings of all its diverse communities, 100 Great Indian Poems is an emotional feast. One that is as rich and flavourful as India itself.

Published on 10th February 2018, the anthology is available to [purchase on Amazon](#) now.

Daljinder Johal

Interview published originally at <https://www.desiblit.com/content/100-great-indian-poems-poetic-feat-feast>.