

In Conversation with GSP Rao (Surya)  
Founding Managing Editor [www.museindia.com](http://www.museindia.com)  
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By Usha Akella

*GSP Rao, an intrepid Hyderabadi, is a man of vision with a winning smile and positive demeanor. Combining his love of literature with his professional capacities resulted in a success story that Asian Outlook is happy to share with its readers. A techie by profession he grasped the power of the internet, sensed a vacuum in online Indian publishing and launched [www.museindia.com](http://www.museindia.com) in 2005 with a few writer friends. Today, Muse India is one of the most visible and successful online sites of Indian literature. It is credited with showcasing regional, Indian English and diasporic writings. His unerring focus has created a portal to access the regional literatures of India through English translations. Established and emerging voices are regularly heard on Muse India through their works and via discussions and interviews.*

*Surya seems to have an intuitive ability to visualize literary needs that result in the creation of bang-on literary projects and expansion of Muse India's portfolio. He launched the Hyderabad Literary Festival – the first large scale annual literary festival in Hyderabad - two years ago that draws participation of over a hundred writers and speakers from varied creative arts. The festival received wide press coverage and was applauded for its roster of talent. Last year Muse India established two national level awards to recognize literary excellence.*

*Surya shares his thoughts on contemporary Indian literature and Muse India's role in the spectrum of Indian publishing.*

1. Surya, I begin on a note of admiration. Without hesitation, you can be applauded as a patron of Literature. Muse India is less than a decade old and had done a phenomenal job of providing a unifying website to showcase all of India's regional literary talent, Indian English writings as well as Diasporic writers. Clearly, your aim was global right at inception. Comments?

Thank you, Usha, for your kind words. Though *Muse India* was essentially my initiative, late Bhargavi Rao, Ambika Ananth and T Vijay Kumar helped me in its launch and were the founding editors. *Muse India* was started in 2005 and our intention right from its inception was to showcase all of Indian Literatures. While Indian writing in English has had a reasonably good exposure, many good works and writers of our regional languages have not received the kind of attention they deserve, basically due to lack of translations. We wanted to bring such works to a wider audience, nationally and globally. We also believe there are many young and emerging writers across India whose voices need to be heard and we consciously work towards this.

2. An unlikely combustion, once could say. I understand that your background is in Technology and the Corporate sector. What drew you to the idea of founding a Literary website, that has become one of the most visible portals to access Literature in India.

I have always had a serious interest in Indian Literature, though I am not a student of Literature. I am an engineer and have had a long professional career as a software designer. *Muse India* brings my professional training and literary interest into confluence. I understood the power and reach of the Internet and emerging technologies. In 2004 when I spoke to several of my writer friends, it was apparent that time had come for an Indian literary web journal. There were a few web journals being published then, mostly by Indians settled in the US. These were devoted to specific Indian languages like Bengali (parabaas.com), Tamil (pathivukal.com of Canada) or Telugu (thulika.com devoted to Telugu fiction), aimed at expats so that they could be in touch with their roots. My idea was to have a quality web journal published from India that would showcase all Indian Literatures globally. My motivation was that such a journal would also help me utilize my professional background meaningfully.

3. Your introductory note in the website is extremely welcoming, embracing amateur writers as well as established writers. Do you think there are enough avenues for emerging and aspiring writers?

As I mentioned earlier, *Muse India* brings considerable focus on young writers. We also started an online posting forum 'Your Space' on the site, where budding writers can post their work and interact with more senior writers to hone their skills. This has become very popular now and a large number of young writers post their work here.

Aspiring writers find it difficult to get their works published by mainstream publishers. This is more so in the case of works of poetry. Self publishing is very expensive. So, many young people create their own blogs on the internet to channelize their creative talent. However, only close friends read such blogs. We thought we should create better opportunities for such writers.

4. You are rapidly expanding the scope of Muse India- in the last two years you've introduced two contests and the first International Literary Festival in Hyderabad. What are other goals? Is book publishing the next step- ebooks and print?

Yes, last year we instituted two national level awards to be given annually to recognize outstanding literary merit. One of them is for a Young Writer, not older than 35, writing in any genre. The other is for a significant translation from any of our regional languages that brings a good work on to a wider platform. These awards have been widely appreciated. Last year (2011) the translation award went to Ranjit Hoskote for '*I Lalla*', his translation of 14<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri mystic

poet Lal Ded, and the Young Writer Award was given to Anindita Sengupta for her debut book of poetry '*City of Water*'.

We also took the initiative of starting 'Hyderabad Literary Festival' two years ago. It is a multi-lingual festival where a large number of India's regional writers share their work in translations and rub shoulders with those writing in English. Several foreign writers also participate in HLF.

Presently we are busy putting these initiatives on a firm footing. In future we will continue to work in emerging technologies to serve our goals better. We are looking into the viability of getting into e-book publishing.

5. Tell us more about the Literary Festival you have launched?

We launched the Hyderabad Literary Festival to showcase the rich history and cultural traditions of Hyderabad. We have held two editions so far with participation of well over a hundred writers and several eminent personalities from other creative fields like films, music and dance on each occasion. We have also had foreign writers in these festivals. Our aim is to bring together writers and creative persons from various fields for cross pollination of ideas. HLF has a stronger focus on regional writers than any other Indian literary festival.

6. A visit to museindia site to stumble upon a treasure trove. I never cease to be amazed by the format of the magazine. I think the solidity of museindia attracts the support you've garnered. Comment?

We are happy at the enormous support we receive from our editors, writers and readers. It is motivating indeed. I believe this support comes basically because everyone sees the commitment we bring to the cause we champion, even though the entire effort is voluntary in nature. Our professionalism in releasing *Muse India* Issues on time consistently is also appreciated. The overall quality of the content, and extent of thematic coverage we do, have steadily gone up over the years. We feel proud of what we have covered in the last 45 Issues.

7. With your large exposure to writers and contemporary Indian writing what are the trends in Poetry and Fiction?

The themes still deal with life, love and nature. The situations and contexts, however, are contemporary. Modern lifestyles, degradation in human values, issues of urbanization and the subaltern are dealt with more now. Poetry is more direct, and may be even detached and irreverent occasionally. Free verse is widely popular. Poets don't seem to be particularly concerned with technique or form or symmetry. Poetry is closer to prose. The language and idiom are modern and show influence of IT and other technologies.

We also notice that female writers write more freely and express themselves on feminism, patriarchy and women issues more strongly. They are bolder and less inhibited – truer to their feelings, I would say - when it comes to depiction of physical intimacy and sexuality. This is particularly evident in the writings of contemporary Tamil women poets (*Muse India* Issue 6, Sep-Oct 2006). The voices of the marginalized – dalits, subalterns, gays and lesbians, and even insurgents – have become loud and powerful, and are heard with empathy and more respect now. There is a large body of dalit literature in many regional languages now.

We find some excellent poetry coming out of the North-East, left out of the mainstream for long. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Robin Ngangom, Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao have been the leading lights for some time. Among the younger poets, one could count Kamal Kumar Tanti, Ibohal Kshetrimayum and Rashmirekha Borah. Their poetry is deeply rooted in their native land and culture. Ethnic resurgence movements in the North East and proliferation of identity politics has resulted in emergence of literary works in Karbi, Rabha, Mising etc.

Yet another aspect one can notice is that there is significant focus now on translations from regional literatures into English and other languages. Sahitya Akademi's *Indian Literature*, *Katha* and *Muse India* have been doing good work in this area. There are several initiatives being taken by national institutions like the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore. This augurs well for our regional writers. Literary festivals and poetry reading events, like the Prakriti festival of Chennai, are becoming increasingly popular and attracting large audiences.

8. Do you find a demarcation in themes that occupy regional writers vs diasporic writers?

In the poetry and short fiction of Indian diaspora, we find an undercurrent of nostalgia and desire to be in touch with the roots. The writers also deal with challenges faced in adapting to alien cultures and issues of multi-culturalism.

Obviously, you don't expect these in the works of writers based in India. They write on contemporary issues affecting life here. However, larger global concerns of terrorism, peace and harmony are common to all writers.

9. I've been a bit baffled by the lack of Creative Writing opportunities at the school and college level in India. Does museindia plan to branch out into providing workshops in the future?

I agree, greater focus needs to be brought on nurturing creative writing skills in syllabi at school and college levels. This will go a long way in developing the power of imagination in children and students. Perhaps the authorities feel that

what is required more is an exposure to good writers and some famous works. Creative writing doesn't come easily to all students and teaching it requires imaginative handling. *Muse India* may conduct an occasional workshop in creative writing, as we did during the last literary festival, but we are not geared to take this up on a large scale. This has to be tackled at the level of designing good school and college curricula.

10. I am delighted to note that you have a Gallery section on the website to showcase artists. How did this come about?

We have always given importance to aesthetics in our website. Right from the first Issue of *Muse India*, we have used pleasing images and pictures to illustrate all the sections. In the sections on regional literature, we consciously pick and feature images that reflect art and culture of the people of that region. This complements the writings presented. The current Issue (Sep-Oct 2012) brings focus on contemporary Kashmiri poetry, and we have featured several striking images of traditional Kashmiri dance forms as also handicrafts of the valley. Similarly, you will find works of many painters and photographers adorning our earlier Issues. It was only natural for us to extend this coverage and introduce a section devoted exclusively to works of Indian arts and crafts. In the current Issue, we have presented exquisite designs of Kashmiri hand-woven carpets in Gallery.

11. Are there any literary collaborations across nations happening via museindia?

Gradually. In Hyderabad Literary Festival, each time we are inviting a different country to participate as a Guest Nation and send her writers and cultural troupes. In the last edition of HLF, we had Germany as the Guest Nation and next year we will have France. We hope to build on these relationships so that some kind of collaborative effort across nations can be thought of in due course.

12. I'd like to close the interview with a fundamental question- why is Literature and its promotion an overriding goal for you in our contemporary time that is so dominated by the visual medium.

Literature is at the root of almost all creative arts, like plays, films, music and ballets. Even paintings and sculptures draw inspiration from literary themes. All visual media survive on creative scripts. Thus, literature is the fountainhead of all creative expression. Further, we need to protect and preserve our cultural heritage. Visual and performing arts have their own significance. Web journals have the capacity to integrate many technologies to disseminate literature and other arts in the form of infotainment that has appeal to the new generation. Web journals help preserve our writings and art in a durable, digitized way. Hence their importance.

It has been a pleasure interacting with you and sharing my thoughts. Thanks for the opportunity, Usha.