

**In conversation with Atreya Sarma Uppaluri (editor-critic-translator-poet),  
Hyderabad, India**

**Dr. Kiriti Sengupta**  
Dental Surgeon & Bilingual Poet-Translator  
Calcutta (W.B.)  
www.kiritisengupta.com

“Poetry is life in words, life is poetry in action.”  
-Atreya Sarma

I never knew him until the release of my first English-language nonfiction *The Unheard I* in August, 2013. I was desperately looking out for a few able reviewers, who could critique my literary nonfiction. Until then I was only aware of *Muse India*(www.museindia.com), one of the renowned literary e-journals published from Hyderabad. It was Atreya Sarma Uppaluri whom I found to be the book-review editor in the said journal. I wrote him an email, seeking his permission, and asking him about his postal address. Frankly, I did not expect a reply at all! To my utter surprise I found Atreya’s response in my mailbox within three hours of sending my first mail. Aah! He expressed his interest towards critiquing my book, and shared his address. I was on cloud nine, for never in my wildest of dreams I could imagine a proper review of my maiden literary enterprise. The Sept. issue of *Muse India* carried Atreya’s review of my book, and it unleashed the reviewer’s take on nonfiction literature. I have had numerous interactions with Atreya until now, and with every interaction I only found him a gem of a literary-worker! As I wrote *My Glass of Wine* (a novelette based on autobiographic poetry), I found it quite apt to include Atreya in one of its chapters, called ‘Southern Affiliation.’

**Kiriti Sengupta:** Hello Sir. It is indeed my honor to have you at my interview desk. How are you doing these days?

**Atreya Sarma Uppaluri:** I am doing wonderfully well, Kiriti, thanks to interactions with literary and friendly souls like you whose works I have the pleasure of reading, reviewing, editing or translating and more importantly, learning and mellowing in the process. So it is equally an honour to be interviewed by a dynamic and creative personality like you, an adept at literary social networking.

**Kiriti:** My pleasure, Sir. You have served in the capacity of a Manager in the banking industry. And now you are continuing as a literary worker. How could you manage this?

**Atreya:** Well, while in the bank I dealt with ledgers and customers, and now I deal with literary works and writers. While in the bank you are to mostly implement the ideas of others, of your bosses, even as you enjoy certain freedom and discretion of your own. Now as a literary worker you have far greater freedom. And I indeed like your expression ‘literary worker.’ Whether you work out of your creativity or help other writers by editing, translating or reviewing – it all amounts to work. Where work is there, it needs to be organized, diarized, prioritized and then if you do it in the spirit of ‘Work is worship,’ it gives you immense satisfaction. I would love to start out my day by getting up very early, complete my ablutions, physical exercise/yoga, and then I meditate. However, in practice, I almost invariably begin my day not with any of them – but with my literary work. When my wife, who has developed her own regular regimen of worship, snubs me for not being regular in praying to God, I tell her ‘My literary work is my worship,’ for after all it amounts to worshipping the Goddess of Learning, especially when you are devoting the best part of your day to what is dearest to your heart.

Right from the beginning, I have had some flashes of interest in self-expression and love for language, scoring a few brownie points on the way. I don’t claim to be an accomplished or spontaneous or prolific writer. I am just a ‘literary worker,’ the way you have so aptly put it, and I am at the lower rungs. While in the bank also, this shade of literary taste had become useful in my official work for there was an enough deal of drafting. And my seniors or bosses encouraged me and utilized my services. Simultaneously, their guidance also helped me in learning the nuances of aptness and brevity. I compered important bank programmes, and also acted as judge of literary competitions. I had won quite a few prizes while in the bank.

Here I would like to specify an instance. When a new chief general manager, Alfred Solomon, joined our Hyderabad Circle, the officers association hosted him a reception on Nov 6, 1997. In his address, he gave a thrust to the importance of English language skills in official communication. It created a spontaneous and epiphanic impact on me and I drove back home with a surge of ideas urging on me to poetize their purport. I did it before I went to sleep after midnight. The next morning, as a part of his introductory perambulations to various departments of LHO, when he visited HRD of which I was one, I was introduced by my chief manager who said I had some poetic gift for him. The 40-line free verse which I wrote under the title ‘Solomonics’ was received by him with warm interest. He later on returned a copy of it with his appreciatory comments which I continue to cherish coming as they did from a perceptive student of literature himself. The poem was later on carried in the association’s bulletin, *Supervision* (Jul 2000). It was an irony that when he passed away while still in service in the same capacity, it fell to my lot to prepare different condolatory messages on behalf of the top-brass – for the bank’s house magazine, *SBI Hyderabad Circle News Bulletin* (Mar-Jun 2000), which I did, and which they didn’t change a whit. This was in addition to my elegiac poem ‘In Memoriam’ on him for the same issue.

While poetry is life in words, life is poetry in action. Poetry talks of things and people. Won’t it be desirable to plunge headlong into the swimming pool of life itself and be talked about, rather than writing poetry and talking of something or someone else? Using the cricket analogy, isn’t playing it itself greater than watching it with our running commentary? Of course, I was never totally cut off from the literary field. I was at least on the fringes, coming in touch with writers and literary associations. Instead of having a vague fascination for literature, I thought it would be better to test the intensity of the desire on the touchstone of some academic acquisition. And it was how I did my Bachelors degree in literature with a first-class after joining

the bank, though I had been a science graduate. Later on I did my M.A. (English), and soon after I bade goodbye to the bank, I completed a PG Diploma in Mass Communications & Translation Techniques that I passed with distinction.

All said and done, it is a matter of self-expression in poetry and literature, and this flair for expression had been an undercurrent throughout my banking life. Even while in bank, I was the managing editor of *Bharatiya Pragna*, an English socio-political monthly, as a hobby and on a voluntary basis, and I worked for this journal for ten years in all. It was a great learning experience to receive and read a variety of articles from learned writers, to edit, to write editorials, reports and articles. Thus, eventually as I sang adieu to the bank, I had segued rather effortlessly into the literary stream. Seeing my literary interests, a media consultant Kasi V Rao offered me to be the founder editor of a neighbourhood English weekly from Hyderabad. He accepted the title I suggested – *Cyberhood*, a portmanteau neologism – Neighbourhood + Cyberabad, denoting the burgeoning culture of the cyber community, namely, the computer and info-tech people.

**Kiriti:** I am keen to listen to your rich experiences as an editor. I am aware that you have composed the profiles of 132 modern Telugu stalwarts for the bilingual book *Marapuraani Maanikyaalu* (2010). You have also edited two books: *Lung Care* by Dr Shyam Sunder Raj, and *Memoirs & Musings of an IAS Officer* (2013) by KV Natarajan. Please, tell me in detail if you found your job rewarding!

**Atreya:** While I edited *Bharatiya Pragna* as a matter of social service, I was paid some honorarium by *Cyberhood* – for which I worked until the paper stabilized. In addition to the civic and other aspects, I imparted some literary flavour to it. The quality of this paper got me a letter of appreciation, among others, from a retired English professor, MG Narasimha Murthy who continues to be my friend even now. Later on I carried an interview with him covering his poetic and artistic accomplishments. My *Cyberhood* stint got me acquainted with Gian Singh Shatir, a *Sahitya Academy* awardee in Urdu. I interviewed him for *Cyberhood* and later on, he entrusted me with the editing of his revised fictional autobiography and this work is underway. My interview of BNIM, a noted artist-writer-choreographer was featured in *Bharatiya Pragna* and this got him to take my services to do the supportive writing in English for his *Marapuraani Maanikyaalu* (The Unforgettable Gems).

The dissertation topic that I chose for my PG Diploma also brought me some recognition. The topic was ‘Linguistic and Other Errors in Print Media: A Study.’ On seeing the 176-page dissertation, MVR Sastry, the editor of *Andhra Bhoomi*, a mainstream Telugu daily encouraged me to write for his paper and referred me to KV Natarajan, a retired I.A.S. officer for editing his book *Memoirs & Musings of an IAS Officer*, which received plaudits for the editorial quality. Here was an interesting piece of advice offered by MVR Sastry: “Never do any services for free. It underrates your work and talents.” From then on, though not for everything, at least for the major assignments I have been charging my fee – the prime consideration being an optimum mix of literary satisfaction and monetary reward. Likewise, an associate of mine at *Bharatiya Pragna* and a senior pharmaceutical marketing executive, BS Sarma introduced me to Dr. Shyam Sunder Raj, and it was how I came to edit his book *Lung Care*, meant for popular reading. My smattering of sciences from my B.Sc. came in handy. Although I am not so prominent, I am at least not unknown in the market and I am now in a position to pick and choose my assignments.

On the whole, my editorial experiences have been a soulfully rewarding one, but whatever I have done until now is only modest.

**Kiriti:** You are a known translator of Telugu literature. May I request you to say a few words on your translations?

**Atreya:** Most of my translation is from Telugu into English, although I do the vice versa as well. I had the privilege of being the editor and contributor of two Telugu features for *Muse India* - “A Focus on Telugu Literature” (Nov-Dec 2011) and “Adivi Bapiraju: A Versatile Telugu Litterateur” (Nov-Dec 2013). The translations that I made there have come in for due praise. Of special importance is the compliment I received from *Jnanpith* recipient Dr C Narayana Reddy whose (the-then) latest poetic work I explicated along with translating some of his poems in the Nov-Dec 2011 issue. Likewise, I translated sixteen select stories by senior writer cum surgeon Dr Mallemala Venugopala Reddy under the title *Salt of the Earth*, which has received favourable reviews in *The Hans India*, *Boloji.com*, and *Muse India*. Earlier I was drawn to Dr Koduru Prabhakara Reddy, a leading paediatrician and prolific writer by virtue of his poetic exposition of *Srinatha’s Chatuvulu* (witty extemporized poems recorded by hearers and passed down). My literary admiration of the book got me to extensively review *The Battle of Palnad*, a ballad in translation from his Telugu original. Impressed with the review, it was he who commended me to Dr Mallemala. Another friend of mine Sujatha Gopal, a lecturer of English language and literature, and my associate at *Muse India* recommended me to Dr V Kondal Rao, a prolific poet, writer and translator. He is the founder of a literary organization – Viswanatha Sahitya Peetham – instituted in memory of Viswanatha Satyanarayana, the first *Jnanpith* recipient in Telugu. On Dr Kondal Rao’s request I translated five Telugu articles by eminent scholars for the 762-page monumental commemorative volume, *Viswanatha: A Literary Legend* (June 2012). And right now I am on an assignment, for the same organization, of translating 101 pages of the 999-page mega novel, *Veyipadagalu* by Viswanatha Satyanarayana.

I hasten to add that it is all not that easy to translate, since our translation tools are inadequate and un-systematized. There are no comprehensive bilingual dictionaries or a Telugu encyclopaedia or thesaurus that I know of. Some of the Telugu words are not found in the dictionaries. It seems there is not a planned and ongoing research into lexicography in Telugu. Everyone opines that there is a greater need for translation but points to the dearth of competent translators. Though the Telugu University talked of a dedicated institute for translation, no concrete effort is visible to enroll competent translators and set up tasks and deadlines. So in the present scenario, one has to significantly rely on one’s comparative study and larger experience. My way of translation is: try to retain the essential meaning and spirit of the original as well the imagery and cultural import; but don’t make it a verbatim translation; and never do a literal translation of the idioms. And when it is a literary translation, one has to be more circumspect. If there are minor and unwitting gaps or flaws or ambiguities, set them right and enhance the value of translation – in order to project the original in proper light.

**Kiriti:** Worldwide the translators are not given their due recognition. Doesn’t it pain you?

**Atreya:** If there is a real demand for a certain translated work or for the works of a particular writer, then the translator, if competent, is bound to get due recognition. Recognition, just like the sales of a book, is also dependent on advertising, marketing and ‘right’ connections.

Wherever a translator is in a position to spare his resources on his own, and for free, with a view to serving the larger interests of literature, they should go ahead with a missionary zeal, not bothering about awards and rewards. But where an original writer is keen on having his work translated and for recognition and profit to himself, justice demands that he should duly compensate the translator, for otherwise the translator, left to him, could have taken up something else. Though books and magazines are multiplying even in the present fast and digital world, there are many original writers who don't get the attention they wish. That being the harsh reality, how can we expect a translator to hog a better limelight, barring a few cases?

**Kiriti:** How did you get associated with *Muse India*? And what role do you generally play towards the Hyderabad literary festivals?

**Atreya:** It was in 2008, on July 13, that a literary friend Gutti Chandrasekhara Reddy happened to mention *Muse India* to me. He is a missionary of Sri Krishna Devaraya – the greatest of the Vijayanagar emperors – and a regular organizer of literary meetings on him. He told me that GSP Rao, a biographer of the emperor in English, was the founder of *Muse India*. But it took me up to January 2009 to register as a member of the e-zine. I began my posts of poems and comments from then on, and in a matter of a few months they caught the attention of the editors. Dr Kumarendra Mallick, the then editor of 'Your Space' section of *Muse India* and a Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize winner in Earth Sciences, phoned me up and enquired whether I would offer some services to the electronic journal. A couple of months thereafter, when I passed my PG diploma and was about to leave for the USA for six months, GSP Rao, the managing editor called upon me to share some editorial responsibility which I readily agreed to, as a labor of love, even as I was leaving for the US in Aug 2009, from where also it could be handled since it was an online affair. And ever since, I happened to be a part of *Muse India* of which I had never heard until a few months earlier. We are a coherent team at *Muse India* and I got to know of Ambika Ananth, chief editor, through a literary cross-reference well before I became a member of *Muse India*. I had spoken to her, a competent bilingual writer, over phone and shared my impressions on one of her articles.

As for the Hyderabad Literary Festival (HLF), its prime mover is *Muse India*. HLF is an annual 3-day national level literary festival with representatives from abroad also participating. *Muse India* has roped in many partners like the Department of Tourism & Culture (Government of A.P.), Central Sahitya Academy, the US Consulate, Goethe Zentrum, Alliance Franchise and OUCIP (Osmania University Centre for International Programmes). The fest puts up simultaneous sessions on art and literature not only in regional languages and English but even in foreign languages. It presents poetry/fiction/play reading, panel discussions, conversations with writers, creative workshops, skits, cultural evenings and book launches & sales. Prominent and senior writers and scholars from all over India in addition to those from USA, UK, France, Germany, Spain, Ireland, Switzerland, Malaysia and Australia have participated. Foreign participants include NRIs and the Indian Diaspora. The HLF has also brought out souvenirs, creative publications and writer profiles on these occasions. *Muse India* has instituted two National Literary Awards – a Young Writer Award and a Translation Award – carrying a cash prize of Rs 20,000 and Rs 30,000 – which are presented during the festival. As for me, personally, I was in charge of the HLF publications. Let me, however, tell you that we have to go a long way even to be a fraction of what the Jaipur Literature Festival is.

**Kiriti:** You are a bilingual poet as well, and your readers are deprived of your published book(s) until now. I know that you remain occupied with your editorial assignments, and translating Telugu works into English. Well, this is an injustice to your existence that demands only your poetic renditions.

**Atreya:** You're so right about it. Which writer doesn't want to see his book in print and in the market? I have written about 250 poems in English so far, and I have sieved and narrowed them down to a respectable number to make my debut book. I hope, and this time very ardently so, to see my book launched in the New Year – 2014. I have already entered into an agreement with a publisher. Then there was also this logic: When a poem is posted on a site and receives good comments from friends, it creates a euphoria; you feel you're a great writer; but as time passes and as you get to read more and more of the works of others, you tend to mull: Are my poems really worthy enough? Aren't they simply balderdash? This hesitancy, this diffidence holds you back. But then, time – or rather the loss of it – makes you thick skinned. After all, this world is made up of the good, the bad and the ugly in equal measure. So also my poetry belongs to this world, or it is a microcosm of my own world, whatever the nature or mix of attributes. So why not go ahead and publish it? I have reached this desperate stage, and so why should I shelve it until my pilgrimage to the other world?

**Kiriti:** Literary critiquing is a challenging job that demands extensive study of literature and a great amount of patience. As a reviewer which genre has appealed to you most - fiction novels, literary nonfictions, autobiography or poetry?

**Atreya:** All the genres have appealed to me, but as you said, literary critiquing needs a special eye, since you have to go into technicalities as well. When a work is basically meant for the general reader despite its literary touch, even a non-technical review also would serve its purpose, for after all the idea is to commend a book for readership. When a reviewer even without much literary grounding enjoys reading such a book, he can review it in an appealing way. Again 'extensive study of literature' is a relative term, since there is no limit to the level of erudition. You have to draw a dividing line between a general review and a research oriented academic review. Both approaches are necessary and the choice depends upon the reviewer and the paper where it is intended to be published. And I have had the satisfaction of reviewing all the genres that you have mentioned. Review of anthologies or collections is easier since you can read a cross-section of the contents and come up with a good review, whereas with the others you need to read through the entire book.

Normally I don't review a book unless I like it very much or most of it. While I am mostly friendly and objective in my approach to reviewing, I don't hesitate, if warranted, to be a little more analytical, incisive and critical if the contents or claims in a book are glaringly misleading or pretentious. At least this is how I do. My observations are based on my modest output of 52 reviews, covering 41 English and 11 Telugu books, across 6 English and 2 Telugu papers.

**Kiriti:** Poetry readership is facing a miserable downfall globally. As a poet what actions, you think, are to be employed to bring more readers to poetry?

**Atreya:** I am of the view that at any point of time the readership for poetry is relatively limited since appreciation of poetry needs a sensitive soul, an aesthetic mind, an empathic strain, some patience and a certain amount of knowledge of poetic concepts. Content of poetry in language curricula has been drastically cut down over the time, and this could be one of the reasons for the

relative dip in interest in poetry, for many impressions during the formative periods can last long. Even then, paradoxically, there are poets in all the age groups, and even youngsters are taking to it in good numbers, if we go by the number of poems in school/college magazines or some others papers or even poetry meets. There are even teenagers who have brought out their anthologies. Liberalisation of poetic craft doing away with the complex and recondite rules of prosody has broad-based poetry writing. And the number of poetry journals – print or online – available is also an indication that poetry is still kicking and alive. There are even journals devoted to metrical poetry – like *Metverse Muse* from Visakhapatnam, which has a creditable international participation and circulation. To teach and guide the budding poets, there are a number of how-to online resources. There are sites exclusively dedicated to sonnet, limerick, haiku, etc. There are many organisations which regularly organize poetry meets, workshops and competitions and give away awards. But it would strengthen the movement of muse if at least in bigger towns and cities, the established poets come onto a platform and organize periodical poetry workshops and appreciation programmes. It may not be out of place here to point out the rigidity on the part of some publishers wedded to free verse and prose-poetry to frown upon and banish even rhymed lines. Why should anyone try to regiment the creative freedom of others by stipulating strait-jacket approaches? Overall, I am optimistic of the state of poetry be it now or in the future.

**Kiriti:** Globally there has been a marked surge of self-publishing. What is your take on this?

**Atreya:** When there is a surge, it is obviously borne out of a strong urge on the part of a large number of writers who find it difficult to get a self-financing publisher. The reasons for a publisher not to come forth are not far to seek, especially in the case of poetry. I don't find anything demeaning in self-publishing which is, after all, akin to self-survival. When you have a passion for your expression and work, you would like to embody and present it. Some of the writers may end up in profits, some may break even, and some may have failed to reach their financial target. But they shouldn't feel hamstrung. They should go on like the proverbial spider. At least you have the copies of your work in a neat, printed form – instead of in loose, illegible and fragile manuscripts. On occasions of domestic or social celebration, instead of presenting cash and articles as gift, you can present your books. When you buy the books of others, why not you buy your own? All this, provided of course, you have the necessary wherewithal, or have patrons/friends to bolster up your creative venture. There are writers who started out with self-publication but later on had the publishers chase them. If you have some spark of real worth in you, some corner of this wide world would, sooner or later, take cognizance of and encourage it. So go on trying to improve yourself and present yourself. This is my motto.

**Kiriti:** This is my last question to you, Sir. We all know that *Muse India* is considered a worthy literary platform all across the nation. A writer feels proud to have his/her submissions accepted in your journal. What would you like to advice the inflating breed of promising writers?

**Atreya:** In fact, a good number of writers who write for *Muse India* are the younger and promising lot, and this trend is healthy and promising to the cause of literature, at a time when we hear noises all over that poetry and literature are dying out what with the rise of computer technology, although computer technology is not a rival to the muse, but a medium and facilitator of it. As long as humankind exists, creativity and aesthetic sensibility also exist. Nowadays, most of the promising writers are savvy; they know the ethos and standard of the media they propose to approach, they read and evaluate the stuff carried in them, and try their

best to dot their i's and cross their t's. Especially, a literary e-zine like *Muse India* wedded to the cause of Muse never likes to rebuff any writer – young or old – so long as their submissions are reasonably good enough. There have been many instances where we simply haven't rejected the submissions for minor flaws or on mere technical pretext. We have silently taken care of them using our editorial discretion. All said and done, *Muse India* is a literary journal; hence the prerequisite of any aspiring contributor is a basic command of language. We expect them to go through the submission guidelines and follow them scrupulously. In case they need any clarification, the editors of *Muse India* are ever willing to provide it, just sort of conducting a literary workshop. Nothing wrong with a workshop as such but then we have to wait until more brains join us and our resources match it. After all, we, the editors don't take any payment nor do we pay the contributors; we just survive from issue to issue on individual sponsorships, for we don't accept any advertisements.

**Kiriti:** Thank you so much, Sir. I have cherished every word that you have shared with me, and with our readers.

**Atreya:** I am simply amazed at your dexterity of putting me – a parvenu – at ease, make me feel big, and draw out the skeins of thinking from the coves of my mind and heart. Thanks a lot, Kiriti, for this wonderful session.