

DELHI'S DIFFERENT MINDS | RAJIV K SAXENA

# A lifetime of science and verses

**POETIC JUSTICE** This professor of life sciences loves to dabble in Hindi poetry and has a website dedicated to it

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Science and poetry don't usually go hand-in-hand. Science talks about facts and logic and poetry deals with emotions. Scientists have no imagination and they are way too grounded, poets are often heard complaining. And most scientists hardly have any patience with a poet's flight of fancy.

This age-old conflict was best captured by scientist-poet — a rare combination — Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *The worthiest professor of physics would be the one who could show the inadequacy of his text and diagrams in comparison to nature and the higher demands of the mind.*

Goethe's words ring true for Delhi-based professor of life sciences Rajiv K. Saxena. The vice-president of South Asian University, he is as much at home in a laboratory as in literary circles.

Born and brought up in Walled City, where his father practised as an ayurvedic physician, Saxena's résumé is formidable — he has served as the pro-vice-chancellor of JNU, has about 140 research publications to his credit, has taught at several US universities for 12 years and has fellowships of all major science academies in India.

But what the résumé does not mention is that he is also a writer and collector of Hindi poetry, and has been trying to popularise Hindi poetry for more than a decade now. His tryst with poetry happened in 1999, when he was a visiting professor at the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health in USA's West Virginia.

"I had gone there without my family for the first time and had been living alone for two years. So, I started writing poems to ward off loneliness. I was surprised at how easily poems came to me. I don't know if it was loneliness, deep thinking or solitude-induced meditation that led to this creativity," says Saxena.

He recites the first Hindi poem he wrote, for us: *Main taj kar jaa nahin sakta tujhé o desh mere/Bulayen lakh lalchayen mujhe pardes déré/Isi pavan dhara per ho*



■ Saxena's formidable library at home has several books on Hindi literature and poetry.

RAJ K RAJ/HT PHOTO

*magan santusht hoon main/Lubha sakté nahin dhan dhanya mehlon ke baséré* (Can't leave you and go away o mother land/The dream of foreign abode though may be grand/ Happy and contented I am on this sacred soil/Promises of riches and high living don't tempt).

Saxena also translated Geeta's 700 Sanskrit shlokas verse by verse into metered Hindi verses during that US sojourn. It was published as 'Geeta Kavya Madhuri' in 2001. "Since childhood, I have always been fascinated with Geeta as my mother Veerbala taught Sanskrit at Delhi University," says Saxena. In fact, his second book is also an illustrated long poem aimed at introducing Geeta to children and first-timers.

In 2007, he decided to share his passion with other like-minded people and launched a website called [Geeta-Kavita.com](http://Geeta-Kavita.com), showcasing the finest of Hindi poetry. Saxena has been scanning bookshops, book dealers, book fairs around the country to collect the choicest of Hindi poetry. He then types out these poems, writes introductions, and looks for appropriate illustrations to package the poetry.

"Books on poetry are not easily available. I have to be very careful while choosing poetry. What touches me is that readers from across the world read these poems every day and leave grateful remarks. Many become nostalgic when they find those poems they had lost all hopes of ever finding again featured on the website," says Saxena.

He is currently busy doing research on lungs' immunity and the health effects of nanoparticles and yet, finds time to feature at least one poem every week on his website. And there are weeks where this number touches four.

In fact, Geeta-Kavita is one of the most popular Hindi poetry websites that features gems of poets such as Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Dharamvir Bharti, Agyeya, Mahadevi Varma, Jaishankar Prasad, Dushyant Kumar. Saxena says the website gets 1.2 million page views every month (about 14 million hits per month).

But not many of his colleagues or even students share his passion for poetry or literature, laments Saxena, who firmly believes that literature completes a man. Many-a-time, the office of this science professor turns into a literary salon where poets and literature-lovers flock. "They come, talk and recite poetry," says Saxena, adding, "One of my happiest moments was when I met poet-prime minister Atal

Bihari Vajpayee and spent time talking about nothing but poetry with him."

And it's not just poetry he is passionate about. Saxena also writes articles for his website in chaste Hindi — many of them bemoan the condition of Hindi language. "The problem is Hindi is no longer the language of thinking; it has become a language of instant communication. Hindi, as a language, is very intimate. Matters of the heart are best expressed in Hindi. There's a certain formality when your girlfriend tells you to 'listen', instead of 'suno', which is a more heart-felt expression," says Saxena.

Radio jockeys, he says, can serve the cause of Hindi well. "They can popularise Hindi poetry by reciting poems, as they do with Urdu couplets," he says.

When we visit his home, we discover Saxena is a voracious reader with a formidable personal library at home. A number of his books are on Hindi literature and poetry, not on science. But what does he do when he is not busy researching a science project or writing and searching Hindi poems. "I love to play the flute," he says.

## THE PARTICULARS

**Name:** Rajiv K. Saxena

**Age:** 60

**Hails from:** Delhi, where his family has been living for four generations

**Key detail:** The eminent scientist runs an extremely popular poetry website to popularise Hindi poetry

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