

Kunwar Narain



Kunwar Narain (1927-2017) is considered one of India's foremost poets, writers and thinkers of modern times. He read widely and blended an international sensibility with a grounding in Indian history and thought. His work is noted for its unique layering of the simple and complex, and embodies, above all, a rare purity and deep humanism. His diverse output of seven decades evolved continuously, from a metaphysical engagement with language to a creative use of history and myth and from visionary insights into nature to the coarse ironies of socio-political reality. He wrote across genres: poetry, epic poems, stories, criticism, translations, essays, diaries and writings on world cinema and the arts. His honours include the *Sāhitya Akādemi* Award and Senior Fellowship; *Kabīr Sammān*; Italy's *Premio Feronia* for distinguished world author; the civilian honour *Padma Bhūshan*; and the *Jnānpīth*. Some of his works remain unpublished.

His early years were spent in the twin cities of Ayodhya and Faizabad, before moving to Lucknow. After over five decades there, where a major part of his writing was done, he moved to Delhi, with his wife Bharati and son Apurva. His house in Lucknow was a major centre for literary and classical music meets, and the city's converging point for writers, artists and scholars from India and abroad. Linked to the *Nayī Kavītā* (New Poetry) in the fifties and sixties—when he also co-edited journals like *Yug Cetnā*, *Nayā Pratik* and *Chāyānaṭ*—he has expanded its frontiers since. Influences on him have been varied; from the Upanishads and Indian epics to Kabir and Khusro, history and mythology to Buddhism and Marxism, Kafka and Cavafy to Ghalib and Gandhi. He gives formative value to his visit to Europe, Russia and China in 1955 and meetings with poets like Hikmet, Słonimski and Neruda. Earlier on, he translated the poems of French symbolists like Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Valéry, and later of poets like Cavafy, Borges, Herbert and Różewicz. A reclusive presence in the literary world, and wary of orthodoxies, he published selectively. His oeuvre began in 1956 with *Cakravyūh*, his first poetry collection. *Ātmajayī* (1965) an epic poem based on the Upanishadic character of Naciketā, is a metaphysical work recognised as a classic of Hindi literature. His experimental story collection *Ākārom Ke Āspās* broke new ground in 1971. In *Apne Sāmne* (1979), socio-political themes got prominence and, a long hiatus later, his much-awarded *Koī Dūsrā Nahīn* (1994) was published. He was honoured with India's highest literary award, the *Jnānpīth*, in 2005. In 2008, his acclaimed *Vājaśravā Ke Bahāne* recalled *Ātmajayī*'s memory in a chain of island-like poems. His third epic poem *Kumārajīva* came in 2015, inspired by the life and times of the ancient Buddhist scholar-translator. Books of his translations of several world poets, and his writings on world cinema, appeared in 2017. In 2018, new books of poems and stories—as well as writings on him—were published posthumously. Some of his works are now in the process of publication.
