



THE (GREAT) INDIAN POETRY COLLECTIVE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Poetry Press Launches Minal Hajratwala's *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment*

"Stunning" debut collection from the award-winning author of *Leaving India*

BANGALORE— *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* is the long-awaited debut collection of poetry by Minal Hajratwala, whose nonfiction book *Leaving India* earned four literary awards in 2009. It is the second book to be published by The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, a startup publishing house based in Bangalore, India.

Hajratwala's writing across many genres has always been rooted in poetry. This innovative book gathers poems and performance texts written over two decades including, for the first time in print, the script for her theatrical extravaganza "Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium." In "Avatars," which premiered at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco in 1999, various invented and "real" deities duel for the passions of the audience.

The poems in *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* are lyrical and scathing in their approach to identity, spirituality, and the catastrophes of the modern world. Hajratwala draws on her decades-long journey as a seeker wrestling the sacred and the profane, urging them toward intimate — and occasionally ecstatic — union.

"She charms, sears, shocks and delights us," writes renowned poet Meena Alexander. Hajratwala's work has been lauded as original, electric, and explosive.

Along with poets Shikha Malaviya and Ellen Kombiyil, Hajratwala is a founding member of The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, a not-for-profit literary publisher specializing in new poetry from India. Under a peer mentorship model, the poets will publish several books by a range of poets each year, discovering and bringing forth new voices that are innovative and diverse. The Collective's first title, *Geography of Tongues* by Shikha Malaviya, was published in 2013 to widespread critical acclaim.

The Collective is also developing **inPoetry: The (Great) Indian Poetry App**, currently in beta.

Below: Advance praise, author bio, author interview, sample poem

Attached: Author photo, cover image, logo

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119 pp • 6.6 x 9 in • ISBN: 978-0-9860652-1-7 • paper • ₹350/\$16.99

Advance Praise for *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment*

“Warning! This book is filled with **unexpected** turns, happy surprises, fresh language (in every sense), sudden **awakenings**, quick tears, knowing laughter. And above all — **delight**.”

— Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones and Bending Home*

“With her **electric** combination of lyric poetry and theater, Minal Hajratwala crosses genres and voices. In the process, she **charms**, sears, **shocks** and delights us. Her voices strip us down to the space where erotic and the sacred commingle. We pass through traumatic knowledge into **a fresh species of enlightenment**.”

— Meena Alexander, *Birthplace with Buried Stones and Fault Lines*

“In Minal Hajratwala’s *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment*, we see the poems and acts go beyond ‘instruction’ to a deeper calling of engagement. They are poems full of ‘the wisest/truest thing you know’; they discern the different ways to ‘dismiss the sun, that artifact of lost seasons.’ Lucid descriptions unite discourse, history, and metaphor into concentrated affects and images that keep you engaged in her language. Just as ‘throats crack,’ the entire collection sings ‘holy, holi, wholly.’ This is a stunning collection of poetry that modulates between steady narratives full of anchored images and storytelling, and playful voices occurring out of lyric utterance.”

— Prageeta Sharma, *Undergloom and Infamous Landscapes*

“Explosive, intercultural deities reign over and accept supplication for the concerns of a postmodern age, from AIDS to abortion to art itself ... At the boundaries of theater, cult ritual and poetry, the artist incarnates herself as original, fearsome divinities never before experienced on the planet: the Goddess of Tough Love, the Aborted Buddha, the Goddess of Absence/Paleface.”

— San Francisco Bay Guardian on the 1999 world premiere of Minal Hajratwala’s “Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium”

About the Author

Minal Hajratwala (www.minalhajratwala.com) is the author of *Leaving India: My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents* (2009) and editor of *Out! Stories From the New Queer India* (2012). Called “incomparable” by Alice Walker and “searingly honest” by the Washington Post, *Leaving India* won a Pen USA Award, an Asian American Writers Workshop Award, a Lambda Literary Award, and a California Book Award. Minal graduated from Stanford University, was a fellow at Columbia University, and was a 2011 Fulbright-Nehru Senior Scholar. As a writing coach, she is passionate about helping people give voice to untold stories.



(For high-resolution images, please download directly from minalhajratwala.com/photos.)

About the Collective

The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective is the coming together of poets who believe words can transform lives. Founded in 2013, in Bangalore, India, as a not-for-profit poetry collective, The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective publishes innovative, diverse poetic voices from India. Through a mentorship model, members of the collective support one another in producing beautiful poetry books, chapbooks, and anthologies. Through workshops, readings, and community and school events, the Collective is building a poetry community in which artistic expression leads to positive action, as each poem initiates a dialogue with society and the greater world.

Poet Advisors

Meena Alexander
Sampurna Chattarjee
Eunice de Souza
Carolyn Forché
Ranjit Hoskote
Jerry Pinto
Sudeep Sen
Ravi Shankar
Prageeta Sharma
Arundhati Subramaniam

Also from The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective

Geography of Tongues by Shikha Malaviya



An Interview with Minal Hajratwala

What is *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* all about?

I've always been interested in how we, as writers, access and address a greater source. As someone raised in a Hindu family and having engaged seriously, if sporadically, in Buddhist practice over a number of years, I have puzzled over questions of meaning, emotion, philosophy, and how the individual physical experience of being our small selves might be related to some larger source which humans over our entire history have variously named things like God, Nature, Spirit, the Collective Unconsciousness, and so on.

The book is divided into four sections. "In the Temples of Silence" gathers poems that stem from various meditative, prophetic, or writing practices, and explore the range of human emotions. In section two, "From the Museum of Lost Sources," I look at myth, story, art, and how we have been either cut off from or connected to our collective pasts. Then, "Archaeologies of the Present" imagines an ethnographer from the future entering our world and trying to document it: What would such a scientist see? What would he or she find remarkable, admirable, corrupt, or seductive? In doing so, of course, the poem also critiques the practice of ethnography itself and calls into question the capacity of an outsider to understand a civilization in any meaningful way. And finally, "Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium" is the script of what began as a one-woman performance poetry show.

The poems and performance texts in the book don't come to any conclusions. They all reflect, in one way or another, my questions and general state of bewilderment at our shared condition. I'm interested in the pathos of how we, as humans, always strive to transcend ourselves. It's both absurd and endearing of us, don't you think?

How did you come up with the idea for your show, "Avatars: Gods for a New Millennium," and what made you want to include the script in this book?

In 1999 I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area and became active in the performance art scene. I was commissioned by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco to do a one-hour performance on the occasion of World AIDS Day. I had just come across the story of a village in Karnataka that had turned a statue of Ardhanarishvara, the half-male-half-female deity, into a deity that would bless people with HIV. So I came up with a monologue in the voice of what I called the God/dess of AIDS, and then I built a whole show around it.

At the time there was also an odd trend of people joining cults in the belief that the world was going to end at the turn of the millennium. I thought the show could be a bunch of gods and goddesses competing to have the audience join their own cult. Other deities I created or adapted to modern times included the Goddess of Tough Love, the Aborted Buddha, the Goddess of Absence/Paleface. I worked with an incredible director and co-creator, Miriam Kronberg, to put together the show in just nine weeks. I played most of the deities myself, and I had several friends who came into the show for smaller parts.

After the museum premiere, I received a couple of fellowships to continue developing and performing it as a solo show. A couple of theatre companies in New York staged readings with professional actors. Eventually I didn't have time to perform it myself anymore, and decided to develop it as a multi-character play, so that groups of actors could perform it.

I'm delighted to have it in print now under an open copyright. There is still a paucity of diverse scripts in most of the theatre world, and with this publication, university and non-profit theatres can perform it freely.

Many of the pieces in *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* are dialogues, featuring characters like Lady Gaga, Cassandra of Troy, Arjuna, and statues of deities in museums. Why did you write in these voices? Do you tend toward hallucinations?

Ha! Perhaps all poets inhabit our own dreamscapes, in which we see and hear realities beyond the obvious? When a question catches my attention, I like to examine it, like a crystal, from many possible angles.

I have empathized with or fantasized about my characters. In the poem "Dialogue of the Lady Monsters," Lady Gaga and Cassandra of Troy have an urgent discussion about questions of fame and mortality from both ends of human history. In "Much Later, Achilles and Arjuna Speak of the Gods," two of humanity's greatest epic heroes talk in a hospital ward, where they are processing the psychic traumas of war. In museums, I often walk by ancient statues that were designed for temple worship, wondering what they think of being torn from their homes and their devotees. These thought-experiments allow me to imagine and experiment with language, in a way that is free from my own biography.

Your first book was published by one of the "Big Five" U.S. publishers. Why did you choose to publish your poetry collection through The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective? How did the Collective come about?

I was fortunate to publish my first book, *Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents*, with a large New York firm. My second book, the anthology I edited called *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*, was with a tiny independent press. This time around, I fortuitously met the two other Collective founding poets, and we just clicked. We all loved the idea of giving poets more control over the process, and of mentoring and publishing contemporary Indian poets. We took all the risks and learned the process with our own books, and after a year of trial and error and hard work, we're preparing to start bringing in new poets. I couldn't be more thrilled to be part of the process of bringing together established senior poets, like the ones on our advisory board, with brand-new writers like the ones who come to our poetry workshops in India, all under the rubric of making Indian poetry truly great.

The cover image is striking and unusual. How did you choose it?

I asked my dear friend, the amazing Indian artist Tejal Shah (tejalshah.in), to create a cover for the book. She came up with an abundance of possible directions, including several remarkable images by the Tibetan-American artist Ang Tsherin Sherpa (tsherinsherpa.com). Ultimately we chose this painting, called *Preservation Project #1*.

I loved the colors and the visual complexity right away, and the ironic humor of the labeled jar seemed to fit with the pseudo-scientific tone of some of the poems. There are also specific lines and images that resonate: the hovering flies, all the hands, the sense of bodies jumbled together in confusion, skin-to-skin.

We all felt it captured beautifully the spirit of the book, and Tsherin kindly agreed to allow us to use it at no fee — earning amazing karma!

How did you become a poet? Where do you get inspiration for your poems?

I was six years old when I wrote my first book: a few folded pieces of colored construction paper, stapled together and dedicated to my parents, filled with little rhyming poems about birds: *The eagle flies / Oh so high / I wish that I / could touch the sky*. I think a lot of children are natural poets and love rhymes and words. Somehow, I never stopped being interested in words and what they could do.

For me, poetry usually starts with the language. I get interested in how two words bump together. As a meditation student who was bringing a lot of anger to the cushion, I remember coming upon this passage in the Dhammapada in which the Buddha says anger is like a rotting fish, and if you hold on to it, if you keep it wrapped up in straw, it will just stink more and more. These two words kept jostling together in my mind — anger, fish, anger, fish — as I tried to understand the relationship between them. The word *fish* is the root of my name, Minal, and so the Buddha's metaphor seemed particularly aimed at me. I sat to write, and the poem *Angerfish* came, as an extrapolation of that concept: What if a person really did have a fish, wrapped up in straw, and it began to stink more and more, and what if the fish eventually took over this person's entire life, until there was no person any more, only the fish, and in the end the fish would have to feed on itself? I wrote the first section quickly, and the other four sections of the poem developed out of it over time.

What advice would you give to aspiring poets?

Pay profound attention to the details of the language: sound, rhythm, melody, meaning. Every good poem is ultimately about language itself, too. Don't use fancy words just to be fancy. Read excellent poetry; read, read, read. If you haven't found any poetry you like, keep looking until you do. Learn how to revise — sometimes for years — until your poem is the best version of itself that it can possibly become. Kill clichés; they will ruin everything.

**Sample poem from *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment*
by Minal Hajratwala**

Insect Koan

at Tassajara Zen Center

Often I think of Siddhartha Gautama meditating in the jungle
among the creatures short & tall—elephants gazelles mynas & especially
the inexhaustible flies.

Paintings never show the Enlightened One frowning as tiny sentient beings
swarm lips (no) eyes (no) nose nor do statues lift gold fingers to brush off
gnats buzzing about the Awakening.

In the old books are stories of rishis so devout neither snake nor tiger bite
deterred their prayer but my practice crawls up my skin / twitches & tickles
skitters along the surface

makes me wonder if these are my ancestors come to encourage me
as relations often do in the most inconvenient of ways.
Everything has a skin—

this cushion with its thousand stitches / stones & their history of water / the
smallest flea its translucent blue-black wing—but
isn't the nasturtium agitated by the hummingbird's slurs?

Doesn't the pond resent wind brushing ripples into the portrait
of mountains clouds & shadows of mountains clouds it has
been painting all morning?

How did the Buddha learn to say to the she-mosquitoes
You with your fertile thirst come to me
& drink?