Akhil Katyal loved Mary Howitt’s *The Spider and the Fly* as a seven-year old. He says he watched with the "cruel curiosity of children the nasty, bitter end of the fly at the hands of the spider". A cautionary tale, it played out differently in his head. He was drawn to the "fun and charm in danger and the wiliness of seduction". He ignored the end and "fell for the flattery of the spider". It was about the same time that he started writing bad poems, he says, which aimed for the same rhythm and rhyme but it was a Delhi University professor years later who shaped them up into verse he calls, "serviceable". Many years coming, his first book of poetry, *Night Charge Extra* was published last year.

An assistant professor now, he teaches English Literature at the Shiv Nadar University in Delhi, and writes sharp, playful and frequently, political, verse.

Edited excerpts from an interview:

**Why is your poetry frequently political?**

Thank god it is infrequently apolitical. We live in a time when a man is lynched for a rumour of beef-eating, when Dalits are savaged by cow-protectors, when more than 50 people are killed and more than 150 blinded by police and paramilitary forces in Kashmir. Even the cosiest of love, nature or cat poem in such times will become political. Home Minister Rajnath Singh said at a press conference in Kashmir - ‘*mujhe jaankari mili hai ki kuch logon ki aankhon mein chot lagi hai* (I’ve got information that some people are hurt in their eyes)’. When politicians take to euphemism, poets ought to take to blistering reality. We ought to try.
Do you think your Hindi/Urdu and English poetry are very different?
I think I am more brazen and mischievous in my Hindi/Urdu poetry. The English poems have more pause, are usually read to smaller audiences, they are slower, sadder things, certainly more thin-skinned.

Who is your muse?
Gorgeous men on good days. On most other days, anyone not wearing a khaki chaddi will do.

Which poets do you love?
Agha Shahid Ali has been an important influence to find a restrained, yet eloquent vocabulary for loss and politics. He wills himself to vulnerability, he seems real and it seems possible enough to try and copy him, then fail, sometimes miserably, but then try again.

His imprint is there in my poems—he might have squirmed hearing this but would still have been encouraging —especially the long poems. He gave me the elegance of metaphor rather than the tediousness of simile, he gave me a sharper register for pain rather than a cumbersome catalogue of complaints, and he gave me a will to use poetic form which, if done well, often transforms the world into the vessel for one's emotions rather than the dustbin for one's self-indulgence.

Dorothy Parker always combined high pathos with self-mocking and that is a highly infectious strain. She remains one of my favourite poets to translate.

Varun Grover, lyricist and screenplay writer, often brings to my world, an unassuming simplicity that has the power to shatter—consider man 'kasturi re, jag dasturi re, baat hui na puri re'.

Rene Sharanya Verma, the extraordinary Delhi poet, brings joy to the writing of her poems as much as to their performance, something I emulate.

Do you identify as queer?
On some days. On other days, I'm just getting on with life.

Many people first saw your poems on Facebook. What do you think of social media?
I think it is great to share stuff that escapes print and television media or stuff those folks are too afraid or constrained to share. But it has its problems. Zuckerberg has a huge market in India and a government to oblige. Accounts are disabled, posts repeatedly disappear, vague 'community standards' are levelled at those who do not stick to statist views on Kashmir. I wrote something on it:

'Do you have Facebook addiction?
Do you keep trying to leave it but lack conviction and keep coming back?
No sweat, I've got a hack.

Just say anything about Kashmir that's even remotely true

Then sit back, they'll deactivate it for you.

(Akhil Katyal is at the Bangalore poetry festival at the Leela Hotel on Aug 5, 6)