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BIRENDRA KUMAR BHATTACHARYYA

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“A humanist - a man who believes in Vasudhaiva kutumbakam (the entire world is one family)" - is the way Prof. Nilakanta Singh, a noted litterateur and Sahitya Akademy Award winner from Manipur, describes Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. One of the greatest writers of his times, and the only Jnanpith Award winner, from this part of the country, he passed away On August 6, 1997. Prof. Singh was with him during his student days and, also a governing body member of the Sahitya Akademy when Dr Bhattacharyya was its President. Says Prof. Singh "He was a multi-dimensional person, known as a novelist, a writer, a poet, a journalist, sociologist and a great political thinker. Dr Bhattacharyya Initially influenced by Marxism, became more of a Gandhian later; and led a life of great simplicity, following the path of simple living and high thinking."

Just like a stream which shows how the beginning of all big things is small, so was the life of Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. He was born on October 14, 1924, in the poor family of Late Shashi Dhar Bhattacharyya, an employee of Suffry Tea Estate in Sibsagar district in upper Assam. He passed the Matriculation examination of Calcutta University in 1941. He not only passed in the first division with four letters, but also secured the highest marks in the University in Assamese, for which he was awarded the Sri Sri Auniati Satradhikar Gold Medal. In 1945, he passed B.Sc. from the same University, after which he joined the freedom struggle.

His beginning, indeed, was very humble. He became a school teacher at Ukhrul in Manipur in 1950. Little did he know that this stint in a far-off land of Tangkhul Nagas in the high hills of the extreme Eastern Himalayas would crown him with, one of the highest literary awards of the country for his immortal book *Yaruingam* in the year 1961. Says Mr Rishang



Keishing, the former Chief Minister of Manipur and an old associate of Dr Bhattacharyya, and also the main hero of the novel around whom the entire story is woven, "Birendra and we came to know each other when we were in the Socialist Party as early as 1947, with Jai Prakash Narayan, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, Aruna Asaf Ali and Acharya Narendra Dev as our leaders. Since we hailed from the same area, i.e., the North east, we became very close to each other. After I graduated from Calcutta University and set up a full fledged high school at Ukhrul on September 19, 1949, I was faced with the problem of getting a Science and Mathematics teacher, as there were no graduates at Ukhrul at that time. Who would venture so far? I thought of Birendra, and his sacrificing nature, and invited him to teach. He readily accepted, and joined us in

the year 1950." It is worth mentioning here that the school in question was earlier a junior primary one, which was subsequently upgraded to Ukhrul Venture Christian Mission High School by Mr Rishang Keishing who also happened to be its headmaster.

Remembering the old days fondly Mr Keishing recalls, "He came and lived with me. He used to wear an old army overcoat. As Ukhrul is a very cold place, in the evenings Birendra would sit near the fire in the kitchen with both legs on the cooking place, and always thinking and imagining something. One day I asked, 'What do you think all the time?' He said he was thinking of writing a book."

He did write that book, and named it *Yaruingam* after the name of the first son of Mr Rishang Keishing, who was hardly a year old then, and born on March 5, 1950. Says Mr Keishing, "In our language, *Yarui* means people and *ngam* means victory. India had become a Republic, so I called my son *Yaruingam* meaning the people have won, the people are the victor."

One can have a glimpse of the inner conflicts in *Yaruingam* in the words of Ms Kathleen Raine, a British poetess of repute, who wrote to Dr Bhattacharyya after having read the novel, in 1994. "This was an absorbing experience, The shocks of the world change as you describe the Japanese invasion, the departure of the British, the presence of Gandhiji, the revolutionary impulse of Marxism, and underneath it all, the flow of personal relations, the respect of men and women for one another, the relative values of reform,

through education and revolutionary impatience for 'liberation' (whatever that is) by destruction of the older order ... and those changes were working all over the world, in different ways, on all of us. That is perhaps a most remarkable revelation to me in England, of a novel about a tribal 'People at the other end of the earth.'

Just as in *Yaruingam*, in his other works as well, Dr Bhattacharyya mirrored experiences of great turmoil and turbulence which the country and its people went through. Says Prof. Singh, "There was conflict, a sort of tussle, in his mind, between violence and non-violence, love and hatred, and all such duality." In his own words, "I have felt at one with rebels wherever they are because like the artist, they want to reform the chaotic world by imposing on it a form of material unity." His final feeling was towards love and brotherhood, and not towards violence and hatred. He wanted to find a meeting point of all such duality. He always tried to understand the inner phenomenon that characterized such duality. "He was equally sympathetic to characters, and portrayed them full of love and understanding, whether on the path of violence or nonviolence.

He did not have the attitude of condemning. He wanted to know what lies beneath this sort of violence, and how it merges from such a beautiful land and cultured society," says Prof. Singh.

Prof. Singh continued, "He had a broad outlook, was scholarly, and a person who has written political novels, which are not merely political, but full of humanistic ideas, influenced by master writers of the West, such as Tolstoy and Hemingway. But his characters were deeply rooted to the soil of this land. Unlike many of his contemporaries, 'he was a writer of the common man,'" The uprising of the industrial workers of the Assam Oil Company, Digboi, in 1939

became the story of Pratipad. The event of Barpathar railway derailment in 1942 was to become the theme of his novel *Mrityunjay* which fetched him the Jnanpith Award in 1979. Dr Vinayak Krishna Gokak, former president of the Sahitya Academi, finds the common thread running through three of his masterpieces, "The world is caught in a moment of crisis, and all the pageantry and variety of life are, built around that moment."

His concern for the common man can be also appreciated albeit in a lighter vein, in an anecdote recollected by Rishang Keishing, "When he worked with me at Ukhrul, I used to take him sometimes to the big church in Ukhrul. The Pastor, one day while delivering a sermon, said, 'Very few people will go to heaven. Most of us will go to hell, because heaven is meant for those who are strictly disciplined, who are for truth, whereas most human beings are selfish, interested in an easy way, of life.' After, we came out of the Church, Birendra said, I have decided I prefer to go to hell, not heaven. Surprised as I was, I asked him why? He said, 'As a socialist we have to be with the masses, not with the few. As most people will go to hell, I too shall.'"

This small anecdote also illustrates that unanimity in his thought and action. He lived in the most frugal manner, a life of voluntary poverty and utter simplicity, till his last days, and walked on the path of truth, trouble and toil which very few would dare tread today. A 1996 citation of the Indira Gandhi National Centre For Performing Arts, New Delhi, describes him as "an eminent literary figure well acclaimed for supporting the cause of the rebels. Social activist and a freedom fighter himself... associated with. Acharya Vinova Bhave who felt Dhirendra would be more appropriate name than Birendra as he' courageously ploughed his lone furrow right from starting his career as a poet."

Mr Ranavir Rangra in his book *Interviews with Indian/ Writers* published in 1992, quotes Dr. Bhattacharyya, "Whatever I have written so far is neither all nectar nor all poison. If at all, it is the reflection of a man constantly engaged in the exploration of reality in order to achieve the ultimate bliss. There is not a single important character in any of my major novels who does not harbour the vision of a happy and harmonious society deep inside him. Either individually or collectively, they all reject the distorted psyche and the widespread malaise of the world of today. It is, however, true that these characters exist only as probable inhabitants of a possible world order, and the creator of that group' himself is only a plausibility." In the foreword to the second edition of *Mrityunjay*, he tells his readers, "Please accept me as you would accept the moon and the stars. The moon gets her radiance from the stars but the impression created is as if she herself is the source of light. This illusion lasts only as long as the stars, beyond the infinite, remain ignorant of their true radiance."

Summing up Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's philosophy of life, says 'Prof. Singh, "Not' country, not caste, not creed, not race, not geography, but Man is most important to him." Indeed, a true Humanist, Universal Soul! (This tribute to the late Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, on his seventy-fourth birth anniversary, on October 14, 1998, is primarily based on interviews of Mr Rishang Keishing, former Chief Minister of Manipur, and Prof. Nilkanta Singh, a great litterateur of Manipur - both very close and old associates of Dr Bhattacharyya, and resource' material made available by his wife Mrs Binita Devi Bhattacharyya.)

Rachna Yadav