

## **Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya:**

### **Indra Nath Choudhuri**

I worked as Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi under its three Presidents for 13 years and have often said to people that I learnt administration from Professor B.K.Gokak, who appointed me as its Secretary in 1984 and from Dr Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, the next President of the Akademi, with whom I worked a full term of 5 years, I learnt as how to love humankind and from Professor U. R. Ananthamurthy, with whom I worked till I retired in October 1996, as how to study literature. All these three Presidents have different demeanour and approach to life. Dr Bhattacharya was quite apart from the other two. He was a man of few words, always having a peaceful bearing, thoughtful. It was very difficult for anybody to realise that here is a writer who got Sahitya Akademi Award at the age of 37 and Jnanapith Award at the age of 55 - the youngest recipients of these two awards till date. He said once, 'I was a very serious student deeply interested in reading and appreciating literature I was a shy speaker. This shyness did not leave me even when later I used to address meetings.' He jokingly further said that my characters speak better than I do. This humility truly made him a writer much loved and much adored by his readers who could feel the greatness of Birendrababu as a man., his transparent nature and his personality which was without any affectation of false ego, full of depth and meaningful insights.

During his many official Visits to Delhi he always stayed in Assam Bhawan. He was not at all demanding rather exceptionally accommodative and helpful and would casually ask, that too rarely, for some pan without betel nuts and jarda, which he always carried with him. I can't remember even one incident when he engaged himself in small talks and this was a rare quality in him which made him dear to everybody. I remember many storms which he faced with me in Sahitya Akademi hut with so much of composure and contentment that I myself felt amazed, at times to look at a man of such great literary heights, without any ego or brazen behaviour having a small physical appearance but at the same time almost touching the sky, He wore his greatness very lightly and with so much of humility that I sometime felt that he is not a man of this world or that he is a great sage or a scholar having deep knowledge and insights fulfilling the old dictum of our shastras: vidya dadati vinayam.

To cite just one example: In spite of the commendation which he received from his two examiners of great name and fame, Dr R. K. Dasgupta and Promotha Nath Bisi for his doctoral thesis 'Humour and Satire in Assamese Literature' he wrote in the preface of his thesis and I quote, "I am more of a writer than an academic. My thesis was written at a time of my life when I had to live by writing alone, and my academic endeavour seemed a luxury. I have no pretensions to scholarship."

His humility was proverbial and that is a great mystery for many. His Lohiaite and Socialist orientation is well known and as a natural consequence he should have been an activist and a rebellious agitator but that what he was not. Though he always stood against injustice and fought for a cause but rebellious, no, he was not a mutinous in nature. The best example of this is his saga of the Nagas in Yaruvingam. which brought him the Sahitya Akademi award in 1961.

Yaruvingam is a daring classic that leads the reader through the ruthless battlefields of the China-Burma-India Theatre of World War II and its aftermath in Nagaland, often provoking you to believe in an eye for eye, but then for Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya there was more to life than vendetta and violence. One of the major characters of this novel Sharengla, near the end of the narration, finds in a child, Koncheng. the future of humanity with full of hopes. The boy seemed to say to her. "Look at me and have patience. The world had everything in it, even today, only we were not aware of it. I am the very limit of this world and the threshold of heaven. Sharengla heard this voice when a deep frustration had overtaken her and she was only having a vision of Christ, blood flowing from his wounds.

In fact it is a book of "Love in the Time of Insurgency". This is the reason why Birenbabu could say about the old Nage man, Najak- "Life cannot be covered up by the big stone of the grave or by tales of ghost and demons." In spite of keeping faith in religion and heaven, the old Najak used to think that a human being remained alive only in the hearts of his fellow men with identical spirit. In his letter to Mamoni he further said and I quote. "I gave priority to the path shown by my character Rishang. Through his life I saw a glimpse of social unity..., and tried to convey a universal and humanitarian view of things in the pages of my novel."

This view he further elaborated in another letter to Indira Goswami. In the letter he said and I quote, "For critics, it is easy to label Yaruvingam as a political novel, because by dividing the literary works into different categories, they can analyze and dissect them according to their subject matter. It is difficult to divide life itself into compartments, and politics is just one of the many divisions of life... For writing a novel, we accept only part of a particular time and place, but the reality is the current of a river. Art selects only a part of the reality and makes it harmonious and beautiful,"

Birenbabu described bloodshed and violence but his intention was to show a life of beauty but then a life of beauty is not harmonious always. One may discover harmonious symmetry in a lotus or in the structure of the Tajmahal, but the deep dark forest, the starlit shadowy pathway in the silent night, the many splendoured aspects of human life as depicted in the Mahabharata or the shabbily dressed, pulled-down, languishing Shakuntala of Kalidasa wearing a single plait cannot possibly be identified as symmetrical harmony. It is the man and aspiration of the soul as said by Leonard da Vinci that what ultimately counts and that what one can find in his Yaruvingam. Whether one receives, what one aspires. or not is not important. The important thing is that in all kind of tragedy, violence and anarchy one still aspires for unselfish love to be made manifest on earth and that makes an object of art beautiful. Birenbabu's perspective was not limited, for he had been able to look into the distance beyond the present hubbub. He made his universal human perspective clear through the sincere realisation of old Nazek, who said: 'To be a Naga is an aspiration worth the while, and easy to all, too easy. But it's not as easy to be human.'

Birenbabu had the vision of this saga of the complex and longer narrative on the Life of the Tangkhul Nagas when he went to Ukhrul on Burma border to take up the job of a school teacher. He had only two pairs of clothes and a great coat of Army surplus, brought cheaply, to protect him from the intense cold. During his one and half years stay he gathered enough insight into the working of the Naga's mind resulting in this famous novel, Those were the difficult days financially through which he passed in the beginning of his career but when he was comparatively well-off he shifted from a thatched roofed house in Gawhati, where he stayed in his younger days to a small house facing the might river Bramhaputru on a hill top, Kharguli, Gawhati. But his simplicity in dress and behaviour remained the same. I have seen him as the President of Sahitya Akademi in a light fawn colour closed neck suit for years together. This simplicity, made him more

attractive as described by Indira Goswami in her memoriam that eminent and budding writers and poets frequently gathered in that thatched roofed house like Hem Barua, Benudhar Sharna, Mahendra Bore and many others and sat on the wooden peeras on the floor, to share the meals with Birendra Kumar. I had visited Birenbabu's hill top Kharguii house several times and enjoyed the meal there served by his wife, a simple and sober educated lady from Tipper Assam, who shared all the ups and down of Birenbabu's life with dignity and determination. If Birenbabu had only two sets of clothes and an army surplus overcoat at Ukul, his wife had to make do with only one sari for some days. In his autobiographical statement Birenbabu once mentioned that he was always for freedom of expression and as a result he was fired from his jobs very frequently. When in 1967 for the third time he was fired, he decided to do free lancing and in that most difficult time his wife always stood by his side. He braved all these but never gave up writing and never gave up celebrating love, peace and creativity of life in his novels against the backdrop of cruelty, horror and destruction before and after India's independence because of war, partition and other modern day malice and violence.

In an interview to Ranvir Rangra he once said and I quote. "Being a freedom-fighter and a devout follower of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, I had decided never to go into government service but to lead an independent life. [I took to journalism because I thought it did not have any constriction -it allowed total freedom. However, when I found myself without a job in between editorship of two literary magazines the problem of making the two ends meet stared me in the face. I had a family but no establishment and no means of livelihood. I had to do free-lancing which had its risks. I was a fairly well-known writer, yet I could never earn more than 300 rupees a month and that was far from adequate." Once he said and I quote that he is voluntarily accustomed to live a life of penury and poverty so that his soul may remain alive and free and hence poverty could not disenchant him from life. He was never frustrated, embittered about life and at the same time never left the honour and dignity of a writer to make money and rebelled against any effort to lower the prestige of a writer. It was this very streak of the rebel that would not let him to oblige the bureaucracy of the All India Radio, about four decades earlier, by dropping the poem 'Naganir Chitthi' and choosing another poem for recitation. He would rather not participate in the poetic symposium than toe the official line. The rebel had to plough his lone furrow but he did it with such courage but with honour and

humility that Vinoba Bhave felt that 'Dhirendra would be a more appropriate name for him than 'Birendra'.

But, if the human conditions lead to violence, it is difficult to escape it and that what is described in *Mrityunjaya*, another outstanding novel, which bagged him the coveted Jnanpith award in 1979, an outstanding fictionalised account of the heroic struggles and angst of a small band of 'revolutionaries' who momentarily forsook Gandhi's ahimsa and embraced violent means to 'hurt' the British during the Quit India Movement of 1942 in a small hamlet in Assam. In fact it reflected the inner conflict and anguish of the people who participated in the freedom movement and also revealed the sacrifice of the Assamese people in the freedom movement which was not known in other parts of India for a long time.

Interviewers, however, were persistent in asking him this question about the change of the mind of a Gandhian that what Birendrababu was, from non-violence to violence and ultimately, by the end of the novel, the reversal of the mind from violence to non-violence, which interviewers felt as contrived and unconvincing. In his reply Birendrababu said that this idea, as reflected at the end of the novel in the words of the wife of Gosain that once we get freedom, we will give up violence and live as good citizens is based on a real incident," Birendrababu elaborated and I quote, "I was actively involved in freedom struggle. The men had this dilemma because they had all along been trained for non-violent struggle. Only Jai Prakash Narain, Ram Manohar Lohia and Achuta Patwardhan were in favour of violence. Not only Jai Prakash Narain but Nehru also subscribed to this view at one time." For Birendrababu violence was not a rule of life and a permanent feature of human existence. It is a temporary expression of life particularly for a cause.

Birendrababu, while relating the ceremony, when he was given the Jnanpith award by the then Prime Minister Smt Indira Gandhi, said that after the award ceremony, as a part of the programme. *Mrityunjaya* was staged for the invitees of the function, Madhu Limaye was also present in the function. After the staging of the novel Mrs Gandhi thanked him and left the place. Madhu Limaye, then, sent for him and said that the dramatization of the novel had reminded him of the dilemma faced by him and others in those days.

Madhu Limaye had worked for the Socialist Party under the leadership of Achut Patwardhan. The derailment of a train by the Madhu Limaye group of socialists had also brought about a sense of guilt in them for it had caused the loss of umpteen innocent lives. Birendrababu further recalled that he had also experienced similar sense of guilt

which got expressed through Gosain in the novel and the change of mind is the natural outcome of it.

Birenbabu wrote a number of novels but his last novel, *Phul Konwarar Pakhi Ghora* published in 1988 is hardly discussed in other Indian languages. I do not know how much it is discussed in Assamese language. I personally feel that it is an outstanding novel which has as its background an Assamese folk story of a prince of flowers, who, flying on a Pegasus, embarks on a hazardous and perilous journey to reach her beloved. The Pegasus symbolises, according to Birenbabu, idealistic flight of the soul. This novel instead of describing outside incidents takes us to an inner journey to understand ourselves. Birenbabu says that in this world of panic stampede, commotion and confusion he tried to infuse in the novel the notion of unity so that in this open ended novel people may have the vision of the universe intertwined with beauty and values of life. The hero of this novel, Navin, is like the prince of flowers fights for the honour and prestige of the region of Assam, its people and culture. He moves on the lofty, frothy waves of the great river Brahmaputra as if it is his fast moving Pegasus and in his struggle, like the Brahmaputra's rise and fall, he is sometimes lifted up to great heights or else thrown down in the whirlpool of incidents as if the wings of his Pegasus are severed. But in spite of the fall Navin does not leave his dream of going ahead on the road of progress and remains as courageous as ever to fight with all kinds of odds and adversaries in life. Being poetic in nature, Birenbabu in this novel infuses his narrative plot with poetic imagery and symbolism. It is a great novel in every respect which reveals his poetic mind which was very predominant in the early life of his writing career. He remained a poet at heart whatever the form he wrote in. In one of his poems he described symbolically the pain and frustration of Indians because of the poverty and underdevelopment which is so rampant in the whole of the country:

I feel guilty, helpless, hurt

The unknown beggar

Does not know me

But I know her

She is my shame

Birenbabu was more a Gandhian than a Lohiaite. Indira Goswami, in one of her reminiscences once wrote that when she joined Delhi University she stayed in a house near Roshanara Garden and Birenbabu was a regular visitor there whenever he had the

chance to visit Delhi. Sometimes he used to come early in the morning, just after dawn. When she would enquire the reason about his early visit to her house, Birenbabu would reply, "I went to Rajghat to pay my homage to Gandhiji. I feel a kind of peace and tranquillity when I sit near his Samadhi in early morning."

Birenbabu, no doubt, described the anxiety, violence, pain and frustration of the people but at the same time he balanced it with the act of compassion and courage and human values

During his 5 years term as President of Sahitya Akademi, I had many chances to spend time with him and always was moved by his humility, greatness and human concerns, I can never forget one incident which was truly moving for me. One day in the office hours, I received a phone call from him, "Choudhuri, can I use the office car today?" Being the President, he had just to ask for the car instead of requesting for it. I was dazed by his humility. That day tears rolled from my eyes. All of a sudden I realized he is not a small stature man hut in height he truly touches the sky. Indra Nath Choudhury Was in Academics, Administration and Cultural diplomacy. Taught in Delhi University Ucca Siksha aur Sodh Sansthi, Hyderabad and University of Bucharest (as an ICCR visiting Proffesor) and was visiting Professor in many other Universities including Central University Hyderabad, and CIEFL, Hyderabad, Jadavpur University and JNU, Delhi. A distinguished Cultural Administrator of India. Was Secretary to Sahitya Akademi (13 years) and Minister (Culture), Indian High Commission, London and Director, The Nehru Centre. London (3 years) Was Member Secretary and Academic Director, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi (4 years).

Written books on Comparative Literature, Poetics and Aesthetics in Hindi. English and Bengali. Latest books: "The Genesis of Imagination": Selected Essays on Literature Theory, Religion and Culture, 2001 (Sterling) and "Sparks Fly Upward: Three Essay on Aesthetics", 1999 (Temenos, L.ondon), Comparative Literature: Some Perspective (2006, Hindi). Hinduism: Religion without Religion (to be out in May, 2011), and more than 50 research papers which include about a dozen papers on Tagore.

Specialization: Literature, Theory, Aesthetics, Dramaturgy, Religion. Cultural and Translation studies. Participated in a number of international seminars and conferences in India and abroad. Lately, participated in an extended and closed (only 21 participants from 10 countries) seminar for five weeks, Sep-Oct 2009 at the Centre for study of

Culture and Philosophy, Washington. Chief Editor, Concise Hindi Encyclopedia, Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra, Ministry of HRD and also Chief Editor, Revised Version of the Encyclopedia, Sahitya Akademi; Was Member, Board of Languages and Translation, IGNOU and also the Academic Council, Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University and Member, Executive Board, Netaji Subha Open University, Kolkata. Now Member Secretary of Vatsal Nidhi of which Dr Karan Singh is the President and also Member Secretary of Sasta Sahitya Mandal of which former Chief Justice P.N.Bagwati is the President. Fellow of Temenos Akademi, UK and also Millennium Trust, Kent, UK Received many awards including the most prestigious Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Ministry of HRD Ganga Sharan Singh Award from the President of India in 2007 and also Delhi Hindi Academy award 2009.